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BEYOND DARWIN:
The co-evolutionary path of art, technology and consciousness

***What one could and should say:
From Unidentified Narrative Objects to New Italian (Media) Epic***

What are audio-visual creators up to lately? And what are the new Media Design and Multimedia Art research agendas leading to? Short-format films, video clips, "art" video, medium-length movies, musical clips, simple audiovisual artefacts?

“If a controversial and controvertible expression such as ‘New Italian Epic’ has any sense, it’s because it creates a sort of electrostatic field that draws in apparently different works that in fact have deep affinities.” (Wu Ming 1, *NEW ITALIAN EPIC 2.0, Memorandum 1993-2008: narrativa, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro*, pag 7.)

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A year ago, in the “Up Close & Personal” seminar on contemporary Italian literature held in March 2008 at McGill University in Montreal, Wu Ming 1 outlined a definition that encompassed the field: New Italian Epic, replete with an acronym, NIE. The label ably spans literary works produced in Italy by different artists and authors, including *Q*, the novel by the Luther Blisset collective, Wu Ming’s novel *54, Attacco agli umani [Attack on Humans]*, *Manituana*, Giancarlo De Cataldo’s *Romanzo Criminale [Criminal Novel]*, Carlo Lucarelli’s *L’ottava vibrazione [The Eighth |Vibration]*, Roberto Saviano’s acclaimed work on the Neapolitan Mafia, *Gomorra*, and other works, “that share diverse stylistic characteristics and common themes as well as a baseline allegorical nature. The genre deals with a particular type of metahistorical narrative with peculiar features deriving from the Italian context”ⁱ. In the spring of 2008, the Wu Ming collective posted online its essay *New Italian Epic. Memorandum 1993-2008: Narrative, Oblique Gaze, Return to the Future*ⁱⁱ. This Memorandum has been downloaded more than one hundred thousand times and has generated a debate, in radio broadcasts, articles in the specialty press and the main daily newspapers, conferences, conventions and symposia, including the one we organized during the spring 2009 session of the doctoral research program of the Planetary Collegium,ⁱⁱⁱ , M-Node^{iv}.

This encounter was born with the aim of responding to the series of reflections, doubts and intuitions that arose from the practical didactic and research experiences in the New Media art and Media Design fields. In fact, our work in the

Media Design & Multimedia Arts Faculty of NABA, the New Academy of Fine Arts in Milan, is focused on trying to forge a synthesis between the linear audiovisual traditions and New Media art. The project bears close kinship with a theory of art found in the tradition of Martin Heidegger, Marshall McLuhan, Joseph Beuys and Arthur Danto. Art is essentially ontology, it has research functions with fallout and spillover that lead to critical examinations pertinent for philosophy and practical acts that serve as experiments. “*Perceiving the art in a made object requires knowledge of theories, history and contingencies of art. An object becomes art when it is inserted by (artistic) theory in another discourse that shifts it from its immediate context to one of artistic speculation.*”^v

In this context we come face with several problems. First, how can we relate to the disastrous proposals coming from mainstream Italian Film & Video (at broadcast level and not)? Our hypothesis, which was verified in the field, was that the authorial dimension of the audiovisual medium should no longer assume its origins in a random “mastery” but rather stem from a concrete ability to tell stories.

The second problem was: How should these stories relate to the new interactive and hypertextual media which shifted “stories” towards a “behavioral” dimension of communication (*1967 Pragmatics of Human Communication*, Watzlawick, Beavin, Jackson)? In fact, contemporary stories are elaborated by a new media galaxy based on multimediality and widespread interactivity. (See the advertisement for Apple that ran on January 22, 1984 during the third quarter of the 18th Super Bowl, pitting the Washington Redskins against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers).^{vi}

Also: How can we activate innovative attitudes in young creators, thereby granting them a central role in the search for new aesthetics amid the technological acceleration of the contemporary world?

To this third problem, we used New Media art to formulate a response. Digging for the intuitions in projects such as Jean-Luc Godard’s *Sonimage*, as well as *Radicals Software*^{vii} and other forms of new hypermedial narrations explored in Roy Ascott’s *La Plissure du Texte*^{viii}, it is possible to chain together in a single continuum reflections on the nature of media and of their trends and tendencies. The link between syntagmatic linear audiovisuality and interactive, hypermedial and participatory New Media art in fact knocked down the distinction between the traditional class of Film & Video and the New Technologies of art.^{ix} This synthesis has its origins in the birth of video art, back when Sony introduced its first portable electronic telecamera. But it was only in the Nineties, when directors able to hybridize directly the two practices – cinema and New Media art - burst on the international scene, that this new relation became clearer. Artists such as Chris Cunningham, Michal Gondry, Spike Jonze, Charlie Kaufmann... Many of them developed their skills while creating video clips in the Nineties for musicians such as the Beastie Boys, Bjork and Daft Punk, or working for music labels such as Warp Records (who had electronic musicians of the caliber of Aphex Twin on their rosters). They succeeded in unifying more or less institutionalized artistic experiments (Chris Cunningham was invited to the 49th Venice Biennial in 2001),

with a resolute reflection on the audiovisual means, and today stand as benchmark Film & Video artists in cinemas around the world.

This moment intersected with the paradigm change begun in 1970 with Werner Herzog's *Fata Morgana*, (1970) which abandoned the canons of big-box cinema to take on a new form that openly seemed to allude to the documentary tradition. It is very important to identify people able to carry out a further synthesis between Film & Video and New Media art. The director Lynn Hershman^x comes to mind.

But if the aforementioned model seemed to resolve the problematics of what a “frontier” media should be in theory, a further question remained. What should new audio-visual artists make?

In the spring of 2007 I posed that question to Andrea Bruciati, artistic director of the Contemporary Municipal Art Gallery of *Monfalcone*^{xi}, and I later repeated it to a number of contemporary Italian artists.^{xii}

What exactly are these Unidentified Narrative Objects?

“UNOs are experiments with an uncertain outcome, often semifailures because they trend too much towards shapeless, indeterminate suspense.”^{xiii} To summarize, from our point of observation, we can describe UNOs as an agglomerate of audiovisual and New Media art works made in Italy in the past 10 years, seeking unexpected kinship or, inversely, dismantling links that had been overly taken for granted. I am beginning to think that the NIE, the New Italian Epic, may be a model on which to base a paradigm, a line of attraction, for new media.

The first message I received was from Stefano Coletto, a curator^{xiv}, who said: “... in general, without getting too specific, I believe that the question is whether digital media are a product of postmodern theories (or that new media led to postmodern theories), in which case we can say any concept of a canon has always been and still is very fragile. Or that the new media have, for a few years now, been introducing a revolution, tantamount to a new modernity after postmodernity, in which case the old canons are being broken. But if old canons that were already seen as fragile are broken, then perhaps we should drop the word ‘canon’. We could use the term ‘world’ or, as Pier Luigi Capucci would say, ‘third life’...”^{xv}

What a coincidence, then, that even Wu Ming remarks that “many commentators, at least the early ones, have focused on the question of ‘postmodern yes/postmodern no/what does postmodern mean anyway?/I don’t know.’”^{xvi}

The NIE is a reading hypothesis. It’s my (their) hypothesis. There is no doubt that there exists a body of audiovisual works produced at the dawn of the age of the digital camera and the mass spread of broadcast technologies that have in common some basilar elements and a basic documentary and image-based nature: Alina Marazzi, Paolo Vari, Antonio Boccola, Marianna Schivardi, Chiara Brambilla,

To be sure, I’m taking of a New Italian (Media) Epic in a “weak” key. Weak is not a bad word, and here I use it to mean something more open than a “strong” version of the New Italian (Media) Epic, one whose greater definitional precision would also limit the inclusion of works that seem to be near to each other. Is Marazzi less New Italian Epic than Sorrentino? For me that’s not so important, but I understand that for others it is, and that it has to be, and that if it weren’t, then I

too would become more interested in a “strong” form of the NIE.

1954

54 tells the tale of the birth of a mass medium in Italy - *“At 11 in the morning on January 3, 1954, in Milan, RAI officially began to broadcast... Television imposes a certain way of seeing the world, as Derrick de Kerckhove writes it spreads the TV Brainframe, appropriating the industrial masses, providing a solution to their leisure problem, and becomes a key tool for consumerism by opening a ‘window on the consumer.’ Television becomes the place where ideas become attitudes, it subsumes the expectations and needs of men and women abandoned by local culture in the name of a grand national medium... The industrial masses, on whose backs nineteenth-century western society was built, were vacillating, but the cathode-ray tube saved them by turning them into the new mass public for television...”*^{xvii}

In 1954, the television medium joined peers and rivals such as radio and cinema. Human communication was made more complex by this new mediatic “ratio” that steered ontology, social relations and markets. Note, please, that current surveys claim that Italy is a bigoted and conservative country with little time for technology. But the concept of “computer program” was conceptually born from the work of Luigi Federico Menabrea, author of *Note* (1842), while Antonio Meucci invented the telephone in 1871 and Guglielmo Marconi invented the radio telegraph in 1901 and was present at the creation of the BBC, and Federico Faggin (1972) was one of the fathers of the microprocessor and then the computer itself.

