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Officina: experiments in engaging with the arts

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This article is primarily concerned with interconnections between forms of *impegno* (political engagement) and aesthetic choices, as they were articulated in the literary and cultural journal *Officina.* In order to reassess the role of *Officina* within the Italian cultural and political debate of the day, this article considers two main narratives unfolding in the journal: the aesthetic rejection of *Novecentismo*, understood as the epitome of artistic autonomy, and the articulation of a form of Marxist *impegno* suitable for a neo-capitalist society and stemming from the class-based idea of the organic intellectual. Using published and unpublished correspondence, we argue that *Officina* had a pivotal role in producing a theoretical framework for the conceptualisation of a post-neorealist idea of Marxist critical analysis as well as of intellectual, aesthetic and political engagement.

Keywords: *impegno*; Pier Paolo Pasolini; *Officina*; historicism; neo-realism.

This article focuses on the interconnections between forms of *impegno* (political engagement) and aesthetic choices, as they were articulated in the literary and cultural journal *Officina. Fascicolo bimestrale di poesia*. The brainchild of Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), Roberto Roversi (1923–2012) and Francesco Leonetti (1924–), *Officina* was a bimonthly literary review, published in Bologna from May 1955 to April 1958 as a total of twelve issues, and from March 1959 to June 1959 as a second series of only two issues.[1] It achieved a rather limited distribution and circulation of no more than 600 copies within an exclusively Italian intellectual landscape. Its editors were then just a small group of young intellectuals and writers, who would gain prominence within the Italian literary and cultural field, especially in the decade to follow, and at least until Pier Paolo Pasolini's tragic death in 1975.

In many respects and from the standpoint of a little, artisan-like magazine, *Officina* formulated a strong response to the rapid emergence of capitalism and of traditional historical Marxism as political praxis, which in the mid- to late 1950s was acutely felt by a generation of young intellectuals who had not actively taken part in the war, but who had nonetheless experienced the Resistance: for instance, Pasolini in Friuli and Roversi in Piedmont.[2]

Moreover, the journal simultaneously re-enacted the interweaving of aesthetic and political narratives on *impegno,* understood as positive political intervention in society (especially post-1956 and the Hungarian crisis); on neorealism and the 1955 debate; on the crisis of hermeticism; and on the civic mission intellectuals should pursue as their ethical imperative.[3] Since its inception, the journal found itself arguing on three fronts: against literary '*autosufficenza*/autonomy, uncritical *impegno*' (Ó'Ceallachain 2013, 476), and the crisis of neorealism

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(Voza 2000, 7). And, quite significantly, all these narratives were not only interpreted as merely expressions of the deficiencies of a rapidly establishing neo-capitalist society, but also as a residue of the arts' dispositions towards indifference under the Fascist regime. Largely, both the aesthetic rejection of *Novecentismo*, seen as the epitome of artistic autonomy, and the articulation of a form of Marxist *impegno*, which was not exclusively based on class struggle but had the anthropologically defined individual at its core, were greeted as the two main historicist narratives, which connected the national dimension of the journal with the current European debate on Marxism.[4] Thus, both to position *Officina* within the parameters of the Italian understanding of new historicism, hailed as a critical international phenomenon, and to assess its significance within the Italian aesthetic and political landscape of the economic boom and rapid industrialisation, this article will ask the following three main questions:

1) How did *Officina* promote a new conceptualisation of historical Marxism as a method for critical analysis, which was compatible with the social and economic articulations of 1950s Italian society?
2) How did *Officina* contribute to a reconceptualization of Italian literary history?
3) How could this short-lived, artisan-like journal shape the understanding of *impegno* in its transition from the 1950s to the 1960s?

The review in brief

In many respects, *Officina* was undoubtedly 'just' a little magazine, which fostered new writing and supported primarily poetry, including dialect poetry, especially in the case of Pasolini's own contributions. Having said that, what did distinguish *Officina* was not its choice of poetry over prose, but the narratives, deeply historicist yet often vocally heretical towards the Communist Party's line, that the journal formulated at the end of the neorealist period and throughout the Hungarian crisis in 1956 (Ferretti 1975, 81–89).

In one of the most incisive and exhaustive contributions on the history and profile of *Officina*, critic Gian Carlo Ferretti saw one of the review's chief limitations in its strong support for a traditional historicist approach as the chief methodological framework for understanding the connection between society and culture, since it remained a methodological rather than a conceptual concern (1975, 13).[5] Petrucciani, on the other hand, stressed *Officina*'s inability to develop conceptual tools to interpret the changes in post-war Italian society, combined with its precarious and never clear-cut position on the threshold between history and science, literature and politics, old and new intellectual figures, as its most glaring shortcoming (Petrucciani 1982, 8580–8581). While accepting Ferretti's reading in so far as it acknowledged the need for *Officina* to renegotiate the boundaries of the brand of historical materialism practised in Italy in the 1950s, we would, however, like to put forward the opposite view.[6] Guido Santato has identified in *Officina* a moment of cultural transition, of a crisis without resolution between two phenomena, which he defines as on the one hand '*crocio-gramscianesimo*' and on the other '*gramsci-continismo*'. In other words, the critic sees in Pasolini's methodology a crisis between the necessity of integrating idealism and stylistic precision with historical precision according to an 'unresolvable' methodological and theoretical eclecticism (Santato 2012, 228). Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo (1983, 130–132) has instead questioned the validity of such critical categories (idealism, Marxism and stylistics), and has suggested that the '*questione della lingua*' should be taken as a central concern for the understanding of Pasolini's critical methodology.

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We should like to argue that it was precisely the continuous, almost systematic, process of internal revision of that particular historicist tradition (practised in Italy at least until the Hungarian crisis and carried out by the editors with a strong theoretical focus on 'method as truth') that brought *Officina* to the vanguard of Italian periodical culture and functioned as its mark of distinction.[7] More specifically, unlike Ferretti and Petrucciani, we place in *Officina*'s high, almost draconian, moral standings and constant state of systemic doubt, its mark of distinction during, before and after the Hungarian revolution. In other words, like Santato and Mengaldo, we read *Officina* essentially as a clear statement on language as a critical method to understand reality. But we believe that such a claim needs to be revisited along the interpretative lines drawn by an evolving classical Marxist conceptual paradigm, which places history at its core and sees class conflict as its engine.

