

12-8-2016

# The Wu Ming Foundation: A Collective Approach to Literature, Art, and Politics in 21st Century Italy

Melina A. Masterson

University of Connecticut - Storrs, [melina.masterson@uconn.edu](mailto:melina.masterson@uconn.edu)

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## Recommended Citation

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A Collective Approach to Literature, Art, and Politics in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Italy

Melina Anne Masterson, PhD

University of Connecticut, 2016

The early 1990s marked a shift in modern Italian history with the advent of the Second Republic and the arrival of Silvio Berlusconi on the political and cultural scene. Berlusconi's almost complete control of the country's media, in addition to his political power as center-right prime minister, presented a unique challenge not only to democracy in general but to Italian culture in particular. It was in this context that Wu Ming, an 'anonymous' Bolognese writing collective emerged. In this study, I will argue that the group is both a unique product of and response to the period of 1993-2016, which runs from the start of the Second Republic, through the Berlusconi years and up to the elections of 2013 and the birth of Beppe Grillo's "Five Star Movement." This period also fully encompasses the literary, political, and cultural formation of the Wu Ming collective, from their beginnings as members of Luther Blissett to the publication of five of their collaboratively written novels (1999-2009) to their increased presence on social media platforms such as Twitter and Pinterest (2010-2016). My work will be organized into four distinct chapters in which I focus on a different element of the Wu Ming project—their novels, transmedial projects and performances, and digital presence—and discuss the variety of strategies and media platforms that they use to question the dominant paradigms established by Berlusconiism. I will also assess and evaluate the effectiveness of the cultural and political solutions offered by each of these components, as some of Wu Ming's strategies of 'writing back,' though aimed at subverting Berlusconi's tactics of culture creation, might instead have the potential to undermine their project and ultimate goals.

The Wu Ming Foundation:  
A Collective Approach to Literature, Art, and Politics in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Italy

Melina Anne Masterson

B.A., Colorado College, 2002

M.A., Boston College, 2007

M.A., University of Connecticut, 2012

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

at the

University of Connecticut

2016

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Melina Anne Masterson

2016

APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

The Wu Ming Foundation:  
A Collective Approach to Literature, Art, and Politics in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Italy

Presented by

Melina Anne Masterson, B.A., M.A.

Major Advisor \_\_\_\_\_  
Norma Bouchard

Associate Advisor \_\_\_\_\_  
Franco Masciandaro

Associate Advisor \_\_\_\_\_  
Eduardo Urios-Aparisi

University of Connecticut  
2016

*For Mom, Dad, and Anthony*

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## **Introduction**

The early 1990s marked a shift in modern Italian history with the advent of the Second Republic and the arrival of Silvio Berlusconi on the political and cultural scene. Berlusconi's almost complete control of the country's media, in addition to his political power as center-right prime minister, presented a unique challenge not only to democracy in general but to Italian culture in particular. It was in this context that Wu Ming, an 'anonymous' Bolognese writing collective emerged. Initially, the five members of Wu Ming were part of the international guerilla cultural group Luther Blissett, which took its name from a Jamaican born soccer player who played in England and Italy during the 1980s and who was known for his purposely erratic play and refusal to engage in the capitalist system that has long governed European soccer clubs.<sup>1</sup> It was under this name that the original four members of the collective wrote *Q* (1999), a novel that takes place in 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany following the posting of Martin Luther's theses. Despite its temporal and geographical setting, the work is clearly a response to the political situation in Italy at that time and must be considered in light of the era of Berlusconiism,<sup>2</sup> of the period of government corruption known as Tangentopoli (Bribe-City) that preceded Berlusconi's venture into politics, and of the dawn of the Second Republic, (the beginning of Berlusconi's political and cultural hegemony). The same can be said of the subsequent novels and projects of the collective. This study will contextualize the birth of the Wu Ming collective and chart their evolution into the transmedial and transnational political, literary, and cultural presence that they are today. I argue that the group is both a unique product of and response to the period of 1993-2016, which runs from the start of the Second Republic, through the Berlusconi years and up to the elections of 2013 and the birth of

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<sup>1</sup> See "The Luther Blissett Manifesto" for an explanation of the name and an outline of the group's identity.

<sup>2</sup> "Berlusconiism" is the term for the phenomenon of the former prime minister's mass-mediated cultural dominance. See Orsina, *Il berlusconismo nella storia d'Italia*, for a more in-depth analysis of the historical and cultural impact of Berlusconi's brand of neoliberal capitalism and his style of governance.

Beppe Grillo's "Five Star Movement."<sup>3</sup> This period also fully encompasses the literary, political, and cultural formation of the Wu Ming collective, from their beginnings as members of Luther Blissett to the publication of five of their collaboratively written novels (1999-2009) to their increased presence on social media platforms such as Twitter and Pinterest (2010-2016). My work will be organized into four distinct chapters in which I focus on a different element of the Wu Ming project—their novels, transmedial projects and performances, and digital presence—and discuss the variety of strategies and media platforms that they use to question the dominant paradigms established by Berlusconi. I will also assess and evaluate the effectiveness of the cultural and political solutions offered by each of these components, as some of Wu Ming's strategies of 'writing back,' though aimed at subverting Berlusconi's tactics of culture creation, might instead have the potential to undermine their project and ultimate goals.

## **II. Wu Ming and the New Italian Epic**

There is little about the Wu Ming collective that does *not* challenge long-existing paradigms and traditions. Part of the innovation of the group is in the approach of the authors themselves, both to their texts and to their own role as writers. First, the Chinese name immediately disassociates them from a direct connection to the Italian context and therefore automatically inserts them into a more liminal, indefinable, and inter/transnational position in the literary world. The choice of the name has double significance, both literally and symbolically: in Chinese it can alternately mean, based on pronunciation of the first syllable, "anonymous" or "five names" and is commonly used by Chinese dissidents as a form of protest. The group's collaboratively written

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<sup>3</sup> The populist, anti-establishment political party created by popular comedian Grillo claims to fight for the "five stars" of "public water, sustainable transport, sustainable development, right to Internet access, and environmentalism." See Grillo, et al. "Programma Del Movimento Cinque Stelle."

novels are all signed with the pseudonym, while the individual works of the different authors are attributed numerically, i.e. Wu Ming 1, Wu Ming 2, etc. Though the collective avoids their visual representation in the media, refusing to allow themselves to be photographed or videotaped, they do not hide their actual identities, and their ‘numbers’ reflect the alphabetical order of their last names. Wu Ming 1 is Roberto Bui, Wu Ming 2 Giovanni Cattabriga, Wu Ming 3 Luca Di Meo, Wu Ming 4 Federico Guglielmi, and Wu Ming 5 Riccardo Pedrini. Four members of the collective are responsible for the writing of *Q*, under the name of Luther Blissett. The group became a quintet in 2000, and therefore *54* (2002) was the first actual novel “a dieci mani.” The five authors would go on to collaborate on Einaudi’s 2005 edition of *Asce di guerra, Manituana* (2007), and the screenplay for the 2004 Guido Chiesa film *Lavorare con lentezza* (aka *Radio Alice*). In 2008, Luca Di Meo, aka Wu Ming 3, left the group. The collective’s subsequent collaborations, *Altai* (2009), *L’Armata dei Sonnambuli* (2014) and *L’invisibile ovunque* (2015) were therefore written by the remaining four authors. Wu Ming 5, whose solo style had often been considered dissonant with that of the rest of the group, left the collective in 2015.

Though they have changed their name (from Luther Blissett to Wu Ming) in the course of their literary production, the use of the pseudonym remains one of the building blocks of their literary philosophy, as they seek to avoid the cult of celebrity of the author. However, this is not to say that they aim to detach themselves from the reading public. In fact, it is just the opposite: their objective is one of collaboration between writer, reader, and text, and therefore they focus on these intimate connections, forged on their blog *Giap!* or in person at their writing workshops and political protests.

Around the time of the release of 54 in 2002, Wu Ming 1 published a “Memorandum” on a phenomenon he coined the “New Italian Epic,” consisting of various texts written after 1993<sup>4</sup> which challenge not only Italy’s cultural and political climate but the general conventions of postmodernism. According to Claudia Boscolo, “The NIE shows the response Italian fiction had to the failure of the mass media to provide factual information on Italian politics and social issues” (Boscolo 2). In Wu Ming 1’s “Memorandum,” and in Wu Ming 2’s “La salvezza di Euridice,”<sup>5</sup> the two members of the collective write at length about the need for storytelling as a way to recover what has been lost, reflecting their push to be ‘active’ participants rather than ‘passive’ consumers in all things. Wu Ming 2 also discusses what he refers to as the “industrialization of narrative” in the Berlusconi years, which refers to the “fiume” (“river”) of stories that had inundated communication, resulting in “1. collective idiocy; 2. the disappearance of facts; 3. compulsory affabulation; 4. the inflation of the imaginary” (Wu Ming 2 131),<sup>6</sup> all effects which the NIE seeks to combat.

Out of the innovation of the New Italian Epic, one key element is its playfulness with language without the cynicism of postmodernism (in the words of Wu Ming 1 “Don’t keep it cool and dry,” 13).<sup>7</sup> This linguistic innovation is paired with “oblique” points of view, a “uchronic” (‘what if’) approach to time and historical fact, and a desire for ‘alternative’ stories. Together these

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<sup>4</sup> The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War are a necessary precursor to these works.

<sup>5</sup> Both of these essays are included in the volume *New Italian Epic: letteratura, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro*.

<sup>6</sup> “1. l’idiozia collettiva; 2. la scomparsa dei fatti; 3. l’affabulazione obbligatoria; 4. l’inflazione dell’immaginario” (Wu Ming 2 131). All translations from Italian to English are mine.

<sup>7</sup> In his view, “The works of the New Italian Epic are not lacking in *humour*, but they do reject the detached and coldly ironic tone of postmodern *pastiche*. In these narrations, there is warmth, along with a clear stance and assumption of responsibility, that leads them beyond the obligatory *playfulness* of the recent past, beyond the compulsive wink, beyond the claim of “don’t take yourself too seriously” as the only line of conduct” (Wu Ming 1 “Memorandum,” 13-14). “Le opere del New Italian Epic non mancano di *humour*, ma rigettano il tono distaccato e gelidamente ironico da *pastiche* postmodernista. In queste narrazioni c’è un calore, o comunque una presa di posizione e assunzione di responsabilità, che le traghetta oltre la *playfulness* obbligatoria del passato recente, oltre la strizzata d’occhio compulsiva, oltre la rivendicazione del “non prendersi sul serio” come unica linea di condotta” (13-14).

narrative devices contribute to the creation of what the collective has coined the “Unidentified Narrative Object,” or “UNO.” As Wu Ming 1 describes it in his “Memorandum,”

At times the New Italian Epic abandons the orbit of the novel and enters the atmosphere from unpredictable directions, “Hey, what’s that? Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, wait...It’s Superman!” Absolutely not. It’s an unidentified narrative object. Fiction and non-fiction, prose and poetry, diary and inquest, literature and science, mythology and *pochade*. In the last fifteen years, many Italian authors have written books that cannot be labeled or pigeonholed in any way, because they contain almost everything.<sup>8</sup>

He cites several examples of UNOs that failed on some level, such as the collective’s own *Asce di guerra*; perhaps the most well-known representative of this new non-genre is Roberto Saviano’s *Gomorrah* (2006).

The New Italian Epic’s interest in alternate histories is particularly important in the Italian context, as it serves as a ‘tongue in cheek’ response to Berlusconi’s penchant for historical revisionism in his political discourse.<sup>9</sup> Wu Ming’s novels, for example, often include real historical and literary figures whose stories have been reimagined by the authors. These works are epic in nature and always have at their core an examination of nation building and leadership, universal

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<sup>8</sup> “[i]l New Italian Epic a volte abbandona l’orbita del romanzo ed entra nell’atmosfera da direzioni imprevedibili, “Ehi, cos’è quello? È un uccello? No, è un aereo! No, un momento... È Superman!” Assolutamente no. È un oggetto narrativo non-identificato. Fiction e non-fiction, prosa e poesia, diario e inchiesta, letteratura e scienza, mitologia e *pochade*. Negli ultimi quindici anni molti autori italiani hanno scritto libri che non possono essere etichettati o incasellati in alcun modo, perché contengono quasi tutto” (Wu Ming 1 22).

<sup>9</sup> Berlusconi has been known to praise Mussolini for his contributions to the Italian state, as well as call into question the values of the Resistance during the Second World War. See Andrews, *Not a Normal Country: Italy after Berlusconi*. In his words, “[t]here is a selective political memory at work in this revisionism that ignores the context of the struggle between Fascism and democracy. The attempt here is to put across the view of Fascists as ‘equal’ victims” (Andrews 52).

themes that make their *oeuvre* relatable on both a global and a local level. Whether they are exploring the American Revolution in *Manituana* from the point of view of the Six Nations, or religious and cultural clashes in the Constantinople of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in *Altai*, what they are truly doing is connecting this history to their own world, a consciousness they are constantly trying to reclaim.

This transnationalist orientation is aided by the ‘multitude’ of their characters, settings, and events: in all of the novels considered in this study, each chapter features a change in point of view and location. Others feature temporal changes, such as *Asce di guerra*, which shifts back and forth between the 1950s and the 2000s. The result is a richer picture of a historical moment that calls into question the commonly accepted narrative, not necessarily disproving it, but encouraging readers to open themselves to other possibilities. Though their novels are meticulously researched, the collective are careful to identify themselves as authors rather than historians; when asked in an interview with Robert P. Baird (“Stories Are Not All Equal”) about their “uchronic” approach to narratives, Wu Ming 4 explains what sets their work apart:

We make use of historians' work, their research and their interpretations, but then we go on beyond the point at which they're constrained to stop. Testimonies, documents, and evidence are the insuperable limits for a historian, beyond which he or she can do nothing but formulate hypotheses. The novelist, however, can free his fantasy and build narratives in the spaces left empty by the lack of documentation. (Baird)

For the collective, one of the primary motivating factors for this creative endeavor, which they share with the other authors of the NIE, is the “search for historical truth, the attempt to build tension through the making of myths, and bringing this tension to a final resolution” (Boscolo 26).

The years of Berlusconi's hegemonic media presence and his political reign have made this mandate a uniting element of this (left-leaning) literary movement.

Wu Ming 1's "Memorandum" incited a great deal of debate at the time of its publication. Members of the academic community took offense to a 'layman' making claims about contemporary literature. Interestingly, Saviano himself, though his book was considered one of the UNOs *par excellence*, disapproved of what the collective describes as the "violenza" of the New Italian Epic movement. His stance furthered the collective's insistence on separating the author from the work, an effort to "Desavianizzare *Gomorra*."<sup>10</sup> The debate has waned in recent years, however, but not without leaving its mark. After 2008 the course shifted, and now the essay is much less important to the foundation of the Wu Ming's literary activity. However, for many years it represented the collective's entrance into the cultural discourse, and while not explicitly a manifesto, the "Memorandum" situates the group within a certain movement aimed at weakening Berlusconi-era power structures and cultural production.

### **III. Berlusconi and Berlusconism**

The members of the Wu Ming collective were coming of age when Silvio Berlusconi began building his empire in Italy, and his impact on their development was felt long before his official entrance into politics. In fact, Berlusconi's story and the phenomenon of "Berlusconism" that resulted from his project, is best viewed through the image of the building, both literal and metaphorical, as it signals the actual beginning of his entrepreneurial career as well as the methods

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<sup>10</sup> A detailed description of the debate surrounding the "Memorandum" can be found archived online at <https://www.carmillaonline.com/2011/01/12/new-epic-bloc-tre-anni-dopo-il/>.

he used to construct his ‘skyscraper-like’ economic, political, and cultural image. As Paul Ginsborg writes in his book *Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power and Patrimony*, the man was not alone in his prowess as a media figure. Others such as Rupert Murdoch, Michael Bloomberg, and Donald Trump all managed to accrue a large amount of wealth and power over a number of sectors, such as the building trades, media enterprises, sports clubs, and commercial television. In Berlusconi’s case, as with Bloomberg and Trump, these commercial activities were also a springboard for (and a significant influence on) his political career.

Berlusconi’s first foray into the business world came in the 1970s in the construction industry, which was up and coming at that time period, especially in the Milan area where he was born and raised. The members of the Wu Ming collective would have been in their infancy at the time, which means that Berlusconi has had his hand in some part of the public sector for the whole of their lives. One significant and telling project of note in the early part of his career was the construction of the ‘subdivision’ on the outskirts of Milan known as Milano 2. This early version of the ‘gated community’ appealed to a certain type of social class and gave its members the assurance of living surrounded by equally upwardly mobile people.

Milano 2 is also the precursor to the “family dream” (Ginsborg) that Berlusconi would dedicate much of his career in the television industry to selling. The financial questions surrounding the building of the community would also foreshadow his numerous corruption scandals and shady economic dealings in years to come. Even this beginning in the construction industry was a cultural move for Berlusconi, as he helped to shape the daily life, interactions, and physical environment of the residents of Milano 2. The way the apartments were organized, the landscape architecture of the grounds, and the exclusive services provided to residents indulged the aspirational fantasies of the (upper) middle class.



Along these lines, television was another way for Berlusconi to contribute to and shape the Italian lifestyle of the time. He saw private television as a way to ‘spice up’ the drab fare that was offered by the public RAI channels, and he foresaw numerous economic opportunities in this sector. Mediaset, one part of his Fininvest conglomerate, would be formed through the purchase of Rete 4, Italia 1, and the transformation of TeleMilano to Canale 5. Already television represented a multimedia platform for him and a springboard for the empire he envisioned: the Italian people would watch his shows on his networks, sit through the advertisements that had been purchased or created through his advertising company, and then buy the products advertised at stores he himself owned.<sup>11</sup> He aimed at controlling the whole of process; as Ginsborg quotes him, “I don’t sell space, I sell sales” (qtd. in Ginsborg 45).

His choice of television programming was strategic as well and clearly influenced by the American market. He bought the rights to soap operas, sitcoms, and films from various foreign markets (largely American), aired soccer matches, and created programming that took a page from the American television book as well (for example, morning talk shows and quiz shows). Where he made his own original (and, some would argue, detrimental) contribution to Italian television culture were in the variety and quiz shows he created,<sup>12</sup> which nearly all feature half-nude showgirls (called “veline,” a name which refers to their ephemerality and softness—“velo” meaning a thin layer of something—but also, to their supposed lack of substance). Just as he ‘sold’ Italians a vision of what their home and neighborhood should be with Milano 2, with these programs he advanced both a capitalist and patriarchal agenda by showing Italians that not only

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<sup>11</sup> According to Ginsborg, “In other words, he wished to guarantee the potential advertisers not just the insertion of a certain number of spots at fixed times, but the control of the whole environment in which the advertisement was located, ensuring value for money and above all increased sales of the product in question” (45).

<sup>12</sup> Or modeled after already existing American quiz shows, such as *Wheel of Fortune* (*La ruota della fortuna*) and *The Price is Right* (*Ok, il prezzo è giusto!*)

could they ‘get rich quick,’ but they could do it with a beautiful woman dancing around them. He created a capitalistic fantasy of upward mobility and wealth for (male) Italians while at the same time reinforcing a patriarchal social model through the degradation of women as entertainment.

He was also influential in shaping political discourse on television, establishing a formula for the “telegiornale” which discouraged dissenting voices and instead focused on politicians, the daily “cronaca” (the crime news), and messages from the Pope. All of these dreams and lifestyle choices he sold were also a means of marketing his own image and guaranteeing public support. By populating his channels with political commentators (so-called “organic intellectuals” like Emilio Fede and Giuliano Ferrara), who would criticize the magistrates on his behalf during his financial scandals and investigations, he enjoyed great support from the viewing public, as they would be more likely to hear critiques of the judges rather than of Berlusconi. This exposure to continued criticism of the magistrates would eventually decrease the faith of the Italian people in the judicial system and would help Berlusconi out of many a legal debacle.

The examples listed thus far show that the former prime minister wielded a considerable amount of power in the sphere of television that helped him, for better or for worse, shape the popular culture imagination around his own likeness and ingratiate himself with Italian viewers. Because there was little to no regulation at the time that Berlusconi was buying up television channels and shows and creating his own programming, the result is that commercial television in Italy developed almost entirely under the control of one person. Moreover, this is before he became prime minister and thus gained control of the public channels of the RAI.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> RAI stands for Radiotelevisione italiana. This is Italy’s public broadcasting company, which is owned and operated by the Italian government.

Not surprisingly, Berlusconi's cultural capital did not stop with advertising, television, and the construction industry. His monopoly over the leisure time of the Italian people was beyond significant. His group Fininvest also included the publishing house Mondadori, which he acquired in 1990, thus demonstrating control not only over what consumers watched on television, but also over what they read. In addition, he owned stake in the right-wing newspaper *Il Giornale*, and his group was responsible for the weekly magazine *Sorrisi e Canzoni*, which related back to his television empire by providing program times and gossip about the most popular shows. This venture also revealed his connection to and awareness of the celebrity culture that he had been instrumental in creating, privileging it over all else. Because of the advent of reality shows such as *Grande Fratello*, he showed the Italian people that they, too, could become celebrities 'from nothing,' without being an accomplished actress or football player. He of course was the example *par excellence* of this 'rags to riches' story,<sup>14</sup> which was undoubtedly part of his appeal. In essence, Berlusconi was buying and selling in nearly every sector of Italian social life, and his reach extended even further when he bought the soccer club A.C. Milan in 1986. In this way he took Italy's most followed and coveted national pastime and made himself its figurehead. He used football metaphors when he spoke to show that he was 'one of the people,' just as he painted himself as the symbol of what Italians could become.

One of Berlusconi's most famous football metaphors comes in the form of his first political party's name: Forza Italia! (Go Italy!).<sup>15</sup> It is one of the great ironies of Italian politics that this

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<sup>14</sup> Berlusconi recounted this 'everyman' story in the pamphlet *Una storia italiana* (2001), which he mailed to the entire electorate ahead of the 2001 elections. For full text:

<http://www.madvero.it/pernondimenticarefile/unastoriaitaliana.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Berlusconi, after becoming disillusioned with Forza Italia's center-right coalition, which included the Northern League, the National Alliance, and the Union of Christian and Centre Democrats, among others, (known as the Casa delle Libertà, or the House of Freedoms), formed a new political party in 2007. This party was called Il Popolo della Libertà (The People of Freedom). In 2013 he would re-found Forza Italia.

man entered the political scene, after having already incited so much controversy in the private sector, on the heels of the Clean Hands campaign to rid the government of decades of postwar corruption. The old guard was gone and the beginning of the Second Republic was a time for someone who understood what having cultural power could mean in the political arena. Berlusconi had already spent the previous years earning the consent of the Italian people through various media, and he had managed to control nearly every aspect of that process. What he could not control was the “guardia di finanza” and the magistrates who continued to investigate him; in fact, the only way to manage them was to have governmental power.

Berlusconi achieved this feat in primarily two ways: by aligning himself with the right people and through tireless self-promotion. According to Ginsborg, “Personal authority and charisma [...], unlimited acquisitive ambitions and ownership, the arbitrary whim of the patron resting on a weakened rule of law, the reciprocity of favours, all these are cornerstones of Berlusconi’s project” (119). It is clear from various biographies and articles written on the man that his leadership style involved a system of favors, and this did not stop when he ascended to national government. To become prime minister in 1994, and then again various times after, he had to align himself with Umberto Bossi’s Northern League and Gianfranco Fini’s National Alliance, among others. This enabled him to earn a majority vote for the center-right and to fill the parliament with his own associates and employees, creating what he called a “partito-azienda” (“business-party”). Everything was business for Berlusconi, even government.

Now, in 2016, Berlusconi’s image, popularity, and power have decreased immensely, yet he never ceases to be entirely out of the news; rather, whether he is in power or not, he remains a case study for the ages, much to the dismay of many Italians today. In an interview with James

O’Nions for the British website “Red Pepper,” Wu Ming 1 commented on the former prime minister’s legacy,

I don't think we will be able to understand what the future is for us until Berlusconi is gone. I think that when he dies or is imprisoned, or however he goes, the whole official political system is likely to crumble as happened in 1993 after the Clean Hands enquiry against political corruption among the major Italian parties, which disbanded almost overnight. And then Berlusconi took the field because he was the alternative that the ruling class in Italy devised in order to fill that void. I think we are probably heading towards a similar situation. (O’Nions)

However, in the time period I am considering in this study, 1993-2016, there is no denying his influence on Italian social, economic, political, and cultural life.<sup>16</sup>

In their nascent phase, the Wu Ming collective was made up of four (later, five) men who experienced their adolescence and young adulthood precisely in the period (80s and 90s) in which Berlusconi began constructing his empire. To say that growing up in this time had an effect on their literary, cultural, political, and social project is an understatement, as did the fact that they come from Bologna, historically one of the ‘reddest’ cities in Italy. This is the generation that came of age in the period after 1968 and previous avant-garde and protest movements and that, as a result, long struggled to establish a coherent political identity and active social and civic presence—or at least a form of activism that could be understood by previous generations. The four different chapters of this study will identify the collective’s various challenges to

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<sup>16</sup> As of 1996, his Fininvest consisted in Mediaset (television), Mondadori (print media), Standa (supermarket chain), Mediolanum (banking sector), Medusa (film production and distribution), Pagine Italia and Società Diversificate.

Berlusconism in the cultural and mediatic arena, as well as assess their short-term success and long-term viability.

#### **IV. Chapter Roadmap**

Chapter One, entitled “Collectivity and Copyleft: Challenging Berlusconism in *Q* and *Altai*,” examines two of the Wu Ming collective’s foundational strategies in challenging Berlusconism and the presence of both in their novels *Q* (1999) and *Altai* (2009). I will begin by exploring the nature of writing as a part of a collective in order to evaluate why (or why not) this act could be considered creatively, economically, or ethically problematic. I will then connect my discussion on the potential subversiveness of collaborative writing to the Italian literary context, as a response to the celebrity of the author in the modern age and specifically to the “cult of personality” cultivated and privileged by Berlusconism. This challenge extends to questions of immaterial property and copyright as well, and Wu Ming’s response is an adherence to what they call the “copyleft” movement, which is the opposite of the typically sought-after copyright laws designed to protect the author and his/her work. There is no commodification of the actual material object/merchandise on their parts, and they are just as inclined to let readers freely download the books in electronic form. This idea is anathema to Berlusconi’s form of deregulated capitalism, especially in light of his ownership of the Mondadori publishing house. As Henry Jenkins points out, traditional copyright laws are concerned with protecting the rights of *authors*, while disregarding those of *readers*. In these terms, I will argue that Wu Ming, in their choice to “copyleft” their works, start from the assumption that READERS have rights, which is a direct response to Berlusconi’s treatment of the Italian public as passive consumers.

These elements of Wu Ming's overall ideology (e.g., collaboration, anonymity, and subversion of dominant power structures, as well as a propensity towards open source materials) are present in their (as Luther Blissett) aforementioned first collective novel *Q*, which tells the story of the sixteenth century peasant revolts in Germany. It is my contention, grounded in theories by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri as well as Umberto Eco, that the subversive collaborations and the "copyleft" movement that serve as the cornerstones of the Wu Ming project are also, in many ways, the basis for the plot of the novel and the characterization of its main protagonists. The collective 'utopia' established through the subversive actions of *Q*'s protagonist(s) is called into question in the novel's 'sequel,' *Altai* (2009), a tale of historic encounters and clashes of civilization, of East vs. West, Catholicism vs. Islam vs. Judaism, old and new ways of thinking, of engaging, of acting. The theme of the collective is just as present here as it is in *Q*, but whereas in the first novel collaboration and collectivity emerge victorious, in *Altai* the joining of forces as a means to gain individual freedom and power reveals the potential for totalitarianism and the dangers of the Berlusconi-esque "cult of personality." This is especially the case for the events surrounding Yossef Nasi, whose library in Constantinople, even though remarkable, gives him the illusion of an invincibility that eventually leads to his demise. Overall, both novels overwhelmingly highlight the need for collaboration and shared knowledge to effect change, fully reflecting the stance of the authors on the individualism and intellectual control of the Berlusconi age.

Chapter Two ("Infinite Niches and Subgenres': Popular Culture in *54* and *Asce di Guerra*") explores two novels that came in between *Q* and *Altai*, *54* (2002) and *Asce di guerra*

(2000, 2005),<sup>17</sup> in terms of their relationship to popular culture. My analysis will address three facets of the collective's challenge to Berlusconi's hegemonic presence in the creation and diffusion of popular culture: 1. his domination of the television and media landscape; 2. his influence on constructions of masculinity that reflect back to the Fascist era; 3. his equally problematic influence on the representations and treatment of women as "veline." The vehicle for these critiques is popular culture itself. At the same time that the collective advocates for global citizenship, they also unabashedly make reference to and engage with the popular culture of the time, from their own generation to that of the historical context of their novels. Popular films, novels, and actors, both Italian and non, have a constant presence in their works, and the narrative function of these elements is twofold: to address and challenge notions of the popular that categorize it as either 'trash' or a consensus-building weapon of capitalist society, and to see it in an almost earnest way as a connector among people of different experiences and backgrounds. This is their answer to Berlusconi's brand of hegemonic popular culture: through transnationalist and transmedial practices, the popular can serve as a vehicle for the creation of what Arjun Appadurai calls "technoscapes" (7) that also result in "communities of sentiment" (8). The latter are a direct response to mass culture theory's "atomization" of society, challenging the notion that in mass society people relate at a merely cellular level and struggle to form meaningful relationships.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>The novels, it should be noted, truly exist in the same narrative world (transnationally connected in and of themselves), as *Asce di Guerra* was born from the research the collective did for 54; likewise, there are certain characters and situations, much like in *Q* and *Altai*, that further connect the two works.

<sup>18</sup> According to Dominic Strinati, "[a] mass society consists of people who can only relate to each other like atoms in a physical or chemical compound. Mass society consists of atomized people, people who lack any meaningful or morally coherent relationships with each other [...] The individual in mass society is left more and more to his or her own devices, has fewer and fewer communities or institutions in which to find identity or values by which to live, and has less and less idea of the morally appropriate ways to live, because mass society, due to the processes which give rise to it, cannot provide adequate and effective solutions to these problems" (6). I contend that "communities of sentiment" work in opposition to this idea and are a basis of Wu Ming's challenge to Berlusconiism.



In this chapter, I will analyze a variety of popular culture references from both *54* and *Asce di guerra* to show the global implications, both positive and negative, of what the Wu Ming collective sees as a popular culture that is becoming less hegemonic and more comprised of “infinite niches and subgenres” (Wu Ming 1 18). These references take the media landscape, both past and present, to task, as well as document Berlusconi’s affinities with the Fascist period and that epoch’s representations of the “New Man.” This discussion of mass media culture, with the former prime minister’s penchant for putting his “veline” on any and all television programming short of the nightly news, necessarily leads to an analysis and critique of Wu Ming’s minimal use of female characters in their novels. I contend that the overly sexualized images of women that Berlusconi has perpetuated in popular culture throughout the course of his reign are a significant cultural, political, and sociological issue that the Wu Ming collective has yet to confront with the same conviction they use in other spheres.

The practices discussed in Chapter Two seek to awaken an historical consciousness in the reader, ideally pushing him/her to see the connections between past events and present reality. Another way the Wu Ming collective encourages ‘reading’ beyond the boundaries of the text is through multisensorial and transmedial practices: live performances, visual images to accompany written texts, musical soundtracks to their novels, and physical engagement with the events of the story. In Chapter Three, “Beyond the Text: The Transmedial and the Multisensorial in the Wu Ming Project,” I will discuss Wu Ming’s use of transmediality and analyze the way in which these different forms of interaction—visual illustrations of *Point Lenana* and *Timira* on the social sharing site Pinterest, fan fiction linked to *Manituana*, a ‘soundtrack’ and interactive art exhibition based on *54*, excursions in the mountains to engage with Wu Ming 1’s *Point Lenana* and Wu Ming 2’s *Il sentiero degli Dei*—influence the reception of the novel and contribute to the creation of a

community, not just of readers, but of collaborators. In my discussion of Wu Ming's transmedial projects, I will draw upon Henry Jenkins's theories on convergence culture, which look at the "flow of content across multiple media platforms" (*Convergence Culture* 3) as a collective process that makes meaning within popular culture and which in turn helps to change the way different media operate. I will analyze the aforementioned transmedial projects as a response to Berlusconi's mass media hegemony, in which he was able to market himself and his 'products' across various platforms to passive consumers. In my view, it is not the ultimate objective of the collective to assert their cultural dominance as Berlusconi has done over the course of the last twenty years, but rather to occupy one of the "infinite niches and subgenres" (Wu Ming 1, "Memorandum" 18) of today's popular culture, the surest sign that Berlusconiism, even if it still persists, has been definitively weakened. Furthermore, the collective's presence in the transmedial realm is perhaps best explained through the context of the gaming world, a social and cultural 'niche' *par excellence*, which privileges creative collaborations and a certain dedication to community advancement. I will conclude the chapter by identifying the affinities between these types of environments and Wu Ming's transmedial projects in order to explain why, though they eschew the "cult of personality," they embrace the idea of their works achieving what Umberto Eco refers to as "cult status."

Finally, neither Wu Ming's novels nor their transmedial projects could have achieved the success they enjoy without their constant and strategic presence in the online world. Chapter Four, "Digital Activism: *Giap!*, Twitter and the 'Net Delusion,'" looks at the nature of Wu Ming's online interactions and their role in a larger, worldwide digital revolution. A discussion of Wu Ming's blog *Giap!* and their Twitter presence (@Wu\_Ming\_Foundt) show how the collective advances their cultural, literary, and political project in the digital realm. I will analyze specific examples

from each of these platforms, produced or created during the years 2010-2016, in order to shift the focus from their artistic production to their constantly evolving political and cultural engagement.<sup>19</sup>

One way in which the collective connects with their followers and critics online is through their blog, *Giap!*, which has proven to be a critical space in which to discuss hot political and cultural topics. The blog format allows for posts and comments of any length, and the immediacy of publishing for both sides (Wu Ming and readers) is one of its most powerful and effective aspects. It fosters continuing debate in a way that newspapers, television news, or even live debates simply do not. Because of their prolific and constant presence on *Giap!*, choosing specific examples is difficult. Therefore, my analysis will consider a ten day period from January of 2016 to show a ‘snapshot’ of content from the blog, which will provide a general picture of the issues and practices at the heart of the collective’s project. Among these are their dedication to the cause of historical memory, particularly of the colonial period (evoked in the very name of the blog, in honor of Vietnamese general Võ Nguyên Giáp), to community organizing, and to creative collaborations that go beyond the traditional written novel.

Beyond the blog, the collective has recently established a more strategic and effective presence on the social media site Twitter. Whereas initially their Twitter feed served primarily as a platform for the comments section of *Giap!*, in 2013 Wu Ming’s activity on the site took a more political and strategic turn and entered into the realm of digital activism. On more than one occasion, the collective used hashtags (#) to protest, propose change, or thwart large-scale marketing or political campaigns. I will specifically examine four such cases of digital activism which are creative, political, and also cathartic for the collective and their followers: 1. #guerrieri, in which they ‘occupied’ a hashtag proposed by the electric company Enel in order to create

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<sup>19</sup> *Altai* was published in 2009, and then the group did not produce another collectively written novel until *L’Armata dei Sonnambuli* in 2014. The individual production of the members, however, was constant during those years.

negative publicity for the organization; 2. #renziscappa, a long-running chronicle of the current prime minister's penchant for disappearing at key moments; 3. #tifiamoasteroide, in which they called for short stories that resulted in an apocalyptic ending for the government headed by Enrico Letta at that time; 4. #salvini, a categorical and scientific rejection of the current secretary of the Northern League's claims about the success of one of his rallies in Bologna. All of these examples reveal Wu Ming's considerable expertise and comfort level in the digital realm, which is largely responsible for their success in these protests. In all cases, they exhibit control of the medium, while the politicians and corporations they challenge appear much weaker adversaries on digital turf. My analysis, which is informed by Joss Hands's theories on activism and Clay Shirky's ideas on the collaborative nature of the Web, shows instances of true protest, resistance, and rebellion in Wu Ming's online activities. Whether this success leads to long-lasting reforms depends largely on how the collective navigates what Evgeny Morozov calls the "Net Delusion," the confluence of those who think the Web is a "cyber-utopia," and those who believe an "Internet-centric" approach is the only way to solve problems (xv-xvi). While the authors are very adept in the digital world, their engagement with the transmedial is what gives their project a more viable path to success, as they ground their online projects in the terrestrial realm, bridging the gap between the virtual and the real.

My conclusion will assess Wu Ming's overall cultural contribution and their potential legacy. Throughout the years of working on this project, the collective itself has evolved and changed. They have become more active on Twitter, thus producing some more concrete outcomes in terms of their protests and their general presence online. They have published novels both as a collective and as individuals, and they have taken their musical show on the road as members of the Wu Ming Contingent, among other bands. The composition of the group itself has also

undergone significant change: in 2015, Wu Ming 5 (Riccardo Pedrini) left the collective. As of the time of this writing, the initial group of five has now become three. While little has been said about Wu Ming 3 (Luca Di Meo)'s 2008 departure from the collective, Wu Ming 5's exit has been more acrimonious. In the conclusion, I will reflect on these changes to the group dynamic and what they reveal about the sustainability of collectivity over the long term and the divisive times in which we live.

## **V. Legacies and Leadership**

To conclude this introduction, the relationship between Wu Ming and Berlusconiism might best be explained through one of the most common tropes of the New Italian Epic. One recurring element in these works is the “morte del vecchio” (“death of the old man”) that usually opens or precedes the narration, a moment that signals the changing of the guard or an absence of a leader. This loss usually leaves the community in crisis, wondering what will become of them without this figurehead and symbol. For the greater part of the Wu Ming collective's lives, this leader has been Silvio Berlusconi. It is interesting that so many of the texts that were produced from the dawn of the Second Republic until today should focus so much on the loss of a leader, when leadership in Italy has largely been fraught with corruption and scandal for as long as they can remember. It is surely a fictional exercise for Wu Ming to imagine having grown up with a leader whose absence would not only be profoundly felt and mourned but who was also such an integral part of the creation of a nation to which they feel deeply connected. Perhaps this element is their final way of challenging—and ultimately condemning—Berlusconiism, a sentiment they share with many other

authors of the NIE and a building block of the communities of shared experience they seek to create.



Prende anche un frammento di specchio,  
per esser certo di riconoscersi  
alla fine del viaggio”  
(*Altai* 103).

**Chapter One:**  
**Collectivity and Copyleft:**  
**Challenging Berlusconism in *Q* and *Altai***

**I. Premise**

This chapter will examine two important building blocks of the Wu Ming Foundation’s project: collectivity and “copyleft.” I will analyze the group’s first novel *Q* (1999) and its (oblique) sequel *Altai* (2009) as vehicles for their ideology. Specifically, I will look at how the primary characters in the novels embody either collectivist ideals or individualistic tendencies, and how these representations serve to challenge “cults of personality” such as that created around former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s theories on the multitude will also serve my analysis of Wu Ming’s collectivity and on the “multiple single” characters they create. In addition, I will also examine instances in the two novels that confirm the collective’s dedication to open sourced materials as a path towards renewed historical memory, another critique of the policies and practices of the Berlusconi era and his ownership of the Mondadori publishing house. Hardt and Negri’s revisiting of Karl Marx’s theories on immaterial property will serve as the basis for my analysis of the “copyleft” movement, and I will also reflect on Umberto Eco’s work on the cultural, social, and political role of the library as seen in *The Name of the Rose* (1980). Finally, I will conclude the chapter by looking at Wu Ming’s collectivity and copyleft as expressions of their relationship to history, which represents a challenge to the historical revisionism of Berlusconi.

**II. Collectivity vs. Cult of Personality**

Wu Ming differ from their contemporaries, even those most closely linked to the New Italian Epic, in many respects, perhaps none more noteworthy than their collectivity. This sustained collaboration has particular resonance in the time period in which they are working, a cultural climate characterized by the cult of personality surrounding former prime minister and



media mogul Silvio Berlusconi. In such an environment, collective writing raises numerous creative, ethical, technological, and even legal questions.

According to Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, this type of collaboration is not only problematic but also potentially subversive, as it calls into question intellectual copyright and attribution: who is the author, and who gets the credit? If there is more than one author, or if the author is anonymous, does that diminish the value of the work? Does a work need a name and face in order to be considered legitimate? It is Ede and Lunsford's contention, following Foucault, Barthes, Williams,<sup>1</sup> and others, that it is precisely this Cartesian 'privileging' of the individual, affording the author celebrity status, which impedes knowledge, success and creation: "Can it be that the notion of individualism, so sacred to the United States, is also its fatal flaw...?" (4). Instead, the two authors view writing as the ultimate collaborative and social experience, a dynamic relationship between author(s) and readers, eschewing the Romantic image of the writer as a solitary figure. In their words: "We are acutely aware of the extent to which our ability to author anything at all is anchored in our experiences with others" (xii).<sup>2</sup> The Wu Ming collective

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<sup>1</sup> See Ede and Lunsford, *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*. Here they are referring to Foucault's "What is an Author?"; Barthes's "The Death of the Author"; and Raymond Williams's *Literature, Marxism and Cultural Materialism*, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> Questions of authorship have further been problematized (from a capitalist perspective) by the increasingly digital world in which we live, changes which the Wu Ming collective largely celebrate. Foucault and Barthes advocated for the diminished role of the author in favor of a more equitable relationship with readers, and now digital platforms and tools are making that even more of a reality. Now not only can readers become collaborators, but with blogs, tumblrs, and other online and social media outlets, anyone can become a writer. It is the very thing against which Walter Benjamin warned in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936): even as far back as the beginning of the phenomenon of writing letters to the editor, anyone could become a published author, thus unseating the "Author" from his/her position of privilege. In these terms, if something is available for all, it loses its status and prestige. This newfound agency and freedom for readers to become authors appears as a threat to some, just as collaborative writing does. Henry Jenkins argues, however, that while there is a great deal of newness in what the digital world offers, the idea of collective authorship is nothing new from a historical point of view: "[f]irst that the digital era has refocused our attention on the expressive potential of borrowing and remixing, expanding who gets to be an author and what counts as authorship; but second, that this new model of authorship is not that radical when read against a larger backdrop of human history, though it flies in the face of some of the most persistent myths about creative genius and intellectual property that have held sway since the Romantic era (*Reading in a Participatory Culture* 107). In Jenkins's view, the cult of celebrity surrounding the author in modern times is what is unnatural and counterproductive; Wu Ming's project, then, would appear to represent a sort of "return to the origins" of writing and

reflect this idea of authorship in their approach to their project in general and to their writing and relationship to their readers in particular, and their choice to engage in artistic and social collaboration could be considered deliberately subversive in light of the time period in which they developed and the cultural climate in which they currently operate.<sup>3</sup> While Ede and Lunsford are primarily discussing collaboration in the North American context, their ideas are no less valid when applied to 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Italy, especially the Italy of Silvio Berlusconi, who has been so ‘inspired’ by American approaches to business, the media, and the arts.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, using a collective pseudonym (one that borrows from the Chinese dissident tradition no less) directly problematizes the celebrity that is typically attached to the author in modern (and postmodern) society. According to Nicholas Thoburn, Wu Ming’s anonymous choice is an alternative to the individualized “cult of personality” around which Berlusconi’s approach to culture and celebrity revolves: “The [...] politics of the collective pseudonym seek to break the bounds of the partial individual by founding itself upon—or bringing into expression—the communal being that traverses and exceeds the individual” (125). The idea of the “communal being” is ultimately at odds with the celebrity culture that Berlusconi has cultivated over the course

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thought, and in the specific context of modern Italian history, this rethinking of author- and readership is in clear opposition to the prevailing ideas and practices of the age of Berlusconi.

<sup>3</sup> The collective also owes much to the tradition of the avant-garde, not just in their challenge of traditional literary practices but also in their role as engaged intellectuals. According to Jochen Schulte-Sasse, in his forward to Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), “Modernism may be understandable as an attack of traditional writing techniques, but the avant-garde can only be understood as an attack meant to alter the institutionalized commerce with art. The social roles of the modernist and the avant-garde artist are, thus, radically different” (qtd. in Bürger xv). It is Bürger’s theory that “Whatever concept of art we have, whatever sense we have of the status of art as autonomous, derives from the social function of art in society” (xxxviii). In these terms, Wu Ming appear to be not only eschewing the Romantic notion of the solitary writer, but also following specifically and historically the avant-garde tradition of challenging not only artistic forms but also power structures: “The avant-garde saw that the organic unity of the bourgeois institution of art left art impotent to intervene in social life, and thus developed a different concept of the work of art. [...] The aesthetic fragment functions very differently than the organic whole of romantic artwork, for it challenges its recipient to make it an integrated part of his or her reality and to relate it to sensuous-material experience” (xxxix).

<sup>4</sup> See Ginsborg; Shin; Andrews.

of his reign, through his gossip magazines, television programming choices, and his ‘branding’ of himself as a cultural commodity and star. Wu Ming choose the “multitude”<sup>5</sup> over the individual, which comprehends the authors as well as their readers (the “collective intelligence” of which Henry Jenkins, citing Pierre Lévy,<sup>6</sup> speaks), and which represents a direct challenge to Berlusconi’s individual “cult of personality” and to traditional views of authorship in Western societies. The Wu Ming project, through their collectivity and anonymity, lend credence to Barthes’s notion that the death of the author brings forth the birth of the reader,<sup>7</sup> and the subsequent communities developed by these newly empowered readers form the base of the collective’s cultural challenge to Berlusconism.

Finally, the Wu Ming Foundation is not the only experiment with collective authorship undertaken by the group. It would be pertinent, as this chapter examines both *Q* and its ‘sequel’ *Altai*, to discuss the two different pseudonyms utilized by the group, Luther Blissett and Wu Ming. When *Q* was published in 1999, the authors were members of the former, which was a much larger, artistic, ‘guerilla’ group operating around Europe at the time.<sup>8</sup> The origin stories of both the name and the project are multiple, because in principle anyone could use it as a pen name and even invent his/her own genesis tale. The other notable aspect of the collective name of Luther Blissett is a question of temporality: it is a rare artistic and cultural situation in which different works, manifestations, or events may occur simultaneously, and by choosing to use the name participants

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<sup>5</sup> See Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*.

<sup>6</sup> Here Jenkins is quoting Pierre Levy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind’s Emerging World in Cyberspace*.

<sup>7</sup> See Barthes, “The Death of the Author.” It is his assertion that it is impossible to know the ‘true thoughts’ of an author, because writing can contaminate them. For this reason, the text only comes into itself when it meets the reader.

<sup>8</sup> Starting in 1994, Luther Blissett was an open name that could be used by any protest group around Europe. It began as a guise under which to perform pranks on the mass media and was an initial foray into the idea of collective identity. The name comes from a former Jamaican-born soccer player who played for Watford (England) and A.C. Milan in the 1980s. Anyone could use the *nom de plume* when performing acts of cultural protest and was the collective’s first experimentation with different forms of authorship and identity.

not only eschew the ‘author as celebrity’ complex, but they also implicitly place their faith in the other contributors of the group to uphold certain standards of quality and message. As Thoburn explains, “Luther Blissett is an ‘open reputation’ that confers a certain authority—the authority of the author, no less—on an open multiplicity of unnamed writers, activists, and cultural workers, whose work in turn contributes to and extends the open reputation. In this sense the author-function is magnified and writ large” (128-129). Thoburn sees this kind of open identity as a moment of the “individuation of the multiple single” (129), as “Luther Blissett is at once *collective*, a “con-dividual” shared by many, and *fragmented*, a “dividual” composed of multiple situations and personalities simultaneously” (Luther Blissett qtd. in Thoburn 129).

The latter definition in particular applies to the characters the authors create in *Q* as well. The Luther Blissett Project was a “tutti e nessuno,” (“everyone and anyone”) a constantly evolving multitude that was accessible and hospitable to social and political protestors around the world.<sup>9</sup> The ‘pranks’ they performed under this name garnered them fame as contemporary “Robin Hoods,” but the overall protest movement was temporary, perhaps by design, and the LBP committed “seppuku”<sup>10</sup> in 1999, thus making them more of an urban legend than an enduring cultural contributor. As the group itself states, “[Seppuku]” is one way like another to get rid once again of an identity, to be reborn open to new experiences of social warfare and new mad passions” (Luther Blissett qtd. in Thoburn 131). 1999 was the same year that *Q* was published, under the name of Luther Blissett, and from the ashes of LBP was born a group, Wu Ming, that sought to refocus their ‘pranks’ on writing as a more long-term form of activism, calling themselves the

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<sup>9</sup> The current members of Wu Ming, for example, participated in a hoax involving the missing persons’ television show *Chi l’ha visto?* in the name of Luther Blissett (another form of protesting the mass media society created by Berlusconi). They also sent four girls in their place to do an interview with Swiss television, to both preserve their anonymous identity and to ridicule the self-importance of television news.

<sup>10</sup> Ritualized suicide, in the Japanese tradition.

“agitatori di scrittura” (Serkowska 220), or the “agitators of writing.” In this transition from LBP to Wu Ming, the group developed a more mature form of protest by tapping into a human need for stories, one that is not specific solely to the Italian context but rather has global implications. According to Wu Ming 1, “Humanity does not exist without narrative and the sharing of stories” (qtd. in Serkowska 222).<sup>11</sup>

### III. Collective Identities and Subversive Collaborations in *Q*

The first battleground on which Wu Ming confronts the practices of Berlusconiism is in their very collectivity, which contrasts directly with the former prime minister’s individualized “cult of personality.” Furthermore, the practices and strategies employed by the collective in their approach to their overall project and to their cultural identity as a group resonate in the plots of their novels as well. Most notably, ideas of collaboration and anonymity (or more accurately, a fluid and adaptable identity), are present in Wu Ming’s (under the name Luther Blissett)<sup>12</sup> first collective novel *Q* (1999). The eponymous *Q*’s counterpart/nemesis is constantly changing names and identities and joining forces with disparate, polarizing groups and movements, all in order to thwart the powerful institution of the Catholic Church. In this way, the power of the collaborative group is consistently privileged over that of the individual, and those characters who seek their own path, most notably in search of fame and money, meet an inevitable downfall. There are many

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<sup>11</sup> “Non esiste l’umanità senza il racconto e la condivisione delle storie” (Serkowska 222). All translations from Italian to English are mine.

<sup>12</sup> For the discussion of *Q*, I will refer to the collective as Luther Blissett, since this is the name under which the novel was published.

parallels to be drawn between the actions of the protagonists (both Q and his rival, the ‘heretic’ of multiple names) and the tenets to which the Wu Ming collective adheres.

According to Sabrina Ovan, the stage is set for collectivity from the opening scene, in which Q describes a fictional fresco depicting the major players and events to come in the novel. She compares this description to Foucault’s work on “*Las Meninas*” in *The Order of Things*,<sup>13</sup> which focuses on an oil painting; Luther Blissett’s choice of a fresco rather than an oil painting is a strategic one, in her view, because “[f]rescoes in fact can be defined as a form of collective work, one that requires a craftsmanlike preparation of the wall/surface to be painted and the cooperation of a number of different hands for its completion” (428). Also in relation to Foucault’s work, the shift from frescoes to oil painting represents the birth of celebrity of the author/artist, the ‘master’ of the craft: “This method clearly emphasizes that in the fifteenth century what we now consider as artwork was related to a more general notion of labor. In contrast, oil painting is a technique that started to gain currency during the sixteenth century, and since it is traditionally completed by a single person in a few sessions, is to be considered as the epitome of authorial artwork” (428-429). If the primary goal of the novel is, as Ovan claims, to emphasize “the role of collectivity in direct opposition to the authority of the individual” (427), then this narrative device serves as a frame for both the story and the ideology of Luther Blissett/Wu Ming.

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<sup>13</sup> According to Foucault, the painting, by Diego Velázquez (1656), which features members of the King Philip IV of Spain’s court, namely his daughter Infanta Margaret Theresa and her entourage of maids, represented a new “episteme” in European art. He analyzed the painting as a crossroads between Classical and Modern Art, and he looked at it not in terms of artistic craft but rather of visual relationships between subject/viewer. See Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*.

## Gert dal Pozzo and the Multiple Single

Just as the collective uses their pseudonym to both eschew capitalist power structures and privilege the group over the individual, so do the name(s) and identities of the main characters in *Q* represent this particular collective approach to identity and society. Most notably, the character of *Q*'s heretical protagonist,<sup>14</sup> and to a certain extent also that of his nemesis, the mysterious *Q* of the title, is ambiguous and ever-changing, adapting to different situations yet always at the forefront of the 'revolution' against dominant institutions. It is useful to retrace the various identities of this protagonist in order to demonstrate how he reflects a privileging of the collective and therefore a particular Luther Blissett-ian (and later Wu Ming-ian) ideology. His name changes to reflect his location, his present allies, and his particular role within the group of the moment: he is always at the service of the collective, and therefore his true identity is not as important as his overall contribution to the movement. In fact, the reader never discovers his 'real' name. He makes a reputation for himself throughout the novel due to acts of valor and bravery, but he no sooner finds fame than he changes his name and moves on, proving that the success of the group is more important than his own individual merits.

The novel begins in 1525 in Frankenhausen, Germany, when Thomas Müntzer, he who declared war on the princes, is captured. There are two levels of conflict at this period of time, the greater religious question of Luther's theses in regards to Catholic doctrine, and the peasant opposition in Germany to Luther's alliance with the wealthy and powerful. The protagonist is identified as one of Müntzer's followers, and it is at his service, at the beginning of the peasant revolts, that he kills his first man, constantly repeating what would become his mantra: "Quello

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<sup>14</sup> Even though the novel is named after *Q*, I also refer to his counterpart as protagonist of the story, as I argue that he is equally as important to the narrative and his constantly changing identity is most closely linked to the Wu Ming-ian ideology to which I am referring. They are, as *Q* says, "due facce della stessa moneta," (597) and so I consider them co-protagonists of the novel.

che devo fare” (“What I must do” 4). At this point, he is unnamed, but his identity is bound to Müntzer’s cause and the responsibility he feels towards the leader and to the rest of his supporters. His first known name is pronounced immediately following Müntzer’s death: “Eltersdorf. I have a room, a bowl of soup and a new name: Gustav Metzger. I’m still alive and I don’t know how” (21).<sup>15</sup> Just like a warm place to sleep and something to eat, a new name is now nothing more than a survival tool. It does not necessarily belong to him, but it will serve its purpose in order to keep him alive and advance his cause: “Now I turn around when they call me Gustav, I’ve gotten used to a name that is no more mine than any other” (23).<sup>16</sup> As he says later on in the novel, “In Frankenhausen I died for the first time. And it wouldn’t be the last” (152).<sup>17</sup> Interestingly enough, these frequent ‘deaths’ are what ultimately keep him alive. For this reason, the main character accepts the loss of his different names and identities as a necessary means to a collective end.

At the same time, just as the Wu Ming pseudonym is a form of protest,<sup>18</sup> so do Gustav’s many aliases represent his hesitancy to be a (legitimate) part of the world against which he is fighting. Eloi, the leader of a “protocommune” in Anversa, Belgium, where Gustav alights later on in his travels, seems to understand the implications of such a choice:

He shakes my hand: “I am Lodewijck Pruystinck, roofer, but my brothers call me

Eloi. And you?”

–“I ended up in that mess by chance and you can call me what you want.”

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<sup>15</sup> “Eltersdorf. Ho una stanza, un piatto di minestra e un nuovo nome: Gustav Metzger. Sono ancora vivo e non so come” (21). All translations from *Q* are mine.

<sup>16</sup> “Adesso mi volto quando mi chiamano Gustav, mi sono abituato a un nome che non è più mio di qualunque altro” (23).

<sup>17</sup> “A Frankenhausen sono morto per la prima volta. Non è stata l’ultima” (152).

<sup>18</sup> The pseudonym is often used by Chinese dissidents so as not to reveal their true names and be entered into a criminal registry/database for life.



-“He who has no name must have had at least a hundred of them,” - a strange smile,  
“...and a story worth listening to.” (150)<sup>19</sup>

Because of their connection with simple survival, the protagonist’s aliases are also logically linked to geography and the corresponding ideology of that place. While Gustav Metzger represented the German part of his existence, the name with which he is ‘christened’ while staying in Eloi’s constructed utopia reflects a more symbolic, biblical state of being that is removed from any membership in a particular nation state: his role as a transnational ‘everyman’ for the people becomes more solidified. The members of the commune label the outsider in the following way:

-“Brothers and sisters, listen. We have among us a man with no name. A man who has fought for a long time and who has seen much bloodshed. He was lost and tired, and he has received care and shelter, as is our custom. If he decides to stay with us, he will accept the name we wish to give him.”

At the end of the table, a ruddy young man, with a thick blond mustache, yells: -  
“Let’s call him Lot, for he who doesn’t look back!”

An echo of approval spreads throughout the room, Eloi looks at me, satisfied: “And so it shall be. We will call you Lot.” (153)<sup>20</sup>

It is here in Anversa, in the safe haven of Eloi’s community, that the narrative gaps of the previous years are filled and his second identity, Gerrit Boekbinder, also known as Gert del Pozzo,

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<sup>19</sup> “Mi stringe la mano: - ‘Sono Lodewijck Pruystinck, copritetti, ma i fratelli mi chiamano Eloi. E tu?’ - ‘Ci sono finito per caso in mezzo a quel bordello e puoi chiamarmi come ti pare.’ - ‘Chi non ha un nome deve averne avuti almeno cento,’ - un sorriso strano, - ‘... e una storia che vale la pena di essere ascoltata’” (150).

<sup>20</sup> “‘Fratelli e sorelle, ascoltate. È giunto tra noi un uomo senza nome. Un uomo che ha combattuto a lungo e ha visto versare molto sangue. Era sbandato e stanco, e ha ricevuto cure e riparo come è nostra consuetudine. Se deciderà di rimanere con noi, accetterà il nome che vorremo dargli.’ In fondo alla tavolata, un giovane rubicondo, con folli baffi biondi, urla: - ‘Chiamiamolo Lot, come colui che non si volta indietro!’ Un’eco di assenso percorre la sala, Eloi mi guarda soddisfatto: - ‘E sia. Ti chiameremo Lot’” (153).

or Gert of the Well, is revealed. Through his account, we learn that Gustav Metzger's death results in the birth of Lucas Niemanson, "brocade merchant from Bamberg,"<sup>21</sup> for reasons that are purely practical: "I took the name of a man with whom I happened to cross paths" (153).<sup>22</sup> He assumes the identity and career of another to fit the situation—he also knocks the man out and essentially 'steals' his identity to save himself. According to Ovan, he sees early on the "advantages of a nonidentity" (Ovan 432). As he puts it, "Fate united the bitter and unfortunate destiny of the merchant Niemanson with my own, on the day of June the 27th, after infinite and solitary wandering" (155).<sup>23</sup> At this point, the protagonist has fully embraced his transience and the fluidity of his name(s) and identity: "For two years I was Gustav Metzger. Today I am Lucas Niemanson, textile merchant. Tomorrow, who knows... (156).<sup>24</sup>

"Tomorrow" he briefly becomes Lienhard Jost, husband of Ursula Jost, in Strasbourg, members of "a well-known theater company" (177).<sup>25</sup> Much like his assuming of the identity of Lucas Niemanson through his travels, taking on the role of actor also seems highly appropriate. It is in the days and weeks leading up to the tragedy in Münster that he becomes Gert dal Pozzo, one of his longest-lasting identities of the novel:

It was November or December of '31, when Lienhard Jost kicked the bucket. That name attracted cops like flies to manure. The family that was hiding me gave me theirs, passing me off as a cousin who immigrated to Germany and then returned after many years. Their name was Boekbinder and the cousin really existed, except

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<sup>21</sup> "mercante di broccati a Bamberga" (154).

<sup>22</sup> "Presi il nome di un uomo capitato per caso sul mio cammino" (153).

<sup>23</sup> "Il caso ha congiunto la sorte amara e sconsiderata del mercante Niemanson alla mia, nel dì di giugno venti e sette, al termine di vagabondaggi infiniti e solitari" (155).

