

Iwan Paolini

BORDERS, CULTURES, AND POWER SYSTEMS: LA BATTANA 1964-1990

Since its foundation, the magazine *La battana* has been a meeting point for an unexpectedly high number of Italian and Yugoslav intellectuals. Thanks to a multidisciplinary approach, *La battana* played a key role in the renovation of both Italian and Yugoslav aesthetic forms; through its numbers, we can see how cultures changed in time. Examining two editorials (from 1964 and 1989), and relating them to twenty-six years of political and social change, the article offers a historical overview of the magazine.

1. The project behind the magazine

The Italian-language magazine *La battana* (“The Small Fishing Boat”) was founded in 1964. After fifty years, we can read through the magazine’s history and evaluate how it registered not only the Balkan democratization process, but also the artistic and cultural debates of those years. In order to clearly understand the birth of the magazine, we must go back to 25 August 1963. On that day Rovinj hosted the first Congress of the Circolo dei poeti, dei letterati e degli artisti (“Poets, Writers and Artists’ Society”), also known as CPLA, an association which was part of the Unione degli Italiani di Istria e Fiume (“Union of the Italians of Istria and Fiume”), known as UIIF. As reported by Ezio and Luciano Giuricin, the CPLA aimed to “promote and coordinate the literary, artistic and cultural activities of

the national group”¹ One of the main goals of the Congress was to create a safe and autonomous space for the promotion of the cultural activities of the Italian minority in the Istro-Quarnerian region. To support and publicize these activities, the idea of an Italian-language magazine was first conceived during the debate at the Congress (Giuricin / Giuricin 2017: 150).

At that time, the UIIF was already managing a few magazines.² In this regard, we must keep in mind that this was not the first attempt of the Italian community of Fiume to create an autonomous literary magazine. In fact, the *Supplemento letterario* (“Literary Supplement”), which consisted of ten issues sold with *Panorama* (“Panorama”), was launched in 1960. However, what the CPLA still needed was the possibility of going beyond the limits of the minority’s circles in Fiume and to take part in European cultural debates. As remarked at the Congress, the main point of this new magazine project was “to keep in contact with other entities in order to let the minority’s writers emerge from the limited setting in which they work”³

Moreover, this cultural and artistic impulse of emancipation had already been anticipated by general, extensive programs of collaboration with Italy, which had already been planned at the XI UIIF Assembly, held in June 1963 and directed by Antonio Borme. It should be noted that the project of a multi-cultural magazine was a significant part of a more extended international and cultural program led by UIIF. During the second CPLA Congress, held in summer 1964, the magazine’s program was outlined and the name was chosen. The same commission nominated Eros Sequi⁴ as editorial director; Sequi appointed Lucife-

1 “[...] promuovere e coordinare le attività letterarie artistiche e culturali del gruppo nazionale” (Giuricin / Giuricin 2017: 154).

2 Among other magazines were: *Arcobaleno* (“Rainbow”), 1948; *Orizzonti* (“Horizons”), 1951; *Panorama* (“Panorama”), 1960.

3 “[...] prendere contatto con altre realtà per far uscire i letterari della minoranza dal ristretto ambito in cui si trovavano ad operare.” (E. Giuricin, L. Giuricin 2017: 154).

4 At that time Eros Sequi (1912-1995) was the director of the Italian Studies Department at the University of Belgrade. Sequi had already been director of the UIIF; in 1951, he was dismissed by the regional

ro Martini and Sergio Turconi as editors. In October 1964 the first issue of the magazine was ready. According to this reconstruction of events, as has been already observed (Milani / Dobran 2010: 19-44), the birth of *La battana* did not depend on the individual initiative of Martini, Sequi, and Turconi (as was previously believed). On the contrary, it was the final expression of a collective need. The CPLA felt the necessity of going beyond the limits of what risked becoming an isolated provincial cultural phenomenon; the whole Italian community felt the importance of connecting their particular experience as a minority both in relation to the motherland (Italy) and to Yugoslavia.



Cover of issue 66 of *La battana*. The image of a modest ship, humble but resistant, perfectly matches the magazine's editorial line. Photo by Vanja Macovaz.