Officina: a laboratory

The story of this short-lived little magazine is renowned. It dates back to the years of the Liceo Classico Galvani in Bologna, when Francesco Leonetti, Roberto Roversi and Pier Paolo Pasolini first met and conceived the project, in terms of what they later described as their shared desire for 'freedom' (Santato 2012, 223–24).[8] If political freedom for them was synonymous with high morals, literary freedom meant a much-needed rejection of both *Novecentismo*, broadly understood as an exclusively literary and autonomous practice, and of the Gramscian intellectual model, if such a model was monolithically and not subtly defined (Santato 2012, 228). In 1955, Pasolini was an established writer who had published *Ragazzi di vita* with leading Milanese publisher Garzanti and *La meglio gioventù*, while encountering robust, unapologetic opposition from the PCI.[9] This disagreement occurred well before the publication of his highly controversial *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (1957) with the same publisher, voicing Pasolini's notorious dismissal of class structure as a means of organising and comprehending collectivity and his laceration of the modern intellectual, torn between engagement with reality and lyrical mysticism.[10] The bourgeois intellectual, whom Pasolini himself reluctantly embodied and performed, was undergoing a profound process of redefinition, which could not have been resolved by the dialectics of reason, but had to be accepted as the expression of an unresolvable tension between the pre-historical and the historical, the pre-ideological and the ideological, the rational and the irrational ([1954], Garzanti edition 1957, see Voza 2000, 11–13; Ferri 1996, 172–174, 176–178).

The editors' ambition was for the journal to take a firm position within the literary field, calling for both a revisiting of the national literary tradition and an opening up of unexplored interpretative pathways (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'Bozzetti e scherme. La posizione', a. I, no. 6, 1955, 250).[11] In this vein, they explicitly questioned the idea of literature as a heuristic and autonomous tool for the understanding of society and sociability, and thus gathered together in an eclectic manner the Italian literary and intellectual intelligentsia of the 1950s and 1960s, largely spread across the three main cultural centres of Rome, Milan and Bologna.[12] For everyone involved in the life of the review, to find a space in *Officina* meant the opportunity to write topical, if not militant, essays, which were not required to be lengthy or too polished, but had to be short and very much directed toward 'the crux' of the matter. Or, in Pasolini's own words to Milan-based poet Vittorio Sereni: 'The review was born poor, dispossessed, but, and I am sure you can feel it, "new". […] you understand that […] we want to start a process of revision of the literary world we have so far lived in' (Rome, 2 March 1955, *Letters*, vol. 2, 25).

This was a *sine qua non* requirement for inclusion, since 'we shall focus on essence, on a scheme; in other words, setting aside the writer, on a not too long and laborious effort, which is a

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summary of his/her work whether done or to be done on the subject', as Pasolini explained to critic Giuseppe de Robertis on 14 November 1955 (Rome, *Letters*, vol. 2, 134). On 2 February 1955, Pasolini wrote to Leonetti stating unequivocally that he was not interested in involving foreign writers or contributors in *Officina* (*Letters*, vol. 2, 14). Pasolini is indicating more than an editorial strategy, he is outlining a conceptual model of cultural, if not explicitly political, action. Despite the editors' best intentions, they more often made an acceptable compromise. In his unpublished correspondence, the young Leonetti makes a similar point in his letter to Pasolini on 27 July 1955:

> Our little qualm, in general, as you know, – and it is relevant to all our 'articles' – is that *Officina* is dedicated to the standard relationships of literary life, which are beautifully shaped like 'debates' (pointless ones). […] We would like to 'raise' the level of our discourse out of rigour and not arrogance (cited in Mancianti 1988–1989, 340).[13]

Especially in the first series, under Pasolini's most interventionist auspices, *Officina* often acted in a not too dissimilar tone from the Gobetti/*La Voce*, but never Futurist, tradition of avant-garde engagement, and opposition through high culture and civic humanism to the status quo determined by the political class (Mengaldo 1983, 147–48). *Officina* was not meant to be a militant journal in the traditional sense therefore, but rather a laboratory of 'systemic doubt', where traditional Marxist criticism and stylistic preoccupations were the two main antagonists in a Gramsci-Contini dialogue. In other words, it would be fair to claim that *Officina* functioned as a legitimising factor within the national aesthetic and political systems in so far as it continued the pre-war intellectual tradition of militancy inaugurated by the Florentine and Turinese avant-gardes gathered around the journal *La Voce* and Gobetti, but added to it the strong need for political *impegno* towards civic society as a whole by choosing, unlike its predecessors, the elite genre of poetry over that of prose, of national literature over translations, or of literary criticism over philosophical writing.

As an optimistic Pasolini spelled out in his letter to contributor Massimo Ferretti on 2 December 1955: 'being published by *Officina* means to be taken into consideration by the most important Italian readers'; it meant 'having enough symbolic capital to acquire a central position on the national map' (Rome, 2 December 1955, Pasolini, *Letters*, vol. 2, 136).[14] In his letter dated 8 June 1955 to Leonardo Sciascia, who at the time was about to debut with his first autobiographical novel *Le parrocchie di Regalpetra* (1956), the young Leonetti had made a similar point about the role and position of the review within the Italian literary space:

> You are one of us and we would very much like to bring about your participation in our enterprises (and then enjoy and take advantage of it). Would you not agree that, despite presenting an image of a 'united front of post-war militant poetry reviews', the other reviews are either politicised or aestheticized–cosmopolitan, and that ours is more direct and stronger than the others? (cited in Mancianti 1988–1989, 332).

Amongst the other notable writers and critics who published and contributed to the review, we find intellectuals, poets, novelists and writers spanning four different generations: those who were born in the 1910s, such as Attilio Bertolucci, Giorgio Caproni, Mario Luzi, Giorgio Bassani (who did not accept the invitation to be part of the editorial group),[15] Alberto Moravia, Franco Fortini and Sandro Penna; those in the 1920s, such as Angelo Romanò, Gianni Scalia, Italo Calvino, Luciano Erba, Elio Pagliarini, and Paolo Volponi; those in the 1930s, such as Edoardo Sanguineti, Alberto Arbasino and Massimo Ferretti; and finally, the old guard with Carlo Emilio Gadda, Giuseppe Ungaretti and Clemente Rebora. Angelo Romanò, Gianni Scalia, and Franco Fortini were to join the editorial team in the second incarnation of the review and would play an important role in changing its focus to more topical concerns, such as intellectual engagement.

