Towards a Collective Intelligence: Transmediality and the Wu Ming Project

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Introduction

Umberto Eco, as far back as 1964 with the first publication of *Apocalittici e integrati,* was not only focused on the two categorizations of "Apocalyptic" and "Integrated" intellectuals and their reactions to a burgeoning and omnipresent mass culture, but also demonstrated his interest in this culture's production, distribution, and consumption:

> The universe of mass communications is—whether we recognize it or not—our universe; and if it is of values that we wish to speak, the objective conditions of communication are those provided by the existence of newspapers, radio, television, recorded and recordable music, the new forms of visual and audiovisual communication. Nobody is free of these conditions, not even the virtuous man who, angered by the inhuman nature of this universe of information, transmits his own protest through the channels of mass communication, in the columns of a great newspaper or in the pages of a paperback printed in linotype and sold in railway station kiosks. (Eco 1994: 20)

Eco's sentiments still ring true in the cognitive, digital society of 21st century Italy. Since the dawn of the Italian Second Republic, it is undeniable that former Prime Minister Berlusconi's tactics of media domination, as well as his approach to culture creation, have had a considerable effect on the Italian collective imaginary; his control of

both public and private television, as well as print media, sport, banking and the building trades demonstrates how he has effectively insinuated himself into every realm of Italian culture. If, as Eco observed, mass communications is indeed «our universe» (*ibid*.: 20), then he who controls that universe wields the power, not just of the government, but of the everyday, and «[n]obody is free of these conditions» (*ibid*.). It is not surprising, then, that this all-consuming media presence has elicited a considerable backlash, especially among left-wing Italian intellectuals, many of whom came of age during the period of Berlusconi's ascent.

The Bolognese writing collective Wu Ming, who set themselves in opposition to Berlusconi's brand of neo-liberal capitalism beginning with their chosen name[1], are among those writers, artists, and thinkers who question the cultural paradigms that have become hegemonic in Italy over the last twenty years. They do so by following in Eco's path, reevaluating the production, distribution, and consumption of culture and adapting their strategies of resistance to fit the increasingly digital world of the 21st century. Wu Ming demonstrate a unique approach to writing not only in their collectivity (which would be anathema to Berlusconi's "cult of the individual celebrity"), but also in the multisensorial and multimedial dimension they bring to narrative. By extending the boundaries of the traditional written text through digital tools, music, and physical performances, they seem to invite increased agency on the part of their readership and seek to connect their followers across times and spaces, thus creating a borderless transnational community. The experience of a Wu Ming novel extends past the printed word, as the collective experiments with the tactile, visual, aural, and even the olfactory to enhance the way in which the reader *lives* the content on the page: soundtracks, hiking excursions, fan fiction, and photo exhibitions, among others, are just some of the ways they seek to go beyond the confines of the written text. Their use

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[1] Wu Ming signifies either "anonymous" or "five authors" in Chinese depending on the pronunciation and is a title often used by dissidents of that country as a form of protest.

of old and new media to achieve these ends represents a clear example of Henry Jenkins's convergence culture[2] at work, since many of their initiatives are designed to foster interaction through multisensorial forms of communication. While an examination of all of these forms exceeds the scope of an essay[3], I will focus specifically on the interplay of word and image in Wu Ming's (relatively recent) venture into the social media/networking site Pinterest. My intent is to illustrate how this particular aspect of their project serves as a microcosm of their overall approach to culture creation and art, and how their facilitation of the collective process of consumption[4] contributes to the development of «communities of sentiment» (Appadurai 1996: 8) and a «collective intelligence» (Jenkins 2006: 2)[5]. These are formations that revitalize the concept of popular culture for the digital age of our cognitive society and offer an alternative to an Italian cultural imaginary long dominated by the practices of Berlusconism[6].

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[2] «[w]here old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways» (Jenkins 2006: 2).

[3] I am currently working on an extended study on the multisensorial in Wu Ming where I argue that it represents one of the primary strategies of culture creation of the collective and is an effective way of forming «communities of sentiment» (*ibid.*: 8) through imagination, participation, and collaboration; this "sensory convergence" invites increased agency on the part of the reader and is one way in the which the collective "writes back" to Berlusconian practices regarding the passive consumer.

[4] See Jenkins 2006: 4 for additional discussion.

[5] Here Jenkins cites French cybertheorist Pierre Lévy (Jenkins 2006: 2).