The name of the magazine is highly symbolic. A *battana* is a small-sized boat which was common among low-class fishermen; it was quite popular in the coastal towns of the North Adriatic Sea (especially in the Istro-Quarnerian region, but also in the Romagna, Veneto and Venezia Giulia regions). Since it was used mostly by members of the working class, it had a simple and basic structure, designed to be resistant and easily repairable. Therefore, the reference in

directorato of the Savez Komunista Jugoslavije (“League of Communists of Yugoslavia”), because he was leading the UIIF towards greater autonomy and the opening of an Italian publishing house (Giuricin / Giuricin 2017: 136-138).

the title had a double meaning. On the one hand, the image of a modest ship, humble but resistant, perfectly matches the magazine's editorial line. On the other hand, the name implicitly remarks a historical, geographical, and cultural aspect, one shared by two nations: north-east Italy and the former Yugoslavia. So, the metaphor referring to both modesty and ambition is accompanied by a clear allusion to the multiple and culturally connected ethnic groups, living on the north-east side of the Adriatic Sea.

These few historical facts underline, once more, that *La battana* was born as a manifestation of a minority community struggling to create a non-isolated space for cultural expression. CPLA members feared being enclosed in their own community; that is why they founded a new magazine that tried to connect them both to Italy and Yugoslavia. Moreover, it should also be considered that the activities of the UIIF were strictly supervised by the Yugoslav Communist Party, a supervision which became more and more vigilant after Tito's break with Stalin in 1948 (Konta 2013: 69-90). During the 1960s, in Yugoslavia the ruling class gradually and cautiously relaxed their relationship with the West; but we must consider that, in the meanwhile, inside the country the hunt for the Cominformist spread (Moscarda Oblak 2007: 69-101). Being part of the Italian minority in a multi-ethnic state, living in the Istro-Quarnerian region, could be problematic by itself; it also became necessary to guarantee intellectual distance from both the Cominform and the Italian Partito Comunista's ("Communist Party") positions (the Italian PC was among the strongest communist parties in the West). As an example, it should be remembered that all the activities and institutions affiliated with the UIIF, including schools and teaching programs, were strictly supervised by the Yugoslav government to make sure that they were aligned with the official, orthodox political line. This is why scholars define the birth of the magazine as an act of cultural activism (Monica 2009: 155-160). The struggle was "to turn a weak into a strong point and, after renouncing self-confinement, focus on an active and participatory

policy”⁵. Once again, the risk of being marginalized because of the difficult political atmosphere, in Yugoslavia as in Italy, was extremely high. It is in this peculiar, double-sided atmosphere that *La battana* was born.

2. The first series: 1964-1989

We can understand the magazine’s editorial line at its beginning by considering a passage from *La battana*’s first editorial:

Almost twenty years have passed since the end of the war. The Italians of Yugoslavia are supporting a magazine which, overcoming marginalization at the border of two cultures, is now trying to create a meeting point between them. Even if they are open, the borders existing between Italy and Yugoslavia – considering the distance from the mother-culture – inevitably create a risk of cultural stagnation. On the one hand, *La battana* wants to contribute to the cultural and literary life of the Italians of Istria and Fiume, to avoid the risk of “minority provincialism”. On the other hand, *La battana* wants to guarantee the living presence of an Italian and Yugoslav culture, to support active participation in literary creation.

By performing these duties, *La battana* is going to achieve a much bigger task: that of being a meeting point between Italian and Yugoslav writers. [...] however, the magazine is not going to offer just a passive introduction to the literary life of both parties, but it will bring to the surface the main problems of the two countries [...] and will embrace every possible contribution to the debate.⁶

5 “Trasformare in punto di forza un punto di debolezza e aprirsi, dopo aver rinunciato all’autoconfinamento, ad un’attenzione attiva e partecipata” (Deghenghi Olijčić 2005: 157).

6 “A vent’anni, o giù di lì, dalla fine della guerra, gli italiani della Jugoslavia promuovono una rivista che, superando una situazione di margine ai confini di due culture, ne esalta invece la posizione di incontro fra di esse. Confini pure aperti come quelli che uniscono Jugoslavia e Italia

The editorial emphasizes three main points. First, the magazine intended to prevent the effect of minority enclosure, encouraged by a self-referential literature, by taking part in European literary debates. Second, *La battana* aimed to sustain emerging artists, both Italian and Yugoslav, encouraging a debate on the renewal of aesthetic forms. Finally, the magazine was an instrument to let the Italian minority play a role of cultural mediation, but also to make it engage with different artistic trends, which were going through a rapid evolution within the specific historical context of the time. Thus, the magazine seems aware of the risks of an editorial line, which was also felt to be deeply necessary, considering the political atmosphere of both Italy and Yugoslavia. At the risk of being flattened between two cultures, *La battana* was able to carve out for itself a very particular role of cultural and aesthetic mediation.

