Populist Realisms and Counterfeit Aesthetics

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I. True Fakes

In Naples in the early 2000s, Napolimania (Naples Mania), a new tourist shop celebrating Neapolitan irony, had among its wares a sweatshirt with the word VERACE printed across the chest in the familiar Radiant URW Bold typeface. The intentional misspelling is a clever enactment of the epistemological and ontological slippage between authentic (*verace* means authentic in Italian) and counterfeit objects. The Versace logo signals costly, elevated kitsch as *alta moda*, whereas the Verace logo points not merely to the 'original' from which it is derived, but rather to its own status as an authentic fake. It points, in fact, to the high-quality brand of true fakes associated with Naples' vast fashion counterfeiting economy.

Fig. 1. Verace logo [recreated by the author].

True fakes are in fact a real thing. Italian journalist Roberto Saviano later used the term to describe a peculiar phenomenon in his infamous 2005 book *Gomorra*, an exposé on the region's organized crime networks known as the Camorra. In the book, Saviano chronicled how Camorra-run factories produce the clothes that are designed by top Italian fashion houses. The factories bid on contracts to manufacture the clothes. The factory that produces the clothes fastest and offers them to the houses at the lowest price wins the contract. The other factories are left with clothes that, while of the same quality, are not bestowed the coveted fashion house trademark. These clothes hit the market at slightly lower prices and bear the designer brand name, albeit illegally.

A trademark is an object-sign with a personality that gives access to a social imaginary. The Versace trademark conjures an expensive world with hyperbolic protagonists who openly display their wealth and embody a daring irreverence for the demure restraint associated with classical notions of taste. The Verace trademark is not (merely) a misspelling, but rather a sense-making object-sign that flaunts its own breakaway rogue social imaginary. This social imaginary is animated by pride in craftiness, ironic playfulness, and a sense of personal freedom to cross in and out of the boundaries of the so-called formal economy.

The differential Versace/Verace underscores the spuriousness of a true/fake distinction that relies on intellectual property marks. It presents the operation of distinction as if it were a magic trick that makes one letter make all the difference. It exhibits social distinction as a political economic practice. 'Ordinary' counterfeiting, where fakes are fabricated differently than their authentic counterparts, threatens to dilute the power of a brand, or at most the profits of the brand (but may actually enhance them). But counterfeiting of the true fake variety lays bare how the mere act of trademarking materials augments their value and how value networks are controlled by global neoliberal regimes that increasingly deregulate labor and trade while increasingly regulating property, especially intellectual property (David & Halbert, 2017). The trademarks imprinted on material goods are empty signifiers, 'where the sign is everything and substance outsourced' to places with cheaper, unregulated labor and lax or nonexistent environmental regulations (David & Halbert, 2017: 155). In this sense, trademarks refer to globally dispersed value networks that produce goods but are opaque to consumers, revealing and deceiving as much as counterfeits (ibid). Trademarks allow transnational corporations to control the profits from things they do not physically make or distribute (Chon, 2015, cited in David & Halbert, 2017). True fakes announce their status as fakes, revealing not just the tricks of formal economies, but also some of the complicities that blur formal, informal and illicit economies. True fakes create an epistemological and ontological murk in the political economy of social distinction, bringing all signs, objects and object-signs within reach of the everyday tinkerer.

This is no small thing. Italy's Silvio Berlusconi and now the United States' Donald Trump have foregrounded the

operations behind the political economy of social distinction in a new brand of populism. The operations behind this populism are affective and aesthetic: they include, on the one hand, a widespread cynical regard for political and business elites and political economic institutions and, on the other hand, the aspirational belief that anything is possible for anyone.

Popular cynicism toward formal late liberal economies has been amply discussed by scholars such as Comaroff and Comaroff (2000). Such a cynicism sees the fraud in narratives of free market competition, regulated labor and, ironically, of transparency. It sees how these tales are told with empty signifiers with shadow referents—for example, the financial fraud perpetrated by the US company Enron who in 2001 cooked the books to signify profitability to the investing public while executives, fully aware of impending bankruptcy, sold off their shares. Without needing to understand what financial derivatives are, popular cynicism understands that the wealth of the economy is measured with fictitious instruments.