<sup>24</sup> "Per due anni sono stato Gustav Metzger. Oggi sono Lucas Niemanson, mercante di tessuti. Domani, chissà..." (156).

<sup>25</sup> "un'affermata compagnia teatrale" (177).

that he had died in Saxony, drowned in a river after the ferry he was on capsized. His name was Gerrit. And so I became the ghost of Gerrit Boekbinder, Gert to his family. (190-191)<sup>26</sup>

His description of this version of himself is particularly remarkable due to his use of the third person, confirming not only the detachment that these temporary identities necessarily required but also perhaps a way of distancing himself from the horror that occurred at Münster. According to Wu Ming 1's definition in his 2008 "Memorandum" on the New Italian Epic, Gert represents the epic hero who is never the protagonist of any one event or revolt but yet plays a part in all of the major events surrounding this challenge to the Catholic Church.<sup>27</sup> He is a plural subject inhabiting different identities according to moments, places, and contexts and creating significant change even while operating far from the center. As he later muses, "Metzger, Niemanson, Jost, Boekbinder, Lot. Many and one. Who I have been" (359).<sup>28</sup> As Thoburn comments, this "tanti e uno" ("many and one") multitude, in direct correlation to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's theories on the subject, represents "the multiple single," defined as "not an undifferentiated whole, but rather an open dynamic where singularity or difference is an expression of collectivity, and vice versa" (127). Furthermore, the various names of the protagonist point to just the kind of carefully constructed anonymity that Thoburn discusses with regards to the Luther Blissett Project, and later Wu Ming: "In so suspending the consistent name, the subjective continuity that would

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<sup>26</sup> "Era il novembre o dicembre del '31, il tempo che Lienhard Jost tirasse le cuoia. Quel nome attirava gli sbirri come il letame le mosche. La famiglia che mi nascondeva mi concesse il suo, spacciandomi per un cugino emigrato in Germania e tornato dopo molti anni. Boekbinder si chiamavano e il cugino esisteva veramente, solo che in Sassonia c'era morto, affogato in un fiume per il ribaltamento del traghetto su cui stava viaggiando. Il suo nome era Gerrit. E così fui il fantasma di Gerrit Boekbinder, Gert per i famigliari." (190-191)

<sup>27</sup> "Succede anche in questi libri: lo spostamento del punto di vista rende l'epica 'eccentrica', in senso letterale. A volte basta mezzo passo, a volte si percorrono anni—luce. L'eroe epico, quando non c'è, non è al centro di tutto ma influisce sull'azione in modo sghembo. Quando non c'è, la sua funzione viene svolta dalla moltitudine, da cose e luoghi, dal contesto e dal tempo" (Wu Ming 1, "Memorandum" 17).

<sup>28</sup> "Metzger, Niemanson, Jost, Boekbinder, Lot. Tanti e uno. Quelli che sono stato" (359).

normally orchestrate the narrative field is unsettled, allowing an excessive communal being, in its discontinuous, variegated, and antagonistic complexity, to itself come forth as protagonist” (Thoburn 127).

This “excessive communal being” shares similarities with the multitude that Hardt and Negri describe, which stands in opposition to “the people.”<sup>29</sup> The latter can be synthesized and collapsed into one, undifferentiated whole, while the multitude, on the other hand, is made up of plural singularities who maintain their differences but connect through their shared commonality. This definition can be attributed to a group of individuals, but in the case of Gustav/Gert/Lot, it also appears to encompass the inner and outer life of a single, complex, plural, *multiple* character. Also like the multitude, the concurrent plurality and singularity that we find in the protagonist does not mean that his character is fragmented or incoherent; on the contrary, these are the qualities that make him an articulate, active leader with the potential to incite real change. Ultimately, what Gustav/Gert/Lot is trying to achieve throughout the pages of *Q* is, as Hardt and Negri put it, democracy in its truest form: “The multitude is the only social subject capable of realizing democracy, that is, the rule of everyone by everyone” (100).

Throughout the novel, Gert collaborates with revolutionaries, actors, money launderers, publishers, false prophets and a family on the run from the Spanish Inquisition—it is through these groups that he has sought a utopian ideal throughout his life, perhaps believing that fire could only be fought with fire and that considerable risks needed to be taken for a new world order to prevail.

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<sup>29</sup> Thoburn cites Sabrina Ovan’s theory that “[...] the name is not, then, an identity in separation from the collective, or even a momentary *share*, but the *passage* of the collective, its putting into play as singularity” (128). This echoes Hardt and Negri’s definition of the multitude as “composed of a set of *singularities*—and by singularity here we mean a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different. The component parts of the people are indifferent in their unity; they become an identity by negating or setting aside their differences. The plural singularities of the multitude thus stand in contrast to the undifferentiated unity of the people” (Hardt and Negri 99). I argue that all of Gustav/Gert/Lot’s identities represent collective singularities that combine to form one “multitude,” or one “multiple single.”

He sheds his nationality, his language, his name in order to blend in these different worlds, serving as an example of Thoburn's "communal being." All of his different aliases throughout the novel represent a multitude, a collective identity of one highly complex protagonist, one who cannot be easily defined according to name, citizenship, profession, language, etc. In short, he is a character who defies boundaries and whose contributions to various groups and movements also serve as an example for the effectiveness of collaboration over individualism and "cults of personality"—and, it could be argued, an exemplary manifestation of Luther Blissett/Wu Ming's ideology in opposition to the ideals of Berlusconi.

### **Gert vs. Q: "Due facce della stessa moneta"**

Thoburn's aforementioned theory of the multiple single is easily applied to Gustav/Gert/Lot/Ludovico's character, but Ovan argues that it equally describes the identity of the eponymous Q. In fact, in Lot's musings about his various identities, he starts with his own multitude in order to arrive at a greater understanding of the identity of his nemesis. Just as he describes himself as "many and one" (359), he moves on, in the same breath, to refer to Q in the same way: "Many and one. An everyman. The man in the crowd. Hidden in the community. One of ours [...] One of us" (359).<sup>30</sup> Ovan sees this as evidence that Q is actually just as much a representative of the collective as Lot; his name is also strategic and, to use Ovan's word, "common" (434). She sees him as the hidden 'painter' of the novel, referring to the description of the fictional fresco that introduces the narration, in which he blends in with the other nameless figures in the background:

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<sup>30</sup> "Tanti e uno. Uno qualunque. L'uomo della folla. Nascosto nella comunità. Uno dei nostri [...] Uno di noi" (359).

Just like the narrator Q, most of the figures who continuously move in and out of the narrative are not outstanding heroes but part of the collectivity or other Qs *in the community*. In this sense the figure of Q mimics the multiplicity of points of view that constitute the novel—of the narrators and the collective of authors—and thus must be read as an attempt to stay free from the controlling role of the author/narrator, usually attributed to a singularity” (434).

According to Ovan, the choice of Q’s name is also a strategic one, and representative of the overall ideology of the collective. The first initial is taken from the book of Qohélet in Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, which emphasizes the “vanity of all life’s experience” (433) because “one fate befalls the wise man and the fool alike” (Qohélet [Eccles. 12:14]). Lot himself makes this connection when he realizes that Q is “many and one,” (*Q* 359) quoting the conclusion of the book of Qohélet: “For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (430). It is Ovan’s view that this choice of a name immediately confers the apocalyptic element, that what is ultimately at stake in the novel is “the end of the world” (Cantichi qtd. in Ovan 433), and we will all--Q and Lot, Cardinal Carafa and Martin Luther, the Catholics and the Anabaptists—be brought to judgment. In this way, Q, in his efforts to maintain the status quo, actually contributes to the apocalypse and the millennial moment just as much as his opponent does. He is the alter ego to both Gustav/Gert/Lot and to the Luther Blissett Project, as his name, in the words of Ovan, “literally embodies the heretical slogan “*Omnia sunt communia*” (Everything is held in common), the motto of Müntzer and the Anabaptist protagonist and also is the chosen tagline of the Luther Blissett Project itself” (437).

Though I would argue that Luther Blissett’s ideology is manifested more convincingly in the figure of Gert, whereas Ovan finds him to be more one-dimensional than Q, the latter does

share a kinship with the collective in terms of his strategically symbolic name. He does not assume multiple monikers and identities like his nemesis; instead, he has one name, just as LBP does, and it confers a specific commitment to a certain ideological worldview. Luther Blissett chose to operate under a collective pseudonym, just as Q selects his apocalyptic biblical reference. In comparison, his opponent has an identity that is constantly changing, and consequently he ultimately enjoys a great deal more freedom than Q. Perhaps Q serves as an alter ego for LBP precisely in the way they are all in some way ‘chained’ to a name, even to a pseudonym, whereas Gustav/Gert/Lot, along with the Miquez family he encounters at the end of the novel, is the only one who is truly free to “sail the sea” (608).<sup>31</sup>

At bottom, the authors tell their story through both Q and his opponent, “two sides of the same coin” (597)<sup>32</sup> and it is this complete perspective, this multiplicity of identities, names and points of view, which contributes to the effectiveness of the narration. The “multiple single,” though perhaps challenging in terms of coherency, does represent a variety of experience, which offers a more realistic and all-encompassing view of history. In the end, according to Ovan, the “[m]ultiplicity of names, finally, is what makes the main characters the ideal narrators: they can recount different lives, in a linear or nonlinear way, because they have lived all of them, in each one bearing a different name” (439). Creating “communal beings” and privileging the breadth of their experience in the pages of *Q* responds directly to the individualistic, profit and fame-driven homogeny promoted by Berlusconi and his political and cultural practices. While *Q* highlights Wu Ming’s drive to establish their own “framing” (Lakoff) through characters who reflect their collective ideals, *Altai* on the other hand features a protagonist who exemplifies the former prime

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<sup>31</sup> “solcare il mare” (608).

<sup>32</sup> “due facce della stessa moneta” (597)

minister's most negative traits and thus becomes a cautionary tale for the dangers of personality cults and delusions of grandeur.

#### IV. The Multitude vs. the Messiah in *Altai*

Ten years after the publication of *Q*, after the “seppuku” of the Luther Blissett Project and the collaboration on three other collective novels (*54*, *Asce di guerra*, *Manituana*), the remaining four members of the Wu Ming Foundation found themselves at a sort of impasse. Wu Ming 3 leaving the group led to a moment of self-reflection and re-evaluation, and this introspection extended to the group's literary past as well. *Altai*, published in 2009, revisits many of the same themes and characters we find in *Q*, in order to see how the millennial moment of the post-Reformation period fared. The novel could be defined as an “oblique” (to use Wu Ming-ian terminology) sequel to the previous work, as it places the protagonist Gustav/Gert/Lot in a secondary role (and with yet another name, Ismail<sup>33</sup>) and instead places greater importance on João Miquez, who collaborated with the former during the days of the diffusion of *The Benefit of Christ Crucified* in *Q*. In this case, João, who becomes Giuseppe, and later Yossef, Nasi, is the counterpart to the dual identity of the protagonist Emanuele De Zante, alias Manuel Cardoso, a character not present in *Q*. In this second novel, the collective provides a counterpoint to Gustav/Gert/Lot's “multiple single,” this time explicitly addressing the dangers of individualism and cults of personality through the character of Nasi. Whereas in the previous novel Wu Ming appear to celebrate the “multitude” of both of their protagonists, albeit in different ways, in *Altai* their challenge to Berlusconi comes in the form of a direct critique of the former prime minister's

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<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that in *Altai* his name remains the same throughout the entire novel, perhaps pointing to the character's advanced age and his reluctance to continue the revolution that so characterized his younger days.



methods, using Nasi's story as a cautionary tale of a leader who considers himself a Messianic figure. The first novel concludes with Tiziano, João, Beatrice, Gomez and Bernardo (João's right hand man and brother, respectively) setting sail for Turkey. In fact, the epilogue of *Q* serves as an appropriate prologue to *Altai*: the group arrives in Istanbul in 1555, and the reader is informed that in the end Cardinal Carafa's plan of 'divide and conquer' works and he eventually becomes pope. Perhaps for this reason, João explains his decision to move east: "Europe is finished" (618).<sup>34</sup> This statement will prove particularly prescient when it comes to the plot of *Altai*, as the destruction of Europe will become, in many ways, João's obsession, as he devolves from a potential ally for the people to a singular-minded menace to society.

### **The Cult of Personality of Yossef Nasi**

On the surface, the character of João Miquez, who first appears in *Q*, seems to be, like Ismail, another "multiple single," an example of the fluid, adaptable, and often collective identities characteristic of Wu Ming's novels. Much like the former, he has had multiple names and been forced to live, as he likes to say, with "his suitcase next to the door" (378),<sup>35</sup> because his Jewish faith means that he could be expelled from society at any time. Furthermore, in *Q*, João's wealth and ambitions are significantly downplayed, and he comes across as a decidedly noble and trustworthy figure. If Ismail, at the end of his travails, is willing to trust him, then we as readers are inclined to see the positives as well. In much the same way, Silvio Berlusconi came onto the political scene as just such a 'savior' figure, emerging just as the First Republic crumbled and Italians were cynical about government corruption. Just like João, he initially charmed people into

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<sup>34</sup> "L'Europa è finita" (618).

<sup>35</sup> "il bagaglio accanto alla porta" (378).

believing he could represent change, with wealth and ambition taking a secondary role. In both cases, however, the tone soon changed and the dangers of the latter became clear.<sup>36</sup>

In fact, João is almost immediately presented as a controversial figure in *Altai*, though readers already know from *Q* that he is not one to shy away from conflict. The novel begins with a fire at the Arsenale in Venice. The still-unnamed protagonist (Emanuele De Zante) is identified as a spy for *La Serenissima* initially in charge of the investigation, and in this first section, a connection to the previous novel is immediately established: “It was then that I heard the name of Giuseppe Nasi. That night, it was the first time, but it would soon become a chorus: the Jew pig, the Sultan’s bitch, the Archenemy of the *Serenissima*, the evil mastermind behind the disaster”<sup>37</sup> (*Altai* 11). Throughout the beginning of the novel he is consistently referred to as the “arcinemico di Venezia” (“the archenemy of Venice,” 62), and it would appear that his power and reach are considerable. Giuseppe Nasi, the powerful enemy of the Venetian state, has officially replaced João Miquez, confidant of Ludovico (formerly Gustav/Gert/Lot) and colleague in the fight against the Vatican. This is the first evidence that the ‘myth’ of Nasi has taken root, another tactic upon which Berlusconi has long relied. In fact, in the words of Geoff Andrews, “We will see that this carefully cultivated image of himself as a new political actor is a myth. Yet myths often worked

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<sup>36</sup> According to Geoff Andrews in his study *Not a Normal Country: Italy After Berlusconi*, “[t]he Berlusconi phenomenon was one response to the crisis of the state and the erosion of trust in conventional politics. It was a postmodern response in that it altered the traditional relationship between the citizen and politics through the use of new global media, created a different role for the political party [...] and prospered in the wake of two grand narratives in Italian politics, namely political Catholicism and Communism. It was also a *populist* response in that it appealed directly to citizens, often as consumers, while pushing at the boundaries not only of formal democratic politics, but legality and constitutional government. This postmodern populism ultimately presented a challenge to politics itself, with the erosion of dissent and the subordination of public interests to private interests” (13).

<sup>37</sup> “Fu allora che udii pronunciare il nome di Giuseppe Nasi. Era la prima volta, quella notte, ma presto sarebbe stato un ritornello: il Porco Giudeo, il Prendinculo del Sultano, l’Arcinemico della Serenissima, la mente malvagia colpevole del disastro” (*Altai* 11).

for Silvio Berlusconi. They helped him come to power and more than once have rescued him from tight corners. They are central to his particular approach to politics” (18-19).

Much like Berlusconi, Nasi takes great care in constructing his image and shaping his group of followers, and he too seeks to usher in a Second Republic of governance, of which he is the supreme leader. His first meeting with Emanuele, a carefully orchestrated, sumptuous banquet lunch with the who’s who of Constantinople in attendance, confirms this, as the once humble João from the pages of *Q* asserts his new identity: “Today’s lunch has shown you who I am [...] A Jew on top of the world. Would you have ever thought it possible?” (125).<sup>38</sup> This barely veiled pomposity is the first sign that Nasi sees himself as a sort of ‘second coming,’ he believes that the Jewish people deserve a free and safe haven, and that he is the man to secure it for them. When newly converted Manuel (formerly Emanuele) starts collecting information for Nasi, he finds that some of the primary enemies of the latter are other Jews who envy his intelligence because he “sees a hundred miles beyond the horizon” (184).<sup>39</sup> Suddenly he is a great mover of the planets, divinely ordained to effect change for his people: “Nasi was shaking dozens of hands, giving out hugs, promising money and justice. He was a new Solomon, a new David, the man who would reunite the tribes of Israel, who would make whole all that had been divided and dispersed. Surely some thought he was the Messiah” (261).<sup>40</sup> Berlusconi, too, worked to create strategic alliances with members of different left-wing political parties, such as Umberto Bossi and his Lega Nord, and his whole system of governance revolved around a system of favors.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, as leader

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<sup>38</sup> “Il pranzo di oggi vi ha mostrato chi sono [...] Un giudeo sulla vetta del mondo. Lo avreste creduto possibile?” (125).

<sup>39</sup> “vede cento miglia oltre il loro orizzonte” (184).

<sup>40</sup> “Nasi stringeva decine di mani, distribuiva abbracci e carezze, prometteva denaro e giustizia. Era un nuovo Salomone, un nuovo Davide, l'uomo che rimetteva insieme le tribù di Israele, che ricomponeva ciò che era stato diviso e disperso. Qualcuno, di sicuro, pensava che fosse il Messia” (261).

<sup>41</sup> According to Ginsborg, combined with his carefully constructed identity via television media, Berlusconi maintained power by aligning himself with the ‘right’ people: “Personal authority and charisma [...], unlimited

of the Second Republic, the former prime minister also put his reign in terms of preordained destiny.

Much like Berlusconi, Nasi sees himself as an example for his people to follow, recalling the former's tireless self-promotion through tactics like his pamphlet "Una storia italiana."<sup>42</sup> Like the modern day politician, the fictional character also views his own story as aspirational, and wants to sell that version to the public. Not surprisingly, then, Nasi initially presents the idea for his grand project to Manuel in terms of historical injustice and under the guise of altruism in its purest form: "But I'm not content with simply transforming myself. I want to transform a people. From weak to strong. From divided to united. From barely tolerated guest to master of its own destiny. From fugitive to protector of those on the run. We've been running for 1500 years. The time has come to stop" (146).<sup>43</sup> He shows Manuel a map of the Mediterranean and describes his imagined utopia on the island of Cyprus. Just as he did in *Q*, he underlines his belief (and again echoes the ideology of Berlusconi) that anything can be bought with the right amount of money, by taking a Venetian ducat out of his pocket and declaring: "In Constantinople the most important business is done with this, and no one wants to stop it [...] The account to settle is with history, Manuel. I have the money to do it and I have the support of the Sultan. He promised me the crown of the island, once it's under his control" (148).<sup>44</sup> This exchange highlights not only Nasi's misguided notion that money is synonymous with power (or, at least, it is a vehicle which leads to

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acquisitive ambitions and ownership, the arbitrary whim of the patron resting on a weakened rule of law, the reciprocity of favours, all these are cornerstones of Berlusconi's project" (119).

<sup>42</sup> In one election campaign, Berlusconi 'sold' voters a certain image of himself by publishing a booklet of 127 pages depicting himself as an entrepreneurial, sporting, political legend who rose to power from humble origins. See Chapter Two pp. 106-107.

<sup>43</sup> "Ma io non mi accontento di trasformare me stesso. Voglio trasformare un popolo. Da debole a forte. Da diviso a unito. Da ospite mal sopportato a padrone del proprio destino. Da fuggiasco a protettore di chi fugge. Sono millecinquecento anni che scappiamo. È giunto il momento di fermarci" (146).

<sup>44</sup> "A Costantinopoli gli affari più importanti si fanno con questa, e nessuno vuole smettere di farli [...] Il conto da pareggiare è con la storia, Manuel. Io ho il denaro per farlo e ho l'appoggio del Sultano. Mi ha promesso la corona dell'isola, quando sarà nelle sue mani" (148).

it) but also his own personal ambitions and designs on the latter. In much the same way, Berlusconi made a political career out of the synergy of the two, using his financial stakes in banks, publishing houses, supermarket chains, the building trades, and the television media to maximize his political capital and thus ensure his own protection under the law.<sup>45</sup>

Here the Wu Ming collective focus on the distinction between common good and individual glory, a theme that clearly has reverberations in Berlusconi's Italy. As the rabbi Eli Ben Haim accuses Nasi, after the two debate the merits of Nasi's plan from a religious point of view, "Blasphemy! You think you're the Messiah!" (252).<sup>46</sup> To which Nasi replies, "No [...] But I would make a good king. And that's what scares you" (252).<sup>47</sup> Even though he believes he is acting in the name of tolerance and religious freedom, with the best interests of all Jewish people at heart, it becomes increasingly clear that the collective nature of Nasi's project is dwarfed considerably by his individual ambition. Unlike Ismail, who always fought against the powerful in order to provide the poor and disenfranchised with more rights, Nasi attempts to take on the Old World Order not only to create a Jewish free state, but also to establish his own reign as its leader. From this point of view, he differs from Berlusconi, because the latter does not come from a disenfranchised group, even though he has enjoyed depicting himself as an underdog in the past.<sup>48</sup> Like Berlusconi, though, it is not enough for Nasi to simply challenge existing power structures; both men then want that power for themselves.

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<sup>45</sup> In the words of Andrews, "For all his claims and plans to make Italy a more prosperous nation, most of Berlusconi's reforms have had a very narrow focus: to preserve his own power and consolidate his extensive private interests, including media ownership" (35).

<sup>46</sup> "Bestemmia! Voi vi credete il Messia!" (252).

<sup>47</sup> "No [...] Ma sarei un buon re. È questo che vi spaventa" (252).

<sup>48</sup> Says Andrews, "Consistently critical of professional politicians, he cultivated the image of himself as an outsider, but someone at ease with the technological shifts of the contemporary world [...] His personal leadership style, characterized by presidential ambitions, has been redefined with great care and detail, in the presentation of his own image as someone much younger than he actually is, and as a successful businessman who can seamlessly extend his own personal success as a salesman to the role of statesman" (20).

So what end does Yossef Nasi meet, and what does this say about his character, ambition, and identity with regards to Wu Ming's concepts of the collective versus the individual? The constant theme of financial gratification undoubtedly sets Nasi's ambitions apart from those of Ismail and his companions from *Q*; in fact, it was constantly the goal of the latter to steal from those with money, because this wealth naturally implied power. Likewise, Wu Ming, and Luther Blissett before them, have identified themselves as 'Robin Hoods' of the digital age. Conversely, Nasi's stubborn belief that his money represents his greatest weapon ultimately contributes to the failure of his utopian plans. As Manuel finally realizes:

Nasi was not only putting his trust into the most powerful army in the world: he was financing it. Perhaps this was his hope: to exchange for a currency even more valuable than gold or silver. To buy the freedom of his future kingdom. It wouldn't be the Israelites who conquered Jericho, but the money of an Israelite would make it possible. (246)<sup>49</sup>

In a clear echo to one of the key elements of Berlusconiism, Nasi places so much faith in the power of his money (rather than, for example, in the development of an actual Jewish army) that he all but ignores both blatant and subtle criticism and fails to consider the truly divisive nature of world religions at the time. In fact, he is furious to learn that the Pope has joined forces with the Venetian Republic, along with Florence, Genoa and others, to create a "Lega Santa," whose primary aim was to oppose Nasi's plans. For someone who is planning what he claims to be a religious revolution, he should not have been surprised to meet opposition from those same religious groups who had long persecuted the Jews. In much the same way, Berlusconi also deals

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<sup>49</sup> "Nasi non si stava soltanto affidando all'esercito più potente del mondo: lo stava finanziando. Forse era questa la sua speranza: riscuotere il credito in una moneta ben più sonante dell'oro e dell'argento. Comprare la libertà del futuro regno. Non sarebbero stati gli israeliti a conquistare Gerico, ma il denaro di un ebreo lo avrebbe reso possibile. (246)

with his critics either by shaping laws to fit his case or by ignoring threats to his power altogether, believing himself to be invincible.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, and even more problematic since Nasi grew up with the dominating presence of his aunt Beatrice/Gracia, he completely disregards women in general and their powerful potential in particular, another allusion to Berlusconi's weaknesses. These factors—money, religion, gender politics—all of which Ludovico/Ismail succeeded in managing in a much more fruitful way in *Q*, represent the beginning of the end for Nasi. In the words of his wife donna Reyna: "You men see intrigue behind every risk, a threat behind every uncertainty, and perhaps you're right. Yet all you have to do is look in the mirror to see the weaknesses that will cause your fall" (272-273).<sup>51</sup> Donna Reyna does not see her husband's utopic vision; she only sees its flaws. His is not a project, or an ambition, but an 'obsession,' which has occupied more of his life than his marriage to her. In fact, his plan takes precedence over his personal relationships in general, which is why he sacrifices so many men (either deliberately or not) for the sake of his empire. Berlusconi, too, has a colorful history with the women in his life, engaging in extramarital affairs, organizing so-called "bunga bunga" sex parties at his various estates, and nominating former showgirls as members of his cabinet. He has been accused of having sexual relations with an underage prostitute, and he is fully responsible for the phenomenon of the "veline"<sup>52</sup> that was born

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<sup>50</sup>See Curtis Wong, "Berlusconi Indicted: A Timeline of the Italian Prime Minister's Legal Battles," for a useful timeline on Berlusconi's legal battles from 1994-2011, which involve charges of bribery, corruption, false bookkeeping, money laundering, tax fraud, and sex with an underage prostitute. *The Daily Show's* Jon Stewart also offered a humorous take on the former prime minister's problems with the law in the episode "La Douche Vita."

<sup>51</sup> "Voi uomini vedete un intrigo dietro ogni azzardo, una minaccia dietro ogni vostra incertezza, e forse avete ragione. Eppure basterebbe che vi guardate allo specchio per scoprire le debolezze che vi faranno cadere" (272-273).

<sup>52</sup> This is the name for the showgirls present on numerous game shows created for Mediaset channels. The name translates to something akin to 'slips of paper,' or 'tissue paper' and comes from the slips of paper used to dispatch instructions within the Fascist Ministry of Information. Later, they were the newsgirls on the program *Striscia la Notizia*. For more see also Hipkins.

out of his television shows. For both Nasi and Berlusconi, the flawed relationships with the women in their lives eventually lead to their downfall.<sup>53</sup>

In the end Nasi's story becomes much more of a cautionary tale than that of Berlusconi, and perhaps it is here that the collective dares to dream about the consequences the former prime minister could have/should have faced for the destruction he caused. The former's actual life is not sacrificed for the cause—he does not die in battle like many other innocent people on all sides of the fight. However, he does lose his dream, and he continues to remain a slave, despite all the money he has, to the Sultan. He as an individual ends the novel with less freedom and less power than he had at the beginning, which is perhaps more symbolic than an actual death. In the Epilogue, after the spectacular failure of his project, the reader finds Nasi solitary and reclusive, awaiting news from Gomez of the whereabouts of those (like Manuel) who were lost in the Battle of Lepanto. He thinks about the words of the Gigante, Mehmet Sokollu, and how he defeated him with his own plan.

There is a moment in every game in which one of the contenders must admit defeat. There are men capable of accepting fate's verdict without pretense, but you are not among them, Nasi bey. You think you can tempt fate and that any result can be overturned. The letter you wrote to the king of Spain proves it. These are your signature and your seal. These are the words with which you offer your services to the biggest enemy of the empire and you promise to convert to Christianity in

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<sup>53</sup> A noted womanizer, Berlusconi and his wife of 25 years, Veronica Lario, separated in 2009 after he was accused of having sexual relations with an 18-year-old named Noemi Letizia. In 2013, the former prime minister was convicted of paying underage exotic dancer "Ruby Rubacuore" (her stage name) for sex (a charge of which he was later acquitted), and he and Lario divorced officially in 2014.



exchange for his support. How many times are you willing to change face to save yourself? (406)<sup>54</sup>

Sokollu brings up an interesting point about the constantly changing identities of the characters in these novels. In this case, Manuel, who will be discussed next in this chapter, appears to change names based on a sincere conversion of faith and belief in Nasi's plan. But in Nasi's case, he merely does it to save his own skin and to seek strategic alliances on the path towards his Nuova Sion. In addition, his are all merely translations of the same name, which indicates that he never truly transforms or grows: there is no shedding of a former identity to make way for another, better self. In much the same way, Berlusconi's constant manipulation of the laws concerning his own businesses show that like Nasi he is incapable of accepting "il verdetto della sorte," ("fate's verdict," 406) and throughout his career he has made a practice, through back room dealings, favors, strategic alliances, and maneuvering around legal road blocks, that he believes he can 'tempt fate.' Sokollu also asks Nasi how many times he wants to change his 'face,' indicating the superficial part of him, rather than his identity or his core beliefs. The reference to Berlusconi's famous bouts of plastic surgery, literally a change in his face, cannot be ignored here either.<sup>55</sup> Sokollu's words appear to highlight Nasi's deviousness rather than his victim status as a member of the "popolo errante." His final admonishment points to Nasi's disregard of his wife and of the women in his life in general: "You know, Nasi *bey*, in the end you and I are alike, I admire your

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<sup>54</sup> "C'è un momento in ogni partita in cui uno dei contendenti viene dichiarato sconfitto. Ci sono uomini capaci di accettare il verdetto della sorte senza infingimenti, ma voi non siete tra quelli, Nasi bey. Voi credete di poter irretire la fortuna e che ogni risultato possa sempre essere ribaltato nel suo contrario. Lo prova la lettera che avete scritto al re di Spagna. Questi sono la vostra sigla e il vostro sigillo. Queste sono le parole con le quali offrite i vostri servizi al più grande nemico dell'impero e gli promettete di farvi cristiano in cambio del suo favore. Quante volte siete disposto a cambiare faccia per salvarvi?" (406)

<sup>55</sup> Berlusconi is known for his attention to his physical appearance. As Marco Belpoliti, in his book *Il corpo del capo*, notes, the former prime minister is obsessed with photographs and with the image he projects. Belpoliti demonstrates how Berlusconi utilizes his own photographed image to frame his personal and political narrative. The power of the visual image will be further explored in Chapter Three.

tenacity. But unlike you, I have never committed the error of underestimating a queen. This is why I hold your life in my hands and I declare your defeat” (407).<sup>56</sup>

Unlike Berlusconi, who continues to evade capture and consequences in one way or another, Nasi is a victim of his own ambition and of the cult of personality that he creates around himself. He puts his face on his enterprise, and therefore he must bear the brunt of its failure. His final fate is perhaps the worst of all for someone who sought to be king and who saw himself as a second coming for the Jewish people: “No one says anything about Yossef Nasi anymore, like an enemy who know longer scares you” (400).<sup>57</sup> His *idée fixe* is what leads to his demise: he is singular-minded and unable to see beyond his obsession. Just as Berlusconi characterized himself as one of the people through his “Una storia italiana,” Nasi initially appears to be part of the ‘collective’ Jewish identity of the “popolo errante;” however, his solitary presence in his personal library at the end of the novel confirms his individualism and lack of connection with the very people he claims to represent. By trying to fight against dominant power structures by adopting them, he ends up combatting alone. He goes by many names between the two novels, but they are all versions of the same person who attempts, to the end, to buy the freedom of his family and his people without actually putting himself on the front lines with the other soldiers. In terms of the ideology of the Wu Ming project, it is clear that Nasi’s character represents a cautionary tale about the perils of associating money and liberty, and of privileging the individual over the collective. He starts as one of the many disenfranchised souls that the authors seem to support, but his plight also shows that attempting to fight back by becoming the enemy is an ineffective way of

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<sup>56</sup> “Sapete, Nasi *bey*, al fondo noi ci somigliamo, io stimo la vostra tenacia. Ma al contrario di voi, non ho mai commesso l’errore di sottovalutare una regina. Ecco perché stringo fra le mani la vostra vita e vi dichiaro sconfitto” (407).

<sup>57</sup> “Di Yossef Nasi invece non si dice più niente, come di un nemico che non fa più paura” (400).

challenging hegemony. With regard to contemporary Italian politics, the example of Yossef Nasi demonstrates the failure of a cult of personality to truly connect with and represent the people, pointing to the damage that Berlusconi's own celebrity and ambition have caused Italian society, and to the consequences that the former prime minister has yet to face.

### **Emanuele/Manuel: an Altai Personified**

The other protagonist of *Altai*, alternately named Emanuele De Zante and Manuel Cardoso, could be considered a younger version of the Ismail character, and he comes into the story precisely in the moment of transition from the 'reign' of Gracia, the unofficial leader of the Miquez family until her death, to the misguided quest for power of Yossef Nasi. In his desire to believe in something grander than himself, he allows himself to be seduced by Nasi's plan and for much of the novel looks at Nasi as the ideal, visionary leader, much like so many Italians did with Berlusconi when he entered the political arena.<sup>58</sup> Emanuele's conversion to Manuel represents a middle ground between Ismail's "multiple single" and Nasi's "cult of personality" and serves as an example of those Italians who are at the crosshairs of these conflicting quests.

He notably begins the novel as a character without a name. It is not until almost thirty pages into the tale that his identity is unveiled; prior to this, he is in the center of the action but nameless, perhaps a sign that he is a blank slate to be shaped and altered at will (foreshadowing his eventual relationship with Nasi and his kinship to the "altai" bird of the title). All that is known is that he is a spy for the Republic of Venice, and that there has been an explosion at the Arsenale. He is a

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<sup>58</sup> According to Andrews, this is best explained through the former prime minister's access to and approach to the media: "Through his unique access to the media, he addressed an 'audience' as much as an 'electorate'; his appeals to loyalty were made to consumers rather than citizens [...] The language he chose to adopt in public combined in a unique, uneven and unprecedented way with the content of his TV programmes" (20).

faithful servant of *La Serenissima* and the right-hand man of Consigliere Nordio, a man he admires in much the same way as he will come to respect Nasi later on in the novel. What is not initially clear is that he is not a ‘typical’ Venetian, and that one detail in particular makes him an ideal scapegoat for a city that has grown increasingly intolerant of its Jewish community. Because of his background, he is wrongly accused of causing the explosion at the Arsenale and thus his flight begins. There is never an inclination that De Zante actually started the fire, but he identifies as a traitor just the same because he hid his Jewish origins from his colleagues and friends. His fidelity to *La Serenissima* is immediately clear, even when the city betrays him, and this sets the stage for the kind of loyalty he will show to Nasi when his conversion to the other side is complete.

Unlike some of the other characters (particularly Ismail, but also Yossef), Emanuele’s identity is a binary: he has one Christian name and one Jewish name. One represents his father, and the other his mother. Both are intensely personal and familiar and cannot be regarded as true pseudonyms, much like the various iterations of João’s name. Following the fire at the Arsenale in Venice, Emanuele is attacked and accused by the Catholic side of his identity but years of bitterness impede him from simply re-embracing his mother’s religion. He also criticizes the false conversions of many Jews, who convert to Christianity only to save their skin, going to mass on Sunday but observing the Sabbath in their own homes. This sentiment also echoes Sokollu’s aforementioned criticism of Nasi about his penchant for changing faces to appease people, representing once again Wu Ming’s aversion to superficiality and pandering. Perhaps for this reason, when he does re-convert—when Emanuele returns to being Manuel—he does it with absolute conviction. However, at this point in the novel, he still struggles with his origins, and of the lies that he believes characterize his Jewish upbringing.

Despite his misgivings and preconceived notions, it does not take long for Emanuele to see an affinity between himself and the Jewish population of Thessaloniki<sup>59</sup> upon his arrival there. His emotional reaction to seeing a Jewish mother and child arriving in this ‘new world’ is steeped in the Wu Ming-ian ideology of history as a community building process:<sup>60</sup> “I had witnessed an ancient scene. I had participated in a representation that had been going on for centuries, for more than a thousand years. I felt tears stream down my cheeks, to my lips, and the bitter taste” (140).<sup>61</sup> Upon seeing this reaction, Nasi approaches him and says, “Bentornato, Manuel Cardoso” (“Welcome back, Manuel Cardoso” 140). Emanuele confirms his conversion, his newfound preference for the Jewish side of his binary identity: “Three months prior I was another person, lost, adrift [...] Emanuele De Zante was dead and I, Manuel Cardoso, had restarted from my *Bar Mitzvah*, as if I were fifteen again” (205-206).<sup>62</sup>

As the person who essentially initiates this second *Bar Mitzvah* for Manuel, Nasi naturally takes on the role of father figure to the newly converted protagonist, underlining a key aspect of the latter’s character. In his previous life, Manuel had converted and remained faithful to the Republic of Venice for his birth father, and now he would show the same loyalty to Nasi out of gratitude for his salvation. Despite the failure of Nasi’s plan and the grave danger in which Manuel is continually placed at his command, the ‘son’ remains faithful to the ‘father.’ When Manuel finally says goodbye to Ismail at the end, he explains his reason for staying by Nasi’s side: “I can’t

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<sup>59</sup> Emanuele’s “fuga” takes him from Venice to Ragusa (Croatia) to Thessaloniki (where many Jews fled during the 16<sup>th</sup> century) and finally to Constantinople.

<sup>60</sup> Wu Ming are interested in reviving historical memory through mythopoesis, a collective process of myth making. See Boscolo.

<sup>61</sup> “Avevo assistito a una scena antica. Avevo partecipato a una rappresentazione che proseguiva da secoli, da ben più di mille anni. Sentii le lacrime solcare le gote, fino alle labbra, e il gusto amaro” (140).

<sup>62</sup> “Tre mesi prima ero un’altra persona, persa, alla deriva [...] Emanuele De Zante era morto, e io, Manuel Cardoso, ero ripartito dal *Bar Mitzvah*, come se avessi di nuovo quindici anni” (205-206).

leave Yossef. Not now that things have gotten worse. He has done so much for me. He killed Emanuele De Zante, and saved Manuel Cardoso” (364).<sup>63</sup>

Ultimately, Manuel’s faithful and obedient nature towards the father figures in his life lies precisely in his mixed identity, which relates back to the title of the novel. An “altai” is the extraordinary result of the intermixing of two different species of falcon, a result that is far greater than the sum of its parts and more powerful than either of its ‘pure’ components:

The snowy white plumage of the bird of prey was streaked with dark gray spots. I had never seen a similar animal, and with the utmost politeness, I asked the falconier what type of bird it was. “They say that its mother comes from the icy lands at the ends of the earth,” he responded, “and its father from the deserts of central Asia, the birthplace of our people. Two different breeds, but similar enough to mate and then leave the eggs on the slopes of the Altai, the Golden Mountains, which give this crossbreed its name [...] It is a very robust falcon, loyal and easy to train. One doesn’t have to do anything, with an altai, and a good falconier does very little. It is the very nature of the falcon which pushes it to fly and to sink its claws into its prey.” (219-220)<sup>64</sup>

These qualities—loyal, easy to train, with parents from two different, yet similar, worlds—describe Manuel quite clearly. What is even more telling is the presence of the ‘falconier’ who

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<sup>63</sup> “Non posso lasciare Yossef. Non ora che le cose volgono al peggio. Ha fatto tanto per me. Ha ucciso Emanuele De Zante, e salvato Manuel Cardoso” (364).

<sup>64</sup> “Il piumaggio bianchissimo del rapace era screziato da una pioggia di macchie grigio scuro. Non avevo mai visto un simile animale, e con la massima educazione chiesi al falconiere di che uccello si trattasse. —Dicono che sua madre venga dalle lande ghiacciate ai confini del mondo — rispose - e suo padre dai deserti dell’Asia centrale, la culla della nostra gente. Due razze diverse, ma abbastanza simili da potersi accoppiare, per poi deporre le uova sulle pendici degli Altai, i Monti d’Oro, che danno il nome a questa stirpe meticcica [...] È un falco molto robusto, fedele, facile da addestrare. Non occorre far nulla, con un altai, e un buon falconiere fa il meno possibile. È la natura del falco che lo spinge in volo e gli fa conficcare gli artigli sulla preda. (219-220)

trains him. Throughout the course of his life, he has taken lessons well from all of the men who have guided him, from Trotta in Ragusa to his father to Consigliere Nordio in Venice to Nasi. Manuel is merely fulfilling his destiny as a loyal falcon of the highest order, and the ‘falconiers’ need only push him in the direction they desire. For someone like Nasi, who is so consumed by his own cult of personality and quest for power, an *altai* is just the kind of follower he desires. However, Manuel’s loyalty also means that those in power can seduce him. In my view, his position reflects that of many Italian citizens, who seek a strong leader and who are swayed by charisma and ambition because it allows them to live vicariously through that leader. These aspirational tales are inspiring for many, and while a collective and nomadic existence like that of Ismail might be intriguing as well, it does not offer the wealth and fame of the former.

Unlike Gert/Ismail, whose multiple names no longer reflect his “*razza senza fortuna*” (“unfortunate race,” *Q* 384) of origin, Manuel’s relationship to his Jewish identity is inextricably bound up in the name he was given in Ragusa and with which he was later re-baptized by Nasi. Perhaps Manuel’s strong identification with his name prevents him from being a true “multiple single” in the style of Gert/Ismail; his character does not represent “an open dynamic where singularity or difference is an expression of collectivity, and vice versa” (Thoburn 127). He does not operate under a constructed anonymity like his predecessor; rather, he is the individual, named hybrid result of two distinct collectivities and identities. Ismail and Manuel, though sharing a certain loyalty to the Nasi family, differ considerably not only in their attachment *to* their names but also *in* their natures: Ismail, as Gracia describes him, is “the river that becomes a cloud” (186)<sup>65</sup> while perhaps Manuel is the river that chooses to “throw itself passionately in the sand, determined

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<sup>65</sup>“il fiume che diventa nuvola” (186)

to pass through it and irrigate it, even if it means running the risk of drying out forever” (185).<sup>66</sup> He does not possess the transformational powers of Ismail; the altai’s nature is not to serve himself, but rather to follow his master’s commands, even if this unwavering loyalty and obedience leads to his own demise. His blended identity makes him powerful, a celebration of difference, but it also makes him vulnerable to those who hold the strings. He is a casualty of Nasi’s ambition, and represents the dangers, with particular resonance in modern Italian society, of becoming a member of a “cult of personality.”

Through Manuel, the authors demonstrate the desire of the people for a strong leader, surely a consequence of the political instability and corruption in modern Italian history, from fascism to postwar Reconstruction to the First Republic and on to the Second. As is typical of works of the New Italian Epic, a common theme is the search for a leader,<sup>67</sup> or in Manuel’s case, a father figure. On the one hand, he represents a certain optimism, as he is a model and devout citizen. In this way, the collective shows the willingness of the Italian people to believe in a cause and contribute to the greater good. On the other hand, Manuel’s desire for a charismatic leader is the ultimate warning, as he is seduced by a ‘false’ leader and ultimately loses his life for it. Much like the Italian people under Berlusconi, he becomes the unwitting victim of one individual’s quest for power.

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<sup>66</sup> “gettarsi con foga tra le sabbie, determinato ad attraversarle e irrigarle, con il rischio di seccarsi e spegnersi per sempre” (185).

<sup>67</sup> Wu Ming 1 refers to this phenomenon as the “morte del vecchio” (“Memorandum” 6), the death of a leader the likes of whom might never be seen again. It is always a crucial period in nation building, and in most cases the death of this leader represents the end of an era. See Introduction, pg. 21.



## V. The Readers Have Rights: Copyleft as Subversive Practice

Privileging the collective good over the individual “cult of personality” is not the only way Wu Ming challenge Berlusconism and capitalistic practices. They also adhere to what they refer to as the “copyleft” movement, a counterpart to the customary “copyright” typically associated with book publishing, which was put in place to guarantee rights and protection to the author and his/her work. Such a practice also guarantees the earnings of the publishing company itself. Since Berlusconi owns the Mondadori publishing house, questions of “copyright” and of ensuring that an author remain the ‘owner’ of his/her material is part of his business, as he also stands to benefit financially from having proprietary rights to works of literature, non-fiction, etc....

As Henry Jenkins points out, traditional copyright laws are concerned with protecting the rights of authors, while disregarding those of *readers*.<sup>68</sup> Copyright is a component of the Western approach to the publishing industry, and therefore Wu Ming’s copyleft puts forth a clear pro-reader and anti-capitalist stance. By doing this, the collective is clearly stating that their primary objective is not economic but rather social, to make their “immaterial property” common.<sup>69</sup> Copyleft presupposes that a book is just an object (a “narrative object,” to use Wu Ming’s terms) and that the ideas do not belong solely to the writer, but to everyone.<sup>70</sup> The (narrative) object, then, loses its “aura,” to quote Walter Benjamin,<sup>71</sup> whereas for Berlusconi it is/was a market commodity. With

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<sup>68</sup> “much contemporary discussion of copyright starts from an assumption that authors have rights, while readers do not” (Jenkins et al, *Reading in a Participatory Culture: Remixing Moby-Dick in the English Classroom* 188).

<sup>69</sup> See Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*. They quote Marx: “‘Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided’ that we denigrate all forms of *being* for the simple sense of *having*” (Marx qtd. in Hardt and Negri 187-188).

<sup>70</sup> It is worth noting that Wu Ming do have a contract with the Einaudi publishing house (notably not Mondadori), but it is explicitly written in their contract that they will publish a certain number of books in paper form, but then the work will eventually be available on the website as a free download.

<sup>71</sup> See Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” He argues that reproductions depreciate a work of art because it loses its authenticity: “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the AURA of the work of art” (5). He further explains, “by making many reproductions, it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (5).

copyleft, Wu Ming put a great deal of responsibility and trust in the hands of the reader, as the written advisory that prefaces each novel clearly states:

The partial or total reproduction of this publication, in electronic form or otherwise, is consented to for noncommercial purposes, provided that the original copyright notice and this notice are included and the publisher and the source are clearly acknowledged. Any reproduction or use of all or a portion of this publication in exchange for financial consideration of any kind is prohibited without permission in writing from the publisher (*Altai*, inside cover page).

While Berlusconi focuses on building consensus with passive consumers, Wu Ming seeks to establish trust with an active readership in order to create a community. This relationship with their readers is one example of a sustained collaboration, as it represents a divergence from the mass culture that Berlusconi had established throughout the 80s and 90s and it takes power out of the hands of one of the primary agents of the creation and diffusion of modern culture, the publishing industry.<sup>72</sup>

### **Copyleft in *Q: The Benefit of Christ Crucified***

Collective identities and subversive collaborations are not the only elements of Luther Blissett/Wu Ming's ideology that are reflected in the narrative of *Q*. In fact, the novel itself makes a great deal of allegorical reference to the contemporary Italian context. In particular, the collective's relationship to "copyleft" and their challenge to various institutions, including the publishing industry and the Catholic Church, is perhaps most clearly manifested in the example of

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<sup>72</sup> See Ginsborg, *Silvio Berlusconi*; Emmott, *Good Italy, Bad Italy*; Andrews, *Not a Normal Country*.

Don Benedetto's Reformation-era text *The Benefit of Christ Crucified*. The controversial work in question is introduced for the first time precisely through the antagonist Q's letters to Cardinal Carafa, and it is here that its exploitative potential and divisive nature are foreshadowed. In this particular letter to Carafa, dated 1541, Q writes about the difficulty in uniting all Christians under the same doctrine: "giustificazione per sola fede," ("justification by faith alone") in which Lutherans believe, versus the "giustificazione per opere" ("justification through works") of the Catholic Church (368). The text that would appear to support the former ideology is the aforementioned *The Benefit of Christ Crucified*, which Q believes represents a grave danger to the institution of the Church:

It is precisely that work [John Calvin's *The Institution of Christian Religion*] which inspired what I consider to be the most dangerous publication to these Italian lands from the time of Savonarola's perfidious sermons and which we owe to the twisted genius of the Viterbese minds by which I am surrounded. I am referring to a brief treatise whose danger far exceeds its size, since *it plainly presents*, in a language accessible to all, *the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone as if this did not completely contradict Church doctrine*. [...] Your Lordship can clearly see the threat that the diffusion of ideas of this kind can represent for Christianity and in particular for the Holy See, if they were to find consensus. If the pamphlet were to find approval among the notables of the Church, it could unleash an epidemic of consensus for Protestants in the bosom of the Church of Rome. I don't dare to think

of what terrible consequences this could have for the politics of the Holy See with regard to Charles V. (368-369)<sup>73</sup>

It is clear at this juncture that the revolutionaries have moved from violence to financial fraud to ‘blasphemy’ in order to combat the corrupt Church. As in other parts of the book, the reader learns about the existence of *The Benefit of Christ Crucified*<sup>74</sup> and its potential consequences before he or she learns of its genesis, and once again, Q seems to be ahead of Gustav/Gert/Lot, almost anticipating his every move. Q had already warned Carafa about the potential dangers of the diffusion of a book that contradicts Catholic doctrine when Lot encounters the book four years later, appropriately through a bookseller and printer in Basil, Switzerland.

The bookseller in question, Pietro Perna, is aware of his potential power as a publisher and is frank about his desire to find a financier for the printing of *The Benefit of Christ Crucified*. Perna believes in the power of the book, more so than in other revolutionary possibilities; in his view, it is not a question of religion but rather one of politics and power. The role of the book peddler in this scenario is not insignificant and certainly reflects Luther Blissett’s all-inclusive approach to publishing and diffusing their works:

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<sup>73</sup> “Proprio tale opera ha ispirato quella che reputo la pubblicazione più pericolosa per queste terre italiche dai tempi dei perfidi sermoni di Savonarola e che dobbiamo al genio distorto delle menti viterbesi tra le quali mi trovo. Mi riferisco a un breve trattatello la cui pericolosità supera di gran lunga la sua voluminosità, giacché *vi è esposta pianamente*, in un linguaggio ben comprensibile per chiunque, *la dottrina protestante della giustificazione per sola fede come se essa non contradicesse affatto la dottrina della Chiesa*. [...] La Signoria Vostra può ben giudicare la minaccia che la diffusione di idee del genere può rappresentare per la Cristianità e in particolare per la Santa Sede, qualora riscuotessero consensi. Se poi il libercolo trovasse plauso tra i notabili della Chiesa, potrebbe scoppiare un’epidemia di consenso per i protestanti in seno alla Chiesa di Roma. Non oso pensare quali odiose conseguenze ciò potrebbe avere sulla politica della Santa Sede nei confronti di Carlo V” (368-369).

<sup>74</sup> As Lot explains later to João Miquez about the text, “Ufficialmente l’autore è un frate benedettino mantovano, ma dietro ci sono alcuni importanti letterati che simpatizzano per Calvino ed esponenti del partito moderato romano, li chiamano Spirituali. Si tratta di un libro scaltro, destinato a sollevare infiniti vespai, perché ha contenuti ambigui espresso in una lingua che tutti possono capire. Un capolavoro della dissimulazione, sul quale già in molti si arrovellano. È stato stampato la prima volta tre anni fa, proprio qui a Venezia. Da allora la sua fortuna non ha smesso di crescere. Ne abbiamo già pronte mille nuove copie da smistare, oltre che qui, nei territori a ovest e a sud della Serenissima. Stimiamo di poterne far circolare diecimila in tre anni” (438-439).

I do my job, understand? I am a bookseller, I travel around, I see a lot of people, I sell books, I discover hidden talents under mountains of paper... I spread ideas. Mine is the riskiest profession in the world, understand?, I am responsible for the diffusion of thought, even of the most inconvenient kind [...] They [Oporinus and Co.] write and print, I disseminate. They believe that a book has value in and of itself, they believe in the beauty of ideas in themselves [...] *An idea has value if it is disseminated in the right place at the right time*, my friend. (394, italics mine)<sup>75</sup>

Perna follows up this statement by showing Lot a well-worn copy of *The Benefit of Christ Crucified* as a case in point for the strategic way ideas (be they helpful or harmful for humanity) can be spread through literature: “‘Take *The Benefit of Christ*. Small, agile, clear, pocket-sized. Oporinus and his friends see it as a hope. Do you know what I see?’ – a small pause for effect. – ‘War. This is a low blow, this is a powerful weapon’” (395).<sup>76</sup> Perna, unlike Q and the other, more ideological revolutionaries in the narrative, seems to view his position from the abstract. He is aware of the influence a written text can have if it is published and diffused in the right way, place, and time. It is inconsequential to him if the text is well written, or if it offers moral and civic-minded ideals. He says,

Do you believe it’s a masterpiece? It is a mediocre book, it recycles and synthesizes Calvin’s *Institution*. But where is its strength? In the fact that it seeks to make the

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<sup>75</sup> “Io faccio il mio mestiere, capito? Io sono un libraio, vado in giro, vedo un sacco di gente, vendo i libri, scopro talenti nascosti sotto montagne di carta... Io propago idee. Il mio è il mestiere più rischioso del mondo, capito?, sono responsabile della diffusione dei pensieri, magari di quelli più scomodi [...] Loro [Oporinus e Co.] scrivono e stampano, io diffondo. Loro credono che un libro valga in sé e per sé, credono nella bellezza delle idee in quanto tali [...] *Un’idea vale se viene diffusa nel posto e nel momento giusto*, amico mio” (394, italics mine).

<sup>76</sup> “‘Prendete *The Benefit of Christ Crucified*. Piccolo, agile, chiaro, sta in una tasca. Oporinus e i suoi amici lo vedono come una speranza. Sapete invece cosa ci vedo io?’ – una piccola pausa per effetto.– ‘Guerra. Questo è un colpo basso, questo è un’arma potente’” (395).

justification *by faith alone* compatible with Catholic doctrine! And what does this mean? That if this book is successfully publicized, perhaps among the cardinals and doctors of the Church, then maybe you and Oporinus, and his friends, and everyone else, won't have the Inquisition breathing down your necks for the rest of your lives! If this book gets the approval of the right people, then those intransigent cardinals risk finding themselves in the minority, understand? Books change the world only if the world can stomach them. (395)<sup>77</sup>

His statement would appear to point towards Luther Blissett/Wu Ming's own adherence to copyleft, encouraging the open diffusion of materials, but also to the risks involved in a completely free market: without the appropriate filters, mediocre texts just might end up starting a revolution. This is certainly a pressing question of today's increasingly digital world, populated by blogs, webzines, and other online writing platforms, in which Benjamin's warnings about the consequences of mass-produced art seem more prescient than ever. Web 2.0, with the myriad possibilities it offers, also brings with it the risk of the echo-chamber effect, in which users solely reinforce their own beliefs in an enclosed system while completely avoiding ideas that differ from their own. In an echo-chamber, if something is repeated enough times, then people are inclined to believe it is true, regardless of whether or not this has any bearing in reality, and the repetition of these ideas within the system is eventually self-perpetuating. *The Benefit of Christ Crucified*, long before the age of Web 2.0, demonstrates just such an effect, as Perna and others are convinced that

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<sup>77</sup> "Credete che sia un capolavoro? È un libro mediocre, risciaccia e sintetizza l'Istituzione di Calvino. Ma dov'è la sua forza? Nel fatto che cerca di rendere la giustificazione *per sola fede* compatibile con la dottrina cattolica! E questo cosa significa? Che se questo libro si diffonde e ha successo, magari tra i cardinali e i dottori della Chiesa, forse voi e Oporinus, e i suoi amici, e tutti gli altri non avrete l'Inquisizione che vi alita sul collo per il resto dei vostri giorni! Se questo libro trova il plauso della gente giusta, i cardinali intransigenti rischiano di trovarsi in minoranza, capito? I libri cambiano il mondo soltanto se il mondo riesce a digerirli" (395).

as long as the ‘gospel’ held therein is spread, then readers will start to believe it. It is clear that the quality of the text carries much less importance than its explosive and strategic potential as a divisive wedge in a religious war.

Some studies, however, have concluded that the echo-chamber effect is not as damaging as it is often perceived. Kieron O’Hara and David Stevens, in their article “Echo Chambers and Online Radicalism: Assessing the Internet’s Complicity in Violent Extremism” conclude that the web might come closer to Habermas’s “ideal speech situations” than critics believe. According to their study, these echo chambers just might have a community building effect, which is ultimately the goal of the Wu Ming collective. In their words, “In the Habermasian public sphere, the emphasis is on discourse, rationality and universality, but sometimes a group may need to bond and emphasize its solidarity. Discussing politics with those with whom one agrees helps mitigate issues of conflict that hinder action (Mutz 2002), and political participation is fostered by discussion of politics with small numbers of like-minded individuals (Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee 2005)” (407). In the case of *Q*, the community-building effect of the dissemination of *The Benefit of Christ Crucified* is inarguable, and even though the content and quality of the text itself might be questionable, the collective seems to prioritize the larger implications—namely, the challenge of the institution of the Catholic Church—as a necessary means to an end.

Perna, and to a certain extent Ludovico, are more concerned about the impact and success of the text on the market than they are about the actual quality of writing or validity of the argument. *The Benefit of Christ Crucified* is important inasmuch as it opposes Catholic doctrine and therefore represents yet another weapon in the fight of the poor and oppressed against dominant power structures. It is clear that neither Perna nor Ludovico are truly followers of its teachings. For the Catholic Church, on the other hand, it is a dangerous book precisely because its

teachings are in direct opposition to the accepted doctrine of the Church; for them, what is at stake is not a fluctuating number of worshippers in various parishes, but rather a direct threat to the papacy itself.

Q, more than anyone, understands the schism the text will cause within the institution, and most importantly the obstacle it presents to his mentor Carafa on his path to becoming Pope. His continuous letters and advice to Carafa highlight, perhaps better than any other example, the contrast between the collective and the individual present in the text. Ludovico supports *The Benefit of Christ Crucified* because its effects on the institution of the Catholic Church will hopefully result in more religious freedom and eliminate the hegemonic presence of the latter. Whether he actually believes in the “justification by faith alone” is inconsequential. I would argue that religious beliefs are not the primary focus for Q either; rather, his objective is to elevate Cardinal Carafa to the papacy and then enjoy personal favors as a reward. Ludovico is at the service of a larger, more ambiguous group, while Q supports the quest for power of a single man (there are echoes of Nasi and Berlusconi here as well). *The Benefit of Christ Crucified* represents a pawn (“un’arma” is used by both of them to describe its function) in both of their games, proof of the considerable power of the written word to enact change if used strategically. On the other side, the power of a text of questionable quality also serves as a cautionary tale about how beliefs can be shaped based on charismatic delivery and populism, indicative of Berlusconi’s success in culture and politics.

In fact, this is precisely what the collective goes on to show through this example. Thanks to the Council of Trent, Q’s wish for the excommunication of the text is granted, which only serves to push Ludovico and Perna towards more extreme measures (also demonstrating a certain resilience on the part of the collective to challenge access to knowledge even in circumstances that



would seem impossible). Their countermove suggests that not only the text but also physical contact with a human ‘spokesperson’ for it would stimulate a more interested and engaged readership/community, precisely the multisensorial approach preferred by Luther Blissett, and subsequently by the Wu Ming collective.<sup>78</sup> As Ludovico, on the verge of becoming Tiziano the Anabaptist,<sup>79</sup> suggests to Perna, “What would happen if *The Benefit of Christ* transformed into a much more dangerous book than it is? What would happen if someone started going around rebaptizing people with the *Benefit* in hand?” (460).<sup>80</sup> Words like “pericoloso” and “arma” once again suggest a reference to Marco Amici’s point that for the collective stories are “hatchets of war”<sup>81</sup> to be unearthed and used in new battles (a reference to *Asce di guerra*). In fact, when Q realizes that the diffusion of the text has only increased after its excommunication, he is much more concerned than his counterparts at the Vatican. He has been on the front lines and understands much more clearly than his colleagues that the real danger is not so much the dissemination of the book itself, but of the ideas contained therein. The populist element is not lost on him, and his concern about the continued expansion of the text begins to show cracks in his armor as to his faith and the power of the institution he is defending. If an excommunication is no longer a powerful threat, then this speaks volumes about the (declining) power of the Church and Q’s own trust in the ability of his colleagues to win the battle.

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<sup>78</sup> See Chapter Three.