It was not by chance that the magazine assumed a strongly multidisciplinary identity from the first issue. At the bottom of the table of contents of the first number, we find a section entitled “Poeti di casa” (literally, “Home poets,” an allusion to the local community) reserved for two poets at the beginning of their careers (Mario Cocchietto and Umberto Matteoni), belonging to the Italian minority and defined as the youngest and least experienced poets from that community. But Matteoni’s and Cocchietto’s poems are symbolically presented as part of a multi-ethnic aesthetic experience and tradition. In fact, in the same number of the magazine we find critical essays about Umberto Saba, a review of the Yugoslav pavilion at the Biennale di Venezia, and a critical reading of Antonio Grams-

creano inevitabilmente un rischio di ristagno culturale nella lontananza dalla cultura madre; all’attività letteraria e culturale in genere degli italiani dell’Istria e di Fiume *La Battana* vuol porgere, da un lato, un contributo contro i pericoli della ‘provincializzazione minoritaria’ e, dall’altro, la presenza viva della cultura italiana e jugoslava; e, insieme, sostenerne i fermenti e le speranze di partecipazione attiva alla creazione letteraria. Assolvendo questo compito, *La Battana* ne svolge implicitamente uno di ben più vasta portata: quello di punto d’incontro tra scrittori italiani e jugoslavi. [...] essa intende tuttavia non limitarsi a una presentazione passiva di quanto da una parte e dall’altra si va facendo [...] e provocare confronti reciprocamente utili accogliendo a braccia aperte ogni possibile stimolo alla discussione” (Martini / Turconi / Sequi 1964: 1-2).

ci. Moreover, we also find reproductions of paintings and sculptures by, among the others, Carla Accardi (*Labirinto*), Arnaldo Pomodoro (*Scultura*), Leonardo Cremonini (*Gli scompartimenti*), Branko Ružić (*Trio bianco*), and Riko Debenjak (*Pettine giallo VI*). In the following issues, many sections were also devoted to movies, which later resulted in special numbers dedicated to new forms and representative techniques in Italian and Yugoslav independent cinema. For example, one can note the section “Cinema indipendente e cinema di gruppo” (“Independent cinema and group cinema”), in *La battana* 14 (1968).

The following issues reinforce this editorial line: it is quite common to find in the magazine literary and artistic works of debut talents from the CPLA next to works of well-established artists belonging both to Italy and Yugoslavia. Almost every issue included critical essays about aesthetic matters, penned by scholars, writers, and intellectuals. These include, from Italy, pieces by Italo Calvino, Paolo Volponi, Franco Fortini, Mario Luzi, and Gillo Dorfles. Such texts become more common over the years. I think it is important to notice the large amount of space dedicated to the neo-avant-garde scene. In fact, during the following twenty years a debate concerning the renovation of aesthetic forms played a key role in the magazine's pages. Italian collectives such as Gruppo 63 and Gruppo 70, involving artists and poets such as Lucia Marcucci, Nanni Balestrini, and Elio Pagliarani, advocated cultural, political, and aesthetic change, in a way that perfectly matched Yugoslav artistic experimentalism (for example, the Slovenian Group oHo). *La battana* 12 (1967) is relevant in this regard: it included a special section on concrete poetry, edited by Adriano Spatola and Arrigo Lora-Totino; it also included works by international poets and artists from various European nations (Balestrini, Bentivoglio, Gappmayr, Williams, Kolář, and others). A focus on the status of the Italian neo-avant-garde scene is also presented in *La battana* 16-17 (1968), edited once again by Adriano Spatola; it includes poems by Balestrini (“Tre volte al giorno la vomita”), Bonito Oliva (“Fiction poem”), Pagliarani (extract from “La ballata di Rudy”), Sanguineti (“T.A.T.”). These

are all poets who contributed to subverting the panorama of Italian writing by creating a new aesthetic language. It is possible to find traces of this specific literary interest up to 1981, when an entire special number was dedicated to visual poetry (*La battana* 62 [1981]), which included works by Lucia Marcucci, Maria Lai, Emilio Isgrò, Ksenia Miličević, and Vesna Parun.

As we can see, avoiding marginalization and provincialism meant taking part in a very intense aesthetic debate, which was going on in Italy and Yugoslavia. This was largely the result of the radically innovative ideas of the neo-avant-garde; debating these issues meant to interrogate the role played by aesthetic forms in social and political life. We can certainly say that the investigation conducted by *La battana* involved the relationship between culture, aesthetics, and politics, creating an engaged space for cultural debate, albeit within a Marxist framework.