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In the true spirit of any little, militant and experimental avant-garde magazine, there was very little distinction between old and new, established and emerging 'agents', for it was the vigour and insight of the contribution that mattered. Rather than a generational divide, we can see two main editorial *habitus* gradually emerging from *Officina*: Leonetti and Roversi on the one hand, and Romanò and Pasolini on the other, with Leonetti often acting as mediator between the two.[16] The Romanò/Pasolini line more strongly supported historicism as a method, while the other pair were more open to what would emerge as the linguistic and structuralist turn in literary criticism, with a progressive schism from issues n.6 to n.10 (Mancianti 1988–1989, ch. 3).

Officina was divided into four sections entitled: 'La nostra storia', 'Testi e allegati', 'La cultura italiana', 'Appendice', which in the second series were to be renamed 'Il nuovo impegno', 'Discorso critico' and 'Testi e note' (Santato 2012, 222–223). No reviews of other publications were ever published, only extensive critical assessments of key problems of what the *Officina* editors accepted as 'Italian literary history' were welcomed. However, following in the footsteps of the most consolidated elite tradition of literary journals since at least the eighteenth century, *Officina* shaped itself as a meta-historical network, a 'review of reviews', embracing an established practice stretching as far back at least as *La Ronda* and a militant statement following on from *La Voce*'s example (see Romanò, 'Analisi critico-bibliografiche II', a. I, no. 2, 1956, 67, 71).

It is also worth remembering that *Officina* published very little prose (in relative terms), apart from Gadda's 'Il libro delle furie' (the third chapter of *Eros e Priapo. Da furore a cenere*, published in full only in 1967) and Calvino's neorealist short story *I giovani del Po* in the first and second series respectively.[17] In line with the journal's articles, the unpublished correspondence reveals some strong reservations on Calvino's neorealist writing and some explicit praise for Gadda's baroque style;[18] the former belonged to a past era of neorealist aesthetics and writing, while the latter embodied the experimental use of languages and dialects in writing prose, which the little Bologna-based journal sought to champion and which was to pave the way to the neo-avant-garde in the 1960s.[19] This editorial position is even clearer if we look at Francesco Leonetti's letter to poet Cesare Vivaldi on 29 November 1955:

> We were and we still are very much against the idea of publishing texts in dialect in *Officina*. This is because *Officina* begins where the dialect period ends, in our opinion, and for the following reasons. We, of course, deem dialect to be a valid means of expression in its own terms. Nevertheless, after the war, for good historical reasons, we have seen a period in which, since the liquidation of hermeticism – or, better, the intimate overcoming of its spiritual attitudes – was happening, and because of the lack of a poetic language, dialect was apt to cover that transition, while also allowing for a more immediate reconnection to a different way of being human (cited in Mancianti 1988–1989, 349–350).

It is worth remembering that as early as 1952, Pasolini co-edited (with Mario Dell'Arco) and wrote the introductory essay for the first Italian anthology of dialect poetry covering the first half of the twentieth century, entitled *La poesia dialettale del Novecento*.[20] Contrary to Leonetti's statement, for Pasolini, dialect poetry was an extremely powerful means of reconnecting intellectuals with otherwise voiceless subaltern groups (Della Terza 1961, 309–10; Mengaldo 1983). *Officina*'s ambition was therefore twofold and Gramscian in spirit: both to rewrite the nineteenth-century Italian literary tradition and to connect, in a historical block, the elites with the marginal groups, which had been left 'outside history'. Crucially, however, such a connection had to be achieved through a new experimental literary language, able ideologically and stylistically to surpass *Novecentismo* and neorealism, and thus to be in a position of championing an idea of literariness, which had to be closely connected and intertwined with the materiality of the real – whether socially or subjectively constructed.

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When *Officina* was passed on to the Milanese Bompiani publishing house – a mainstream publisher working outside elite circles – Leonetti, in a letter to Pasolini dated 16 September 1957, reiterated the review's relentless and foundational civic mission, its stark rejection of literary history produced by a coterie of individualities (see Scalia on De Sanctis, cited), and emphasised the need for an understanding of history as social collectivity:

> If you could use as a Guile of Reason this moment which is both viable and favourable to your fortune, and propose the review to Garzanti (under a formula not of adoption but partial takeover, with a broad-based editorial board, all of whom useful, and with a certain attention, perhaps a publicity launch, perhaps at national level, which might also mean at European level, but with vigorous and not simply feigned willingness). At the end of the day, it could be a review, which might function a little like the 'backbone' of a publisher, like a collection of lively forces, and it is […] already and surely a very useful cultural tool; perhaps not passive in itself, if carefully used to build a new literature based on ideas, rather than on individual works (and, finally, an opposition to official culture in mediated, stimulating and reinvigorating forms) (cited in Manchianti 1988/89, 393).

In a letter to the editor discussing the new life of the review, in January 1957, Pasolini also admitted that they did not have sufficient political training to be able to discuss anything but literature and its own 'truths' and methods (*Letters*, vol. 2, 271). Even more than before, now in its final incarnation, *Officina*'s ethos still supported a collective conceptualisation of aesthetic and literary efforts, and it reinforced the importance of ideas/truth as the pre-eminent analytical method, over that practised by *Novecentismo*'s individual self-indulgence. Such a methodological and conceptual step change paved the way for other reviews, such as *Il Menabò* and *Quaderni piacentini*, which would re-focus their attention on the relationship between writers and society (Santato 2012, 229).

A manifesto

Officina was a fairly eclectic mix of long, theoretically and historically sound essays, and of poetic contributions; or one could argue it was a laboratory for theorising historical materialism and practising poetic subjectivity. Presumably, however, and in a not dissimilar fashion from the early twentieth-century periodical culture it questioned and challenged, in the mid-1950s *Officina* intended to be, in many respects, a fairly traditional manifesto for cultural renewal in almost absolute terms since:

> It wants to be a review entirely devoted to poetry and poetics (and to critical activity concerning poetry, and only exceptionally other themes), not elegant and anthological, but beautiful and fast-paced, tenacious, and a review of principles […], of a group, of a tendency, at its foundations, and open to all movements. […] A review of men in their thirties – not of today's youngsters (a review that by definition wanted to be anti-traditionalist, and it is now our tradition we need to break in order to rebuild it) (Leonetti, letter to Pasolini, 18 October 1954, Francesco Leonetti personal archive).