<sup>79</sup> When the censors crack down and printing becomes more difficult, Ludovico is ‘re-baptized’ as Tiziano the Anabaptist, and he travels the Po valley baptizing converts to the doctrine espoused in *The Benefit of Christ Crucified*. It is the ultimate transformation for a character who has always opposed the institution of the Church.

<sup>80</sup> “Cosa succederebbe se *In Beneficio di Cristo* si trasformasse in un libro molto più pericoloso di quello che è? Cosa succederebbe se qualcuno si mettesse ad andare in giro ribattezzando la gente con il *Beneficio* in mano?” (460).

<sup>81</sup> In her article “Wu Ming: Anonymous Hatchet Throwers at the Dawn of the 21st Century,” Giuseppina Mecchia quotes Marco Amici: “Wu Ming [...] treats stories as if they were, precisely, unburied hatchets that would bring back to visibility the visceral nature of conflicts and don’t hide the violence of historical choices and of the contexts imposed by History” (qtd. in Mecchia 202).

Likewise, the ramifications of disseminating *The Benefit of Christ Crucified* also elicit doubt in Ludovico/Tiziano and cause him to question his purpose and motivations. The text is a weapon, and clearly both he and Q have lived through enough violence and destruction that they are wary of it and approach it delicately. Just as the latter begins to question his own faith in the Church and in his mentor to continue to lead, so does Ludovico/Tiziano ponder his own morals as he resorts to preaching crypto-Lutheran gospel after a life of challenging this very thing. He has spent his life fighting for religious freedom and, ironically, he now finds himself as a false prophet. Operating from within the confines of the very system one is trying to fight is not foreign to Wu Ming or the Luther Blissett Project. In fact, especially when the writing collective was part of the greater LBP, it was commonplace to fight fire with fire, or even to justify more extreme, morally ambiguous methods if it meant effecting change on a greater level. According to Wu Ming 1, with regards to LBP's media hoaxes, "by using the tools of traditional counter-inquiries, we had gotten no results. The 'homeopathic' effect of one single lie cured the illness better than the traditional media medicines administered to the public opinion" (Jenkins interview with Wu Ming, qtd. in Thoburn 131).

To conclude this section, as has already been stated, *Q* is set in the 1500s but there is no doubt that much of it makes allegorical reference to contemporary Italy. It is a critique of the institutions, of the susceptibility of the people to the powers of proselytism (religious and non), and of the continual manipulation of the poor and disenfranchised at the hands of the wealthy and powerful. As Fabrizio De Donno points out regarding Ludovico and João's experiment with the printing press: "The evocation of *The Benefit of Christ Crucified* (1543) in the novel is of course a reminder of the heretical nature of *Q* as a text itself aimed at challenging the contemporary "religion" of capital and state" (253). Their success in this endeavor also indicates that perhaps

there are other channels to combat Berlusconism in contemporary Italy. While on the one hand, the success of *The Benefit of Christ Crucified* points towards the malleability of the people and their inability to think for themselves, it also places emphasis on intimate human contact and community as a way to engage and spread ideas. They might have been peddling nonsense for the sake of their bigger battle against the Catholic Church, but they also make a strong case for the effectiveness of the grassroots approach to community building and consensus.

### **Copyleft in *Altai*: Private Libraries and Immaterial Property**

In *Q*, the diffusion of *The Benefit of Christ Crucified* was an early example of a “copyleft” movement to bring knowledge (albeit strategically, and not without controversy) to the masses. It should come as no surprise that in *Altai*, Yossef Nasi, although he participated in and was in many ways the mastermind of the aforementioned project (when he still went by João Miquez), prefers to use his knowledge as a weapon and therefore keep it largely to himself. His library serves as a perfect example of his approach to the sharing (or lack thereof) of information, and Wu Ming utilize it precisely to point out the dangers inherent in such a relationship with knowledge.

Even in *Q*, João’s library is one of the first things Ludovico/Tiziano notices, foreshadowing that relationship with knowledge and writing that would eventually contribute to the former’s demise: “A luxurious library, narrow and long, shelves of inlaid wood, ancient volumes; over his shoulder, behind the desk, hung on the wall, a Moorish scimitar” (*Q* 437).<sup>82</sup> Just like that, knowledge and war, books and battle, are intimately, and prophetically, linked. Again, the collective refers to stories as “hatchets of war” (Amici, qtd. in Mecchia 202). This connection is

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<sup>82</sup> “Una biblioteca lussuosa, stretta e lunga, scaffali di legno intarsiato, volumi antichi; alle sue spalle, dietro lo scrittoio, appesa alla parete, una scimitarra moresca” (*Q* 437).

confirmed in the conversation that follows, as João reveals not only similar ideals to those of Pietro Perna regarding the importance of the printing press but also the first inklings of his larger project and the establishing of strategic alliances:

The printing press is the business of the moment. And it's not just important for profit: it spreads ideas, expands minds, and, not insignificant, it strengthens human relationships. For a family like mine, important yet always in danger, and in general for all Jewish people, *it is important to establish relationships with men of letters, scholars, highly regarded and credible people who can influence others, in their respective communities*. If you want, it's a *patronage of interest*, and this is why I'm not only attracted by the Jewish press [...] I need people capable of sensing the new waves of thought, and the works destined to shake people's souls and change the course of events. (438, italics mine)<sup>83</sup>

From this description, it is particularly interesting to note that João looks at the use of the printing press as a form of patronage, showing that he is less interested in the actual diffusion of knowledge than he is in buying the favor of authors and readers. His words echo those of Berlusconi in his approach to television programming.<sup>84</sup> What seems appealing to Ludovico/Tiziano at the time, but which proves dangerous in the follow-up novel, is that João

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<sup>83</sup> “La stampa è l'affare del momento. E non è importante solo per il profitto: veicola le idee, feconda le menti e, cosa non trascurabile, rafforza i rapporti tra gli uomini. Per una famiglia importante eppure sempre a rischio come la mia, ma forse più in generale per tutti i Giudei, *può essere decisivo intessere relazioni con uomini di lettere, studiosi, persone riconosciute e credibili che possono influenzarne altre, nelle loro comunità di appartenenza*. Se volete è un *mecenatismo interessato* ed è per questo che non mi attrae soltanto la stampa giudea [...] Non avrete difficoltà a capire perché mi interessa favorire il partito dei tolleranti e dei moderati dentro e fuori la Chiesa, e ostacolare il diffondersi dell'intransigenza religiosa e della guerra spirituale condotta dal Sant'Uffizio. Mi servono persone capaci di fiutare le nuove correnti di pensiero, le opere destinate a smuovere gli animi e a mutare il corso degli eventi” (438, italics mine).

<sup>84</sup> As previously quoted by Paul Ginsborg, the former prime minister has said, “Basically, private television was an act of transgression which tempted great numbers of people. I thought about all those things which could enter their homes—game shows, quiz shows, information, but also advertisements and consumer goods” (qtd. in Ginsborg 34).

already has a master plan and is always thinking strategically. In the case of *Q*, the former accepts, supports, and benefits from João's constant scheming because the two share a common enemy. However, their approaches (and their overall objectives) ultimately diverge significantly.

In *Altai*, Manuel's first glimpse of Yossef (formerly João)'s library is through a small opening from a secret room, as if the library were a place to observe and not in which to participate, or touch. "Below us a large room opened up, the walls occupied by hundreds of bound volumes. We found ourselves in a secret room, built to be able to observe the library without being seen" (*Altai* 116).<sup>85</sup> In fact, it is in this room that Nasi finally makes his grand entrance into the novel, surely because it is this library that represents all his aspirations and dreams. As the English bibliophile Ralph Fitch puts it, "[t]his place is precious [...] It is a haven for fugitive books" (143).<sup>86</sup> For Manuel "le pareti colme di libri" ("the walls full of books") are "montagne da scalare, per scorgere dalla vetta un orizzonte mai visto" ("mountains to climb, to glimpse a brand new horizon from the top" 144).

It is significant that when Manuel finally leaves Palazzo Belvedere towards the end of the novel, his last stop is the library. He reflects on the fact that perhaps more truth is contained in that library than in Nasi's vision of the future.

The volumes were sleeping on the shelves, barely visible. I had spent hours, entire days, holed up inside, my nose between the pages that smelled like escape, like survival, retracing ancient knowledge, that of my people, and of the other peoples they had encountered during their long wandering. If the New Sion was a utopia,

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<sup>85</sup> "Sotto di noi si apriva una grande stanza, le pareti occupate di centinaia di volumi rilegati. Ci trovavamo in una camera segreta, costruita per poter osservare la biblioteca senza essere visti" (*Altai* 116).

<sup>86</sup> "[q]uesto luogo è prezioso [...] È un approdo per libri fuggiaschi" (143).

the history contained in those books was concrete, made up of flesh and blood, of lives lived, hopes, defenseless study, faith. Perhaps I had never been as close to the Kingdom as I was in that place. (379-380)<sup>87</sup>

Through Nasi's inability to share and interpret the wealth of information at his disposal ("The volumes were sleeping"), the Wu Ming collective affirms Hardt and Negri's revision of Marx's theories on immaterial property. They cite and elaborate on his affirmation that "'[p]rivate property has made us so stupid and one-sided' that we denigrate all forms of *being* for the simple sense of *having*" (186). Furthermore, this behavior stands in direct opposition to the potentiality of the multitude: "The rising biopolitical productivity of the multitude is being undercut and blocked by the processes of private appropriation" (186). In these terms, Nasi's library, where it once spoke to his wealth and worldliness, now wholly symbolizes his failure. He considers himself a member of the "popolo errante" but he never truly finds the 'common' beyond this label; he believes the connecting factor between all of the races and ethnicities in Constantinople and beyond is money, and therefore focuses only on what (power, land) he himself can privately amass. His is a profoundly antisocial project, and his disregard of the potential of the multitude initiates his downfall.

The failure of Nasi's project supports Wu Ming's belief in the merits of the copyleft approach; the collective adheres to Hardt and Negri's notion that "[s]ocial life depends on the common" (188) and that the conditions necessary for the success of the multitude preclude the privatization of immaterial property. In *Q, The Benefit of Christ Crucified* is a controversial text

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<sup>87</sup> "I volumi dormivano sugli scaffali, a malapena visibili. Avevo trascorso ore, giorni interi, chiuso lì dentro, il naso sui fogli che odoravano di fuga, di sopravvivenza, ripercorrendo una conoscenza antica, quella del mio popolo e dei popoli che esso aveva incrociato nel suo lungo peregrinare. Se la Nuova Sion era un'utopia, la storia contenuta in quei libri era invece concreta, fatta di sangue e carne, vite vissute, speranze, studio indifeso, fede. Forse non ero mai stato tanto vicino al Regno come lì dentro" (379-380).

whose diffusion has a significant impact on the institution of the Church and on society in general. It represents the proof of the power of the printing press and of a copyleft stance. There is no such text in *Altai*, and instead Nasi contradicts his earlier convictions on the strategic nature of the written word and becomes a hoarder of knowledge. According to the collective, a gorgeous, comprehensive library in the hands of one man holds much less power than a mediocre text in the hands of many.

This critique of ‘ivory tower’ intellectualism in favor of a more lateral and all-inclusive approach to literature and knowledge certainly finds resonance in the overall ideology of the Wu Ming foundation with regards to their own creative project. However, I would argue that *The Benefit of Christ Crucified* does represent a problem that perhaps the collective themselves are trying to resolve through their own writings. The text is strategic for Tiziano et. al because of its controversial content but not necessarily for the quality of the writing, or because he and his cohorts actually believe in its message. Through this example we see the *potential* for a simple text to make an impact through populist means, but it could also be seen as a warning (perhaps intentionally, perhaps not) about privileging quantity over quality or worse, possibly spreading ideas which could be dangerous or detrimental to the cause. Wu Ming have been clear about their desire to occupy a place in popular culture rather than in the more exclusive literary canon, but the idea that the popular cannot also include sophisticated literary works seems to merely reinforce the status quo and support Berlusconi’s notion that the public are merely brainless consumers and popular culture is synonymous with ‘trash.’<sup>88</sup> A fusion of the quality and content of Nasi’s library

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<sup>88</sup> Umberto Eco, in 2001 on the eve of Berlusconi’s re-election, described what he deemed the “Mesmerized Electorate,” those people whose views on politics, culture, and society had been shaped by Berlusconi’s media domination. He wrote that this group of voters “has no defined political opinion but has based its values on the creeping form of ‘culture’ imparted for decades by the various television channels, and not only those owned by Berlusconi. What counts for these people are ideals of material well-being and a mythical view of life, not unlike that of people I would call generically the Albanian immigrants. The Albanian immigrant wouldn’t have dreamt of coming to Italy if

with the ubiquity of *The Benefit of Christ* would truly represent a bridge between the popular and the literary.

To conclude this section, it would be pertinent to make a final comment regarding the library and the collective's connection to Italian semiologist and author Umberto Eco. The latter's 1980 debut novel *The Name of the Rose* also addresses the role of the library and that of the librarian to either allow access to knowledge or to conceal it from patrons. In the words of library historian Jeffrey Garrett,

Eco naturally regards the library on two distinct but interrelated cultural planes. On the first level, it is one of the great commonplaces of Western literature, an "intertextual archetype" representing at one and the same time both the grandeur and the ultimate vanity of all human intellectual striving. At the same time, Eco also regards libraries in their reality, as institutions still clinging to an outdated, quasi-sacred mission, urgently in need of secularizing reform. (377-378)

The Wu Ming collective appear to share his critiques, and in fact, just like Eco's villainous librarian Jorge of Burgos, it is revealed at the end of *Q* that the eponymous protagonist also served as a librarian in Wittenberg before embarking on his role as Cardinal Carafa's right hand man. Furthermore, just like in *Q* and *Altai*, Eco's characters express awe over the library at the beginning, only to discover its flaws later. The affinities also run deeper. Like Eco's novel, Wu Ming's stories (both *Q* and *Altai*, but also their other novels) contain other tales, characters, and motifs that have been borrowed and recycled from other works, the "remixing" described by

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the TV had showed him for years only the Italy of *Open City*, *Obsession*, or *Paisan*—he would have steered clear of this unhappy country. He comes because he knows Italy as a country where a colorful television hands out easy money to those who know that Garibaldi's given name was Giuseppe: a rich, showbiz Italy" (*Turning Back the Clock: Hot Wars and Media Populism* 117).



Jenkins.<sup>89</sup> Not only does this technique make each work its own ‘library,’ containing myriad other novels, but it also necessarily promotes collective authorship, since these novels clearly come from more than one source. Moreover, in the words of Garrett, “In postmodernist thought, the literary text, the library, the labyrinth—each often serves as a complex sign for the other, just as each stands for and thus interprets the world and the human condition” (380). For Wu Ming the presence of the private, exclusive library of Yossef Nasi represents the antithesis of the copyleft movement they are attempting to sustain.

## VI. Conclusion

Overall, both *Q* and *Altai* overwhelmingly highlight the need for collaboration, equality, and ‘common’ knowledge to effect change, fully reflecting the ideals of the Wu Ming collective and their approach to challenging the foundations of Berlusconiism. Readers see utopic visions crumble in the hands of overly ambitious individuals as well as the benefits of hybrid or even multiple identities in truly being a citizen of the world. They can also observe what happens when people are empowered with knowledge as opposed to being excluded from it because of race, class, wealth, or ethnicity. All of these aspects reflect in some way Wu Ming’s support of collectivity and copyleft, and their opposition to the media dominated culture of Berlusconi and the passive consumers it creates.

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<sup>89</sup> Jenkins argues that even parts of the canon come out of borrowing and remixing: “[f]irst that the digital era has refocused our attention on the expressive potential of borrowing and remixing, expanding who gets to be an author and what counts as authorship; but second, that this new model of authorship is not that radical when read against a larger backdrop of human history, though it flies in the face of some of the most persistent myths about creative genres and intellectual property that have held sway since the Romantic era” (*Reading in a Participatory Culture* 107).

Through a challenge of individualism and immaterial property rights, the larger question the collective addresses is that of history. That is to say, it is Wu Ming's contention that the Italian people have a dysfunctional relationship with their own history, with specific regard to the modern era,<sup>90</sup> and much of this absence of historical memory can be attributed to both government and the media alike. They dedicate a large part of their project to "mythopoesis," or myth making, which they see as key to renewing historical memory and changing the relationship the Italian people have to the past. "Mythopoesis" is necessarily collective, as it speaks to the way a culture makes defining myths together, just as it must also be available to all, and not exclusive to a certain echelon of the populace. Collectivity and copyleft vs. individualism and copyright is ultimately a question of *practice*; the fundamental *ideological* difference between Wu Ming and Berlusconi is actually in their respective relationships to history. According to Marco Amici, "Wu Ming [...] treats stories as if they were, precisely, unburied hatchets that would bring back to visibility the visceral nature of conflicts and don't hide the violence of historical choices and of the contexts imposed by History" (qtd. in Mecchia 202). This lack of historical memory is exactly what Wu Ming challenges and what they attempt to recreate through a return to the epic mode and myth making.<sup>91</sup> If as a community of storytellers readers can eschew celebrity and fame and collaborate

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<sup>90</sup> In Chapter Four, I will discuss more specifically the collective's challenge to the historical memory of the colonial period, as shown through their blog *Giap!*

<sup>91</sup> Both of these literary choices have a didactic aim and seek to offer a solution to the period of historical memory loss created by Berlusconi's control over what Italians see on television and read in the newspapers. Wu Ming were not the only authors who sought this return to epic and history; Wu Ming 1's 2003 "Memorandum" on the New Italian Epic outlines this movement, consisting of many texts written after 1993 (the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War are a necessary precursor to these works) which 'write back' to Italy's cultural and political climate. According to Claudia Boscolo, "The NIE shows the response Italian fiction had to the failure of the mass media to provide factual information on Italian politics and social issues" (2). In Wu Ming 1's "Memorandum," and in Wu Ming 2's "La salvezza di Euridice" (both of which are included in the volume *New Italian epic: letteratura, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro*, 2009) both of them write at length about the need for storytelling as a way to recover what has been lost, also reflecting once again their push to be active participants rather than passive consumers in all things. According to Boscolo, "NIE can be considered as a tool which enables the contemporary Italian reader to take an active part in the construction of meaning within a society that has progressively forgotten how to interpret its own history" (19). See Introduction, pp. 2-7.

on new cultural myths, only then can they change the course of historical narrative, past and present.

Both Wu Ming and Berlusconi have specific ideas about how to approach history, national identity, and relations with the rest of the world, but the difference lies in the end game. For Berlusconi the ideal path is a vertical ascent, while for Wu Ming it is a horizontal maze (again, Garrett's reference to the "labyrinth"). While Berlusconi would like to gain more money, power, and notoriety, Wu Ming's objective is to acknowledge that history is global and interconnected. In their view, without this awareness there can be no improvement in the present situation in Italy (the idea of starting local to go global; or perhaps in this case, learning from the global to help the local). The power they are seeking is collective and for the people (not just Italian). The next chapter will examine how their novels seek these same transnational connections, while at the same time challenging Berlusconi's approach to popular culture and gender roles on a local level.



Oggi la stragrande maggioranza  
dei prodotti culturali non è *di massa*:  
viviamo in un mondo di infinite nicchie e sottogeneri.  
Il *mainstream* generalista e “nazionalpopolare”  
è meno importante di quanto fosse un tempo,  
e continuerà a ridimensionarsi  
(Wu Ming 1, “Memorandum” 18).

**Chapter Two:**  
**“Infinite Niches and Subgenres”:**  
**Transnational Popular Culture in *54* and *Asce di Guerra***

**I. Premise**

In this chapter I will focus on the role of popular culture in the Wu Ming collective’s overall project. In particular, I will analyze the way in which the group works within the popular to challenge particular elements of Berlusconiism. Through the novels *54* (2002) and *Asce di guerra* (*Hatchets of War* 2000; 2005), the collective employs aspects of the popular, mass-media produced culture of the time to make a present day critique of Berlusconi’s dominance of the media landscape, his problematic relationship with Italy’s Fascist past, and his treatment of women as “veline.” My analysis will be founded on Dominic Strinati’s theories on popular culture, as well as Arjun Appadurai’s ideas on the creation of communities of sentiment through modern technology. The discussion on Berlusconi’s affinities with the Fascist New Man and the representation of women in the Second Republic will be grounded in gender theory and in particular on studies by Lorenzo Benadusi, Danielle Hipkins and Lorella Zanardo. I will conclude by demonstrating how Wu Ming’s penchant for the popular relates to a quest for transnationalism that directly dialogues with Berlusconi’s nationalistic, exclusionary practices.

**II. Defining ‘Popular’: “I figli problematici della popular culture” vs. “il nazional-popolare”**

In *54* and *Asce di guerra*,<sup>1</sup> as well as in the rest of their *oeuvre*, it is evident that the Wu Ming collective seeks to make transnational connections with their project, in an attempt (whether fully realized or not) to create community and “multitude.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, they form these networks unequivocally and unapologetically from within popular culture. The collective has clearly stated

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<sup>1</sup> The novels, it should be noted, truly exist in the same narrative world (transnationally connected in and of themselves), as *Asce di Guerra* was born from the research the collective did for *54*; likewise, there are certain characters and situations, much like in *Q* and *Altai*, that further connect the two works.

<sup>2</sup> See Hardt and Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*.

that they consider themselves “figli problematici della popular culture” (“problem children of popular culture;” Wu Ming 1, *New Italian Epic* 126); how this is defined at this point in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, perhaps bears clarification. In his 2008 “Memorandum,” on the New Italian Epic, Wu Ming 1 maintains that popular culture is different today than it was in the past, more “articolato e complesso,” (“articulated and complex” 18) and that defining it as ‘trash’<sup>3</sup> is too simplistic. Instead, the novels that he considers part of the New Italian Epic are precisely the kind of popular phenomenon that represents an immediate challenge to Berlusconiism, his predilection for so-called ‘low brow’ culture, and his reliance on the passivity of the consumer.<sup>4</sup> These works seek to operate within the popular by engaging the *people* in a way that gives them the rights and agency that Berlusconi’s approach precludes.<sup>5</sup>

In essence, Wu Ming and Berlusconiism approach popular culture from opposing points of view and with differing objectives, which become particularly clear when viewed against the backdrop of Dominic Strinati’s three primary questions about popular culture. In the first place, according to Strinati, the debate begins by addressing production: who or what determines popular culture? According to Wu Ming, it comes from the people “as an autonomous expression of their interests and modes of experience” (Strinati 3), whereas for Berlusconi “it is imposed from above by those in positions of power as a type of social control” (3). In his “Memorandum,” Wu Ming 1 makes the group’s position clear: the works of the New Italian Epic have “complessità narrative”

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<sup>3</sup> “quelli che usano il “popolare” come giustificazione per produrre e spacciare feticci...o quelli che disprezzano qualunque cosa non venga consumata da un’élite” (Wu Ming 1 18).

<sup>4</sup> See Orsina, *Berlusconiism and Italy: A Historical Interpretation*.

<sup>5</sup> In the words of Wu Ming 1, “le opere NIE stanno nel *popular*, lavorano con il *popular*. I loro autori tentano approcci azzardati, forzano regole, ma stanno dentro il *popular* e per giunta con convinzione, senza snobismi, senza il bisogno di giustificarsi di fronte ai loro colleghi “dabbene.” Per questo nella mia “catalogazione” del NIE sono assenti opere che in inglese definiremmo “*highbrowed*,” scritte con pretese di superiorità, intrise di disprezzo per le espressioni culturali più “plebee”. Opere, insomma, che conferiscono *status*, i cui autori (e lettori!) puntano alla letteratura “alta,” a “elevarsi” fino a essere accettati in qualche parnaso di stronzi” (“Memorandum” 18).

(“narrative complexity”) but “attitudine popolare,” (“popular attitude”) and according to the authors, “POPULAR CULTURE puts the accent on WHO receives it and who appropriates it” (18).<sup>6</sup> For Berlusconi, on the other hand, it is a question of using mass means to sell the most product to the largest group of people.

The collective also differs from Berlusconi from an economic standpoint, which is Strinati’s second question, as they continue to lend credence to the idea that popular culture is not simply about profit but can be a realm in which artists are free to create.<sup>7</sup> The various creative outlets of their own project serve as a clear example, as does their adherence to “copyleft”<sup>8</sup> and the possibility to download their works at no cost. For the former prime minister, with his ownership of the Mondadori publishing house, the AC Milan soccer team, Mediolanum bank, Fininvest, Mediaset, and others, it is clear that profit is a primary objective of his popular project. Finally, both offer significantly different takes on the ideological influence of popular culture: for Berlusconi, it is a tool of indoctrination and hegemony, whereas for the collective it is a platform for proposed rebellion.<sup>9</sup> In his “Memorandum,” Wu Ming dismisses the common assumption that

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<sup>6</sup> Here Wu Ming 1 also distinguishes between “cultura popolare,” (folk culture), and “cultura di massa,” (that which is produced by mass means). In his words, “Oggi la stragrande maggioranza dei prodotti culturali non è DI MASSA: viviamo in un mondo di infinite nicchie e sottogeneri. Il MAINSTREAM generalist e “nazionalpopolare” è meno importante di quanto fosse un tempo, e continuerà a ridimensionarsi. La sfumatura di significato, invece, consiste in questo: cultura di massa indica COME viene trasmessa questa cultura, vale a dire attraverso i mass media; CULTURA POPOLARE pone l’accento su CHI la recepisce e se ne appropria. Di solito, quando si parla del posto che la tale canzone e il tale film ha nella vita delle persone, o di come il tale libro o il tale fumetto ha influenzato la sua epoca, si usa l’espressione “popular culture.” Il problema è che il dibattito italiano sulla cultura pop novanta volte su cento riguarda la spazzatura che ci propina la televisione, come se il “popular” fosse per forza quello, mentre esistono distinzioni qualitative ed evoluzioni storiche” (Wu Ming 1, “Memorandum” 18).

<sup>7</sup> In Strinati’s words, “Does the emergence of culture in commodity forms mean that criteria of profitability and marketability take precedence over quality, artistry, integrity and intellectual challenge? Or does the increasingly universal market for popular culture ensure that it is truly popular because it makes available commodities people actually want? What wins out when popular culture is manufactured industrially and sold according to the criteria of marketability and profitability – commerce or quality?” (3).

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter One.

<sup>9</sup> “Is popular culture there to indoctrinate the people, to get them to accept and adhere to ideas and values which ensure the continued dominance of those in more privileged positions who thus exercise power over them? Or is it about rebellion and opposition to the prevailing social order? Does it express, in however an imperceptible, subtle and

popular culture is simply what is on television and insists that it is actually made up of “infinite niches and subgenres” (18).<sup>10</sup> Because of this, the “nazional-popolare” no longer holds the power it once did, and along with this, Berlusconi’s own cultural influence has diminished. The tenets to which Berlusconism adheres, in terms of the production, consumption, and diffusion of popular culture, can be rather easily viewed under the lens of mass culture theory,<sup>11</sup> but the existence of the Wu Ming collective and other groups like it indicates that the audience for the former prime minister’s brand of popular culture is more discerning than commonly perceived. The collective came of age during the years of Berlusconi’s reign, yet in their opposition to his approach to culture they still see the popular as a viable and influential platform, proving that the ‘masses’ are much more diverse than the theory would suggest. They moved from being the consumers of popular culture to the producers of it, and they did this armed with the critiques of mass culture theory and a sincere belief in the range and multiplicity of popular culture and the social and cultural diversity of the audience.

### **III. Challenging the Mass Media Landscape: From the Postwar to the Second Republic**

#### **Television culture in 54: *lo sguardo obliquo* and the McGuffin Electric**

Berlusconi has often been criticized not only for his monopoly of the television landscape, as the owner of Mediaset and, during his tenure as prime minister, the national RAI channels, but also for his programming choices. He took his cue in large part from American television, buying

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inchoate manner, resistance to those in power, and the subversion of dominant ways of thinking and acting?” (Strinati 3-4).

<sup>10</sup> “infinite nicchie e sottogeneri” (Wu Ming 1, “Memorandum” 18).

<sup>11</sup> See Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, pp. 6-49.



the rights to broadcast many popular American sitcoms, and modeling his popular game and variety shows after similar programs in the U.S.<sup>12</sup> The news still existed on television, but it was largely broadcast by political allies and friends of Berlusconi, and did not necessarily provide the public with a comprehensive and balanced perspective on national and world events.<sup>13</sup> According to Paul Ginsborg, the former prime minister foresaw numerous economic opportunities in this sector. Ginsborg quotes him as saying: “Basically, private television was an act of transgression which tempted great numbers of people. I thought about all those things which could enter their homes—game shows, quiz shows, information, but also advertisements and consumer goods” (qtd. in Ginsborg 34).

Broadcast television, then, is a fundamental cornerstone of Berlusconi’s cultural dominance. In *54*,<sup>14</sup> Wu Ming address this aspect of popular culture, both past and present, through the “oblique” narrative point of view<sup>15</sup> of a McGuffin Electric Deluxe television set, which has been stolen from an American military base near Naples.<sup>16</sup> In Wu Ming 1’s words it is “non

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<sup>12</sup> Examples include *Wheel of Fortune* (*La ruota della fortuna*) and *The Price is Right* (*Ok, il prezzo è giusto!*)

<sup>13</sup> Here I am referring to so-called “organic intellectuals” like Emilio Fede, anchor for TG1 on Rete 4 from 1992-2012, and Giuliano Ferrara, ex-communist and minister under the first Berlusconi government. He went on to found the daily newspaper *Il Foglio*, which leans towards the center-right in its political orientation. Fede in particular has been accused of partisan reporting with regards to Berlusconi.

<sup>14</sup> *54* tells the story of the year 1954 through the various historical moments and people who made that time significant and more globally connected than is often acknowledged. The novel shifts point of view and geographical location with almost every chapter in order to complete the complex mosaic of that time. In terms of settings, the story moves from Italy (Bologna, Trieste, and Naples, in particular) to the former Yugoslavia to France to the United States to Russia. It is told from the perspective of fictional characters (Pierre, Vittorio, Kociss), real historical figures (Cary Grant, Tito of Yugoslavia), and inanimate objects (the McGuffin Electric television set, Bar Aurora). Themes shift from the legacy of the Resistance and Communism to the international drug trade to organized crime to the Triestine irredentist movement to the formation of the KGB. In the end, the collective demonstrates the transnational interconnectedness of these events and characters, in an attempt to engage in what they term “mythopoesis,” a return to myth making as a first step to reawakening dormant historical memory.

<sup>15</sup> One common element of the New Italian Epic is the so-called “sguardo obliquo,” or unusual or atypical narrating voices.

<sup>16</sup> The choice of the name for the television set is also likely not by chance. In Alfred Hitchcock’s cinematic language, a “MacGuffin” is a plot device, an object/idea/person that the protagonist pursues, sometimes with no narrative explanation. The American director has a presence in the novel as well, as he, along with the MI6, tries to convince Cary Grant to return to acting, with a role in *To Catch a Thief*. Furthermore, the name also connects back to the collective’s days as members of Luther Blissett. In “The Luther Blissett Manifesto,” the first item that appears is a quote from Hitchcock himself about “MacGuffin.” “Mac Guffin’ is the name by which we call this sort of action:

funzionante ma dotato di coscienza” (“not working but endowed with a conscience,” “Memorandum” 15). Readers are introduced to the McGuffin Electric television set early in the novel, deemed “un televisore fuori dal comune” (“not your average television” 25) at the Allied military base of Agnano in Naples. It had been brought there as a gift for the troops, but left alone when everyone went home for the holidays. It is immediately presented as the *opposite* of an inanimate object; in fact, its loneliness and anxiety are palpable: “What kind of awful situation was this! The inactivity was truly unnerving. Doubts and hypochondria make one lose trust in oneself. Will I still be able to do my job well? Will they be able to make me function even here, so far away from home? Will I once again make the people laugh, interest them in the news, move them?” (25)<sup>17</sup>

McGuffin continues to gain humanity throughout the course of the novel as it relates news to its various owners: it is not just a source of information but also a creator of dialogue. During its period of inactivity, it thinks back to its ‘glory days’ in the U.S., when it continuously served its function and pleased its owners.

The 5th of March, after not even a month of life, it had excited the man of the house with the sensational news of the death of Iosif Visarionovič Džugašvili, better known as Stalin. Thanks to the physiological luminosity of the screen, no one in the family experienced tired eyes while following the interminable live coverage of

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stealing papers, stealing a document, stealing a secret. The thing is not important in itself, and logicians go wrong in searching for a truth in the Mac Guffin. In my work I’ve always thought that while the ‘papers’, the ‘documents’ of the ‘secret’ of the construction of a fortress must be important to the characters of the movie, they have to be of no interest to me, to the story-teller” (Alfred Hitchcock). The “Manifesto” contextualizes this connection to the group immediately after: “Luther Blissett is both the story-teller and the Mac Guffin of a board-game played on the stage of the world” (“The Luther Blissett Manifesto”).

<sup>17</sup> “Che razza di situazione! L’inattività era davvero snervante. Dubbi e ipocondrie assalivano la fiducia in se stessi. Sarò ancora capace di fare bene il mio lavoro? Riusciranno a farmi funzionare anche qui, così lontano da casa? Tornerò a far ridere la gente, a interessarla con le notizie, a commuoverla?” (25).

the sentencing of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, accused of espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union and condemned to death. On that rectangular cathode-ray tube, even grandmother Margareth, a half-blind eighty-plus year old, had managed to distinguish those few select images of the signing of the armistice in Pan Mun Jon, in Korea. It was July 27. Not even a month later, McGuffin had announced that Moscow possessed thermonuclear atomic bombs of the kind dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That had been its last communication. After that, nothing more. They had turned it off one evening in mid-August and never turned it on again. (25)<sup>18</sup>

McGuffin delights in serving its purpose, and therefore readers feel its sense of impotence when left only with its unfulfilled potential. This is highly symbolic as a critique of mass media culture in general and of Berlusconi's relationship with television programming particular—these objects have so much capacity for good, because they provide knowledge and information. On the other hand, if they are used improperly (or not at all), then ignorance prevails. As Lorella Zanardo observes, in her expose on Italian television culture *Il corpo delle donne*, “No, television itself is not like this. Its form and its language do not come from its intrinsic nature, but they are simply the result of the economic, political and cultural conditions in which it is developed” (50).<sup>19</sup> In a stroke of even greater irony, once the television set falls into the wrong hands in the novel, it

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<sup>18</sup> “Il 5 marzo, dopo nemmeno un mese di vita, aveva esaltato il padrone di casa con la sensazionale notizia della morte di Iosif Visarionovič Džugašvili, meglio noto come Stalin. Grazie allo schermo a luminosità fisiologica, nessuno della famiglia si era stancato gli occhi seguendo l'interminabile diretta alla sentenza contro Ethel e Julius Rosenberg, accusati di spionaggio a favore dell'Unione Sovietica e condannati a morte. Sul cinescopio rettangolare da diciassette pollici, anche nonna Margareth, un'ultraottantenne mezza cieca, era riuscita a distinguere le poche immagini della firma dell'armistizio a Pan Mun Jon, in Corea. Era il 27 luglio. Nemmeno un mese dopo, McGuffin aveva annunciato che Mosca possedeva bombe termonucleari sul genere di quelle sganciate a Hiroshima e Nagasaki. Era stato il suo ultimo scopo. Da allora, più niente. Lo avevano spento in una sera di metà agosto per non riaccenderlo mai più” (25).

<sup>19</sup> “No, la televisione non è così. La sua forma e il suo linguaggio non derivano dalla sua natura intrinseca, sono semplicemente il risultato delle condizioni economiche, politiche e culturali in cui si è sviluppata” (Zanardo 50).

becomes a drug runner; not only does it cease to serve its potentially noble purpose, it brings actual destruction on a global scale.

The critique of the corrupting influence of television culture is also evident when the former encounters the other notable oblique point of view of the novel, the local Bolognese bar Aurora. This bar is a microcosm for the daily culture of the Bologna of the time,<sup>20</sup> and the two oblique points of view encounter each other for a simple reason: the World Cup is coming, and Bar Aurora would like to broadcast the games for its patrons. Not surprisingly, when the McGuffin Electric makes its first appearance at the bar, it is a significant event that changes the whole dynamic of the place:

Sudden silence. Almost magical. Hearts and breaths float suspended between smoke and the ceiling. Mouths form round shapes, gasps escape. Oooh, look, look, look at that! [...] Transported by the Capponi brothers, like an ancient pharaoh, the device enters the throne room. Bar Aurora had never been so full. When it came time to hoist it up onto the shelf, everyone wanted to help, to touch, to participate. “I was there!” they will tell their grandchildren. (299)<sup>21</sup>

The veneration of this object is highly prescient of the role the television will come to play in Italian culture: now they are as omnipresent in Italian homes as objects of religious worship used to be. Of course on this important occasion, McGuffin does not work, for reasons only the readers

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<sup>20</sup> Bar Aurora is the local bar in Bologna populated primarily by ex-partisans. It is run by Nicola, the older, more serious brother of Pierre, and it often serves as a microcosmic space for the postwar experience, particularly of those associated with the Resistance, at the local level. Like the McGuffin Electric, there are certain chapters told from the point of view of the bar itself, using the subject pronoun “we.”

<sup>21</sup> “Silenzio improvviso. Quasi magico. Cuori e fiati galleggiano sospesi tra fumo e soffitto. Le bocche si arrotondano, i sospiri si sprecano. Oooh, Ecco, ecco, guarda lì che lavoro! [...] Trasportato dai fratelli Capponi, come un antico faraone, l'apparecchio entra nella sala del trono. Il bar Aurora non è mai stato così pieno. Al momento di issarlo sul mobile, tutti vogliono aiutare, toccare, partecipare. ‘Io c'ero!’ diranno ai nipoti” (299).

know. The critique here is thinly veiled: that box is full of drugs, both literally, and if one considers the type of programming that would soon characterize Italian television, also figuratively.

The addition of the McGuffin was justified because of the World Cup, but other offerings, even in 1954, represented exactly what the television of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century would become:

They wanted to watch *Anche oggi è domenica*. A despicable program. The listeners send letters. They make wishes. They choose ten of them. They grant them. A ninety-year-old man had been to Rome as a child. He had thrown a coin in the Trevi Fountain. Legend says that this guarantees a return trip, but the old man had never returned to Rome. Can one resist the double temptation to save an ancient legend and make the dreams of a dying man come true? No. *Anche oggi è domenica* grants that wish. (313)<sup>22</sup>

These types of programs continue to pervade the mass media landscape, both in Italy and on a global level, and are certainly part of Berlusconi's approach to visual culture and his relationship with a certain cross-section of the Italian populace. As Giovanni Orsina argues in his book *Berlusconism and Italy*, this type of programming, in which the common man's dreams come true, feeds in to the "illusion of material well-being" (83) that served as a foundation of Berlusconi's rhetoric, along with the "myth of the 'good' civil society and the 'sanctification of the people'" (82). In a political culture that condemns the intellectual elite, the "people," which Orsina defines, in Berlusconian terms, as "unitary, homogeneous, and straightforward in its

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<sup>22</sup> "Volevano vedere *Anche oggi è domenica*. Un programma ignobile. Gli ascoltatori inviano lettere. Esprimono desideri. Loro ne scelgono dieci. Loro li esaudiscono. Un vecchio novantenne era stato a Roma da piccolo. Aveva buttato un soldino nella vasca della fontana di Trevi. La leggenda vuole che quel gesto sia la garanzia di una seconda visita, ma il vecchio non è più tornato a Roma. Si può resistere alla doppia tentazione di salvare un'antica leggenda e avverare il sogno di un moribondo? No. *Anche oggi è domenica* esaudisce il desiderio" (313).

goodness and in its being wedded to certain basic human values” (83), can have all their wishes granted by television programs like the *Anche oggi è domenica* of the 1950s, a precursor to Berlusconi’s game shows and other celebratory and emotional programming like Maria De Filippi’s *C’è posta per te*.<sup>23</sup> All of these examples show Italians as good, loving, and most of all, capable of making something out of themselves from nothing, just like Berlusconi himself.<sup>24</sup>

It is clear that the Wu Ming collective views *Anche oggi è domenica* as a banal predecessor to the programming that would characterize their adolescence, but this is not the only cultural critique proffered through the presence of the McGuffin Electric. It is not just an inanimate object observing the ways of humanity, but it is also American, analyzing Italian culture and behavior from an outsider’s perspective. Its review is unfavorable: “Since it had come to stay with the Italians, McGuffin had known no peace. Tossed from right to left by rude people, slapped around and cursed at, exposed to the throwing of objects, obliged to reflect arguments and embarrassments, kidnapped, scratched, violated with a screwdriver” (248-249).<sup>25</sup> McGuffin’s judgment of the Italians is negative, but it is also clear that the authors see its character—representative of mass media culture and the infiltration of American influence that characterized the postwar era—as just as dangerous as the “gente villana” (“rude people” 249) with whom it comes into contact in Naples and beyond.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> 1993-present, on Mediaset’s Canale 5.

<sup>24</sup> See *Una storia italiana*.

<sup>25</sup> “Da quando stava con gli italiani, McGuffin non conosceva pace. Sballottato a destra e sinistra da gente villana, preso a schiaffi e bestemmie, esposto a lancio di oggetti, costretto a specchiare liti e vergogne, trafugato, scalfito, violentato con un cacciavite” (249).

<sup>26</sup> Strinati also talks about the fear of Americanization in his discussion of mass culture theory. Though some view the so-called Americanization of popular culture as a threat to national culture and identity, this view can always be changed by attempting to see this culture from the point of view of the consumer, who might relate more meaningfully to some American cultural product than those who judge the culture from on high. (33).

So what happens to McGuffin? To explain the end that the television set meets, Wu Ming employ an American popular culture reference as an ironic point of comparison, specifically the popular Hanna Barbera cartoon *Tom and Jerry*:<sup>27</sup>

McGuffin had aired cartoons of cats who chased mice. The mouse, named Jerry, lived behind the baseboard of a spacious and well-furnished dining room. A hole served as his door. Inside, a bed carved out of a small box, and various pieces of furniture recycled from the trash. Of the woman of the house, only her feet and broad calves were visible. With a broom she tried to hit the cat of the house. The cat had dirtied the dining area. The cat was named “Tom.” He would spend his days chasing “Jerry.” Cats and mice circled around McGuffin, at the top of a mountain of garbage. Often, a female cat would nap inside McGuffin. She did not look like “Tom.” The mice had long hair and tails, and they did not look like “Jerry.” (353)<sup>28</sup>

This example could serve multiple purposes. In the first place, it shows life imitating art: at one time, McGuffin transmitted these images of a cat and a mouse, and now, albeit in a very different way, it still ‘contains’ those same animals, but this time in the flesh. Second, it is a commentary on fiction versus reality: what is seen on television is not real and often depicts that which is not only unbelievable but also unattainable (the stories of *Anche oggi è domenica* as a case in point). In other words, it is not to be trusted. The Wu Ming collective finds the television

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<sup>27</sup> The cartoon was created in 1940.

<sup>28</sup> “McGuffin aveva trasmesso cartoni di gatti che inseguivano topi. Il topo di nome ‘Jerry’ viveva dietro il battiscopa di un tinello spazioso e ben arredato. Un buco faceva da porta. All'interno, un letto ricavato da una piccola scatola, e vari arredi riciclati dai rifiuti. Della padrona di casa si vedevano sempre e solo i piedi, e grossi polpacci. Con una scopa cercava di colpire il gatto di casa. Il gatto aveva sporcato il tinello. Il gatto si chiamava ‘Tom.’ Passava le sue giornate a inseguire ‘Jerry.’ Topi e gatti si aggiravano intorno a McGuffin, in cima alla collina di rifiuti. Sovente, una gatta s'appisolava dentro McGuffin. Non somigliava a ‘Tom.’ I topi avevano peli e code lunghe, e non somigliavano a ‘Jerry.’” (353)

set more useful in its inanimate state: “It would no longer capture electromagnetic rays in order to transform them into dreams or nightmares. No longer would one stare at it with an expression as burnt out as the cigarette butts that now surrounded it. Yet, McGuffin served a purpose. The cat was pregnant. She would give birth before Christmas. It had passed from one home to another. Now it *was* a home” (353).<sup>29</sup> In the end, McGuffin accepts its fate and its purpose; the collective is not suggesting the complete elimination of television culture, but rather its re-purposing in order to better serve its viewers. It has the potential to “be a home,” but it can also be the bearer of insidious and harmful content, like Zanardo points out. There is no denying the role of the television in popular culture, but since it has long been the primary domain of Berlusconi, finding a way to work within it is a significant challenge for the collective.<sup>30</sup>

### **Print Media and Cinematic Critiques in *Asce di Guerra***

While *Asce di guerra* does not feature an overt critique of the medium of television like *54*, the novel still engages with the popular through references to both cinema and print media. In many cases the engagement with the popular is much more local, by way of newspaper articles and conversations that take place at the local bar (much like in the previous novel as well).<sup>31</sup> Because *Asce di guerra* is in many ways a more overtly historical and (auto)biographical work,<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “Non avrebbe più captato onde elettromagnetiche per trasformarle in sogni o incubi. Nessuno l'avrebbe più fissato con lo sguardo spento come i mozziconi di sigaretta che ora lo circondavano. Tuttavia, McGuffin serviva a qualcosa. La gatta era incinta. Avrebbe partorito prima di Natale. Era passato di casa in casa. Adesso era una casa” (353).

<sup>30</sup> Up to this point, the collective has made no ventures into television. They have participated in the screenplay of a film, *Lavorare con lentezza* (Chiesa 2004), but have not engaged directly in television culture.

<sup>31</sup> In *Asce di guerra* the local bar in question is Bar Nicola, which is likely as a direct reference to *54*, where Nicola Capponi, brother of Pierre, is the part owner and primary bartender at Bar Aurora.

<sup>32</sup> *Asce di guerra* is a truly hybrid work, part historical novel, part reportage, part present-day narrative. The work recounts the experience of Vitaliano Ravagli, one of the somewhat mythologized partisans who participated in the war in Indochina in the 1950s, fighting on the side of the Viet Cong. As the collective themselves write in the premise to the novel: “*Asce di guerra* è per un terzo l'autobiografia di Vitaliano Ravagli, per un terzo una miscela di *fiction* e



this primary connection with journalism is interesting, particularly in light of the collective's own critiques of the media and their engagement with combatting Italy's problems of historical memory. In other words, Wu Ming's 21<sup>st</sup> century novel reveals more about the 1950s postwar era than many of the newspapers did at the time. The constant presence of reported information from *Il Resto del Carlino* (or, at the time, the *Giornale dell'Emilia*) that perhaps fails to tell the whole story illuminates Italy's present day problems with the lack of trust in journalism and ignorance (due in large part to the former's failures) of its own history. Furthermore, as they did through the narrative tool of the McGuffin Electric, the authors also use newspapers and films to highlight the connection between fascism and Berlusconi. Throughout the novel, the collective appears to take the most popular newspaper in the historically red city of Bologna to task for its involvement with the Fascist government and for the way it presently reports on problems of immigration in the Berlusconi era.<sup>33</sup> The name change of the newspaper towards the end of the war serves as an effective metaphor for the 'cosmetic' changes employed by the Italian government following the amnesty, in which many fascist officials regained important posts and avoided punishment for

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*non-fiction* (un personaggio immaginario in cerca di un personaggio reale s'imbatte in storie vere) e per un terzo saggio (ancorché "disinvolto") sulle guerre d'Indocina, sorta di reportage epico che rimbalza continuamente tra Laos e Vietnam. Non vi è alcun equilibrio fra queste parti, né vi è lo sforzo di produrre una sintesi" (3). The narrative transitions continuously between the past and present, as a young Bolognese lawyer by the name of Daniele (a fictional character said to represent the Wu Ming collective) becomes interested in finding him and hearing his story. In my analysis, I will refer to Daniele's experience in the present as he discovers aspects of Italian history that had previously been unknown to him, and my references to Vitaliano will refer to both his experience in Laos and his present day life as a former partisan in Imola and Viet Cong in Indochina.

<sup>33</sup> The concept which serves as the foundation of their critique is that of the "Italiani, brava gente?", which in the words of Angelo Del Boca is a myth that "ha coperte tante infamie, e anche queste che esporremo, appare in realtà, all'esame dei fatti, un artificio fragile, ipocrita. Non ha alcun diritto di cittadinanza, alcun fondamento storico. Esso è stato arbitrariamente e furbescamente usato per oltre un secolo e ancor oggi ha i suoi cultori, ma la verità è che gli italiani, in talune circostanze, si sono comportati nella maniera più brutale, esattamente come altri popoli in analoghe situazioni. Perciò non hanno diritto ad alcuna clemenza, tantomeno all'autoassoluzione" (10). Likewise, the Wu Ming collective offers no clemency to the ex-Fascist soldiers who never atoned for their crimes, and none to the newspaper that was tasked with telling the truth and failed to do so.

their crimes, while partisans were held accountable. As Daniele's mother's boyfriend explains to him,

Between '43 and '45, *Il Resto del Carlino* was the newspaper of the Socialist Republic, did you know that? The editor even had governmental duties. When the massacre in Marzabotto happened, they wrote that it was a false accusation spread by the partisans. After the end of the war, they changed names to make it seem like they themselves had actually changed. It was called "Il Giornale dell'Emilia." Only eight or nine years later, they went back to the original name, but it was always the same paper. The best-selling newspaper in Bologna, even when it was the reddest city in Italy. In my opinion, this explains a lot...(49)<sup>34</sup>

The name change was clearly a superficial rather than substantive fix, which mirrors the same phenomenon that occurred in the government: in the collective's view, Italy changed its outside hoping to change its inside, and this failure not only to transform but also to confront the past has led to many of the country's current problems. Furthermore, the fact that Daniele was unaware of the former identity of his city's newspaper is perhaps most indicative of the historical memory that Wu Ming attempt to reclaim.

One early example in the text serves as an effective point of reference for the collective's overall challenge to the efficacy and reliability of print media. The chapter is entitled "The Story of Soviet," or rather the story of Daniele's partisan grandfather. His chronology is pieced together

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<sup>34</sup> "*Il Resto del Carlino* tra il '43 e il '45 è stato il giornale della Repubblica Sociale, lo sapevi? Il direttore aveva anche incarichi di governo. Quando ci fu la strage di Marzabotto, scrissero che era una calunnia messa in giro dai partigiani. Dopo la fine della guerra hanno cambiato nome per fare finta di essere cambiati anche loro. Si chiamava "Il Giornale dell'Emilia". Solo otto-nove anni dopo hanno ripreso il nome di prima, ma era sempre lo stesso giornale. Il giornale più venduto a Bologna, anche quando era la città più rossa d'Italia. Questo secondo me spiega molte cose..." (49). All translations from *Asce di Guerra* are mine.

through various official “carabinieri” reports accusing him of building and detonating a bomb in a church near Bologna, killing an altar boy. In addition, he is also accused of attacking the same “carabiniere” who was responsible for these reports. Of particular note in this story is a headline and article from the then *Giornale dell’Emilia* (before and after *Il Resto del Carlino*): “16 February 1950: Castelfiorino, chilling episode. Ex-union leader assaults and massacres Carabinieri official. Suspected of the massacre in Ca’ del Rovere – The bomb killed a 9 year old altar boy” (27).<sup>35</sup> The article goes on to describe his violent actions, holding him up as an example of the lengths to which the Communist party would go in order to challenge the state and the Christian Democrats. Soviet’s story concludes with a letter from his friend, Guido Cortesi, to the former’s wife, in which he clearly states that the truth about the encounter between Soviet and the “carabiniere” lies elsewhere: “Dear Caterina, don’t believe what’s written in the newspaper. Even if they changed its name out of shame, it is still the same newspaper of the SS and the Black Brigades, the landowners and the police. It didn’t go down like they say” (28).<sup>36</sup> These words sum up the collective’s own critique of the newspaper, and of print media before, during, and after the war. Ending Soviet’s story with Guido’s interpretation effectively lends more credence to his version and makes it clear to the reader that all future headlines and articles from that newspaper should be approached with a certain amount of skepticism as to their veracity.

*Il Resto del Carlino* is mentioned numerous times throughout the text, usually in connection to something dubious that was reported, or which swayed public opinion in a

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<sup>35</sup> “16 febbraio 1950: Castelfiorino, raccapricciante episodio. Ex-sindacalista aggredisce e massakra ufficiale dei Carabinieri. Era sospettato della strage di Ca’ del Rovere – La bomba uccise un chierichetto di 9 anni” (27).

<sup>36</sup> “Cara Caterina, non ci devi credere a quello che scrive il giornale. Quello, anche se ha cambiato nome per la vergogna, rimane sempre il giornale delle ss e delle brigate nere, degli agrari e della polizia. Non è andata come scrivono loro” (28).

dangerous direction.<sup>37</sup> When Daniele is describing the immigrant Said's problems in present day Bologna, which according to the collective are strongly linked to problems of historical memory partially caused by biased journalism, his friend Vasquez connects the situation to the American novel *American Tabloid* (1995) by James Ellroy: "America has never been innocent. We lost our virginity on the ship on the way here and we have never looked back with regret. We can't attribute our fall from grace to a single event or set of circumstances. We can't lose what we've never had" (66).<sup>38</sup> Vasquez then goes on to connect the introduction of the book to the current situation in Italy: "It can't get worse than this, but the origin of this shit is way in the past [...] This country is rotten to its core. It is fascist in its soul. It has never come to terms with its past" (66).<sup>39</sup> Vasquez goes on to reflect on the lack of historical memory in present day Italy, which only contributes to a deterioration of society and its institutions. Much like the Wu Ming collective, he sees the Resistance as a defining moment, of both short-term Italian glory and long term societal failure.

The last time was with the Resistance. The rest is almost all shit. In centuries of history, very few times did we *almost*, and I say *almost*, manage to have a shred of dignity. Then we did all we could to water down that sole moment of glory. This

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<sup>37</sup> With regards to a difficult situation involving the immigrant population in via Rimesse in 2000, the collective holds the newspaper responsible for declaring certain areas of the city "come simbolo del degrado" (65); or on a similar occasion in San Petronio in Bologna in 1998, "Il 13 novembre *Il Resto del Carlino* impazza con la tesi del complotto politico ordito dalla Jihad e dagli Autonomi. La giunta non lesina disprezzo per gli occupanti 'manovranti' da chissà chi. E i cittadini, tranne qualche centinaio in tutto fra solidali e indignanti da tanto accanimento, forniscono il loro silenzio-assenso alla versione corrente: 'uno sfregio alla città, premeditato e calcolato.' Si parla molto di 'ferita difficile da rimarginare'" (220).

<sup>38</sup> "L'America non è mai stata innocente. Abbiamo perso la verginità sulla nave durante il viaggio di andata e ci siamo guardati indietro senza alcun rimpianto. Non si può ascrivere la nostra caduta dalla grazia ad alcun singolo evento o insieme di circostanze. Non è possibile perdere ciò che non si ha fin dall'inizio" (66).

<sup>39</sup> "Al peggio non c'è mai limite, ma il punto d'origine della merda è remoto [...] Questo paese è marcio fin dalle fondamenta. È fascista nell'anima. Non ha mai fatto i conti col passato" (66).

country deserves its present. Everything, all the shit. This intolerable meanness, solitude, boredom, homogenization... makes me wanna vomit. (66)<sup>40</sup>

The collective uses this exchange between Daniele and Vasquez to shed light on the connection between Berlusconi's Italy and the postwar period, and how once again the media hold a large responsibility for seemingly promoting ignorance among the people. Locked archives, biased journalism, and the amnesty of that time have all contributed to societal divisions in present day Italy and perpetuation of the myth of the "Italiani brava gente?" (Del Boca 10). The media, according to the collective, do not operate at the service of truth; instead, they manipulate reality and history to placate the populace, or they bow to political power rather than maintain their own autonomy and integrity.

Both novels employ headlines from *Il Resto del Carlino* as a narrative device, but perhaps the clearest link between *54* and *Asce di guerra* in terms of mass-mediated popular culture comes from overt references to cinema as a source of cultural information. Films, as much as newspapers and magazines, have the potential to inform the public and contribute to the cultural imaginary, whether or not that is their explicit intention. Along these lines, however, according to Strinati, cinema is perhaps the most problematic of all the arts, because it is by definition and design produced through mass production methods. Therefore, films "no longer possessed the 'aura' of authentic and genuine works of art; nor could they be 'folk' culture because they no longer came from the 'people,' and therefore could not reflect or satisfy their experiences and interests" (4). Moreover, the wide reach of cinema also makes it a vehicle for propaganda. Wu Ming address

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<sup>40</sup> "L'ultima volta è stata con la Resistenza. Il resto è quasi solo merda. In secoli di storia, pochissime volte siamo quasi, dico quasi, riusciti ad avere un briciolo *de* dignità. Poi s'è fatto di tutto per annacquare quell'unico momento *de* gloria. Questo paese si merita il presente. Tutto quanto, tutta la merda. Questa intollerabile meschinità, solitudine, noia, omologazione...*me* viene da vomita" (66).

both aspects of this argument through one particular example in *Asce di guerra*, presenting both the criticisms of the medium and its potential as a cultural guide.

In the text, there are certain chapters told by the protagonist Vitaliano in the year 2000, many of which focus on the PTSD that continues to plague him, and on these nights, when he cannot sleep for the terror, he takes walks around town. On one of these occasions, he comes home and turns on the television, only to find the 1963 film *La banda Casaroli* (Vancini) with Renato Salvatori. He is instantly transported to the past: “One from back in my day, a good one. Writing appears: ‘Bologna, December 1950.’ Cars swerved off the road, police jeeps, and passersby gathered in tight groups. A young man walks under the porticos with the collar of his jacket up: he is probably around twenty years old” (19).<sup>41</sup> In this case, it is clear that Vitaliano connects to his past through the cinematic lens.

At the same time (as seen in the next chapter) in Bologna, Daniele has a similar popular culture experience while he is flipping through the channels. Initially he finds himself in the familiar environment of Berlusconi’s 20th-21st century television programming: “Close ups of stopwatches and full lips, headlines from tomorrow’s newspapers and horoscopes, sitcom reruns and live coverage of sporting events from the other side of the globe, Protestant preachers and engineering lessons” (20).<sup>42</sup> He refers to this phenomenon of changing channels as the “naufragio dello zapping,” (the “shipwreck of channel surfing”) and he extends the metaphor to describe the unknown film (in reality, the same film that Vitaliano is watching) he stumbles upon as an “isola” or an “island.” “*La banda Casaroli*. Vague recollections, something from my grandfather’s time.

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<sup>41</sup> “Uno dei miei tempi, uno bravo. Compare una scritta: ‘Bologna, dicembre 1950.’ Macchine sbandate fuori strada, jeep della Celere, passanti radunati in capannelli. Un ragazzo cammina sotto i portici con il bavero della giacca rialzato: può avere sì o no vent’anni” (19).

<sup>42</sup> “Primi piani di orologi cronografi e labbra carnose, titoli dei giornali di domani e oroscopi, repliche di telefilm e dirette di eventi sportivi dall’altra parte del globo, predicatori di sette protestanti e lezioni di ingegneria” (20).

A true story. Bologna, December 1950 [...] It's hard to say where this sensation comes from, but it's definitely something different from the usual films about the 1950s" (20).<sup>43</sup> It is the screening of this film that instigates the whole action of the novel, as it sparks Daniele's curiosity about those years.

He goes on to reference explicitly not only the power of cinema but also the failure of politicians, institutions, and journalists to provide the people with a complete picture of Italian history.<sup>44</sup>

Cinema drags me into a black hole. Do other films like *La banda Casaroli* exist? Surely very few. Ghosts. The political use of memory has given us a flat, distant, distorted image of that decade. The simple and carefree decade of *Poveri ma belli*. Those inane tearjerkers of Matarazzo, con Amedeo Nazzari and Yvonne Sanson. That honest, hard-working little Italy, who thinks it's allied with the great Western powers when in reality it is becoming one of their colonies. Stupid little Italy, with one foot still in fascism (same codes, same prefects, same police) and the other one up in the air, on the brink of those new precipices called "modernity." Picture perfect Italy, perhaps a little infected by the presence of the communists, killjoys who ruin the atmosphere of general harmony [...] Ideologies pass, but we Italians are always *Brava Gente*, the *mamma*, the family, the bar and a priest in the

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<sup>43</sup> "*La banda Casaroli*. Reminiscenze, qualcosa dei tempi di mio nonno. Una storia vera. Bologna, dicembre 1950 [...] È difficile dire da dove arrivi questa sensazione, ma certo è qualcosa di molto lontano dai soliti Anni Cinquanta su celluloidi" (20).

