

## **Interview About the project The Big Plot on the book "Anthology of Web Literature" – Cristiana Campanini – 2010.**

### **Cristiana Campanini: What is the story at the heart of The Big Plot, in brief?**

Paolo Cirio: The vicissitudes of this story center on two real-world identities: a Russian spy arrested in Canada in 2006 (Paul W. Hampel) and a Russian right-wing party with branches across Europe (Eurasia Party). In The Big Plot these entities have been literally cloned through the use of various web platforms that help to define an identity. Using this process, these identities morphed from a "real" state into a "fictitious" one, becoming easily manipulable as elements of a story about espionage and conspiracy, with sentimental and psychological complications.

The plot concerns four main characters: an ambitious but psychologically unstable journalist, a businessman accused of being a Russian spy, a corporate psychologist frustrated by his job, and a private aircraft pilot with nationalist Eurasian fixations. Contact between the journalist and the Russian businessman, who has international political and business connections in the military sector, is procured by the boyfriend of the journalist. The latter works as the psychologist of the businessman/spy.

During an interview the journalist is initially attracted by the charm of the rich businessman/spy, who in turn falls madly in love with her. Unexpectedly, the reporter leaves both the psychologist and the spy, and elopes with the pilot of the spy plane, an event which leads to her involvement in the activities of his nationalist Eurasian political party (secretly financed by the spy).

The psychologist follows the changes in his former girlfriend through social networks, trying initially to dispassionately psychoanalyze the events, but he also experiences moments of hysterical instability. This leads to him founding a humanist political movement to attack the Eurasian party.

As a non-linear story there is no end and the beginning could be found in several places, because each episode has many points of temporal references with the whole storyline.

### **CC: How long did the project take to complete and how many people were involved?**

PC: The development of the project took about two years, and consisted of theoretical research into the form of the writing, the creation of the story's plot, and the design of contemporary art installations. The people involved included six actors, three editors, and various friends. The Big Plot was funded in part by a German institution of video-art (Werkleitz Halle) through the European Media Artist Residency Program 2009.

### **CC: How have audiences reacted to the project so far?**

The Big Plot has worked through four different channels of public participation. The first, more classical in nature, used invitations, interviews and reviews to tempt audiences to follow the story online. The second channel, more subtle, in which people found and followed online and offline parts of the story without knowing that it is fiction, this is in the tradition of Invisible Theater and has a maieutic function. The third channel, the most participatory one, allowed the audience to create new characters and pieces of the story. The last channel has been offline, through site-specific installations in exhibitions of contemporary art, providing the public with an opportunity to read and see the story in a purpose-built environment.

### **CC: Describe the creative processes behind The Big Plot. Did you start from a literary subject, or from a real story? What were your sources and influences?**

PC: The Big Plot was a continuous mixing of sources, stories and characters, both real and fictitious. In chronological order: the first step (real) was to clone the identity of a Russian spy on Facebook, using information gathered from newspaper articles. After a time, some old "friends" of the spy showed up, and the subsequent exchanging of messages (on the borders of international espionage) provided inspiration for several episodes of the story. In fact, some episodes of the spy in "The Big Plot" are authentic revelations of close friends found on Facebook.

The second source (real) was the Eurasian nationalist political party; a cloned version of which was included in the plot of the story through messages on forums, specially created websites, and groups on social networks. The third step (fiction) was to imbue these sources with a literary quality, taking inspiration from novels, which gave the tissue of the story, building up the personalities of the characters around the central figure of the spy.

The fourth step (real and fictional) was the casting, which aimed to find actors with real lives closely resembling those of the characters. In fact, the psychologist in *The Big Plot* is actually a real New York psychologist, the Russian leader is a singer of Russian folk-rock music with proper fans, and the journalist is really an actress who works in Toronto and Berlin, and is a native Russian. The actors gave selected real photos of their private lives that were republished on their character's social network profiles. Further, most of the episodes of the story were recorded by the actors with their own webcams in their homes.

The fifth and final step (fiction) was the participation of the audience who have created new characters and developed new pieces of the plot by following the main story-line - a process I had no control over. Indeed, individuals unknown to me have created dozens of new profiles on Facebook, Flickr, blogs and even some videos on Youtube. The created new characters who began to interact dramaturgically with the four initial protagonists.