[6] I use this term to refer to those practices utilized by the former prime minister to gain consensus and maintain control over Italian popular culture. These practices include, but are not limited to: strategic television programming on both public and private networks that focused on American sitcoms, quiz and variety shows, all of which featured the requisite *veline*, or scantily-clad young women; control over publishing and print media through ownership of the Mondadori publishing house, as well as other newspapers and magazines; selling the Italian people a specific type of capitalist dream

"I figli problematici della popular culture"

Perhaps one of the reasons for Wu Ming's attraction to the multi (or trans)medial and the multisensorial, and specifically to the relationship between word and image, is precisely their background and their predisposition to and engagement with the popular culture of their time. For the purposes of this essay, I intend to use the terms "popular culture" and "mass culture" synonymously, in keeping with the intentions of the collective itself. In his 2008 "Memorandum" on the *New Italian Epic,* Wu Ming 1 discusses the historical distinction between the two terms in the Italian context, which he finds problematic in modern times, as the folkloristic connotation of *cultura popolare* clearly contrasts with the technological, mass-mediated *cultura di massa*.[7] In his view, the difference involves placing a focus on the

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through the building of the subdivision/media headquarters of Milano 2; his use of sports metaphors and his own "rags to riches" story to sell himself as the "everyman" of Italian culture; and the forging of strategic alliances and the establishing of laws that would protect his questionable business dealings. According to Paul Ginsborg, what Berlusconi truly promoted was "negative freedom", an unregulated form of liberty which essentially allowed him to alter the legal system for his own personal gain.

[7] «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 e 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 2009: 18). [Today the great majority of culture is not MASS: we live in a world of infinite niches and subgenres. The

producer (mass media) rather than on the consumer (the people), neither of which fully represents the "popular culture" which today we associate with those films, television shows, video games, and magazines which have been both produced through mass means and consumed by a large part of a more global population. In his words: «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 e o il tale fumetto ha influenzato la sua epoca, si usa l'espressione "popular culture"» (Wu Ming 2009: 18). What is important to underline here, particularly because it appears to challenge many Cultural Studies theories on the damaging, hegemonic effects of mass produced popular culture, is that Wu Ming 1 does not provide a qualitative judgment on popular culture as a whole; rather, he acknowledges its role in human life and interactions, and the ability of the consumer to somehow mold the culture to satisfy him or herself, indicating that the power of hegemony lies more in "production" than "reception". Like Eco, he neither ignores the social and political implications of popular culture nor does he indiscriminately embrace the popular in all its forms. Rather, he recognizes that it is, as Iain Chambers has described it, daily life: «...an informal knowledge of the everyday, based on the sensory, the immediate, the pleasurable and the concrete» (Chambers 1986: 13); in short, something that is distinctly human and inherently accessible to all. It can be, as Horkheimer and Adorno have contended, a source of alienation, but it can also, in an increasingly digital and multimedial

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MAINSTREAM and "National-Popular" are less important than they were in the past, and they will continue to change shape. Instead, the distinction consists in this: mass culture indicates HOW this culture is transmitted, which is to say, through the mass media; POPULAR CULTURE places the accent on WHO receives it and makes it his/her own. Usually, when we speak of the place that a certain song or film has on a person's life, or how a certain book or comic strip has influenced its time period, we use the expression "popular culture". The problem is that, ninety times out of a hundred, the Italian debate on popular culture has to do with the trash on television, as if "popular" were only that, while instead there are qualitative distinctions and historical evolutions to consider.] All translations from Wu Ming 2009 are my own.

world, serve as a point of "convergence", to use Jenkins's terminology, between people of different social classes, ages, and cultures.

Wu Ming would appear to strive for the latter in their approach to popular culture, and their desire to actively engage in this realm (rather than contribute to the "canon" or be associated with a more high-brow "cognoscenti") appears to support Eco's principle that «in order to analyse mass culture you have to secretly enjoy it» (*ibid*.: 52). In fact, as Wu Ming 1 himself has remarked on the occasion of his conference keynote for "The Italian Perspective on Metahistorical Fiction" (2008)[8], the members of the collective grew up in a cultural climate that was focused on crime novels and science fiction, not politically engaged works of literature; they were, instead, «figli problematici della popular culture» (Wu Ming 2009: 126), the very thing that the "apocalyptic" intellectuals feared:

> We were raised on a steady diet of genre narratives, rock music, cinema, role-playing games, the first videogames…And we were already using the Internet, rather, what came before it, the "Bbs" and preweb electronic communication…We weren't interested in behaving like "proper" intellectuals or being snobbish towards the culture industry. We wanted to contribute to popular culture, feel its conflicts and contradictions inside us, rather than stigmatize it by looking at it from the outside, or even refusing to look at it at all. When our novel *Q* came out, we explicitly declared our