But cynicism is not the only fuel of a new brand of populism. A seemingly paradoxical will to believe in the incredible ignites discontent and turns it into possibilist fervor. The increasing quotidian insecurity people experience in the absence of labor protections and state services, including security proper, has been accompanied, paradoxically, by an uptick in overdrawn hopes for fantastic wealth (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000). This fusion of hope and hopelessness motivates people to engage in a 'constant quest for new, magical means for otherwise unattainable ends' (26).

This fusion of hope and hopelessness is a joint performance between, on the one hand, the fantastically wealthy and powerful, such as organized crime affiliates, business elites and politicians, and on the other hand, workaday people who decide to believe in the possibilities embodied by the former. In this essay, I suggest that this widespread circulation of empty signifiers, fraudulent narratives, doubly fictitious financial instruments, and innumerable fake goods (counterfeit Italian fashion is a multibillion-euro business), has accreted in a counterfeit aesthetics, a popular sense of one's personal access to the operations that make possible and legitimate any social distinction and therefore to the political economic reality those distinctions are meant to signify.

Below I sketch out how counterfeit aesthetics blends hyperbole and realness to bet against and test the limits of what can be real, and to bring to a point of emergence what potentially could be real. This affective-aesthetic force can take shape as paranoiac conspiracy-oriented fears or, the focus of this essay, outsized, pronoiac possibilist desires. I begin with some brief comments on the Verace mark as an emblem of counterfeit aesthetics. It signals the unique credibility of the self-announced counterfeit and the willful credulity of consuming publics, and all of this credit has been transvalued into immense political power.

II. Popular Realisms

Although the Verace mark draws from the Versace label because the intentional malaproprism makes its point eloquently, this particular semiotic resource runs deep. As a label associated with hyperbolic luxury, it offers the Verace mark the power not to undermine, but to deform the Versace mark, and in the process enhance the Verace mark's ordinary realness. I explain below.

The Versace style at the time of Gianni Versace, especially in the 1980s, was marked by excess—it was in synch with 'the big statement, the dramatic entrance,' as his sister Donatella described it (Backus, 2008). A mixture of neoclassical and baroque, including brocades, the Greek key motif, the distinctive Medusa head logo, and, of course, gold. Versace became a favorite among American rap artists for whom success means buying power, beginning with Tupac Shakur, who in 1996 walked the runway for Versace in Milan. This kind of rapper aesthetics took 'fantasies of kitsch and capitalism' to their 'illogical extremes' (Stephenson, 2016). In this aesthetic, rapper bodies and lifestyles, in images and in life, are oversaturated with signs of wealth and power: diamonds and gold, luxury cars and palatial homes, pet cheetahs and Cristal.

Kitsch offers another way to trace counterfeit aesthetics. Whereas kitsch has been infamously defined as aspirational mimicry, as the 'obvious, easy and direct sign of the kind of aesthetic response one would like to picture oneself as having,' that is, as a taste for luxury, the Versace brand offers something more (Binkley, 2000: 139). As costly Italian high

fashion, it is both aspirational and the already *arrivé*, both unabashedly imitative and decidedly self-same. Rapper aesthetics takes this double identity further, transmuting 'failed' imitation into an aesthetic value itself and transvaluing insincerity into sincerity (Binkley, 2000). The visible seams of this lux aesthetic enhance rather than undermine its potency; it is a (de)constructed aesthetic that declares distinction while openly displaying its operations. Through hyperbole, the lux aesthetic performs 'realness'.

The Verace mark takes hyperbolic realness in a different direction. The realness it performs is located in the visible seams of counterfeiting itself, and more specifically Neapolitan-style counterfeiting, which signals a proud disregard for formal, legitimated political economic regimes in pursuit of alternative gains that the formal economy does not officially underwrite. It enacts a possibilist popular realism that is wildly different from that most paradigmatic brands of Italian popular realism, neorealist cinema. Using *in situ* life in the post-WWII streets as setting, the non-professional actor as protagonist, and the travails of downtrodden ordinary folk as story, neorealist filmmakers generated an aesthetic of the real that could serve as dramatic social commentary. While filmmakers and audiences may have believed in the veracity of these on-screen depictions during the genre's heyday, both the nature of belief and the meaning of veracity have changed in contemporary Italian media ecologies, where multiple popular realisms now mirror and diffract one another.