**CC: The literary experience of *The Big Plot* is that of a free play of roles that can be manipulated and molded. Is the concept of the game one of the elements that inspired you? If yes, how?**

PC: More than just being a game, I would prefer to define it as an experimental art work. The continual research into breaking the boundaries between reality and fiction certainly makes it a work of conceptual art. The literary context suggests similarities with *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Pirandello, because of the wide use of metalanguage in the work, and the inquiry into the origins of personality and human identity.

Often these types of non-linear web narrative projects are considered as games, in my opinion erroneously. More and more you find television fiction, films and literature made by overturning the order of events and expanding the references in which the story takes place - resulting in a tangled skein to reassemble in various ways. But not for these reasons should they be considered games.

Also we should look more closely at the so-called "participatory" nature of these cross-media forms that are being created, in which the audience actively creates new characters and pieces of stories. I consider this more of a sociological than a playful phenomenon, manifesting a sort of super identification, or even a complete penetration of the Society of the Spectacle in the human existence.

**CC: *The Big Plot* has helped to define the genre of Recombinant Fiction. What is this?**

PC: More than creating a new genre, I have tried to define a form of art that combines literature, cinema and theatre through the use of interconnected digital media and popular platforms.

Recombinant Fiction is based on the theories of media convergence (1), the culture of participation (2) and the use of reality as narrative (3).

(1) The story is told through media that are scattered and multiform, however they are used organically to allow the fragments of the narrative to converge. Media here are, in a broad sense, all the valuable tools to broadcast messages on a large scale, which are reproduced digitally, and we can define this set as an abstract network-structure. For example, an article or an ad in a newspaper is a media in the same way as a billboard - both can be used in a convergent way as narrative tools, and given their digital origin, they are in the same network-structure. Of course, this set of media also includes the character's profiles on social networks. Even an event in public space can become a media with narrative functions, and because of organisation happening via the internet and sms texts, it is in the whole recombinant network-structure of the media used for the narration. Digital networked media created a totality that goes beyond a single media, inside which the story is acted and evolves.

(2) Public participation is active and dramaturgically led by the main characters of the story. The audiences of the fictions not only reassemble fragments of the story in the scattered and multiform media around them, but further, they use the potential of their Personal Media to converge their electronic identity, real or specially created, forming parts of the main narration and mixing them into the recombinant network of the narrative. Examples include the comments wrote by the audience via mobile phones on a blog post of a character in the story.

(3) Reality is used as a narrative, transporting entity and identity from the real level to the narrative one and later, tangible effects of the narrative are brought back into reality. There are several ways to achieve this process, all facilitated by the contemporary simulation of reality; thinking of all aspects of reality as influenced and abused by mass-media. Humans have always used stories to perceive the reality, but it has never been like in our civilisation. In fact, the current state of advanced semio-capitalism is totally based on fabrication of the reality recursively. With the Recombinant Fiction, the show can be controlled via a new narrative, which can guide the effects on the real world. However Recombinant Fiction does not conform to practices like Situationism, Hoax, Fake, Troll, etc., because the show is regularly officially declared as a narration, so that audiences, out of the catharsis of the show, are consciously aware of attending and participating in a real spectacle. Moreover, Recombinant Fiction is meant to stage a proper drama of conflicts, reversals and resolutions through the use of monologues and dialogues between characters that have a proper engaging personality.

**CC: You got inspired from the Recombinant theater of the Critical Art Ensemble. What is your relationship with them and what is the theoretical basis of this work?**

PC: I'm merely a fan of the CAE, I never had the honor to work with them. In their brief text on Recombinant Theater I found prophetic insights into new forms of contemporary entertainment. Recently there has formed a large academic community discussing the definition of Cross-Media fiction, Alternative Reality Games, Transmedia, etc. However, it was the CAE in the early nineties, whose vision, displayed in their concept of a Performative Matrix, set the stage for the organic and recombinant use of electronic identity and real space. This new stage and mask became essential for contemporary performers. Moreover, their theory was focused on political theater and the urgent need to infiltrate the structures of power with performances capable of subverting existing orders by simulating their mechanisms.