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[8] Wu Ming 1's speech is entitled "Noi dobbiamo essere i genitori", taken from a piece by American author David Foster Wallace. The roundtable was held in London at the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies and was organized by Claudia Boscolo, in light of the interest and debate sparked by the initial publication of Wu Ming 1's "Memorandum" on the *New Italian Epic*. It was on this occasion that Wu Ming 1 presented this original speech, and in 2009 it was published, along with an updated and annotated (by collaborators) version of the original "Memorandum" and an essay by Wu Ming 2 entitled "La salvezza di Euridice". The volume was published by Einaudi under the name *New Italian Epic: Letteratura, sguardo obliquo e ritorno al futuro.*

intentions to fight our battle from inside pop culture and conduct our practices from within the culture industry. (*Ibid.*: 126)[9]

Wu Ming could surely be classified as "integrated" according to Eco's classification of intellectuals, but what distinguishes them further is perhaps this self-awareness and transparency: they are conscious of the fact that they are using mass culture, in all of its hegemonic potential, to comment on the same, working from "within" the system, so-to-speak. More importantly, the culture in question is also largely visual, from television to video games to the Internet, all of which is undeniably bound up in narrative. Wu Ming take inspiration from the popular, and specifically visual, culture in which they were raised, but rather than utilize it to gain consensus in a more Gramsian sense, they attempt to integrate it into their novels in a way that, at its most utopian level, aims to build community, encourage participation, and offer cultural alternatives to what Wu Ming 1 sees as the rapidly disappearing "mainstream".

The group's multi- and transmedial approach to culture creation is undoubtedly a response to Italy's society throughout the authors' lifetimes, namely the period of the Second Republic and the reign of Silvio Berlusconi. In fact, many of the collective's practices and strategies would appear to mirror those of the premier/media mogul himself. For example, much has been said about Berlusconi's ability to market himself and his products across various platforms, from television to print media to billboards, and the Wu Ming collective

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[9] «Eravamo cresciuti con una dieta stabile di narrativa di genere, musica rock, cinema, giochi di ruolo, i primi videogame…E usavamo già Internet, anzi, quello c'era prima, le Bbs, comunicazione elettronica preweb…Non ci interessava il comportamento "giusto" da intellettuale, e nemmeno le tirate snob contro l'industria culturale. Volevamo dare il nostro contributo alla popular culture, portarci dentro conflitti e contraddizioni, non stigmatizzarla guardandola da fuori, o addirittura rifiutandosi di guardarla. Quando uscì il nostro romanzo *Q*, dichiarammo in modo esplicito che volevamo combattere la nostra battaglia dentro il pop e portare le nostre pratiche all'interno dell'industria culturale.»

responds in kind, with their use of social media, other digital platforms, and the more traditional book form. Berlusconi has his (ideally) passive consumers, the "Mesmerized Electorate"[10] of which Eco spoke prior to the elections of 2001, while Wu Ming seek the "active" reader who is willing not only to go beyond the text but also to collaborate in its continued life. Both sides depend on their interlocutors for their success, with Berlusconi being judged by economic profits and Wu Ming in terms of an increase in their readership (perhaps "followers" would be a better term) and the diffusion of their ideas. The text is Wu Ming's version of the open market, and they offer a wide range of options to their "consumers"; specifically, they aim at transforming those readers into active contributors to a collective narrative. Furthermore, they operate under the assumption that their readers have rights and are potentially intelligent interlocutors. As Maurizio Vito notes, «According to Wu Ming, art and literature today, more than ever, should entertain by means of attrition, should lead by means of challenging the existent, rather than please their audiences while toying with the world» (Vito 2010: 4).

This is not to say that the collective's approach is universally effective and that their version of popular culture has unilateral appeal for all members of the Italian Left. Furthermore, the divisiveness of Wu

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[10] From the 2001 essay "For Whom the Bell Tolls: A 2001 Appeal for a Moral Referendum": the "Mesmerized Electorate" «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 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» (Eco 2006: 117).