Below I offer a loose collage of some of these popular realisms to convey a contemporary Italian media ecology where palimpsests of representations, reproductions, and deformations generate a field of possible truths and orientations toward the truth. These popular realisms include the following genres: Neapolitan independent DIY music, first-person gaming, pulp realism, hyperrealism, reality television, and contemporary Italian C-movies.

A. DIY Musical Realism

Fig 2. Still from music video Lady Lucky by Fortuna, 2011.

Neomelodica is a genre of Neapolitan pop music genre widely produced and consumed across southern Italy and beyond. One of its strongest appeals for fans is the 'realness' of its performers, of the stories they tell, and of the vernaculars in which they tell them. This realness (often in contrast to the slickness of high production values) fosters intimate publics and local affective communities (Pine, 2008). Remnants of the neorealist aesthetic persist in the music and music videos associated with this genre.

In 2011, the fourteen-year-old neomelodica singer Fortuna (luck), at the time one of the most talked about and favored singers on the scene, recorded 'Lady Lucky': 'Hollywood, for me, is "A Sanità,"' (a comparatively poor neighborhood of Naples' historic center).[1] She sings, 'This street, for me, is the world.' They call her Lady Lucky, and like Lady Gaga, she sings for these people, 'my people'. In an expansive gesture toward authentic Neapolitanness—a theme found in the repertoires of many neomelodici singers—Fortuna declares, 'Not even for a million would I change my life; I want this life of mine to stay the way it is…I dream with my eyes open'.

The 'authenticity' of neomelodica music has been a point of contention on the scene and beyond it. Aesthetically, the music is decidedly local, saturated with the vernaculars of its milieu. Songs can become enormously popular among the hundreds of thousands of fans across southern Italy and beyond. But the

'authentic Neapolitanness' of these songs tends also to be the very feature that restricts their circulation among other audiences both in the south and nationally. The mixture of worn-out synth disco beats, Neapolitan language lyrics, and microtonal melismas signals for non-fans obstinate, regressive provinciality (Pine, 2012).

At the same time there is very little to call *authentic* about a song that is but another note emanating from the massive song production that animates the scene year after year, decade after decade. In musical structure, melody, and in lyrical content and style, the song is quite like the many other songs young performers sing as they compete for the attention of fans. However, 'Lady Lucky,' written by one of the most successful neomelodici singers to date, Gianni Fiorellino, is more polished than the average song—as is the music video. Fortuna's success is most certainly linked to this higher grade in quality.

But some protagonists on the neomelodica music scene allude to a kind of counterfeit success. This is when they say that some singers 'have *certain peopl*e backing them.' You can 'sing like shit' and yet get plenty of gigs on the wedding and baptism circuit, they say. They are referring to singers who are affiliated with crime boss impresarios who apply pressure to the markets of their circumscribed territories by activating their networks to facilitate the circulation of some singers and the marginalization of others. The result is distorted markets, manually managed mini alternative culture industries each with their affirmative culture.

On the scene there are always many morphing rumors that circulate speculations, suspicions, and 'certainties' about who is who and how they got their success. 'Counterfeit success' is also the allusion discernible in the critiques of non-fans who describe the scene in ways that make it out to be the bad copy of the dominant music industry scenes, in both its aesthetic and economic practices. Because the music is produced, circulated and consumed largely in the contact zone where the so-called 'informal' and 'illicit' economies overlap, it inspires reactions ranging from bemusement and outrage when people see local Neapolitan 'stars' performing celebrity like uncanny imitations of dominant music industry icons. This is 'performing performing' (Affron, 1980). The mimetic gestures that conjure in Fortuna's music video the young 'Lucky starlet' (the name she gives herself in her song) operate at the threshold of parody

(although unwitting) and perhaps threaten in some small measure to expose the artifice of mainstream celebrity and the sinister nature of *its* affirmative culture. But what neomelodica music affirms is the exuberant will to believe, the aesthetic event of shared enthusiasm that is celebrity.

