

Poetico-Political Audiovisions

Experimentations with Language and Social Activism in Italian Production

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In the small village of Fosdinovo in Liguria, in the hills that surround *Cinque Terre*, a “Museum of Resistance” has recently been opened with the intention of preserving and transmitting the memory of the fight for liberation against Nazi-Fascism in that region. The small Museum was designed by the local community together with the historians of the University of Pisa and, for the exhibition concept, with the Milanese group *Studio Azzurro*, which since the 1980’s has been working in Italy in the fields of video art, video installation, ambiances, and interactive works. Years and years of artistic experimentation have come to fruition here in order to conceive a space of images in motion, of “living” and speaking memories, and of documents activated by the spectators themselves. It is, in fact, the now-elderly protagonists of those episodes who, captured on video, are talking to us from a series of screens. In short and important stories they narrate and describe much more and far better than any static document, picture, or written text can do. The newspapers, the press releases, the period photographs are not exhibited under glass (as is usually the case); rather, they can be “virtually” touched and consulted by the visitors. With a simple touch of the hand on a horizontal screen the image changes, and it is therefore possible to interrogate it and to “turn the pages” of the material of the period. In this way, in the dim light of the Museum, we gain access to the faces and voices of the protagonists and to the rare documents of the archive.

This is just one example of how experimentations in a field like video art, which is frequently considered to be “elitist,” might be effectively transferred into solutions with “public utility,” solutions for political and social communication. Actually, *Studio Azzurro* is one of the most important research groups working on electronic technology in Italy. Also very well-known abroad, the group was born in the ‘70s as the *Laboratorio di Comunicazione Militante* (“Militant Communication Workshop”) and is oriented toward the analysis of media and the development of various projects of counter-information. Its refined and elegant installations, its “sensible ambiances,” in which virtuality and interactivity eliminate every visible technological device, have always maintained the contact between “ethics” and “aesthetics,” as in the case of the wall of screens realized for the *Architecture Biennale* of Venice in 2001, a gigantic fresco in motion about metropolitan nightmares and the ever-growing discrepancy between

poverty and wealth; or in the 1994 installation, *Il Giardino delle Cose* (“The Garden of Things”), which, in an age all too easily consecrated to the fashion of the immaterial, constitutes a provocative and poetic manifesto in favour of the importance of the senses, of the care and love for “real” things. Here, in a long succession of monitors, a series of objects slowly emerges from the dark, thanks to the movement of the hands that give them a certain *visibility* by caressing and warming them up. The use of infrared cameras allows a “functional” technology, typically used for military purposes, to veer towards poetic valences (similar operations have been performed by the group with satellite images).

Moreover, experimentation with new image and sound technologies seems to offer an extremely wide range of linguistic choices and a particularly rich and complex field of intervention to those authors who deeply believe, in the wake of the cinematic avant-gardes of the ‘20s, that “new thoughts” require “new words,” new articulations of language, and new aesthetics capable of evading stereotypes, the automatisms of perception, and the cage of genres and styles. For this purpose, an author like Gianni Toti (a poet and a theatrical and cinematic author connected to the experimentations of Soviet Futurists—particularly Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky—and author, together with Cesare Zavattini, of the ‘60s *cinegiornali liberi* [“the free cine-journals”]) found himself discovering and choosing, in an already mature period of his professional life, the video medium. The electronic image’s capacity for metamorphosis, the metaphorical power of “collages,” which ensures the simultaneity of many images, and the capacity to create temporal, spatial, and chromatic alterations in real time have made it possible for this Italian pioneer of video art to execute, with much more abundant means and articulations, the experimentations of the avant-gardes within the context of the poetico-political utopias of the twentieth century. His video-poems, realized for a short experimental period in the ‘80s in the studios of RAI, Italy’s public TV network, his *VideoPoemi*, and his recent *VideoPoemOpere* (“Opera-Poem-Videos”), which are long, complex, and visionary works, unite innovation in language with political discourse. Using video, Toti has explored the protagonists of the twentieth century’s (defeated) aesthetic and political revolutions, the nightmare of a planet made to conform to the logic of the market and to a savage cementing of cities and thought (*Planetopolis*, 1994), and then, currently, the planetary holocausts, starting from that suffered by the Indios (in his trilogy started with *Tupac Amauta* in 1997). In *Acà Nada* (1998), realized during his residency at the PRIM in Montréal, Toti used computer graphics, with all the simulations they allow, in order to realize an overturning of point of view. He was not interested in the perspective of the colonizers, who arrive on