Italy is a technological country – but the broadcasts don’t say this. [...]

The NIE is a hypothetical way of reading this angle. It refers to the factual existence of a body of cinematic and audio-visual works that have a common imaginary and a shared technological backdrop.

Genova 2001

Moreover, after the events of July 19 to 22, 2001 in Genoa, and driven by the need to communicate what Amnesty International defined as “the most serious suspension of democratic rights in a Western country since the Second World War,”^{xviii} there was a powerful wage of film, video and documentary output made possible by low-cost digital cameras. These tools were an intrinsic part of the real battle fought in Genoa. On one side there was the police with clubs and violence: *“When I got to the first floor of the school I saw serious beating going on. Four police officers, two with a white belt sash and two plainclothes officers were beating motionless demonstrators on the ground. It seemed like a Mexican slaughterhouse.”*^{xix} On the other side were digital cameras trying to describe just the facts. After the events of Genoa in 2001, a new ethical tension took flight, coalescing into a form of Mediactivism.

The Cloud

Italian audio-visual and New Media art are bringing a great many artists, many of them at work since the early Eighties when Sony sold its first portable video camera, the Portapak Video Video Rover^{xx}. to converge in a single – albeit still vast – imaginistic and narrative cloud. By and large they create brief video clips, but they don't look down on tinges of the documentary or other formats, and every once in awhile they produce “Unidentified Narrative Objects.” The quantity of this corpus of work is filling network space (granted that the sheer accumulation of video material seems at times to be more a case of techno-narrative bulimia than a quest for quality), and many can be defined “Garage media” – “*Garage media is a widespread approach to making media products; it takes place in the user's computer and its usual subjects are holidays, romantic walks and art exhibitions*”^{xxi} They don't amount to a generation in the demographic sense, because the authors have widely varying ages, but they are a generation that shares snatches of poetics, snippets of mental maps and a ferocious desire that systematically pushes them to the archives, or, where the archive is the street, into the streets. Genoa 2001 was a watershed in this sense.

Becoming Aware, Responsibility and Grammar

Nobody can shun their responsibility when they make images. Nobody can argue that video is not a tool with which to explore human culture and reality. Nobody can deny that the video medium contains not just “communication” but also some of reality's foundation. In February 2009, Amos Bianchi, my colleague and the person in charge of post-graduate courses at NABA, as well as deputy director of the Media Design & Multimedia Arts school, sent me an email with this analogy – *By now we can consider video as a language (with its own grammar and syntax) based on a technique (digital technology in the broadest sense of the term). In this sense we can build an analogy with writing, which is another language based on the alphabetic technique. And just as, with writing, everybody writes but only writers explore the language's full potential, so with video, everybody can make it but it is the Film & Video and New Media artists who are delegated the task of exploring and broadening the frontiers.* (In this sense Media Media art is understood as a form of exploratory research.)

The work and the author

Wu Ming 1 wrote “works,” not “authors,” because the New Italian Epic is more about the former than the latter. As it happens, each of these authors has made – and is still making – audio-visual and new media art that does not fit in the classic literary definition. Who are these authors? They are directors and writers like Alina Marazzi, Paolo Vari, Marianna Schivardi and Chiara Brambilla. Some emerged from the storytelling and ethics born in Genoa, others, such as Eva and Franco Mattes, Paolo Pedercini, or Salvatore Iaconesi, are exclusively focused on New

Media Art. But all have produced “Unidentified Narrative Objects, whether audio usual or in the new media field, that are willy-nilly and indifferently in the categories of short films, video clips, installations or others – including electronic grammar and rhetoric which is journalism, and in turn memory and in turn a story.

What do we mean by “epic”?

Our use in this context of the adjective “epic” has nothing to do with the “epic theater” of the Twentieth Century or with the sense of “objectivity” that the term has acquired in some literary theories. [...] In the wake of Genoa 2001 there exists an epic, the epic of the nemesis and of justice, of the open wound, which can be cured or ignored only with a genuine verdict, whether this comes in a court of justice or the historical record. Epic in this sense is a canon, a mode of doing “mediactivism” in Italy, one with no prefabricated style, but rather generated by the “ensemble” of operator-rebel-witness, and telecamera, that informs the eye and the hand of the new narrator.

After Genoa, we all return to Genoa.

These narrations are epic, because today we live in a New Media Epic, a new epic and epoch of the media. In fact, we conduct or put our actions and representations, and even our experiences, on YouTube, on Facebook and so on. Just Google our name and we become spectators of the new digital epic. When we start filming our newborn child, we begin to tell his or her new media epic, and we proceed to post their photos on line, then we open a whole Web site, and soon enough she or he begins to publish early drawings, first with the help of a mother and father, eventually on her or his own. And this will accompany the person for their entire life (beginning with the pathetic epic of the parent).

The epic belongs to everyone.

Many of these works refer to historical facts, and borrow conventions, stylemes and stratagems from their own era. Such a notion of “epic” can be found in works such as “*Un'ora sola ti vorrei*” [I Want You For Just One Hour], *The Big Bother*, *Darko Maver*, *69 Bites*, , ... and many others. These narrations are Epic because, today, Media are instantaneous and thus the possibility of distance no longer exists.

[...] In the Google era, the *Battle of Agnadello* in the early sixteen century would have been lived in real time, news would have been generated with the opportunity of the moment, and the consequent epic would have been different. The same truth applies to the epic retreat of the *Julia* Division on the eroic retreat from Russian second war front.

The heroic epic of the Avatar

The epic is a story-creating genre, one that needs the random event. Everything arguably happens by chance, then we by inserting it in a narrative or discourse end up needing it, and we bestow meanings upon it. But today it is we who create our identities online. And this determines our social rule. All the decisions that we take on how to tell ourselves, on what is effectively true, what is true but not true, what

is effectively false, what is false but not false, and what is at the same time false/true and true/false (a quantum epic?), are our existential epic. The photos that we show, the people to whom we send updates and alerts on what we are doing and what we are learning, the favorite films, videogames and books, and the texts we write on the Internet – everything is a bearer of a new epic. And if until yesterday the epic was the dominion of poets and heroes, today it is the territory of author-people, the Internet crowds. The author is the parent of his avatar, and responsible for the latter's choices. The word, which etymologically tracks back to Sanskrit, originated in the Hindu tradition, in which it meant the incarnation, the assumption of a physical body by a god (Avatar, in fact, means “He who descends”). Relying on translation and metaphor, (new) media jargon understands that a real person who chooses to show himself to others, does so through a self-representation, an incarnation – in short, an *avatar*.

Abandoning the real world in order to enter into a world where reality is larger, in order to participate in another community, does not resolve fundamental existential anxiety. Nor does it simplify self-consciousness; rather, it amplifies it, it renders it “epic.”

The author describes his life and shares his intimacy with an entire community^{xxii}. The author is much, much more exposed, including to himself. Thus is born an intimate, micro and family-style epic, shared with an unknown Other and alterity, and even if singular gestures appear innocuous, the ensemble of behaviors that amount to communication in the new interactive media end up generating a very detailed epic. And, as this epic brings power, then somehow these details appear to deserve being recognized and known. In the Epoch of the New Media, we are all Heroes.

The origin

In any discussion of the New Italian (Media) Epic, it's inevitable to cite a novel that has shown the current foundations of the drive to join the chronicling of reality with literature:: *Gomorra*, by Roberto Saviano^{xxiii}.

The film of the same name by Matteo Garrone has furthermore laid down the base for a new mainstream cinema in which documentary directors merge with those of box-busting cinema. The subject is reality, the form is narrative, epic literature. This is the gist of Fake. It is here that the Italian public began to see UNOs as audiovisual artifacts that define their era, such as Alina Marazzi's *Un' Ora sola ti vorrei [I Want You For Just One Hour]* (2002), Paolo Vari's *Fame Chimica [Chemical Hunger]* (2008), Marianna Schivardi's *The Big Bother* (2006-2008) and it is here that we begin to see the *precursors* in works of New Media art such as *Mouchette*^{xxiv}, *Darko Maver*^{xxv}, *etoy*^{xxvi} and *Brandon*^{xxvii}. The aforementioned authors are very aware of their era and dialogue with it. Think of the therapeutic mechanics of Alina Marazzi's first work, *Un'ora sola ti vorrei* (2002). The daughter finds her lost mother thanks to letters and found biographical footage that the father stored in a family closet. The author made a film comprised partly or entirely of footage that was not created by the filmmaker, changing its

meaning by placing it in a new context.