B. First-Person Realism

Fig 3. Mock GTA Napoli videogame cover image by Antonio Pezzella, 2013.

Celebrity can also take the form of the antihero. First-person shooter games are one example. Since the late 1990s, Grand Theft Auto (GTA) was one of the biggest selling and most controversial video games of its time. In the game, players go on missions in the service of organized crime networks with the promise of rising in their ranks. The game is set in different environments, called mods or modifications, most of them resembling real U.S. cities. In the early 2000s in Naples, pirated copies of the Vice City mod (which resembled Miami) was disguised as 'Grand Theft Auto, the Naples mod' and sold by Naples' street vendors. Unwitting customers bought the game only to return home and find that while the disc cover promised Naples as GTA's new setting, the actual contents were still the familiar Vice City. The fantasy of playing the overlord not just in a fictional world but in their own fictionalized neighborhood was powerful enough that hundreds of Neapolitans willingly believed they were purchasing a real pirated copy of a new GTA game edition. The fraudsters inspired public belief not by fabricating a counterfeit, but merely by tapping the counterfeit aesthetic that emanates from the Neapolitan true fake brand.

In March 2009 a pair of independent game developers created a mock screen shot of the hypothetical GTA Napoli game mod and posted it on Facebook. We see the player standing and looking out onto Piazza Garibaldi. Below him reads, in Neapolitan, the command, *You don't have a single Euro. Go to Via Marina and become an illegal parking attendant*. In the top left corner reads a tip: *To earn money more quickly you have to cry. Use phrases like*, I have children at home, I have to eat too, and It's not like I go around stealing. *To convince people to park click twice and shout*, Hey chief, you need to park? *Once the driver gets out of the vehicle, say*, Come on, give me some money please! *If the driver isn't willing to give you an adequate sum, click three times to smash his windshield.*

The pair of game developers excited their FB friends with the faux screenshot. Their friends started to gather together in support of the idea of crowdsourcing the coding needed to actually produce the game. Several more screenshots circulated, each depicting in various neighborhoods around Naples how the game, inflected with local ways of speaking and being, would play out. Most scenes played like the one on Via Marina. They begin with performances of subservience and they end in violent acts of domination. The nonexistent

game mod (existing only as an aesthetic) was a way for some Neapolitans to reimagine their city, rebrand it and cast themselves as prepotent protagonists. This sensibility becomes a powerful figuration that is mediated, objectified, disseminated and reflected back.

Fig 4. Still from music video GTA NAPL by Moderup, 2017.

In December of 2016 the Neapolitan rap group Moderup took up this aesthetic possibility when they released the song GTA NAPL.[2] Their YouTube video has received one and a quarter million hits. The young singers perform a competitive boast familiar in rap music:

> You want so bad to play the badass that you ain't
> You wear a chain but you only hang yourself with it
> We work so we can eat in restaurants,
> Brother, not to share crumbs
> You gotta do big things from the start, when you're young
> I got money on the brain since there was still the lira
> Like the military, but trained in the streets
> Bring me these other rappers and I'll eliminate them.

Moderup's song is addressed to counterfeit Neapolitan rappers, rappers who sing about violent street life but know nothing of it firsthand. *Don't talk about things that aren't true*, Moderup warns them. Moderup knows what's real, because they see it all the time in their hood. They look around them every day and it looks like Grand Theft Auto Naples. So real it's unreal. *You think we're bullshitting?* Moderup sing, *Come and see for yourselves what it's like. GTA Naples. It's not a game.* What appears to be a game is, for some people, reality. The song is troubled by the question of realness. It suggests that rappers are meant to sing only about what they know personally. It presumes that rap songs are documents of reality, or at least that only some rappers have earned the license to rap about hard realities. Their depictions, however staged (like the gang-on-gang robbery depicted in the music video for GTA NAPL), will necessarily be true fictions coming from real experience. With tautological tightness, self-aggrandizement is declared the exclusive privilege of the great. The song also addresses a taken-for-granted desire for money and success, embodied in bling (and meals in restaurants). It suggests that satisfying these desires necessarily entails the pursuit of supremacy, much like the modus operandi scripted in Grand Theft Auto. If you really live the life, you can rap about it, and rapping about it means you've risen up and 'stood out' from that reality. You too want to rap and make it big, but you're only after the material success, the bling: *You wear a chain but you only hang yourself with it*.