their ships and “see” the mainland (*Acà Nada*, “here nothing” in Spanish, designates Canada), but that of the indigenous people, those who were already on that land thought to be desolate. Technology, bent to the needs of creative and artistic experimentation, can indeed help us to (literally) transform our point of view and make us see things in a new way. In the works of Toti, one of the most renowned and important video-artists even on an international scale, the video image takes on the character of a *metamedium* capable of rendering concrete the dream of the total work of art. In his compelling “electronic frescos,” film strips from old movies enter into dialogue with new “choreographic creations.” Structured on a sonorous concept that brings together classical music, popular and political songs, and electroacoustic compositions, these “electronic frescos” combine digital image, synthesized creations, and pictorial tradition (as well as innovation). Composed of neologisms, and often recited in a blend of languages, his poetic texts accompany the images, but they are frequently written on the screen, thus becoming images themselves. Letters and sentences are twisted and curled up to become metaphors in motion. They undergo every possible form of metamorphosis, hence following in the wake of the utopias of Italian futurists who, in their 1916 manifesto on *La cinematografia futurista* (“Futurist Cinema”), foresaw the creation of “the dramas of humanized and animated letters—jortographic dramas—typographic dramas—geometric dramas—numeric sensibilities.” Rather than sticking to the small screen of the TV, Toti’s dream for these works involves a cinematographic vision: a vision in darkness, a revolving and involving vision (even with respect to sound) that can better reveal the power of associations and elaborations. And therefore, just as Eisenstein and Abel Gance have done before, Toti dreams of screens different from those present; he dreams of multivisions, of circular or vertical supports of projection, of new projections for new spectators.

It is clear that these works make use of (digital) image and sound technologies in a way very different—in fact opposite—from the “special effects” of Hollywood cinema. Here video effects are used as “normal effects,” as minimal units of language. Rather than reinforce the impression of reality (the “credibility” of a story or even the verisimilitude of the incredible and the unlikely), they tend to create not only ways of seeing that are both participatory and critical, but also mental activity and the possibility of a dialectical encounter with the works. The point is to create a way of seeing that involves work. Let us not forget that in Italy, in 1980, Michelangelo Antonioni experimented with electronic technologies for his feature film, *Il mistero di Oberwald* (“The Mystery of Oberwald”), revealing in them an extreme versatility for a non-naturalistic ren-

dering of colour. About this topic, Luciano Tovoli, Antonioni's director of photography, writes, "The screen is a white canvas, one should be able to work just like a painter who works on a white canvas, and not through an imposition of clichés. If cinema is tired, it is because we have given up on research."

Thus, the dream of multivisions and immersive visions is far removed from the spectacularity of spherical and revolving projections that are deployed today in some large-scale expositions or in certain special cinematographic halls (where the same old stories or documentaries continue to be projected). It is, in fact, related to the utopia of seeing with all senses, of inciting synaesthetic combination and comparison. Using that special art form known as video installation, this endeavour, starting from the end of the '50s, has been undertaken by various artists at the international level and in different ways. The art of video installation also has a political value: one might think of the video installations of Wolf Vostell in Germany, a few years after the end of the Second World War, that denounced the connection and the complicities of 1950s television (of power) with the preceding dreadful period.