Theoretical engagement took the shape of annual congresses, organized by the magazine's directors in Opatija (and later in Portorož and occasionally in Umag); some of the preeminent scholars of the Italian scene were invited to take part in the debates, including Cesare Segre, Maria Corti, and Umberto Eco, and attendees included intellectuals and poets such as Andrea Zanzotto, Emilio Isgrò, and Giovanni Giudici. The title of the first congress (1965) is extremely poignant: *La letteratura oggi: attualità di un impegno? Civiltà industriale e tecniche espressive* ("Literature today: the possibility of engagement, industrial society and expressive techniques") (*La battana* 4 [1965]). Congresses in the following years focused on important topics such as *Letteratura e pubblico* ("Literature and audience") (*La battana* 9-10 [1966]) and *Funzioni e strumenti della critica* ("Instruments and purposes of critics") (*La battana* 13 [1967]). Once more, the real question was: is there any possibility of adapting existing aesthetic forms to the social and political changes of our era? And even more: could these aesthetic forms play a key role in a nation, such as Italy, going through a delicate cultural transition, or in a multi-ethnic state, such as Yugoslavia, not fully aligned between the great political forces of the world? If yes, how?

Ultimately, the theoretical debate about literature and art was a way to think about political and economic power, especially considering that, in Italy, during the 1960s and 1970s a debate about the artist's social engagement was very lively as part of a strongly polarized political atmosphere.

We can now understand how the three goals set by the magazine in the 1964 editorial acquired a significance that went beyond the limits of the UIIF. Being a minority community meant not just recreating an ideal connection to the motherland and Italian cultural and literary identity, as evidenced by the magazine's attention to dialect literature (*La battana* 38 [1976]), but it also meant a thorough questioning of the role of the artist in the community. We can see that this role concerned three main points: reforming the language in order to reform the community, confronting ideology and power systems, and (the most important of these) connecting cultures.

At the same time critics also had to question their tasks and instruments. It is sufficient to mention, as an example, the great contribution that Umberto Eco and Maria Corti made to the magazine in elaborating the semiotic approach to literature and visual arts. Yet it cannot be denied that, between the 1970s and 1980s, the magazine faced a moment of stagnation. On the one hand, it increased collaborations with first-grade intellectuals and artists (Raboni, Sanguineti, Magris, Pahor, Andrić, Lalić, Kish, Matvejević, and many more); on the other hand, the magazine went through a gradual process of intellectual stagnation, insisting on retrospective themes, which had lost their strength and relevance in the literary scene. Not accidentally did the UIIF come under renewed scrutiny from the League of Communists of Yugoslavia during the 1970s.⁷ Simultaneously, the dream of a communist multi-ethnic state started to crumble, epitomized by Marshal Tito's death in 1980 and by the multi-party elections in 1990. As the dictatorship's censorship declined, reticence on one hand and new urges on the other emerged. This renewing need, combined

7 I will just mention that UIIF's president, Antonio Borme (1921-1992), was discharged in 1974 (Giuricin / Giuricin 2017: 165-168).

with the thematic stagnation of the magazine, required a repositioning of the magazine's editorial policy. After twenty-five years, *La battana's* number 90, in 1988, opened with a farewell editorial; numbers 93-94 (1989), edited by Ezio Giuricin, Elvio Baccarin, and Maurizio Tremul, opened with an editorial entitled "Indirizzi programmatici della 'nuova serie'" ("Programmatic directions for the 'new series'") (Baccarini / Giuricin / Tremul 1989: 11-13).

3. The new series (1989-1992)

This new chapter of *La battana's* history opens with an honest report on earlier activities. It is possible to read in the words of the renewed editorial committee the symbolic (but also practical) necessity of marking out a new and accurately defined path for the magazine's future. The new editorial board wishes to

[...] assure to the Italian national community a leading role in a wider cultural frame, between the areas and contexts it has helped connect until now. To achieve this aim, *La battana* must become an instrument of analysis, debate, and discussion about Ethnicity – which doubtlessly is, not only culturally and literally, but above all socially, historically, and politically, a hard human reality. [...]