C. Pulp Realism

In a sense, Roberto Saviano is a more successful rapper than Moderup. He claims to write about firsthand experiences and about stories he's read or heard recounted to him. He calls *Gomorra*, his 2005 exposé on Neapolitan organized crime, a non-fiction novel. Because the reality that he sought to depict is elusive, almost 'unreal,' he resorted to literary devices. Because it is unimaginable and unspeakable, and yet true, it requires fiction (Bendinelli, 2014).

The operations of making unrealities real are found not only in the controversial form of Saviano's book, but also within the diegetic world he shares with readers. In the book we learn that camorra affiliates rely on being publicly visible, but in fictional masks. Affiliates are nicknamed according to TV and film

iconography. Arrests are events where affiliates look into the camera and want to appear as if victorious. They scan the movies for interesting behavior to mimic (Saviano, 2006). They cultivate fear by fashioning themselves after Hollywood masks, drawing from films such as *Pulp Fiction, Kill Bill, Donny Brasco, The Godfather, Taxi Driver, Goodfellas, Il Camorrista*, and of course, *Scarface* (Bendinelli, 2014: 251).

Camorra crime clans are remarkable among all Italian organized crime networks for their avid self-production through real capitalist violence and fantastic imaginaries (Mazzarella, 2011). Representations actually constitute part of the phenomenon of organized crime—not only the representations of public opinion and law enforcement, but the representations organized crime affiliates fashion for themselves, drawing on the aesthetic resources that are at-hand in order to develop their personal brands and render themselves either more ferocious or magnanimous—but always more prepotent.

Following the publication of his book, Saviano was the target of critics who argued that he generated *Gomorrism*, a consumer-citizen practice entailing the hermeneutics of suspicion and the sense that you are civically engaged simply because you read revelations of the dirty truth (Dean, 2001)—and in the process encouraged counterfeit activism and brand citizenship. According to this critique, the counterfeit aesthetics that help generate power among crime clan associates bleeds into the mediatic performances of their anti-camorra counterparts.

D. Hyperrealism

Matteo Garrone's 2008 film version of *Gomorr*a pokes holes in the camorra's counterfeit aesthetics. The film opens in the garish blue solarium where camorristi primp and preen themselves just before getting shot to death. It ends with a bulldozer that carries off the bodies of two young men. They were not big enough for the shoes they put on when they stole arms from the local boss and played out their own scenes from *Scarface*. The film renders the young men's aspirational fantasies eerily concrete in their hyperbole and, at the same time, pathetic by adopting an unflatteringly anti-spectacular optic. As a counterpoint to mainstream mafia films, *Gomorra* is shot in overexposed light in scenes at Naples' periphery, unlike the historic center showcased as a labyrinthine kasbah in Italian

B-movies or as a nativity scene in the neorealist films of De Sica. Deaths are anticlimactic, unseen, and when they are visible, as in the case of the opening and closing scenes, they are wholly inglorious.

Although it possesses many of the qualities of neorealism, Garrone has said his film is not neorealist. 'What counts in cinema is returning [to the viewer] that sense of continuous invention that characterizes reality,' he stated ('Gomorra Il Film,' 2008). *Gomorra* is indeed a self-inventing reality, even hyperreal, as the world it enframes comes alive with real convicts and fugitives who populate the cast and composed part of the neomelodica soundtrack. Defending himself against this revelation, Garrone said that when he shot the film he had entered a 'gray zone' ('Gomorra Il Film,' 2008). Knowingly or unwittingly, Garrone was referring to the murk that blurs not only the lines between reality and its others (realism, neorealism, fiction, spectacular fantasy), but also the lines between the counterfeit and the shadow. Cinema promises a fictionalized reality, a counterfeit in which viewers willingly believe, and yet the illicit real infiltrates with shades of gray. The two young protagonists who arrive at a tragic end were testing the limits of the real, a real that accommodates fantasy and is staged by millennial capitalism.

