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>Friends?

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Paolo Cirio

> interview

A You defined "The Big Plot" as a romantic spy-story played on the info-sphere. Can you give me a more detailed description?

It's experimental storytelling, which uses videos, texts, pictures, signs and performances to tell a story about espionage, political issues and sentimental relationships. It is presented over several media channels and in public spaces and includes audience participation. The spectators play a crucial role in the unfolding of the story; they follow clues by reading diaries and watching videos of the characters, they assist at public events, they find other pieces of the story disseminated over the internet and they can contact the characters to find out more information. The fiction is based on a true story; the main role is a Russian spy who was arrested in Canada three years ago. By using his real cover name, I exploited his identity and his life to fictionalize an alleged plot by a Russian political movement. One of the aims of this movement (which does have a counterpart in real world) is to create a super-state called Eurasia. During the story any political aspirations are spoiled by complicated love tangles and weaknesses in the psychological integrity of all the characters.

The story revolves around four main characters. Each has uploaded videos to their own YouTube channel and pictures to Flickr accounts. They each manage a Facebook account, and usually a blog. Some use even

more platforms (like a LinkedIn account), some use less. Do you conceive of social networks just as a means to properly channel specific types of information or as platforms with specific qualities that need to be exploited as a group? How did you make use of them for the different characters?

Each character functions as a narrator and each chooses what to show us, providing a versatile, expressive tool to work with. Such active roles convey connotations to the story by developing distinct narrative voices through the way they manipulate media. So a character's choice of social network platforms and how they use these platforms helps to depict traits and qualities. For example, the spy, who is the oldest character, does not over-expose himself. He posts a little photography work on Flickr and has a Facebook account, but only because his friends have forced him. In contrast, the political leader spreads his propaganda widely, making use of several platforms, while the journalist exploits the social platforms suitable for her job, such as LinkedIn. However here we need to mention a distinction: between media that log our lives without our consent or control, and those we intentionally use to broadcast our personal information. To make reference to this important difference, the project also details some information on websites like Google and Wikipedia. Each media aims to have an appropriate narrative function. The notion of Personal Media should have a broader meaning, in which any technology that allow us to broadcast personal content becomes a powerful and dangerous tool for social relations. Portable devices that increase interconnectedness, social networking applications that facilitate interpersonal communication, platforms for self-publishing and a general loss of privacy – all these things affect how we experience our private lives and how we relate to others. The book "The Future of Reputation" By D.J.Solove explains some of these issues. Dramaturgically, the characters of any contemporary fiction should deal with personal media, because they are the most utilized way of communicating sentiments, events, relations, etc. of common people. The empathic effect on spectators should be stronger when a fiction uses the same expression of audience's ordinary articulation of the reality.

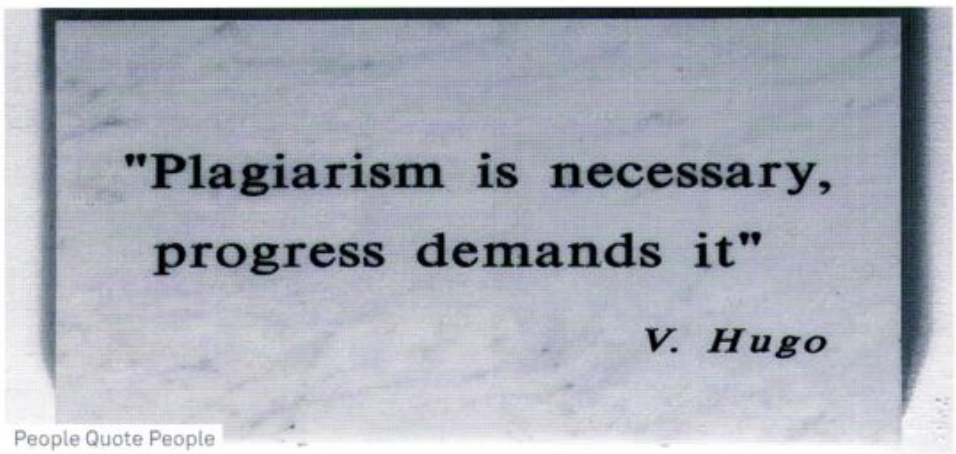
You selected the four professional actors through a real casting process. Their recognizability is primarily through their faces (as it is in the Facebook philosophy), so was this the most important element you considered in the selection, or were there others? How have you planned their interrelation?

Like a casting for a movie I selected actors who better personified the characters of the story, but in a way that blurs actors' real lives and fictional identities. For example, the psychologist of the middle managers is actually a real New York psychologist, his second job after being an actor. He acted and recorded some of the video episodes in his studio. The young leader is a native Russian guy, who sang in a Russian rock band with its own real-life fan base. The journalist is enacted by an actress who lives between Toronto and Berlin, and who often travels in Russia as well. I also asked the actors to give me some of their intimate pictures, which portray them with real friends and relatives. This posting of real pictures on the characters' blogs and Facebook profiles, in combination with fictional revelations of their experiences, created a perilous mixture of verisimilitude, which resulted in some actors refusing to take part at the audition stage. I was extremely determined to obscure real and fictional spheres, without missing specific attributes of both.