F for Fake

We are talking about a new type of relationship with reality that is mediated by a new language. It is no tone of mere fantasy, but rather refers to facts; it's a documentary literature, a non-fiction novel if you will – the first example was Primo Levi's *"If This Is a Man."* Literary works become in this case tools for the description of reality. They describe or imply something which is not real but could be real, they make a document or other object created to look like a real object that exists or could exist, or a performance where an event is played, or made up of untrue statements.

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Principal characteristics of the New (Italian) Media Epic

Continuing in the furrow plowed by Wu Ming 1, I will try to identify and describe the distinctive traits of this new media narrative. As said before, the goal of this cataloguing exercise (inevitably only indicative) is didactic^{xxviii}, that is, the point is to create a concatenation of meanings, a line of attraction, which will allow us to name that nebulous cloud of effects created by the new technologies of electric and electronic communication.

1. Don't keep it cool-and-dry .

"The New Italian Epic emerged from a work on "genres," it was born by forcing them to their logical extremes, but it's not enough here to describe the process to the old term "contamination." "Contamination" alluded to primary conditions of "purity," to well-marked and visible borders, and thus to the possibility of recognizing the origins, calculating the heritage percentages to obtain homogenous aggregates – in short, as a way to assure recognition of what exactly is in a mixture. Today, though, there's a break, a gap, and we have gone beyond this – most authors don't even pose this problem anymore. "Contamination? Between what and what else, pray tell? It's almost impossible to rebuild a posteriori just what effectively has gone into the mixtures of Genna's novels such as "L'anno luce" [The Light Year] and "Dies irae", or of an UNO like Saviano's Gomorra (indeed, the debate on this shows every sign of being endless.)"^{xxix}

Today Film & Video works use archival research and images – found footage. These can be private and often, as in the case of Alina Marazzi, family archives, or they can be public, belonging to institutions or foundations, often available online. Sometimes they lose their paternity in the process, and others' images are used, regardless of rights. Today, directors (if that term still makes sense), artists and authors use anything they think is *right* and *serious* to use. Right and serious. The two adjectives are entirely appropriate. The works of the new cloud are not lacking

in *humor*, but reject the detachment and cold irony of the postmodernist *pastiche*. In these cinematic audiovisual artifacts and in these New Media art works there is a warmth, positions are taken and responsibilities assumed that go beyond the compulsive complicity and postmodern insistence on “not taking oneself too seriously.” These works are serious and at the same time, amusing, they make one laugh seriously. They draw on an *ethic* of storytelling after years of playing around and of electronic and audiovisual bulimia. What’s important is to understand is that in the New (Italian) Epic there is a *responsibility in the gaze* and in the image that stems from the possibility of “reactivating” it and recharging it with meaning after the exhausting onslaught of *television* and *advertising*.

“In the footnotes to “The Name of the Rose,” [...], Umberto Eco gave a definition of postmodernism that became famous. He compared the postmodern author to a lover who would like to say to his beloved: “I love you desperately,” but knows he can’t say it because it’s a phrase from harlequin romances, and so says instead: “As they say in harlequin romances, I love you desperately.” In later years, the abuse of this attitude led to a significant stagflation of the word and an overabundance of ‘metafiction’: telling of one’s own storytelling in order not to have to tell anything else.”^{xxx}

In the New Italian (Media) Epic the accent shifts to what really matters. In short, it turns the phrase to “Despite what they say in harlequin romances, I love you desperately.” The cliché was evoked and immediately left aside, the declaration of love begins to recharge itself with meaning. Civil passion, empathy with nature, anger, sadness at the death of a mother – these are the sentiments that structure works such as Herzog’s *Fata Morgana*, *Un’ora sola ti vorrei* and others. *“This takes place in the absence of any clever winks, without any alibis or escape routes, with a full claim on the emotive tonalities used.”*^{xxxii}

As with literature, postmodernism’s rejection of the predominant emotional tonality is an effort an intention that is not necessarily a success. It may be simply that one has not found the way to transmit passion to the reader. What’s important is that the effort is seen, that the gap (and hence the passion) can be perceived. What is important is that, regardless of the success or not of the mediatic result, an *internal ethic* to the narrative work is recognized. *“That’s a big step forward. What matters is that perennial irony, disenchantment and alibi are not theorized and don’t get invoked to fill up any holes.”*^{xxxiii}

2. *“Indirect gaze”, the hazard of the point of view.*

The issue of the “indirect gaze” is, in the New (Italian) Media Epic, where the fusion of ethics and style is most intense. In contemporary audiovisual and New Media Art works, unexpected and unusual points of view are often used, including those of objects, places or even immaterial flows. In their New Media art work *Human Avatars*, Andrea Zappa e Vini Reilly^{xxxiii}, created an installation that looks into the relation that exists between the planes of reality and virtuality. The

installations offers an awareness of one's own subjectivity through the reduction to an avatar, and at the same time offers a subjectivity based on the voyeuristic activity of surveillance. The public is invited to enter into a small wooden house, while an image of their real body is projected inside in scaled version of the same house. Visitors thus turn into voyeurs who literally spy on their own virtual projections. Confirming the dimension of the voyeur, a second room inside the house is scaled again and projects the faces of those who look at their avatars and projects them on the outside of the real house. Two topical themes of today are emphasized: The ambiguous relationship between the virtual and the real, and the voyeuristic role of the surveyed-surveoyer in which all of us in the media society seem obliged to think. "...*The point of view continues to slide from one to the other thanks to the old expedient trick of "indirect free speech," which while as old as the hills remains able to surprise if used at the right moment with the right intensity*"^{xxxiv}.

The central role is taken up by the relationship between the point of view and the story. From what "point of view" to the new authors choose to look – and thus show the spectators – the process of historical becoming? Almost always from the least predictable. In Marianna Schivardi's *Big Brother* (2008), the advent of the panopticon and the society of surveillances is seen through surveillance cameras that ceaselessly observe the life of real inmates held in the San Vittore prison in Milan. The work is a simulation of a reality show that underscores the actual condition of mediatic imprisonment in which all inhabitants of the western technological world live. The gaze from the margins, the unusual point of view of inmates themselves, best embraces the trend. A mugger has clearer ideas than most of us on the historical role of prisons – this is probably because a calm pragmatism allows him to go to the root of the problem, to put himself in the shoes of theoretical Martians who don't understand "why those who haven't don't anything have to work all day while those who commit crimes get to do nothing and sleep all day." The Big Brother format offers a mechanism in which truth as a process of unveiling is intrinsic to the aims, and within grasp of the lens. You can see here an ethical function in which the author becomes the guarantor of the work (and who could make such a work better than Marianna Schivardi?). Something similar is present in the "supercharged" point of view of *Gomorra*, - "... *which makes such a huge contribution to the impact of the book. To whom does the narrative voice of Gomorra belong, and to whom its gaze? Is it always that of the author?*"^{xxxv} Another example of a gaze that is a narrative "I" comes at a certain point when Lise Marazzi looks in the camera and whispers, with Alina's voice, "We're expecting a baby!" It's a case of technical prowess to show the image of the mother who, with the voice of her daughter, gives form to her (re)birth. What happens in books also happens in audiovisual works: The shift of the point of view renders the epic "eccentric," quite literally. The new epic hero is no longer at the center of things but influences the action from the sidelines.

And when there is no such hero, his function is carried out by the multitude, of things and places, of context and time. In *Grizzly Man*, Herzog choreographs a

hero through takes and images that the man made during his life among the bears. The dramatic scene (one that makes us ask whether a scene is a real experience) of his real death is described by the attitude of the actual director as he listens to the audio cassette in which the fatal aggression was recorded. Who is the hero here – the director or the protagonist? And the protagonist of the gaze is the character, or characters, whose exploits are being told, or that of the author who interprets, like a shaman or medium, the story? Very often it is the narrative “I” of the director (a term that is eroding quickly) that uses found footage to communicate his experience, his truth. The work’s “text” should resonate, should enter into dialectic communication with the spectator (whether this be passive in front of a screen or an active observer in a New Media art work), so that the spectator can identify himself and become a spect-actor (a usage that reflects the original sense of the word). From here on, the New Media Epic takes on a *maieutic* position, relying on a point of view to trigger critical dialectics that produce “other” points of view.