Fig 5. Still from Reality directed by M. Garrone (2012, Italy).

E. Reality TV

In his next film, *Reality* (2012), Garrone cast in the leading role Aniello Arena, a former camorra clan affiliate serving a life sentence for triple murder. In the film, he is a Neapolitan fishmonger bewitched by the mediatic universe built by Berlusconi. In the film, Cinecittà is not the manufacturer of neorealist or hyperreal representations; rather, it is reality in its quintessence, embodied in the reality TV show *Big Brother*. After his audition for the show at Cinecittà, the fishmonger returns to Naples and waits to hear if he has been selected. He begins to see *Big Brother* all around him, through phantom casting agents who have come to surreptitiously observe him and gather further impressions to make their decision. Life for Arena's character becomes an audition for the Real. When he asks for reassurance from the former *Big Brother* star who first auditioned him, he's told, 'Never stop believing. Never give up'.

Garrone said he cast Arena because, having already spent many years in prison, he would look at the world with a child's eyes when temporarily released for the shooting (of the film, that is). He would perform the real dreaming Neapolitan encountering the Real—in this case, the spell of consumer-capitalist Berlusconian spectacle, 'reality.' Indeed, Arena said that he had dreamt a similar dream as a young man growing up seeing camorra bosses with fantastic wealth and status.

Reality begins with a lavish wedding scene, a Louis XIV-style enactment at a banquet hall known in Naples as the premier setting where camorristi get married and neomelodico singers perform. It is also the setting for the subsequent reality TV program, *The Boss of Ceremonies*. Not incidentally, the banquet hall was sequestered years before the launch of the TV program. La Sonrisa's proprietors were convicted of constructing the hall by way of an illegal subdivision (the court nevertheless allowed the hall to operate and the reality show to be recorded).[3]

Garrone's *Reality* is a commentary on the pursuit of a particular kind of success, to be incorporated as an icon in a TV reality. In depicting the delusions of an aspirant, *Reality* revels in what the New York underground artist Jack Smith called the aesthetics of failure, or non-commodifiability. Arena's character is unwilling to accept his non-commodifiability; by the end of the film he

fails to transform himself into a reality TV protagonist and so he slips onto the set of *Big Brother* uninvited.

Many neomelodici singers, like Fortuna, however, accept their non-commodifiability in dominant culture industry. They take 'moldy artifacts' from the dominant and gild them, approaching what Jack Smith described as 'moldiness, Glamorous Rapture…hopeless naiveté, and glittering Technicolor trash' (Smith, 2014: 337). Performing performing, they become great 'spectacular flaming images' in their own universe. In her song 'Lady Lucky' Fortuna compares herself to Lady Gaga but declares that Hollywood, for her, is her own little neighborhood. 'This street, for me, is the world,' sings the self-named 'Lucky starlet,' counterfeit Lady Gaga.

Failed artifice, the stuff that dominant culture industry cannot use in the fabrication of hegemonic 'reality' is what's tossed out as trash. But the frame of reality is making more and more room for trash.

F. The Italian C's

One neomelodico, however, dreams of the day when the political regime a.k.a. culture industry will beckon the neomelodici to join in its public sphere spectacle a.k.a. reality. Mimmo Dany, in his 2010 musical film, *A Neomelodico President*, demonstrates that 'performing performing' is the key to success. Dany, an actual neomelodico, plays himself playing politician. Having been rejected from the reality show *X Factor*, he decides, with the encouragement of a call from Berlusconi, to run for the office of Campania Region president. Berlusconi wants to co-opt Dany's popularity as a singer to enhance the power of his own party, and Dany wants to co-opt his popularity as politician to get onto his dream reality program, *The Celebrity Island*.