<sup>44</sup> See Boscolo, 2. This is a typical theme of works categorized as "New Italian Epic."

immediate vicinity. Condemned to an eternity of Christian Democratic rule, no matter what mess ends up in government. (22)<sup>45</sup>

This sequence represents the moment in which Daniele begins to connect the present to the past, and the vehicle that prompts this is popular cinema. He goes on to reflect on this medium and the legacy of these films in relation to their historical context and initial reception.

Was it the need for tranquility, for reassuring figures, for social and political peace, which crystalized in cinema, while all that went against this desire was dismissed, censured? [...] Cinema indulged dreams and ignored the rest: the public had no desire to hear the hard truth, because they had already lived it. Certainly, censure at both the church and state level hit hard: Monicelli's *Totò e Carolina* wasn't distributed because it was accused of scorning law enforcement. Expressing oneself wasn't easy. There was satirical comedy, but over time satire lost its incisiveness, even the most caustic films became part of the scenery, just another reassuring presence of the *Italiani Brava Gente*. (23)<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> "Il cinema mi trascina in un buco nero. Esistono altri film come *La banda Casaroli*? Sicuramente poca roba. Fantasmì. Di quel decennio, l'uso politico della memoria ci ha consegnato un'immagine piatta, lontana, distorta. La decade ingenua e scanzonata di *Poveri ma belli*. Quella melensa e dalla lacrima facile dei film di Matarazzo con Amedeo Nazzari e Yvonne Sanson. L'Italietta onesta, laboriosa, che si crede alleata delle grandi potenze occidentali mentre ne diviene colonia. Italietta stupida, con un piede ancora nel fascismo (stessi codici, stessi prefetti, stessi questori) e uno a mezz'aria, sul ciglio di nuovi baratri chiamati 'modernità.' Bella Italia da cartolina, forse un po' ammorbata dalla presenza dei comunisti, guastafeste che rovinano l'atmosfera di concordia generale [...] Le ideologie passano, ma noi italiani sempre Brava Gente, la mamma, la famiglia, il bar e un prete nelle immediate vicinanze. Condannati a un eterno democristianesimo, qualunque accozzaglia si trovi al governo" (22).

<sup>46</sup> "È stato il bisogno di tranquillità, di figure rassicuranti, di pace sociale e politica a cristallizzarsi nel cinema, mentre tutto ciò che non assecondava quel desiderio veniva rimosso, censurato? [...] Il cinema assecondò i sogni e ignorò il resto: era troppo duro perché il pubblico aspirasse a sentirselo raccontare, oltre che a viverlo. Certo, la censura clericale e di stato picchiava duro: *Totò e Carolina* di Monicelli non venne distribuito perché accusato di vilipendere le forze di polizia. Non era facile esprimersi. C'era la commedia satirica, ma col tempo la satira ha perso incisività, anche i film più caustici sono ormai elementi del fondale, l'ennesima rassicurante presenza degli Italiani Brava Gente" (23).



Just like other historical accounts, the message of a film can change with time—narrative is always subjective, and therefore interpretation is fluid. Perhaps for this reason, the power of cinema, the collective seems to say, should be considered suspect, because its impact always depends in large part on its diverse and constantly changing audience. Conversely, this also makes it a more valid touchstone of popular culture, as it defies mass culture theory's notion that a cultural object's status cannot be elevated over time.<sup>47</sup> *La banda Casaroli*, for example, plays a different cultural role and is evaluated differently in the year 2000 than it was upon its release in 1963. The significance of Daniele's critique in this example is above all social and cultural, as postwar cinema in particular took on greater importance as a source of information, precisely because the journalistic and political alternatives failed. The myth of "Italiani, brava gente?" was perpetuated just as much on the page and in political discourses as it was on screen.

*La banda Casaroli* serves to link both Vitaliano and Daniele's narrative threads and works as the primary catalyst for the latter to explore the past and ultimately find the former. There are also other moments in the text in which popular films take on a narrative significance. In an email between Daniele's colleague Manuela and her sister, which I will analyze later in the chapter in terms of gender roles, Manuela mentions Daniele and his friends talking about *Good Morning, Vietnam* (Levinson 1988) as the only Hollywood film that sympathizes with the Viet Cong. Upon the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of that war, Daniele reflects on how other films have treated the event, many of them focusing on empathy for the American soldiers rather than compassion for the people of Vietnam. His comments reflect the failure of cinema to provide a complete perspective on history; leaving aside whether or not this *should* be the responsibility of cinema (to inform in an impartial and balanced way), his discourse indicates that films *possess* this

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<sup>47</sup> See Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*.

directive regardless. The way certain historical events are represented on the screen influences the way viewers perceive them, even if they are aware that they are watching a fictional representation.

The media culture of his time, in which Berlusconi had fashioned himself a master of visual manipulation, no doubt influences Daniele's observations. Many times throughout the former prime minister's career, he has employed the largely aesthetic concept of "bella figura" to change the narrative, both about his own personal life and about Italian history itself. By way of example, he has framed the discourse (ala Lakoff) on the Fascist period, the Second World War, and the Resistance in revisionist terms, calling into questions the values of the latter and declaring that Mussolini did some 'good things' for Italy.<sup>48</sup> According to John Tumminia, "[s]ome insight may be gained from Berlusconi's two most famous comments on the subject of Mussolini: 'Mussolini never killed anyone ... [he] used to send people on vacation in internal exile,' and 'The racial laws were the worst fault of Mussolini as a leader, who in so many other ways did well'" (186).

Through his speeches, television appearances, and overall constructed identity as a "Uomo Nuovo" for contemporary Italian politics, Berlusconi's narrative takes precedence over the newspapers and history books because it is visual, persuasive, and broadcast to a large amount of people at any given time. In much the same way, in his critique of cinema, Daniele seems aware that the narrative on the Vietnam War has been forged by Hollywood, more so than by history books or by newspapers. He places a great deal of blame on cinema for perpetuating these

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<sup>48</sup> See Tumminia, "Silvio Berlusconi: 'I am the Jesus Christ of Politics.'" In his words, "The evidence suggests that Berlusconi has a talent for truth-bending and exaggeration—in effect creating his own revisionist history. [...] Evidence of manipulation and the bending of facts can also be found in prior years, and his attempts to manipulate those around him for material gain are also evident. One story recounts him filling a rental office of one of his properties with relatives posing as interested customers in order to convince investors that the property was valid and desirable. [...] Thus Berlusconi bends the truth for personal and professional gain, creating what has been called *hyper-fiction*" (193).

representations, but I would argue that his comments reveal the greater societal problem mentioned above. Hollywood's contribution to the way we view the war in Vietnam, just like Berlusconi's interpretation of the Resistance and his regard for Mussolini, takes on greater importance precisely because no valid alternative presents itself as opposition. If newspapers, magazines, history books, and literature provided a formidable challenge to cinematic images, then a more balanced historical narrative might result.

Daniele is disillusioned with filmic representations of historical events, but it also becomes clear that cinema is ingrained in the way he himself interacts with history. When he begins interviewing people about the postwar period, he is struck by a certain Mirco's story, which "sembra la scena di un film" ("seems like a scene from a movie" 107). When Mirco asks Daniele why he is so interested in these stories, his response encompasses the lack of historical memory that pervades modern Italy: "I don't know. Maybe because no one has ever told them to me" (108).<sup>49</sup> This is the underlying message of the novel: the truth exists, but it is not always available through mass means. In short, "le storie sono asce di guerra da dissepellire" ("stories are hatchets of war waiting to be unearthed" 125).

In this section, I have shown how the collective challenges Berlusconi's mass media dominance and critiques the Italian media landscape in general, through television, print media, and cinema in *54* and *Asce di guerra*. These critiques also hint at the affinities between the former prime minister's approach to politics and culture and that of Mussolini and the Fascist era. The point the collective makes through both novels is that the only way the narrative will change is with greater consumer awareness and the diffusion of these 'other' stories, these "asce di guerra."

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<sup>49</sup> "Non lo so. Forse perché nessuno me le ha mai raccontate" (108).

Storytelling, through means which are both transnational and popular, is what will contribute to the “communities of sentiment” (Appadurai 8)<sup>50</sup> that will challenge “mass society” (Strinati). The Wu Ming collective’s search for ‘alternative’ stories from the postwar period point shows their refusal to believe the lies they maintain have been perpetuated throughout Italian history, through all forms of mass media, and on which contemporary politics have been founded. They clearly operate under the conviction that unearthing these “hatchets of war” will provide them with an additional weapon with which to combat the commonly accepted narrative of the past and dispel the myth of “Italiani, brava gente.”<sup>51</sup>

#### **IV. Constructions of Masculinity in *54* and *Asce di guerra*: The Evolution of the “New Man”**

The collective continues their critique of mass media culture by specifically addressing a question that has resonated throughout modern Italian history: that of masculinity. In this instance, they aim their analysis not only at the constructions of machismo promoted by Berlusconi throughout his tenure, but also at the connection between these representations and their Fascist predecessors. In short, Berlusconi’s version of masculinity is not very different from Mussolini’s Fascist “New Man.” Both are anti-intellectual, anti-feminist (though in different ways), champion dominance and virility, and more importantly, purport to be prototypical models for Italian men to follow.<sup>52</sup> Both leaders are also keenly aware of their mediatic representations as a tool to shape

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<sup>50</sup> According to Arjun Appadurai, these groups possess the potential to incite real change: “These mass-mediated sodalities have the additional complexity that, in them, diverse local experiences of taste, pleasure, and politics can crisscross with one another, thus creating the possibility of convergences in translocal social action that would otherwise be hard to imagine” (8).

<sup>51</sup> In Del Boca’s words, “Se ci sono italiani che meritano di essere definiti ‘brava gente,’ nell’accezione vera, non autoassolutoria, non mitizzata, questi sono proprio gli splendidi e umili operai del volontariato” (304).

<sup>52</sup> See Cassata and O’Loughlin, *Building the New Man: Eugenics, Racial Science and Genetics in Twentieth-Century Italy*. See also Benadusi, et al, *The Enemy of the New Man: Homosexuality in Fascist Italy*. It has long been said that after Italy was ‘made’ during the Risorgimento, what followed was the need to ‘make’ the Italians (Massimo

public opinion;<sup>53</sup> where they differ, perhaps, is in their relationship to modernity. Where Mussolini's "Superman" was 'anti-modern' and 'ruralist,' Berlusconi is the epitome of the new 'urban' man.<sup>54</sup> In 54, these two versions are both consolidated and called into question through the character of real life actor (and masculine ideal, for many) Cary Grant.

### **Cary Grant vs. Archibald Leach: "due facce della stessa moneta"**

The authors first introduce Cary Grant in the novel at his Palm Springs home, when both the CIA and MI6 approach him for what turns out to be a top-secret mission. After various pretexts regarding Cold War issues, the agents finally explain the purpose of their visit: they want to change Western public opinion of Yugoslavia's Tito. They hope to achieve this precisely through the medium of film, starring Cary Grant in the (sympathetic) role of the political leader. The reason

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D'Azeglio). With regards to this idea, Lorenzo Benadusi states, "The body and character of the Italian people had to be molded according to the necessities of the new national state. It was imperative to create a minimum of anthropological homogeneity through moral, behavioral, and health standards. The link between 'body and nation' was indivisible; health, physical fitness and masculinity were considered indispensable moral values for everyone and above all necessary for the country" (11-12).

<sup>53</sup> According to Benadusi, during Fascism, "Propaganda helped spread the image of masculinity as being aggressive, authoritarian, and soldierly through iconographic representation, the exaltation of physical education and youthfulness, and the public exposure of the Duce's body as a model of virility and political culture" (28-29).

<sup>54</sup> Unlike Fascism's "New Man," whose virility was associated not just with pronatalism but also with "warrior-like" (Benadusi 14) characteristics derived from nationalist ideas, Berlusconi's version shows power and dominance through business dealings and the amassing of wealth. The latter is clearly of the idea that the 'battlefield' has changed, and he considers it highly important to dress for the occasion. I will discuss his 'uniform' later in this section, as described in *Una storia italiana*. Perhaps the most important similarity between Mussolini and Berlusconi's New Men is their exclusionary nature: if one does not possess the characteristics of said "New Man," then that person is automatically an outsider. According to John Tumminia when speaking about Berlusconi, "[m]any of his words and actions reveal a closed-minded tendency to put things in black-and-white terms: his political friends as good (the in-group) and his political foes as evil (the out-group)" (200). This echoes Benadusi's point on the greater ramifications of the Fascist New Man: "The repeated use of sex-related adjectives such as male,' 'virile,' and 'potent' as opposed to 'female,' 'impotent,' and 'cowardly' was aimed at establishing camaraderie in a community of males that was cohesive yet constantly impelled to demonstrate and boast their personal courage and strength in respect to the next. [...] The regime, through the image of the new man and the male stereotype connected with it, tried to enhance its self-representation and highlight the difference of those who did not conform to that model" (28).

the two organizations seek out Cary Grant for this mission is simple, though perhaps unusual given the circumstances: “we reach out to you as an actor and as an...elegant man” (53).<sup>55</sup>

Grant’s presence in the novel is particularly effective as a direct contrast to many of the men whom the fictional protagonist Pierre encounters at Bar Aurora, including his brother Nicola. These are mostly men who have participated in the Resistance, and it is not a stretch to presume that they do not possess the same grooming practices or lifestyle of the famous Hollywood actor. At the beginning of the novel there are chapters dedicated to the partisans, to the Triestine irredentist movement, and to the gangster Lucky Luciano. These different, more bellicose male representations are further contrasted with the initial scene featuring Grant, which details his morning toilette. This description represents exactly the kind of ‘modern’ masculinity that Mussolini eschewed and on which Berlusconi has likely modeled himself:

Whet the blade on the sharpener attached to the wall, dissolve the soap in the dish with hot water, remove the loose bristles of the badger hair brush, lather the face, put the razor into action, slow down near the dimple in the chin, remove soap residue with the hot washcloth, inspect the face for wayward hairs. Cary shaved with his right hand, appreciating every instant of that morning liturgy, after which followed the sacral dressing: suit and shirt commissioned from Quintino in Beverly Hills, tie that matches his socks, no garters because Cary’s socks *did not dare* to fall down to his ankles, Derby or Full-Brogues on his feet. (34)<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> “ci rivolgiamo a voi in quanto attore e in quanto...uomo elegante” (53).

<sup>56</sup> “Affilare la lama sulla coramella fissata alla parete, sciogliere il sapone nella ciotola con l’acqua calda, togliere le setole caduche dal pennello in pelo di tasso, insaponarsi il viso, passare il rasoio, rallentare in prossimità della fossetta sul mento, rimuovere i residui di sapone con la pezzuola calda, ispezionarsi il viso alla ricerca di peli superstiti. Cary si radeva con la destra, apprezzando ogni istante di quella liturgia mattutina, a cui seguiva la vestizione sacrale: abito

This description echoes the previous section, as Pierre gets ready to go out dancing. Without his father at home, and with his conflictual relationship with his brother, it is clear that Grant has become a sort of ideal for him:

By now the movements were automatic: he could knot his tie with his eyes closed, roll his pants with precision to the centimeter, check to see that the back slit of the jacket was set and the buttons shined. He pulled the laces of his good shoes; he didn't like to stop in the middle of dancing to tie them again. When this happened, he felt ridiculous and vulnerable [...] From above the credenza he took out the photo of Cary Grant and stuck it between the wall and the mirror. He took a step back and tried to assume the same indescribable expression [...] Cary Grant's smile was formal and elegant and at the same time natural. That smile was a contradiction. Pierre tried his best to imitate it, but it was precisely for this reason that he was unable. He did better with his walk and the way he kept his hands in his pockets was almost perfect. (27-28)<sup>57</sup>

Pierre is not the only man who emulates the actor. In fact, it is exactly this appeal—the fact that men admire him and want to be him—that makes Grant a compelling character in the novel. He positions himself as the masculine opposite to Mussolini or even Hitler, and based on the outcome of the war, it would appear that his version of masculinity emerged the victor: “The

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e camicia commissionati a Quintino di Beverly Hills, cravatta intonata col calzino, niente reggicalze perché i calzini di Cary *non osavano* scendere alla caviglia, Derby o Full-Brogues ai piedi” (34).

<sup>57</sup>“Ma i movimenti ormai erano automatici: poteva farsi il nodo alla cravatta a occhi chiusi, curare al centimetro il risvolto dei pantaloni, controllare che lo spacco posteriore della giacca fosse bene in piega e i bottoni lucidati. Strinse i lacci delle scarpe buone, non gli piaceva doversi fermare nel bel mezzo del ballo per allacciarsi le stringhe. Quando succedeva si sentiva ridicolo e vulnerabile [...]. Da sopra la credenza sfilò la foto di Cary Grant e la incastrò tra il muro e lo specchio. Fece un passo indietro e cercò di assumere la stessa indescribibile espressione [...]. Il sorrisetto di Cary Grant era formale ed elegante e allo stesso tempo naturale. Quel sorriso era una contraddizione. Pierre si sforzava di imitarlo, ma proprio per questo non ci riusciva. Se la cavava già meglio con la camminata e anche il modo di tenere le mani in tasca era quasi perfetto” (27-28).

New Man, at least for the moment, wouldn't tuck his pants into his tall leather boots in order to march in goose step. The New Man, if anything, would reflect Cary Grant, perfect prototype of Homo Atlanticus: civil, but not boring; moderate, but not progressive; rich, of course, maybe even filthy rich, but neither cold nor lazy" (35).<sup>58</sup> Here the collective uses precise language to relate their argument to the Fascist case under no uncertain terms. The war is over, and the "New Man" of that period is no longer the virile, pro-natalist, anti-urban Fascist, but rather the suave and debonair man about town. The end of the war required a new set of cultural definitions for a great many things, and reanalyzing the masculine ideal of the Fascist era was one of them.

Cary Grant is also interesting for the Wu Ming collective because of his origins, an example of a working class individual who came to represent the epitome of male elegance.<sup>59</sup> He is someone who has both versions of the "New Man" inside of him, and therefore he is an ideal vehicle for the collective's analysis of masculinity. He was born Archibald Leach in England, and therefore he himself is proof that one is not *born* Cary Grant. In fact, the actor constantly fights with this other side of his identity. In that same description of his morning shave mentioned above, his 'other half' makes an appearance, demonstrating a complete opposite performance of masculinity:

Archie, who was left-handed, brushed his cheeks with the palm of his left hand, which he had closed like a clamshell. Two days without shaving and with no desire to do so. The grizzled, bristly, itchy fluff. Lingering in that pose, against his lower

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<sup>58</sup> "L'Uomo Nuovo, almeno per il momento, non avrebbe avuto le braghe infilate in stivali di cuoio alti due piedi, per marciare al passo dell'oca. L'Uomo Nuovo, semmai, si sarebbe rispecchiato in Cary Grant, perfetto prototipo di Homo Atlanticus: civile, ma non noioso; moderato, ma progressista; ricco, certo, magari ricchissimo, ma non arido né tantomeno imbolsito" (35).

<sup>59</sup> "Si era negato in quanto proletario, e ora faceva sognare milioni di persone. Ciò che era stato ottenuto da un individuo, a maggior ragione sarebbe stato ottenuto da tutto il resto della classe operaia. Cary Grant era la dimostrazione che il progresso esisteva e andava nella direzione giusta almeno fin dall'Uomo di Cro-Magnon" (35).



lip he felt the remains of an old callous from his days as an acrobat, an almost thirty-year old indentation of dry, white tissue. Every week the manicures shaved and polished, spread ointments, softened Cary's hands, hands that every woman in the universe would have wanted under her skirt or unbuttoning her blouse, but the calloused tissue never stopped growing, a souvenir of a past life, that of Archibald Alexander Leach. (34)<sup>60</sup>

Archibald Leach represents a more virile, anti-urban, and athletic representation of masculinity, more in line with the Fascist "New Man," whereas Cary Grant is the "New Man" of the 1950s. One represents a cult of celebrity and personality and bears the burden of defining masculinity for a generation of postwar-era men; the other comes from more humble beginnings and is "an English proletariat imprisoned in the body and in the myth of the most fashionable man in the world" (155).<sup>61</sup> Throughout the novel, Wu Ming play a great deal with Grant's struggles to suppress Archibald Leach, a continuous battle of these two "New Men." The former wants to eliminate that version of himself forever, but it is always lurking beneath the surface. Similarly, after the Fascist period ended, those who had ascribed to Mussolini's version of the "New Man" surely had to reevaluate their identities, and even if they put on an elegant suit and new affectations, that "Black Shirt" side of their persona still lingered.

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<sup>60</sup> "Archie, che era mancino, si sfiorò le guance col palmo della sinistra chiuso a conchiglia. Due giorni senza radersi e senza alcuna voglia di farlo. La peluria brizzolata, ispida, scomoda. Indugiando in quella posa, sentì contro il labbro inferiore ciò che restava di uno dei vecchi calli d'acrobata, cunetta quasi trentennale di tessuto secco e bianchiccio. Ogni settimana le manicure piallavano e limavano, spargevano unguenti, ammorbidivano le mani di Cary, mani che ogni donna dell'universo mondo avrebbe voluto sotto la sottana o intente a sbottonarle la blusa, ma il tessuto calloso riprendeva a escrescere, souvenir della vita precedente, il passato di Archibald Alexander Leach" (34).

<sup>61</sup> "un proletario inglese imprigionato nel corpo e nel mito dell'uomo più stiloso del mondo" (155). It has been well documented from Freud to Judith Butler that gender identity is not easily defined, and that it is largely influenced by societal norms and expectations. For my purposes, I am only trying to analyze the popular culture implications of the masculinities present in the collective's novels; a more involved gender studies analysis exceeds the scope of this project.

Here the collective addresses the question of the fate of the Fascists following the war: while many of them received no punishment whatsoever, with many continuing to serve in government thanks to the amnesty, it is unreasonable to believe that they ceased to be Fascists overnight. This applies to their notions of gender roles and identity as well. Becoming Cary Grant, the collective seems to say, is merely a superficial fix to a much more profound cultural disconnect. In fact, this idea of “due facce della stessa moneta,” (*Q* 597) this sense of *unheimlich*, is a recurring trope in Wu Ming’s *oeuvre*, an insistence on the fact that, as a global populace, we are more alike than we are unlike, and that there is always another version to a person, problem, or event. A perfectly elegant man has a rough side, just as historical events have the point of view of the minority rather than just the dominant, accepted narrative. More specifically, even when the Fascist “New Man” changed his clothes, he remained a Fascist inside.

This dual characterization of Grant/Leach also has present day resonance, as it serves as a tongue-in-cheek parallel with Berlusconi’s own *Una storia italiana*. In this biography, which the former prime minister sent to the houses of all Italians on the eve of the 2001 elections, there is a section entitled “Lo stile di vita,” (“Lifestyle”) which boasts clear affinities with the descriptions of both Grant and Pierre:

For thirty years, he has worn blue or gray double-breasted suits from Ferdinando Caraceni. For thirty years he has worked, traveled, and received [guests/visitors] in a blue tracksuit. For thirty years, he has worn shirts from Bianca Mauri, light blue or with thin sky blue stripes. For thirty years, he has worn shoes from Albertini in Via del Gesù in Milan. His legendary “pincushion” tie from Marinella is much imitated. [...] He doesn’t wear watches, except during “public events” when he has to give a speech or participate in a television program. In those instances, he

wears his father Luigi's "Nileg" watch, which he himself gave to his father. (*Una storia italiana* 9)<sup>62</sup>

As with Grant, part of Berlusconi's success—and masculinity—is tied to the way he physically presents himself to the world. The difference, of course, is that the former is a Hollywood actor while the latter is a politician, highlighting the superficial and carefully constructed nature of Berlusconiism and the highly performative aspect of his politics.<sup>63</sup> According to Marco Belpoliti in *Il corpo del capo*, the former prime minister is well aware of the image he is projecting to his constituents: "[t]he Prime Minister is photographed [...] as if he were a mirror in which to gaze at one's reflection" (15).<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, in Belpoliti's view, "Berlusconi is the first Italian politician since the end of the Second World War who has curated his own image with the same consistency and constancy as Mussolini" (23).<sup>65</sup>

Politics, like cinema, have long been performative, just like the forms of masculinity present in the novel. Berlusconi, and Mussolini before him, are actors on a stage just like Cary

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<sup>62</sup> Da trent'anni veste doppiopetti blu o grigi di Ferdinando Caraceni. Da trent'anni lavora, viaggia e riceve in tuta blu girocollo. Da trent'anni indossa camicie della signora Bianca Mauri, azzurre o a sottilissimi quadratini celesti. Da trent'anni calza scarpe di Albertini di via del Gesù a Milano. Imitatissima ormai la sua mitica cravatta "puntaspielli" di Marinella. [...] Non porta orologi, salvo che negli "esami pubblici" quando deve pronunciare un discorso o partecipare a una trasmissione televisiva. Allora indossa l'orologio "Nileg" di papà Luigi che lui stesso aveva regalato a suo padre" (*Una storia italiana* 9). All translations from *Una storia italiana* are mine.

<sup>63</sup> According to Tumminia in his psychological profile of Berlusconi, "An undeniable narcissism is also present in Berlusconi's personality profile, and there is a wealth of evidence to support this. After much back and forth with the media, Berlusconi confirmed reports of extensive plastic surgery he has undergone, including eye lifts, neck surgery, and other assorted nips and tucks" (191). Furthermore, "Pride not only about his height but his general appearance has made hair mysteriously appear on election posters and at least one of the magazines in his media holdings, *Panorama*, has been known to have made 'a shiny bald patch on the back of his head' disappear" (194).

<sup>64</sup> "[il] Presidente del Consiglio si fa fotografare [...] come se fosse uno specchio in cui contemplarsi. Noi – i suoi elettori, ma anche i suoi oppositori, detrattori, e persino nemici – siamo la superficie riflettente in cui Silvio Berlusconi si guarda: la sua vera immagine è il mondo" (Belpoliti 15).

<sup>65</sup> "Berlusconi è il primo politico italiano, dalla fine della Seconda guerra mondiale, che ha curato la propria immagine con la stessa costanza e continuità di Mussolini" (Belpoliti 23). Belpoliti cites specific examples of Berlusconi's photographic 'tricks': "come l'uso della calza di nylon sulla telecamera per nascondere le rughe del viso, al momento della candidature politica, oppure la presenza di 'consulenti dell'immagine' per abiti, pose, trucco la più nota dei quali è Miti Simonetto" (23).

Grant, and the quality and reception of their performance ensures their future success. All three men share certain affinities in terms of what it means to be a man, whether it be in 1934, 1954, 1994 or 2004: it is all about how one dresses, how one walks, and how one talks. The Fascist “New Man,” the postwar “New Man,” and the “New Man” of the Berlusconi era have a mirror-like relationship to one another. In 54, Wu Ming’s analysis of these different male figures in popular culture helps to explain the tensions between a nascent mass media society and the reality of the aftermath of the Resistance, all of which serve as an allegory for contemporary Italy. Cary Grant’s charismatic and elegant representation of masculinity contrasts greatly with that of Vitaliano Ravagli in *Asce di guerra*, who in the very same time period is making his way through the jungles of Indochina in order to mollify his rage towards fascist regimes (though exhibiting the “warrior-like” characteristics of the Fascist “New Man” ala Archibald Leach).

### **‘Men of Action’ in *Asce di guerra***

Unlike 54, mass mediated constructions of masculinity do not play the same role in *Asce di guerra*. In fact, Vitaliano Ravagli presents an interesting contrast not just to the previous novel’s representation of Cary Grant, but also to the fictional character of Pierre, who is roughly the same age as Ravagli, living in the same general area, at the same time period. The mass media (television and film, primarily) is what provides Pierre with a variety of male role models, while Ravagli’s lack of exposure to (or perhaps interest in) these platforms means that his influences regarding masculinity come from his more immediate experience. Pierre and Ravagli both come of age slightly after the Resistance and as a result are desperate to form their own identity at a time when many of their male friends and acquaintances were defined by a war that still lived in

recent memory. Pierre gravitates towards examples of the anti-soldier, while Vitaliano is a young man in search of a war. At the beginning of the novel, when he leaves for Laos, he frames his actions in relation to men he has long admired: “The heroes I have always wanted to imitate seem closer. The country is different, light years away, but the spirit is the same. Young men who at my age took up arms and fought as partisans [...] Il Moro and Bob, real legends [...] Now I can go back to being somebody” (*Asce di Guerra* 6).<sup>66</sup> Ravagli’s self-realization comes not from looking in a mirror or attending to his physical appearance and style, but rather by taking up arms and negotiating his definition of masculinity on the battlefield, ironically exhibiting one of the primary characteristics of the Fascist “New Man.”<sup>67</sup>

Vitaliano’s role models also involve direct narrative intersections with the other novel, further highlighting the relationship between the two works and thus defining his version of masculinity through a comparison with his peer Pierre. The character of Bob mentioned above is almost certainly a reference to the same character in *54* whose funeral Nicola attends towards the end of the novel. Mirco, another Resistance fighter, describes him to Daniele:

Luigi Tini, known as Bob, was the commander of the Thirty-sixth [regiment]. He treated me like a younger brother, he used to say I brought him luck, I was his mascot. I admired him because he was bold, sharp, and fearless. A man of action, in other words, ready to risk his own skin. One who was never idle: even in

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<sup>66</sup> “Gli eroi che ho sempre desiderato imitare sembrano più vicini. Il paese è diverso, lontano come Marte, ma lo spirito è lo stesso. Ragazzi che alla mia età hanno imbracciato le armi e combattuto da partigiani [...] Il Moro e Bob, vere e proprie leggende [...] Ora torno ad essere qualcuno” (*Asce di Guerra* 6).

<sup>67</sup> According to Benadusi, during the Fascist period, “The search for a new identity and collective order also influenced the male image and the model of masculinity that, with the spread of nationalism, had increasingly become associated with “warrior-like” characteristics. Since a strong, powerful nation had to be made up of virile men, masculinity was associated with the ability to fight for the homeland; it became symbolic of virtue, health, vigor, and national regeneration” (14).

moments of relative tranquility, he always found something to do. Supplies, requisitions, ambushes. (93)<sup>68</sup>

This description is particularly striking when analyzed along with the portrayals of Cary Grant and Professor Fanti<sup>69</sup> from 54, not to mention its resonance with the ideal of the virile Fascist “man of action.”<sup>70</sup> For Vitaliano, Bob’s courage and action are what make him a role model; this contrasts greatly with Pierre’s admiration of Grant’s elegance, charm, and grooming. Together the two representations provide a more complete picture of masculinity at this moment in history, those who idolized their local heroes and those who looked to Hollywood for models of success.

The character of Vitaliano suggests once again that the “New Man” presented by the collective in 54 is merely a superficial fix: underneath the elegance and impeccable grooming of a Cary Grant lies the rough, aggressive Archibald Leach, just as Pierre and Vitaliano represent two sides of this very same coin. Mussolini’s Fascist “Uomo Nuovo”—virile, ruralist, anti-bourgeois, and anti-intellectual—has been given a facelift, and herein lies the modern day critique: Berlusconi’s “New Man” attempts the style and charisma of a Cary Grant, but underneath it all lurk these same constructions of masculinity dating back to the Fascist period. The two sides of this coin (young, athletic, virile vs. elegant, well groomed, self-made) still endure in Italian society, and Berlusconi has exploited both in his ascent to power.

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<sup>68</sup> “Luigi Tini, detto Bob, era il comandante della Trentaseiesima. Mi trattava come un fratello minore, diceva che gli portavo fortuna, ero la sua mascotte. Lo ammiravo perché era audace, scaltro e senza paura. Un uomo d’azione, insomma, pronto a rischiare la pelle. Uno che non stava mai con le mani in mano: anche nei momenti di relativa tranquillità, trovava sempre qualcosa da fare. Rifornimenti, requisizioni, imboscate” (93).

<sup>69</sup> Professor Fanti is Pierre’s English teacher, a man noted for his elegant, if quirky, style, and his passion for pigeons and jazz.

<sup>70</sup> See Benadusi et al.

## V. Female Representations in *54* and *Asce di guerra*: A Challenge to Velinismo?

### Neglected Women in *54*

Just as Berlusconi continues to present himself as a masculine ideal to which others should aspire, his control of mass media has also had a significant effect on the way women are portrayed on Italian television today. His preference for variety shows featuring one or more showgirls, called “veline,” (again, a reference to the Fascist era)<sup>71</sup> recalls the era of the divas and “maggiorate” of the 1950s,<sup>72</sup> and has inarguably shaped the cultural imaginary of the “Donna Nuova” for the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century. In this televised world, these women, as Zanardo describes them, are “ragazze decorazione” (36). As a proposed critique of Berlusconism, then, the presence (or lack thereof) of

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<sup>71</sup> The name “veline” first and foremost refers to Fascist Italy: this was the name for slips of paper used by the Fascist Ministry of Information to dispatch instructions during the *ventennio*. Because of this connection to news, it became the name for the newsgirls on the variety show *Striscia la notizia*, which began in 1988 on Mediaset’s Canale 5. Now the term refers to any showgirl on any program and is often deemed synonymous with “prostitute.” Danielle Hipkins, in her article “Whore-ocracy: Show Girls, the Beauty Trade-Off, and Mainstream Oppositional Discourse in Contemporary Italy,” argues that this tendency comes from the moralizing practices of postwar cinema and has come to represent some of the worst “women on women violence” today. Instead of blaming a system which has helped to internalize these views of women, Hipkins claims that not only is there a “trade-off” when it comes to beauty (that one might be beautiful OR intelligent but is not allowed to be both), but that the discourse on the “velina” represents a new form of sexism that might be helped by a post-feminist approach. Ultimately, she sees such actions like Lorella Zanardo’s documentary *Il corpo delle donne* as counterproductive, since all it does is further denigrate women who have chosen to represent their bodies in a certain way, rather than celebrate a woman’s right to choose to do what she wants with her body, be it as a velina, a prostitute (which are NOT one and the same) or as an athlete (for example).

<sup>72</sup> See Gundle, *Bellissima*. According to the author, “Post-war Italian cinema was full of female roles and images because the female body was the ‘imaginary place of its re-birth’, just as it was of the country itself” (143). Many of the actresses to emerge from this period were endeared to the lower classes as well because of their relatability: “The down-to-earth qualities of the stars’ main roles created an accessible and familiar set of identifications for Italians. Italy was not yet a mass society, but still a country of peasants, white-collar workers, artisans and workers. It therefore preferred recognizable types as its idols. In contrast to the manufactured products of Hollywood, Italian stars preserved a certain accessible quality that was much appreciated by the public” (154). It is worth noting that this ‘accessibility’ was in large part due to their shapely figures and ample bosoms, which indicates that then, like now, the female body served as a diversionary tactic from real social problems. Another connection between these stars of the past and the “veline” of today is their potential as role models and the generational divide they cause. Says Gundle, “Although older and more conservative women did not like most of the new stars, whose overt physicality and screen roles they disapproved of, they had a huge appeal for the younger women in provincial and rural locations. These women, who were going to the cinema and reading the press regularly for the first time, found in them an accessible and familiar example of emancipation and material progress” (168). Here he is talking about the divas of the 1950s and 60s, but this description could equally apply to the “veline” of the television age.

female characters in *54* is also notable. Like many of Wu Ming's works, women occupy significantly less narrative space than do the men. According to Giuseppina Mecchia,

All of their cultural references have a strong 'male' connotation [...] Women, in their novels, are witches, lovers, healers, mothers, sisters, daughters: intelligent, sensitive, beautiful and beloved, they remain nonetheless prisoners of the character stereotypes associated with female characterization in the 'genres' of choice of the Wu Ming collective. They are rarely given political agency, and since they can't plausibly take part in the physical battles that tend to represent the central part of plot development in all of the 'narrative objects,' they are confined to the domestic sphere of eroticism, motherhood and logistical support, while the heroic warriors—from the Bolognese periphery to Laos, from Venice to Istanbul—keep fighting on. (207-208)

In fact, despite it being perhaps Wu Ming's most culturally diverse and transnational novel to date, the only female characters in *54* with any real presence are Betsy and Angela, both of whom are presented in relation to the aforementioned males, Cary Grant and Pierre. Angela is Pierre's lover and a woman trapped by her responsibilities to her family and her limited role in society. Italy is a country that had only given women the right to vote at the end of the 1940s, so it is not surprising that it had not achieved gender equality by 1954. The reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century shows progress from the 1950s but certainly not equality.<sup>73</sup> In a media culture that reduces women

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<sup>73</sup> According to Caterina Soffici in her study *Ma le donne no: come si vive nel paese più maschilista d'Europa*, with the end of feminism came the (detrimental) silence of women, who ceased to fight for this equality. "Dalla metà degli anni ottanta a oggi – con poche e rare eccezioni – le donne non sono più state un tema di nessuno. Siccome il femminismo vecchio stampo non era più di moda, se ne è approfittato per dare tout court il benservito ai temi della parità. Non rientravano più nell'agenda politica e l'eredità non è stata raccolta da nessuno. [...] Alla fine di questo viaggio ho dato una risposta alla mia domanda iniziale: le donne in Italia non lottano più perché, convinte di essere libere, pensano non sia più necessario" (18-19). Soffici has, however, seen some positive change in the past six or



to “veline,” that is, to tissue paper, a true challenge to Berlusconi would confront the role of women, not just in narrative but also in society. An analysis of the character of Angela will show where this representation succeeds, and where it falls short.

An orphan following the war, she is tasked with taking care of her mentally handicapped brother Ferruccio. In order to ensure that he has the best care, she makes her first sacrifice, which also displays her considerable survival skills: she becomes engaged to Odoacre,<sup>74</sup> who is head of the Bolognese section of the Communist party and head of the Villa Azzurra, a well-respected mental health facility. She does not love Odoacre, but she is personally and financially responsible for her brother and cannot afford to help him on her own. She is “una bella ragazza in miseria” (“a beautiful girl in misery” 78), resigned to her fate in a way that makes her not a victim, but a realist. She has no time for Pierre’s whims and romantic notions: “We can’t change the world, Pierre. Even if I leave Odoacre and spit on everything he has done for my brother and me, what do we do after? [...] And everyone would call me a whore, because I left the doctor Odoacre Montroni for the King of ballroom dance” (101).<sup>75</sup> In 1954, just as in present day Italy, the title “puttana” is given out freely without regard for its actual definition, supporting Danielle Hipkins’s argument that language is part of the problem.<sup>76</sup> Angela also goes even further, underscoring the differences not just between Pierre and herself, but also between men and women and their views of the world: “You men are delusional, and because of your delusions you massacre everything.

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seven years. The dialogue has been reopened, and ironically, Berlusconi’s own scandals have helped this reawakening: “Paradossalmente, è stato il Massimo rappresentante del sogno machista italico a innescare il processo di reazione” (20).

<sup>74</sup> Flavius Odoacer, an Ostrogoth and first Barbarian king of Italy, came to power in 476 AD after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. It is possible that, in giving this name to that particular character, the collective was attempting to confer on him a certain authority and also stress an association with Germanic roots. His name also contrasts with the history connected to Pierre’s own full name, Robespierre.

<sup>75</sup> “Non possiamo cambiarlo io e te il mondo, Pierre. Anche se io lascio Odoacre e sputo su tutto quello che ha fatto per me e per mio fratello, cosa facciamo dopo? [...] E a me mi darebbero della puttana, perché ho lasciato il dottor Odoacre Montroni per il Re della Filuzzi” (101).

<sup>76</sup> Hipkins argues that Italians are missing the vocabulary to talk about women beyond the adjective “bella” (425).

I can't leave my husband and you know it. Love is a luxury for the rich. And you and I are not rich, Pierre" (124).<sup>77</sup>

Angela ends up being much stronger than she initially appears, after her brother kills himself to 'free' her and she discovers her husband's betrayal.<sup>78</sup> For a person who seemed so trapped by the obligations of her life, it becomes clear that, even when it comes to her sacrifices, she makes her own decisions, and this includes the choice to leave Bologna. As she calmly explains to Pierre that the two need to go their separate ways, he looks at her with more awe than he looks at any of his male role models in the novel: "Angela seemed gigantic to him, as if he had always underestimated her, as if now the person he had loved was another, a thousand times tougher and stronger than himself. The pain had profoundly affected her, turned her to iron" (318).<sup>79</sup> When describing the men he admires in his life, including his partisan father and brother, he never refers to any of them as being made of "iron." Much like the character of Beatrice/Gracia in *Q* and *Altai*, or Molly Brant in *Manituana*, the Wu Ming collective does include subtle nods to the strength of women in their novels, though these references can also get lost in a sea of masculine representations.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> "Voi uomini siete degli illusi e per la vostra illusione massacrare tutto. Non posso lasciare mio marito, lo sai. L'amore è un lusso per ricchi. E io e te non siamo ricchi, Pierre" (124).

<sup>78</sup> Odoacre suspended Ferruccio's treatment in order to cause a relapse, so that he could come in and 'save the day.'

<sup>79</sup> "Angela gli sembrava gigantesca, come se l'avesse sempre sottovalutata, come se adesso la persona che aveva amato fosse un'altra, mille volte più dura e forte di lui. Il dolore l'aveva incisa a fondo, resa di ferro" (318).

<sup>80</sup> Teresa De Lauretis, in her essay *Gaudy Rose: Eco and Narcissism*, points to a similar disregard of females in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. In her view, "[t]he issue of a difference that divides the social subjects and imposes the question of the relation of subjectivity and experience to meaning, social formations, and power; a question only implied in Juliet's, but critically and politically articulated by feminism. And hence the 'problem' of women, a contradiction in the semiotic universe which metaphysics and poetics can no longer hide, or patriarchal fictions reconcile. The awareness of that contradiction as well as the improbability of reconciliation is not new to literature or even to the fictional genre chosen by Eco" (67). In fact, she seems to say that while challenging the "name of the father" discourse, he merely perpetuates it: "[w]hat the book finally affirms is the truth of discourse, the *Name of the rose*, and thus the continuity of the very institution it seems to challenge: the Name of the Father" (67).

When Angela finally leaves Odoacre, thanks in large part to Pierre, who gives her the contact information of Professor Fanti's in-laws in London, she does so by confronting the problem head-on: "Angela did not enter into the room. She felt like she couldn't get any closer, that she had to keep her distance, and her resolve. She looked him in the eye while she said her last words: 'You're a piece of shit. You and I both know why. Goodbye forever'" (341).<sup>81</sup> She also explains herself later to Professor Fanti with a great deal of self-awareness, after she has already settled in London: "Aside from the culture shock, I'm happy to be here, where I don't know anyone and I have to start over from the beginning. I'm someone who knows how to adapt" (358).<sup>82</sup> Angela proves to be more of a 'woman of the world' than she initially appears, and her willingness to re-invent herself is ultimately a bigger influence on Pierre and his future than any of the other male role models in the novel. He finally leaves Bologna, because she has shown him that it is possible.

Also of note is that Angela is really the only *Italian* woman represented in the novel. There are brief mentions of Pierre's Zia Iolanda, for example, but otherwise the ratio of Italian men to women in *54* is as unbalanced as it could possibly be. There are male representations from all parts of the peninsula, but the only Italian woman who 'speaks' in the novel is Angela. Her words are few compared to the multiple discourses from the male characters, but they do have a significant impact on the action of the novel.<sup>83</sup> Pierre is moved to change his life because of her,

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<sup>81</sup> "Angela non entrò nella stanza. Sentiva di non potersi avvicinare di piú, di dover mantenere una distanza, la certezza di quello che doveva fare. Lo guardò negli occhi mentre gli regalava le ultime parole: 'Sei un uomo di merda. Tutti e due sappiamo perché. Addio'" (341).

<sup>82</sup> "A parte lo spaesamento, sono contenta di essere qui, dove non conosco nessuno e tutto è da rifare da capo. Sono un tipo che si sa adattare io" (358).

<sup>83</sup> This singularity is reminiscent of the solitary female character in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, with whom the character of Adso enjoys an evening of pleasure that results in a tragic end for the woman. In the words of De Lauretis, "Nameless and speechless body, she (it) stands for *natura naturans*, the presymbolic or presemiotic realm of, as Kristeva would call it, the maternal *chora*. [...] So the woman, too, like Jorge and like the faithless and corrupt Mother Church embodied in the Abbey, will burn for all eternity. Less obviously, however, she is also the figure of

and he is the driving force in the tale. The question is: how can this novel be representative of one year in history, taking into account the media, irredentism, the drug trade, popular culture, organized crime, etc. without considering the experience of women at this time?

Not only are there very few female characters in the novel, and even fewer who are Italian, but the collective also utilizes non-Italian characters to comment on and characterize Italian women. Of course, the characters who disrespect Italian women are not exactly men of good repute. For example, Stefano Zollo, called “Steve Cemento,” the right-hand man of noted gangster Lucky Luciano, does not appreciate Italian women. In his view, Italy is a backwards and uncivilized country: “Beautiful women, sure, but they had no idea what real femininity was. They seemed like peasants all dressed up. Nothing like New York women. Now they were classy ladies, he remembered them well: the nightclubs, the high class brothels” (84).<sup>84</sup> Naturally, this description does not speak highly of American women, either. Clearly, Steve Cemento favors high-class escorts and associates femininity with overt sexuality and submission. There is further conversation on the topic when he and Lucky Luciano end up at a Neapolitan brothel and the latter makes a distinction between Italian and American women, explicitly connected to both consumer culture and the domestic sphere.

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the abyss” (62-63). De Lauretis describes this chain as “woman-mother-church-truth-death” (63) and sees the woman as *natura naturans* in direct opposition to the *natura naturata* of the creation of the book itself.

<sup>84</sup> “Belle donne, certo, ma non avevano idea della vera femminilità. Sembravano contadine vestite a festa. Niente a che fare con le newyorkesi. Quelle sì erano femmine di classe, se le ricordava bene: i night-club, i bordelli di lusso” (84). This comment echoes the ideas put forth by Stephen Gundle in *Bellissima*, that Italian actresses of the postwar period were “exotic, fiery, passionate, beautiful and adult;” they appeared to be ‘natural,’ lacking the “constructed sex appeal of the glamorized star, but a certain raw earthiness that seemed natural and unspoilt. To outsiders, Italy possessed the eternal appeal of an old civilization and the fresh vibrancy of a country that, for all its problems, seemed basically dynamic and optimistic” (142). Clearly, Steve Cemento is less impressed with this type of sexuality, preferring instead that described by Gundle: “In America, sex appeal was a manufactured quality that diffused sexuality through a complex set of signs and techniques. It relied on grooming, fashion, hair styling, cosmetics, studied flirtatiousness and lighting. The Italian actresses, by contrast, offered something more raw and unpolished” (159).

The fact is that the level of civility in a society is measured by the *fimmine*. This is why I sell household appliances. It is a mission of civility [...] Let me explain. What is the difference between the American *fimmine* and Italian women? [...] Household appliances. [...] American *fimmine* [...] have appliances that do the housework for them. Therefore, they have time to take care of themselves, to read magazines, to keep up with fashion trends. They are *nu poco cchiú* free, my friend, and therefore *cchiú* beautiful and intelligent. This is why they make you lose your mind. Italian *fimmine*, on the other hand, are housewives and mothers seven days a week. Then on Saturday night they get all dolled up and try to convince their husbands that they've married fine ladies. But they're a little bit pathetic. It's not their fault. Italian men want a good midwife at home, a housewife all week long, and then they demand that she become Silvana Mangano, or even Marilyn Monroe. *Accussí* it ends up that the husbands lose interest early on, and the wives don't feel appreciated and stop taking care of themselves. The moral of the story: they get fat and out of shape and at thirty years old they're already worthless. And everyone is unhappy! (86)<sup>85</sup>

This distinction is significant in many ways, namely that despite Luciano's claims, there really is no difference between Italian and American women. In both cases, men have unrealistic

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<sup>85</sup>“Il fatto è che il livello di civiltà di una società si misura dalle *fimmine*. È per questo che io vendo elettrodomestici. È una missione di civiltà [...] Ve lo spiego. Qual è la differenza tra le *fimmine* americane e le donne italiane? [...] Gli elettrodomestici [...] Le *fimmine* americane [...] tengono gli elettrodomestici che fanno i lavori di casa al posto loro. Perciò tengono il tempo di curare l'aspetto, di leggere le riviste, tenere dietro alla moda. Sono *nu poco cchiú* libere, amico mio, quindi *cchiú* belle e intelligenti. È per questo che ti fanno uscire di testa. Le *fimmine* italiane invece sono massaie e *matri* di famiglia sette giorni su sette. Poi il sabato sera si tirano a lucido e tentano di convincere il marito di aver sposato una gran dama. Ma sono un poco patetiche. La colpa non è loro. Gli uomini italiani vogliono in casa una brava levatrice, una massaia per tutta la settimana, poi pretendono *ca diventa* Silvana Mangano, o addirittura Marilyn Monroe. *Accussí* finisce che i mariti si stufano presto, le mogli non si sentono apprezzate e smettono di curare l'aspetto. Morale: ingrassano, si sformano, a trent'anni sono da buttare. E tutti sono scontenti!” (86).

expectations of women: they are supposed to run the household, raise the children, and do so while still maintaining their sex appeal. The increasing celebrity culture, through the medium of film in particular, has planted illusions in the heads of both men and women about physical beauty; both Italian and American men want women who are both Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, who are doting and pure but who can also transform into sexually adventurous bombshells on command. The expectations of women appear to be largely the same between the two countries; the difference is that, in the eyes of Luciano, consumer society has ‘liberated’ women, freeing them up to focus more on their appearance and their apparent primary role as sexual objects for men. Through Luciano’s discourse, the Wu Ming collective puts forth a critique on the influence of consumer culture regarding the reinforcement or reshaping of gender roles. I would argue that the criticism works more on a sociological level than it does as a feminist statement: the character of Angela is not enough to counterbalance the lack of representations of women in general and Italian women in particular.

What is also significant about Luciano’s comment is the mention of the actresses Silvana Mangano and Marilyn Monroe as the ‘models’ to which women (and men) aspire.<sup>86</sup> This is not the first time the authors cite cinema as an influence on gender roles and physical appearance, as has already been discussed with Cary Grant and with Berlusconi. There are a few moments in the text in which female actresses are identified as ideal representations of femininity and beauty, just as Grant represented a certain type of masculinity. On one of Angela and Pierre’s first dates, for example, she wants to see the 1953 film *Siamo donne* (Franciolini, Visconti, Rossellini, et al) because people thought she looked like the actress Alida Valli. This comparison validates

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<sup>86</sup> Gundle devotes one of the first sections of *Bellissima* to the impact of Silvana Mangano on the image of the natural, earthy, and well-endowed “maggiorata” (pin-up girl).

Angela's beauty, as if finding her celebrity *doppelgänger* was what made her truly beautiful. Pierre, on the other hand, prefers reality to the screen, finding Angela much more attractive than her famous counterpart. Furthermore, he questions the authenticity of the cinematic representation: "Actresses who played themselves in their everyday lives. Filthy rich women who pretended to miss the 'simple life' and *envied* the poor" (74).<sup>87</sup>

The fictional world's attempt to mirror reality clearly offends him; much like Lucky's Luciano's discourse on the difference between Italian and American women, there is a gap between expectation and possibility. In the case of *Siamo donne*, Pierre cannot reconcile the images of beautiful, famous actresses with these same women in their 'normal,' everyday lives—they do not convince him, because he cannot separate their reality (as wealthy, attractive women) from the filmic world of which they are part. It is surely not by chance that the Wu Ming collective includes this film in particular, as it seeks, in Pirandellian fashion, to highlight the reality behind the mask. However, the presence of the camera and the screen are what separate these women from the 'real world' of the spectators, so as long as they are on film, they are 'stars' before they are 'regular' women. In fact, showing scenes of their personal lives might only serve to enhance further the cult of celebrity that surrounds them, by attempting to make them more accessible to the common spectator, a similar approach used by Berlusconi to portray himself as a representative of civil society *par excellence* (Orsina) in *Una storia italiana*. According to Stephen Gundle in *Bellissima*, the female film stars of the 1950s were desirable for precisely this reason: "They could simultaneously appear to be products of the Italian heartland, like the lower-

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<sup>87</sup> "Attrici che interpretavano se stesse nella vita di tutti i giorni. Donne ricche sfondate che fingevano di rimpiangere la 'vita semplice' e *invidiavano* i poveri" (74).

class girls who had enchanted travelers and artists of the nineteenth century, and modern-day pin-ups” (143).

Pierre then begins to analyze, with a great amount of skepticism, the different episodes of the film. He laughs at Alida Valli’s envy of the simple lives of her masseuse and working class families, he is appalled by Rossellini’s episode featuring a hen-chasing Ingrid Bergman, and he reduces the third episode on Isa Miranda to: “Always the same old story: my life is empty, how many small, simple pleasures I have denied myself, I should have chosen another profession but it’s too late to turn back now” (75).<sup>88</sup> When Anna Magnani argues with a taxi driver over the fee for her dog, “Pierre wanted to strangle her with his own hands, someone who wastes people’s time just to get out of paying one extra, miserable lira” (74).<sup>89</sup> From Pierre’s perspective, cinema serves as a shield for these women to avoid interacting with real life. These are those same women that Luciano spoke about as the sex symbols to which Italian women should aspire and which both Italian and American men desire, but Pierre appears to see them as both unattainable and unappealing. Of course, his views are entirely hypocritical. He exalts the cinematic persona of Cary Grant while at the same time disdaining those same female (Italian) representations.

Cinema is one of the ways the collective confronts the question of gender and gender roles in their novels, and in this case, the character of Pierre would appear to be a mouthpiece for Wu Ming’s views on Italian celebrity culture. Yet the double standard cannot be ignored. It is clear through their representation of him that the collective is critical of Cary Grant as well—he is at times weak, narcissistic, and naïve, which not only serves to highlight the superficiality and

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<sup>88</sup> “Sempre la solita solfa: la mia vita è vuota, quanti semplici, piccoli piaceri mi sono negata, era meglio se facevo un altro mestiere ma ormai non posso tornare indietro” (75).

<sup>89</sup> “Pierre l’avrebbe strangolata con le proprie mani, una che fa perdere tempo alla gente che lavora per non pagare una misera lira di supplemento” (75).



illusion that characterize the cult of celebrity (fiction vs. reality), but also the idea of masculinity as a mask and/or a construct. Pierre emulates this man who is flawed on a profound level, but the increasingly visual media culture of the time means that spectators are more prone to judge the proverbial book by its cover. The representation of Cary Grant also skewers Hollywood for its self-importance and its (perceived) influence on world affairs. However, there are just as many things to admire about the man in the novel as there are to disdain, and this is precisely what is missing from this discussion of Italian actresses. In Pierre's view, not only are the latter idiots, but Angela is a fool for admiring them and not seeing her own (in his eyes) superior beauty. He is allowed to engage with popular culture in a way in which she is not. Perhaps it is this point that reverberates most profoundly as a critique of Berlusconi here—popular culture provides women a very small niche, whether they are the well-known actresses of the 1950s or the *veline* of the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>90</sup> In the words of Caterina Soffici, “[t]he popular culture of our country,

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<sup>90</sup> As I already mentioned, Lorella Zanardo explores the objectification of women in Berlusconi's television programming in her documentary *Il corpo delle donne* (2009) and the book (by the same name) recounting its genesis (2010). She observes a strange contradiction in the “veline” of today compared to the divas of the 1950s: while both groups build careers largely on their beauty, she sees the former as more objectified than ever, yet willing to ‘sell’ themselves as a product. In some cases, it seems, these women are willingly commodified, something for which Danielle Hipkins, (“Whore-ocracy”) takes Zanardo to task: Hipkins finds the latter's approach to feminism too narrow, not accepting of women who choose certain professions, even if that profession is “velina.” In any case, Zanardo's work reflects the attitude of many with regard to the treatment of women on television. Here she deconstructs the popular Italian program *Striscia la notizia*: “Le due ‘veline,’ provocanti, ammiccanti, stanno in ginocchio sulla scrivania dei conduttori, occupando i lati dello schermo. Sorridono al pubblico, vezzose e infantili. Non parlano quasi mai. Ogni tanto si alzano per lo ‘stacchetto,’ un balletto durante il quale la telecamera sbircia insistentemente sotto le minigonne. Sono ‘ragazze decorazione’: volti e corpi piacevoli ma non eccessivi nelle forme, sguardi ingenui. Sono le ‘grechine,’ le decorazioni che le maestre ci insegnavano a disegnare alle elementari per abbellire le pagine dei nostri quaderni. A queste ragazze non è richiesto quasi mai di parlare e, se lo fanno, è solo per avvalorare l’affermazione di un uomo: dunque fungono, oltre che da grechine, da eco, da amplificatori. Figura indispensabile alla rassicurazione maschile, la ‘grechina’ incarna il sogno della ragazza della porta accanto. Pareva, guardando le immagini scorrere sullo schermo, la tv di una tribù primitiva su un’isoletta sperduta nell’oceano, una tribù non ancora evoluta i cui istinti più sviluppati fossero una sessualità spicciola e un umorismo infantile. I due conduttori, maschi, invece parlano. Cosa dicono? Il linguaggio è quello dei maschi adolescenti in pieno scombussolamento ormonale. Loro però, lacchetti e Greggio, sono vicini ai sessanta e hanno la spensierata arroganza degli anziani maschi italiani: incuranti degli anni che passano, alternano barzellette a battute a doppio senso sulle loro partner in trasmissione, che per età potrebbero essere le loro nipoti. In particolare, meriterebbero un’analisi approfondita i versi emessi da Greggio: sembrano proprio studiati per raggiungere un pubblico misto di bambini, ragazzini e adulti. E allora, cosa emerge da uno dei programmi più guardati della tv italiana? Emerge che *Striscia*, con quei due sessantenni adolescenti e quelle due lolite, è davvero uno spaccato dell’Italia d’oggi: perdita di ruoli, mancanza di figure di riferimento. Dove sono gli adulti a cui i ragazzi

so nurtured and popularized by television, has never freed itself from certain prejudices and stereotypes of women and men that go back quite clearly to the 1950s and 60s” (135).<sup>91</sup> With their representation of Angela and this experience of the screening of *Siamo donne*, the collective certainly call into attention the hypocrisy and banality of such limited female roles, but by not populating their novels with female characters who might combat those claims, they simply highlight the problem without offering a viable solution.

### **“Donne di ferro” in *Asce di guerra***

Much like *54*, *Asce di guerra* also features very few female characters, and the ones who have the most presence are almost all in the present day part of the narrative. One woman of interest is Daniele’s mother, “la Giovanna di Rifondazione,” better known as “la nuora di Soviet” (“the daughter in law of Soviet” 48). This is how Daniele describes his mother: “No one would ever define her as ‘the ex-wife of Antonio Zani’ [...] Let’s say that in our family he was not the one who *wore the pants*. When they separated in ’85, he went to live in Modena with a quiet, submissive woman [...] My mother, on the other hand, stayed with her in-laws, with whom she had always gotten along well, and she continued to teach literature at the middle school” (48).<sup>92</sup> Daniele’s mother also describes her own mother-in-law, Caterina, in similar terms: “She seemed mild-mannered, but inside she was made of iron. She raised two children with her husband in jail,

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e le ragazze possono ispirarsi in modo simbolico? Indubbiamente però il format è geniale, perché, nonostante tutto, gli autori hanno tenuto conto del problema delle coscienze” (36-37).

<sup>91</sup> “[l]a cultura popolare del nostro paese, in ciò ben alimentata e a sua volta divulgata dalla televisione, non si è mai liberata di alcuni pregiudizi e stereotipi sulle donne e sugli uomini che ricalcano in maniera impressionante quelli degli anni cinquanta e sessanta” (Soffici 135).