Ming's cultural production would appear to indicate not only the continued political fragmentation of both the Right and Left in Italy, but also a shift in the production and consumption of popular culture in general. In fact, the collective is aware that the "popular" to which they aspire is no longer what it once was. In the aforementioned "Memorandum" on the *New Italian Epic*, Wu Ming 1 refers to this "new", less hegemonic popular culture as a series of «infinite niches and subgenres» (Wu Ming 1 2009: 18)[11]. In fact, it is Wu Ming 1's assertion that mass culture is much less powerful than its past iterations, as the Internet has undoubtedly influenced methods of mediation, allowing direct contact between producer and consumer. This shift naturally represents a downturn in Berlusconism. The fact that Wu Ming were weaned on the mass media age of Berlusconi puts them in a unique position to utilize technology in a community-building effort that was not possible in the age of the former prime minister. These communities, as Wu Ming 1 points out in his "Memorandum", are no longer for the "masses"; instead, the group seeks to create "niches" that can still manage to affect the Italian social, political, and cultural spheres. In this case, rather than aspire to reach the "masses" of the popular culture of the past, the collective strives to connect to the "multitude"[12] made possible by the digital era.

For Berlusconi and those who became magnates in the age of television and mass media, the Internet presents the unique problem of control: with television, Berlusconi created a monopoly. By contrast, the Internet represents so many unique cultural niches that even someone as media savvy as Berlusconi would find it difficult to control. Whereas the former prime minister created his persona and established himself as a fixture of the Italian cultural imaginary through television, the Internet is where Wu Ming find their place and establish their identity as digital activists. Even when the objective is

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[11] «infinite nicchie e sottogeneri» (Wu Ming 1 2009: 18). For full citation, see footnote 7.

[12] See Hardt – Negri 2004.

not overtly political, as it is on their blog Giap![13], the communities the collective creates online directly contribute to their opposition of previous prevailing cultural forces.

Transmediality and Pinterest: Visualizing the Text

Even though Wu Ming actively avoids their own visual representation[14], the collective sees the image as an intrinsic—and strategic—component of popular narrative, a view which can surely be attributed to the aforementioned historical context in which the collective was formed; the different forms that the visual takes, though, reveal the creativity and innovation of the authors themselves. It is the addition of these various visual representations that transforms Wu Ming's narrative production (already categorized, to use their terminology, as "unidentified narrative objects", or "UNOs"[15]) into

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[13] http://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/.

[14] There is one primary exception to Wu Ming's penchant for the visual, which is a direct response to Berlusconi's "cult of personality" (Thoburn 2011: 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, and the publicity photograph on their website at one time featured a faceless 1950s dance troupe and now (following the departure of Wu Ming 3, Luca Di Meo, in 2008) shows a band with different musical instruments but the same face on all four members. Wu Ming 1 explains, «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» (Wu Ming 1 2009: 143).

[15] In Wu Ming 1's "Memorandum", he refers to the more experimental literary production of the last twenty years as "unidentified narrative ob-

transmedial projects[16]. They have also begun, with the publication of Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed's *romanzo meticcio Timira* in 2012, to make use of 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". 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 "good reads". Wu Ming, along with the Einaudi publishing house (which is responsible for the non-ebook part of the group's project), have created boards for their most recent novels: *Timira*, *Point Lenana* (2013), and *L'armata dei sonnambuli* (2014). In many ways, the content of these boards and the idea-sharing nature of

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jects", or UNOs. He describes UNOs as «Non sono più romanzi, non sono già qualcos'altro» (Wu Ming 1 2009: 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 makes the argument that these more experimental forms, which incorporate multiple genres, literary and non, can be labeled as an "ibridazione eso-letteraria" 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» (Patti and Chimenti 2010: 51).

[16] The specific nature of these projects varies, as do the forms of media employed by the collective to enhance the narrative experience, but the ultimate objective of this constant innovation and expanding of narrative boundaries is to engage with the reader on a deeper level and encourage his/her active participation and collaboration on the project. The collective has done everything from inviting online fan fiction for the novel *Manituana* (2007), to creating a soundtrack and live musical and multimedial performances for *54* (2002), to organizing mountain hikes for both *Il sentiero degli dei* (Wu Ming 2 2010) and *Point Lenana* (Wu Ming 1 and Roberto Santachiara 2013).

Pinterest in general are representative of the overall transmedial nature of the Wu Ming project.

In the majority of the collective's novels, either those written *a dieci/otto mani*[17] 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 contributions 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» (Pinterest: *Point Lenana* board)[18]. What is perhaps most striking about this impressive array of "extra" content is that no matter how varied the visual representation, it all comes back to the text. The majority of photographs, drawings and videos are captioned with a pertinent citation from the novel itself. Let us look at one particularly effective example from the board in question.