3. *Narrative complexity, popular habits.*

The *New Media Epic* is complex and popular at the same time, or at least it searches to be both. Video is almost by definition popular, as it uses general and shared codes and forces a confrontation between “high culture and low culture.” Antonio Gramsci held that the chronic Italian cultural difficulty was linked to the historical fracture between the language of culture and that of the plebes – audiovisual artists can contrast this fracture and give a new cultural direction to the new Italy of the video age. The narrations are cold and require notable cognitive labor from the reader – and yet in many cases they enjoy significant public success and sales. How is this possible? There are two main reasons: The first is that the public, those masses, are more intelligent than many of us are willing to recognize, a fact that is overshadowed by an old struggle between a movie industry that by its nature tends to trim a proposal down to its lowest common denominator “level” and Italian intellectuals who like to spend time demonizing *popular culture*. The second reason is that narrative complexity is not sought out at the expense of readability. [...] I remember a conversation with Simona Pizzuti after the Milan convention.

SP: “*In these works, the content is in the reality, but the communication is narrative. They are neither documentaries nor films, neither reportages nor novels. The content in both cases is the reality (truth) but the transposition is narrative.*”

FM: “*The bits of truth are present in a narrative mode.*”

SP: “*Let’s just say that the content is the reality (always understand as a possible truth), but the presentation is narrative. The new thing is that these two aspects usually don’t go together.*”

FM: “*It’s something new.*”

SP: “*Until now people sought a coherence between the medium and the message. The documentary is true and should have an objective description, while the film is artificial and should have a narrative presentation.*”

FM: “*The same is true for reportage and the novel.*”

SP: “*In the NIE, and shifting to the NI(M)E, there is an association between reality (mere fact) and narration.*”

FM: “*Yes, if by narration or storytelling we mean the definition of knowledge through action.*”

SP: “*We can say that the epic acts through connotation and is not denotation.*”

FM: “*Can we say that?*”

SP: “*Boh, I mean as an everyman’s view, we’re not critics after all.*”

4. “*Alternative stories, potential uchronies.*”

*Uchrony – roughly “non-time” – is a subgenre born from science fiction. Over time uchrony has gone beyond the borders of “paraliterature” and writers in other areas have used the word, including Philip Roth (“A The Plot Against America”) and Michael Chabon (“The Yiddish Police Union). A “uchronic” narrative starts with the classic question “what if”: What would have happened if a certain event (e.g. Napoleon’s defeat at Waterlook, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, the Stalingrad counteroffensive) had not taken place? A typical example of a uchronic novel is Philip K. Dick’s “The Man In the High Castle,” which takes place in the Nineteen-Eighties but in a temporal continuum in which the Nazis won the Second World War. The premise is very similar to the one Robert Harris uses in “Fatherland.” IN reality, the term “uchrony” is imprecise and often gives rise to errors. In English it is use, in keeping with its etymology, for stories set in a mythic or indeterminate time, without offering signs that allow it to be placed before or after the historical continuum in which we live. In this sense, the Tolkien trilogy of “The Lord of the Rings” takes place in the non-time of uchrony. For novels such as “Fatherland,” English critics usually use terms such as “alternative history fiction”^{xxxvi}. Some of the works linked to the New Italian (Media) Epic are explicitly based on “alternative narration.” There is even a name: *mocumentary*. In Herzog’s *The Wild Blue Yonder*, the protagonist looks at the camera and says “I come from deep space.” Cinema, due to its very structure, often uses Uchrony, be it in an Italo-French sense or the English one, without however seeming to purport that the tale being told is false. It’s the mixture with the documentary form that brings uchrony to the field of falsification, giving a particular character to the ensuing work. Today reality is divided between the virtual and the enhanced. Virtual reality is a possible one. Enhanced reality is the basic condition for the New (Italian) Media Epic: Today, alongside traditional means of reality construction, we have telecameras, digital cameras, wireless communication systems, 3-D real-time animation, methods to share our experiences through Internet and corollaries such as e-mail, chat MMOD, Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, etc. A manifesto of this is *Darko Maver* by Eva and Franco Mattes, known artistically as 01.org. This work portrays a cursed artist invited to the 48th Venice Biennial, to the Italian pavilion, in September 1999. But it turns out he died in prison in Pristina, under NATO bombs, and later it turns out that he in fact never existed, but his cursed works are real. The*

real represented by the atrocity of the images of the bombing are blended with the unreality of the artist; meanwhile, the atrocity vanishes and the image seems even to self-censor itself as it fades, while on the contrary the artist seems to become more and more real, breaking logical barriers and incarnating himself in the virtual possibility that the story is in fact, somehow at least, true or at any rate possible.

"It might be interesting, insofar as the 'social' roots of 'artistic' choices are concerned, to suggest that the invasion of uchronies is the likely product of the invasion of games and simulation (videogames, scientific models, digital maps...) By 'game' we mean the ability to experiment with the environment or context as a form of problem solving, while by "simulation" we mean the ability to interpret or construct models of real processes."^{xxxvii}

It is not possible today to think of cinema and of New Media art without referring to video games.

5. *"Hidden" subversion of language and style.*"

Many of these works are experimental even from the stylistic and linguistic point of view, [...] a kind of dissimulated experimentation that aims to subvert, from the inside, the commonly used linguistic register of the fiction genre"^{xxxviii}. At the beginning, one doesn't notice a different style, but looking at the work one senses something strange, a series of reverberations that produce a cumulative effect. The use of '*found footage*' leads the new cinematic works to take on new grammatical and stylistic keys. "*Found footage*", the fruit of archival research, restores images and identifies *topoi*; some sequences become the leitmotiv of the audiovisual text populated both metaphorically and metonymically by allegories. The NASA archive images in *The Wild Blue Yonder*, the picture of the shuttle hanging in the atmosphere over the earth, are an allegory of the otherness that observes the earth. An English review of the novel *Q* highlighted the "tendency to strip out verbs from the descriptions of combat in the fairly successful effort of conveying the confusion and velocity of the action."

6. *Unidentified Narrative Objects.* This is the point where the frontiers between literature, the audio-visual and New Media art are the most blurry, at times vanishing outright. New Italian Epic works, during their genesis, can have an "aberrant" development and born with the appearances of something else. Or, to change metaphors: The New Media Epic has abandoned the orbit of the linear story and has entered the atmosphere of unpredictable directions, with new semantic connections generating hypertextual meaning flows. "Um, what's that? Is it a cartoon? NO, it's a documentary! Wait a second, ... it's a movie!" What is certain is that it's an Unidentified Narrative Object. "Fiction and non-fiction, prose and poetry, diary or investigation, audiovisual or installation, linear and non-linear, art and science, mythology and a little *pochade* painting"^{xxxix}. In the last fifteen years many artists have made audiovisual works, hypertextual and interactive

installations that can not be labeled or classified in any way at all, because they contain bits of just about everything. As we said above (along with Wu Ming), “contamination” is not the right term to describe these works. It is not just an endo-technological” hybridization, a mixing of audio-visual genres, but rather the use of *anything and whatever it takes* to achieve one’s end. Nor is it a simple matter of “non-fiction cinema” tradition that led to works such as *Volevamo anche le Rose, e Darko Maver o Operazione Pretofilìa [Operation Priest-ophilia]*^{xl} and *The Big Bother*. Those works were not “monsters” and they were not products of an aberration. “*Today we have to register the uselessness of various conventional definitions. Including, as noted before, that of ‘postmodern,’ because her the use of different stylemes, keys and languages is not filtered by cold irony in the face of the subject matter. These are not narratological operations, but efforts to tell stories in the way the author believes most right.*”^{xxli}

Today everyone has telecameras and computers where they can load digital editor programs for audio and visual stuff. It’s a time of Garage Media, in which lots of audiovisual material is made at home, in the garage. Garage media products are distributed by the Web, on YouTube, Vimeo, Google video, flickr, and quality doesn’t really doesn’t matter – what matters is “if they make themselves get watched,” if they elicit curiosity, emotion, criticism. This is the result of a technonarrative bulimia that is permeating every segment of the population. Wu Ming claims that today everybody writes, whereas once that was not true, and today we can say that everybody makes movies, and whereas once that was absolutely not the case.