It is not possible to be satisfied by merely reproducing the potentialities of the ethnic group "as they are". We must try to change and renew them. In this sense, *La battana* will try to work together with those energies [...] that are trying to redefine the role of the national community and its culture in society, supporting the development of an inter-ethnic democratic background in which it will be possible to truly value the message and the creative strength of minorities.⁸

8 "[...] assicurare al gruppo nazionale italiano un ruolo da protagonista in una cornice culturale quanto più vasta, tra gli spazi e le realtà di cui, sin'ora, è stato valido tramite e ponte. Per avvicinarsi a quest'obiettivo *La battana* deve diventare uno strumento d'analisi, di dibattito e di confronto sulle realtà dell'Etnia. Una realtà difficile: non solo culturale e letteraria, ma anche – e soprattutto – sociale, storica, politica, umana. [...] Non ci

In the “Indirizzi programmatici” (“Programmatic directions”), the new editorial board is, in fact, insisting on three key concepts. The first is a continuity with the past: the new series comes as the heir of a clearly structured magazine, with a significant network of international intellectual connections and a recognized cultural role in Italy and Yugoslavia. It seems certain that the new editorial board consciously read the old series as an expression of the cultural potential of the Italian community, an expression that, at those times, had exhausted its potential and needed to be renewed with new impulses. As a result, the second key concept is an intention to mark a turning point: aware of earlier stagnation, alert to change in the European social and political contexts, the new editorial board insists on the urgency of changing the editorial policy in order to reclaim a crucial role on the Italian and Yugoslav cultural scenes. Continuity and departure might appear a contradiction, but this problem is solved by the third key concept: ethnicity. We have seen why and how the first series was born into a fragile and peculiar social context and how important the concept of national identity was. This element of continuity must now take note, without the shadow of the Yugoslav Communist Party, of the failure of an ideal – a communist state alternative both to the East and West blocks, one that was multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. An honest analysis of mistakes and faults was needed: this was the chance to develop a multi-ethnic society and, most of all, to reflect upon the role of the state and literature in this transformation. The Italian community, as a minority group, had the opportunity to have a strong impact on the debate about new forms of societies taking place in those years; this is why its experience, its cultural memory, and its historical role in the Istro-Quarnerian region has to be rediscovered

si deve accontentare di riprodurre le potenzialità, le risorse e le strutture del gruppo etnico così “come sono”. Bisogna tentare di cambiarle, di rinnovarle. *La battana*, in questo senso, cercherà di operare in sintonia con quelle forze [...] che si propongono di ridefinire il ruolo del gruppo nazionale e della sua cultura nella società, e di favorire lo sviluppo di un contesto di rapporti democratici ed interetnici in cui sia possibile valorizzare effettivamente il messaggio e la portata creativo-progettuale delle minoranze.” (Baccarini / Giuricin / Tremul 1989: 11-12).

and stimulated by a renewed magazine offering a wider approach to various subjects. The time for new reflections on identities, for a new perspective, had come.

Whereas the first series had as its main points of interest culture, aesthetics, and politics, the new editorial policy shifts toward writing, ethnicity, and cultural identity. This is why, after this point, issues have been organized by social and anthropological themes, resulting in a greater degree of uniformity than before. As an example, the first number of the second series is a special issue entitled *Etnicità e stato* (“Ethnicity and the state”); *inter alia*⁹ it includes papers reflecting on the role of the Italian community in the construction of a new multi-ethnic society.

In the new series, a sociological vision of the present is accompanied by a historical and anthropological approach to fundamental themes involving the concepts of nation, state, and individual and collective identities. In such a criti-



Cover of issue 95-96 of *La battana* (1991) dedicated to Zanini's novel *Martin Muma*. Issues of the second series have a new format and minimalist covers, showing the title of the magazine on a white background and, occasionally, small graphic embellishments. Photo by Vanja Macovaz.

9 This first issue of the new series is divided into seven thematic sections; each section included up to seven short essays. The areas of interest of these sections are: *Quale stato per le minoranze* [“Which state for minorities?”]; *Etnie nello stato plurinazionale: la Jugoslavia* [“Ethnic groups in a multi-national state: the Yugoslavia case”]; *Immaginare il futuro: proposte e riflessioni del gruppo nazionale italiano* [“Imagining future: proposals and reflections from the Italian national group”]; *La questione delle minoranze nei rapporti internazionali* [“Minorities and international relationships”]; *La sfida europea* [“The European challenge”]; *Cultura, persistenza, identità* [“Culture, persistence, identity”]; *Ethnons e territori* [“Ethnicity and territories”] (*La battana* 93-94 [1989]).

cal moment, the need to question common values emerged, with the need to rediscover and rebuild social communities. These themes would later find a literary expression in the third number of the new series, with the publication of extracts from *Martin Muma* (Zanini 1990), one of the first novels to give a voice to the tragic events that had happened years before in Goli Otok; in fact, in this autobiographical novel Zanini recalls the experience of political imprisonment in the labor camps of the island. Reflections on occluded memories and historical traumas support the process of constituting new democratic societies.

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