One could further extend such a hypothesis to include how Pasolini et al. viewed *Officina*'s mission: as a method for comprehending reality, but a historicist method, which ultimately presupposed 'truth' as an individual, existentialist, outcome of any analysis (on this point, see also Fortini, 'Il nuovo impegno', n. I, new series, 1959, 3–6).

Method and truth

In many of his essays, such as 'La Posizione', 'Una polemica in versi', and 'La libertà stilistica', Pasolini returns to the same issue linking Marxism with existentialism, and denounces the 'irrationalism' of earlier Novecento literature, whose formalism, imbued as it was with its own

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aesthetic consciousness, seemed to tone with the Fascist involution of society ('La libertà stilistica', a. II, no. 9–10, 1957, 342). Behind the scenes, as ever, the connection Pasolini sketches in the summary of the review's ethos lies in the nexus of method and truth. In a quasi-positivistic/Hegelian fashion and looking back at the debate on realism, he sees poïesis as a way of rebuilding knowledge, or better still the knowledge guaranteed by tradition, a tradition that needs to be broken to be renewed and discovered all over again (344–345). And as Leonetti partially clarified in a letter to Pasolini (27 February 1955):

> […] do you remember that at least until two, three years ago, mine and Roversi's position was one of tremendous diffidence, not only towards hermeticism, but towards the whole of modern poetry, where concepts were in circulation – even treated as fundamental – that were expounded by the Symbolist movement (with its own decadentism on the one hand, and with its own critical organisation which no longer defended but took for granted the purely 'essential' lyrical world) (cited in Mancianti 1988–1989, 316).

Pasolini's ambitious attempt is that of realigning Croce's lyrical categories both with Contini's philological precision and stylistics and with Spitzer's *Stilkritik* and psychological mysticism within a Gramscian theoretical framework. In a nutshell, *Officina* designed a space 'in between' the subjectivity and objectivity (and not only history) of a crisis, which had to account for the extra-textual and ideological elements of textuality (Casadei-Santagata 2007, 324–325; Ferri 1996, 203, 205).[21] As well as being indebted to the critical methodologies of Croce, Spitzer and Gramsci, Pasolini was also deeply indebted to Contini's *Preliminari sulla lingua del Petrarca* (1951) and to its defence of the *Commedia*'s plurilingualism, interpreted as a means of resolving the unresolvable tension between rationality and irrationality through the multiple and diffracting points of view of the individual characters, and not only through the fixed gaze of the author, which was instead championed by Petrarch's monolingualism (Santato 2012, 231; Ferri 1996, 206). As Mengaldo has pointed out (1983, 137–139), if such a dichotomy is not entirely satisfactory and is in many ways restrictive, experimentalism can nonetheless be realised as another impossible, yet productive, conflict; furthermore, and, suggestively as far as *Officina*'s civic mission is concerned, it can be realised as 'violent conceptualisation' (Scalia [1963] 1982, 8597), or even more pertinently as a mixture and contamination of styles which, in exceeding any rigidly constructed dichotomy, achieves significance.

A fuller understanding of *Officina*'s methodological position can be gained from the two essays Pasolini published as main author. Especially in the second series, the notions of *sperimentalismo* as constant dialectical opposition and *neo-sperimentalismo* as a fusion of neo-realism and post-hermeticism seem to be the ones most widely accepted and explored. Such concepts allow for a reconsideration of the fundamental assumptions of Gramscian cultural analysis and, as Benedetti spells out, for a critique of a form of literary neo-experimentalism (and not experimentalism), which had been reduced to a pure game of self-referentiality, deprived of any literary tradition (1998, 118; and see also de Castris 1993, 38 and Vighi 2000). For Pasolini, *sperimentalismo* is intrinsically part of literary language, for it enables the writer to transform and create fictional realities through a careful philological activity, consisting in arranging a mutable constellation of signs. *Sperimentalismo* marries Gramsci with Contini, and in doing so produces further interpretative potentialities, which are still part of a given historical context (Levato 2002, 26). Literariness, Pasolini concluded, is to be interpreted as an analytical method to explain semantic structures germinating from a historical reality (Pasolini, 'La libertà stilistica', 346). In line again with the European debate on Marxism, *Officina* as a whole subscribed to the notion of *literariness* as a sign in linguistic terms encompassing both subjectivity and reality, or as a dynamic form of equilibrium, which could be read simultaneously either as a political/ideological

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or aesthetic (lyrical) statement (342, see also Scalia on 'Serra', a. I, no. 4, 1955, 131; Ferri 1996, 205).

As Pasolini notoriously argues elsewhere in his reflections on heretical Marxism from *Le ceneri* to *Empirismo eretico* (1972) (see de Castris 1993, 34; Vighi 2000, 239–240), poetry has to be a preferred means of interpreting, transforming, engaging and experimenting with reality or, more significantly, reality as irrationality, for it allows a fusion of language and materiality (de Castris 1993, 33, 37; Mengaldo 1983, 128). Pasolini saw poetry as acting according to the paradigm of crisis and contradiction – an articulation of his thought which he developed during his time in Friuli and in *Le ceneri*, and which led him to privilege an anthropological over a dialectical or even existentialist view of society and of collectivist action (de Castris 1993, 31–32).

It is perhaps worth remembering that in 1957, Sartre published in the Polish journal *Twórczość* 'Questions de méthode', to be reprinted in 1960 as *Critique de la raison dialectique.* This essay was Sartre's own attempt at reconciling existentialism and Marxism in terms of complementary and not opposing methods of analytical inquiry into reality. In a way, albeit never in direct or open dialogue, both Sartre and the *Officina* group were sharing an ethical and aesthetic mission when trying to reaffirm the importance of individuality – after its post-war dismissal that favoured collective engagement and endeavour – while not simply discharging the aesthetics of mimesis but, as we shall see, rather upholding those of neorealist *mimesis* plus the experimental *contamination* of styles (Ferri 1996, 140; Luperini 2012, 92). If one, therefore, considers how the French philosopher read the idea of subjectivity as fundamental in the working mechanisms of collective action (Vittoria 1992, 170–171), *Officina*'s timely central concern of re-assessing the relationship between *io/storia* (subjectivity and history) and the role of literariness and experimentalism implicitly achieves a *longue durée* effect of transnational reverberation.[22] In its fusion of historicity, language and subjectivity (and in their irreconcilable differences), *Officina*'s contributions aligned themselves indirectly with the European Marxist debate on aesthetics and ideologies, which was at the time unfolding not only around Sartre but also around the 1950s version of the Frankfurt school starting with Adorno's *Minima moralia* in 1951 and peaking with Marcuse's *Eros and Civilisation* in 1955.