That’s the way things are today – the UNOs are unsuccessful experiments because they tend to end up shapeless and indeterminate, vague. They are not really audiovisual or New Media art works, but they are not anything else either. But experiments are necessary even if they don’t all succeed. One can learn from failure, a failure can be quite interesting. ^{xxliii} Marianna Schivardi defines *The Big Bother* (2007) as “quasi-fiction”. It takes place in the San Vittore prison in Milan. It is a mix of social research, diary, documentary, television anti-news show, with innumerable citations and allusions to the big brother. It is a giant allegory: the inmates are subjected to constant surveillance by telecameras, they live in a real-life “Big Brother,” much like the characters in the TV format, and they are an allegory of our situation as beings who are increasingly being spied upon and controlled by the great digital panopticon that our society is creating. . “*A narrative object that is not a failure is Gomorra. The writer Helena Janeczek has had a clear influence on Saviano’s work, not just because she was his publisher but also because in her own seminal works, Lezioni di tenebra [Lessons of Darkness] (1997) and Cibo [Food] (2002) she explored some of the tones and outbreaks that the author of Gomorra skilfully used. Food, for example, jumps suddenly from a narrative form (tales about eating and gastronomic problems that various people tell their masseuse) to the essay form (along treatise on bovine spoingiform encephalopathy and the Creutzfeld-Jakob Syndrome)*”^{xxliii}

7. *Community and trans-mediality.*

Every New Media Epic work exists in a potential shroud comprising a quantic cloud of homages, allusions, spinoffs and “lateral” stories. There are interactive itineraries that the public – the prosumer – actually operate. There are drawings, designs, illustrations, songs, hypertext links, even network games, role-playing games, and other contributions that come “from below” thanks to the fundamentally open and chanting nature of the work and the world it contains. This new form of narration is a new “literature” that tends, sometimes implicitly but often expressly, to a state of transmediality. That is, it tends almost centripetally to move beyond the digital or linear contours to pursue its movement in other multimedia and multimodal forms, thanks to communities of people who interact together and essentially create together. The authors encourage these “reappropriations” and often participate directly themselves. Salvatore Iaconesi, known as xDxD, launched the *RomaEuropaFakefestival*, *Reff*^{xiv}, and re-appropriated the experimental concept of the festival.

The projects are directly conceived as transmedial, starting in audiovisual form but moving beyond into network modes, or at times even combined into a book. There are plenty of examples of this, with artists such as Eva and Franco Mattes, and naturally Wu Ming, standing out in particular.

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Grafts, samples and inserts

These terms derive from the work of Dimitri Chimenti^{xlv}.

In the New Media Epic, a narrative strategy intervenes to produce various degrees of simulation and dissimulation, all part of real experience, in order to develop characters and situations that themselves have a narrative dimension. Dimitri Chimenti borrows from critical cinema theory tools to understand the narrative devices that allow the novel to grasp History and textualize it. What we are doing is bringing these tools to the audiovisual arena to see which, by extension, can be applied to the unstable world of New Media art. - “*Normally, realism appears as a ‘dominant rhetoric,’ [...]. What happens (in Gomorra) is that events and lives and things are prolonged into their literary doubles, which favors the slide from the real in the textual reconstruction. [...] The use the novel makes of historical documents is a primary support.*” In the video we use “*historical sequences*” through the practice of ‘*found footage.*’ The use of these ‘*documents*’ allows us to ‘*textualize the real.*’ This ‘*starts with an immediate fact: the extreme closeness between denotation and the modes of representation.*’ This is the starting point for a series of grammatical (semantic) operations, in audio-visual and New Media art, that serve “*to elaborate the density of meanings that the historical world offers us.*”

Realism and the textualization of the real

“Maurizio Grande [...] spoke of ‘textualization of the real’^{xhvi}. That is quite a different concept from realism, because it doesn’t play out entirely within the canons of realistic composition and mimetic writing. Grande meant by this term the ability of a text to exhibit and construct the real – understood as a representable and communicable socio-cultural space – in the measure allowed and established by a given culture in a given historical period.” Consider, for example, the testimonies of the feminists, or the films made during rape trials, as they exist in Alina Marazzi’s work, “*Volevamo anche le rose*’ [*We Also Wanted Roses*]’. The audiovisual textualization is not separable from the work’s material. When *Volevamo anche le Rose* samples images from found footage, it transforms them by transferring to them a connotation typical of artistic texts – re-readability. To watch the film *Volevamo anche le Rose* is a more natural thing to do than to watch the audiovisual clips or read the original source material used by Alina Marazzi. The spectator is forced to make constant referral to a world outside the text and is required to accept a series of overlaps and tie-ins between the textual dimension and the field of the real. When Chimenti says extra-textuality, events and existences, field of the real or even the real itself, he is not referring to a material universe that is external to language and textuality in general, “*but rather that cultural dimension that is implicated in language and that is determined only in relation to a given community in a given historical period.*”^{xlvii} This helps us understand that the experimental language developed in New Media art is foundational for the world, as it is the vehicle for the sharing and structuring of our experiences of the real, and possesses an ontological dimension that can itself generate an experience of the World. What Dimitri Chimenti writes about literature also holds for New Media art - “*It is the work itself that offers itself as the possible site of a re-elaboration of cultural and linguistic codes that structure our experience of the world. That’s no small difference, as it allows us to arrive at the real not as a kind of data, and basically defined by preconceptions, but as the result of practicable itinerary of the world.*” This is the direction Franco Marineo takes in his work. His *Reality on a Finer Scale*, amounts to a case study on how films involve creating an epistemic construction of the real. Chimenti says the work offer itself as a possible place for the re-elaboration of cultural and linguistic codes that structure our experience of the world. Marineo underscores this with his cinematic work. Eva and Franco Mattes do the same with their New Media art.

Chimenti writes that “*if realism is a fact of writing, the textualization of the real is a fact of culture...*” By analogy, we can argue that realism in audiovisual cinema is a grammatical fact, while the mediatization of the real is a fact of culture. What we need to understand, then, is how a mediatic work manages both to capture a portion of reality while also giving it back to the cultural universe with a surcharge of meaning.

Grafts, samples and inserts

These terms come from the work of Marco Dinoj who, analyzing the Italian films *Buongiorno Notte* and *il Caimano*, identifies three figures with which a text can ransack the historical past to make it a new portion of reality: *the graft, the sample and the insert*. This is a taxonomic effort designed for the audiovisual and cinematic medium, which operates with modalities that are different from literature. But if we analyze these forms of human communication from a strictly narrative point of view, with a bit of allegorical guesswork to be sure, we can see how many differences disappear

The **Grafts** belong to the tradition of the historical novel in general and are essentially its most common figure. It is a narrative move that grafts onto historical events, recontextualizing their meaning. For a graft to work, the History on which it is placed has to be more than a mere backdrop and more than a figure created by the text itself. Events that run parallel to the story, and collisions between events that appear to be distant and autonomous, are what recontextualizes the past. The history used, then, has to have its own intimate dignity to justify being used at all, while the material grafted in can be the fruit of cultural or artistic research, of the author's imagination, of well-known events, or personal experiences (as well, obviously, as a mix of all the above). According to Dinoj, *Gomorra* relies heavily on the graft. Examples are the tailor who charges vocation after seeing, by chance and on television, Angeline Jolie wear to the Oscar awards an outfit made by him in a Camorra-owned shop. Another graft is the episode in which the Camorra gunrunner makes a pilgrimage to Russia to pay homage to the inventor of the world's most famous machine gun, Mikhail Kalashnikov. [...] These are "fictional characters" who don't exist, but their experiences are absolutely coherent with those of plausibly and possibly real individuals. What goes into "fictional characters" is not the same documentary stuff of which real characters are made. They are not based on third-party or official sources, be they newspapers, books or biographies. Their advantage is that they allow themselves to be subordinated to storytelling exigencies – they carry out a "role that places them in the interstitial space that exists between reality and its representation"^{xlviii}. The graft helps mediate between the level of realistic fiction and the level of the real; the goal of this mediation is to install meanings on the structure of real events. "Fictional characters" begin life in the text, exit and intersect with the domain of the real, and then return again to the text.

The **insert** is an object that always introduces a fictional character or element that the text needs to develop the story (and make it more engaging). It is different from a graft because it manipulates events from the inside of the text, while the graft moves in parallel to the textualized events and characters, and so exercises only an indirect effect on them.

The **sample** is an object that presents itself just as it is in history: an autonomous document of narration that is immediately recognizable and credible. Examples are the photographs in the work **Darko Maver**, the newspaper articles and the invitation to the Venice Biennial. The sample connects with the two other figures, the graft and the insert, extending its own meaning beyond its original documentary limits. A document becomes a sample when it is pushed to interact with elements that guarantee the widening of its field of meaning. Consider the gaze of Lise Marazzi as she stretches out on the grass in *Un'ora sola ti vorrei*. The sample on the one hand bolsters the documentary credibility of the work while on the other opens up to symbolic interaction with the work's text. The mere archive document is characterized by its informational value, and since it is destined to exhaust itself in its own use value, it engenders an aesthetic sense and not a broader aesthetic value able to embrace the necessary or possible updates that reality may and should have.

