

New Realism: Philosophy Recovers from the Post-Modernist "Hangover"

Francesca Giuliani (November 08, 2011)



"On The Ashes of Post-Modernism: A New Realism", an eight-hour long marathon of philosophy at the Italian Cultural Institute

The day after the 2011 New York City Marathon took place, the [Italian Cultural Institute](#) [2] of New York hosted an eight-hour long philosophical marathon, where the finest minds of our time challenged each other to define what is happening in the contemporary world of philosophy after the post-modernist "hangover" has passed.

The international conference "On the ashes of Post-Modernism: a New Realism", an initiative of the Framework Program "Slowness and Quality" promoted by La Fondazione NYC and sponsored by Alitalia, was a very intense and fruitful occasion to debate the state of the art in philosophical studies and approaches towards reality, in times when reality itself is increasingly complicated and hard to categorize systematically.



The conference saw world famous public intellectuals such as [Umberto Eco](#) [3] and [Hilary Putnam](#) [4] skypping with each other (Putnam was connected with the ICI from his home) and engaging in conversations over the questions posed by the audience, and a great number of prominent contemporary philosophers such as Akeel Bilgrami, Giovanna Borradori, Ned Block, Paul Boghossian, Petar Bojanic, Maurizio Ferraris, Markus Gabriel and Riccardo Viale, all presenting their reflections on those concepts such as "fact," "objectivity" and "reality" that Post-Modernist philosophy had dismissed as wrong and false, and on a more correct framing of those concepts in the context of today's and tomorrow's society.

The inspiring principles that motivated the Italian Cultural Institute to host such a panel have a lot to do with Italy per se. In fact, as Mario De Caro stated in his conclusive remarks, the claim to the existence of a "New Realism" represents the urge to a renewal of Italian culture after a season in which the Italian contribution to the global cultural debate has been less effective, when compared to a glorious and magnificent past of excellence.

The importance for philosophy to re-discuss its place in today's world after Post-Modernism, as Riccardo Viale (Director of the Italian Cultural Institute and Professor at Università di Milano-Bicocca) mentioned in his speech, is crucial in this critical historical moment.

The failure of "turbocapitalism" and a "gasification" of social structures trigger the need to reconsider the aforementioned notions that Post-Modernism wouldn't recognize and would instead debunk.

On this note, Hilary Putnam (Harvard University) stressed the importance of Scientific Realism, with a touch of irony in his words when he referred to Jacques Derrida as the philosopher who wouldn't recognize its importance, but still "flew on planes all the time."

While Akeel Bilgrami (Columbia University) focused his speech on "Realism and Practical Reason" on analysis of the importance of the individual as an agent, and on the perspective and detachment games that take place when the individual considers himself in "first person" or in "third person," Ned Block (NYU), by asking the audience his question "Is Consciousness an Illusion?" and challenged them with an analysis of color perception between color-blind people and regular-sighted people stressed the idea that there are, in fact, objective facts.

Ferraris (Università di Torino), who elaborated on "Reality as Unamendableness," explained the connections between the Post-Modernist concepts of the impossibility of objectivity and political and social perversions such as populism, the confusion of natural and social facts and its implications on constructivism, and the misconceptions on epistemology and ontology, the first worth reaffirming over the second specifically for its amendableness.

Umberto Eco (Università di Bologna) affirmed that he never fully understood Post-Modernism in fields other than the literary and the architectural, and especially in the realm of philosophy: "If there are no facts, only interpretations, then what are you interpreting?" he questioned.

Eco's arrival was saluted with great trepidation, especially by the international press attending the event who hoped to hear him commenting on Italy's severe political crisis: they went home disappointed, and probably a little confused.

Referring to his elaborations in "[Kant and the Platypus.](#)" [5] and to Charles Sanders Peirce's dynamic concept of "[Unlimited Semiosis.](#)" [6] that is given when the objects of the world force us and accustom us to reacting to them, Eco embraces a position of "minimal realism": "We speak because there's something that makes us speak. We don't know this 'something,' but the chain of interpretations either says 'yes' or 'no.'"

The possibility of failure, ultimately, shows that there is 'something' controlling our interpretations. Reality is out there, and we "kiss it," as Eco said, each time we fall and smash our face on the ground. The inquiry to understand it and find truth in it, however, is open like an "[Opera Aperta.](#)" [7]



Reality is out there, and it's about time that philosophers acknowledge it once again, and contribute to its definition and evolution in an increasingly pragmatic and approachable spirit. "Does philosophy matter?" asked Ned Block during his intervention. The answer is: "Yes, it finally does, once again."

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[5] <http://www.amazon.com/Kant-Platypus-Essays-Language-Cognition/dp/015601159X>

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