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[17] The collective was originally made up of five members; Wu Ming 3 left the group in 2008.

[18] «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 Pinterest: *Point Lenana* board are my own.

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). This reference is further explained through the extra 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". The two worlds of text and image are linked through the use of a caption, which is 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. (*Ibid.*)[19]

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

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[19] «...Il tuo inglese è appena decente (stramaledetto inglese che non ti ha permesso di fare il concorso diplomatico! Dovevi prendere piú lezioni dal professor Joyce…) ma capisci che parlano di prendere una decisione, di sce-gliere 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.»

photographs and video of the people and places mentioned in the text, represents a moment of "convergence" not just of old and new media, but also of word and image, and of history and popular culture. Otherwise stated, it showcases 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. According to Jenkins, these moments of convergence have a community-building effect and create a participatory culture which in turn cultivates the formation of a collective intelligence. Jenkins's theories see this paradigm shift as a positive turn, a relationship between technology and popular culture that could have a unifying, rather than alienating, effect.

The choice of *Follow the Fleet* is an interesting illustration of these convergences in many respects. First of all, 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, or, perhaps more appropriately, for today's multitude. It has also, with the passing of time, taken on greater historical cultural significance than perhaps 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, high and low culture and, as in the case of *Follow the Fleet*, even national cultures. Let us examine the various layers of this particular instance in order to understand the depth of its cultural convergence.

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)[20]. Wu Ming 1 and Roberto Santachiara come across this anecdote decades later and include it as a significant event

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[20] 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 geared towards an English audience, keeping in mind that Benuzzi was a prisoner of war in Africa under British control.

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[21], showing Rogers and Astaire dancing across Mount Kenya on the cover of their book. 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 the reader/viewer, 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. Emanuela Patti discusses a similar presence of paratext in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Petrolio* and Giuseppe Genna's *Italia De Profundis*[22], 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» (Patti 2010: 89). The presence of pre-literary material, such as the image of Astaire and Rogers in our 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» (*ibid*.: 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

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[21] See note 15 for further discussion on UNOs.

[22] 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*.

(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 21st century reader? What the image does communicate is that there are multiple, surprising narrative threads at work, 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). This transcendence of boundaries is further expressed by the expansion of the visual on the cover of *Point Lenana* to the collective's Pinterest page, with the addition of a YouTube clip of the scene "I'm Putting All My Eggs in One Basket", which was especially significant to Benuzzi when he first viewed the film. The clip is important largely because of Benuzzi's own struggles with comprehension and context, as he tries to translate the song from English to Italian and understand the sense of it in that particular moment of his life, just as the reader tries to interpret the same moment that many decades later. I would argue that this example lends legitimacy to Jenkins's observation that convergence does not destroy but rather encompasses and enriches. 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.

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? According to Renate

Brosch, images are adapted to different contexts more easily than texts. Because 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. (Brosch 2009: 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 ideas of things we have 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» (*ibid*.: 52), part of the cultural imaginary that «always already precedes the picture» (*ibid*.: 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 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, when the system is pushed back towards the intuition from which it descended'» (*ibid*.: 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—it. 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 addition, as the case of Wu Ming suggests, this practice is occurring outside the boundaries of a nation, in a "technoscape", which requires and provokes action and resistance by the reader: «…there is an active, creative element in media consumption which produces imaginative communities beyond the national» (*ibid.*: 60). The type of community created through the use of visual images, particularly through a social media tool like Pinterest, reflects Appadurai's notion of transnationalism as «a rearrangement of social contacts through and by technology» (Appadurai 1996: 7). Likewise, Pinterest boards such as those created and cultivated by the Wu Ming collective lend credence to the notion of imagination as a «collective, social fact» (*ibid.*: 8):

> 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. (*Ibid.*)

In these terms, Wu Ming's transnational community is largely enabled by the open nature of the digital realm, as the collective is able to foster relationships across borders that are not limited by time, space, or citizenship. The group's activity on multiple digital platforms, from Pinterest to Twitter to their blog Giap!, also facilitates these connections.

The use of social media and networking sites to "pin" photographs and videos related to printed material also points to the dynamic dimension of the text. The book, once published, might represent an inanimate, static object, but a website like Pinterest gives it continued life. New updates can be made long after the publication of the book and long before any reprintings would be considered. There are also neither temporal nor spatial limits to the process. Followers of the Wu Ming collective from all over the world can contribute to the board, at any time, on any day, from across the miles.