§

Dreams

Uchronies lead to dreams a great example of this is the work of Chiara Brambilla, *Lo zio sam e il sogno bosniaco [Uncle Sam and the Bosnian Dream]*, which only apparently deals with Bosnian pyramids but in reality addresses dreams, those of a people and that of a man. One of the characteristics of art is that of updating our dreams. This updating is very important as dreams are what Aristotle would call the efficient cause of our life – they are the pulses that move the knowing libido and the existential forms that we assume in sight of the goals we want to attain. These goals are the precipitate of our dreams. When I entered Fabrica, the Benetton's Research Center for Mass Culture^{xlix} for the first time, I saw a plaque that read "Don't Try To Rob Dreams" and reflected on the power of such a statement. Over time I have thought back on that phrase, and become convinced that the current problem is no longer that of the theft of dreams. The technological setting of today is linked to the innovation of the present, and the fact that man spends a lot of energy on trying to live in the present. As a social animal, man is constantly involved with his group in decoding signs of belonging. These signs are attitudes, habits, tendencies and concepts – all these "things" are always linked to the past due to the simple fact that, once the "man-and-technology" ensemble defines new proportions and human relations and gives birth to new concepts, terms and paths to meaning, we need at least ten to fifteen years for these to become real, shared, social attitudes. Aesthetics always refers to the past, and we tend to live looking backwards. It is the artist who has the task of updating our imagination, of updating our dreams. This is what the artists of the New (Italian) Media Epic do. Their works propose new visions of contemporary reality and

possibility, and they carry out an essential contemporary task of “making us literally see” our new proportions and possibilities. Our dreams are tied to this. Often we have an old imagination, which is normal; indeed, any system of desires and expectations is linked to what ethnosociology calls “accounts” – the forms and ways we have of seeing the world, all of which are created within codified forms. Artists today need to have an ethical tension surrounding their role and to operate inside an existing imaginary while updating the system of dreams in order to make us aware of our possibilities, which themselves are constantly updated by technology. Today the danger is not that somebody comes and steals our dreams – it is that we ourselves produced old and unrealizable dreams. The task of the New (Italian) Media Epic is, above all, that of making us aware of how our environment is changing or has changed. This view is very well expressed in Brambilla’s ‘*Lo Zio Sam e il sogno bosniaco*’, which tells a uchronic (but real) tale of a Bosnian emigrant who becomes a millionaire in Texas. He is convinced that Bosnia-Herzegovina, the most benighted and poor of the former Yugoslav regions, is home to the largest pyramids on the planet. He is so convinced of this that he finances a vast array of archeological digs, which he himself leads. But the dream that emerges from the tale is that of a Bosnia that finally finds something in which to believe, something that will allow it to stand out clearly on a map, a dream of tapping into a mass tourism market that so often today seems to be one of the most lucrative economic options. It is the dream of cultural and national pride for a land that has no story or legend to represent it.

A, B e C

“What is an allegory? The oldest but also most trivial answer is that allegory is a rhetorical expedient. The word derives from the combination of two Greek terms, allos (other) and egorein (to speak in public). ‘To speak of something else’ or ‘an other (way of) talking.’ Saying one thing in order to say another. To tell a story that is really another story, since the characters and their actions replace other characters and actions or because they personify abstractions, concept or moral virtues. The lowest and most comprehensible level for the definition of allegory posits it as a binary relation between each image and each meaning, a precise one-for-one correspondence. That is allegory as a ‘key.’ Once the key is found, the door opens. A common form of key-type allegory is historical: Events of another era are told with allusions to what is happening now. The film ‘300’ shows Spartans and Persians, Leonides fighting at Thermopoli, but speaks of today’s ‘clash of civilizations’ and George W. Bush’s ‘War on Terror.’ Historical allegory is a set of correspondences between the past as described in the work and the present in which the work was created. Key-type allegories are flat, rigid and destined to age without grace. Sooner or later, future readers will not be able to recognize the context, allusions and references and the work will stop speaking to the readers’ era because it is too tied to its own. [...] Still, not all historical allegories are key-types, not all are so intentional, explicit, coherent and one-for-one. In a basic sense, any narrative work placed in the past is a historical allegory, regardless of

*the author's intentions. [...] Even stories set in the future, as with science fiction, are written as if they were past. The future is only a veil, as all worlds have already happened".*¹

"Carrying this line of thought to its logical extreme, we can say that all narrative works are set in the past. Even when the verb tense is the present, it's just a form of the historical present – the spectator still sees things that have been already thought, already made, already objectified in the work. Hence all stories are allegories of the present, however indefinite the latter may be. Their indeterminacy does not denote an absence: Allegories are "time bombs," amounting to potential readings that turn into reality when the time arrives. The complete inadequacy of defining allegory as a 'rhetorical expedient' is now clear. Indeed, Walter Benjamin, in his 'Origins of German Baroque Drama' (1928) described allegory as a series of unpredictable bounces, a triangulation between what can be seen in the work, the intentions of the work's author, and the meanings the work takes on despite the author's intentions. This level of allegory utterly lacks a 'key' that can resolve interpretation once and for all. We are now in the land of metahistory, which can be compared to bouncing a ball in a room with three moving walls, but also as a continual jumping between three temporal planes:

- The time represented in the work (always a form of the past, even if the setting is contemporary);

- The present during which the work was written (even this has obviously since become part of the past);

- The present during which the work is enjoyed or consumed, whenever this may be – tonight, next week, in 2050, or ten thousand years from now.

Works that continue to resonate in this present are called "classics". Their secret is in the wealth of their metahistorical allegory, the same as we find in the great myths and legends"^{li}. The story of the quest for origins in Blade Runner (1982) has survived and been retold for generations because its deep allegory continues to "activate itself" in the present and offer dialogues relevant to the time of those who read or listen to it. "It's superfluous to note that a deep and vital allegorical level is not itself any guarantee of survival over time, nor of access to the status of a 'classic.' It is a necessary but not sufficient condition. This is a question of the evolution of taste and mentality, and even a bit of luck – all selective forces that form a "canon" that is to a large degree arbitrary. It is not a development that one can plan or know about beforehand, and it can take many years or even centuries to understand just how great a work may be."^{lii} I am not trying to understand if the works I've talked about here will last for a long time – perhaps not, given the diaphanous pace of digital culture. My purpose, and that of Wu Ming, is different: The search is for the allegorhythm of the New Media Epic. "Allegorhythm. The reader knows the word 'algorithm.' An algorithm is a set of rules and procedures to follow in a determined order to resolve a problem or obtain a result. It is a term used often in mathematics and computer programming. 'Allegorhythm' is a neologism [...] taken on loan from the work of Alex Galloway

and McKenzie Wark, whose writings on video games and gamer culture [...] were an inspiration, even if the use [...] in this text is different. [...] Every game has an algorithm and the player has to learn it if he is to resolve the problems, improve his abilities and jump levels much as Bruce Lee does in *Game of Death*. But every game is also allegory: It is made up of images in movement that represent something else (mathematical procedures, binary code, the language the machine speaks to itself). The player can learn the algorithm of the game only by interacting with the images, that is, through allegory. So in order to find the algorithm, he has to understand and master the allegorhythm. He has to decrypt the allegory and discover its secrets. Not just videogames, but novels and other narrative forms all have allegorhythms.^{liii} Even television works have their allegorhythm. Who knows, maybe we can do the same with audiovisual and interactive, multimedia narrative forms.

That, anyway, is what we are trying to do.

§

Alternative behaviors^{liv}

At bottom, all the works being discussed here explore the new proportions of a humanity that is increasingly hybridized with technology. As Dimitri Chinmenti says: “These works offer themselves as places for the re-elaborate of new cultural and linguistic codes that structure our experience of the world,” and so they amount to full-fledged devices for the generation of the present. [...] These works allow us to arrive at the real not as a kind of data, and basically defined by preconceptions, but as the result of practicable itinerary of the world. Given all that we should open up a new debate about technology, beginning to considerate as an otherness, while at the same time opening a radical new approach to nature. [...] We should do this in order to build a future that we should imagine, because it will be *without us*. It is painful to think that all that we have built in our lives and – even more important – in centuries of civilization will in the end amount to nothing more than a handful of dust, but everything fades away sooner or later. [...] Other species went extinct before us, and our moment will come. That’s the way it works, it’s part of everything, the dance of the world.