It's essential that part of "The Big Plot" happens in physical reality, especially some of your interventions, which can be described as creating an "alternate reality game". What's your approach to playing online and offline at the same time? Did you face any unexpected results?

Through my experience creating and orchestrating smart-mobs with street-art happenings, I have become interested in actions conducted in public spaces that are organized via digital networks, in which participants are directed by instructions to show up at a real-world location. Unsettling the social conventions of public spaces is one of my major ambitions. Inevitability, I saw creating an Alternative Reality Game as a way to bring together all my former experiences and to exercise myself in theatre and cinema, which are also my passions. The point of working on physical reality is that if a project is not declared as fiction, or art, people believe in it much more than online reality, where people are always more skeptical and the effects are softer - working with both could simulate reality almost perfectly. This simulation is the scenography and the stage where roles play the fiction.

This movie is scattered in online platforms and physical reality with multiple points of reference. Are you comfortable in calling it a



People Quote People

post-movie? And why do you think it can be defined as "recombinant fiction"?
It does look like a post-movie, but there is an ongoing discussion about what to call this "new form of art", and there have already been many suggestions. I use "Recombinant" because I think that the Critical Art Ensemble theory of Recombinant Theatre has given prophetic and visionary ideas of new forms of fiction, specifically when they have a political or social dimension. Personally, I see The Big Plot as a conceptual art piece, though it's difficult to maintain a formal integrity because of its experimental nature.

After the plot reached an appropriate stage of development you decided to open the platform and so the narrative. Then, after some press feedback you told me that a student community in U.S. started to develop many more characters and stories, deeply shaping the story. Who are they and what, in your opinion, motivated them to embrace the story?
Honestly, I haven't much information about who they are, but I'm quite impressed with their determination and insistence to act in the story. They set up more than ten new characters with Facebook profiles, blogs, twitters, and so on - some even posted video pieces. They follow the plot-line, however they created new pieces of the story, over which I lose all control, except via the four main characters who try to lead them dramaturgically. From a proposed experiment, I have created a real participative drama, which is not a hoax or a game but genuine fiction. I think that with the Alternative Reality Game, we definitely surpass older notions of passive media spectatorship. People have learned some rules and practices – they now know how to act and play in immersive stories.

One of the formats you seem familiar with are diagrams that you used in GWEI and Amazon Noir, and as a standalone concept in the "algorithms triptych" of "Open Society Structures". What do diagrams represent to you and how do you approach them?
I see diagrams as a fascinating medium to describe complex concepts and systems, and people really enjoy to read and interpret them by following the persuasive flux of mechanisms, a process, I think, that is rooted in expressive human language. Diagrams drive imagination in a logical simplicity able to explain everything and hence to influence and signify. I'm a fan of Mark Lombardi's diagrams, he really used them in a constructive way to weld art and information together. Specifically, the Algorithms Triptych of Open Society Structures combines social-organization-orientated software designing, and questioning if we can outline a more functional civilisation by redrawing its architecture (the Microsoft model vs. Unix is the tacit example). In the art history context these algorithms can be seen like an updated version of the Joseph Beuys' blackboard sketches. However I didn't use sources from anywhere else than my notes to draw these diagrams. I was surprised too when in less than a month I had the whole picture of them, I guess it's because I spent so many years thinking deeply about the revolution!

In People Quote People you also deeply questioned the author's role - defining it "social degeneracy" and mixing up quotes (that we abuse today through mindless copy-and-pasting) and authors. In your perspective, is misquotation a form of cultural rebellion, or just an exemplary practise to highlight the fragility of the ultra fast global communication?
It's a provocation, for sure a dangerous one. I never verified how many misquotations I caused by this project, I suppose many, because it had high traffic and I even sold banners on it. I may argue about the romantic figure of the genius that shaped our culture after the Middle Ages, however it's in our time that the importance of names became a fixation for anyone. In fact, nowadays, building a reputation online is professionally more important than our resumes, and at the same time there is the ultra fast mass production of ideas, content and activities created by million of people interconnected that share everything (the so-called Prosumers). This phenomenon inevitably results in cases of homonyms, plagiarism, inaccuracies and misquotations. In this situation, if we try to leave behind the single author, the credits and so on, we can focus on a general wisdom that rises from the crowd in the network. I subtitled this project "The Death of the Author 2.0" (from the Roland Barthes' book) but actually it's about something that is coming into existence, but of course it's without name and surname, just people's ideas.

You are developing a new work involving the credit card payment system. Can you tell me more about it?
It has been a couple of months that I have been studying finance, the virtualization of money and the credit card industry. There is a lot to say, but it's still highly top secret.