<sup>92</sup> “Nessuno la definirebbe mai ‘l’ex-moglie di Antonio Zani’ [...] Diciamo che in famiglia non era lui a *portare i pantaloni*. Quando si separarono nell’85, lui andò a vivere a Modena con una tipina taciturna e remissiva [...] Mia madre invece è rimasta coi suoceri, coi quali s’era sempre trovata bene, e ha continuato a fare l’insegnante di lettere alle medie” (48).

without losing an ounce of dignity” (49).<sup>93</sup> These words: “iron,” “dignity,” “not the wife of...” and “the person who wears the pants” all endow these women with largely positive traits that would seem to indicate their independence and power. The use of the word “ferro” (“iron”) in particular echoes Pierre’s description of Angela at the end of 54. However, in both cases these qualities seem to be lurking beneath the surface—there is a difference between ‘to seem’ and ‘to be,’ the idea that women are perceived on the surface as weaker than their male counterparts, but that deep down they possess a resilience and strength.

In an echo of these other women of “ferro,” Daniele also describes Manuela, his work colleague, as the “pietra,” or “rock” (123) of his legal studio. This is not the first time in Wu Ming’s *oeuvre* that we see women as integral to the *foundation* of something, constant and strong but also undervalued and taken for granted.<sup>94</sup> The second part of the novel features an email written by Manuela to her sister, which underscores some of the primary gender questions at work in the story. The message mentions Daniele’s newfound passion for stories of the postwar period, and how she has yet to meet Vitaliano because of his vulgar way of speaking—“‘figa’ di qua, la ‘figa’ di là” (170)<sup>95</sup>—and Daniele thinks Manuela is too ‘politically correct’ to meet him. According to Manuela, in order for the two of them to meet, “[f]irst we need a period of ‘reconditioning,’ [...] Even though reconditioning means making me listen to the discourses of one of his friends, an absurd guy named Leo, someone who talks to you really seriously (about the Third Reich, mostly) and at the same time reaches his hand out and stops it about a millimeter from your breasts, then he looks you in the eye as if to say: ‘What should I do, touch them?’”

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<sup>93</sup> “Sembrava tanto modesta, ma sotto sotto era di ferro. Ha tirato su due figli con il marito in galera, senza perdere un grammo di dignità” (49).

<sup>94</sup> The character of Molly Brant in *Manituana* is an effective example of this.

<sup>95</sup> Perhaps the primary distinction here is that Ravagli truly does not appear to have relationships with women beyond the confines of the city’s bordellos.

(170).<sup>96</sup> There are contradictions on both sides here: Daniele does not want to expose Manuela to Vitaliano's vulgarity, but at the same time he does not see a problem with his friend's sexual advances towards her. What is the difference between Leo and Vitaliano's behavior, in the end? Both men appear to treat women as sexual objects, and Daniele, as much as he admires her, clearly does not view Manuela as an equal. As Mecchia points out, Vitaliano, and implicitly Daniele as well, are only reflecting the ideas of male potency and female sexuality that were formed during the Berlusconi years, so the 'conformity' of Manuela's political correctness (that the discourse around female sexuality must go beyond the "veline") is just as 'mainstream' as Vitaliano's supposedly subversive views on women and sex.

The other contradiction, however, lies in Manuela's own response to this behavior. Of Leo she counters, "But he's a fun guy [...] whenever he arrives, he greets us in a really classy way: 'There he is! Where there's pussy, there's Zani!'", but he does it in a way that doesn't piss you off" (170).<sup>97</sup> Leo's use of metonymy to identify her strictly in association with her genitals likely does not offend her because this discourse is so common that it no longer occurs to women to take it as an affront. This in itself is the strongest commentary on how deeply entrenched Berlusconi-era sexism has become. Manuela is intelligent, successful, and strong, and yet she finds it 'fun' that Leo makes sexual advances towards her and identifies her as "figa" because she has clearly internalized these behaviors as normal. Zanardo comments on the way the television has affected the way women view their own bodies and, consequently, identities:

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<sup>96</sup> "[p]rima ci vuole un periodo di "ricondizionamento," [...] Che poi il ricondizionamento consiste nel farmi sorbire i discorsi di un suo amico, un tipo assurdo che si chiama Leo, uno che ti parla serissimo (del Terzo Reich, più che altro) e intanto allunga una mano e te la ferma esattamente a un millimetro dalle tette, poi ti guarda negli occhi come per dire: 'Allora che faccio, tocco?'" (170).

<sup>97</sup> "Però è un tipo divertente [...] arriva questo Leo di cui ti ho appena detto, che ci saluta in modo veramente fine: "Eccolo! Dove c'è figa, lì c'è Zani!", ma lo fa in un modo che non t'incazzi" (170).

Watching TV, you understand from a very young age that your body seems to have an enormous power over men, over the audience. And in fact, in this neoliberal society where the ends justify any and all means, women's bodies – and in greater measure those of young girls – have become a powerful tool of economic exchange. Therefore, those grotesque images we see on screen, of such boorish and infantile eroticism, those gigantic images we see on billboards and on the sides of the trains and busses, those images we see in magazines...what do they communicate to young girls? A combination of strength and disorientation. (29-30)<sup>98</sup>

Stefania Benini also discusses this phenomenon in her article “Televised Bodies: Berlusconi and the body of Italian Women.” In her view, women are either reluctant to speak or their protests are made invisible, and as a result, those women who came of age during the Berlusconi years in particular simply do not hear them, as in the case of Manuela. This lack of engagement echoes Soffici's notion that women no longer protest because they are convinced they are free. According to Benini, “The women who speak against this status quo are only a few Cassandras,<sup>99</sup> whose announcements of catastrophe fall on deaf ears” (90).

In a way, Manuela's story represents another casualty of the lack of historical memory, along with the political unrest and immigration issues that are dear to the Wu Ming agenda: how

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<sup>98</sup> “Guardando la tv, intuisce già da piccolissima che il tuo corpo sembra avere un potere enorme sugli uomini, sul pubblico. E infatti, in questa società neoliberista dove il fine giustifica qualsiasi mezzo, il corpo delle donne – e in maggior misura quello delle bambine – è diventato un potente strumento di scambio economico. Allora, quelle immagini che scorrono sullo schermo, grottesche, di un erotismo così becero e infantile, quelle immagini che incombono gigantesche dalle affissioni, dai tram e dagli autobus, quelle immagini che occhieggiano dalle riviste... cosa comunicano alle ragazzine? Un insieme di forza e smarrimento” (Zanardo 29-30).

<sup>99</sup> Benini cites Loredana Lipperini, Caterina Soffici, Marina Terragni, Michela Marzano as some of the Cassandras in question.

can women have a legitimate role in the present if they were never fully recognized for their participation in significant events from the past? Along these lines, when Daniele interviews Elio Gollini in Imola, he learns about the role of women in the Resistance: “Without the women we would have been lost... We wouldn’t have been able to do anything” (130).<sup>100</sup> Gollini shows Daniele a photograph of the 36<sup>th</sup> Brigade, and the latter is immediately struck by the youth of the women (no one older than 20) and their clean-cut and dignified appearance, as compared to the male soldiers. This attention to physical appearance served as a weapon,<sup>101</sup> as Gollini explains: “You know, especially those of us in the city, we really took advantage of the women, because they aroused less suspicion and they didn’t have the problem of draft evasion or living underground. They were phenomenal at transporting weapons and explosives. Then when we started publishing *La Comune* and the pamphlets, it was they who went around and distributed them” (130).<sup>102</sup> In this case, women were able to exploit gender stereotypes in order to infiltrate areas where the male partisans could not go.

Daniele goes on to leaf through the book *Per essere libere* by Livia Morini (1981), about the women of the Resistance. The book includes testimonials by different women who had participated, and *Asce di guerra* includes these voices as well. By allowing these women to ‘speak’ in their novel, Wu Ming address, at least in part, their own issues with the representation of female characters. When Daniele closes the book, he thinks: “[i]t’s true that the stereotypical image of the partisans is that of the mountain man guerrilla fighter, dear to the ‘Guevarian’ imaginary of the subsequent generation. It doesn’t occur to you to think about the GAP and the

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<sup>100</sup> “Senza le donne saremmo stati persi... Non avremmo combinato niente” (130).

<sup>101</sup> There are clear allusions here to Tito (and the MI6 and the CIA)’s ideas of physical appearance as a part of political and military strategy in 54.

<sup>102</sup> “Sai, soprattutto noi altri in città, ci siamo avvalsi moltissimo delle donne, perché insospettivano meno, non avevano il problema della renitenza alla leva e della clandestinità. Per trasportare le armi e gli esplosivi erano fenomenali. Quando poi stampavamo *La Comune* e i volantini, erano sempre loro a portarli in giro e a distribuirli” (130).

SAP, much less about women. You have to make an effort, you have to focus and *think about it*” (131).<sup>103</sup> This statement applies to everything that Daniele is doing in the novel, as well as puts forth an imperative for readers: inform themselves, *think*, and break outside the confines of how this period in history has been interpreted in the past. Daniele does not think of women when he thinks of the Resistance, just as he does not associate partisans with the conflicts in Indochina. It is clear that the ‘real’ history goes beyond the most commonly accepted narrative of the past, and a better understanding of all sides of this history could have an influence on many problems facing Italian society today.<sup>104</sup>

In terms of the issue of female representations, both his mother and Manuela set positive examples for Daniele as he embarks on his quest to rediscover the past, just as Angela served as a behavioral model for Pierre in *54*. Also in Wu Ming’s 2007 novel *Manituana* with the character of Molly Brant, and in *Q* and *Altai* through the character of Beatrice, there are strong female role models for the male protagonists. In line with other works in the New Italian Epic, these characters move the action from a point that is not the center, which is typically the role reserved for the epic hero. As Wu Ming 1 notes, “The epic hero, when he/she is present, is not at the center of everything but influences the action in an oblique way” (“Memorandum” 17).<sup>105</sup> Yet by removing these women from the center of the action, their role may also be significantly diminished in the eyes of the reader. Similarly, Berlusconi’s “veline” also operate on the fringes of the main action—as Zanardo observes, they occupy primarily “i lati dello schermo” (“the sides of the screen,” 36)—and by not giving the women actual agency (their role is defined by their influence on the

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<sup>103</sup> “[i]n effetti l’immagine istituzionale e manualistica del partigiano è quella del guerrigliero montanaro, cara anche all’immaginario “guevariano” della generazione successiva. Non ti viene da pensare ai GAP e ai SAP e tanto meno alle donne. Devi fare uno sforzo, devi fare mente locale e *pensarci*” (131).

<sup>104</sup> See Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?*

<sup>105</sup> “L’eroe epico, quando c’è, non è al centro di tutto ma influisce sull’azione in modo sghembo” (17).

male characters) this remains one aspect of Berlusconiism that the collective fails to truly challenge.

## VI. Conclusion

Wu Ming have openly declared their allegiance to and preference for popular culture as both the vehicle and the target audience for their project. In other words, they want to work within popular culture in order to change it. However, the films, music, books, and celebrities referenced in their works are not limited solely to the Italian context:<sup>106</sup> their version of this type of culture, both that produced through mass means and that intended for the masses, is decidedly global and transnational in nature, and this represents their true challenge to Berlusconiism. Arjun Appadurai, much like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, views globalization through mass media as a potentially unifying, but not homogenizing, phenomenon. In his view, “Part of what the mass media make possible, because of the condition of collective reading, criticism and pleasure, is what I have elsewhere called a ‘community of sentiment,’ a group that begins to imagine and feel things together...these sodalities are often transnational, even postnational, and they frequently operate beyond the boundaries of the nation” (8).

By choosing popular elements that cross boundaries both geographical and temporal, the Wu Ming collective gives their novels a transnational orientation, which challenges the more nationalistic tone and historical revisionism of Berlusconi’s administration. According to Sven Beckert (as quoted by Deacon, Russell and Woollacott), transnational history starts from the premise of “the interconnectedness of human history as a whole, and while it acknowledges the

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<sup>106</sup> James Bond; Cary Grant; *Good Morning, Vietnam*; *American Tabloid*—to name a few from both of the novels considered in this chapter.



extraordinary importance of states, empires, and the like, it pays attention to networks, processes, beliefs, and institutions that transcend these politically defined spaces” (qtd. in Deacon, Russell, and Woollacott 4). Through this transnationalist bent, the Wu Ming collective attempts, with varying levels of success, to unite the global and the local: exploring the notion of the interconnectedness of human history and popular culture also allows them to address the Italian context specifically. In particular, their focus on historical, global questions of mass media and gender identity, often brought forth in their works through popular channels, directly challenges, on a local, present-day level, Berlusconi’s impact on Italian culture in the present, from his control of mass media to his role in perpetuating gender stereotypes and constructions dating back to the Fascist period.

However, perhaps what distinguishes *Asce di guerra* and *54* most as works by the collective is the focus on the popular not in the mass-mediated sense but rather in its appeal to the ‘people.’ In these and all of their novels, Wu Ming promote storytelling itself as a potential (transnational) community-building solution to the divisiveness of Berlusconiism. The title of *Asce di guerra*, for example, though it brings immediate associations with violence, has another, more metaphorical significance. Multiple times throughout the novel the idea emerges that “[s]tories are nothing but hatchets of war to unearth” (5),<sup>107</sup> a nod once again to Italy’s repressed historical memory and the need for storytelling to form a new consciousness of the past. Much like Appadurai’s “communities of sentiment” (8), engagement in storytelling, itself a popular phenomenon, can also serve to both inform and connect. In the words of Claudia Boscolo, “NIE can be considered as a

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<sup>107</sup> “[I]e storie non sono che asce di guerra da disseppellire” (5)

tool which enables the contemporary Italian reader to take an active part in the construction of meaning within a society that has progressively forgotten how to interpret its own history” (19).

In the case of *Asce di guerra*, Vitaliano is the storyteller and connector: “Uncontrollable, in my old age the desire to tell my story, to leave a testament to whomever might wish to receive it, had grown. For those who were with me in the jungle. For Budrio, wherever he has come to rest. For my children, so they know where the trails of hate lead” (244).<sup>108</sup> Vitaliano’s relationship with storytelling is both personal and global: he mentions his children and his companions, but the ambiguous “for whomever might wish to receive it” indicates that his story has a potentially broader reach. His statement also points to the *necessity* of storytelling: it is “uncontrollable” (244) because silence can no longer be tolerated. Furthermore, one of his last comments in the novel points unequivocally to the popular, transnational perspective the Wu Ming collective is seeking to offer:

Sometimes, on a clear evening, I look towards the south, the blue line of the Apennines sloping to the horizon. I think about the battles of the 36th [regiment]. I think about the five continents, immense stretches of land, multitudes of men and women on the march. I remember, as if I had seen them all myself, centuries of fighting and bloodshed. *I feel part of a universal community that crosses borders and connects epochs, the community of those who storm the sky.* (244-245, italics mine)<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> “Irrefrenabile, con la vecchiaia è cresciuta la voglia di raccontare, di lasciare una testimonianza a chi vorrà raccoglierla. Per chi era con me in quella giungla. Per Budrio, chissà dove riposano i suoi resti. Per i miei figli, che sappiano dove conducono i sentieri dell’odio” (244).

<sup>109</sup> “A volte, nelle serate terse, guardo verso sud, la linea blu degli Appennini che degrada sull’orizzonte. Penso alle battaglie della Trentaseiesima. Penso ai cinque continenti, sterminate distese di terra, moltitudini di uomini e donne in marcia. Ricordo, come se li avessi vissuti tutti, secoli di lotte e sangue. *Mi sento parte di una comunità universale*

World-wide locations from past to present, a multitude of people and experiences, global policy issues, and storytelling as a community-builder all contribute to the transnationalist perspective of popular culture the authors attempt to establish in these novels. Taken together, all of these elements present a clear challenge to Berlusconi's own approach to this type of culture, which is unabashedly anticommunist, *qualunquista*, and nationalistic. Though their project does not succeed on every level, the collective encourages readers to "fare mente locale e pensarci" (*Asce di guerra* 131), to think about what they see, hear, and read in the media and to understand that their own realities are more globally and temporally interconnected than they appear to be on the surface. By using popular culture to both comment on Berlusconi's dominance of the television media landscape, and to suggest alternatives, they follow the already-cited idea put forth by Lorella Zanardo that the medium itself is not the problem: "Its form and its language do not derive from its intrinsic nature; they are simply the result of the economic, political and cultural conditions in which it has developed. We can have the television that we deem best, or we can keep this one. Just like we can hurt ourselves, or try to feel better. It depends on us. All of us" (50).<sup>110</sup> The next chapter will further explore how the collective expands the possibilities of the "infinite niches and subgenres" (Wu Ming 1, "Memorandum" 18) of popular media through different forms of storytelling, resulting in a project that is not only transnational in its focus but also transmedial.

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*che supera i confini e congiunge le epoche, la comunità di coloro che prendono d'assalto il cielo*" (244-245, italics mine).

<sup>110</sup> "La sua forma e il suo linguaggio non derivano dalla sua natura intrinseca, sono semplicemente il risultato delle condizioni economiche, politiche e culturali in cui si è sviluppata. Possiamo avere la televisione che riteniamo migliore, oppure tenerci questa. Come possiamo farci del male, oppure cercare di star meglio. Dipende da noi. Tutti" (Zanardo 50).



We're becoming more and more aware of a fact:  
we don't do literature in the strict sense of the term.  
"Pure" literature, the world of academics, makes us feel claustrophobic.  
It's a narrow space inhabited by self-referential cliques.  
We are "storytellers by every means necessary" (Wu Ming 1).<sup>1</sup>

*Comunicare col pubblico in tutti i modi  
è una fatica d'amore.*

Charles Dickens (Wu Ming, [www.manituana.com/section/83](http://www.manituana.com/section/83))

**Chapter Three:**  
**Beyond the Text:**  
**The Transmedial and the Multisensorial in the Wu Ming Project**

**I. Premise**

Despite their many differences, one thing the Wu Ming project and Berlusconi share is a penchant for exploring the narrative and persuasive potential of different media. In this chapter I will examine the collective's transmedial and multisensorial practices - the live performances, the visual images that accompany the written texts, the musical soundtracks to their novels, and the physical engagement with the events and setting of the story - in order to show how these represent an alternative to Berlusconi's mass media hegemony, in which he too utilizes multiple media platforms to shape his personal, professional, and cultural narrative. Utilizing theories by Henry Jenkins and Renate Brosch, I will begin with an analysis of the role of visual images in their storytelling, with particular emphasis on their use of the website Pinterest for *Timira* (2012) and *Point Lenana* (2013). The next section will focus on the collective's use of sound, taking as examples their various "reading concert"<sup>2</sup> and the soundtrack/art exhibition for *54* (2002). I will ground my analysis in soundtrack theory, as well as ideas put forth by Richard Walsh and Graeme Harper on the relationship between narrative and music. Subsequently, I will deconstruct the group's most multisensorial and transmedial project to date, the website for *Manituana* (2007), in order to demonstrate the community-building potential of these types of narrative practices, particularly because of their affinities with gaming culture. This connection in particular shows how the technological advances of the Berlusconi era can also be used to challenge the individualistic and capitalistic tendencies of that same age, and how the act of storytelling remains one of the collective's greatest weapons.

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<sup>1</sup> See Bertante, et al. "The Perfect Storm, or Rather: The Monster Interview."

<sup>2</sup> This is Wu Ming's terminology: it describes the presentations of their novels that are set to music, or perhaps songs that are composed based on their works, with the text added in later. Musicians or musical genres often appear as protagonists of their stories, and most of the members of the collective were involved in music before the formation of Wu Ming.

## II. Defining Transmediality

After what I have demonstrated thus far about Wu Ming's approach to literature and art, it should come as no surprise that they do not limit themselves to strictly writing historical novels. On the contrary, the written text is merely a starting point for the creation of multiple and diverse other worlds that offer a variety of perspectives on narration, reading, and media. In this case, they take their cue from the former prime minister, whose own cultural domination is due in large part to his control of multiple media platforms.<sup>3</sup> While Berlusconi has encouraged television viewers to go beyond the medium of television to purchase one of his products (or to simply buy in to his own image and "cult of personality"), Wu Ming engage with multimedia to show that these channels can be used for 'art,' not just for profit, and that different forms of media can enhance a given work in various ways.

To start, it is useful to establish a working definition of transmediality. First and foremost, a transmedial narrative is one that features storytelling across different platforms. The Wu Ming collective uses printed materials, eBooks, "reading concerti," musical compositions, fan fiction, and Pinterest, among others. Inge Lanslots, who analyzes the presence of transmediality in the works of the New Italian Epic in general, defines this approach to art as "a community of knowledge under construction" (234),<sup>4</sup> referencing Henry Jenkins's theories on convergence culture. Jenkins himself states, citing Pierre Levy, "Transmedia storytelling is the ideal aesthetic form for an era of collective intelligence. [...] Participants pool information and tap each other's expertise as they work together to solve problems" ("Transmedia Storytelling 101"). In this sense, transmediality entails active collaboration, new media experimentation, and a commitment (and curiosity) to exploring the boundaries of storytelling.

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<sup>3</sup> See Ginsborg, *Silvio Berlusconi: Television, Power and Patrimony*.

<sup>4</sup> "una comunità di sapere in costruzione" (Lanslots 234). All translations from Italian to English are my own.

From a media perspective, Jenkins's theories are optimistic, but within the study of traditional narratology there is some debate over the definition of transmediality. Marie-Laure Ryan, in her volume *Narratology Beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality and Disciplinarity*, views the (traditional) speech-act approach to narrative as problematic because it considers narrative as a strictly language-based phenomenon that ignores both the visual and the musical. Rather, Ryan sees narrative as cognitive, rather than verbal: "There are, quite simply, meanings that are better expressed visually or musically than verbally, and these meanings should not be declared *a priori* irrelevant to the narrative experience" (10). The Wu Ming collective clearly echoes her view that narrative is more than just language, and the idea that thought is fundamentally narrative reflects their philosophy regarding storytelling and historical memory: we try to make sense of the world through "storification" (8).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the collective maintains that a culture can only reconnect to its history through the process of "mythopoesis,"<sup>6</sup> myth making as a process for regaining historical memory.

Finally, it is also important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to address the role of technology in transmedial storytelling, as its influence in shaping cultural phenomena is undeniable. In particular, experimentation with different media can, according to Ryan, result in a change of genre, and herein lies the potential challenge to Berlusconiism.<sup>7</sup> Genres originate from innovative texts that set a precedent, whereas media can only produce something once the technology exists. Therefore,

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<sup>5</sup> Ryan's definition of narrative as a cognitive template is as follows: 1. Narrative involves the construction of the mental image of a world populated with individuated agents (characters) and objects (spatial dimension). 2. This world must undergo not fully predictable changes of state that are caused by non-habitual physical events: either accidents (happenings) or deliberate actions by intelligent agents (temporal dimension). 3. In addition to being linked to physical states by causal relations, the physical events must be associated with mental states and events (goals, plans, emotions). This network of connections gives events coherence, motivation, closure, and intelligibility and turns them into a plot (logical, mental, and formal dimension) (4).

<sup>6</sup> See Wu Ming 1, "Memorandum."

<sup>7</sup> In Ryan's words, The use of different forms of digital technology to create, sustain, and diffuse narrative worlds extends to a discussion of media versus genre: genre allows for conventions to be adopted rather freely, while a medium "imposes its possibilities and limitations on the user" (20).

“new media give birth to new forms of text and to new forms of narrative, which in turn may be codified into genres” (Ryan 20). In this way, Wu Ming’s transmedial approach to narrative—which involves storytelling on different platforms in a way that is also multisensorial—has the ability to establish new narrative genres in the future, a legacy that could offer a more significant and long-lasting challenge to popular culture in the post-Berlusconi era.

### **III. The Transmedial and the Multisensorial, Part I: The Visual**

This analysis of Wu Ming’s potentially genre-bending transmedial- and multisensorial-ity begins with the visual, which is a particularly significant aspect of their project for various reasons. To start, their relationship with their own personal visual representation, as I discussed in the introduction, is a deliberate response to Berlusconi’s “cult of personality” (Thoburn 125). While one of the means by which the former prime minister gained consensus was to be ever present in Italian culture—that is to say, by putting his photographic image on nearly everything from billboards to book covers to television ads—the collective responds by doing just the opposite: they are never photographed or videotaped. The publicity photograph on their website at one time featured a faceless 1950s dance troupe and, following the departure of Wu Ming 3, Luca Di Meo, in 2008, showed a band with different musical instruments but the same face on all four members (see below). Currently, the image is of three masked cartoon men, similar to that featured on the cover of *L’Armata dei Sonnambuli* (2014).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> During the time of this writing, Wu Ming 5 also left the group. As of 2015, Wu Ming is now a trio.





(Images courtesy of [www.wumingfoundation.com](http://www.wumingfoundation.com))

Wu Ming 1 explains their reasoning,

No, photos, no filming. Once the writer becomes a face that's separate and alienated...it's a cannibalistic jumble: that face appears everywhere, almost always out of context. A photo is witness to my absence; it's a banner of distance and solitude. A photo paralyzes me, it freezes my life into an instant, it negates my ability to transform into something else. I become a 'character,' a stopgap used to quickly fill a page layout, an instrument that amplifies banality.<sup>9</sup>

However, even though they actively avoid their own visual representation, Wu Ming see the image as an intrinsic—and strategic—component of popular narrative. This view can surely be attributed to the historical context in which the group was born, in the prime of Berlusconi's media dominance. The different forms that the visual takes, though, reveal the creativity and innovation of the authors themselves. It is the addition of these representations that transforms Wu Ming's narrative production (already categorized, to use their terminology, as “unidentified narrative objects,” or “UNOs”<sup>10</sup>) into transmedial projects. One way the collective explores this potential is

<sup>9</sup> See “The Perfect Storm, or rather: The Monster Interview.”

<sup>10</sup> In Wu Ming 1's “Memorandum”, he refers to the more experimental literary production of the last twenty years as “unidentified narrative objects,” or UNOs. He describes UNOs as “Non sono più romanzi, non sono già qualcos'altro” (22). Emanuela Patti and Dimitri Chimenti further explore this classification, defending Wu Ming 1's theory not as an attempt to obliterate the novel genre but rather to advocate for its future evolution. Their analysis of the UNO

through the idea-sharing social media site Pinterest, where they (or their readers/collaborators) can post photographs, videos, or other related images to the Wu Ming or novel-specific ‘board.’<sup>11</sup>

In the majority of their novels, either those written *a dieci/otto mani*<sup>12</sup> or individually by the members of the group, the end of the text is followed by a *Titoli di coda*, a sort of bibliography to a work of fiction; the expansion to Pinterest means that these *Titoli di coda* now encompass the visual realm. A visit to the *Point Lenana* board on the site offers photographs of the novel’s protagonists (who are almost all real historical figures, such as Felice Benuzzi, Rodolfo Graziani, and Emilio Comici, to name a few), videos to illustrate certain events from the text, artists’ renderings of the various locations, from the Alps to Mount Kenya and all the cities and countryside in between, as well as comments and content from the authors, Einaudi editors, and readers to further support the visual experience. The wealth of information and its contribution to the world of the text is explained in the title of the board: “If a book has closing credits, it can also have extra content: images, sounds, video and other related elements to accompany an unidentified narrative object by Wu Ming 1 and Roberto Santachiara” (*Point Lenana* board, *Pinterest*).<sup>13</sup>

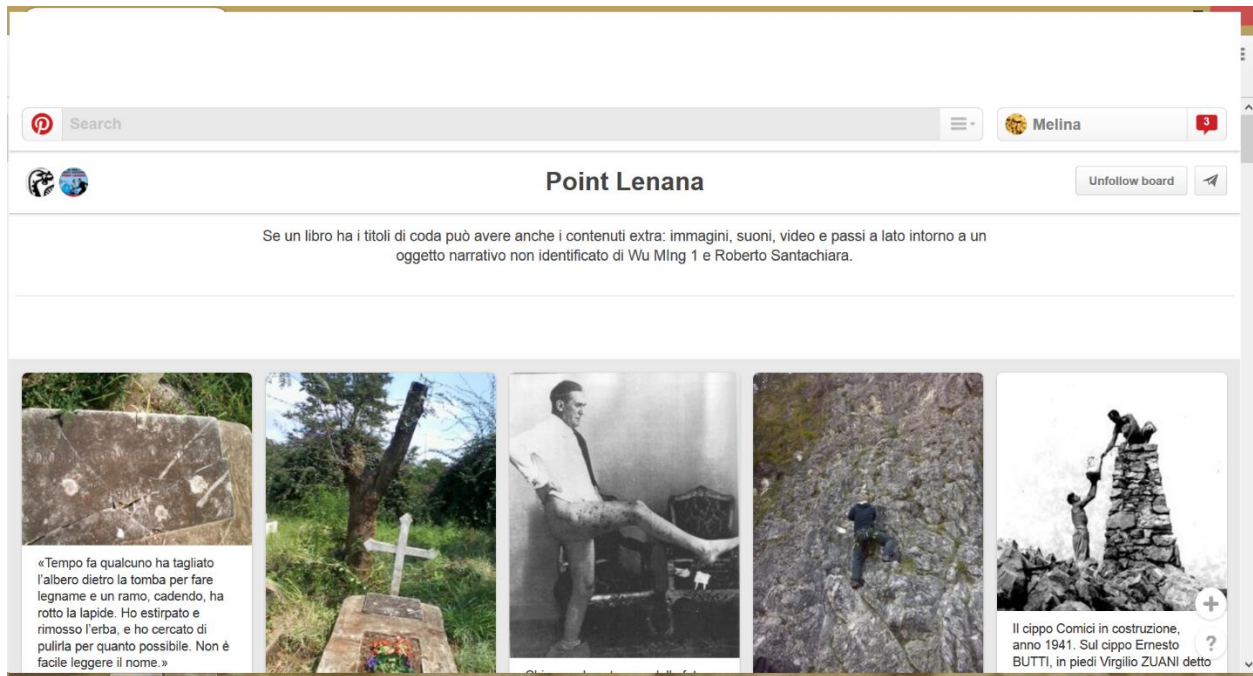
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makes the argument that these more experimental forms, which incorporate multiple genres, literary and non, can be labeled as an “ibridazione eso-letteraria” (1) and perhaps represent a more sincere attempt to confront reality and call into question our means of communication: “sono la consapevolezza e la presa di responsabilità nei confronti del potere manipolatorio che il discorso letterario, così come ogni altro mezzo espressivo, esercita sulla realtà” (3).

<sup>11</sup> These ‘boards’ have the function of a bulletin board, in which users can ‘pin’ information that is useful or relative to that particular topic. The topics of these boards seem infinite, from recipes, to fitness practices, to wedding ideas, to book recommendations.

<sup>12</sup> The collective was originally made up of five members; Wu Ming 3 left the group in 2008. The collectively written novels that followed, *Altai*, *L’Armata dei Sonnambuli*, and *L’invisibile ovunque* were written by four authors rather than five.

<sup>13</sup> “Se un libro ha i titoli di coda può avere anche i contenuti extra: immagini, suoni, video e passi a lato intorno a un oggetto narrativo non identificato di Wu Ming 1 e Roberto Santachiara.” All translations from *Point Lenana* board, *Pinterest* are my own.



(Screenshot #1)

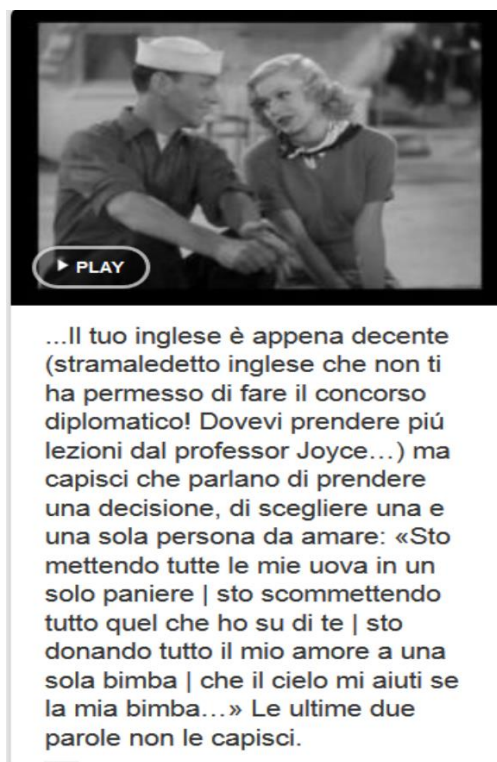
What is perhaps most striking about this impressive array of “extra” (*Point Lenana* board, *Pinterest*) content is that no matter how varied the visual representation, the written text still maintains its centrality: the majority of photographs, drawings and videos feature captions with a pertinent citation from the novel itself. One particularly effective example from the board in question will demonstrate the convergence between these different media.

### ***Point Lenana and Follow the Fleet: Convergence Culture at Work***

Published in 2013, *Point Lenana* lays bare its visual dimension as early as the cover of the printed text, where it features an image from the 1936 Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers film *Follow the Fleet* (dir. Sandrich). The authors further explain this reference through the expanded content on the collective’s Pinterest board for the novel, with a link to a video of the particular scene described in the text, the performance of the Irving Berlin song “I’m Putting All My Eggs in One Basket.”

A caption links the two worlds of text and image, taken directly from the moment in the text in which the protagonist Felice Benuzzi sees the film but can only partially comprehend it:

Your English is barely acceptable (cursed English, which prevented you from taking the diplomacy exam! You should have done more lessons with Professor Joyce...) but you understand that they're talking about making a decision, about choosing one and only one person to love: "I'm putting all my eggs in one basket | I'm betting everything I've got on you | I'm giving all my love to one baby | Heaven help me if my baby don't..." You don't understand the last two words. (*Point Lenana* board, *Pinterest*)<sup>14</sup>



(Screenshot #2)

<sup>14</sup>“...Il tuo inglese è appena decente (stramaledetto inglese che non ti ha permesso di fare il concorso diplomatico! Dovevi prendere più lezioni dal professor Joyce...) ma capisci che parlano di prendere una decisione, di scegliere una e una sola persona da amare: ‘Sto mettendo tutte le mie uova in un solo paniere | sto scommettendo tutto quel che ho su di te | sto donando tutto il mio amore a una sola bimba | che il cielo mi aiuti se la mia bimba...’ Le ultime due parole non le capisci...” (*Point Lenana* board, *Pinterest*).

This constant reconnection with the text is an effective illustration of the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between word and image. In Jenkinsian terms, this use of Pinterest, with the ‘pinning’ of black and white photographs and archival footage, along with more recent pictures and video of the people and places mentioned in the text, represents a moment of “convergence” (Jenkins) not just of old and new media, but also of word and image, and history and popular culture. Otherwise stated, it highlights the *coexistence* of new visual and old textual media, illustrating how the former does not necessarily replace the latter but rather builds on and enhances it. For Jenkins, these moments of convergence have a potential community-building effect, creating a participatory culture, which in turn cultivates the formation of a collective intelligence. This is also both the objective and the philosophy of the Wu Ming collective (they are self-declared devotees of Jenkins’s theories), but the limited following of these boards suggests that whatever community they do manage to build using this medium is a small one.

This is not to say that the convergence itself is not effective from a transmedial point of view. In fact, the choice of *Follow the Fleet* is an interesting illustration of this mixing of media in many respects. First, a Hollywood film starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers is assuredly a piece of popular culture, created by mass media and intended for the masses. It has also, with the passing of time, taken on greater historical and cultural significance than it had at the time it was released: now it is a piece of ‘Americana,’ an artifact of a certain time period and a part of the *oeuvre* of the famous dancing pair. This example is one of many employed by the collective throughout their works to mobilize popular icons and artifacts to bridge the gap between past and present, artistic traditions, and, as in the case of *Follow the Fleet*, even national cultures.

Felice Benuzzi views the film in Rome and writes about it in his autobiography, alternately titled *No Picnic on Mount Kenya* (1953) and *Fuga sul Kenya* (1948).<sup>15</sup> Wu Ming 1 and Roberto Santachiara come across this anecdote decades later and include it as a significant event in *Point Lenana*, thus showing a genre convergence of autobiography and biography. Wu Ming 1 and Santachiara also choose to add the visual to their UNO,<sup>16</sup> showing Rogers and Astaire dancing across Mount Kenya on the cover of their book (Screenshot #3). They consider the episode so emblematic of the cultural intersections and confrontations in the novel that they create an immediate visual correlation between the landscape and this piece of popular culture, even though the two are not obviously linked from a geographical or temporal point of view. Right from the cover, however, the authors communicate to the reader that the two are connected, and the visual immediately engages him/her, who is surely asking him/herself what the dancing duo has to do with the mountain behind them, even before he/she arrives at the sections of the book dedicated to Benuzzi's experience with the film.



(Screenshot #3)

<sup>15</sup>Interestingly, one is actually not a translation of the other but rather a rewriting; the English version, written by the author himself, contains different anecdotes and appears to be more appropriate towards an English audience. This is particularly notable since Benuzzi was a prisoner of war in Africa under British control.

<sup>16</sup>“Unidentified Narrative Object.” See Introduction, pp. 5-7.

Emanuela Patti discusses a similar presence of paratext in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Petrolio* (published posthumously in 1992) and Giuseppe Genna's *Italia De Profondis* (2008),<sup>17</sup> using Pasolini's own ideas on cinema to refer to this extra literary material as "pre-literary" (in relation to "pre-filmic"). According to Patti, such material "enables a constant objective scrutiny of the literary object, and emphasizes the gaps, discontinuities, superstructures (such as ideologies) existing between reality and fiction/writing" (89). The presence of pre-literary material, such as the image of Astaire and Rogers in the example, encourages a reading beyond the boundaries of the text and attempts to "'unhinge' fictionality in order both to prevent the reader from falling into its alienating state and to attempt to keep life and writing as close as possible" (90). In other words, the open-ended nature of paratext in a novel provides the reader with more rhetorical power while diminishing (for the better, in Pasolini's view) that of the author.

It is important to note that this choice for the cover of the novel makes use of popular culture icons from a time and place in the past that might not be immediately recognizable to today's average reader (Italian or not). Why deliberately place a visual reference to a film from the 1930s, which, though popular at the time, does not carry an immediate significance for a 21<sup>st</sup> century reader? What the image does communicate is that there are multiple, surprising narrative threads at work in the novel, and that even seemingly unrelated ones will eventually be woven together. It also reveals the global nature of the project: a novel by Italian authors named after a mountain in Kenya with tap dancing white Americans on the cover. This is a hallmark of the collective's work: they consistently seek to show that history is interconnected and effectively transnational, and that media-generated popular culture can be a bridge-builder among different groups and nations (not just a consensus-building agent of hegemony).

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<sup>17</sup> Genna's novel (2008) is mentioned in Wu Ming 1's "Memorandum" as an example of a work that belongs to the *New Italian Epic*.

Through this use of Pinterest, Wu Ming illustrate the reverberations of seemingly unrelated events, people, and even works of art not only to the Italy of the past but also to the globally connected world of the present. Whether this results in Jenkins's "collective intelligence" is difficult to determine at this juncture, particularly in light of their limited following on the website, but what the collective does do is challenge readers to be more transnational in their interpretations of world events. This shift goes against the nationalistic tone of the Fascists featured in the novel, and of the often-similar patriotic rhetoric of the Berlusconi era.

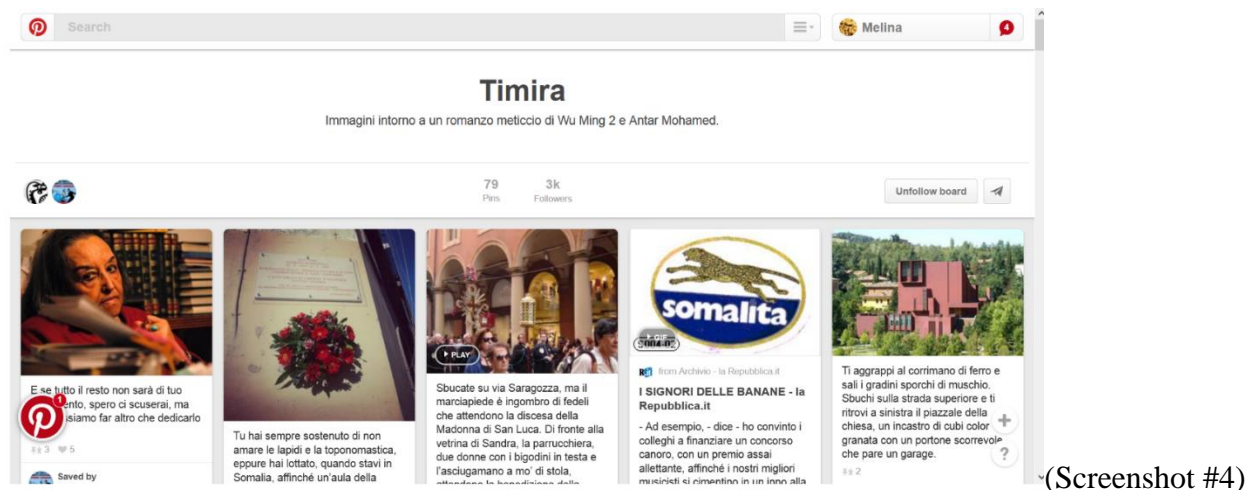
### ***Timira*: The Colonial Past Becomes Present**

*Point Lenana* was preceded on Pinterest by *Timira*, whose board features the same variety of photographs, video, and paintings of mostly real historical places and figures, all focused on a similar challenge to the forgotten colonial period and the historical revisionism of Berlusconiism.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, one of the appealing aspects of Pinterest as a transmedial platform is that it offers three possibilities for the expansion of a story, as in the *Follow the Fleet* example: a 'pinner' can post a visual image, add a caption, and include a link (to a video, an article, etc...).

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<sup>18</sup> Both novels also include Africa and Italy's colonial past as primary themes, with *Timira* tackling the aftermath of that conquest and its repercussions in the present day. Isabella was born to a Somali mother and an Italian father who had been sent to that country during the colonial period. In a relatively unusual turn of events, she and her brother Giorgio were recognized by their father as his offspring and were primarily raised in Italy, attending Roman schools. Isabella's choice to eventually return to Somalia, where she married a Somali man with whom she had a son, Antar (the co-author of the novel), and the subsequent difficulties she faced when trying to return to Italy in the 1990s (as an Italian citizen) resonate quite strongly with present day issues of policy and migration.





As a case in point, on the *Timira* board, there is an image of the front page of the newspaper *l'Unità* from 1969 that mentions Somalia on the first page, in block letters. The caption for this particular pin is: “Five days after the assassination of President Shermarke COUP D’ETAT IN SOMALIA power is assumed by a “Revolutionary Council” made up of military and police officials – The “putsch” was not to result in bloodshed – All ministers arrested – The new regime wants to ‘continue with Shermarke’s politics’” (*Timira* board, *Pinterest*).<sup>19</sup> Clicking on the image allows the user to zoom in, and a second click redirects to a web page for Jaalle Siyad, Somali President from 1969-1991, on which he publishes a “Revolutionary Speech by Mohamed Siad Barre on 21 October 1969.” In this speech, Siad Barre calls for an independent Somali nation:

We will abolish bribery, nepotism and tribalism. Tribalism was the only way in which foreigners got their chance of dividing our people. We will close all roads used by colonialists to enter our country and into our affairs. We will build up a great Somali nation, strongly united and welded together to live in peace. [...] We will make Somalia a respected country in its internal and external policies. I would

<sup>19</sup> “A cinque giorni dall’assassinio del presidente Shermarke COLPO DI STATO IN SOMALIA i poteri assunti da un “Consiglio rivoluzionario” composto da ufficiali dell’esercito e della polizia – Il “putsch” non avrebbe provocato spargimenti di sangue – Tutti i ministri arrestati – Il nuovo regime vuole “proseguire la politica di Shermarke” (*Timira* board.” *Pinterest*). All translations from *Timira* board, *Pinterest* are my own.

like to ask all Somalis to come out and build their nation, a strong nation, to use all their efforts, energy, wealth and brains in developing their country. (Mohamed Siad Barre)<sup>20</sup>



(Screenshot #5)

This example reveals both transmediality and intermediality on a variety of levels. First, much like there is a merging of biography and autobiography in *Point Lenana*, here there is a genre convergence of literature and reportage, as the collective not only references actual historical events but also calls the reader's attention to the media coverage of those events. The collective is constantly taking the media to task for their responsibility in the loss of national historical memory, particularly of the colonial period.<sup>21</sup> Their work is often a study, not just of history, but also of media culture, and the constant reconnection to real newspaper articles and television broadcasts is not only intermedial but also overtly critical of the business of journalism.<sup>22</sup>

As in *Point Lenana*, this 'pin' also directly references the text, as the novel itself features sections labeled "archivio storico," ("historical archive") and in this case, on page 267, the actual

<sup>20</sup> See *My Country and My People: The Collected Speeches of Major-General Mohamed Siad Barre, President, the Supreme Revolutionary Council, Somali Democratic Republic*.

<sup>21</sup> Most notably in the diffusion of the idea of the "Italiani, brava gente?" See Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?*

<sup>22</sup> See Chapter Two, pp. 80-100.

headline of the newspaper in question is featured. Through the digital platform of Pinterest, Wu Ming are more able to present both sides of the story, by connecting the (left wing) Italian interpretation of the event (“The crises of a hypothetical independence from neocolonialism”<sup>23</sup>) to the Somali perspective (“We will build up a great Somali nation,” Barre). In addition, Siad Barre’s declaration is dated 1969 but is then re-published on a new platform by another, modern-day Somali politician. The version featured on the website is also in English; on page 269 of *Timira*, the Italian version can be found. Therefore, with just two clicks, the authors recreate the experience of those three pages of written text, connect the historical event to present day, and expand their potential audience through a crossing of linguistic borders.

### **The Visual as (Transnational) Community Builder**

So what is it about the visual that is so effective in transforming the narrative and capturing the reader’s attention, and why is it such a fundamental cornerstone of the Wu Ming project? Culturally speaking, the collective takes a page directly out of Berlusconi’s playbook. Marco Belpoliti, in his book *Il corpo del capo*,<sup>24</sup> explains the latter’s obsession with photographs. He uses as the basis for his argument Susan Sontag’s idea that “collecting photographs is collecting the world” (Belpoliti 14, citing Sontag *Sulla fotografia*),<sup>25</sup> and he demonstrates how Berlusconi utilizes his own photographed image to frame his personal and political narrative. According to Belpoliti, “The peculiar thing that the Italian tycoon and politician seems to possess is the capacity to construct a story based on photographic images: he has a story to tell and he knows how to tell

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<sup>23</sup> “Le crisi di una indipendenza ipotetica dal neocolonialismo” (*Timira* 267).

<sup>24</sup> See Chapter Two, pg. 107.

<sup>25</sup> “collezionare fotografie è collezionare il mondo” (Belpoliti 14).

the story that he wants to appropriate” (15).<sup>26</sup> Wu Ming do not necessarily use the visual image as a point of departure, but it is surely a key part of the final iteration of their overall project. They, like Berlusconi, understand that photographs or pictures can render narrative more effective and accessible to many different types of audiences.

This universal nature of the visual is possible, according to Renate Brosch, because images are adapted to different contexts more easily than texts. Since they require less cognitive effort, they succeed in building communities more easily:

[images] become agents in so far as they contribute to the shaping of identity and difference in the process of travelling through different medial and cultural contexts. However, their impact or ‘performativity’ is not exhausted in providing an aid to self-fashioning and othering, as it were, but extends into the world of cultural practice as migrating images can provide the basis for the formation of interested communities of readerships. (51)

Brosch also distinguishes between ‘images’ as carriers of ‘concepts,’ as opposed to ‘pictures,’ which represent a visual display. Images-as-concepts build on the idea of things one has already heard about and seen, and they are not just visual in the traditional sense of the term: “rather, they are always the result of an ideologically informed way of seeing” (52), part of the cultural imaginary that “always already precedes the picture” (52) and which is constantly being shaped and reshaped. Brosch further explains (by integrating the work of linguist Lakoff with Bergson) the emotional reaction that an image might trigger by arguing that the latter exists in both our unconscious and our consciousness and is therefore linked to mood and affect: “We have but

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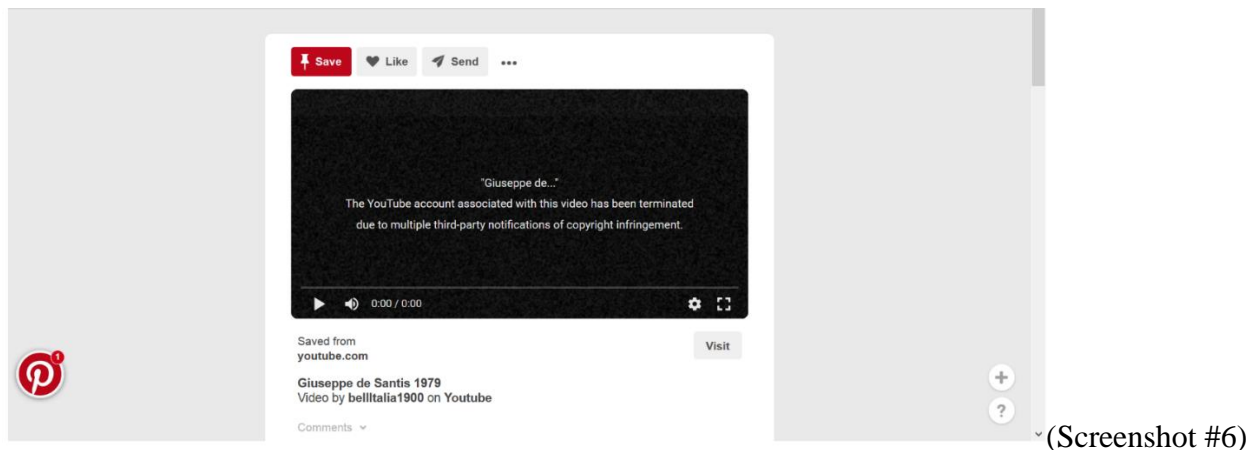
<sup>26</sup> “Quello che il tycoon e politico italiano sembra possedere di peculiare è proprio la capacità di costruire un racconto partendo dalle immagini fotografiche: ha una storia da raccontare e sa raccontare la storia di cui vuole appropriarsi” (Belpoliti 15).

two means of expression, the concept and the image. It is by means of concepts that a system develops; it is via images that it intensifies” (Bergson qtd. in Brosch 54). In these terms, the photographs, videos, and paintings the Wu Ming collective use to ‘illustrate’ their novels on Pinterest build on concepts that are always already present in the mind of the reader; the images thus intensify the textual world, provoking a deeper emotional reaction in the person reading—and seeing—they. Furthermore, the fact that there is a migration between the image posted in a social media system and the text (whether it be the electronic version or the traditional book) means that mediation by the reader is necessary; he or she ‘remediates’ between one medium and another. In these terms, the open nature of the digital realm contributes significantly to Wu Ming’s transnational community, as the collective is able to foster relationships across borders not limited by time, space, or citizenship.

However, despite the transmedial possibilities that a platform like Pinterest might offer, the reality of these communities is likely different. As of July 21, 2015, the *Timira* board had 2,786 followers. Einaudi editore, in general, has close to 4,000. Penguin Random House, “the world’s largest English language trade publisher, bringing you the best in fiction, nonfiction, and children’s books” (*Pinterest*) has over 1,400,000. For a smaller market (and in Italian rather than English), almost 3,000 followers seems like a respectable number, especially for a more ‘niche’ platform like Pinterest. The numbers for *Point Lenana* are similar, yet the overall Wu Ming Foundation board has only 622. These numbers suggest that the expansion to Pinterest primarily engages those who have already read the novels, and does not contribute a great deal to the diffusion of these works on a broader scale.

Another question regarding the effectiveness of Pinterest for their project is a purely technical one. As I already mentioned, this platform allows users to pin a photo with a caption,

and link that photo to either a website, a video, or simply an enlarged version of the photo itself. Part of Wu Ming’s archival work involves recovering pertinent historical footage from the RAI. In numerous cases, however, it is not possible to view the videos they have linked due to either expired URLs or copyright infringement. A particularly pointed example from the *Timira* board involves film director Giuseppe de Santis (1917-1997), whose *Bitter Rice* (1949) was one of Isabella Marincola’s first acting opportunities. The caption to the video of a 1979 interview with the director, taken from the text, reads: “De Santis is a Communist, he believes in the International Workingmen’s Association and in my opinion he wants you to represent it, to say that his rice workers are to be understood as a symbol for the class war, right here [in Italy] just like in the Third World” (155).<sup>27</sup> Clicking on the link to the video, the following message appears:



In a discussion of class warfare and communist politics, this type of ‘capitalist’ reaction—whether this is what the collective intended or not—has perhaps even greater resonance than the content of the actual video.

<sup>27</sup> “De Santis è un comunista, crede nell’Internazionale dei lavoratori e secondo me ti vuole per rappresentarla, per dire che le sue mondine sono da intendere come un simbolo della lotta di classe, qui da noi come nel Terzo mondo” (155). The “ti” in this caption is referring to Isabella; part of the novel was written in this conversational tone between the authors and their subject.

Technical difficulties and the size of these online communities aside, there is evidence that, on a small scale, their project is expanding through their readers, though it could also indicate another potential problem for the collective. For one, they appear to have abandoned Pinterest for the time being: Wu Ming did not create a Pinterest board for their most recent collective novel *L'Armata dei Sonnambuli*, and maintenance of the *Point Lenana* and *Timira* boards, as evidenced by the expired links, is sparse or non-existent. However, a board for *L'Armata dei Sonnambuli* exists. It is unclear from the website if the 'pinner,' Antonio Bitti, has any association with the collective, but judging from the other boards on his page, the French Revolution is simply one of his many interests. He does not appear to have the official 'sponsorship' of Einaudi, though the publishing house is among the followers of his board. Just like the collective, all the images, links, and videos he pins relate back to the novel by way of a caption. His would appear to be a form of visual 'fan fiction.'<sup>28</sup> However, the Wu Ming foundation does not follow his board. In fact, the collective only follows Einaudi editore. This is another indication of the limited world of Pinterest for them. If they followed more like-minded pinners (or even not like-minded pinners), they would surely draw more interest in their own boards. Pinterest offers potential for a different sort of interaction, with respect to *Giap!* or Twitter, but the collective seems to have utilized it primarily as a platform on which to display visual images, rather than as a site for engagement and building connections for the long term.

#### **IV. The Transmedial and the Multisensorial, Part II: Sound and Music**

Despite their different overall objectives, both Wu Ming and Berlusconi place importance on visual images with regards to the narrative process. In addition, the collective and the ex prime

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<sup>28</sup> See Jenkins, "Fan Culture," in *Textual Poachers*.

minister, a former cruise ship entertainer who marked his 2011 exit from office with the release of a collection of love songs,<sup>29</sup> are also active in the musical realm. In fact, sound plays a key role in the collective's transmedial projects; most of its members come from musical backgrounds, having been a part of different bands before forming Wu Ming, and the possibility of telling the same story on different platforms opens the doors for them to combine these two narrative forms. It is telling that the group tends to describe themselves as a "band of novelists" ([www.yoyomundi.com/54](http://www.yoyomundi.com/54)): the connection between literature and music is clearly fundamental to their project.<sup>30</sup>

The primary link between the two, according to Richard Walsh, is rhythm, "our most basic experience of temporal structure" (56). In fact, Wu Ming's soundtracks and "reading musicati" make use of both the storytelling element and the rhythmic component of music in order to shape their narratives. Moreover, the fact that Wu Ming refer to the musical accompaniment to their novels and projects as "soundtracks" further links their literary production not only to the auditory, but also to the visual, and particularly the cinematic, realm. It is my contention that looking at the sonorous element of the collective's project through the lens of cinema and soundtracks sheds light not only on Wu Ming's affinity for film and its place in popular culture, but also on the connections between sound, image, and the written word that they attempt to draw through their use of different media. In other words, there is something inherently cinematographic about the collective's overall project, from the narrative to the musical accompaniment to the visual. As such, it is useful to look

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<sup>29</sup> The album is entitled *Vero amore* and features twelve long songs written by the former prime minister and performed by Mariano Apicella.

<sup>30</sup> See Harper, ed., *Sound and Film in Visual Media: A Critical Overview*. See also Walsh, "The Common Basis of Narrative and Music: Somatic, Social, and Affective Foundations," in *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*; Seaton, "Narrative in Music: The Case of Beethoven's 'Tempest' Sonata;" Reay, *Music in Film: Soundtracks and Synergy*.



at how music serves narrative in the cinema in order to understand its role in Wu Ming's works and how it functions to subvert previous, Berlusconi-era norms of popular culture production.

### **Literary “soundtracks”**

David Neumeyer and James Buhler identify four principle functions of music in (cinematic) narrative: 1. it provides temporal unity; 2. it identifies recurring motifs, phrases, or cues, allowing viewers to make associations between temporally disparate segments; 3. it introduces emotion; 4. it is referential in that certain sounds can be used to access already existing knowledge or associations about a person, an event, or a culture (43). Wu Ming's “reading musicati,” for example, though not cinematic in the strictest sense of the term, often abide by all four of these principles. In the same vein, Pauline Reay, in her volume *Music in Film: Soundtracks and Synergy*, discusses the intrinsic interdisciplinarity of music in film, which might further explain the collective's natural inclination towards its inclusion in their projects. By way of examples from films by Martin Scorsese and Pedro Almodóvar, Reay demonstrates how a compilation soundtrack that features popular songs, original music and classical pieces, through strategic use of lyrics and the “extra-textual meanings conveyed by the songs” (Anderson qtd. in Reay 40), can blend the boundaries between high and low culture and render the cinematic narrative world richer and more complex. Wu Ming use a similar approach to the musical component of their transmedial projects, thus highlighting even further the fundamentally cinematic nature of their artistic production.

The examples of such convergence, while not necessarily endless, are numerous and varied. Some of their works, such as novels like *54* and *Manituana*, have soundtracks that were created after the publication of the written text (thus, “non-diegetic,”), while others, such as

*Pontiac*<sup>31</sup> and *Razza Partigiana* were born directly as “reading musicati” (*Giap!*). Three bands made albums inspired entirely by their novels: *Yo Yo Mundi* (54), *Skinshout* (*Altai*), and *Funambolique* (*Arzéstula*), but the most common musical occurrence, according to *Giap!*, is the individual song, composed either by their readers/followers of their own initiative or a result of purposeful collaborations by the collective. For example, in the years 2014-2015, the collective was more active musically than ever. During that time, they not only organized presentations of *L’Armata dei sonnambuli* throughout Italy, but they also established seven different “reading concerti” with different ensembles.<sup>32</sup> In addition, they also formed the Wu Ming Contingent, a punk rock band, whose first album *Bioscop*, inspired by the aforementioned novel, was released in 2014.

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<sup>31</sup> *Pontiac* is a “spin-off” of *Manituana*. I will discuss it in greater depth later in the chapter.