Method and literary history

Officina's unspoken alignment with the European cultural debate on historicity and the civic mission of the individual is of fundamental importance to the recalibration of the journal's role as, first and foremost, a national endeavour, acting as a mediator in the transition from neorealism to the new avant-gardes.

The review's interest in an understanding of literary history as a series of conceptual step changes, encapsulating subjectivity and objectivity, emerges in the first three essays published as lead articles; they are all on canonical figures and they hardly propose an anti-canon. Not only do such contributions go back to the nineteenth century tradition, they also advocate a conceptual and non-linear history of Italian literature to be recounted according to a series of ideological/aesthetic, well-defined a-temporal categories. Pasolini's Pascoli, Leonetti's Leopardi and Romanò's Manzoni are, to varying degrees, positive intellectual figures, fundamentally because of their linguistic experimentalism. Leopardi, Pascoli and Manzoni are not only aloof, passive intellectuals, but 'living organisms and thoughts', solidly grounded in the materiality of their linguistic existence and not simply in any form of 'weak thought' or obsessive regurgitation (Pasolini, 'Pascoli', a. I, no. 1, 1955, 7, Leonetti, 'Leopardi', a. I, no. 2, 1955, 58, Angelo Romanò, 'Manzoni', a. I, no. 3, 1957, 91). Far from slipping into any form of weak thought, in their

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materialist and experimental preoccupation with the language of reality, these writers could be productive, transformative forces (even throughout Pascoli's contradictions). These first three essays make a strong claim for a poetics of action towards reality and for creating a durable link between literariness as linguistic experimentalism and *impegno* as action upon reality. The bourgeois hero's return is not anticipated as the usual symbol, or allegory even, of crisis and lack of totality, but rather as a teleologically driven force for transformation (Ravetto 2003, 234).

Pascoli is innovative because through his linguistic experimentalism with the language of the '*umili*' (lower classes), he can avoid writing intimistic, self-referential obsessive poetry and thus he can be counted as an example of anti-Novecentism. However, Pasolini's own interpretation sees Pascoli still failing on two counts (Mengaldo 1983, 145–146). Firstly, unlike Manzoni and, more incisively, Verga right through to Gadda, Pascoli does not expand his linguistic range in response to a given historical reality, 'a vision of the world which presupposes a point of view removed from the world itself' ('Pascoli', 8). Secondly, Pascoli's problem is still teleological. It lies in his exclusive preoccupation with a cyclical notion of time, which does not allow change and transformation in reality. Such an idea of static temporality is expressed in Pascoli's lack of historical awareness and obsessive regurgitations of the same images in his works.[23] In a similar anti-*Novecentista* vein, Leonetti's Leopardi, too, is not only the poet of pessimistic, lyrical intimacy, but an enlightening advocate of a 'propositive tension', of a transformation ('Leopardi', 58).

In the opening issue, in Scalia's short yet programmatic reading of another foundational figure, Francesco De Sanctis, the debate on the Gramscian methodological discourse continues and still refers back to the nineteenth-century tradition of civic humanism. Scalia places De Sanctis against and at the same time in-between both Croce (the lyrical) and Gramsci (the historical) (Ferri 1996, 162). The critic has to be re-inscribed in the main literary tradition (although not paradigmatically), because of his battle in defence of a sense of civic mission and commitment, since: 'Art as a relationship with human and natural realities is the main focus of artistic research and critical analysis: De Sanctis has given us one of the highest examples of a historical discourse founded on the arts' ('Un paradigma: l'attualità di De Sanctis', a. I, no. 1, 1955, 31).[24] *Officina* looks at the nineteenth-century intellectual tradition of civic humanism as the blueprint of a new history for Italian culture or of a new literary history, which has to be written outside the ethical and moral limitations imposed in turn by decadentism and by neorealism (Mengaldo 1983, 127–128).

Throughout *Officina*'s short life, decadentism and neorealism are discussed on numerous occasions and according to more or less explicitly juxtaposing perspectives but unavoidably as two unsatisfactory solutions (Leonetti, 'Il decadentismo come problema contemporaneo', a. I, no. 6, 1956, 211–227 and again in Leonetti, 'Di qua e di là dal neorealismo' (a. I, new series, 1959, 7–8). Ultimately Leonetti, in agreement with Pasolini, concludes that, if decadentism has to be discussed as essentially a moral problem and dilemma, there can be no easy conclusion. Furthermore, if decadentism was unable to overcome the moral, stylistic and political problem of its day (namely, that embodied by liberalism and by Croce's philosophy), by the same token neorealism was prone to a simplistic view of reality that favoured an exclusively 'positive' ethical stance expressed by an artificial language, and it was unable to capture the diverse registers of reality in linguistic forms. 'Nevertheless, is it not, rather, a decadent *refoulé* which is fighting, like we are, against this desire to be, or to be new?' (Leonetti, 'Il decadentismo come problema contemporaneo', 226). For *Officina*'s group as a whole sought to propose: 'a historicist-realist design founded on the idea (borrowed from Gramsci, but read through a Crocean-Gramscian-Continean lens, and common to the whole of *Officina*'s discourse) of "culture" as a necessary

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mediation between poetry and reality, as an indispensable matrix or a dialectic pole foundational to a truly renewed literature' (Ferretti 1975, 50).

Language and experimental writing are ways of constructing alternative realities within the historical (or again Hegelian) domain and of engaging with society as a whole (Vighi 2000, 244). After 1955, if renewal was still possible or indeed needed, how could it have been pursued? What conceptual paradigm could have sustained such a renewal?