A reader might discover the page long after the publication of the book, and can still contribute and give the text life long after its initial popularity. The relationships that result from this kind of interaction are web-like rather than linear, and cross both spatial and temporal boundaries. This focus on the multitude and ‹‹migrating ideas and images›› (Brosch 2009: 1) gives Pinterest the potential to become an important building block in the creation of a continuously evolving transnational community of readers and collaborators.

Conclusion

The actual impact and legacy of the Wu Ming collective's work may still be difficult to judge in the grand scheme of Italian culture, though I would argue that they have effectively occupied one of the "niches" of popular culture mentioned by Wu Ming 1 in his "Memorandum". Specifically with regard to the politics of a post-Berlusconi nation, their voices have been significant. Their discussion on Giap! about the comedian-turned-politician Beppe Grillo and his Five Stars Movement garnered a considerable following in both the European and North American contexts; they sent out a call on Twitter for short stories which called for the end of the Enrico Letta government by way of an asteroid coming to Earth and compiled an ebook anthology within months; on the same platform, they have also highlighted the frequency (complete with digital map) with which the current prime minister Matteo Renzi fails to fulfill his daily obligations with the hashtag #renziscappa. In short, the Berlusconi government has fallen, but the collective continues to wield their "hatchets of war"[23].

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[23] This refers not only to the title of one of their collective novels, *Asce di guerra* (2005) but also to Marco Amici's article "La narrazione come mitopoiesi secondo Wu Ming", in which he refers to the collective's stories as «asce di guerra disseppellite, che rispolverino la visceralità dei conflitti, che non nascondano la violenza delle scelte e la violenza dei contesti imposti dalla Storia» [unburied hatchets that unearth the visceral nature of conflicts and

However, Wu Ming, despite their distaste for their country's politics and politicians and their sharp critiques of bourgeois society, take a largely positive approach to their art, seeing in it, like Jenkins and Appadurai, an answer, a way of writing back to power structures that heretofore appeared beyond the control of the average citizen (or artist). Experimenting with visual technology, as we have seen in the examples from Pinterest, is one way in which the collective expands traditional ideas of narratives *and* passes that agency and power on to their readers.

This is not to say that the use of Pinterest and other social media sites represents a sort of digital utopia which effectively combats capitalistic practices and places the focus solely on the community. In fact, in a September 2011 post on Giap!, Wu Ming 1 warns against the fetishism of Internet content and points out that, in fact, the average Facebook user is actually a "laborer" for the site, generating content on a daily basis that results in profit for Mark Zuckerberg and his associates (Marx's *s*urplus labor). The same could be said about contributors to Pinterest. To bring back Eco's observations on "Apocalyptic" versus "Integrated" intellectuals that began this essay, Wu Ming 1 sees this particular discourse on technology as a (hypocritical) dividing line between the two perspectives: if one criticizes the web, then he/she is "apocalyptic", while positive endorsements carry "integrated" propaganda. He refers to these two, perhaps overly simplistic, groups, as an «old conceptual frame» (Wu Ming 1 on Giap!: 26 September 2011), and he offers the following solution:

> To realize that our relation with things is neither neutral nor innocent, to find ideology therein, to acknowledge commodity fetishism—these are all achievements in themselves: we may still be injured and insulted, but at least we are not "injured, insulted, *and loving it*"…When I talk about "defetishising the Net", I mean the acquisition of this awareness, which is the requirement to stay

reveal the violence of historical choices and the violence of Historically imposed contexts] (Amici 2006: 13). All translations of Amici 2006 are my own.

"inside and against", inside in a conflictual way. 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. (*Ibid*.)

Rather than "Apocalyptic" or "Integrated", Wu Ming 1 calls for the intellectual who is "aware", in a Foucaultian sense, of the strategic relationship between power and knowledge. This third category reflects perhaps more than anything the collective's approach to their transnational and transmedial project, a form of *impegno* that could be characterized, to use Pierpaolo Antonello's words, not by «an Adornian mistrust of the culture industry» (Antonello 2009: 13) but by shifting attention from «traditional modernist forms of communication and persuasion» (*ibid.*: 19) to those of the postmodern and digital era. Pinterest is just one example of how awareness of the strategies and power relations present in the production, distribution, and consumption of (in this case, visual) culture can lead to "a worldwide alliance", a case of media convergence that has the potential to contribute to the formation of a "collective intelligence" whose very collaborative nature challenges the capitalistic practices of the Berlusconi years.

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