Furthermore, among the first to use the video medium in Italy (when the "portapack" had just arrived from Japan and was still very heavy and unreliable), was *underground* filmmaker Alberto Grifi, known as an experimenter with devices and machinery and as the author of films dear to Marcel Duchamp, such as *La verifica incerta* (made in 1965 and realized together with the painter Gianfranco Baruchello). His 1971 video, *Anna* (which is considered to be "the first Italian video"), exalts, thanks to the continuity of video takes, the *tempi morti* (literally, "dead times," or a time in which nothing happens) already told by *Nouvelle Vague*. This video portrays a girl without a home and without roots; at the same time, however, it is a document about the fights and conflicts of those years, about public demonstrations, about the condition of women. An interesting case of cross-fertilization between experimental cinema and political militancy was narrated by another pioneer of the social documentary, Silvano Agosti. After having filmed the assaults by police in public squares at the end of the '60s, he would re-project them on the backs of policemen (obviously caught unaware). In this way, he would unite the necessity and the urgency of counter-information with the unusual and provocative practices of cinematic experimentation—the overcoming of the screen, the selection of new projection supports, Body-Art, performance, happening, etc.—that we find from the historical avant-garde right up to the underground cinema and contemporary art.

Also active in Italy is Giacomo Verde, whose work takes place on the boundary between experimentation with language and political themes,

starting in fact from a “desecration” and a “de-construction” of the television set itself. In a theatrical fashion, Giacomo Verde teaches the destruction of TVs in live performances, or he makes use of a closed-circuit TV system for small-scale shows in which TV becomes a “small theatre,” bringing together live actions and on-screen representations. Furthermore, he invents and proposes games to be played in schools with the creative use of the television monitor, without watching the programs but by using segments thereof, by covering the set, and by exploiting some of its characteristics in a ludicrous or provocative manner. Performer, video artist (or *technoartist*, as he prefers to be called), and *online* cultural worker Verde realizes his videos starting from political demonstrations, and from theatrical laboratories organized in prison, blending works on “videodrama” (a genre born in Italy in the ‘80s) together with video art and the desecratory and playful spirit of the “Fluxus” movement. Alessandro Amaducci, on the other hand, has built his work on the precious documents found in Torino’s *Archivio Cinematografico della Resistenza* (“Cinematic Archive of the Resistance”), which he then transfers onto video in order to work on them, even to re-create them, and to place them at the disposal of younger generations. His approach to the electronic image is characterized by this background of old filmic memories that come back into his current works like phantasms from the past, like oneiric visions or incurable wounds. Amaducci narrated in video the desolation and the abandonment of some large factories in Torino, such as FIAT, that were once extremely active; he worked on the tragedy of the Holocaust, and on the memories of the fight for Liberation. Even in his last and maybe most important work, *Spoon River* (made in 2001 and based on the famous poetry collection of Edgar Lee Masters), the archive film still constitutes, together with the films of the avant-gardists, a necessary reference to a past universe, to the sometimes dramatic imaginary of the twentieth century.

The Sicilian group *Cane CapoVolto* is also inspired by the cinema of the avant-garde and, above all, by the surrealists. In its complex and enigmatic works, we find an echo of Guy Debord’s critique of the society of the spectacle, as well as a reflection on the manipulations of information, on the true and the false, and on the deceptive mechanisms generated by a dishonest relationship between image and sound. Here, the recovery of old amateur films or old scientific documentaries serves in the execution of visual and sonorous experiments on the emptiness of the “civilization of images.”

On the other hand, in a sober and “pure” way, with no recourse at all to effects and metamorphoses, some other authors in Italy work with video in a direction sometimes far removed from the aesthetics of video