Method and politics

As clarified in 'La libertà stilistica', the association between method (poïesis) and truth (reality) would also become the key factor in the 1950s definition of engagement in the arts from neorealist aesthetics to the neo-avant-gardes; moreover, it would be embraced in the PCI's Cultural Commission programme (Vittoria 1992, 107) as well as accounting for what Pasolini came to see as a truly unorthodox Marxist voice. If Gramsci had to be scrutinised and reconfigured in order to solve the problem of the '*nazional-popolare*', the Cultural Commission was also, in the same years, moving from an orthodox position on culture, seen as organically growing from a given group or class, to a more nuanced and less dialectic understanding of it, which took into account individuality and subjectivity as tenable forms of artistic expression. But it also took into significant account the role of intellectuals and journals in facilitating cultural production in its own terms and not as shaped by party politics (Vittoria 1992, 120–121; Billiani 2016, 87–88). This is why, when, on 19 July 1955, Leonetti wrote to the militant, intellectual, established father figure Elio Vittorini about *Officina*'s overall structure and the merits of his Einaudi series 'I gettoni',[25] he could state that:

> As you have certainly deduced, we are trying very hard to give *Officina*'s first part, 'Our History', a rigorous structure that we see as a discreet critical revision, with a gently historiographical note and in direct correlation with the poetics and ideology of the first half of the century. Following this will be compositions, which do not need to be beautiful, that is to say abstract, anthological, if compared to the implicit tendency of the review […]. And a third part, 'Italian Culture' which, within the boundaries of constant bibliographical references, aims to be programmatic and methodological (cited in Mancianti 1988–1989, 339).

As a concerted endeavour, a 'cultural experience' with multiple voices and not only that of Pasolini, *Officina* envisaged an idea of culture as relentless position-taking exercises but not as '*posizionamenti*' and, more specifically, as a form of broken mediation between the political and the aesthetic. Only in this way could the journal articulate the '*dramma irrisolto*' between subjectivity, language and reality (which can be understood as historical reality in the case of '*impegno*'), which declared the end of neorealism and *Novecentismo*.

In both 'Il neo-sperimentalismo' and 'La libertà stilistica', the question of how to achieve freedom in stylistic practice is once more linked to wider problems related to ideological choices. In his 'Il neo-sperimentalismo' in particular, Pasolini stressed the 'expressionistic', experimental, vitalistic and of course anti-decadent, hermeticist and neorealist aspects of the Italian tradition, since all are an expression of bourgeois culture. This is, of course, Pasolini's counter-attack (if not a direct attack) against the PCI's ostracism of his own works (most notably *Le ceneri*) as well as a response to the party's assumptions on the pedagogical role of the arts in society. If it is partly true that Pasolini is, in this instance, arguing against neorealism and bourgeois culture, it is also true that his choice of privileging poetry over prose indicates an alternative to a rationalist and historicist method of critical enquiry in order to achieve greater awareness of contemporary culture in its irrational and subaltern expressions (Ferretti 1974, 210).

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In this respect, Pasolini had judged the party position to be conservative because it refused to accept the category of vitalism, as an anthropological determination which is not class-centred, over that of class consciousness as a powerful social and ideological force for driving change and, therefore, social reform. According to Pasolini, vitalism as an individual transformative force was, on the contrary, to be adopted as a methodological category as well as a theoretical principle, to renew both our conceptualisation of the Italian tradition and of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity. Pasolini could not accept the PCI's party line on realism as mimesis and authenticity because of its exclusive emphasis on an optimistic solution,[26] but he could instead support a call for an aesthetic/conceptual construction – albeit illusionary and precarious – of culture/literary history and intellectual freedom, if these were founded on technical experimentation, philological precision and, crucially, linguistic pluralism and experimentalism (see also, Roversi, no. 1, new series, 1959, 16–17). Thus the new 'engaged writer and intellectual' (Roversi, 'Lo scrittore in questa società', no. 2, new series, 1959, 16–19) ought to reject self-reflecting literary practices, such as hermeticism, in favour of 'experimental' literature, while both pursuing a socio-political reinterpretation of culture and examining the tensions and contrasts between subjective and intersubjective experience and history.[27]

Between issues 6 and 11, Leonetti and Roversi in many ways responded to Pasolini, thereby illustrating *Officina*'s different dispositions and internal fractures. Leonetti finds Pasolini's position problematic. An illuminating essay in this respect is Leonetti's 'Preposizioni per una teoria della letteratura' (a. II, no. 9–10, 1957, 369–397). Developed through six separate sections, the 'Preposizioni' sketch a conceptual map for a new literary theory, responding to the self-legitimising positions of Croce, Gramsci and Pasolini. Leonetti is against history, if deterministically conceived, against Croce's attitude towards historical reality and, more importantly, against Pasolini's problematic dismissal of decadentism on moral grounds. However, Leonetti takes sides with Pasolini when he opts for experimental writing as a method for historical awareness and rejects both positivism and the total ontology of the real as an old-school interpretation of the idea of *engagement*.[28]

In the second, and even more so in the third series, the problem of literariness continued to be key; but it was more explicitly and directly connected with that of *impegno*, as Vittorini points out in his letter to Leonetti (12 October 1957):

> Dearest Leonetti, your letter has made me anxious about *Officina*. Look, it would be a real shame if you decided to give up now. You might be pedantic and jaunty (or jaunty pedantics) but you still are the only ones with whom one can have a proper chat, and perhaps even generate ideas, without getting bored. Pascoli himself, if *Officina* was no longer there, would end up being absorbed by the Rome-based planners that want to cultivate Italy like a small garden – the Bassanis, the Bertoluccis, etc. (cited in Mancianti 1988–1989, 397).

Even in his critique of Pasolini's precarious (unorthodox) take on Marxist cultural praxis and of Fortini's 'natural engagement' with limited critical distance, Vittorini acknowledged the centrality of civic presence/tradition/humanism as far as any cultural discourse is concerned, and the imperative for intellectuals to be part of the social sphere as a solid and intersubjective whole and not as fragments spread across egotistic 'gardens' (see Scalia on 'Serra', on pre-war humanism and proto-*impegno*, 129).[29] The same vitalism (never messianic in nature), which for so long was central to the development of the Italian tradition, was to be kept alive both in literary and ideological spheres. Until its closure, *Officina* had been trying to reshape the role of the intellectual and the notion of engagement in view of transformations in the public sphere. Without following the PCI's party line, it did so in opposition to *Il Politecnico*'s post-war excessive dichotomies, its '*ordine laico*' (Scalia, 'Per uno studio sulla cultura di sinistra del dopoguerra', a. II, no. 12, 1958, 515), to neorealistic moralism and even to *Nuovi Argomenti*'s lack of 'teamwork' (Scalia,

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'Nuovi Argomenti', a. I, no. 3, 1955, 114). *Officina*'s multi-faceted, often contradictory narratives around the articulations of engagement indicate how the notion of the 'hegemonic block' and of neorealism had to come to an end by the 1950s.