<sup>32</sup> These concerts are as follows: 1. *L’Alfabeto delle orme*, featuring Wu Ming 2 and Frida X. Texts from the anthology *The Footpath Way*, translated by WM2. 2. *Emilio Comici Blues*, Wu Ming 1 and Funambolique. WM1 extracted the chapters from *Point Lenana* that dealt with the famed alpinist Comici, put them in order, and asked frequent collaborators Funambolique to write the music. 3. *GODIImenti*, Wu Ming 2 and Egle Sommacal. A laboratory for collective writing organized by WM2 between January and June 2014. Different collectives such as Spinta dal Bass – No Tav, reAzione, Comitato No Tav, No Rigassificatore Offshore, Monte Libero, Opzione Zero e Presidio Europa – No Tav, “tutti impegnati contro alcune delle Grandi Opere Dannose, Inutili e Imposte (GODII) che devastano, impoveriscono e opprimono il territorio e la democrazia italiana” ([www.recommon.org/godimenti](http://www.recommon.org/godimenti)). 4. Quattro, Wu Ming 2 and Frida X. Reading of the text for the inauguration of a photographic exhibition of the same name. 5. *Razza Partigiana*, Wu Ming 2 and supergruppo, on tour since 2009. Thirteen passages, with thirteen original musical compositions to tell the story of Giorgio Marincola (mentioned above in discussion of *Timira*). 6. *Surgelati*, Wu Ming 2 and Contradamerla. “Opera a 10 mani per scrittore e gruppo rock”, a project that was originally commissioned by [comunanze.net](http://comunanze.net) for the festival “Nutrire la propria identità” in Le Marche. “Surgelati” è stato interamente scritto, composto e prodotto in forma collettiva e laboratoriale da Wu Ming 2 e la Contradamerla. Articolato come fosse un concept-album, lo spettacolo prova a reinventare la forma concerto, arricchendola di una definita continuità narrativa e attingendo ad universi espressivi eterogenei. “Surgelati” non è il semplice adattamento di una serie di testi a una serie di musiche, ma un esperimento di fusione (a caldo) di entrambi gli elementi in un solo corpo emozionale e di senso, in cui succede che la parola possa interpretare la parte del suono o, viceversa, che sia la musica a farsi racconto. Wu Ming 2 & Contradamerla mettono in suoni e parole (strettamente avvinghiati) l’odissea sul posto di ogni essere umano, la permanente distanza tra quello che si è per gli altri e quello che si vorrebbe essere. Un viaggio impossibile da programmare, in cui convivono slanci in avanti, passi indietro, memoria e perdita di memoria, inattese deviazioni e rientri alla base” ([www.molotovbooking.com/roster/wu-ming-2](http://www.molotovbooking.com/roster/wu-ming-2)). 7. *Zó bòt!!!*, Cvasi Ming: Wu Ming 1 and 2/3 of the Switters. Inspired by the representation of the Terror and violence in *L’Armata dei sonnambuli*.

## Yo Yo Mundi and 54

It is clear from this long list of examples that the collective ‘hears’ their novels, just like they ‘see’ them, and many of their followers share their multisensorial approach to narrative. In particular, as I mentioned above, soundtracks have been created for both *54* and *Manituana*. In terms of the former, created by the group Yo Yo Mundi, the goal of the album is to “interpret certain moments of the book and to give voice and life to many of the extraordinary protagonists of the work.”<sup>33</sup>

The creation of the album was a transmedial project in itself, as it was recorded live, with the performance featuring photographs from the time as well as a previously unpublished text from Wu Ming. The collective offers a short introduction to the project on Yo Yo Mundi’s website, referring first to the unique experience of working in a collective and how this polyphony naturally leads to novels that “proliferate with stories, characters, points of view, and perspectives.”<sup>34</sup> This variety gives these works a broader appeal, as there is something for every type of reader. In the words of the collective, “The vocation of our way of making literature is without a doubt popular,”<sup>35</sup> and music is surely a component of that popular approach. They go on to talk about the particular multiplicity of *54*, which lends itself to such musical and cinematic collaborations:

*54* is the most choral of our novels, in which the roots of our process are the most exposed, putting into play a variety of masks; it is also the novel with the most stories and the one which lends itself most naturally to cinematic and theatrical

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<sup>33</sup> “interpretare alcuni momenti tratti dal libro e per dare voce e vita a molti degli straordinari protagonisti dell’opera” (Yo Yo Mundi, June 2004.). Yo Yo Mundi also resemble Wu Ming in terms of the structure of their group. Like the collective at the time of the release of the album (no longer true, since Wu Ming 3 left the group), there are five members, all of whom have been in the group for over twenty years. They dedicate much of their artistic time to collaborations with different artists and share a creative space in the center of Acqui Terme, in Piedmont, their home city. In other words, they appear to uphold many of the same ideals as the collective, making this collaboration a logical one. All translations from the website [www.yoyomundi.com/54](http://www.yoyomundi.com/54) are mine.

<sup>34</sup> “pullulano di storie, di personaggi, di punti di vista, di angolazioni” ([www.yoyomundi.com/54](http://www.yoyomundi.com/54)).

<sup>35</sup> “La vocazione del nostro modo di fare letteratura è senz’altro popolare” ([www.yoyomundi.com/54](http://www.yoyomundi.com/54)).

adaptation. Furthermore, many of the idiosyncrasies and technical methods of the collective are borrowed directly from music: Wu Ming loves to see itself as a band.<sup>36</sup>

As Wu Ming/Luther Blissett stated when they broke out with *Q*, regarding writing as a collective: “It’s like Jazz: great collective spirit, group arrangements and individual solos.”<sup>37</sup> Like jazz, there is the idea of reciprocal interaction, of a ‘call and response’ approach, and this is how the collective characterizes their collaboration with Yo Yo Mundi as well. In the introduction, they make clear that this interaction has a broader scope: “An energetic, virtuous cycle is activated: Wu Ming touched hidden chords in Yo Yo Mundi. Yo Yo Mundi touched hidden chords in which they conceived of situations and characters. Together, we are seeking to touch an ever broader audience.”<sup>38</sup>

The project itself consists of a CD in which “the music of YYM and the novel *54* intersect in surprising ways,”<sup>39</sup> which would go on to become a theatrical production as well. On stage, Wu Ming’s words are brought to life by actors, with the music of Yo Yo Mundi providing the soundtrack in the background. The representation is organized around the musical interpretation of various characters/events from the text, like Cary Grant and the McGuffin Electric television set. While the actors read and the musicians play, photographs featuring the various historical realities flash in the background. In this way, music serves almost all of the functions outlined by

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<sup>36</sup> “E tra i nostri romanzi *54* è quello più corale, quello in cui le radici del nostro modo d’essere sono esposte mettendo in scena una varietà di maschere traboccanti, quello più denso di storie e quello che pare naturalmente adatto a una resa cinematografica o teatrale. In più, molte delle idiosincrasie e dei procedimenti tecnici del collettivo sono mutuati pari pari dalla musica: Wu Ming ama vedere se stesso come una band” (Wu Ming [www.yoyomundi.com/54](http://www.yoyomundi.com/54)).

<sup>37</sup> “*Manituana*, the Clash of Civilizations and George Bush’s Ancestors.” Interview by Loredana Lipperini.

<sup>38</sup> “Si attiva un circolo energetico virtuoso: Wu Ming ha toccata corde riposte negli Yo Yo Mundi. Gli Yo Yo Mundi hanno toccata corde riposte in chi concepì situazioni e personaggi. Insieme, cerchiamo di toccare un pubblico sempre più vasto” ([www.yoyomundi.com/54](http://www.yoyomundi.com/54)). This might be one of the only times that Wu Ming explicitly declare that they are seeking to expand their audience, and that one of the goals of their multi- and transmedial approach is the diffusion of their works.

<sup>39</sup> “la musica di YYM e il romanzo *54* s’intrecciano in modo sorprendente” ([www.yoyomundi.com/54](http://www.yoyomundi.com/54)).

Neumeyer and Buhler with regard to narrative. It serves as the temporal glue of the presentation, as it is the one consistent element amidst a backdrop of constantly changing images and textual moments. Certain songs have been composed for specific characters and events in the text, and the emotional impact of the soundtrack in the live presentation is undeniable. Finally, the soundtrack is referential in the way it evokes a certain place and time, particularly with the help of the background images; however, its more significant feat lies in the fact that even though the songs and images represent 1954, both are equally applicable and appropriate to the present day or the more recent past.

One example in particular shows this potential universality of both music and theme, as well as the collective's continued dedication to copyleft and community. One of the songs from the performance, "Non c'è nessun dopoguerra" (lyrics by Wu Ming, music by Paolo E. Archetti Maestri, performed by Yo Yo Mundi), is, in the first place, a direct reference to the novel: *54* begins with this poem.<sup>40</sup> The song was clearly composed for the soundtrack for *54*; however, there is also another video of the song, available on YouTube, which was created by the association "Adottando"<sup>41</sup> of Bologna, which offers aid and negotiates adoptions for and with Bosnia-Herzegovina. The video features images of the war-torn country in an interesting crossover moment. In the first place, the relationship to the Balkans is not completely out of place in terms of the themes of the novel itself, which deals with the former Yugoslavia and features Dubrovnik as one of its many settings. The situation the authors describe in that area at that time, particularly

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<sup>40</sup> "Non c'è nessun 'dopoguerra'. /Gli stolti chiamavano 'pace' il semplice allontanarsi del fronte. /Gli stolti difendevano la pace sostenendo il braccio armato del denaro. /Oltre la prima duna gli scontri proseguivano. Zanne di animali chimerici affondate nelle/carni, il Cielo pieno d'acciaio e fumi, intere culture estirpate dalla Terra./Gli stolti combattevano i nemici di oggi foraggiando quelli di domani./Gli stolti gonfiavano il petto, parlavano di 'libertà,' 'democrazia,' 'qui da noi,' mangiando i frutti di razzie e saccheggi./Difendevano la civiltà da ombre cinesi di dinosauri./Difendevano il pianeta da simulacri di asteroidi./Difendevano l'ombra cinese di un civiltà./Difendevano un simulacro di pianeta" (*54* 5).

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.adottando.it/>.

the role of Tito, is certainly a precursor to the eventual violence of the 1990s. The novel itself is set in 1954 but was written in the 2000s with knowledge of all sides of the conflict; therefore, applying the themes from the transmedial performance to the more recent events in Bosnia-Herzegovina is both appropriate and effective. In this way, “Non c’è nessun dopoguerra” is hardly limited to the post World War II context: the words ring true for other nations that have gone through a similar historical cycle.

These affinities also point to the potential universality of music and to what Graeme Harper refers to as “conceptual resonance” (4). Harper argues that sound and image, when considered together, influence one other and have the potential to alter the viewer/listener’s perception of each. By way of an example, it is useful to consider how a popular song on a movie soundtrack can change a viewer’s impression of a particular scene or character. In most cases, the non-diegetic song is not composed specifically for that scene<sup>42</sup> but rather is chosen by the director because of an artistic connection s/he finds between the different art forms. The association with the image on the screen often irrevocably changes the interpretation of the song in the cultural imaginary as well. I already mentioned the “extra-textual meanings” of songs as discussed by Reay, which are “also often related to the song lyrics as well as conveying a sense of the social and historical context” (Smith qtd. in Reay 40). The example of “Non c’è nessun dopoguerra” shows how the collective sees the use of music, variously contextualized, as another way to expand the boundaries of their project, a sign of transmediality but also the formation of a community of sentiment.<sup>43</sup> In this way, Wu Ming and their followers lay the groundwork for a type of popular culture that encourages connections among people rather than reinforcing the hierarchical, profit-driven version of the “nazional-popolare” long perpetuated by Berlusconi.

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<sup>42</sup> Here I am referring to popular movie soundtracks, as opposed to originally composed movie scores. See Reay.

<sup>43</sup> See Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*.

## V. The Transmedial and the Multisensorial, Part III: *Manituana* and Gaming Culture

The examples examined thus far clearly show transmediality as a cornerstone of Wu Ming's overall project, a way to expand the text, and thus the readership, beyond the page. This expansion is key to establishing their own 'niche' brand of popular culture, as opposed to that of the Berlusconi-era mainstream. Most of the collective's novels have some sort of transmedial component, the presence of another medium (e.g., Pinterest, music, live performances) with which they seek to tell or re-tell the story found in the traditional written text. In the case of their 2007 novel *Manituana*, however, Wu Ming create a true transmedial project. An 'alternative' version of the story of the American Revolution is told, in three different languages, across a variety of platforms, all centered around the central location of the book's website: [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com). An analysis of the site as an example of a community-building transmedial project also reveals the collective's affinities with (video) gaming culture, a phenomenon that is surely not unfamiliar to a group that considers itself "the problem children of popular culture" (Wu Ming 1 *New Italian Epic* 126).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> "i figli problematici della popular culture" (Wu Ming 1, *New Italian Epic* 126).



(Screenshot #7)

In terms of the overall structure of the website, there are numerous options available to the user. In the first place, there are three languages (Spanish, English and Italian) available.<sup>45</sup> Upon entering the website's portal, different links appear across the top of the page: *the book*, *trailer*, *latest news*, *side stories*, *placemarks*, *visions*, *sounds*, *chronology*, *Level 2*, and *Pontiac*. Moving from left to right, clicking on *the book* brings the user to a synopsis of the plot, and, in the Italian version, a way to purchase the text. It is worth noting that the collective does not offer the link to the free download in this case; this is most likely not by accident, as the site bears the name, though barely visible, of the Einaudi publishing house as well.

The text extends to both the visual and the auditory in the *trailer*, which features a narration with images in the background. In this case, the latter are illustrations rather than the more commonly used archival photographs of historical figures and locations (such as those utilized in the performance of *54* and the examples from Pinterest). The final product is not unlike a trailer for a film, which indicates that the novel has a natural visual and audio component as well, further proving the connection between Wu Ming's *oeuvre* and the cinematic genre. By providing this

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<sup>45</sup> However, the content varies from language to language and Italian has the most options by far.



type of preview, the collective immediately gives the text a specific transmedial dimension and identity; like a film, they announce that the story that follows will be visual, musical, and at times interactive, a “motion picture.”

The next link, *latest news*, also speaks to the dynamic and transmutable nature of the text, as it features interviews and articles that reference the continually evolving world both inside and outside of the pages of the novel. In addition, it is the place where the authors lay bare the motivations behind their transmedial project. In terms of narration, Wu Ming 1 explains in an interview that the collective sees themselves as “storytellers by every means necessary.” “We’ve made incursions into cinema, comics, roleplaying games. We came up through the Luther Blissett Project, which was as multimedia and cross media as you could imagine. Novels are perhaps our principal instrument of expression, but not the only one” (“The Perfect Storm”). In the same interview, Wu Ming 4 also comments on the type of community they are seeking to create through this project: “To whomever wants to be guided on a journey through unexplored territories and to map out a fantastic world. Narration is the sharing of stories, nothing more. The more people choose to populate the ‘Manituana’ world, the more possible it will be to expand it, render it vivid, give life to its peoples and characters” (“The Perfect Storm”). The collective’s ideas point to a sort of ‘return to the origins’ of the oral nature of storytelling, the original way of establishing and maintaining historical memory, which as I have already discussed is a fundamental building block of their project. Wu Ming’s interpretation also disdains considerably any intellectual claims at highbrow literature. This utopian vision of narration as inherently human, natural and accessible to all is, of course, a bit too facile, and the collective does exert a certain amount of control over *what* exactly comes to populate the *Manituana* universe. If they are, in a sense, the editors of the

content of the website, they operate with discretion as to what they publish. Narration is storytelling, but not everyone is a storyteller.

However, the collective claims that they see in their readers the potential to transform and improve their stories, and they view themselves as the ‘hosts’ of the *Manituana* world, rather than the editors. In an interview with Loredana Lipperini, Wu Ming make their objectives for this digital community clear:

To tell a story is to discover a world. The pages of a book are one of the magical entrances to it. You can choose to keep all the other doors closed, or you can try to open up all of them, as a sign of hospitality. Again, it has to do with deciding whether to offer a universe to solely admire, untouchable in its presumed beauty and perfection, or to invite others to transform it, to explore its potential. It is not only about aesthetics: if we believe that men and women together can better the world, we will do everything possible so that readers can improve our stories by any means necessary.<sup>46</sup>

One way in which their readers can ‘improve’ their narrative universe is through the creation of what the collective calls *racconti ammutinati*, or *side stories*.<sup>47</sup> Here the authors lead by example, as they themselves composed numerous stories that run parallel to the plot of *Manituana*: “They are not just simple ‘previews,’ but rather ‘side’ stories, born from the wood of the table during our meetings. Unfinished and inconclusive, they were rebellious, riotous,

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<sup>46</sup> “Raccontare una storia è scoprire un mondo. Le pagine di un libro sono uno degli ingressi magici che lo dischiudono. Si può scegliere di tenere chiuse le altre porte o si può cercare di spalancarle tutte, in segno di ospitalità. Ancora una volta si tratta di scegliere se offrire un universo da contemplare, intoccabile nella sua pretesa bellezza e perfezione, o se invitare a trasformarlo, a svilupparne le potenzialità. Non si tratta solo di estetica: se crediamo che uomini e donne assieme possano migliorare il mondo, faremo di tutto perché lettori e lettrici possano migliorare le nostre storie con ogni mezzo necessario” (“Manituana, the Clash of Civilizations and George Bush’s Ancestors,” Interview by Loredana Lipperini). All translations from Italian to English from [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com) are mine.

<sup>47</sup> Here I am using the collective’s English translation of this section.

mutinous chapters [...] Narrative material that got away from us.”<sup>48</sup> Again, Wu Ming expose their own creative process by sharing these fragments with the reader; they also compose some of these *side stories* purposefully for the website. This extra literary material also shows how the novel itself evolved during both the writing process and post-publication, proving that the narrative world is anything but static. To maintain this dynamism, the collective invites their readers to ‘enter into the pact’<sup>49</sup> and take some ownership of that space: “In the months and years to come we will welcome, select and publish with joy the stories and fragments that you decide to send us, as long as they live and breathe the world that we are building together.”<sup>50</sup> What is important to note is that the collective’s ‘hospitality’ is not absolute: there are conditions to this participation. The group will select the stories which best reflect their ideology and narrative goals, and they will be the final decision as to whether or not these tales are suitable to the world they are trying to construct. The “community of sentiment” the collective aims to create, then, is not all-inclusive; in the end, occupying a cultural niche means cultivating a specific group of followers, which consequently limits the group’s mass appeal. There are numerous secondary accounts in this section, but nearly all of them are in Italian and the audio files of the readings no longer work, another sign of the specific niche Wu Ming occupies, as well as the ephemeral nature of creative projects on the Web.

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<sup>48</sup> “Non si trattava di semplici ‘anticipazioni,’ ma di racconti ‘lateral,’ germogliati sul legno del tavolo durante le riunioni. Incompiuti e inconclusivi, erano capitoli ribelli, riottosi, ammutinati [...] Materia narrativa sfuggita dalle mani” (Wu Ming, “Racconti ammutinati”, [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com)).

<sup>49</sup> See Derrida, *Of Hospitality*.

<sup>50</sup> “Nei mesi e anni a venire accoglieremo con gioia, selezioneremo e pubblicheremo i racconti e frammenti che vi salterà il ghiribizzo di inviarci, a condizione che vivano e respirino nel mondo che insieme andiamo costruendo” (“Racconti ammutinati”). The language used here is reminiscent of that of their blog *Giap!* In that case, the collective attempts to exercise control over who exactly can become a “Giapster.” “This blog is open to the contributions and views of many, but not everyone. As long as you refrain from trolling, you can write what you want, subject to antifascist discrimination. Right-wing comrades and the like have many other places where they can spread their bile. This is a protected space” (*Giap!*).<sup>50</sup>

Continuing on with the navigation of the site, the section *places* serves as a precursor to Wu Ming's Pinterest boards. There are images of the different physical locations found in the novel with a caption taken from the text, and a link to find the spot on Google Earth. Much like Pinterest, this section privileges the visual and eschews both the chronological and the geographical. For example, the first place on the 'map' is Johnson Hall, which is represented by a painting by E.L. Henry, with the caption (from the novel): "After many years, Joseph was still in awe of the grand façade, of the number of windows, of the wood that seemed like white rock. For a long time it had been the house of his sister Molly, who for almost twenty years had been the governess and companion of William Johnson, mother of his last eight children" (19).<sup>51</sup> In this example, the façade in question is visible in the picture, but what is missing is geographical context. The collective includes a link to Google Earth, which allows readers to see the location of that house, but its relation to the other locations present in this section is not as clear. This is a similar tactic to their use of Pinterest: people, places, and things are taken out of their narrative and temporal context, and the reader is able to connect or reconnect the dots as he/she sees fit (or not at all). Though they do provide key dates and background to the events of the novel in the separate *chronology* section, the lack of temporal or geographical structure to this visual aspect of the representation invites the readers to construct the world according to personal interpretation. Wu Ming claim that this absence of boundaries is part of this type of storytelling: "One of the principles of transmedial narration is that each tile of the mosaic can be autonomous, a jewel to admire on the palm of one's hand, even without connecting it to the design as a whole."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> "Dopo tanti anni, Joseph restava ancora impressionato dalla grande facciata, dal numero di finestre, dal colpo d'occhio del legno che sembrava pietra bianca. A lungo quella era stata la casa di sua sorella Molly, per quasi vent'anni governante e compagna di William Johnson, madre dei suoi ultimi otto figli" (19).

<sup>52</sup> "Uno dei principi della narrazione transmediale è che ciascuna tessera del mosaico possa essere autonoma, un gioiello da rimirare sul palmo della mano, anche senza collocarlo nell'intero disegno" ("Suoni", [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com)).

Consequently, this tactic can either fuel creative contributions or drive away potential readers who are in search of greater, more immediate coherency.

As discussed in the previous section, music also plays a major role in the *Manituana* project. Under the *sounds* link, which is divided into “Music” and “Words,” one finds numerous songs inspired by or dedicated to the novel, either commissioned by the collective or contributed independently by the musician(s). Marco Bertoni’s “AAAAnalogia,” for example, does not appear to directly reflect any character or scene in the story but rather, through fragments of different voices and accents, seeks to capture “the flavor of the novel.”<sup>53</sup> In the case of “Odio vero” by Yu Guerra!, the song came first, but when the musician read *Manituana* he instantly felt connected to the characters (and historical figures) of Joseph Brant and Philip Lacroix. It is clear he also feels an affinity with the collective themselves: on the website, he refers to *his* group as a “collettivo di musicisti” and *Wu Ming* as a “band di scrittori.”<sup>54</sup>

Some of the songs reflect both the overarching themes of the novel and the traditions of the culture in question, lending credence to Reay’s aforementioned theories on the effectiveness of the compilation soundtrack.<sup>55</sup> For one of the presentations of *Manituana* in Crema, Wu Ming enlisted the help of the group Beans, Bacon & Gravy, who consider themselves, to a certain extent, the bearers of American folk music:

The Beans play the music that the European immigrants (Scottish, English, Irish, French) brought to the colonies in the 1700s, forming the basis for what we refer to today as *quintessentially American* music, even though it has never abandoned its European roots. We are talking about the *fiddle songs*, the ballads, the jigs that the

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<sup>53</sup> “il sapore del romanzo” (“Suoni,” [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com)).

<sup>54</sup> “band of writers” (“Suoni,” [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com)).

<sup>55</sup> See Reay, *Music in Film: Soundtracks and Synergy*.

white colonialists played, listened to, and danced to during the years we describe in *Manituana*.<sup>56</sup>

Among the songs the collective chose for the presentation was a traditional Seneca chant, which was passed down by the American folk musician and activist Pete Seeger, who was given access to the song by Ray Fadden, the head of the Six Nation Museum.<sup>57</sup> Much like their views on storytelling, this engagement with the traditional music of the native tribes of the American territory shows a privileging of the oral tradition, which according to Simon Frith is the initial phase of music technology, as it is stored not on disks or devices but in the body, i.e. through performance.<sup>58</sup>

The previous examples are all individual songs collected from friends or admirers of Wu Ming, the most typical type of contribution to their project. An even more ambitious and cohesive undertaking comes from the label Casasonica, which produced, as in the case of *54*, a soundtrack for the entire novel. The head of the label, Max Casacci, asked contributing musicians to read the novel and choose a chapter or character to ‘set to music.’ Out of this request came eight tracks, all available as free downloads online.<sup>59</sup> On the website, the collective offers different possibilities for the listening experience:

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<sup>56</sup> “I Beans suonano la musica che gli immigrati europei (scozzesi, inglesi, irlandesi, francesi) portarono nelle colonie d'Oltreatlantico nel corso del '700, ponendo le basi di quella che oggi suona all'orecchio come musica *quintessenzialmente americana* ma che non ha mai reciso le proprie radici europee. Sono le *fiddle songs*, le ballate, le gighe che suonavano, ascoltavano e danzavano i coloni bianchi negli anni che raccontiamo in *Manituana*” (“Suoni,” [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com)).

<sup>57</sup> See *The Six Nations Indian Museum: Mohawk Oneida Onondaga Cayuga Seneca & Tuscarora Indians. Artifacts Emphasis on the Culture of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy*, <http://www.sixnationsindianmuseum.com>.

<sup>58</sup> See Tessler, “Metamusic: Metamusic in the Age of Metamediation” in Harper, ed. *Sound and Music in Film and Visual Media: An Overview*, pp. 739-753.

<sup>59</sup> As of July 2015, the soundtrack was available for download on iTunes. The links present on the website [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com) do not function. This is another example of the “website-as-relic”—or an archive rather than an active project.

Whoever wants to, can listen to the songs while reading the chapters on which they are based. Someone will be able to suggest new combinations. Others will be able to play with the songs, perhaps taking them in another direction, acoustic guitar and voice, violin and mixer, remix. In the end, whomever believes that the reader should be able to imagine the sounds of the novel on his/her own can listen to the tracks with the book closed.<sup>60</sup>

From this statement it is clear that the collective views music and narration as intimately linked and that they consider both essential to a truly transmedial storytelling experience.

To continue beyond the auditory and visual senses into the more tactile realm, the *visions* section of the website represents perhaps the most abstract and unusual branch of this transmedial project, lending credence yet again to the increasing physicality of storytelling on multiple platforms. This link details the extra material that has been largely created by readers inspired by the novel, and the variety within this category demonstrates the far-reaching potential of a written text.

The first example is a war board game, created by the Roman group Miles Gloriosus Wargame,<sup>61</sup> who adapted an episode from the novel in which Chief Joseph Brant leads a group of Native Americans in an attack against several American settlements. The game debuted in 2008 for the Convention Hellana, a war game convention for central and southern Italy, held annually in Agliana, Tuscany.<sup>62</sup> Like Wu Ming's *Manituana* community, this type of gaming culture

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<sup>60</sup> "Chi lo desidera, potrà ascoltarla mentre legge i capitoli dai quali è scaturita. Qualcuno potrà suggerire nuovi abbinamenti. Altri potranno giocare la stessa partita, magari in tutt'altra direzione, chitarra acustica e voce, violino e frullatore, remix. Infine, chi ritiene che ognuno dovrebbe immaginare da solo i suoni di un romanzo, potrà ascoltare i brani tenendo chiuso il libro" ("Suoni," [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com)).

<sup>61</sup> This group's primary objective is the creation and execution of war board games for adults. They make them, they play them, and they bring them to international competitions. It is not unlike the culture associated with role-playing games and MMOGs (massively multiplayer online games).

<sup>62</sup> For more information on this convention, Massimo Moscarelli's blog lends some insight into this world: <http://www.massimomoscarelli.it/leadaddicted/index.php?s=hellana>.

represents a cultural niche environment *par excellence*. In this case Miles Gloriosus Wargame bring the words from the page, not into life, but into *simulation*, yet another virtual (but not web-based) environment. By introducing the game to a convention of people who might share their love of gaming but not necessarily their familiarity with Wu Ming's text, Miles Gloriosus Wargame also help to broaden the reach of the novel and potentially expand the community surrounding it. This shows that, within every cultural niche, there are 'sub'-niches that operate both within and outside of the digital environment in unexpected ways.

Another example of the non-digital and 'oblique' diffusion of the project is the doll of the protagonist Molly Brant, created by Elena Gamboni for UNICEF. The latter's website explains the purpose of these dolls as follows:

With a minimum offer of 20 euro, you can adopt a "Pigotta" made by our volunteers and allow UNICEF to provide urgent, life-saving medical care to a child in Guinea Bissau. UNICEF's lifesaving kit consists of vaccines, doses of Vitamin A, an obstetric kit for safe childbirth, antibiotics, and an antimalarial mosquito net.<sup>63</sup>

The doll was created without the advance approval of the collective, but the group immediately saw the symmetry in the representation due to the connection between Molly Brant, obstetrics and vaccinations. In the words of the collective, "Obstetric kit. One of the chapters of *Manituana* that struck readers the most was the one about Mary's childbirth in Oswego. Vaccination. In *Manituana* we see the traditional version, before Jenner."<sup>64</sup> This example not only links the text to the physical world, but it also shows the connection between two seemingly

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<sup>63</sup> "Con un'offerta minima di 20 euro puoi adottare una Pigotta realizzata dai nostri volontari e consentire all'UNICEF di fornire a un bambino della Guinea Bissau interventi mirati che riducono il pericolo di mortalità nei suoi primi anni di vita. Il kit salvavita dell'UNICEF è composto da vaccini, dosi di vitamina A, kit ostetrico per un parto sicuro, antibiotici e una zanzariera antimalariale" ("La Pigotta Dell'Unicef").

<sup>64</sup> "Kit ostetrico. Uno dei capitoli di *Manituana* che più ha colpito i lettori è proprio quello del parto di Mary a Oswego. Vaccinazione. In *Manituana* ne vediamo la versione tradizionale, prima di Jenner" ("Visioni," [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com)).



unrelated countries and historical moments. Gamboni saw the relationship between this Native American woman at the dawn of the American Revolution and the needy children of Guinea Bissau in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and was able to create a physical manifestation of this connection. As in the previous example, Gamboni also contributes to the diffusion of the *Manituana* project through her work, as she potentially exposes people all over the world to the literary character and real historical figure of Molly Brant. Finally, the tradition of the adoption of the *pigotta* itself seems appropriate to the character as well: Wu Ming paint her as an altruistic, charitable and wise figure, and through UNICEF she is able to continue the tradition of helping the poor and disenfranchised that historically characterized her life.

These two examples represent rather unique physical manifestations of the characters, themes and events of the text. It is noteworthy that Wu Ming categorizes them as *visions*, since they seem to defy labels in terms of the diversity of the media and the decidedly tactile element they both possess. Furthermore, a board game and a UNICEF doll inherently invite participation, expansion of community, and *play*.<sup>65</sup> Both were created by users, or “rogue readers,” (Jenkins, *Fans* 1) to use Henry Jenkins’ terminology, which points again to a level of engagement akin to that of gaming culture, in which contributors truly come to inhabit the world of the game. This connection becomes even clearer when the user arrives at *Level 2*.<sup>66</sup>

## Level 2

The website of *Manituana* features so much extra material that it seems almost impossible for there to be additional, more profound, contributions to the world of the text. Yet *Level 2* is advertised as “a place where the contents of the novel and the website are amplified, extended, and

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<sup>65</sup> See Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*.

<sup>66</sup> *Level 2* is only available in Italian.



*conversazioni*, *mappe*, *segnalibri*, a chance to return to *Level 1*, and *Pontiac*.<sup>69</sup> The *personaggi* section details the historical background of the real historical figures present in the novel, while under the *officina* link, much like the *Titoli di Coda* of Wu Ming's other novels, there is background on the writing process.<sup>70</sup> *Diramazioni* take off where *side stories* end in *Level 1*: Wu Ming place their research in the hands of the readers and ask them to contribute original stories. The submissions are many and varied, from a haiku for every chapter,<sup>71</sup> to a second epilogue for the novel,<sup>72</sup> to a possible prequel to the story.<sup>73</sup> Then, under *conversazioni*, there are reflections, feelings, analysis, and emails from readers, with the option to engage and comment. The collective intervenes when appropriate to answer questions and discuss their narrative choices. The *mappe* section features even more details from *Level 1*, with text coming not just from the collective but from other sources; *segnalibri* features links to a selected bibliography.

Finally, *Pontiac* is a bit like a third dimension to this already multifaceted project. It is a mere mention in the text of *Manituana*, but in reality, according to some historians, the Pontiac Rebellion is one of the key events of the American Revolution.<sup>74</sup> For this reason, Wu Ming chose Chief Pontiac as the protagonist of a “reading concerto” that is linked to *Manituana* yet comprehensible even for those who have not read the novel. The collective wrote twelve original

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<sup>69</sup> Here I am using the Italian titles because Level 2 only exists in that language.

<sup>70</sup> It includes notes, deleted chapters, emails and audio files of meetings of the collective. As the authors note, “We want to make our writing workshop accessible to those who are curious to know how five people can write one novel, or how certain decisions on the plot and the characters were made. We give readers the possibility to touch the files, the tools, to smell the odor of the materials used” (“Officina,” [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com)).

<sup>71</sup> Rossano Astremo wrote these haikus. Here is an example: “Nella traiettoria di arcobaleni opachi/I sogni invadono la mente/Gocce sulle labbra di Joseph” (“Diramazioni,” [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com)).

<sup>72</sup> Monica Mazzitelli wrote this epilogue, which featured Esther Johnson.

<sup>73</sup> Contributed by Giacomo Morotti, “Fantasmi nella notte, pupazzi di neve” is a ballad and a short story about the Massacre of Schenectady in 1690.

<sup>74</sup> 1763: a confederacy of Native American tribes joins forces under the leadership of Ottawa chief Pontiac against British forces in an attempt to take control of their forts and undefended settlements. The siege went on for months, until strategic peace deals between the British and the different tribes eventually disbanded the confederacy. Because of Pontiac, King George III put a limit on colonial growth with the Proclamation Line of 1763, and when the Rebellion was over the Six Nations were once again divided (the Seneca fought for the Indian revolt, while the Mohawk participated in the English repression).

texts, while the musicians did the same, both working at the same time. The illustrations came later, after they understood that the popularity of the live shows meant they should record an album. Wu Ming describe the end result as “a sort of spoken fairy tale for adults, an illustrated audiobook, with drawings, words, and sounds.”<sup>75</sup> Essentially, the collective adds their own ‘fan fiction’<sup>76</sup> to the project and transforms it into a live transmedial performance, a precursor to those that will accompany *Timira* and *Point Lenana* a few years later.

In addition, this extra dimension also features a donation page, one that varies slightly from the one found on the Wu Ming foundation website. In this case, the authors offer four possibilities for donating;<sup>77</sup> furthermore, they include a section in which they preemptively answer questions about why they are asking for this kind of money, namely that the project entailed competencies beyond their abilities, and they wanted to compensate those other contributors. Like many public media projects, such as National Public Radio (NPR) or the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the United States, the collective places the onus largely on the user, while still packaging it as a question of choice. Public radio funding drives, for example, use much the same language: i.e. ‘if you like the programming you hear, if you think it’s important, then please contribute.’ Users are not required to pay for any of the services or features of the *Manituana* website; the donation button, however, gives them the opportunity to own a part of that universe and to feel personally responsible for its continued existence. Naturally, relying on donations from their followers cannot possibly put Wu Ming on the level of a media mogul like Berlusconi in terms of money and reach, though it is also clear their cultural goals are other. In my view, analyzing this project in terms of

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<sup>75</sup> “una sorta di fiaba sonora per adulti, un audiolibro illustrato, con disegni, parole e suoni” (“Pontiac,” [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com)).

<sup>76</sup> See Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* and *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*.

<sup>77</sup> (1) “in regalo,” but “Se scegli questa opzione, ci piacerebbe che anche tu facessi un regalo a qualcuno, un gesto gratuito, magari ad una persona che nemmeno conosci;” (2) “scegli TU quanto;” (3) “al nostro prezzo (5 euro);” and finally, (4) “di ritorno,” or those who downloaded for free but who choose to make a contribution after the fact (“Pontiac,” [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com)).

fantasy gaming culture helps to explain both the approach of the collective to this type of collaboration with the reader, as well as the engagement and commitment of the latter to the transmedial experience, monetary and otherwise.

### ***Level 2 and Fantasy Gaming Culture: Manituana as RPG***

According to sociologist T.L. Taylor, in her volume *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*, the gaming world in question revolves around “the notion of shared persistent world environments full of both instrumental and free action” (28). The world of the game is structured, just like the different levels of the *Manituana* project, but the gamers also help to shape it, just as Wu Ming’s collaborators do. Taylor’s work focuses primarily on massively multiplayer online games, or MMOGs, and her description of these gaming worlds largely echoes the options available to Wu Ming’s online community:

the creation of game guides, walk-throughs, answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs), maps, object and monster databases, third-party message boards and mailing lists, play norms, server guidelines, modifications, plug-ins, strategies and strategy guides, auctions/trading, tweaks to user interfaces (UI), macro sharing, fanfic, game movies, counter-narratives, comic, and fan gatherings. (155)

In a given MMOG, the players are asked to engage in any number of these activities: the world of the game may be created and structured by an outside party, but the level of commitment to the shaping of this environment by users is anything but passive. Perhaps for this reason, gaming culture, which once existed on the fringes of mainstream popular culture – that area reserved for the ‘geeks’ and ‘nerds’ – has moved decidedly beyond its original niche. The popularity of such film trilogies as *The Lord of the Rings* and the Harry Potter series have contributed to a new

acceptance of the fantasy realm as ‘cool,’ and their fans are no longer relegated to the cultural margins. The definition of fantasy gaming offered by J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks and W. Keith Winkler in their volume *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games* is particularly relevant here, as it involves the idea of collectivity and community: “Broadly speaking, fantasy gaming is grounded in shared worldviews, lifestyle tastes, and affinities, as well as collectively-imagined selves/identities. That is, fantasy game players feel that they have something in common with other fantasy gamers” (2). The authors go on to divide fantasy gaming into three categories: role-playing games, collectible strategy games, and online video or computer games. While all three can relate to Wu Ming’s project, I contend that role-playing games offer the most affinities and shed light both ideologically as well as practically on what the collective is trying to accomplish through this transmedial expansion of the text.

First and foremost, role-playing games, or RPGs, are more concerned with the creation of stories than they are with determining a clear ‘winner’ or ‘loser’ for the game. For years, *Dungeons & Dragons* was the RPG *par excellence* among teens and adults alike,<sup>78</sup> and these evenings or afternoons of play often went on for hours precisely because the investment was in the improvement of the story and the development of the characters, not on the ending. Furthermore, players work collaboratively to create these tales, and the inner structure of the game ensures that

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<sup>78</sup> “A basic RPG, such as D&D, is one where several people (two or more) come together, usually for several hours over the course of an evening. Most RPGs consist of a *setting* and a *system*. One person is designated to be in charge of the story and is typically given a specific title depending on the RPG in question (e.g. the Storyteller, Dungeon Master, or Referee). This person is responsible for all aspects of the game (setting and system) except the actions of the *players*. The players create fictional personas called *characters*, within the rules and genre specified by the game, and then collectively engage in protracted storytelling. Any challenges or obstacles that arise are resolved according to the system, either referencing a number on a character sheet (which details the strengths and weaknesses of the character), by rolling a die, or by some combination of the two. Once the outcome is known, for good or ill, the story continues. In this way there are never really “winners” or “endings” in RPGs. Rather, the players are interested in experiencing a good story, but also improving their characters’ strengths and diminishing their weaknesses, thereby allowing them to experience grander and more epic stories” (Williams, et al 3-4). See also Robichaud and Irwin, *Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy: Read and Gain Advantage on All Wisdom Checks*.

they do not go beyond the parameters of what is true and coherent to the fictional world. According to Dennis Waskul's study on "The Role-Playing Game and the Game of Role-Playing: The Ludic Self and Everyday Life," the objective of an RPG is to create "a habitable universe for those who can follow it, a plane of situations and acts through which to realize their natures and destinies" (Goffman qtd. in Waskul 20). He maintains that even though structures exist, as imposed in particular by the Dungeon Master or 'leader' of the gaming universe, gamers do not feel bound by them; on the contrary, they are seen as resources rather than limitations. In his words, "[f]antasy personas may say or do whatever they please, so long as other players and the DM<sup>79</sup> agree that such actions are 'reasonable'" (Waskul 23). These words find resonance in Wu Ming's premise to the *diramazioni* section of *Level 2*, which invites readers to create their own side stories based on the research and background information presented under the *officina* link: "We would like for them to become stories produced by the community of readers, such that the site transforms into a participatory extension of the novel and especially of the world that we want to explore. The only caveat: historical coherence and compatibility."<sup>80</sup> While this condition to participation might initially seem limiting, when considered under the lens of gaming culture, the idea of staying true to the narrative world is very much the norm, and gamers follow these rules loyally and without question.

Wu Ming's editorial control can be seen as a negative and contradictory element, or it can point to the collective's position within the hierarchy of the gaming universe. One of the key figures in the world of the RPG, ala *Dungeons & Dragons*, is the figure of the aforementioned

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<sup>79</sup> Dungeon Master.

<sup>80</sup> "Noi vorremmo che diventassero racconti prodotti dalla comunità dei lettori, in modo che il sito si trasformasse in un'estensione partecipata del romanzo e soprattutto del mondo che vogliamo esplorare. Unico vincolo: coerenza e compatibilità storica" ("Diramazioni," [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com)).

Dungeon Master.<sup>81</sup> Both Waskul and Ethan Gilsdorf describe this figure as “God-like,” with the former explaining further: “[t]he DM occupies a supreme status: he or she creates the worlds, plots and scripts that become a make-believe setting for the game itself” (Waskul 20). In this scenario, Wu Ming play the role of the collective Dungeon Master of their narrative world, the puppet masters that build the universe and then invite the players to interact within it. Likewise, they also determine what does or does not belong in this realm, as they are responsible for its integrity.

One contribution the collective received which put them to the test was entitled “*Manituana: un deragliamento balcanico*” by Marko Kraljevec. In the preface to the story, the collective describes how they were unclear about how the distinctly pro-Serbian tone of the author related to their work at all. Eventually they decided that it did somehow belong to the narrative world, as reader interpretation is necessarily a part of that realm: “In the end, what the hell do we care? It’s not like we have to respond to every aspect of what we receive and publish! It’s not like we have to be the guardians of the *fan fiction*! If this ‘allegro naufragio’ exists, if ‘Marko’ saw it and explored its potential, it means that it was there in the text, at some level of the narration.”<sup>82</sup> While many of the *side stories* are more clearly in line with the collective’s ideology, this is an example where perhaps they acknowledge that the world of the game is somehow separate from real life, and therefore different boundaries may exist between the real and the virtual. In gaming terms, they are not imposing their will as much as they are ‘refereeing’ the fantasy world that they helped to create, fulfilling their duty as DM.

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<sup>81</sup> This name is specific to the game *Dungeons & Dragons*, but all RPGs have a version of the ‘head’ storyteller.

<sup>82</sup> “Ma insomma, che cazzo ce ne fotte? Mica dobbiamo rispondere ad ogni aspetto di quel che riceviamo e pubblichiamo! Mica dobbiamo fare i guardiani della *fan fiction*! Se questo ‘allegro naufragio’ esiste, se ‘Marko’ ne ha visto e sviluppato la potenzialità, vuol dire che nel testo c’era, a un qualche livello della narrazione” (“Diramazioni,” [www.manituana.com](http://www.manituana.com)).



Moreover, part of the success of these games is due to the willingness of players to respect the authority of the DM and the universe s/he has created. This loyalty is thanks in large part to the nature of the group of people gaming attracts. According to Waskul, the fantasy gaming world is a uniting force among disparate peoples: “role-players are often a motley crew of dissimilar people who are otherwise separated by significant social, cultural, and institutional barriers” (26). Because the narrative realm is what participants have in common, they treat it with great respect. In terms of Wu Ming, it initially appears that their collaborators and contributors tend to be like-minded friends and acquaintances. However, in the gaming sense, it is possible that these people are actually “a motley crew of dissimilar people” (26) who share narrative, artistic and political experimentation. Along these lines, the collective is cultivating these particularly ‘niche’ relationships, which exist outside of the mainstream but at the same time attract enough people who remain staunchly and passionately committed to their prolonged existence. It is clear that being a part of a gaming world means enjoying the benefits of a closely connected and creative community. This is a social as well as an artistic advantage, and it is my contention that Wu Ming are aware of these possibilities and utilize them for this purpose.

To conclude this section, it is important to mention one key fact about the *Manituana* project: it is now essentially defunct. A visit to the website still allows users to explore the majority of the written texts, but all audio and visual links are expired and there do not appear to have been any updates since 2008. The site is still in existence but in terms of content, much of the transmediality is an idea rather than a reality. What conclusions can be drawn from this disappearance of extra materials? Why do all that work, just to let it disappear? This places Wu Ming in the company of other avant-garde movements, in which the objective is not to create a long-lasting final product, but rather to experiment with narration in the moment and expand their

repertoire for the books that follow. In other words, the goal is not the project itself, but the act of storytelling in a collaborative environment. The physical product, then, retains a certain ephemeral quality, but the narrative skills the collective and their readers develop through the process are what endures. This would be in line with Wu Ming's ideas about storytelling as a way to preserve and cultivate historical memory, as well as their aversion to the commodification of cultural products. On the website, they capture a narrative moment – an intense one, but like the worlds of RPGs, they are forever in flux and, ultimately, more about *play* than about endings.

### Going Off-Line

Finally, between role-playing and online games, it would appear that gaming culture exists primarily in the virtual world. However, this is not to say that it lacks the physical element. On the contrary, these online and role-playing communities do not just stay behind their screens: they meet up all over the world on a regular basis for gaming conventions. In these environments, gamers come dressed as their favorite characters and participate in panels, information sessions, simulations, and meet-up groups.<sup>83</sup> Attending these conventions also offers the possibility of being the first to view trailers for upcoming films, sneak peeks into new games, limited edition comic books, and so on.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> They are not unlike the war board game conventions mentioned earlier in this chapter.

<sup>84</sup> T.L. Taylor opens her aforementioned study by describing her experience at a similar "Comic-con" convention in Boston in the last decade: "Within a block of the hotel I begin seeing people wearing nametags—typical enough for a convention—but I quickly notice something different. The names written on them are odd sounding and seem to contain arcane information. From this small detail alone I know I am at the right place. I slip on my own badge declaring my game character name, my server, and my (by then defunct) guild. Now identified as "Iona, Bailerbents, Hidden Lore," I quickly feel the silent shift from outsider to fellow gamer. [...] This event, a "Fan Faire," presents some unique experiences in blurring the boundaries between game and nongame space, off- and online lives, avatars and "real" identities and bodies. The longer I have spent with *EQ*<sup>84</sup> the more I have come to believe that this boundary work is at the heart of massively multiplayer games, and indeed Internet life in general" (1).

Wu Ming's own "reading musicati," presentations, and performances invite just this kind of blurring of boundaries between the real world and the world of the text, bringing it to life off- as well as on-line. Perhaps the best example of how the collective incorporates the physical principle of "Comic-Con" into their project, beyond the previous contributions from readers for the *Manituana* website, comes from the promotion of Wu Ming 1 and Roberto Santachiara's *Point Lenana*. The novel was released on April 30, 2013, and a search through the calendar archives on their website reveals the following statement in conjunction with the publication of the text: "The same day, Wu Ming 1 will embark on the Long Trek."<sup>85</sup> The choice of language is key here for several reasons. First, it reflects the thematic content of the novel. The story begins with Wu Ming 1 and Roberto Santachiara retracing the steps of Felice Benuzzi to the top of Mount Kenya; the tradition of alpinism is also one of the key narrative threads of the novel. This language also points to the physical nature of this aspect of the transmedial project—it is not just reading the text, but physically feeling the experience of the mountain. This particular tour, with respect to other novels by the collective, was focused in large part in mountain areas. Some presentations took place in alpine lodges, while others combined with the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CAI (Club Alpino Italiano). Where possible, the presentation was also paired with a physical excursion in the mountains. In doing so, the authors brought their readers into closer contact with several major themes of the text.

This tendency towards physical contact in addition to the diffuse and complex virtual world can be further analyzed through the lens of fan culture, a close relation to the phenomenon of fantasy gaming worlds. Henry Jenkins, whose work on convergence culture I have already discussed throughout this study, has also examined 'fandom' and engagement from both a

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<sup>85</sup> "Il giorno stesso, Wu Ming 1 partirà per la Lunga Scarpinata" ("Calendario presentazioni di *Point Lenana*, maggio-giugno 2013," *Giap!*).

sociological and media studies perspective. His volume *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* might appear at first glance to have little to do with the present discussion: after all, he is analyzing the medium of television, a foray into which the Wu Ming collective has not yet—and might never—endeavor(ed). The study was published in 1992 but re-released in 2012 upon its twentieth anniversary, primarily because, even though Jenkins analyzes *Star Trek* devotees and *Twin Peaks* obsessives, the fundamental ideas about the phenomenon of participation are just as relevant now as they were at the beginnings of Internet and digital media culture. His discussion of fandom in particular helps shed light on some crucial aspects of why the physical is not only necessary but also actively sought-after in transmedial storytelling.

One of the key motivations of television fandom, according to Jenkins, is the desire of the fans to “draw texts close to the realm of their lived experience” (*Textual Poachers* 53). Arguably, there is nothing closer to “lived experience” than being able to touch narrative content with one’s hands—to taste, touch, and smell that reality. Wu Ming’s mountain excursions bring readers into that multisensorial space and allow them not only to interact with the authors but also with the setting and, indirectly, with some of the themes of the novel. Touching the rock of the very same peak in the Alps that Felice Benuzzi or Emilio Comici scaled renders the text even more vivid: it is the question of ‘proximity’ of which Jenkins speaks. In his view, by bringing the text/television show/film/work of art into his/her own reality, “[t]he text is drawn close not so that the fan can be possessed by it but rather so that the fan may more fully possess it. Only by integrating media content back into their everyday lives, only by close engagement with its meanings and materials, can fans fully consume the fiction and make it an active resource” (62).<sup>86</sup> The language here –

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<sup>86</sup> Another reason the example of mountain excursions to promote *Point Lenana* is effective is because it encourages participants to engage in “re-reading” of the text, something Barthes tells us belong to children and old professors, but which Jenkins claims is a true sign of fandom. “The commercial narratives only become one’s own when they take a

integration of media content, engagement, and active consumption – very clearly reflects Wu Ming’s own ideology in terms of the cultural niche they are trying to create, as well as the antithesis of Silvio Berlusconi’s cultural strategies.

The second part of fandom, in addition to proximity to the world of the text, is group collaboration, which addresses the real question of physical presence: even in a world that is increasingly more digital, human interaction is more important than ever. In short, readers/viewers/writers/participants need others to truly live the experience of a given text, television show or film. As Jenkins states, “For most fans, meaning-production is not a solitary and private process but rather a social and public one [...] Fan reception cannot and does not exist in isolation, but is always shaped through input from other fans and motivated, at least partially, by a desire for further interaction with a larger social and cultural community” (75-76).

As Wu Ming 1 states in an interview on *Giap!*, meeting face to face and sharing body space also reflect the orality of storytelling from the past—there is the idea to “metterci il corpo,” which indicates not only physical presence but also responsibility for the story. The collective does not allow themselves to be photographed (i.e. “metterci la faccia”), but they do participate in these readings quite willingly because in this case they see the benefits of physical proximity as opposed to a strictly visual, and perhaps static, component. This emphasis on physicality is not casual; rather, I view it as a direct commentary on Berlusconi’s own concept of “il corpo,” as a sort of ‘gold standard’ upon which the Italian people should model themselves. In Belpoliti’s words, “We –his supporters, but also his opposition, detractors and even enemies – we are the reflective surface

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form that can be shared with others, while the act of retelling, like the act of rereading, helps sustain the emotional immediacy that initially attracted the fan’s interest” (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 77).

in which Silvio Berlusconi looks at himself: his true image is the world” (15).<sup>87</sup> Contrary to much of their project, in this case there are affinities between Berlusconi and Wu Ming’s views on the body: for both, it provides a source of narration, and for the collective it is the final ‘media platform’ in the cycle of transmedial storytelling.

## VI. Conclusion

In this chapter, my analysis has gone both literally and figuratively beyond the text to analyze the Wu Ming collective’s use of transmediality as a tactic against the hegemonic “nazional-popolare” perpetuated by Berlusconism. While both the collective and the former prime minister experiment with multiple media platforms to shape their narrative and cultural contributions, the latter does so to gain individual power and profit, while the former’s focus is on storytelling and community. I have presented examples of Wu Ming’s use of visual images to enhance narration, of the role of music and performance in their works, and of the specific case of *Manituana* as a demonstration of the group’s penchant for role-playing games and of the authors’ figurative role of “Dungeon Masters” of the narrative worlds they create. I concluded with an analysis of their physical meetings with readers as an example of not only the total multisensoriality of their project but also the role of fan culture in building and shaping a base of contributors, something the passive consumption-driven popular culture of Berlusconi eschews. I am left with two primary thoughts/observations about this aspect of the collective’s project.

In the first place, the sheer amount of work and engagement that a transmedial storytelling project entails is considerable, and Wu Ming’s ambition to continually push themselves beyond

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<sup>87</sup> “Noi – i suoi elettori, ma anche i suoi oppositori, detrattori, e persino nemici – siamo la superficie riflettente in cui Silvio Berlusconi si guarda: la sua vera immagine è il mondo” (Belpoliti 15). See Belpoliti, *Il corpo del capo*.

the written word is admirable. The level of contribution they are able to elicit from their readers also points to a certain success of their overall project; in other words, they have managed to forge connections with people, and these contributors clearly take the Wu Ming project to heart. They compose songs, write fan fiction, organize presentations and excursions—all of these things point to a positive and fruitful fan culture and community of sentiment. Of course, when viewed in comparison to the amount of success a cultural magnate like Berlusconi has been able to achieve by giving consumers little to no agency, the Wu Ming project seems quaint and less effective; however, when viewed under the guise of fantasy gaming culture, it is clear that mainstream success is simply not the group's ambition. A comparison of the two in these terms, then, adds little to the overall understanding of the collective and their project.

What I find problematic about this wide array of content across different media regards maintenance. As I mentioned before, an analysis of the *Manituana* website reveals that nearly all audio and visual links are now defunct. The website was created in 2007, and now, nine years later, it is not an active and continually evolving transmedial storytelling platform, but an archive. Likewise, video links on the Pinterest boards for *Point Lenana* and *Timira* are also no longer functioning. YouTube searches for Yo Yo Mundi's performances of 54 produce only bit and pieces but not the whole performance. The collective appears to place importance on the process rather than on the product, experimenting with the 'hot' platform/website/medium of the moment and then moving on as quickly as they have begun. This tendency can be explained through their views on commodification and fetishization<sup>88</sup> and their place in the history of avant-garde literary movements in Italy<sup>89</sup>—they would rather be storytellers in the past tradition of orality than producers of objects to be bought and sold. Still, by missing the opportunity to truly cultivate and

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<sup>88</sup> See Wu Ming 1, "Feticismo della merce digitale e sfruttamento nascosto: i casi Amazon e Apple."

<sup>89</sup> See Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

maintain the narrative worlds for these different novels, they do themselves and their readers a disservice. Alternatively, perhaps all fandoms have a shelf life, and the Dungeon Masters are simply acting according to laws that govern these fantasy realms, which in the end might be more realistic than thinking a transmedial storytelling project might endure in the transient and ephemeral digital age. As Wu Ming 1 says with regards to the transmedial element in works of the NIE, “It is a mistake to judge the interaction among members of a community based solely on the quality of the results (which is really just a question of taste). Virtue is its own reward, the important thing is collaboration and communication” (*New Italian Epic* 23).<sup>90</sup>

. Finally, I have already discussed the collective’s relationship to popular culture in terms of what Wu Ming 1 referred to as one of many “infinite niches and subgenres” (“Memorandum” 18),<sup>91</sup> but perhaps this idea is further explained by Umberto Eco, who has written about the phenomenon of “cult objects.” In this study, I have discussed the “cult of personality” of Berlusconi as something the collective actively seeks to challenge through their own identity and presence in popular culture. Creating a “cult *object*,” however, is a different story. If a book, movie, or other cultural phenomenon achieves ‘cult status,’ it generally means that it has become exceedingly popular within one of the “infinite niches” (Wu Ming 1, “Memorandum” 18) in question. It is liked (or loved, or venerated) by a specific group who has, in a certain sense, taken ownership of the product; it is revered in part for its lack of mainstream popularity, creating a group of ‘insiders’ who are bound even closer together by their shared love of the work. Much like gaming culture, these groups could also be viewed as “communities of sentiment,” and, I would

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<sup>90</sup> “È un errore giudicare l’interazione tra membri di una comunità solo in base alla qualità dei risultati (che tra l’altro è pure questione di gusti). Il premio è la virtù stessa, importante è che si collabori e comunichi” (Wu Ming 1, *New Italian Epic* 23).

<sup>91</sup> “infinite nicchie e sottogeneri” (Wu Ming 1, “Memorandum” 18).



argue, a last point of comparison to fully understand Wu Ming's transmedial world. In Eco's words, for a book or movie to become a cult object,

The work must be loved, obviously, but this is not enough. It must provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world [...] I think that in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole. (*Travels in Hyper Reality* 197-198)

In this way, Wu Ming's "Dungeon Masters" create a world that is so distinct and complex that their readers have a choice as to which characters, themes, or events speak to them personally. There are countless examples of participants writing fan fiction about one specific character, or composing songs based on one particular scene in the text, or discussing particular recurring motifs. Wu Ming's transmediality not only relates to the gaming world but also, within its particular niche in popular culture, engages readers enough to elevate their works to the level of cult status. Even if the group is small, the love for the product is passionate, and as opposed to the "cult of personality" that they try very hard to avoid, this is the kind of cult that more clearly speaks to their ideology and motivations. Wu Ming have made it clear that they are the "problem children of popular culture" (*New Italian Epic* 126) and therefore they want to help transform production, distribution and consumption in this realm, not eradicate its existence.



Alas, those charmed by the promise of digital activism  
often have a hard time distinguishing it  
from “slacktivism,” its more dangerous digital sibling,  
which all too often leads to civic promiscuity—  
usually the result of a mad shopping binge  
in the online identity supermarket that is Facebook—  
that makes online activists feel useful and important  
while having preciously little political impact.  
(Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion* 187-188)

Internet non è un altro mondo, è *questo* mondo.  
C’era chi voleva darle il Nobel per la pace,  
ma Internet fa anche la guerra.  
(Wu Ming, *Giap!* 17 June 2011)

**Chapter Four:**  
**Digital Activism:**  
***Giap!*, Twitter, and the “Net Delusion”**

**I. Premise**

Neither Wu Ming’s novels nor their transmedial projects could have achieved the success they enjoy without the collective’s constant and strategic presence in the online world. This chapter looks at Wu Ming’s interactions in this realm and their role in a larger digital revolution that has slowly been taking place not just in Italy but around the world over the last fifteen to twenty years. I intend to discuss Wu Ming’s blog *Giap!* and their Twitter account @Wu\_Ming\_Foundt to show how the collective advances its cultural, literary, and political project online. My analysis will begin with a discussion of digital activism and its potential as a community-building movement, which is informed by the theories of Joss Hands, Arjun Appadurai, and Clay Shirky. I will then focus on specific examples of the collective’s online production between the years 2010-2016,<sup>1</sup> first on the social media site Twitter and then on their blog *Giap!* I will conclude by relating the collective’s activities on the Web to the work of Evgeny Morozov on the “Net delusion.” While Wu Ming seem to harness the power of digital tools in a way that far surpasses the more traditional control of popular culture and media exhibited by former prime minister and media mogul Silvio Berlusconi, does this truly mean a new cultural frontier? In short, does the Internet really offer a different path to freedom of expression, or does it simply condition us in different ways? Given

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<sup>1</sup> 2009 is the year of publication of *Altai*, which was the last collectively written novel until 2014’s *L’Armata dei Sonnambuli*. In the meantime, Wu Ming established the current version of *Giap!* and they joined Twitter and Pinterest (see Chapter Three). This would appear to indicate that they invested their energies more specifically in their digital projects in those years.

their familiarity with the digital realm, the collective does appear to be appropriately skeptical of the tools they are using, and my analysis will show various policies and procedures in play that seek to combat what Morozov calls “cyber-utopianism” and “Internet-centrism” (xv-xvi). In this way, I argue that the collective engages in digital activism not only to challenge social injustices but also to attempt to civilize the Internet itself and establish a sense of balance between the virtual and the physical world.<sup>2</sup>

## II. Introduction to Digital Activism: Rebellion, Collective Action, and the “Cute Cat” Theory

Joss Hands, in his book *@ is for Activism*, distinguishes between protest, resistance, and rebellion as different forms of activism, digital and non. He defines protest as “the expression of dissatisfaction with a state of affairs, which always entails an appeal to others” (4). Resistance is more active and in defiance of authority; it involves refusal of both consent and compliance. Rebellion, on the other hand, tries to transform circumstances by identifying the deeper problems/frameworks at play and therefore must be collective and cooperative. It combines both dissent and resistance with action; true activism, then, requires all three elements. Hands also distinguishes between rebellions that seek solidarity and freedom and those that seek power: in the case of Wu Ming, the kind of revolution the collective is pursuing is not aimed at *gaining* power as much as in *dissolving* power relations. These theories on digital activism help put the collective’s participation on Twitter and *Giap!* in context in order to explain the effectiveness (or not) of the digital component of their community-building project.