**CC: While your story seems to celebrate the power of social networks, it also reveals their fragility. The Big Plot seems to be a real example of how the network can be penetrated and tampered with. Does The Big Plot also want to highlight dangers?**

PC: They are dangers however no one cares about, and by being accepted in society as structural they tend not to be perceived as a problem. I speak about the controversial issues of online privacy: right now we are in an era of total deregulation, irresponsibility and abuse of social networks for publishing anything. It is certainly a fad but one that could fundamentally influence the future of many people. An interesting text on this topic is *The Future of Reputation* by D. Solovieva. People are not generally aware of the consequences that would result if Facebook decided to make public all of its five hundred million profiles. Perhaps for many things would not change much, but many others would lose careers, endanger social relations and more. For this reason private services are becoming more popular (e.g: reputationdefender.com) because of the need to protect and clean up reputations online.

The Big Plot explores this issue deeply, ambitiously trying to educate about the dangers. But the forces in the media that record parts of our lives without our control are numerous and powerful, and include Google, Wikipedia and articles published on anonymous websites. On the other side, however, social network are an important weapon in the hands of anyone wanting to expose and inform about responsibility and reveal the dark sides of individuals and entities.

**CC: Has web 2.0 brought fluid and spontaneous expression, or something more like an alternative style?**

PC: Expression on the web can take different forms and characteristics; just think of the formal rules implicit in the various platforms of social networks. For example on LinkedIn the writing is hardly spontaneous, and not everyone uses Twitter to relate their everyday life - some use it to provide information on specific topics. However, we can assume that in general the language on social networks is informal, very self-reflective and personal, almost making the literal autobiographical diary the official genre. I believe that this feature is a great opportunity for an author. The use of the voice narrating in first person in the media greatly amplifies empathetic and emotional effects. I often use the example of the subjective in cinema

to elucidate this concept; with reference to social networks and the publication of amateur material on the internet, it is as if we put a third eye, located in our Personal Media, into the hands of character of a story, thus putting the audience in the most intimate and personal point of view possible.

**CC: As people jump around from one point of the story to another, a sense of amazement is generated as they realize that the characters are indexed in the first few pages of Google's search engine. Does this step imbue the project with a quality of realism more than other steps?**

PC: Google becomes the blender that amalgamates the two levels of reality and fiction. To be able to manipulate the result of a Google search in order to vary the perception of the meaning of the subjects of story at will was the main aim of the project. To give practical examples, in the searches on Google, the so-called nationalist Eurasian party reshapes its existence from real to fiction and vice versa by meshing real and fictional data in the Google reality. This also applies to the mysterious Russian spy, and to the other two identities.

And it is not just Google, but the whole Internet that becomes a network of signifiers. We may apply structural characteristics of a network to semiotic and social contexts, then research in these structures as a neural system. Interactions and variation of flows over a set of nodes in a general network can affect the entire functionality of a system; in this case they are functions of narrative interpretation and signification, which means functions concerning the construction of reality.

**CC: Does The Big Plot, as a literary expression, only exist in the network? Can it ever get out of the Internet?**

PC: Many actions of The Big Plot have occurred outside the Internet. In fact, two performances have taken place and hundreds of flyers and posters relating to the political movements of the story have been spread in Berlin, London and many other cities. The relationship between the literature and the theatre was integral to the drama, because rather than promoting the show, they were parts of it. In fact, many have begun to follow the story from a poster on the wall found in their neighborhood or from a flyer distributed by the hand of a character in the story.

**CC: Is the theme of the dissolution of identity, which we participate in every day by scattering pieces of our life online through social networks, central to your work?**

PC: Central no. Simply it is our contemporary world, and as an artist is my duty to use mode of expression of our time, analyze and un-dramatise them.

**CC: Can The Big Plot in this sense be considered a neorealist work?**

PC: Pure neo-realism. When I started the project (2008) it was only the beginning of what is now a mass phenomenon - the contemporary use of platforms such as Facebook to vent compulsively personal political and sentimental frustration and hopes. This is evident among people around us and we read about it daily in newspapers around the world. Social and political campaigns are born and die in social networks, and are mixed up with the private and intimate thoughts of millions people.