Dany's performances as a singer and politician converge as he discovers that pronouncing campaign promises is just like singing verses. Rhyming for rhyming's sake, he declares: 'If you make me president, you won't have to worry about anything anymore more, today I solemnly swear, I'll even lower your utility bill!' This is the exhilaration of fame itself; politics is an afterthought.[4]

III. Populist Realisms

The media ecology of diffracted realisms sketched out above, when tinged with counterfeit aesthetics—cynicism towards political economic elites and institutions coupled with hyperbolic beliefs in fantastical possibilities—provides fertile ground for a new kind of cynical political credibility.

The cynicism became matter of fact after Italy's 1992 'clean hands' investigations. The cataclysmic proceedings documented how ruling parties conspired to collect a second layer of taxes that they systematically solicited or extorted as bribes in exchange for public works contracts and business-friendly legislation. They uncovered corruption networks entangling organized crime affiliates, public administration, all ranks of political office, and business elites throughout the country. They convicted nearly a third of Parliament's deputies and toppled the ruling elite. Out of the ruins a star arose: Silvio Berlusconi. And he met a public willing to believe the incredible.

Already a real estate and media mogul who had had the help of former socialist party Prime Minister Bettino Craxi to legalize his monopoly of private television channels, Berlusconi used his army of public relations and media professionals to create a telepopulist, telecratic *anti-party* called *Forza Italia* (Go Italy!), a soccer chant. He made a 'personal' connection with supporters by way of his power to have the greatest television presence (Rainolo, 2009). During his 2001 reelection campaign, he used his print media empire to distribute hundreds of thousands of free copies of a 125-page color photo book hagiography titled *An Italian Story*, which recounts his personal and business successes, his rise to power, his battle against the opposition, and his plan to make Italy more just, more competitive, and more modern. He offered a vision of infinite growth, prosperity and wellbeing. He offered *himself* as living proof of the ideology of personal economic success.

Berlusconi promised to single-handedly produce a second economic miracle, transforming dreams into reality. He *has* done so, but only telemediatically. He imported television culture from the US, creating Italy's own exploitation television, saturating the airwaves with pure entertainment programming and an abundance of nudity. He fulfilled desires while suppressing critical broadcast coverage of his politics.

He perverted the Gramscian ideal of the national-popular, or culture from below, with the power to unify a nation through total inclusion by making Italy the society of the spectacle *per eccellenza*, where democracy is a ratings game.

The lasting impact of Berlusconi was 'the cultural idea that you could do anything in your own interests' (Kirchgaessner, 2016).[5] He defied the verdicts of the Italian courts and questioned the credibility of the press, openly disputing the legitimacy of its judgments on his many trials and on his viability as a candidate. When called out on his most untruthful statements or for failing to follow through on his boldest promises, Berlusconi would often reply with a trademark phrase: 'sono stato frainteso'—*I have been misunderstood*. Public mistrust of the judiciary and the media has outlived him (Newman, 2017).

IV. Populist Realism Trumped

Fig. 6. Cover of June 18, 2018 issue of Time by Tim O'Brian.[6]

What Berlusconi started, drawing on American branding technologies, Trump perfected: not just politics as a ratings game, but also the politician as the reality TV star. Not just mistrust in the judiciary and the media, but also 'the magical freedom and irresponsibility of a celebrity' (Butler, 2016). As Judith Butler has said, Trump's 'refusal to submit to evidence and logic make him all the more popular. He lives above the law [and, I would add, reality] and that is where many of his supporters also want to live' (Butler, 2016).

It would be a dizzying experience to try to make one's way through the seemingly endless murk of Trump realism, but there are several signposts to indicate that it is shaped by counterfeit aesthetics:

One: When Tony Schwartz began writing Trump's 1987 memoir, *The Art of the Deal*, he realized that he needed to put an acceptable face on Trump's loose relationship with the truth. So he wrote in Trump's voice the following: 'I play to people's fantasies […] People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It's an innocent form of exaggeration—and it's a very effective form of promotion' (Mayer, 2016).

Two: Timothy L. O'Brien, author of the 2005 investigative biography, *Trump Nation* described *The Art of the Deal* as a 'nonfiction work of fiction.' Trump used the book to turn almost every step of his life, both personal and professional, into a 'glittering fable' (Mayer, 2016).