I will discuss the success, both potential and realized, of their proposed rebellion later on in this chapter, but at least ideologically speaking, Wu Ming’s commitment to collectivity and

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<sup>2</sup> Their reasoning is best explained by Wu Ming 1 in a *Giap!* post from 26 September 2011 about “defetishizing the Net.” “If we stay ‘inside and against’ the Net, we may find the way to enter into an *alliance* with those who are exploited upstream. A worldwide alliance between ‘digital activists,’ cognitive workers, and electronic-industry workers would be the most frightening thing for the bosses of the Internet” (Wu Ming 1, “Feticismo della merce digitale e sfruttamento nascosto: i casi Amazon e Apple”).

cooperation is inarguable. If a focus on creating community is a cornerstone of digital rebellion, then the collective clearly meets this prerequisite as well, taking advantage of the participatory nature of this online environment in order to form these groups, which are defined by Clay Shirky, quoting Dan Gillmor, as “the former audience” (7). That is to say, “those people who react to, participate in, and even alter a story as it is unfolding” (7), as compared to the audiences of the past who simply consumed content. While the Internet is at times depicted as an isolated place populated by lonely individuals behind their computer screens, Shirky claims that humans naturally look to form groups, even in an environment such as this, which is much more collective and collaborative than previously imagined. He sees the digital realm as more open than ever, capable of completely changing our communication and interactions with one another. In his words, “[w]e are living in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations” (20-21). While not exactly a utopia, the Internet does break down some of the institutional barriers that have long perpetuated hierarchical relationships among people, and now, “newly capable groups are assembling, and they are working without the managerial imperative and outside the previous strictures that bounded their effectiveness” (24).

To illustrate his point, Shirky uses the image of the ladder to describe the level of engagement and communication among people when it comes to participating in group activities. Of the three ‘rungs’ mentioned, “sharing” is the least demanding and most accessible, while “cooperating” calls for greater commitment in helping to create group identity. According to Shirky’s definition, the Wu Ming collective engages without question in collaborative production (part of cooperation), in which “no person can take credit for what gets created, and the project could not come into being without the participation of many” (50). The most difficult of the three

‘rungs’ on Shirky’s ladder, collective action, also describes Wu Ming’s ideology, as it “requires a group of people to commit themselves to undertaking a particular effort together, and to do so in a way that makes the decisions of the group binding on the individual members” (51). On the first ‘rung,’ participants share “awareness;” on the second, creation. The rung of collective action insinuates shared responsibility, which requires a level of engagement in which individuals “have some shared vision strong enough to bind the group together” (53).<sup>3</sup> This theory is also echoed in the work of S.G. Tarrow, who considers “social movements to be collective action, based on four properties: collective challenge, common purpose, social solidarity, and sustained interaction” (qtd. in Sandoval-Alamazan and Gil-Garcia 366). In these terms, the collective has certainly harnessed these changes in communication effectively, contributing to the leveling of the hierarchical playing field. As Shirky says, and as the collective appears to comprehend, “When we change the way we communicate, we change society” (17).

Shirky’s work focuses largely on human nature in relation to technology, while Ethan Zuckerman offers a theory on the tools themselves. In “The Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism,” his hypothesis is as follows: “Sufficiently usable read/write platforms will attract porn and activists. If there’s no porn, the tool doesn’t work. If there are no activists, it doesn’t work well” (*My Heart’s in Accra* blog). In other words, in trying to build the tools to satisfy the most base and basic desires of online users, new possibilities have been created for activists as well. Zuckerman cites many examples of governments trying to ban sites due to political dissent, but when they touch those sites that pass the “cute cats” test, i.e. those sites that can (also) be used for the most banal of purposes, they get the attention of the people as a whole. Twitter is an example of a tool

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<sup>3</sup> Rodrige Sandoval-Almazan and J. Ramon Gil-Garcia also explore “Collective action theory” (attributed to Mancur Olson Jr.) in their article “Towards cyberactivism 2.0? Understanding the use of social media and other information technologies for political activism and social movements, pp. 365-378.

that can serve both functions. Says Zuckerman, “[it] is far from the perfect tool – it’s centralized and easily blocked. But it’s also used for lots of dumb purposes, which means it passes the cute cats test.” Many movements begin on sites not purposely designed for activism, which could explain why they are potentially effective. Twitter is just such a site, which is perhaps why the Wu Ming collective uses it as a platform of protest.

### **III. Twitter**

Beyond Zuckerman’s “Cute Cat” theory, in most of the literature on the social media site Twitter, the jury is still out on how powerful of a tool it really is to effect social change. It has been credited with being the organizing force behind the Arab Spring,<sup>4</sup> and it is undoubtedly a source of instant (though possibly not factual) information. The immediacy and simplicity of Twitter, not to mention its unique function of connecting people all over the world regardless of their race, class, or celebrity status, make it a potentially powerful tool. According to Dhiraj Murthy, “Twitter has the potential to increase our awareness of others and to augment our spheres of knowledge, tapping us into a global network of individuals who are passionately giving us instant updates on topics and areas in which they are knowledgeable or participating in real-time” (x). Clive Thompson, in a 2007 *Wired* article, offers a slightly different perspective from that of Murthy: in his view, Twitter creates an almost sixth sense in users. That is to say, when one continually reads short updates about friends and colleagues over time, one develops a different awareness of who they are as people and their lives, “an almost telepathic awareness of the people most important to me” (“How Twitter Creates a Social Sixth Sense”). He goes on to explain,

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<sup>4</sup> See Murthy, *Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age*. See also Berenger, *Social Media Go to War: Rage, Rebellion and Revolution in the Age of Twitter*. The medium is currently a touchstone for the Black Lives Matter movement, to name just one example; new hashtags supporting various causes are created daily and are now accepted as a legitimate form of protest.

It's like proprioception, your body's ability to know where your limbs are. That subliminal sense of orientation is crucial for coordination: It keeps you from accidentally bumping into objects, and it makes possible amazing feats of balance and dexterity. Twitter and other constant-contact media create *social* proprioception. They give a group of people a sense of itself, making possible weird, fascinating feats of coordination. (Thompson)

Thompson also sees Twitter as profoundly “collectivist,” as it allows users to create a “shared understanding larger than yourself.” In this way, like so many aspects of Wu Ming’s project, Twitter represents the multitude: it is “a collection of communities of knowledge” (Murthy xi), held together by a plural group identity.<sup>5</sup>

These communities of knowledge might be political, profound, and socially conscious, or they can be banal and superficial: there is a constant shifting between the meaningful and the trivial. The same individual (celebrity or non) may tweet what he/she had for breakfast, and then appeal to his/her followers to vote for legislation on female reproductive rights, all within five minutes of each other. The Twitter user must constantly reevaluate the importance of the tweets they are reading, and context can prove difficult if the previous communication is about the quality of the bagel the person just finished eating.<sup>6</sup> In this way, however, Twitter serves as an interesting example of the way culture is created and diffused and the agency with which followers engage with the medium. Twitter has, after all, effectively broken down the boundaries between

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<sup>5</sup> I explore the concept of the “multiple single” in Chapter One, pp. 25-39. See Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*. “The multitude, designates an active social subject, which acts on the basis of what the singularities share in common. The multitude is an internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity (or, much less, indifference) but on what it has in common” (100).

<sup>6</sup> The same critique has been leveled at today’s television news, as it often shifts ‘seamlessly’ from stories about war to ‘fluff’ pieces about puppies, which causes the viewer to give less importance to the former because the change in tone lessens the gravity of the report.



‘commoners’ and ‘celebrities,’ given users the agency to report on news (making them authors in a Benjaminian sense),<sup>7</sup> and allowed for the forming of ‘niche-like’ communities online, in which consumers of the medium determine whom they consider to be ‘experts’ on something. Murthy questions whether or not Twitter has allowed for the erosion of traditional media hegemony by giving users this amount of power, the democratizing effect being that it gives ‘ordinary people’ the chance to become ‘opinion leaders,’ which is evidenced in the case of Wu Ming.

While the authority and expertise of these ‘opinion leaders’ is questionable when compared to more mainstream media outlets,<sup>8</sup> it is also important to recognize the fluidity and variety of the content on Twitter, and this is due largely to the advent of hashtags. Murthy claims that the use of the latter, which group Tweets from different users around the same discussion thread, is why Twitter has been useful for social movements: “[t]his discourse is not structured around directed communication between identified interactants. It is more of a stream, which is composed of a polyphony of voices all chiming in” (4). The “retweet” function on Twitter also increases the audience exponentially in very quick fashion: if a friend is already following Wu Ming, sees a certain proposed hashtag and retweets it, it reaches his/her followers (who might not follow Wu Ming), and the exposure continues to follow from there. Thanks to the facility with which readership can be increased and the direct contact with their readers/followers that the medium enables, Twitter could be considered a cornerstone of Wu Ming’s drive for “collective

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<sup>7</sup> See Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin contends, concerning writing, that the role of the author began to shift with the first letters to the editor. Suddenly, nonprofessional writers were published in the newspaper. In Benjamin’s words, the phenomenon that occurred with filming and photography had extended to literature—it was no longer the field of the professional but open to ‘amateurs’: “At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer [...] Literary license is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialized training and thus becomes common property” (16).

<sup>8</sup> See Umberto Eco’s discourse, given at the University of Torino, on how those who were once considered the ‘village idiots’ have now been promoted to ‘opinion leaders’ thanks to social media: “Il Web ha promosso scemo villaggio a opinion leader,” 11 June 2015.

intelligence” and community, as well as a certain level of digital authority and presence.

### **@Wu\_Ming\_Foundt**

So how does the collective utilize this social media platform beyond the formation of these communities? To begin, there have been clear examples of Wu Ming using this medium to successfully mobilize protest. Before I mention specific cases, a brief structural analysis of the collective’s engagement on the site is useful. First, as of October 31, 2015, Wu Ming had 51,700 followers, 70,700 total tweets, and were following 1,025 other users or groups. In terms of the latter, most of the people they follow are either associations, journalists, or other political activists. Overall, they seem to choose like-minded individuals or groups, which is not unlike how the majority of users choose to engage online in the digital age (the “echo chamber” effect).<sup>9</sup> The fact that they do not follow those with opposing viewpoints does not mean, of course, that they cannot and do not read what is coming from the other side. What it does mean is that these tweets, which are almost assuredly in opposition to what they believe, will not appear in their newsfeed when they log on to the site. Furthermore, if the people or groups they are following represent some kind of “community of sentiment” (Appadurai 8) or “collective intelligence” (Levy qtd. in Jenkins 2), then it is logical for them to surround themselves with people who share their ideals. They clearly employ filters in order to control negative content, which is one way they demonstrate awareness of Morozov’s “Net Delusion” of “cyber-utopianism” and “Internet-centrism,” to be discussed later in this chapter.

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<sup>9</sup> See O’Hara and Stevens, “Echo Chambers and Online Radicalism: Assessing the Internet’s Complicity in Violent Extremism.”

Their followers, on the other hand, offer a different story. By way of example, I clicked on the first person who came up under their followers and found Pastor Alex Rivas, whose bio describes him as: “Figlio di Dio, Ricercatore, Lider, Profeta. Un essere umano” (“Son of God, Researcher, Leader, Prophet. A human being”). His “fixed tweet” at the top of the page addresses homosexuality as unnatural.<sup>10</sup> In another example, he tweeted his thoughts on the holiday of Halloween: “A death cult. A monument to evil. Commercialized idiocy. A demonic portal.”<sup>11</sup> These are just two instances, but they are enough to highlight this particular follower as decidedly outside of the collective’s ideology and practices. Of course, Twitter is also known for being a prime place for passive aggressive targeting, or “trolling,” of people whose views differ from one’s own. It is therefore not uncommon to follow people with whom one profoundly disagrees, just to have the opportunity to insult him/her (or worse, threaten the other person) without the physical confrontation.

To further illustrate the complex group dynamics of Twitter, another follower points to the discussion from Chapter Three of this study regarding communities of sentiment and the niche groups born out of gaming culture. His or her handle is @AscediGuerraBlog; while he/she has very few tweets, his/her profile links to his blog [ascediguerrablog.wordpress.com](http://ascediguerrablog.wordpress.com). The biography reads: “I love stories, narrations in all their forms, whether they be books, songs, films, comic strips, tv shows, all types of texts. We are narrations ourselves.”<sup>12</sup> The user explains that the

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<sup>10</sup> A fixed tweet is almost like the ‘motto’ of a page at any given time. It does not move with the chronological newsfeed and therefore retains superior status at the top of the page.

<sup>11</sup> Pastore Alex Rivas (PastoreAleRivas). “Un culto alla morte. Un sacrario al male. Una stupidità commerciali. Una porta demoniaca. #Halloween è qualche cosa ma “un partito”.”. 30 Oct 2015, 23:27 UTC. Tweet. All translations from @Wu\_Ming\_Foundt and related Twitter accounts are mine. This particular user has accounts in both Spanish and English as well, with a slight variation of the Twitter handle: @PastorAlexRivas for Spanish and @AlexRivasPastor for English. The content of the accounts is the same.

<sup>12</sup> Ascediguerrablog (Ascediguerrablog). “Amo le storie, le narrazioni in ogni loro forma, che siano libri, canzoni, film, fumetti, serie tv, testi di ogni tipo. Siamo noi stessi narrazioni.” 4 Aug. 2016.

purpose of the blog is to exchange stories, ending the premise with a quote from Wu Ming (that stories are “asce di guerra da disseppellire”) and a similar sentiment from Stephen King. If the person is simply a ‘fan’ of the collective or an actual associate or friend is wholly unclear, but this particular user, when compared to @PastoreAleRivas above, shows the whole spectrum of Wu Ming’s followers on Twitter and suggests that this is a somewhat unpredictable and confrontational environment.

### **Crashtags: *#guerrieri***

Having established the collective’s general presence on the social media site, let me consider specific examples in which Wu Ming utilized Twitter to either challenge dominant paradigms or, in some cases, to influence actual change. Perhaps the most interesting and effective case comes from the group’s war on the electric company Enel in 2013.<sup>13</sup> It started with a new marketing campaign by the latter, proposing the hashtag *#guerrieri*, or “warriors,” in an attempt to celebrate the ‘extraordinary’ in the ordinary. The idea for this campaign, created by the advertising firm Saatchi and Saatchi, was for Italians to share stories about the simple acts of courage and bravery in their everyday lives, from their daily commute to the hours they put in at work to their sacrifices for their family. They were to submit these tales to a storytelling platform on the company’s website (making this, quite ironically, a transmedial project), and the most popular would be entered into a contest to win an electric bicycle. What Enel did not count on was that this platform, being open to all, would also provide space for their critics to attack them.

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<sup>13</sup> Enel, which stands for Ente nazionale per l’energia elettrica, is an Italian multinational corporation. It was initially established as a public entity in 1962 but was privatized in 1999. The company operates in 30 different countries around the world, and from the perspective of Wu Ming is responsible for many human rights and environmental atrocities both at home and abroad.

Rather than share stories about daily feats of ‘heroism’ with the proposed hashtag, Wu Ming and others transformed #guerrieri into a “crashtag”<sup>14</sup> by attaching the former to damaging evidence against the company. Because Enel had paid to be one of the Top Trends on Twitter, their negative publicity became even more widespread. According to *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, in the beginning the campaign had received little more than 400 daily mentions, while on one particular day, following the onset of the “crashtag,” there were 2500. With the help of Twitter, the collective and their followers effectively shut down the marketing campaign within a short amount of time.

It all began on September 23, 2013, with a tweet from @enelsharing: “Discover the stories of #guerrieri<sup>15</sup> who told guerrieri.enel.com about their experiences, courage, determination, and hope.”<sup>16</sup> In addition, there were posters featuring various individuals engaging in what would widely be considered ordinary daily tasks. By way of example, one features a woman riding public transportation. Above her image, there are the words: “We are the warriors of the underground. /We are the warriors of waiting in the rain and running to the bus stop. /We are the warriors of waking up at the last stop. /We are the warriors of the same old roads and of the ever-changing horizons. /we are the warriors of STANDING ROOM ONLY.”<sup>17</sup> Below the image, the campaign continues: “These are the warriors we believe in, millions of Italians who we support with all our energy. In business, in research, socially, and in every day battles. If their story is also yours, tell it on guerrieri.enel.com. You will become the protagonist of a new communication campaign.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> A neologism indicating a hashtag that achieves the opposite of its originally intended effect.

<sup>15</sup> For this section, I will keep all hashtags in the original language to maintain their integrity and significance.

<sup>16</sup> Enelsharing (enelsharing). “Scopri le storie dei #guerrieri che si sono raccontati su guerrieri.enel.com testimoniando esperienze, coraggio, determinazione, speranza.” 23 Sept. 2013. All translations of Enel’s #guerrieri marketing campaign are mine.

<sup>17</sup> “Siamo i guerrieri del sottosuolo. /Siamo i guerrieri delle attese sotto la pioggia e delle corse alle fermate. /Siamo i guerrieri dei risvegli al capolinea. /Siamo i guerrieri dei tragitti sempre uguali e degli orizzonti sempre nuovi. /Siamo guerrieri dei POSTI IN PIEDI.” (“#Guerrieri,” *Enelsharing*. 2013).

<sup>18</sup> “Sono questi i guerrieri in cui crediamo, milioni di italiani che sosteniamo con tutta la nostra energia. Nelle imprese, nella ricerca, nel sociale e nelle battaglie di ogni giorno. Se la loro storia è anche la tua, raccontala su guerrieri.enel.com. Diventerà protagonista della nuova campagna di comunicazione” (“#Guerrieri.” *Enelsharing*).

Finally, the slogan: “WHATEVER YOUR BATTLE MAY BE, YOU HAVE THE ENERGY TO WIN IT. AND YOU HAVE OURS AS WELL.”<sup>19</sup> Or as the company wrote on the social network site Zzub, in an attempt to incentivize users to participate in the campaign,

Do you feel like a warrior? Do you dream, struggle, and fight every day to fulfill your dreams and achieve your goals? Are you a person who acts, works, engages, and creates? Welcome among the heroes of everyday life! The storytelling platform dedicated to us #warriors is online. Together we will write the diary of an Italy that hopes and fights and does not fear challenges. This collective storytelling will be led by a Guide, who will reveal the cards with which you will construct your story.<sup>20</sup>

On this particular site Enel offered users points for their contributions,<sup>21</sup> which provided them with additional incentives on the social network site, pointing to an agreement between the electric company and Zzub prior to the beginning of the campaign.

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<sup>19</sup> “QUALUNQUE SIA LA TUA BATTAGLIA, HAI TUTTA L’ENERGIA PER VINCERLA. ANCHE LA NOSTRA”. Other examples include: “Siamo i guerrieri delle serrande aperte all’alba/Siamo i guerrieri degli uffici accesi fino a sera/Siamo i guerrieri dell’industria pesante e della fabbrica delle idee/Siamo i guerrieri dei mercati, delle edicole, degli ospedali. Siamo i GUERRIERI DEL LAVORO.” Or “Siamo i guerrieri dello zaino sulle spalle e la testa altrove/Siamo i guerrieri del sentirsi fuori posto e fuori misura/Siamo i guerrieri delle difese ancora da forgiare/Siamo i guerrieri del sogno, dell’ideale e del sempre. Siamo i GUERRIERI ALLE PRIME ARMI” (“#Guerrieri.” *Enelsharing*).

<sup>20</sup> “Ti senti un guerriero? Sogni, combatti e lotti ogni giorno per raggiungere i tuoi sogni e realizzare i tuoi progetti? Sei una persona che agisce, lavora, s’impegna e crea? Benvenuto tra gli eroi della vita quotidiana! È online la piattaforma di storytelling dedicata a noi #guerrieri. Tutti insieme scriveremo il diario dell’Italia che spera e combatte e che non ha paura delle sfide. Lo storytelling collettivo sarà guidato da una Guida che scoprirà alcune carte, con le quali comporrà la tua storia” (“Guerrieri | Zzub.” 2013).

<sup>21</sup> According to blogger Matteo Flora, “Zzub è una community online nata nel 2008 e oggi è la più grande community di passaparola in Italia, che vanta dalla loro presentazione oltre 30.000 iscritti. In realtà gli iscritti sono, lo vedremo poco più avanti, gli utenti che sono stato in grado di rintracciare sono 38.131. La piattaforma è di proprietà di Eikon Strategic Consulting che potrebbe essere, ma non ne ho conferme, la società che gestisce l’intera campagna social di Enel” (“Quanto rumore per i #guerrieri di Enel, siano o no #mercenari.”). When a person becomes a Zzubber, they have access to products and services before they are officially on the market, they get trials of certain products to test, they can accumulate Punti Karma to have greater access to more prestigious campaigns and have greater status within the community, and they win Zzub gadgets.

Following the initial announcement of #guerrieri, the activity on Twitter started innocently enough, with tweets from @enelsharing like: “‘It takes courage to be happy,’ Karen Blixen #guerrieri #quote”;<sup>22</sup> but it did not take long for critics to write back, something a platform like Twitter makes exceedingly easy. Following a number of tweets by other users calling into question Enel’s use of the hashtag #guerrieri, Wu Ming began their contribution with a more decisive call to action: “The most sensible thing is to use the hashtag #guerrieri to spread counter information, counter inquests, links to the fight against @enelsharing”<sup>23</sup> This led to contributions from many of their followers, such as @L’Amazzone Furiosa, who tweeted: “And if we substituted #guerrieri with #avvelenati? #Enel.”<sup>24</sup> At a certain point, Wu Ming and their followers started to appropriate the actual ads and commercials. @claudioriccio tweeted: “#guerrieri of energy? Those who kill and torture for access to oil.”<sup>25</sup> @Wu\_Ming\_Foundt: “@enelsharing is asking for 1,600,000 Euro from @Greenpeace\_ITA for protests against coal greenpeace.it/enel Here are your #guerrieri.”<sup>26</sup> @gattoclochard: “#Guerrieri are those who can pay the #enel bill.”<sup>27</sup> As reported by *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, the protestors, as opposed to what Enel intended, defined “guerrieri” as “those who, every day, on the ground, fight against Enel’s coal plants” or “those who have to pay the most expensive (energy) bills in Europe and are on unemployment.”<sup>28</sup> These are just a few examples of

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<sup>22</sup> Enel (enelsharing). “‘Per essere felici ci vuole coraggio,’ Karen Blixen #guerrieri #quote.” 24 Sept. 2013, 2:35 a.m. Tweet.

<sup>23</sup> Wu Ming Foundation (Wu\_Ming\_Foundt). “La cosa più sensata è usare l’hashtag #guerrieri x veicolare controinformazione, controinchieste, link sulle lotte contro @enelsharing.” 24 Sept. 2013, 6:37 a.m. Tweet.

<sup>24</sup> L’Amazzone Furiosa (L’Amazzone Furiosa). “E se sostituissimo #guerrieri con #avvelenati? #Enel.” 24 Sept. 2013, 10:01 a.m. Tweet.

<sup>25</sup> Riccio, Claudio. (claudioriccio). “#guerrieri dell’energia? quelli che uccidono e torturano per impossessarsi del petrolio.” 24 Sept. 2013, 6:51 a.m. Tweet.

<sup>26</sup> Wu Ming Foundation (Wu\_Ming\_Foundt). “.@enelsharing chiede 1.600.000 euro a @Greenpeace\_ITA x le proteste contro il carbone <http://t.co/M2IO4gvJHX> Ecco i #Guerrieri”. 24 Sept. 2013, 10:43 UTC. Tweet.

<sup>27</sup> Tornatore, Luca (gattoclochard). “#Guerrieri son quelli che riescono a pagarla, una bolletta dell’#enel @beppeccaccia @Wu\_Ming\_Foundt @enelsharing”. 24 Sept. 2013, 10:18 UTC. Tweet.

<sup>28</sup> “quelli che ogni giorno, nei territori, si battono contro le centrali a carbone di Enel” or “quelli che devono pagare la bolletta più cara d’Europa e sono in cassa integrazione.” (De Agostini, “Enel, la pubblicità diventa boomerang: “epic fail” di #guerrieri su Twitter.”)

the barrage of tweets that began the morning of September 24, 2013, and by midday, the “crashtag” had already done significant damage. As Wu Ming tweeted: “In this moment, h. 12:08 the hashtag #guerrieri has effectively changed course ☺ #boomerang Who knows if now the Twitterpolice will intervene.”<sup>29</sup>

To make matters worse, and in highly ironic fashion, Enel elected to ignore the power of the very same medium they were seeking to exploit, discounting the potential effects of Wu Ming’s Twitter blitz. In other words, they chose to pretend the assault was not happening and continued to promote the campaign in newspapers and on television. Because both sides were using the hashtag #guerrieri, it only augmented their exposure, which in this case became mostly negative publicity. They clearly put a great deal of stock into their relationships with newspaper owners and in fact, only *Il Fatto Quotidiano* reported on the problem at all. However, the campaign was still a ‘flop,’ which is further proof of the ever-widening gap between social media and traditional news outlets. The newspapers did not have to report on the attack, because ultimately the battlefield was online. As the collective explained on *Giap!*:

Today (24 September 2013), along with many others, we had fun “crashing” an odious, incessant marketing campaign by Enel. A campaign dreamed up by Saatchi & Saatchi, hardly new to the scene. It’s just that, well, on Twitter certain marketing brontosaurus that try to be “hip” *are* latecomers. In reality, we limited ourselves to doing just what Enel asked, which was to use the hashtag #guerrieri. The result?<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Wu Ming Foundation (Wu\_Ming\_Foundt). "In questo momento, h. 12:08, l'hashtag #guerrieri risulta pressoché "dirottato" :-)) #boomerang Chissà se adesso interverrà la twitterpolizia". 24 Sept. 2013, 10:09 UTC. Tweet.

<sup>30</sup> Oggi (24 settembre 2013), insieme a tant\* altr\*, ci siamo divertiti a “dirottare” un’odiosa, martellante campagna pubblicitaria dell’Enel. Campagna ideata da Saatchi & Saatchi, mica gli ultimi arrivati. Solo che, ehm, su Twitter certi brontosauri del marketing che si sforzano di avere idee “hip” *sono* gli ultimi arrivati. In realtà, ci siamo limitati a fare quello che Enel chiedeva, cioè usare l’hashtag #guerrieri. Risultato? (*Giap!* 24 Sept 2013)



They then show a screenshot of guerrieri.enel.com with the message “Service Unavailable.” Currently, the page cannot be found.

Wu Ming referred to the failure of Enel’s campaign as “the most clamorous case of unintended consequences in the short history of Italian social media marketing.”<sup>31</sup> @Detta\_Lalla explains their anger well: “An energy-based multinational company, devoted to profit, guilty of environmental devastations, with ambiguous international and political ties, exploiter of workers and the common good, pretend to be on the side of those who pay for the crisis. And they give you an electric bicycle and a set of pots and pans.”<sup>32</sup> In my view, though, the important thing to focus on is not that the collective and others effectively thwarted Enel’s campaign on Twitter, but rather that this type of social marketing shares real affinities with the Wu Ming project, which could be one of the (many) reasons the collective was so immediately offended by the electric company’s attempt to, as they said on *Giap!*, be “hip.” Through the website guerrieri.enel.com and the Twitter handle @enelsharing, Enel sought to do exactly what Wu Ming has been doing for at least fifteen years now: collective storytelling. To give just one example, the #guerrieri project is not unlike Wu Ming’s *Manituana* project,<sup>33</sup> at least at its outset. So what are the implications of a high-profile advertising campaign that uses more grassroots methods? Are these ‘other’ approaches to storytelling becoming mainstream? And if so, what does this mean for the Wu Ming project as a cultural alternative? Perhaps this is another reason they combat so fiercely against this campaign:

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<sup>31</sup> “il più clamoroso caso di eterogenesi dei fini nell’ancora breve storia del social media marketing italiano” (De Agostini)

<sup>32</sup> “Una multinazionale dell’energia, dedita al profitto, colpevole di devastazioni ambientali, dalle politiche e legami internazionali ambigui, sfruttatrice dei lavoratori e dei beni comuni, finge di stare dalla parte di chi paga la crisi. E ti regala un bici elettrica e un set di pentole.” (Lalla, “#Guerrieri e mercenari: l’ipocrisia e il marketing sulla nostra pelle.”)

<sup>33</sup> See Chapter Three, pp. 159-178.

Enel's decision to utilize collective storytelling in their marketing just might threaten Wu Ming's niche-like existence on the fringes of popular culture and media, which is where they prefer to be.

Furthermore, the 'militaristic' language utilized by the energy company echoes that of the collective, discussed elsewhere in this study. For Enel, hard-working Italians are "guerrieri" who meet on the 'battlefield' of daily life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, just like Wu Ming's stories are "hatchets of war" (*Asce di guerra* 125) and a controversial text like *Q's The Benefit of Christ Crucified* is "un'arma" (*Q* 394). Both sides appear to favor this bellicose tone when referring to their projects, implying that the tensions of 21<sup>st</sup> century life are such that we must all take up arms to survive. In fact, in the end the two sides do end up 'going to war' against one another, and because of their greater familiarity not only with the digital realm but also with collective storytelling, Wu Ming emerges victorious, with a better trained 'army' behind them.

### **#Renziscappa**

The example of the #guerrieri campaign shows the effective use of a carefully aimed hashtag in a precise (and brief) amount of time. Wu Ming's response to Enel's project did not last long because extended Twitter 'warfare' was not necessary. Within 24 hours, they were able to dismantle a marketing campaign that had surely been in the works for months. In other cases, though, the collective uses Twitter to protest or expose something continuously over the long term, altering both the cause and the strategy for the change they are seeking. This is the case with the hashtag #renziscappa, which is used to highlight the shortcomings of Italy's current Prime Minister Matteo Renzi.<sup>34</sup> In particular, the collective accuses the latter of missing important appointments

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<sup>34</sup> As of this study, early 2016.

and in general showing a lack of leadership at crucial times: “Because when the going gets tough, he disappears, stands people up, sneaks away, delegates to others, remains silent. Then he reappears on Twitter bragging and bumbling.”<sup>35</sup>

The idea for the sustained attack on Renzi’s leadership was born on Wu Ming’s Twitter page on November 4, 2014, when, in retweeting the hashtag sent to them by another user, @danffi, they began to count the days, places, and times in which the premier failed to fulfill his obligations. The collective started with the missed appointment of the same day in Bagnoli, where he was to present the Sblocca Italia<sup>36</sup> decree. Protests had already been organized, and then the premier cancelled the appearance at the eleventh hour.<sup>37</sup> From this missed appointment, the collective went back in time and began to chronicle the premier’s absences, plotting each of them on a digital map. Here are a few examples:

4 November 2014, @Wu\_Ming\_Foundt tweeted: “#Torino Summit, July 2014: cancelled in extremis. Visit to Val Susa, September 2014, last minute no-show. #Renziscappa.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Wu Ming Foundation (Wu\_Ming\_Foundt). “Perché quando il gioco si fa duro lui scompare, tira pacchi, se la svigna, delega ad altri, tace. Riappare su Twitter gradasso e maldestro.” 04 Nov 2014, 07:49 UTC. Tweet.

<sup>36</sup> Briefly, the “Unblock Italy” decree, put into law on September 14, 2014, proposes to reduce bureaucracy by ‘opening’ Italy up to development in a variety of sectors, from waste management to the environment to public services. It has been fairly controversial and Renzi has been accused of having a neoliberal agenda not unlike his predecessors, like Silvio Berlusconi and Enrico Letta. (De Rosa, “Sblocca Italia: extractivism made in Italy”).

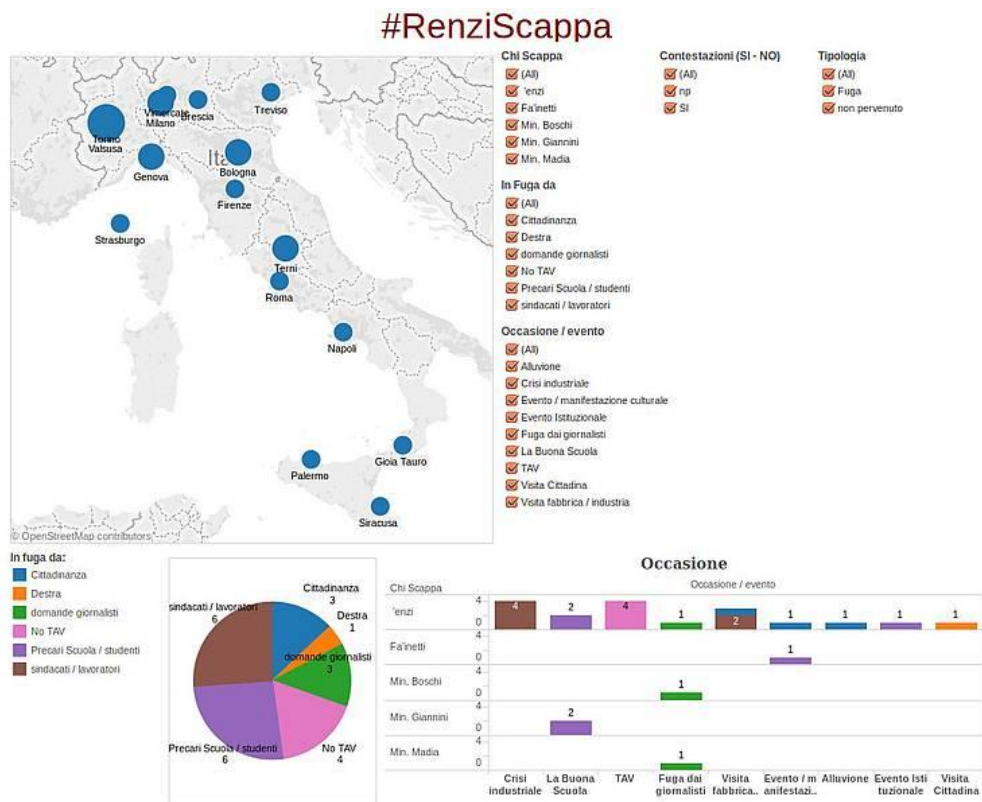
<sup>37</sup> Turrini, “#Renziscappa, gli scrittori di Wu Ming raccontano tutte le fughe del premier.”

<sup>38</sup> Wu Ming Foundation (Wu\_Ming\_Foundt). “Summit di #Torino, luglio 2014: disdetto in extremis. Visita in Val Susa, settembre 2014: pacco all'ultimo minuto. #Renziscappa”. 04 Nov 2014, 11:04 UTC. Tweet.

Same day, in response to the above tweet: “Violence against workers in #Terni: silence for days. Unexpected reception in #Brescia: runs away. Visit to #Bagnoli: cancelled. #Renziscappa.”<sup>39</sup>

The following day: “October 2014: fear of being booed, #Renziscappa from the flood in #Genova...and he gets booed in #Bergamo anyway.”<sup>40</sup>

These tweets were followed by other users tweeting instances of Renzi’s unfulfilled obligations using the same hashtag. Below is the map of those absences, courtesy of *Giap!* and Twitter user @figuredisfondo (*Giap!* 12 Nov. 2014).



<sup>39</sup> Wu Ming Foundation (Wu\_Ming\_Foundt). “Botte agli operai di #Terni: silenzio x giorni. Accoglienza imprevista a #Brescia: via di corsa. Visita a #Bagnoli: annullata. #Renziscappa.” 04 Nov 2014, 11:20 UTC. Tweet.

<sup>40</sup> Wu Ming Foundation (Wu\_Ming\_Foundt). "Ottobre 2014: paura fischii, #Renziscappa dall'alluvione di #Genova... e i fischii li becca a #Bergamo <http://t.co/UVEJaQAqr>". 05 Nov 2014, 08:52 UTC. Tweet.

The map also details from whom or from what the premier was escaping. The blue circles represent the individual cities and are larger based on the number of occurrences of missed appointments. The whereabouts of his ministers and confidants are also documented, as are the particular causes they appear to be avoiding, many of which are of high importance to the Wu Ming collective and their collaborators and followers. As Davide Turrini notes, “It so happens that in this sort of “hot autumn” of the Renzi government, the place from which the premier has ‘fled’ most frequently is the Northwest, Piedmont to be exact, seat of the No Tav movement” (“Renziscappa, gli scrittori di Wu Ming raccontano tutte le fughe del premier”).<sup>41</sup>

The collective not only documents the premier’s missed appointments, they also take him and his staff to task for their ineffective use of digital media. By way of example, on 3 November 2014, @matteorenzi tweeted, “Yesterday they said we were kids, today we’re a strong power. They fear us, because they understand that this is #ourtime.”<sup>42</sup> His tone was not unlike that of the #guerrieri marketing campaign, and it was certainly not without cliché. Wu Ming immediately seized the opportunity to criticize not only the Prime Minister’s rhetoric but also his use of the medium, responding directly to his tweet: “This [tweet] of @matteorenzi’s is disastrous: the framing, the words, and the images it leaves you with are all wrong: RENZI – STRONG POWER – FEAR.”<sup>43</sup> And they continue: “Either @matteorenzi’s staff is completely confused, or – more

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<sup>41</sup> “Tanto che in questa sorta di “autunno caldo” del governo Renzi il luogo da cui il premier è “fuggito” con più frequenza in pochi mesi è il Nord Ovest, più precisamente il Piemonte, culla del movimento No Tav” (Turrini). The No Tav movement stands for “No Treno ad Alta Velocità,” and it opposes the construction of a high-speed railway to connect Turin with Lyon, France. The reasons for their protest are environmental, social, and economic, and the fight is becoming more and more high profile. For more information: <http://www.notavtorino.org/>. The Wu Ming collective is a sustainer of this movement. Turrini’s reference to the “hot autumn” recalls the factory worker protests of 1969, during Italy’s “Lead Years.”

<sup>42</sup> Renzi, Matteo (matteorenzi). “Ieri dicevano che eravamo ragazzini, oggi che siamo poteri forti. Facciamo paura, perché hanno capito che questa è #lavoltabuona”. 03 Nov 2014, 11:07 UTC. Tweet.

<sup>43</sup> Wu Ming Foundation (Wu\_Ming\_Foundt). “Questo di @matteorenzi è un tweet disastroso: sbagliati il framing, le parole, le immagini che restano: RENZI – POTERI FORTI – PAURA.” 3 Nov 2014. Tweet.

likely – he writes these tweets himself and they have to take the ‘furbofono’<sup>44</sup> away from him.’<sup>45</sup>

The collective’s comments channel George Lakoff in their reference to linguistic framing and its political implications<sup>46</sup> and show the care as well as the cunning they employ in crafting their own tweets.

Presumably, there was some backlash both to Renzi’s tweet and Wu Ming’s response, and, much like in the case of #guerrieri, the collective demonstrated their considerable advantage over those in power when it comes to social media. The next day, just after 2 pm, 4 November, they tweeted,<sup>47</sup>

It was @matteorenzi who chose to focus on social media, and Twitter in particular. The latest wrong moves featured above show that [Renzi] is on edge [...] Then we’ll hear from those who don’t think Twitter is the reality of the people who vote etc. [...] Thanks for nothing, eh! That’s a whole other story [...] The point is that the image of ‘enzi as a communicator is showing its cracks, it was supposed to represent his “new” self and that self is just as phony [...] And it’s showing its cracks because lately ‘enzi has had to deal \*directly\* with social conflict, a stress test he wasn’t prepared for [...] The honeymoon is over in any case. Even some of

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<sup>44</sup> Because of lack of a better translation, and also in deference to the way the collective plays with language, I have chosen to leave certain “neologisms” such as “furbofono” untranslated.

<sup>45</sup> Wu Ming Foundation (Wu\_Ming\_Foundt). “O @matteorenzi ha uno staff in piena confusione, o – probabilissimo – se li scrive da solo e devono togliergli di mano il furbofono.” 3 Nov 2014. Tweet.

<sup>46</sup> The collective is well acquainted with Lakoff’s 2004 work *Don’t Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives*, in which he theorizes that when one controls the language, one controls the message. He argues that by attacking an opponent’s views using their own linguistic frames, one only continuously re-evokes that frame, keeping the opposition’s ideas at the forefront. Instead, by establishing an individual or a group’s own frame, our language better carries forth our ideas. I maintain that through mythopoesis and playfulness with language, Wu Ming demonstrate a desire to create new frames and thereby actively change the dominant discourse.

<sup>47</sup> The following is a series of tweets, which I have combined into one fluid discourse. Since tweets are limited to 140 characters, all comments separated by ellipses were tweeted independently and in quick succession.

his cultural ‘coriferi’ (journalists, “innovators,” satirists) have begun to be anti-enzi [...] Which doesn’t at all mean that ‘enzism’ is finished. But it has lost that aura that the media called magnetic. And a drop in the magnetic charge of ‘enzism means that certain ‘supercazzole’<sup>48</sup> will be seen as such. For our fight this can only be positive [...] The tactic that works? The “antiwelcoming committees.” The official visits that come up against walls of rage and mockery at every turn.<sup>49</sup>

They continue their Twitter attack on the premier, accusing him of perpetuating the status quo, or, as they put it, “the usual inequality” (“la solita disuguaglianza”) and the “fake ‘new’” (“finto ‘nuovo’”). In a more personal critique, they identify him with a certain bourgeois subculture from the 1980s and the boom of modern consumer society. The “paninari”<sup>50</sup> were obsessed with name brand clothing, a hedonistic lifestyle, and a lack of engagement. These people, who were typically young and well-off, were, in a sense, the opposite of those who took part in the protests of the late ‘60s and ‘70s, often dubbed the “sessantottini,” or the “68ers:” in essence, Wu Ming accuse Renzi of being an anti-revolutionary. The tweets above are just some of the output that came in a 24 hour period of time, and later the authors pieced them together on *Giap!* to tell the whole story of the

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<sup>48</sup> “Supercazzole” is another neologism I prefer to leave untranslated. It loosely translates to “nonsense,” like a string of words put together without forming a coherent thought.

<sup>49</sup> Wu Ming Foundation (Wu\_Ming\_Foundt). “È stato @matteorenzi a puntare sui social e soprattutto su Twitter. Le ultime mosse sbavate qui sopra sono sintomatiche di forte nervosismo...Poi arrivano quelli che Twitter non è la realtà di quelli che votano ecc...Grazie al cazzo, eh! Tutt’altro piano del discorso...Il punto è che l’immagine di ‘enzi’<sup>49</sup> come comunicatore mostra crepe, è stata pompata come il suo essere “nuovo” ed è altrettanto farlocca...E mostra crepe perché in questi giorni ‘enzi ha avuto a che fare \*direttamente\* col conflitto sociale, stress test a cui non era preparato...Luna di miele comunque finita. Anche alcuni suoi coriferi culturali (giornalisti, “innovatori”, satirici) d’un tratto fanno gli anti-‘enzi...Quanto non vuole affatto dire che il ‘enzismo sia finito. Ma ha perso l’aura che i media gli disegnavano magnetica...E un calo di carica magnetica del ‘enzismo significa che certe supercazzole verranno recepite come tali. Per le lotte ciò è solo positivo...La tattica che funziona? I “controcomitati d’accoglienza”. Le visite ufficiali che sbattono contro muri di rabbia e scherno, ovunque...Perché quando il gioco si fa duro lui scompare, tira pacchi, se la svigna, delega ad altri, tace. Riappare su Twitter gradasso e maldestro.” 4 Nov. 2014, 2 p.m. Tweet.

<sup>50</sup> The neo-liberal subculture of the “Paninari” is a complex one. Members of this group were associated with various ‘foreign’ status symbols and brands, such as Nike, Swatch, Levis, Timberland, and McDonald’s. For a tongue and cheek explanation/diagram, see: “Italy’s Fast Food-Loving, Timberland-Wearing, Forgotten Youth Culture.” (<http://www.openingceremony.us/entry.asp?pid=9014>).

origin of the hashtag #renziscappa.<sup>51</sup> As of the writing of this study, the hashtag is still in use and the collective's disdain for the premier has not diminished. Unlike #guerrieri, which was a blitz Twitter attack, the #renziscappa campaign is a decidedly slow burn, chipping slowly away at the prime minister's reputation. It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of their action at this point—they have certainly spread the hashtag among other Twitter users, and if one follows any of these people one is surely left with a negative image of Renzi in his/her mind.

However, I maintain that the real critique in this example is not of Renzi himself, but of the political process and its related discourse. Firstly, through #Renziscappa, Wu Ming demonstrate that social media can be used not just to post “cute cat” pictures,<sup>52</sup> but to hold elected officials accountable. They also show how these platforms are immediate, far-reaching, and broadly accessible. Secondly, as in the #guerrieri example, they chide these elected officials for their digital ignorance, for not understanding that a social media site like Twitter is also a place where linguistic framing is key to the communication of the message. In fact, on a platform in which the message is limited to a fixed number of characters, that framing becomes more important than ever. In the collective's view, politicians (and marketing firms) have not progressed beyond the “Cute Cat” theory of digital activism, and this, perhaps more than any other reason, is why they target them on Twitter. Of course, Matteo Renzi is not the first political figure—or even the first prime minister—Wu Ming have focused their attentions on in this realm. In the case of Renzi's predecessor, they took a more dramatic (and fantastical) approach.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Giap!* “#Renziscappa. Note su ‘enzi come comunicatore e sullo stato del ‘enzismo.’” 4 Nov. 2014.

<sup>52</sup> See Zuckerman.

<sup>53</sup> Chapters One-Three of this study take a deeper look at the collective's challenge to former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, particularly in terms of their approach to popular culture. Now that he is no longer the prime minister, their current political challenge on social media is directed towards those who are currently in power.



## #tifiamoasteroide

If Wu Ming have slowly been collecting evidence of Renzi's shortcomings as a political leader since 2014, before this their energies were concentrated on the awkward and ineffective coalition government of Enrico Letta.<sup>54</sup> This time their primary form of protest had a more artistic bent, though the medium of Twitter and the use of a strategic hashtag were once again the vehicles for this form of activism. The call began on June 6, 2013, with a Tweet: "Comrades, let the contest begin: write short science fiction stories in which a big meteorite strikes the Letta government, and we'll offer a free ebook!"<sup>55</sup> According to the collective's proposal, all of these stories should feature the same dramatic ending to the Letta government: "After the deafening roar, with the ringing in our ears, we still heard that music. Where until just moments ago Enrico Letta, head of the coalition government, stood, a terrifying chasm was opening. Clouds of black smoke rose from the enormous crater."<sup>56</sup> The ending is, of course, dramatic and apocalyptic (not to mention tongue in cheek), but it also speaks to a persistent problem in politics, not just in Italy but around the world as well: how can 'new blood' be introduced to government when elements of the 'old blood' continue to circulate through the system? On the surface, it would appear that the collective is out of practical solutions to the problem; however, I would argue that by invoking the end of the world, they are hoping for precisely the opposite. That is to say, with this contest they are still seeking

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<sup>54</sup> Enrico Letta was the Italian prime minister from 2013-2014, and he headed a fairly difficult coalition government comprised of his own party, the Partito Democratico (PD), former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's former party, the Partito della Libertà (PdL) and Mario Monti's centrist Scelta Civica (SC). He was not elected to the post but rather invited by Italian president Giorgio Napolitano to take over from Pier Luigi Bersani. Though his coalition managed to include all ends of the political spectrum, this did not translate into a particularly effective government. Amid criticisms of slow government and lack of economic reform (not to mention attacks from Berlusconi and his ministers), Letta resigned the post in 2014 and was succeeded (again, without a formal democratic election) by Matteo Renzi, another member of his own party.

<sup>55</sup> Wu Ming Foundation (Wu\_Ming\_Foundt). "Compagn\*, scatta il contest: scrivete racconti di fantascienza dove un grande meteorite colpisce il governo Letta, e facciamo il free ebook!". 06 Jun 2013, 08:37 UTC. Tweet.

<sup>56</sup> "Dopo il boato assordante, con le orecchie che fischiavano, sentivamo ancora quella musica. Dove fino a un istante prima si trovava Enrico Letta, capo del governo di larghe intese, si apriva una spaventosa voragine. Dall'enorme cratere se levavano nubi di fumo nero" (Vanetti, "Tifiamo asteroide" 6 Jun 2013).

solutions, just not of the pragmatic variety. Instead, #tifiamoasteroide speaks to the cathartic power of art, as well as its ability to offer new and creative alternatives to the status quo. In some ways, this particular project is a perfect synthesis of Wu Ming's approach to both art and politics.

Two months later, on August 10, 2013, the collective made note of the publication of the anthology with the following tweet: "Hey @EnricoLetta, wumingfoundation/com/giap/?p=13891 an asteroid is coming for you. Ten times over ☺ #Tifiamoasteroide."<sup>57</sup> In this particular example, Wu Ming combine the digital activism of Twitter with collective storytelling; it is the hashtag #Tifiamoasteroide that attracts the attention of potential participants, but the outcome here is decidedly different from the other examples analyzed thus far. Normally a hashtag is used to group/connect Tweets, so that a search of a particular hashtag brings forth all things said on Twitter about that particular topic. In the #guerrieri example, by using the hashtag continuously for a 24 hour period, the collective used sheer volume to create negative publicity for Enel. In this case, though, the group is less concerned with the traditional function of the hashtag and more with its possibilities as a building block or simply as a way to elicit attention. They are also clearly aiming towards a small-scale project here. This is perhaps the best example of the collective combining their political inclinations with their art, giving their followers a variety of ways to express their dissatisfaction with the government.

As a conclusion to this example and its perceived success, I will make brief mention of a *Giap!* post from April 2014 regarding a possible 'sequel' to #tifiamoasteroide, this time for the Renzi government. In the post, Wu Ming 1 acknowledges the significance of the first initiative:

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<sup>57</sup> Wu Ming Foundation (Wu\_Ming\_Foundt). "Ciao @EnricoLetta, qui <http://t.co/dxI1GJTGCM> ti arriva addosso un asteroide. Cento volte :- ) #Tifiamoasteroide". 10 Aug 2013, 15:19 UTC. Tweet.

It certainly worked for us as a literary project, in the sense that it was a good example of social cooperation and collective writing, and the anthology we got out of it had a certain depth, with its witty tales that encouraged us not to succumb to defeat and to the depression of the aftermath of coalition governance. An anthology that was downloaded by tens of thousands of people, the slogan “Tifiamo asteroide” went beyond the project, becoming a popular saying on Twitter. No big deal. A small thing. But it is the accumulation of small things that produces catastrophes. Renè Thom, etc.<sup>58</sup>

This explains their approach both to #tifiamoasteroide and to #renziscappa: revolution is often a slow, tedious process, but a commitment to the “piccole cose” (“small things”) will eventually produce results. It is the opposite of the Berlusconi-esque way of thinking about culture, in which everything is spectacle and instant gratification is at a premium.

### **Contro #Salvini**

While #renziscappa and #guerrieri had relatively diverse approaches which resulted in varied outcomes, what they did have in common was Wu Ming’s intolerance for hypocrisy and for the perpetuating of what they determine to be false images, surely a nod to the years of Berlusconi and the carefully crafted identity the former prime minister created through the

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<sup>58</sup> “Sicuramente ci ha portato bene come progetto letterario, nel senso che è stato un bell’esempio di cooperazione sociale e scrittura collettiva, ne è venuta fuori una antologia di una certa potenza, con dentro racconti beffardi che invitavano a non abbandonarsi allo sconfittismo e alla depre post-larghe intese. Antologia che è stata scaricata da svariate decine di migliaia di persone, lo slogan “Tifiamo asteroide” è andato anche oltre il progetto, divenendo un modo di dire diffuso su Twitter. Niente di che, intendiamoci. Una piccola cosa. Ma è l’accumulo di tante piccole cose a produrre le catastrofi (nel senso della teoria delle catastrofi, Renè Thom, ecc...)” (*Giap! #Renziscappa*. Note su ‘enzi come comunicatore e sullo stato del ‘enzismo.’ 4 Nov. 2014)

media.<sup>59</sup> They are more than skeptical about people and organizations who speak in clichés but have yet to prove their claims with actions. Social media, more than anything, allows its users to decide what kind of face they want to present to the world, and often reality is eschewed for a more attractive and charming persona. The “cult of personality” is no longer reserved for the rich, famous, or powerful. Of course, this applies to the collective as well; after all, they are users of these sites just like anyone else, and through this study it has been shown that their group identity, both on and offline, is nothing if not carefully crafted. To return to the example at hand, however, the collective takes issue with the ‘spin’ of politicians on social media, and this extends to the current leader of the Lega Nord, Matteo Salvini.<sup>60</sup>

On November 8, 2015, Salvini planned a demonstration in Piazza Maggiore in Bologna in an attempt to stop the government and challenge Matteo Renzi’s Partito Democratico. Why they chose the historically ‘reddest’ city in Italy for this rally is one issue; that they chose Wu Ming’s city is another. Even before the rally happened, the collective anticipated the hyperbole of Salvini’s message. On November 6, they tweeted: “When Salvini says, ‘There were 100,000 of us in Piazza Maggiore!’ keep in mind that means 23 people per square meter #Bologna.”<sup>61</sup> And in fact, Salvini tweeted, using his own name as a hashtag, “#Salvini: With these 100,000 [people] we begin the REVOLUTION OF DECENT PEOPLE! #Liberiamoci.”<sup>62</sup> As the collective writes on *Giap!*, “Such hyperbolic numbers, shot out randomly and repeated by the media without doubt or hesitation, created the expectation of a proper *invasion*. And instead, as we are about to

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<sup>59</sup> See Khrushchev, “The Secret Speech - On the Cult of Personality,” 1956.

<sup>60</sup> The Lega Nord per l’Indipendenza della Padania, or the Northern League, was founded officially in 1991 by Umberto Bossi and is known as a right wing, regionalist, and often xenophobic political party. The current party secretary is Matteo Salvini.

<sup>61</sup> Wu Ming Foundation (Wu\_Ming\_Foundt). “Quando Salvini dirà: “In Piazza Maggiore eravamo centomila!” tenete presente che vuol dire 23 persone a metro quadro. #Bologna”. 06 Nov 2015, 13:24 UTC. Tweet.

<sup>62</sup> Salvini, Matteo (matteosalvinimi). “#Salvini: Da questi 100mila parte la RIVOLUZIONE DELLE PERSONE PERBENE! #Liberiamoci”. 08 Nov 2015, 13:04 UTC. Tweet.

demonstrate *geometrically*, the “march on Bologna” was a flop.”<sup>63</sup> Just like they did with #renziscappa, they then proceed to systematically disprove Salvini’s boastful claims, scientifically measuring the piazza and accounting for the actual amount of space available during the Lega’s manifestation. On November 7, 2015, they issued the following tweet: “We invite everyone, tomorrow, to compare #Salvini’s numbers, the photos of the piazza and this: <http://acme.com/planimeter>.”<sup>64</sup> This digital measuring instrument helped the collective detail precisely the amount of space available in the piazza “geometrically” and just how much of it was actually used during Salvini’s protest (not surprisingly, a much smaller amount than the politician claimed).<sup>65</sup>

In all the examples mentioned thus far, the collective counters whomever they are challenging with the opposite approach. In other words, Enel tried to put the focus on their customers in an attempt to improve their image, and Wu Ming shifted the attention directly back to the energy company by presenting facts about their business dealings, completely refuting their idealistic celebration of everyday Italians. Along the same lines, Renzi attempted to appeal to the so-called Italian spirit, and the collective responded by pointing out specifically each of the times in which he himself did not fulfill that mandate of Italians as “poteri forti” (“strong powers”). Salvini, too, used hyperbolic and clichéd language, and Wu Ming countered with the indisputable science that disproved his claims. Rather than just openly disagreeing and engaging in arguments, which many are content to do on Twitter, Wu Ming constantly find surprising ways to question

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<sup>63</sup> “Tali cifre iperboliche, sparate a caso e ripetute dai media senza dubbi né tentennamenti, avevano create l’aspettativa di una vera e propria *invasione*. E invece, come stiamo per dimostrare *more geometrico*, la “marcia su Bologna” è stata un flop” (*Giap!*, “I quattro gatti di #Salvini a #Bologna e i numeri del flop di #Liberiamoci, metro quadro per metro quadro.” 9 Nov. 2015).

<sup>64</sup> Wu Ming Foundation (Wu\_Ming\_Foundt). “Invitiamo tutti, domani, a fare confronti triangolati tra le sparate di #Salvini, le foto della piazza e questo: <https://t.co/3DTjRzY1bg>”. 07 Nov 2015, 09:28 UTC. Tweet.

<sup>65</sup> *Giap!*, “I quattro gatti di #Salvini a #Bologna e i numeri del flop di #Liberiamoci, metro quadro per metro quadro,” 9 Nov. 2015.

hypocrisy in a subtle but effective way. As they write on *Giap!*: “Let’s preemptively ask a rhetorical and therefore banal question: does the fact that Salvini and ‘Lega’ racism flopped in Bologna mean they’re any less dangerous? Of course not. But we are convinced that nonsense needs to be refuted. Maybe, if all the wild tales of these last few years had been treated like this one, Salvini would be a nobody. An ex-competitor of a low budget quiz show.”<sup>66</sup>

Naturally, this begs the question: does Wu Ming’s Twitter challenge to the veracity of Salvini’s statements actually diminish his power and position? If social media continues to be used in this way, can digital activists truly effect change through this bottom-up approach? It is unclear to me if these questions can be answered at this moment in time, especially since the collective appears to be using the “piccole cose” (“small things”) approach to change. What I do see as a potential game-changer here is the fact that there is a counterpoint, and that counterpoint bears the same weight as the initial declaration. In other words, social media is inherently more democratic than traditional political situations and platforms, and Twitter in particular offers almost unprecedented access to those who enjoy a great deal more celebrity or prestige than the average user. It is one platform on which celebrities and non-celebrities, politicians and citizens, completely intermingle. Salvini can tweet his perspective on the Bologna rally, and Wu Ming can instantly and directly respond and refute his claims. In this way, Twitter offers immediacy as well as equality.

Prior to mediums like this, someone could repudiate a politician’s position or disagree with public policy by writing a letter to an editor of a newspaper, and the audience would be limited to

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<sup>66</sup> “Preveniamo una domanda retorica e perciò banale: per il fatto che a Bologna hanno floppato Salvini e il razzismo leghista sono forse meno pericolosi? Certo che no. Ma siamo convinti che le fandonie vadano smontate. Forse, se si fossero trattate le molte supercazzole sbraitate in questi anni come si è appena trattata questa, Salvini sarebbe un signor nessuno. Un ex-concorrente di telequiz di bassa lega” (*Giap!*, “I quattro gatti di #Salvini a #Bologna e i numeri del flop di #Liberiamoci, metro quadro per metro quadro,” 9 Nov. 2015).

the readers of that particular publication. In addition, there would be a significant gap in time between the original claim and the response. A politician like Renzi could make a grand statement about Italy embracing its role as a rising power, and these words would be the dominant story for at least twenty-four hours before the media would issue a response, positive or negative. This is simply not the case any longer, which means that one can challenge something so quickly that it might actually overtake the original claim. This infinitely more adversarial climate diminishes the power of the political figure or party, at least socially, because he or she will often be acting on the defensive.

In this case, Wu Ming have the advantage of the response; at the same time, all their examples here are *reactionary* rather than ‘actionary,’ rarely proposing their own ideas of reform. This appears to be a first step but surely not an end goal; they begin by weakening the power structure and the integrity of the candidate, or the movement, or the campaign. As of this study, their presence on Twitter has evolved into a much more significant part of their overall project, combining artistic expression and political and social engagement. My analysis demonstrates how they have used the medium on various occasions to carry out social action,<sup>67</sup> but these examples also show that they are still far from enacting long lasting reforms.

#### **IV. *Giap!***

Whereas Twitter allows the collective to engage in brief but immediate exchanges with both their supporters and their detractors, their blog *Giap!*, the oldest component of the group’s online presence, encourages extended conversation among engaged “giapsters.”<sup>68</sup> Before I begin

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<sup>67</sup> See Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, "Towards Cyberactivism 2.0? Understanding the Use of Social Media and Other Information Technologies for Political Activism and Social Movements."