How did you go extinct, Mister Neanderthal?

“The end of our civilization and of our species is written in the heavens. Literally. It’s not a question of ‘if,’ but of ‘when’. We are not eternal, but rather more precarious than ever, hanging on to a grain of dust that spins in an infinite void. If we realize this, if we can accept it, we will live our life less truculently, less like bullies. Yes, bullies. What we can no longer accept is boorishness and narrow-mindedness. We cannot idly accept that the species is doing its utmost to accelerate the process of extinction and to make it more painful – and less dignified – than it has to be.”^{liv}

James Lovelock, author of “Gaia,” was right.

What we see as artificial is natural; it is the product of a living being, a

participant in the animal kingdom [...] Are the towers of Australian termites natural formations? Then human constructions should also be considered natural, as they are produced by man, a member of the animal kingdom and hence part of nature. Nothing lasts – in fact what we call “non-biodegradable” really means material that takes a very very long time to erode. But the Earth has the time and energy to corrode, dissolve, melt, break and absorb. *“And the damage? The ecosystems we have ruined? The species we have annihilated? Those are our problems, not the planet’s. Towards the end of the Permian Era, about two hundred and fifty million years ago, some ninety-five percent of all living species went extinct. It took a while, but life returned, stronger and more complex than before. The Earth will manage just fine, and will end only when the Sun decides. We, however, are in danger. We are dispensable.”*^{lvi} Despite this, anthropocentrism is stronger than ever today – even though it is an ideology or paradigm that is against us. Despite scientific discoveries and objective proof – humanity was removed from the center of the universe by Galileo, from the center of nature by Darwin, and from the center of himself by Sigmund Freud, while neuroscience today is nibbling away at the final resistances of the I – we don’t seem in general to be able to shed the absurd idea of being the Chosen Species. *“In fact, many people would say we are not even a species, we transcend taxonomies and are the only beings to have a soul, the only ones to dialogue with God.”*^{lvii} Giuseppe O. Longo coined the concept that the accelerated hybridization between man and *tecnica* is propelling humanity towards a new hybrid species, as indicated by the title of his book, *Homo technologicus*^{lviii}. Roberto Marchesini, in *Post-human*, claims that hybridization with technology is part of the human evolutionary story^{lix}.

It’s misleading to conceive of language or culture as opposed to nature: They are full-fledged constituents of the natural process, and it makes no sense at all to draw counterpoints between the artificial and the natural. Given the imbalances introduced during the industrial era and by capitalist rapacity towards nature, there don’t seem to be any alternatives to this cultural outlook. The future does not exist; it ceased once the hypothesis of technological Singularity was confirmed. It is not history that is dead but the future – *“...even science fiction – once it got over its primordial and progressive orgy – has largely given up trying to tell the ‘future story’ and sets its plots in non-times, in remote eras or even in future times that are so close as they could already be present somewhere.”*^{lx} This is one reason why the oblique point of view is so important, and why – as Calvino had guessed – the literary “yield” of extra or non-human, even unidentifiable gazes will become even more important. These experiments allow us to exit from ourselves – like my technoetic work, *The Artist Formerly Known As Vanda -TAFKAV*.^{lxi}

“It’s clear, we are humans, our perceptions are human, our gaze is human, our language is human. We are antropoi, we can’t really adopt a non-anthropocentric point of view.”^{lxii} But we can use technologies as a medium to simulate one. We can work towards obtaining a counter-environmental effect. Not a simple “depaysement”: *“...but the supreme effort of producing an eco-centric thought. That would mean simultaneously seeing the world from the outside and seeing*

ourselves from the outside as part of the world and its continuum^{lxiii}. [...] The human genetic *pool* is facing the greatest remixing in at least two million years (if we identify Adam and Eve with *Homo Habilis*). Thanks to communication technology, populations are hybridizing and creating novel mestizo forms. Geneticists say that people's ability to move around is what spurred the homogenization of our species. At the same time, natural selection is often blocked by technology. Many individuals who would naturally be destined to perish due to various serious functional deficits can today live and even reproduce, as natural predators no longer have much impact on the rules of survival. Steve Jones, a geneticist at University College, London, is one of those who claims that human evolution has essentially stopped. «*For our species, things have stopped improving or worsening. If you want to know what Utopia looks like, look around you.*»^{lxiv} In many parts of the globe, children no longer need be certain they will lose a sibling; people everywhere have stopped dying in a big way, and almost all, rich and poor alike, can be sure of reaching adulthood and hence the age of reproduction. For the same reason that it stopped, genetic evolution has begun to work backwards. Some characteristics of modern technological life could spur evolutionary changes that don't amount to adaptation and many not even help us survive. This is what is meant by "non-adaptive evolution." We might say that today it is culture, and not genetic heritage, that is the selective factor, the one that decides who lives and who dies. Evolution may by now be "memetic," having more to do with ideas than with genes. But it could happen that the mimetically evolved individual falls in the field of non-adaptive evolution, delays the reproductive phase while age cohorts that have not developed much interest for culture begin quickly having children. In which case, culture (and the type of intelligence associated with culture) could turn out to be an evolutionary disadvantage. That is sort of what happens in *Gomorra*, where a low culture that considers investments in a very short-term light wins out. The society that loves culture, which thrives on a longer time frame, and therefore understands the social importance of justice, of ethics, of good habits and rules, is evolutionary disadvantaged. The evolutionary advantage of this human type, the outlaw and the criminal – you can add bankers or financiers – leads culture and intelligence ever lower. The advantage of the human type that loves culture is that, understanding evolutionary theory, he knows that he can't accept this logic passively. This latter type has the ability to choose.

The ability to choose.

This is why awareness today has to be high on the political agenda. By acquainting oneself with culture one gains tools for the understanding of the world that allow one to adopt aware positions rather than ending up as alienated and prey to the rest of the world. Today deciding where one wants to be on the evolutionary scale is a political choice. And, clearly, an ethical one as it has to take evolutionary mechanisms into account. We think of evolution as something that leads to structural changes, but often its effects are played out in intangible areas such as behavior and thought. But if thought evolves, then the physical individual may fall

in the ranks of non-adaptive evolution. Technological communication channels have offered enormous conquests to humanity; as Steve Jones says, we live in Utopia. Non-adaptivity leads us to have ever-growing needs for machines in order to survive. We are already dependent on machines [...]. Even if we built them to satisfy human needs, we have structured our life and our behavior in order to satisfy them. Think of how Film & Video authors adapt themselves to the point of view of the camera; the very word *cameraman* amounts to a metaphorical example of this hybridization...[...] Today we are developing prototypes of cameras that are directly linked to the optical nerve through a *braingate*. How will we adapt to a camera that is an integral organ of a director? Might it seem like evolution is pushing us to hybridize ourselves with machines when in fact it is just a case of virtuous symbiosis?

The evolution of humanity could take place within a paradox, it could be the victim of its own success, it could turn out to be something unable to keep up with the pace of non-evolutionary processes that it itself has generated. Or it could simply shift and generate an evolution on another scale – perhaps merging into a kind of co-evolution between the biological and the technological. As argued above, we build machines to satisfy our needs, and then immediately we begin to structure our lives in order to satisfy these machines. As the complexity of machines increases, we will adapt. This is George Dyson’s idea - “*everything that human beings are doing to make it easier to have operational control over computer networks is, at the same time, and for different reasons, making it easier for computer networks to control human beings.*”^{lxv}

All this has a lot to do with the forms of writing, creativity and communication.

Kevin Kelly claims that, with the network, we are creating a great Gaia, a thinking Earth. And Nick Bostrom of Oxford University contends that transferring our brains into the computer may well signify our last act. An advanced artificial intelligence could subdivide various components of human cognition and reassemble them in something that is not human. In his science-fiction novel *Creatures of Light and Darkness (1969)*, Roger Zelazny tells a story in which we are the reproductive organs of the machines which, once they learn to reproduce themselves on their own, will render us obsolete. But we have an advantage – we can be aware, so long as we grasp our evolution from a cultural point of view, by giving value to mimetic cultures even when they entail devolutionary side effects. Reflections on language, on story telling, on the techniques of sharing human experiences and proportions, and hence reflections on the forms of ontology, all lead to this kind of thinking and open up new prospects for the future of humanity. It is by starting here that we will find the shared allegorhythm of the new media epic. Its path will be in the dense thicket of texts, images, interactions and instruction manuals we will make and use to grasp the deep allegory. Art and literature have lived in the phantasmagoric depths, delving into dangerous illusions such as species-ism, anthropocentrism, the transcendence of the Ego, Western primacy, progress, the rejection of the future and other paradigms that have filled the earth with ruins. “*Today, art and literature cannot limit themselves to sounding*

belated alarms: They have to help us imagine an escape route. They have to cure our gaze and bolster our ability to visualize [...] It is nice – and epic – to formulate questions. This is the real war, and for as long as we're on the planet, there will never be a postwar."^{lxvi}

Art today has a central role: It has to manage to exit from recognized gestalts, update aesthetics, and generate new technoetic and cybernated ontologies.