art (yet they manage to do so in an extremely effective way with respect to the connection between language and themes). The social and political documentaries of Daniele Segre, a leading figure in Italy in the profound renovation of this genre, are based on an experimentation with language that intends to use the precise “mise-en-scène,” photography, and even recitation in a truly special blending of documentary and fiction. Here, under the caress of lights and cameras, protagonists—such as miners, metal-mechanic workers, union delegates, and African immigrants, as well as AIDS patients, young people with Down’s syndrome, and Alzheimer patients—evade the stereotypical image imposed on them by hurried TV news reports. Thus, they become real protagonists in every respect, in order to stimulate our human participation and our capacity for identification and dialogue. Antonietta De Lillo, in *Promessi Sposi* (1994), tells a true story by structuring it as a dramatic progression that combines theatre and cinematographic suspense, by emphasizing the story’s sense of mystery through photography that exalts the contrasts between black and white, as well as with enigmatic details captured by the camera. It might be interesting to note, in addition, that some of these authors, such as Segre, De Lillo, and Agosti, today realize narrative feature films as well.

In his *Il sangue non è acqua fresca* (“Blood is not Fresh Water”) of 1997, without any fear of using a diaristic, personal, and autobiographical style, video artist and documentarist Theo Eshetu narrates “his” Ethiopia in a brief cinematic essay on historico-political counter-information. Independent filmmaker Giuseppe Baresi brings the conflict between the First and the Third Worlds on stage in his video *La Febbre* (1994, with Giuseppe Cederna), which is drawn from *The Fever* by Wallace Shawn. Realized by combining theatrical monologue with old amateur Super-8 films and video shots, and by disorienting the spectator with continuous variations of point of view, modes of narration, and the very “grain” of image, *La Febbre* constitutes a “manifesto” at once dramatic and actual, political and human. Such an approach, in fact, portrays and mirrors—with the necessary specificities—a tendency, at the international level, to substitute the presumed “omniscience” of the narrator with a decisively personal and subjective view, which is frequently represented by the voice of the very author, or by the “impressionistic” movements of a small camera used as a notepad. Baresi, just like Giacomo Verde and the group “Fluid Video Crew,” has also realized videos in the war zone of the neighbouring ex-Yugoslavia.

In any discussion about relations between audiovisual production and “political” themes in Italy, it is hard not to mention the long and pioneering work of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci-Lucchi. At first only in

film, then in video, and recently also in the form of real and proper installations (at the 2001 *Venice Biennale*, for example), the two authors—who have had various personal shows and publications all over the world—perform a truly archaeological excavation in the stores and collections of old films (amateur films included), thus providing us with an impeccable and ominous portrait of entire periods, attitudes, modes of behaviour, and ideologies. From the minute and detailed re-reading and re-creation of strips taken not only from old government films, but also from travel films or movies that appear to be innocuous, there emerges an anthropological picture, a portrait of classes, that is also social and a denunciation of totalitarian regimes, colonial invasions, and subtle ideological manipulations. The two authors use the lightness and the versatility of the video medium in *Nocturne* (1997), which is a subdued and sorrowful testimony of a Belgrade oppressed by the embargo.

Other authors, such as “Fluid Video Crew” in Rome, Maria Martinelli in Emilia-Romagna, and Sara Maggi in Tuscany, work on the borders between old and extremely new technologies, always focussing on a specific politico-cultural discourse. And in all these cases, although in different ways, the video medium is used not only for its lightness, economy, and “intimacy,” but also used as an instrument that, as it absorbs theatre and cinema, photography, music, and literature, is capable of “playing” all preceding instruments to create new (personal, poetic, and problematic) tendencies for political discourse beyond and against the pretext of “objectivity” and ideological propaganda. It is therefore a medium of mental short circuits, of unpredicted associations and visual and sonorous shocks capable of going not only back in time, toward the great experimentations of the twentieth century (or, as in some of the foregoing cases, toward the tradition of Neorealism), but also forward, following in the wake of that *expanded cinema* theorized in 1970 by Gene Youngblood. It is, in Italy (despite innumerable difficulties caused by the lack of structures, support, and investments in this sector), a medium capable of finally ensuring, through the relentless efforts and experimentations of a series of authors, a dialogue between two poetico-political voices that have long been considered irreconcilable: the “cinema of reality,” with its moral and civic duty, and the most daring experimentations of the avant-garde, which are inclined to profoundly renew ways of seeing and thinking.

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