<sup>68</sup> “Giapster” is the name given to frequent contributors to the blog.

with my analysis of *Giap!* and the particular content therein, it is useful to discuss the medium itself. Blogs in general have represented an enormous shift in questions of authorship over the last ten to fifteen years, as absolutely anyone who has a computer and an Internet connection can now be published, something against which Walter Benjamin presciently warned in his 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Just as anyone can be filmed now, even if he or she is not a professional actor, so too can anyone publish, even if he/she is not a professional writer. In Benjamin’s analysis, this increased agency on the part of the amateur author begins with letters to the editor that go on to be published in the newspaper: “At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer [...] Literary license is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialized training and thus becomes common property” (16). Through *Giap!*, then, everyone becomes a ‘published writer’ whose opinions appear to be given equal validity and which undergo a very limited vetting process (i.e. if the comment or post is too right-wing, it will be blocked). Spelling and grammar errors, or poor writing ability, are not obstacles to publishing on the blog. At this point, the ideas and participation in a community of knowledge are privileged over quality of writing/content and the status (the level of education and expertise, professional qualifications) of the person writing. Much of this is facilitated by the medium itself: Volker Eisenlauer sees blogs as “medium” collaborative (with Twitter being low and wikis being high), in which, in the words of Hands, “interlocutors have an attitude oriented towards understanding and consensus, and even if this cannot be reached, the obligation is to retain the open-ended possibility that it might” (16-17).

Where I have elsewhere spoken about Arjun Appadurai’s “communities of sentiment,”<sup>69</sup> here Henry Jenkins’s theory on “collective intelligence” (2) would be appropriate, referring to

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<sup>69</sup> “a group that begins to imagine and feel things together” (Appadurai 8).



communities of readers in which no one knows everything but everyone knows something, and all knowledge is available to everyone. In fact, engagement on the blog reflects the participatory culture that Jenkins and Wyn Kelley define in *Reading in a Participatory Culture*, in which there are 1) low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement; 2) strong support for creating and sharing creations with others; 3) some type of informal membership whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices; 4) members who believe that their contributions matter; and 5) members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (8). The result is that all writers are readers and all readers can become writers. They engage in this culture to “construct their identities and give expressive shape to their own lived experiences” (18).

Shirky echoes this sentiment, explaining that “user-generated content” is “not just a personal theory of creative capabilities but a social theory of media relations” (84). He goes on to discuss the nature of the readers when it comes to blogs, which speaks clearly to the Wu Ming experience. According to Shirky, very few blogs have a widespread following; more of them speak to a niche audience.<sup>70</sup> This explains why not every blog interests the average reader: he or she is simply not the target audience. Also a cornerstone of Shirky’s argument is the idea of fame, which proves useful to the understanding of Wu Ming’s approach to *Giap!*: the more famous the user, the less chance there is for interactivity. In other words, the more popular the blogger, the more his/her blog serves a ‘broadcast’ function and does not allow for conversation. In his words, “The Web makes interactivity technologically possible, but what technology giveth, social factors taketh away. In the case of the famous, any potential interactivity is squashed, because fame isn’t an

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<sup>70</sup> “And it’s easy to deride this sort of thing as self-absorbed publishing—why would anyone put such drivel out in public? It’s simple. They’re not talking to you [...]. The people posting messages to one another in small groups are doing a different kind of communicating than people posting messages for hundreds or thousands of people to read. More is different, but less is different too. An audience isn’t just a big community; it can be more anonymous, with many fewer ties among users. A community isn’t just a small audience either; it has a social density that audiences lack” (Shirky 85).

attitude, and it isn't technological artifact. Fame is simply an imbalance between inbound and outbound attention, more arrows pointing in than out" (91). Elsewhere in this study, I have discussed Wu Ming's desire to occupy a cultural niche rather than become a hegemonic presence, and Shirky's theory supports this preference: at this point the collective's level of fame does not interfere with their ability to reciprocate. The arrows between inbound and outbound attention are not unbalanced. In these terms, it can be said that interactivity and fame move in opposition to each other—the former becomes stifled when one person has so many followers that they cannot engage with them individually. Since this contact is a fundamental part of their overall project, it is clear why Wu Ming favor a medium, such as a blog, which is better suited to a smaller, more engaged group of followers.

A blog with a relatively niche-like following fits with Wu Ming's ideology and motivations, but this is not to say that *Giap!* is a utopia, and that all participation in (digital) culture is meaningful and life-affirming. The reality is that the collective's blog is a space purposely constructed for difficult discussion. These debates do not result in peace and harmony—in fact, consensus is almost never achieved at this level, especially in the polarizing and divisive political climate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—but the ability to participate in culture, as opposed to consuming it, is where the value of this practice lies. The Internet, in many ways, is still the Wild West: for every positive way it expands human interaction and agency, it also gives users the 'freedom' to hide behind the anonymity of the online forum and, as Wu Ming put it, "troll" the web. There is no greater purpose, no protesting of dominant paradigms: these 'trolls' exhibit cruelty on the Internet because it is still frowned upon for them to behave like this in the non-digital social world. It is possible that these users experience catharsis from 'misbehaving' and breaking social norms online. Wu Ming generally embrace their critics and detractors, even publishing insults against

themselves on *Giap!*, but they do draw the line when it comes to their neo-fascist compatriots, thus emphasizing their ‘niche’ rather than their universal space.

### ***Giap!:* A Deconstruction**

Wu Ming immediately put forth their far-left ideology with the title of their blog, as *Giap!* takes its name from the Vietnamese general, Võ Nguyên Giáp, who gained notoriety for driving both the United States and France out of Vietnam and who served as military commander during various wars and battles between 1945 and 1975. In commemoration of the general’s death in October 2013, the collective explained their attachment to the name via the blog:

Let’s be clear: for us “Giap” is not so much *the* Great Personality, *the* Famous Name, the Hero [...] On the contrary, for us “Giap” is multiplicity, “Giap” stands for the myriad of people who, each in his/her own way, contributed to decolonization, to the worldwide fight against racism and colonialism, to the awakening of the dispossessed all around the world. For us “Giap” is *the century*, the part of the 20th century that is worth continuing to question, with a critical spirit but without foolish revisionisms. Neither repeating nor denying, but assuming responsibility for the *phylum* that brings us to today, without worrying about tearing up pages of family photo albums for fear that the memory police might see them.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> “Sia chiaro: per noi “Giap” non è tanto *la* Grande Personalità, *il* Nome Famoso, l’Eroe [...] Al contrario, per noi “Giap” è molteplicità, “Giap” sta per le miriadi di persone che, ciascuna a suo modo, hanno contribuito alla decolonizzazione, alla lotta planetaria contro razzismo e colonialismo, alla presa di coscienza degli spossessati di vaste aree del mondo. Per noi “Giap” è *il secolo*, la parte del XX secolo che vale la pena continuare a interrogare, con spirito critico ma senza revisionismi cialtroneschi. Né replicare né rinnegare, assumersi la responsabilità del *phylum* che ci porta all’oggi, senza affannarsi a strappare pagine dall’album di famiglia per paura che le vedano gli sbirri della memoria” (Giap! 3 October 2013). All translations from *Giap!* are mine.

In short, there *is* something in a name, and just like their own pseudonym, they chose the title of their blog very carefully to reflect their belief system, motivations, and ultimate goals.

Furthermore, the collective also carefully curates the experience for the readers of their blog. As they write under the heading “Qualche parola in più su di noi,” (“A few words about us”), “*Giap!* is our blog, but it is also a community of readers, and it is many other things.”<sup>72</sup> When one accesses the site, the most prominent element is, first and foremost, the written posts. Headlines are large, visual illustrations are often used, and the post itself takes up most of the left-center of the page. Sometimes these contributions, which come every two days or so, reflect current events, others promote upcoming books or tours, and still others commemorate key moments from Italy’s recent past. The theme of decolonization and racism, the reason for the title itself, is never far from the forefront. In addition, the collective often refers back to their own past posts and discussions, in an effort to keep historical memory alive. *Giap!* is also a sort of home base for their other digital activity: one finds recaps of their Twitter activity, or links to articles they have written for other online publications. On the right side of the page, on the top there is their most recent publication (at the time of writing, *L’invisibile ovunque* [2015]) and below there are links to their most recent musical productions (under the name Wu Ming Contingent). This is followed by a calendar of their tour dates, and, in addition to archives dating back to the founding of the site in 2010, there are also links to various topics that are often discussed on the blog.

One particularly notable aspect of this platform is the way they immediately establish limits, both with their followers and with their potential detractors and critics. First of all, not only does the collective make themselves available for interaction with their readers through the blog,

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<sup>72</sup> “*Giap* è il nostro blog, ma è anche una comunità di lettrici e lettori, ed è molte altre cose” (*Giap!*).

but they also provide their email address. They do not do this without conditions, however: “Please, use it with parsimony and good judgment. We can’t guarantee quick responses because the amount of mail we receive makes it very difficult to keep up.”<sup>73</sup> According to this statement, it would appear that they are experiencing, in Shirky’s terms, an ‘imbalance’ of inbound and outbound attention, and are consciously trying to regain and/or maintain an equilibrium in their relationship with their readers. In addition, they put forth criteria for the kind of followers they are seeking (and those they are not): “This blog is open to the contributions and perspectives of many, but not all. As long as you don’t “troll,” you can write what you want, with the exception of antifascist discrimination. Right-wing comrades and the like have other places in which to spread their sludge. This is a reclaimed space.”<sup>74</sup>

Unlike Enel, or even Prime Minister Renzi, the collective is not naive about the destructive potential of the environment in which they are working. In fact, they face their critics head-on by ‘owning’ the discourse against them. On the right-hand side of the page, there is a section entitled “Hanno detto di noi” (“Said about us”), in which the collective publishes their negative reviews. Here are just a few examples, which at the very least illustrate Wu Ming’s sense of humor: “In literature, four brains added together to write a novel equal zero. Maybe even less [...] A fruit salad of cartoons, old films, fiction excerpts, faded screenplays, foreign telephone books, vintage paintings and Salgarian imitations gone wrong.”<sup>75</sup> Or from *Liberio*: “And furthermore, how in the devil do they write with ‘ten hands,’ the fabulous five? Captain Soviet writes a chapter and

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<sup>73</sup> “Per favore, usatelo con parsimonia e criterio. Non garantiamo risposte rapide perché la mole di posta che riceviamo rende molto difficile stare al passo” (*Giap!*)

<sup>74</sup> “Questo blog è aperto ai contributi e alle vedute di molti, ma non di tutti. A condizione di non trollare, potete scrivere quel che volete, fatta salva la discriminante antifascista. Camerati e affini hanno molti altri luoghi dove spandere i loro liquami. Questo è uno spazio bonificato” (*Giap!*).

<sup>75</sup> “In letteratura, quattro cervelli messi insieme per scrivere un’opera fanno zero. Forse anche meno [...] Una macedonia di fumetti, vecchi film, spezzoni di fiction, sceneggiature ingiallite, elenchi telefonici stranieri, dipinti d’epoca e imitazioni di salgariani impazziti” (*Avvenire, Giap!*).

SuperGuevara another? Or does the Maoist Man write everything and the others do the editing?”<sup>76</sup> Or another: “*Altai* is a load of rubbish, just like *Q*.”<sup>77</sup> And finally, from *Il Domenicale*, the newspaper founded by Marcello Dell’Utri,<sup>78</sup> “Wu Ming stand with Al-Qaida, who want to bring us down and who make Hitler look like an amateur. Make your voices heard, your values. And, if you believe, tell them to go to hell.”<sup>79</sup>

These are just a few of the many examples that Wu Ming has published on *Giap!*, all attempts to control discourse, either negative or positive, by controlling language.<sup>80</sup> If they ‘embrace’ these critiques, it diminishes the power of words, and furthermore, it makes light of them, somehow turning the table on these critics and making them look petty and small. Rather than using the words of the opposition to disprove them, the practice against which Lakoff warns, Wu Ming repeat the words of the opposition exactly as they are. They do not “negate the frame” (3); rather, they let the frame discredit itself on its own. By publishing the harshest critiques against them, the collective clearly states that they are aware of their somewhat controversial position, and that they are not interested in peace and harmony.

Finally, the other structural aspect of the blog worth mentioning goes back to the question of copyleft that I discussed in Chapter One and the voluntary contributions I touched on in Chapter Three.<sup>81</sup> *Giap!* also serves as the collective’s virtual bookstore, offering links to the free downloads of all of their works. Immediately below this link (which is captioned: “Ebook al popolo. Gratis.

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<sup>76</sup> “E poi, come diavolo scriveranno a dieci mani i favolosi cinque? Capitan Sovietico scrive un capitolo e SuperGuevara un altro? Oppure scrive tutto l’Uomo Maoista e gli altri fanno l’editing?” (*Libero, Giap!*)

<sup>77</sup> “*Altai* è una boiata, proprio come *Q*.” (*Giap!*).

<sup>78</sup> Convicted Mafioso and senator under Berlusconi.

<sup>79</sup> “I Wu Ming stanno con Al-Qaida, il cui obiettivo siamo noi e fa di Hitler un dilettante. Fate sentire la vostra voce, i vostri valori. E, se credete, mandateli affanculo” (*Giap!*)

<sup>80</sup> See Lakoff, *Don’t Think of An Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives*.

<sup>81</sup> See Chapter One, pp. 57-73, and Chapter Three, pg. 172.

Vive la classe ouvrière!” [“Ebook for the people. Free. Long live the working class!”]), there is the somewhat conflicting request for donations. They begin by justifying the role of *Giap!* in the digital realm: “Some have called it ‘a free radio,’ others describe it as both a cultural and political point of reference (in the broadest sense of the term). It’s not for us to say. For sure, it is a place on the web where we can discuss. And sometimes concrete projects are born from this discussion, and virtuous practices for the web are launched.”<sup>82</sup> Of course, these “virtuous practices” cost money, and because the blog is not only focused on discussion but also action, perhaps the collective feels justified in asking their readers for financial support. The request is as follows (immediately after the above justification):

[It’s just that] years pass, lives get complicated, and managing this enormous amount of activity costs more and more energy, time, and money. We’re talking about hundreds of hours a month. We do it for militancy, but when you’re running on empty, militancy starts to wane. Therefore, don’t be shy: if you believe that *Giap* is important, if you think that our work online and our project as a whole are worth your support, encouragement, feedback, a... “counter-donation” on your part, you can use PayPal to send us a few shillings.<sup>83</sup>

Just as Wu Ming appeal to their readers to use good sense when contributing to the blog, they also try the same approach when it comes to donations. These connections they attempt to

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<sup>82</sup> “Qualcuno l’ha definito ‘una radio libera,’ altri lo descrivono come un punto di riferimento non solo culturale ma politico (nell’accezione più vasta del termine). Non sta a noi esprimerci su questo. Di sicuro, è un luogo del web dove si riesce a discutere. E a volte dalla discussione sono nati progetti concreti, sono partite ‘pratiche virtuose per il web’” (*Giap!*)

<sup>83</sup> [Solo che] gli anni passano, le vite si complicano e costa sempre più fatica, tempo e soldi gestire quest’enorme mole di attività. Sono centinaia di ore al mese. Lo facciamo per militanza, ma quando hai il fiato corto anche la militanza ne risente. Quindi, bando alle timidezze: se credi che *Giap* sia importante, se pensi che il nostro lavoro online e il nostro progetto nel suo complesso valgano un sostegno, un incoraggiamento, un feedback, un... “contro dono” dal parte tua, puoi usare PayPal per mandarci qualche scellino” (*Giap!*)

forge also echo the gaming culture I discussed in Chapter Three:<sup>84</sup> the collective finds another way to connect with readers by involving them both financially and ideologically in their process. In a society that perhaps realized the apex of consumerism under the leadership of Berlusconi, the option of the donation is both realistic and democratic, as readers can decide how much the work is worth to them. Perhaps the most interesting (and puzzling) part of the economic aspect of their project, however, is that Wu Ming does not totally eschew traditional print media: their books are available as free downloads, but they are also available in print at both local bookstores and national chains. Maybe the reason is purely practical, as realistically a writing collective cannot survive in a consumer society without selling at least a few books, and their contract with Einaudi is a form of compromise. It does, however, appear rather contradictory to their declared ideology, and unlike so many instances in which they are unabashedly transparent about their choices and actions, an explanation for their relationship with Einaudi, if it exists, is not prominently featured on *Giap!*. It is worth mentioning, however, that the copyleft message found on their free downloads is also present in the print edition, and furthermore, the collective includes an additional message that might well explain the reasoning behind their decision to engage with traditional print media: “The authors defend free library loans and are contrary to norms and directives that, by monetizing such a service, *limit access to culture*. The authors and the editor renounce any royalties that might derive from library loans of this work” (italics mine).<sup>85</sup> This language suggests that the objective of the collective is the diffusion of their work, and therefore the medium (print or digital) is less important than the message.

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<sup>84</sup> See Chapter Three, pp. 159-182.

<sup>85</sup> “Gli autori difendono la gratuità del prestito bibliotecario e sono contrari a norme o direttive che, monetizzando tale servizio, *limitino l’accesso alla cultura*. Gli autori e l’editore rinunciano a riscuotere eventuali royalties derivanti dal prestito bibliotecario di quest’opera” (*L’Armata dei Sonnambuli*, print edition. Italics mine).



### Cyber-utopianism vs. Internet-centrism: *Giap!* and the Net Delusion

Having discussed the multitudinous nature of *Giap!*, I will now examine how it is representative of both the ideology and practices of the collective's overall project. It is appropriate to begin with an example that is both political and cultural, namely the case of the intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini. November 2, 2015 marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his untimely death, and on this occasion Wu Ming 1 wrote an article for *Internazionale* entitled "La polizia contro #Pasolini, Pasolini contro la polizia" ("The Police Against #Pasolini, Pasolini Against the Police"), which addressed the conspiracy theories about the author and filmmaker's death and the rumors that he had somehow conspired with the police during his controversial life. The collective linked to the article on *Giap!*, but what is interesting to note about this example is that they posted the link on October 29, 2015 but did not immediately open it up for comments. Instead, they set a date for the opening of the comments section, in order to give readers time to formulate intelligent comments rather than writing knee jerk reactions: "N.B. We will open the comments on Giap after 2 November 2015 (the forty year anniversary of the smirks here above)<sup>86</sup> in order to allow for a rational reading and pertinent and thoughtful contributions."<sup>87</sup>

This example is worth noting because of the collective's attempt to gain control the discourse—they appear to have a clear idea as to the type of discussion forum they would like to cultivate (the "frames" they are trying to establish), and therefore they take a proactive approach by encouraging civility and reflection. In fact, since the #Pasolini post, Wu Ming have taken to including this addendum on all of their posts that might incite heated debate. While understandable

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<sup>86</sup> Referring to two police officers in a photo, featured at the beginning of the post, who are clearly smiling over the dead body of Pasolini.

<sup>87</sup> "N.B. Apriremo i commenti su Giap dopo il 2 novembre 2015 (quarantennale dei sorrisetti qui sopra) per consentire una lettura ragionata e, nel caso, interventi meditati e pertinenti" (*Giap!* "La polizia contro #Pasolini, Pasolini contro la polizia," 29 Oct. 2015).[2](#)

considering the vitriol that is often spewed from the ‘safety’ of the online forum (a fact of which the collective is clearly aware, given their familiarity with the environs), this approach seems fairly contradictory in terms of the supposed openness of their project and desire to engage with others.

While it is undeniable that the Web is littered with hateful comments and insensitive responses to questions, the collective’s attempt to “control the message” (Lakoff) is also potentially problematic. On the one hand, they make it quite clear that, because *Giap!* is a niche space, they are allowed to manage it as they wish. In fact, it is possible that if other bloggers and tweeters established the same parameters, this would help to ‘civilize’ these social media platforms that are oftentimes the most anti-social places on the Web. On the other hand, the collective also risks the stagnation of certain important discussions because they deny entry to those whose views differ too greatly from theirs. Perhaps their reasoning is best explained in their own words, in a *Giap!* post from 2011 regarding the idea of nominating the Web for the Nobel Peace Prize: “The Internet is not another world, it is *this* world. There are those who wanted to give it the Nobel Peace Prize, but the Internet also makes war. The Internet is objectified work. The web consists of relations of production, ownership, and power. [...] The Internet is a place of conflict.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> “Internet non è un altro mondo, è *questo* mondo. C’era chi voleva darle il Nobel per la pace, ma Internet fa anche la guerra. Internet è lavoro oggettivato. La rete è relazioni di produzione, di proprietà, di potere. [...] Internet è un luogo di conflitti” (*Giap!* “Note sul #referendum, i social network e il ‘popolo della rete,’” 17 Jun. 2011).

These words also suggest Evgeny Morozov's skepticism regarding both "cyber-utopianism"<sup>89</sup> and "Internet-centrism."<sup>90</sup> Wu Ming seem fully aware of our fetishistic tendencies towards the Web and perhaps the lack of discernment about what is truly democratic and free about such a platform. In Morozov's words, "Currently we start with a flawed set of assumptions (cyber-utopianism) and act on them using a flawed, even crippled, methodology (Internet-centrism). The result is what I call the Net Delusion. Pushed to the extreme, such logic is poised to have significant global consequences that may risk undermining the very project of promoting democracy" (xvii). The collective's addendum seems aimed precisely at this "Net Delusion:" they clearly understand that 'free' is not equivalent to 'democratic,' and that "the Internet is more important and disruptive than they have previously theorized" (266).

### A "Snapshot" of Content

Since *Giap!* has been in existence since 2010, and prior to that existed in other forms, it is difficult to choose just a few examples to illustrate the content and function of the blog. Looking at a random ten-day period in early January 2016, on the 10th of that month, the collective posted a promotional poster for an upcoming event that combined narrative, musical performance, and historical past and present, all recurring elements in the Wu Ming *oeuvre*. The post, entitled "Un

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<sup>89</sup> "Failing to anticipate how authoritarian governments would respond to the Internet, cyber-utopians did not predict how useful it would prove for propaganda purposes, how masterfully dictators would learn to use it for surveillance, and how sophisticated modern systems of Internet censorship would become. Instead, most cyber-utopians stuck to a populist account of how technology empowers the *people*, who, oppressed by years of authoritarian rule, will inevitably rebel, mobilizing themselves through text messages, Facebook, Twitter, and whatever new tool comes along next year. Paradoxically, in their refusal to see the downside of the new digital environment, cyber-utopians ended up belittling the role of the Internet, refusing to see that it penetrates and reshapes all walks of political life, not just the ones conducive to democratization" (Morozov xiv).

<sup>90</sup> "Internet-centrism: Unlike cyber-utopianism, Internet-centrism is not a set of beliefs; rather, it's a philosophy of action that informs how decisions, including those that deal with democracy promotion, are made and how long-term strategies are crafted. While cyber-utopianism stipulates *what* has to be done, Internet-centrism stipulates *how* it should be done" (Morozov xv-xvi).

inverno di Resistenze in Cirenaica,” (“A Winter of Resistance in Cyrenaica”) serves as a useful entry into the typical content of the blog. It features an introduction to the book *Resistenze in Cirenaica*, compiled by Compagnia Fantasma, Kai Zen, Bhutan Clan, Valerio Monteventi and Wu Ming, and in this introduction the authors explain the name: “What is *Resistance in Cyrenaica*? It is a permanent cultural worksite that seeks to make the Cyrenaica district a laboratory of historical memory, antiracism, solidarity with migrants and refugees, a reawakening of repressed colonial memory, unification of the resistances that served as antidotes to the poisons of war and terror. We want to free ourselves of all Italo-centric and Euro-centric perspectives.”<sup>91</sup>

Wu Ming are referring to an actual part of the city of Bologna, a neighborhood in which at one time the streets were named for Italy’s colonial achievements, until they were changed to reflect the names of fallen partisans. According to the collective, this connection was not by chance, because in reality there are oft-forgotten intersections between the destinies of those who suffered under colonialism and the partisans: “Because Cyrenaica was a place of Resistance, of solidarity, of dens, of ‘safe houses’ and hidden arsenals, and there was even a clandestine typography. Only Via Libya kept its colonial, or colonialist, name.”<sup>92</sup> The fact that the realities of colonialism and the partisan cause were so intertwined is truly the inspiration both for the book and for the cultural center: “We can and we must “deprovincialize” and “creolize” the narration of the partisan wars. And the double names of the streets of Cyrenaica serve as a useful narrative

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<sup>91</sup> “Che cos’è *Resistenze in Cirenaica*? È un cantiere culturale permanente che vuole fare del rione Cirenaica un laboratorio di memoria storica, antirazzismo, solidarietà a migranti e profughi, ritorno del rimosso coloniale, unificazione delle resistenze antidoti ai veleni della guerra e del terrore. Vogliamo liberarci di ogni sguardo italo-centrico e anche eurocentrico” (*Giap!* “Un inverno di Resistenze in Cirenaica. #Bologna,” 22 Jan. 2016).

<sup>92</sup> “Perché la Cirenaica era stato luogo di Resistenza, luogo di solidarietà, di covi, di ‘case sicure’ e arsenali nascosti, e c’era persino una tipografia clandestina. Solo via Libia mantenne il nome coloniale, anzi, colonialista” (*Giap!* “Un inverno di Resistenze in Cirenaica. #Bologna,” 10 Jan. 2016).

inspiration.”<sup>93</sup> However, in line with the general parameters of the Wu Ming project, it was not enough to think only of the narration. The stories, which true to form encompass the global and the local of their transnational approach, had to be accompanied by an opportunity for both action and *interaction*: “And so it happened that, after months of work, the 27th of September 2015 arrived. A day of music, stories, strolls, projections, all to unearth the stories of those who stood up to fascism, to colonialism, to German imperialism and Italian imperialism in Africa and the Balkans.”<sup>94</sup> In the case of this event, hundreds and hundreds of people came to understand their history from a transnational perspective. This is a good example of collaboration, transmedial storytelling, and intellectual *impegno* to re-awaken historical memory. It is also an example of the collective’s multi- and transmediality, as the performance featured “reading sonorizzati anticolonialisti e antifascisti” (“anticolonialist and antifascist musical readings”) and the intersection of narration, music, and physical performance.<sup>95</sup> Finally, it reveals their dedication to the causes (namely, the colonial period and the liberation of oppressed peoples) represented by the *Giap!* name.

The collective’s next post, three days later on January 13, 2016, continued the discussion of Italy’s Fascist past, but this time it did so not through local initiatives but through a critique of mainstream print journalism, a favorite target of Wu Ming’s. The post, entitled “Il razzismo italiano e i fantasmi del deserto, ovvero: 20 sfondoni di Maurizio Molinari (e una nota su Dacia Maraini)” (“Italian Racism and the Ghosts of the Desert, or rather: 20 Lies by Maurizio Molinari

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<sup>93</sup> “Si può e si deve “sprovvincializzare” e “creolizzare” la narrazione delle guerre partigiane. E i doppi nomi delle vie della Cirenaica forniscono uno spunto narrativo utilissimo” (*Giap!* “Un inverno di Resistenze in Cirenaica. #Bologna,” 10 Jan. 2016).

<sup>94</sup> “È così che, dopo un lavoro di mesi, si è arrivati alla giornata del 27 settembre 2015. Una giornata di musiche, racconti, camminate, proiezioni, per disseppellire le storie di chi resistette ai fascismi, ai colonialismi, all’imperialismo tedesco e a quello italiano in Africa e nei Balcani” (*Giap!* “Un inverno di Resistenze in Cirenaica. #Bologna,” 10 Jan. 2016).

<sup>95</sup> See Chapter Three.

(and a Note on Dacia Maraini)’), begins with a sarcastic reference to the publication *La Stampa*<sup>96</sup> and two of its journalists, Massimo Numa and director Mario Calabresi: “We can’t be shocked, or even isolate *La Stampa* from the general practices of newspapers and the rest of the Italian mainstream media. Squalor and servility are everywhere. Nevertheless, it’s important to point out passages from one phase to another, decreases in quality, and movement towards the Right.”<sup>97</sup> More precisely, the collective goes on to comment on *La Stampa*’s new director, Maurizio Molinari, who claims to be an expert on the Middle East but is, in their eyes, a colonial apologist. Regarding an editorial about the events in Cologne, Germany, on New Year’s Eve, 2015<sup>98</sup> (entitled “Da dove viene il branco di Colonia,”<sup>99</sup> or “Where the Gang From Cologne Comes From”), Wu Ming claims: “It is a fact that discourses of this kind, so broadly and explicitly *colonialist*, on the first page of *La Stampa* – and therefore in a setting of *mainstream* acceptability – haven’t been seen in about eighty years.”<sup>100</sup> They then set out to list, one by one, what they considered to be the most egregious errors and discrepancies of Molinari’s editorial, while at the same time also condemning other mainstream news outlets for the way they covered the Cologne story: “It bears repeating: we are not talking about revolting Facebook pages full of lies like ‘All of the crimes committed by immigrants.’ We are not even talking about *Libero* or *La zanzara*.<sup>101</sup> We are talking about the presumably ‘serious,’ *mainstream* press, beacon of democracy and all that goes with

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<sup>96</sup> Italy’s more centrist daily newspaper, based in Turin.

<sup>97</sup> “Non possiamo cadere dalle nuvole, e nemmeno isolare *La Stampa* dall’andazzo generale dei giornali e di tutti i media *mainstream* italiani. Lo squalore e il servilismo sono dappertutto. Tuttavia, è importante segnalare passaggi di fase, salti di qualità, ulteriori salti in basso e spostamenti a destra” (*Giap!* “Il razzismo italiano e i fantasmi del deserto, ovvero: 20 sfondoni di Maurizio Molinari (e una nota su Dacia Maraini)”).

<sup>98</sup> See McGuinness, “Germany Shocked by Cologne New Year Gang Assaults on Women.”

<sup>99</sup> See Molinari, “Da dove viene il branco di Colonia.”

<sup>100</sup> “È un fatto che discorsi del genere, così platealmente ed esplicitamente *colonialisti*, sulla prima pagina de *La Stampa* – e quindi in un ambito di accettabilità *mainstream* – non si vedevano da un’ottantina d’anni” (*Giap!* “Verso una nuova guerra dell’Italia in #Libia? Ricordiamo cosa abbiamo fatto in quel paese”).

<sup>101</sup> The first is a conservative newspaper published in Milan, the latter is a radio program conducted by Giuseppe Cruciani for Radio 24.

it.”<sup>102</sup> What makes this particular post so indicative of their project is that it addresses the problem of the attacks in particular and of racism and immigration in general through a critique of the mainstream media as a perpetuator of the status quo/perpetrator of the racist myths on which much of today’s most virulent political discussion is based. As I also discussed in Chapter Two of this study, the collective is often first and foremost critical of the communicators, taking them to task for their failure to educate the public, therefore keeping Italy from true growth due to stunted historical memory.<sup>103</sup>

This topic is continued again a few days later, with the January 21 post of “Verso una nuova guerra dell’Italia in #Libia? Ricordiamo cosa abbiamo fatto in quel paese” (“Towards a new Italian war in #Libya? Remember what we did in that country”). The post begins with the same question addressed in *Resistance in Cyrenaica* on January 10: that is, the renaming of Bolognese streets to ‘erase’ the colonial past and laud partisan fighters instead. This post, which takes inspiration from an example from Wu Ming’s own backyard, extends to a larger discussion about a potential new military intervention in Libya. The involvement in that country is connected to fighting terrorist groups like ISIS/Daesh, in light of the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015. In this transnational post, the present connects to the past (the colonial period in Libya and the current fight against terrorism, as well as the racial prejudice that continues to link the two), and the local connects to the global (one neighborhood of Bologna to Libya to Isis/Daesh). Furthermore, there is an emphasis on historical memory, or Italy’s lack of it: “Beyond the disgust we feel for Al

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<sup>102</sup> “Va ribadito: non stiamo parlando di pagine FB rivoltanti e piene di bufale come “Tutti i crimini degli immigrati”. Non stiamo parlando nemmeno di *Libero* o de *La zanzara*. Parliamo della stampa *mainstream* presuntamente “seria”, faro della democrazia e quant’altro” (*Giap!* “Verso una nuova guerra dell’Italia in #Libia? Ricordiamo cosa abbiamo fatto in quel paese”).

<sup>103</sup> See Chapter Two, pp. 80-100.

Qaeda, the videomessage of the Algerian Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Anabi, the number two al-Qaeda operative in the Maghreb, shows that they remember history down there. Here we don't.”<sup>104</sup>

As a final example, on January 18, the collective contributed another promotional post, this time for: “#AlPalodellamorte. Presentazione a #EscNonSiTocca con reading di Elio Germano.” This contribution regards the series *Quinto Tipo*,<sup>105</sup> directed by Wu Ming 1, and the text by author Giuliano Santoro, a frequent *Giap!* contributor, looks at Rome and its recent history, including its relationship with migrants. It is a promotional post, as well as one of solidarity with the causes represented in the novel, and it represents the Wu Ming project in both content and medium: in addition to the subject matter, there are audio recordings of actor Elio Germano reading selections from the book, along with other participants. Finally, this post also introduces what is perhaps a new turn in the financial strategy of the collective: at the end, there is the possibility to join the *Quinto Tipo* series and receive the next four texts, with a payment option. What is different about this possibility, with respect to their other novels and projects, is that membership in the *Quinto Tipo* ‘club’ is not based on voluntary donation, but rather by a set fee. Perhaps this is an indication that the free ebook is not always an option for the long term duration of a project, and with the continued growth of the collective’s undertakings, as well as their expanded audience, they have garnered both the respect of potential buyers and writers who want to publish under their umbrella.

The series *Quinto Tipo*, directed by Wu Ming 1 for Edizioni Alegre, declared its first publication, *Diario di zona*, di Luigi Chiarella (Yamunin) on *Giap!* on November 11, 2014. The post from that day starts by describing the evolution of the Wu Ming Foundation:

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<sup>104</sup> “Al netto del ribrezzo che proviamo per Al Qaeda, il videomessaggio dell’algerino Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Anabi, n.2 di al-Qaeda nel Maghreb, dimostra che laggiù la storia la ricordano. Qui no” (*Giap!* “Verso una nuova guerra dell’Italia in #Libia? Ricordiamo cosa abbiamo fatto in quel paese”).

<sup>105</sup> *Giap!* “#AlPalodellamorte. Presentazione a #EscNonSiTocca con reading di Elio Germano.”



For a long time, “Wu Ming Foundation” was only a name: that of our website and the full name of our collective. But from the beginning of our journey, our goal was to create a network that went beyond the four/five of us. Today this network exists, a constellation that holds different areas and projects together: *Giap*, which for some time now has become more than a blog; the “giapster” community, the mailing lists, and the working groups that were born from discussions here above; [...] the laboratories, which we called Wu Ming Lab and which we continue to hold throughout Italy, aimed at dismantling toxic narrations; the various musical collaborations to which members of the Wu Ming collective belong and which take the “reading concerti” listed on the right column of this blog on tour around Italy [...] the subversive alpinist association Alpinismo Molotov; and now, Quinto Tipo.<sup>106</sup>

This is followed by a trailer for the series, which describes it as follows: “Prepare for encounters of the Fifth kind. We spy unidentified narrative objects...We send signals...We establish contact...with intelligences alien to the mainstream...and we publish them.”<sup>107</sup> Essentially, the collective is seeking other forms of experimental writing, like their own but at the same time different. “One of the guidelines will be: *everything but novels*. In the sense of – how

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<sup>106</sup> “A lungo ‘Wu Ming Foundation’ è stato solo un nome: quello del nostro sito e quello esteso del nostro collettivo. Ma sin dall’inizio del nostro percorso, la nostra prospettiva era di farne un network che andasse oltre noi quattro/cinque. Oggi questo network esiste, una costellazione che tiene insieme diversi ambiti e progetti: *Giap*, che da tempo è qualcosa di più di un blog; le comunità *giapster*, le mailing list e i gruppi di lavoro nati da discussioni svoltesi qui sopra; [...] i laboratori di smontaggio delle narrazioni tossiche che abbiamo chiamato Wu Ming Lab e stiamo tenendo in tutta Italia; la punk-rock band Wu Ming Contingent; i vari collettivi musicali dei quali fanno parte membri del collettivo Wu Ming e che portano in tour per l’Italia i reading/concerti elencati nella colonna destra in questo blog [...] l’associazione sovversiva a fini escursionistici Alpinismo Molotov; E adesso, Quinto Tipo” (*Giap!* “#QuintoTipo. Una collana diretta da Wu Ming 1 per le Edizioni Alegre”).

<sup>107</sup> “Preparatevi a incontri del Quinto tipo. Avvistiamo oggetti narrativi non-identificati...Mandiamo segnali...stabiliamo un contatto...con le intelligenze aliene al mainstream...e li pubblichiamo” (*Giap!* “#QuintoTipo. Una collana diretta da Wu Ming 1 per le Edizioni Alegre”).

do we want to call them? – “novel-novels.” [...] Here we would like to concentrate on other things. [...] Today we are in search of alien objects.”<sup>108</sup>

The posts I have cited here clearly reflect the collective’s beliefs in transnational and transmedial narrative, as well as their intellectual *impegno* with regards to re-awakening Italy’s historical memory (particularly of the colonial period). Furthermore, this small sample also reflects the various roles the members of Wu Ming play in the execution of their project. They are writers, collaborators, musicians, supporters, promoters, editors, protestors, and artists. Their project *does* extend beyond themselves, as they add their names to other movements and promote other types of experimental writing and collective organizations. According to Wu Ming, their familiarity with the Web is perhaps their greatest weapon against Berlusconi: “In other words: Berlusconi [...] ‘berlusconizes’ all discourses by keeping them backwards and reactionary. Berlusconi produced rhetoric that always referred back to himself. And if he is ‘the TV’ and is old and ‘analog,’ well then the Web is his enemy.”<sup>109</sup>

In the same post, however, they go on to warn readers that Berlusconi’s eventual fall cannot simply be attributed to the victory of digital over analog; clearly there are greater cultural and social forces at play. They seem aware, to quote Morozov, of the “temporary false comfort of the digital world” (201),<sup>110</sup> which provides immediate reactions but not always (or perhaps not yet)

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<sup>108</sup> “Una delle linee-guida sarà: *di tutto tranne i romanzi*. Nel senso dei – come vogliamo chiamarli? – “romanzi-romanzi”. [...] Qui vorremmo concentrarci su altro. [...] Oggi cerchiamo oggetti alieni” (*Giap!* “#QuintoTipo. Una collana diretta da Wu Ming 1 per le Edizioni Alegre”).

<sup>109</sup> “Insomma: Berlusconi [...] “berlusconizza” e mantiene arretrato (perché reattivo) ogni discorso. [...] Berlusconi ha prodotto retoriche che rimandano sempre a lui. E se lui è “la TV” ed è vecchio e “analogico,” allora la rete è sua nemica” (*Giap!* “Note sul #referendum, i social network e il “popolo della rete”).

<sup>110</sup> He goes on to say, “Apparently, nothing bad ever happens on the Internet frequented by the editors of *Wired*; even spam could be viewed as the ultimate form of modern poetry. But refusing to acknowledge the Internet’s darker side is like visiting Berkeley, California, cyber-utopian headquarters, and concluding that this is how the rest of America lives as well: diverse, tolerant, sun-drenched, with plenty of organic food and nice wine, and with hordes of lifelong political activists fighting for causes that don’t even exist yet. But this is not how the rest of America lives, and this is certainly not how the rest of the world lives” (Morozov 20-21).

long term solutions. They know they are not living in a “cyber-utopia” (Morozov). In fact, after analyzing all the different angles of their project, I would argue that Wu Ming’s greatest weapon is not their command of blogs and tweets, but rather their capacity to create a network that exists in that liminal space between the digital and terrestrial. These examples from *Giap!* show that their community organizing might begin on the Web, but more often than not these collaborative groups go on to meet, create, and protest in the physical world. To go along with Shirky’s argument about the human interaction at the base of all digital groups, it is the collective’s ability to operate effectively in both realms that challenges culture creation and engagement ala Berlusconi. *Giap!* is an effective platform for extended debate, but what renders it even more so is its focus on making human connections and building community, both on and off the Web.

## **V. Conclusion**

Joss Hands’s theories on digital activism began this chapter, and his ideas serve as a useful conclusion as well. In his study, he discusses the solidarity behind the type of human and social rebellion exhibited by Wu Ming: “The summary of my argument is that there lies at the heart of rebellion the kind of thinking that entails the mutual recognition of others, and of solidarity and openness [...] It is my contention that the digital, networked age is one that can be, and is, amenable to just this kind of horizontal, communicative action, and lends itself to a horizon of dissent, resistance and rebellion” (17-18). In these terms, the (not so) ‘new’ frontier of the Internet and social media represent a logical and fruitful environment for the expansion of Wu Ming’s overall project. They had already established their adherence to the copyleft movement with the publication of *Q* in 1999, so their relationship to their texts was already atypical of many of their contemporaries; transferring these texts to free eBooks, then, was a relatively easy transition, ideologically speaking.

They were also already using a pseudonym and writing as a collective when they began experimenting with new media. The version of *Giap!* that exists now has been in existence since April 2010, but before that they used the website [wumingfoundation.com](http://wumingfoundation.com) (which has now become an ‘archive,’ with a Creative Commons license), so it is safe to say that they have always navigated the waters of new and old media in the course of their project. They have slowly added to their digital presence over the years (Twitter came into existence in 2006 but the collective joined in 2010, and Pinterest<sup>111</sup> most recently). While they have acquired a following through person-to-person interactions, performances, and protests (especially increasing their ‘tour’ calendar over the last few years), their following online, and therefore their reach, is greater in the digital realm. Compared to traditional mass media, there is dialogue (not a unidirectional path from producer to consumer) and that dialogue is constant, so the web becomes a space of constant negotiation, collaboration, and also dissent. New media also aid in the transnationality of their project because they are able to cultivate relationships across borders that are not limited by time, space, or citizenship.

Of course, relying solely on new technologies can also be problematic, as evidenced by Morozov’s theories and also by Wu Ming’s own admission about the potential “fetishism” of the Net.<sup>112</sup> The Internet is not a neutral utopia. However, the scope of this project is not to assess the dangers of the Web, but rather to determine how the collective utilizes it to advance their project and challenge Berlusconi-era culture creation. In these terms, perhaps the fundamental question here is one of technological determinism vs. social constructionism: do media technologies change culture, or does culture change technology? In the case of Wu Ming, changes in new media

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<sup>111</sup> See Chapter Three, pp. 137-151.

<sup>112</sup> See Wu Ming 1, “Feticismo della merce digitale e sfruttamento nascosto: I casi Amazon e Apple.”

technologies have influenced their strategies of resistance (for example, would they have challenged Enel in the #guerrieri example if the Twitter technology had not preceded it and ‘taught’ them another way of interacting as part of an online community?), while at the same time the years of Berlusconi pushed the Italian public to seek alternatives to his mass media domination and more readily engage with new media as a way of cultivating their own cultural niches. Based on the examples discussed in this chapter, I contend that Wu Ming’s interactions in the digital realm *do* represent the rebellion that Hands describes: they recognize the deeper problems and frameworks of Berlusconi’s mass media empire and relationship to popular culture, they are collective and cooperative in their attempt to change those paradigms, and their approach involves dissent, resistance, and action. Most importantly, they use the Internet to create a community, both on and off the Web, that has become bigger than themselves, which supports Shirky’s ideas of our desire for human connection even through digital means. Do they have a following that rivals Berlusconi’s? Of course not. But, in comparison to the former prime minister and business tycoon, they do rule the Web.





## Conclusion

In Chapter Four, I discussed Clay Shirky's ladder of group collaboration. As I mentioned, the third and most difficult 'rung' on that ladder involved "collective action," which "requires a group of people to commit themselves to undertaking a particular effort together, and to do so in a way that makes the decisions of the group binding on the individual members" (51). Shirky's words serve as a useful point of reference for the conclusion of this study. For many years, Wu Ming have conducted an admirable experiment in the wilds of collectivity, and particularly at their outset their objective was surely the selfless collaboration described by Shirky. But just how viable is this type of group work over the long term? Wu Ming 5's 2015 departure and the discord it appears to have sown indicate that cultural, economic, and personal pressures can disrupt collective harmony.

In a *Giap!* post from 15 February 2016, entitled "Zeppo's Gone. Riccardo/Wu Ming 5 è uscito dal collettivo," ("Zeppo's Gone. Riccardo/Wu Ming 5 has left the collective") the group announced Wu Ming 5's departure under a picture of three (rather than five) of the Marx brothers. The remaining three members explained that their colleague had voiced a desire to leave the collective the previous June, but because they were in the middle of finishing *L'invisibile ovunque* (2015) and a new album by the Wu Ming Contingent, and "based on our principle that the work comes before the author,"<sup>1</sup> they decided to wait to make the announcement. Regarding the reasoning behind his decision to leave, the collective explains, "Riccardo's decision came after long personal reflection and a gradual reduction of his participation in the activities of the

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<sup>1</sup> "in base al nostro principio che l'opera viene prima dell'autore." (Wu Ming, "Zeppo's Gone: Wu Ming 5/Riccardo è uscito dal collettivo"). All translations from *Giap!* and other online sources are mine.



collective.”<sup>2</sup> The post goes on to discuss the inevitability of change within its ranks and their thoughts on collectivity in general:

The life of groups, of collaborators and friends, is subject to transformations, revelations and existential crises. As far as we’re concerned, Wu Ming was never conceived as a life-long destiny, and it is absolutely normal for its members to want to change course. After all, it had already happened in 2008 with Luca/Wu Ming 3. Compared to then, however, the situation is very different. Our “band of narrators” is more active than ever with projects that go well beyond the writing of novels and which involve more and more people. Through *Giap* and the network of contacts and collaborations built over the past sixteen years of activity, Wu Ming has by now gone beyond the limits of the collective, becoming a small constellation, a point of reference and – we like to think- a community: the Wu Ming Foundation. A “collective of collectives” that churns out investigative reports, music, meetings, stories, books, sounds and images.<sup>3</sup>

These words reflect, in no uncertain terms, that in their eyes all of their initiatives have led to the creation of a “community of sentiment” (Appadurai). Their reach has grown, and they have

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<sup>2</sup> “La decisione di Riccardo è maturata dopo una lunga elaborazione personale e un progressivo diradarsi della sua partecipazione alle attività del collettivo.” (Wu Ming, “E forse una ragione c’è. Su un libro firmato ‘Wu Ming 5’”).

<sup>3</sup> “La vita dei gruppi, di collaboratori e di amici, è soggetta a trasformazioni, prese di coscienza e rivolgimenti esistenziali. Per quanto ci riguarda, Wu Ming non è mai stato concepito come un destino a vita, ed è del tutto normale che i suoi membri possano scegliere di cambiare percorso. Del resto, era già accaduto nel 2008 a Luca/Wu Ming 3. Rispetto ad allora, però, la situazione è molto diversa. La nostra “band di narratori” è sempre più attiva in progetti che vanno ben oltre la scrittura di romanzi e che coinvolgono sempre più persone. Tramite *Giap* e tramite la rete di contatti e collaborazioni costruita in oltre sedici anni di attività, Wu Ming ha ormai superato i confini del collettivo, per diventare una piccola costellazione, un ambito di riferimento e – ci piace pensare – una comunità: la Wu Ming Foundation. Un “collettivo di collettivi” che sforna inchieste, musica, incontri, storie, libri, voci e immagini.” (Wu Ming, “Zeppo’s Gone: Wu Ming 5/Riccardo è uscito dal collettivo”).

effectively filled one of the “infinite niches” of present day popular culture. But what does this indicate about their future? What does it mean to “go beyond the limits of the collective?”

In this initial post, it is clear that they are disappointed by Wu Ming 5’s departure, and in fact the relationship between Riccardo Pedrini and the other members of the collective did not end peacefully. Just three months later, on 12 May 2016, another post appeared on *Giap!*: “E forse una ragione c’è. Su un libro firmato ‘Wu Ming 5’” (“And maybe there’s a reason. About a book signed ‘Wu Ming 5’”). In it the remaining three members of the group accuse their former companion of ‘false advertising.’ Around that time, the latter’s newest book, written alongside photojournalist Francesca Tosarelli and entitled *Ms Kalashnikov*,<sup>4</sup> had been published. The post specifically addresses the fact that Riccardo Pedrini decided to sign the book “Wu Ming 5” even though the collective had expressly asked him not to. As they explain, “Our ‘solo’ works carry the name “Wu Ming” + the appropriate number if the band unanimously recognizes them as a part of our own production, a singular expression of the work carried out together.”<sup>5</sup> In this case, however, upon reading *Ms Kalashnikov*, which chronicles the lives of female soldiers in war zones across Africa and the Middle East, the collective determined that “the style, poetics and content were *already* completely foreign to Wu Ming’s project.”<sup>6</sup> They asked, “in the name of a rule that our ex-companion, too, had always shared”<sup>7</sup> to refrain from referencing the collective in his signature. Clearly Wu Ming 5 disregarded this request. Even in his rebuttal to the collective’s claims, he

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<sup>4</sup> Francesca Tosarelli is a photo reporter whose work has been published in many international publications. In this collaboration with Wu Ming 5, she traveled to various war zones throughout Africa and the Middle East to photograph women who take up arms in the conflicts. She would send her diaries home to Wu Ming 5, who used them to construct his narrative. See <http://mskalashnikov.com/>

<sup>5</sup> “Le nostre opere “soliste” recano la firma “Wu Ming” + numerale se la band, all’unanimità, le riconosce come parte della propria produzione, espressione singolare del lavoro fatto insieme.” (Wu Ming, “E forse una ragione c’è. Su un libro firmato ‘Wu Ming 5’”).

<sup>6</sup> “Lo stile, la poetica e i contenuti erano *già* del tutto estranei al percorso di Wu Ming.” (“E forse una ragione c’è. Su un libro firmato ‘Wu Ming 5’”).

<sup>7</sup> “in nome di una regola che anche il nostro ex-socio aveva sempre condiviso.” (“E forse una ragione c’è. Su un libro firmato ‘Wu Ming 5’”).

never explains why he chose to do this, nor do any of the journalists who interviewed him explicitly ask the question.

Wu Ming 5, however, does speak freely about his exit from the collective and their subsequent treatment of his latest work, which challenges both posts on *Giap!* and therefore the overall transparency and integrity of the group. In an 11 May 2016 post on the website for *Ms Kalashnikov*, entitled “Qui non ci sono eroi,” (“Here there are no heroes”) he explains that he decided to leave the collective to explore his own research without having to answer to what he calls “regole aziendali che prevedono l’aderenza a un canone” (“corporate rules that dictate an adherence to a canon”),<sup>8</sup> not for the so-called “personal reasons” the collective claimed in the *Giap!* post. In an interview with Emanuela Giampaoli for the Bologna edition of *Repubblica.it*, he reiterates the same point, that when he and Tosarelli presented their novel to the other members of the collective, his colleagues had, in his words, “a reaction that I still cannot explain.”<sup>9</sup> He also claims that he was not included on the blog post announcing his departure: “Through a smoke screen of militant rhetoric and flag waving [...] they said that I did it for ‘personal reasons.’ Without asking me about anything [...] And, on the blog, the comments were closed. They took away my access to the site and to Twitter. But at this point Wu Ming is basically a business.”<sup>10</sup> There are, however, two points that these two versions of the story seem to have in common. Firstly, that the collective is governed by strict rules, and participation in the group requires a loyalty and dedication to these conditions. Again, this echoes the affinities between the Wu Ming

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<sup>8</sup> Wu Ming 5, “Qui non ci sono eroi.” All translations from *Mskalashnikov* are mine.

<sup>9</sup> “una reazione che io ancora non mi so spiegare” (Giampaoli, “Cultura, Wu Ming 5 è uscito dal gruppo: “ora scrivo con Francesca”).

<sup>10</sup> “Attraverso una cortina fumogena fatta di retorica militante e bandiere al vento [...] si dice che l’ho fatto per ‘motivi personali’. Senza aver concordato con me nulla [...] E, sul blog, i commenti erano chiusi. Mi hanno tolto gli accessi al sito e a Twitter. D’altronde ormai i Wu Ming sono un’azienda” (Giampaoli, “Cultura, Wu Ming 5 è uscito dal gruppo: “ora scrivo con Francesca”).

project and the gaming world, where rules are put in place that are intended for the benefit of the community as a whole, and failure to adhere to them results in expulsion from the game. The other point on which the two sides are in agreement is that the collective has undergone a transformation over the years. On the one hand, according to Wu Ming 5, this change involves the group becoming more of a business.<sup>11</sup> According to other members of the collective, on the other hand, their expanded reach has resulted in community.

Through various articles and online posts from the week of the novel's release, it becomes clear that for both sides the issue is deeply personal. Despite the collective's more diplomatic words regarding their reaction to *Ms Kalashnikov*, Wu Ming 5 insists that the debate over the contents of the novel was carried out entirely over email, which the post on *Giap!* does not indicate at all. He goes even further to call the collective's reaction to his novel a "tradimento fraterno" ("brotherly betrayal").<sup>12</sup> For all the collective's transparency, this is certainly not the version they gave on the blog. It is Wu Ming 5's contention that the series of long and contentious emails that preceded the final break "[r]epresent no more no less than an attempt to deny my and Francesca's work visibility."<sup>13</sup> In another interview with Nanni Delbecchi for *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, he references Wu Ming's explanation of the "personal reasons" for his departure, saying that what he

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, he reiterates this point several times in the immediate aftermath of the release of *Ms Kalashnikov* and the backlash from his former associates, not just in the interview with Giampaoli and his post on the book website. From *Il Fatto Quotidiano*: "come dimostra il libro, sono uscito perché nella letteratura di Wu Ming c'è ormai poco che mi interessa, di politico come di umano. Non mi sento più nel ruolo di un intellettuale di area, il mio modo di scrivere è diventato incompatibile con i meccanismi aziendali di quello che in 15 anni è diventato un marchio di fabbrica" (Delbecchi, "Con Ms Kalashnikov Wu Ming Perde Pezzi").

<sup>12</sup> In his words, "In tutti questi mesi non ci siamo mai parlati. Hanno letto il romanzo ed è arrivata la prima email per chiederci di abbandonare il progetto. Mai una parola, tutto solo per mail. Ho provato a capire, a darmi una spiegazione e l'unica cui sono arrivato è che nel romanzo non ci sono eroi né eroine. Che Francesca è vera, scrive di fatti vari. E non è una 'brava compagna.' Però potevano limitarsi a prendere le distanze dall'opera, io tra l'altro avevo già annunciato al collettivo che stavo pensando di abbandonare. Così invece è stato un tradimento fraterno" (Giampaoli, "Cultura, Wu Ming 5 è uscito dal gruppo: 'ora scrivo con Francesca'").

<sup>13</sup> "[r]appresenta né più né meno un tentativo di negare visibilità al mio lavoro [sic] e a quello di Francesca Tosarelli" (Wu Ming 5, "Qui non ci sono eroi").

cannot forgive is “the insistence on personal, internal themes, which provoked an opposite reaction. The willingness to erase not only the novel, but also the human journey from which it was born.”<sup>14</sup> He describes his ex-companions as arrogant, insulting, and calculating, and then he adds one last point that puts the collective’s work in a different context: “According to Wu Ming, a good book can only be written by an intellectual: we want to prove the contrary.”<sup>15</sup> In Wu Ming 1’s 2008 conference address “Noi dobbiamo essere i genitori,” however, he explicitly says that the collective has never had any interest in traditional intellectual culture: “We weren’t interested in ‘proper’ intellectual behavior, nor the snobby tirades against the cultural industry.”<sup>16</sup> Clearly this is another consequence of the evolution of the collective, at least in the eyes of Wu Ming 5: it has brought them closer to the very groups they disdained at the beginning of their project.

Beyond the contentious finger-pointing, there *is* one thing in particular that would appear to represent a true change of course for Wu Ming and a real challenge to their notion of community. The most remarkable aspect of these interviews with Wu Ming 5, beyond his palpable frustration with his former companions, is that they include his photograph, clearly the author photo for the book jacket for *Ms Kalashnikov*. Perhaps this gesture, above all, represents not only his definitive break with the group and their ideology, but also a significant crack in the seemingly rock-solid identity of the collective. Not only does he speak ill of his comrades (and they of him), but he puts his face behind his comments. And he does this all while continuing to use the name that he seems

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<sup>14</sup> “l’insistenza su temi personali e interiori, che ha provocato una reazione contraria. La volontà di cancellare non solo il romanzo, ma anche il percorso umano da cui è nato” (Delbecchi, “Con Ms Kalashnikov Wu Ming Perde Pezzi”).

<sup>15</sup> “Secondo Wu Ming, un buon libro può essere scritto da un intellettuale; vogliamo dimostrare il contrario.” (Delbecchi)

<sup>16</sup> “Non ci interessava il comportamento ‘giusto’ da intellettuale, e nemmeno le tirate snob contro l’industria culturale” (Wu Ming 1, “Noi dobbiamo essere i genitori” *New Italian Epic* 126).

so eager to denounce. The result is that Wu Ming's carefully constructed collective identity, which so militantly refused its visual representation, now has a face.

I have indicated numerous times throughout this study that Wu Ming are children of the Berlusconi era, the “problem children of popular culture” (Wu Ming 1, *New Italian Epic* 126) and representative of the time period in which they were born and evolved. Perhaps this split with Wu Ming 5 can be seen as further evidence that the collective carries the contradictions and tensions of the present day on their shoulders. In short, the group's acrimonious devolution can be seen as a sign of the very divisive political, social, and economic climate in which we live, a time in which community is perhaps more necessary and more difficult to cultivate than ever. Admirably, their experiment in collectivity has endured for over fifteen years. In that time, they have written, collaborated, composed, created, protested, learned, taught, and *engaged* in a way few intellectuals/activists/writers in Italy have. And the remaining members do not appear to be stopping. But Wu Ming 5's departure does discredit the idea of the collective utopia, and his remarks paint the group as a tripartite version of *Altai's* Yossef Nasi—that even in their collectivity there is something of the “cult of personality” and, certainly, ego involved. Of course, there is no proof of the version of either side of this story. What is significant is the tabloid-level discourse that they appear to have fallen into, which would indicate that something in the system is broken.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of this break is that it would appear to lend credence to the views of the collective's detractors, particularly those who see the pseudonym as a marketing ploy and the group's activities as frivolous. According to Adriano Scianca for “*Libero Quotidiano*,” the collective's transparency is a farce. “[s]ì, ti si nota di più, molto di più se ti metti un nome da battaglia e giochi a fare l'autore che rifiuta le logiche della dittatura mediatica” (Scianca). In this article he comments on the “tediosissimo collettivo” and the contentious break with Wu Ming 5 with barely disguised glee: “Perché se dopo la terza elementare crei la tua banda, ti metti i nomi di battaglia e ti dai altisonanti codici di condotta, il tuo nemico più implacabile non sarà il fascismo, il capitalismo o l'imperialismo, ma il senso del ridicolo. Che qui sembra davvero l'unico vincitore” (Scianca).

In closing, at this point in the 21<sup>st</sup> century ‘fair and impartial’ seems like an idealized dream of the past, and Wu Ming, as a politically-oriented group that interacts with others of the same persuasion and clashes continuously with those who occupy the other side of the political spectrum, are representative of this cultural and political climate. Finding a middle ground and having a mass appeal are harder now than ever, and the challenge of building and maintaining a community with multiple heads working together to achieve consensus seems increasingly difficult. The Wu Ming collective has made a career of countering individualism with collaboration, with varying results; they have effectively filled a cultural ‘niche’ and demonstrated an alternative to Berlusconi, regardless of how small the scale. However, this rather public break with Wu Ming 5 shows that there is more behind the scenes than they, despite their perceived transparency, would like to share. What will be tested now is not necessarily the resolve of the collective, but the loyalty of their community of followers. If the latter stays committed to the ‘game,’ this speaks volumes about the overall success of the Wu Ming project. If not, perhaps it is true what Shirky claims about “collective action:” it is the most difficult ‘rung’ on the collaboration ladder, and is even harder to maintain over the long term. Of course, the same could be said about Berlusconi’s political reign and mass media dominance. In many ways, Wu Ming have outlasted the former prime minister in their commitment to the production, distribution, and consumption of popular culture; their success as a trio—and a part of a larger “constellation” of collectives—remains to be seen.





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