Conclusions

In this topsy-turvy paradigm-shift, *Officina*'s editors gave space to fragmented notions of either engagement or experimentalism as interconnected ways of understanding the real, since both of them had to conform to a more diversifying notion of civic society, ethics and civic commitment, which was emerging in the 1950s.

As detailed in the debate on method, literary language and the reassessment of the nineteenth-century national tradition, this shift was towards a form of engagement and a concept of literary tradition, which accounted for the vitalistic nature of reality, thereby becoming socially inter-subjective and communicative, and not prescriptive and strictly based on class consciousness, as dictated by the PCI, just as in Pasolini's own view in *Ragazzi di vita* (Voza 2000, 21; Mengaldo 1983, 129). Despite never being overtly political and apart from the essays on Lukács in Italy by Fortini and the article 'Marxissants' by Pasolini ('Il nuovo impegno', no. 2, new series, 1959, 69), *Officina* signalled a general recalibration not only of the relationship between intellectuals and society, but also of the role played by the arts in shaping the public sphere.[30]

In 'Marxissants', therefore, the probing questions that Pasolini asks are: what constitutes opposition, how can an intellectual voice dissent from hegemonic power? Where are the boundaries of neo-capitalism? What language can a writer use to talk about new social configurations, such as urban migration, the new proletariat, decolonisation? Which social groups have been marginalised in neo-capitalist society? As witnessed throughout *Officina*'s entire existence, Pasolini's answers notoriously rejected rationalism *per se* as a method to uncover truth, and rather welcomed the idea of an inclusive humanism, which placed the individual and especially marginal groups at the centre, 'including the poorest man of the poorest land, on the verge of being eliminated from himself, from the world, of no longer existing' (no. 2, new series, 1959, 73). Such an anthropological understanding of humanism as engaged intersubjectivity was *Officina*'s own central question, which has remained, evidently, without a definite answer and which, as far as the 1950s are concerned, reflected Pasolini's 'unresolved dilemma' and ambivalence towards unorthodox Marxism in so far as it questioned precisely those ideological and aesthetic presuppositions that had defined the post-war era in Italy and across the European cultural landscape.

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Notes

1. As far as the landscape of reviews with a similar programme is concerned, comparable initiatives took place around Italy's main intellectual centres. It is worth remembering that, in Milan, in 1955 A. Giambronco Guiducci established *Ragionamenti* and in 1956 Luciano Anceschi *il Verri*; in Rome, in 1953 Alberto Carocci, Alberto Moravia, Leonardo Sciascia and Enzo Siciliano set up *Nuovi Argomenti*, in 1954 Romano Bilenchi, Carlo Salinari and Antonello Trombadori founded *Il Contemporaneo* (a supplement to *Società*), in 1956 Nicola Chiaromonte and Ignazio Silone, *Tempo Presente* and in 1958 Lelio Basso, *Problemi del socialismo*, and in 1958 Fabrizio Onofri and Marco Cesarini Sforza, *Tempi Moderni*; in 1959 Elio Vittorini and Italo Calvino initiated *Il Menabò* in Turin; in 1954 Francesco Campagna in Naples established *Nord e Sud*.
2. For the genesis of the review see, Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Bozzetti e scherme. La posizione", a. I, no. 6, 1955, 245.
3. Critics seem to concur on these points (see de Castris 1993, 42; Ward 1995, 51–58; Ferretti 1974, 293–301; Francese 1991, 9–10; Bertoni 2010, 84, Ó'Ceallacháin 2013, 476–77). For an overview of the wide-ranging debate, see Carlo Bernari's reply to the "Questioni sul realismo. Inchiesta di Franco Matacotta. Risposte di Carlo Bernari, Alberto Moravia, Vasco Pratolini, Elio Vittorini", *Tempo Presente*, no. 2, 7 July 1957, 519.
4. If this assessment has been widely accepted by critics discussing *Officina*, there has never been an attempt at connecting the debate to a wider European landscape.
5. For an overview of the intellectual profile and composition of the journal, see D'Elia (1998); Ferretti (1964); Ferretti (1975); Ferretti (1998); Scalia (1963 [1982]); Ó'Ceallachain (2013).
6. Ferretti's position was criticised by Roberto Guiducci in *Avanti*, 14 May 1975 as not having investigated the methodological innovations presented by the journal. In 1955, Guiducci had co-founded the journal *Ragionamenti* and Franco Fortini was also a member of the editorial committee.
7. The main assessments to date of the relationship between intellectuals and the PCI are Vittoria (1992) and to a lesser extent Ferretti (1975, 77–81). In a letter to Franco Fortini, Pasolini praised the journal *Ragionamenti* for its 'attitude' towards the Hungarian crisis, and invited Fortini to read his own response in his poem "Una polemica in versi" published in *Officina*, no. 7, 1957, 283–289. Fortini offered his own lyrical reply 'Al di là della speranza (Risposta a Pasolini)', *Officina*, no. 8, 1957, 319–323 (for a discussion of this 'polemica' see Ó'Ceallacháin 2013, 478–486).
8. Pasolini discusses the history of the review in "La posizione", a. I, no. 6, 1956, 244. The bimonthly issue was published in Bologna by the local Arti Grafiche Calderin: the first series of the review ended in 1958, while the second one, published by Bompiani, started in March-April 1959 and terminated after two issues in the same year. Gianni Scalia, Angelo Romanò and Fortini joined the review's editorial board only in its second series. The journal had its office in via Rizzoli, 4, Bologna. Each issue was sold at L. 300, while the price for an annual subscription was L. 1.500. The administration of the magazine was handled by the bookshop 'Palmaverde' in Bologna. The bookshop belonged to Roversi, but Otello Masetti, head manager at the Cappelli bookshop in Bologna and close friend of Roversi's, ran it. In a letter dated 17 October 1955, Leonetti wrote to Pasolini suggesting that *Officina* should be read by militant readers and academics (Archivio Bonsanti, Gabinetto Vieusseux, Francesco Leonetti, ref. 661).
9. Carlo Salinari had vigorously criticised Pasolini's novel *Ragazzi di vita* with a review "Un equivoco libro sulle borgate" published in *l'Unità* on the 5 July 1955. Other communist critics (Tormbatore, *l'Unità*', Rome, 11 August 1955, and Seroni, *Vie Nuove*, 24 July 1955) had also been quite critical (Voza 2000, 8–9).
10. After Carlo Salinari's strong criticism of *Ragazzi di vita*, in *Officina* Pasolini opened a series of polemical exchanges directed particularly at *Il Contemporaneo*. In the same issue Calvino and Pasolini had instead reached a rather clear, yet extremely productive, disagreement over *Ragazzi di vita*.
11. In some unpublished notes, Leonetti sketches *Officina*'s ideal profile: 'Format: longish, like that of Ortega's, *The Rebellion of the Masses*. 40 pages. Every two months. Thick paper or thin. Six hundred or seven hundred copies' 'Sales per issue: 1, 74850 – 2, 92824 – 3, 82548 – 4, 87732 – 5, 85017 – 6, 92505 – 7, 92989 for a total for the first few issues of 608, 465' (file ARA VOS PREC, 446, 451). Sales and distribution were never of any significance and never enough to sustain the overall endeavour.
12. For the cultural specificity of the Bologna-based intellectual network, see Leonetti (1998, 107–117).
13. On this point, Fortini and Pasolini also came to disagree. Fortini was more open about the limitations of such an approach as being also inscribed in the tradition of old-school historicism.