Francesco Monico (Venice - Italy)

Monico is both a technoetic researcher and artist focused on how technology shapes human communication, behavior and thought. He is primarily engaged in directing the Media Design and New Media Art Department which he founded at the Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti Milano - NABA. He is Professor of Theory and Method of Mass Media in the same institution as well as director of the PhD program M-Node - Planetary Collegium. Senior Fellow of the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology in Toronto.

The text was english edited by Christopher Emsden.

- ⁱ Cfr Boscolo C., “Scardinare il Postmoderno. Etica e metastoria nel New Italian Epic”. <http://www.carmillaonline.com/archives/2008/04/002620.html>
- ⁱⁱ <http://www.carmillaonline.com/archives/2008/09/002775.html>
- ⁱⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planetary_Collegium
- ^{iv} www.m-node.org e www.m-node.com
- ^v F. Monico, *Outline of a Subversive Technopoetic*, PhD, Italiano dell'autore.
- ^{vi} [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1984_\(television_commercial\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1984_(television_commercial))
- ^{vii} <http://www.radicalsoftware.org/e/index.html>
- ^{viii} <http://alien.mur.at/rax/ARTEX/PLISSURE/plissure.html>
- ^{ix} New Technologies of Art is the phrase proposed by the MIUR, Italy's higher education ministry, for the new curriculum related to new media and new interactive and multimedia technologies. I don't know why but I have always thought this phrase was the fruit of the experience offered by Paolo Rosa at the Brera Fine Arts Academy's Biennial in Milan.
- ^x <http://www.lynnhershman.com/>
- ^{xi} www.comune.monfalcone.go.it/galleria/
- ^{xii} Toni Thorimbert, Antonio Somaini, Mimmo Lombezzi, Fabio Carlini, Franco Bolelli, Domenico Quaranta, Marco Mancuso, Derrick De Kerckhove, Paolo Atzori;
- ^{xiii} Wu Ming 1, NEW ITALIAN EPIC, versione 2.0, Memorandum 1993-2008: narrativa,, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro. Pag. 7, 14, 09,2008 on line <http://www.carmillaonline.com/archives/2008/09/002775.html>;
- ^{xiv} Stefano Coletto curates the exhibitions and activities of the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa in Venice and has created and maintained the series *Tomorrow Now - Pratiche artistiche contemporanee nella cultura digitale, 2005-2008*
- ^{xv} Mail Re: Appunto per paper New Media Art Education & Research 2009 del 19 febbraio 2009, 12.57;
- ^{xvi} Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 2;
- ^{xvii} F. Monico, *Il Dramma Televisivo, l'autore e l'estetica del mezzo*, pag. Meltemi 2006, Pag ...;
- ^{xviii} Amnesty International in 2002 officially requested an investigation into the way police officers handled public order issues during the Italian G8 summit, criticizing the excessive violence and asking also for investigations into just how police officers were instructed before the event. According to Amnesty, many indications of human rights violations warranted verification because they were supported by evidence from medical doctors, photographs and eyewitness accounts. While Amnesty welcomed the launch of a series of criminal investigations by Italian judicial authorities, the organization claims that, given the scope and gravity of the accusations and the large number of foreign citizens involved, with associated high levels of international concern, the probes are *insufficient to provide an adequate response*. It recommends the institution of an independent inquiry commission, stating that the work done by the first commission in 2001 was *unsatisfying and marred by disagreement and acrimony*. - In *Italy: G8 Genoa policing operation of July 2001*. Index Number: EUR 30/12/2001 Published: 1 November 2001; On line <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR30/012/2001>;
- ^{xix} That is the way Michelangelo Fournier, at the time of the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001 was deputy vice-quaestor of the First Roaming Police Force of Rome, described to judges what he saw at the moment of law enforcement officers' entry into the Diaz school. Source: *la Repubblica 13 giugno 2007*;
- ^{xx}- La CV 2400 Video Rover – In 1967, Sony introduced the first portable electronic telecamera, the CV-2400 Video Rover, with which it was possible to make movies on one's own in complete autonomy. |With this tool, video art was born.
- ^{xxi} Francesco Monico, definizione in occasione del Workshop per la 11° Biennale Internazionale di Architettura di Venezia: *The Video As Seen At The End of The Era of The Video*, on line su <http://endofthevideo.blogspot.com/> ;
- ^{xxii} Secondo Steven Levy in *On the Burden of Twitter* (Sul fardello di Twitter), on line http://www.wired.com/techbiz/people/magazine/17-02/st_levy, The author feels guilty if he doesn't update his blog but he also feels guilty if he exhibits himself too much.
- ^{xxiii} http://www.robertosaviano.it/content.php?__params=/0/120/134/&LANG=EN
- ^{xxiv} <http://mouchette.org/>
- ^{xxv} http://0100101110101101.org/home/darko_maver/
- ^{xxvi} <http://www.etoy.com/>
- ^{xxvii} <http://brandon.guggenheim.org/>
- ^{xxviii} The reflections and observations on the work of Wu Ming 1 emerged during the meetings held at NABA, Scuola di Media Design & arti Multimediali della Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti di Milano nella primavera del 2009.
- ^{xxix} Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 14;
- ^{xxx} Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 14;
- ^{xxxi} Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 14;
- ^{xxxii} Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 15;
- ^{xxxiii} Zappa A, Reilly V., *Human Avatars*, 2005, on line 11/01/2009 http://www.azapp.de/ha_07.html
- ^{xxxiv} Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 15;
- ^{xxxv} Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 16;
- ^{xxxvi} Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 19;
- ^{xxxvii} Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 20;
- ^{xxxviii} Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 20;
- ^{xxxix} Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 22;

- xi <http://www.molleindustria.org/it/operazione-pretofilia>
- xli Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 22;
- xlii Da Wu Ming 1, Memorandum, pag 22, parafrasi dell'autore.
- xliiii Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 23;
- xliv http://www.romaeuropa.org/index_en.html
- xlvi Cut up di INNESTI, PRELIEVI E INSERTI IN *GOMORRA* DI ROBERTO SAVIANO - Appunti per una tipologia retorica, con una postilla su *Gomorra* e gli "oggetti narrativi" di Dimitri Chimenti (le parti tra virgolette sono gli originali dell'autore) - on line su <http://www.carmillaonline.com/archives/2009/03/002974.html#002974>
- xlvii Maurizio Grande, *La Commedia all'Italiana*, Bulzoni 2002.
- xlviii Cut up di INNESTI, PRELIEVI E INSERTI IN *GOMORRA* DI ROBERTO SAVIANO - Appunti per una tipologia retorica, con una postilla su *Gomorra* e gli "oggetti narrativi" di Dimitri Chimenti on line su <http://www.carmillaonline.com/archives/2009/03/002974.html#002974>
- xlviII IPI, D. Chimenti, testo citato.
- xlix In 1996 Oliviero Toscani invited me to collaborate on a Fabrica project. This center, initially led by Godfrey Reggio, was born as a center of excellence with year-long fellowships given to international researchers in the world of art and communication. I focused on the media area, which at the time was growing in importance..
- l Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 26;
- li Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 26;
- lii Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 26;
- liii Wu Ming1, Memorandum, pag 27
- liv Questo paragrafo è ispirato al lavoro '*Alternative Behaviours*' St. Martin School of Art, Sculpture Department (Studio A4) I09 Charing Cross Road, London WC2 - 29th March 1974 – Roy Ascott
- lv Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 28;
- lvi Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 28;
- lvii Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 28;
- lviii Cfr., Giuseppe O. Longo, *Homo Technologicus*, Meltemi 2001.
- lix Cfr., Roberto Marchesini, *Post-human, verso nuovi modelli di esistenza*, Bollati Boringhieri, 2002.
- lx Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 29;
- lxi TAFKAV, <http://tafkav.blogspot.com/>
- lxii Wu Ming 1, Memorandum, pag 29;
- lxiii Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 29;
- lxiv *Le Scienze*, Ed. It. Febbraio 2009;
- lxv Dyson G., *L'evoluzione delle Macchine*, Cortina, 2000.
- lxvi Wu Ming 1, NIE 0.2-2008, pag 29;