Three: In 2006, reality-TV producer Mark Burnett turned *The Art of the Deal* into a show with Trump as the star. Trump plays a boss feared and admired by his young staffers who compete to be retained by him. He embodied a new abusive management style (Reid, 2016).

Four: Timothy O'Brien described *The Apprentice* as 'mythmaking on steroids. There's a straight line from the book to the show to the 2016 campaign,' he added (Mayer, 2016).

Five: In 2008, in the midst of the economic crisis, the contestants of *The Apprentice* were replaced by celebrities. In 2010, in the aftermath of the crisis, Burnett thought viewers would be more interested in watching 'regular working people,' so brought the original format back. But the ratings

were low, so he returned to the celebrity format and the ratings spiked.

Six: When asked shortly before inauguration what he thought of the president-elect's decision to keep his position as executive producer of *Celebrity Apprentice*, former Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich said Trump was making a mistake because he 'is going to be the executive producer of a thing called the American government. He's going to have a huge TV show called "Leading the World"' (cited in Klein, 2017: 115). And despite Trump's gaffes, his sordid past and his potential criminal behavior, it seems he continues to flourish because to his followers he presents *realness*.

Seven: A decade before Trump purchased Mar-A-Lago in 1985, the owner of the estate had bequeathed it to the US government so that it could be used as a presidential retreat or a 'Winter White House.' But no president used it and it was eventually returned. Long before the 2016 election, Trump had enjoyed boasting about the fact that he lived in a house intended for presidents (Klein, 2017). Klein writes, 'It is as if he was playing at being president for three decades. And now, with the 2016 elections, that fantasy has become a reality—or is it reality that has been swallowed whole by Trump's fantasy?' (83-84).

Eight: Trump's enormously popular campaign slogan, 'Make America Great Again,' offers an answer. The slogan is a counterfeit promise. Reagan originally used it in 1980 (and it turned out to be another kind of fake). Trump said that he only recently became aware of this, but he did make sure to note that Reagan had never trademarked it. Trump, of course, did.

Nine: Naomi Klein reminds us that 'Trump branded a part of the economy that had never been branded before: high-end real estate. He pioneered the idea that where you work (an office tower), where you live (a condominium), and where you play (your golf club or vacation destination) would all be franchises of a single global luxury brand. Trump sells the opportunity for people to live inside his brand' (Klein, 2017: 66). And as Klein writes, 'the Trump brand stands for wealth itself—or, to put it more crassly, money. That's why its aesthetics are Dynasty-meets-Louis XIV' (Klein, 2017: 74).

Ten: Naturally, in 2013 Trump was one of three bidders on Gianni Versace's former 19,000 square foot villa with a 24-karat gold-lined pool, in South Beach, Florida.

V. Conclusion

Berlusconi was convicted of tax fraud and placed under house arrest and Trump is now facing impeachment for obstruction of justice, but these are by no means the ends of populist realism and counterfeit aesthetics. The willingness of publics to believe in obvious fakes is an enduring phenomenon because, for them, shoddy performances are an expression not of fakery, but of realness, a realness that makes room for anyone to become anything they want. This possibilism, ripening in states of precarity, supercedes political ideology, is a crucial source of the cynical political power that nurtures it.

Notes

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKtd-QLYfbo.

2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGu9zst_AzE.

3. More recently, a journalist writing for *L'Espresso* revealed that Raffaele Cutolo, the infamous celebrity boss of the now defunct *Nuova camorra organizzata*, was recorded saying that he had bought the structure that is now *La Sonrisa* and that it is worth almost ten times its original value (Papaianni, 2014). The 'Boss of Ceremonies,' Antonio Polese, brother of one of the proprietors, refuted the assertion and threatened the journalist: 'He'll pay dearly for this' (Iurillo and Postiglione, 2014).

4. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCohzronK6o.

5. Kirchgaessner is quoting Jacopo Iacoboni, a political journalist at *La Stampa*.

6. Time magazine published a cover Thursday, June 7, 2018, on Donald Trump's campaign discreditting the Russia investigation.

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