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14. In his contribution, Leonetti too admits that *Officina* did not sell many copies, but reached all the important circles and relevant cultural agents, and this happened thanks to Pasolini's powerful role as cultural mediator (Leonetti 1998, 110–111).
15. See Pasolini's letter to the 'Editors of *Officina*', Rome, 15 April 1955, (*Letters*, vol. 2, 55).
16. Leonetti and Fortini began falling out around issues, a. II, no. 12, and 1-2 of the last series in 1959 (see for an extensive discussion of the various positions taken by the editors Mancianti 1988–1989).
17. In a letter to Leonetti, Calvino wrote that he judged that short story to be a failure (Turin, 19 February 1957) (Baranelli 2000, 482–483). In a letter to Pasolini on 5 April 1955, Leonetti describes Gadda as 'their ideal' (*Letters*, vol. 2, 323), while in a letter to Pasolini (14 February 1957) Leonetti finds Calvino quite disappointing (*Letters*, vol. 2, 380), while Pasolini considers him 'good if not outstanding' ("To *Officina*'s editors", Rome, 5 February 1957, *Letters*, vol. 2, 279).
18. In 1960 in *il Verri*'s first issue Alberto Arbasino published the article "I nipotini dell'ingegnere e il gatto di casa De Feo" as a critical appraisal of his generation and the magisterial role played by Gadda.
19. This editorial choice was often perceived as one of the shortcomings of the review, as Ferretti notes (1975, 35), but it is nonetheless squarely positioned within Pasolini's own interest in poetry as the only literary expression capable of fostering experimentation.
20. In 1957, together with Sergio Citti, Pasolini wrote the Roman dialect parts of Federico Fellini's film *Le notti di Cabiria* (1957).
21. Romanò, "Analisi critico-bibliografiche II", a. I, no. 2, 1955, 69. Romanò reinforced his anti-Crocean position in all his contributions, particularly so in the "Analisi" and the essay on "La scapigliatura", a. II, no. 7, 1957, 255–263.
22. As Vittoria (1992) observes, the relationship between the PCI and Sartre became stronger in the 1960s and in concomitance with the Algerian war of independence.
23. Carlo Salinari was very critical of Pascoli's lack of engagement in an article published in the *Contemporaneo*, 1, 1956. For an overview of all initiatives and contributions on Pascoli around the same time and on the occasion of his birth centenary, see Lanfranco Caretti, "Pascoli", *Il nuovo corriere*, Firenze, 21 Feb. 1955.
24. See also Romanò on "Manzoni", 88 and "Analisi critico-bibliografiche III" (a. I, no. 4, 1955, 151) for a critique of Bo's idea of literature and life as mirrors of each other, and thus existing outside of the historical dimension.
25. Leonetti and Roversi praised "I gettoni" because of their intrinsic literary and not only political value. Pasolini did not agree with such a claim. ("Prospetto delle riviste (III): Digressione per "I gettoni", a. I, no. 4, 1955, 159). See on this specific point Ferretti (1975, 49).
26. The exchange between Pasolini and Calvino on *Le ceneri* is testimony to this aesthetic change (Calvino, Turin 1 March 1956, wrote to Pasolini who replied from Rome on 6 March, 1956) (*Letters*, vol. 2, 173–176).
27. As Enzo Siciliano observes, *Officina* understood the importance of an intellectual figure like Renato Serra, trapped in the contradictions between the expectations of the literary world and those of society (1982, 8630).
28. See also, Leonetti, "Due versi sulla rivoluzione", a. II, no. 12, 1958, 481. In this essay Leonetti incisively concluded that 'historicity needs to be centred on the individuality-history and history-morality issues' (490).
29. In 1959 [n. d.], Angelo Romanò wrote to Pasolini about the internal tensions with Fortini, who had been questioning the basic principles informing *Officina*'s ethos (Archivio Bonsanti, Gabinetto Vieusseux, Angelo Romanò, ref. 1005).
30. In the second series the disagreements between Pasolini and Fortini will become more obvious. Fortini wanted to keep the literary and political spheres separated, while Pasolini could not see a clear distinction between the two.

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Italian summary

In questo articolo si discutono le intersezioni tra diverse forme di impegno, inteso come impegno politico, e le altrettante scelte di carattere estetico presentate nella rivista *Officina*. La nostra ipotesi di partenza é che *Officina* abbia svolto un ruolo fondamentale nella creazione di un sistema per la teorizzazione di una preposizione post-neorealista tanto dell'analisi critica marxista quanto del concetto di impegno intellettuale e politico. Attraverso il supporto di fonti archivistiche e l'analisi delle due principali linee discorsive che si dipanano in *Officina* - ovvero, quella del rifiuto estetico del Novecentismo, inteso quale epitome

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dell'autonomia dell'arte, e quella dell'articolazione di una forma di impegno marxista che potesse essere adatta per una società neo-capitalista e derivante da un ulteriore sviluppo dell'idea di intellettuale organico - ci si propone pertanto di rivalutare il ruolo di questa rivista d'avanguardia all'interno del dibattito culturale e politico italiano, facendo debito riferimento al coevo dibattito europeo sulla medesima questione.

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