Uncertain Meanings:
Voice-Off, Subtitles and Postmodern Allegories in my Recent Works

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Abstract

This thesis is about my recent works and some questions intimately related to them, with particular attention to my thesis project; the single channel video, *I usually live abroad.* This work plays with voice-over in order to discuss its traditional authoritative and absolute meaning. Further, the work reveals the impossibility of establishing an organic unity of meaning, proliferating the possible interpretation of the fragments that constitute the work. I will use the concept of "postmodern allegory" as defined by Jeremy Tambling to interpret my recent works that refer to the historic breakdown of ideologies whose fixed values and meanings seem incapable of interpreting contemporary reality.

How can voice-over be used beyond the realms of authority and objectivity that are usually associated with this component of cinematic language? Instead of considering voice-over as belonging to a separate space from that of the images, I propose that it creates an interstitial space for a negotiation between the spoken text and the images. What is at stake for me is not the authority of the voice-over but its possibility to question objectivity through a subjective point of view able to provoke individual reactions among viewers.

A second concern is what the potentialities are of the relationship between images and subtitles? The dominant use of subtitles is translation. I propose that there are other more creative uses of texts juxtaposed with images. Subtitles are for example a way to express unspoken thoughts or a possibility to subvert the centrality of the image in movies and videos, they can also create a dialogue instead of a translation in their relationship with the voice.

This thesis also refers to a conception of allegory, developed by Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man, that is essential in exploring the deceptive nature of the language I use and the meanings I can communicate with it. I am specifically considering postmodern allegories as something distant from traditional allegories. Allegory is a device to express, through the use of fragments, a world in which it is impossible to establish any definitive

meaning. Differently than a metaphor, an allegory doesn't state that A=B and it doesn't

establish a consecutive pattern in which we associate something specific with one other

specific thing, but often it creates a successive pattern open to several interpretations

that fracture instead of unifying any further meaning. My recent works aim to feed this

pattern.

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Introduction

"*Phenomena within postmodern reality cannot be interpreted statically; they require a thinking which is relational, and which rereads one text, or one feature of a text, in the light of another, shifting the interpretive value to be given to each part accordingly*" (Tambling136).

My practice is focused mainly on videography and non-linear narrative structures and I combine visual, sound and text elements in order to construct new environments that disrupt their narrative origins and this creates space for an encounter between the viewer and a personal, sometimes surreal, association of fragments from everyday life. An interpretive approach that doesn't establish a stable and absolute meaning but explores a complex and uncertain reality is present throughout my recent works. Like sewing together snippets of various fabrics, recombining fragments can yield a totally new final product. For me, this represents a way to re-elaborate personal and collective experiences, redefining their values.

My working method is informed by experimental documentary and cinema and my videos follow along the trajectory of essay-movies, structuralist cinema and experimental filmmaking. Authors such as Chris Marker, Peter Rose, Peter Liechti, and James Benning are significant references for my recent works, specifically in terms of the experimental use of long sequence shots, voice-off[1],and subtitles. I will discuss specific works and their relationship to my practice throughout this thesis.

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[1] I will consider the term voice-off instead of voice-over in order to evoke a more subjective use of voices that don't belong to what is visible within the frame, beyond the omniscience and objectivity traditionally associated with voice-over. Beginning in 1982, Michel Chion established a theory of voice-over as the voice of authority and power, this defined the traditional use of voice-over in movies and documentaries. Among the authors who, in the last 30 years, have discussed Chion's position, I will consider Laura Rascaroli's critique of traditional voice-over which is connected to an intimate and subjective use of voices

I employ these cinematic techniques (voice-over, subtitles, long sequence shots) in my recent works to challenge the concept of authenticity that is associated with most broadcast documentary and movies. Voice-over is traditionally associated with an omniscient narrator who, from outside of the frame, delivers readymade truth that the viewer has to use to interpret the images. Subtitles are conventionally presented as a reliable translation of what is said by the voice of an actor or voice-off. Long sequence shots are conventionally associated with the representation of a continuous reality. In my works, voice-off, subtitles, and long sequence shots are used to question the possibility of an omniscient narrator through the use of multiple voices; the reliability of translation through the use of an ironic juxtaposition between voice and subtitles that goes beyond translation. My intention is to express a fragmented reality based on disruption instead of an organic and continuous reality. Within the scope of this practice I address political and philosophical questions as they pertain to both individual and collective issues:[2] each of my works explore interstitial spaces where apparently nothing is happening but where residues of experiences are deposited. In these liminal spaces memories are re-edited and re-signified without following any original order or meaning.

By focusing on cinematic devices such as voice-off and subtitles, I will analyze some structural components that are recurrent in my works and the reasons that bring me to explore these cinematic tropes. In my practice, what is at stake is not a documentation of real facts or a linear narration that communicates through a cohesive chain of events. It doesn't matter if it involves "reality" or fiction; I am more interested in

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that, instead of defining a univocal meaning, they express the uncertainty and complexity of the individual in contemporary society.

[2] The influences of education, the excess of information, and the European economic crisis are some of the topics that concern my most recent works.

considering how different languages, and specific communicative devices, try to

represent something that seems impossible for any language: a clear and stable

meaning[3]. My works also refer to the deceptive nature of languages themselves, which in

their manifest incapability to signify things once-and-for-all, contain devices that can be

used to recreate deceptive and forceful ideological "Truth". Translation is a good

example of an interpretive mode that displays how each historical language reveals the

impossibility to define a meaning once-and-for-all, instead of a never-ending shifting of it.

Each new translation represents the failure of a language to define stable connections

within its tropes and, at the same time, the possibility of any language to create new

uncertain associations of meanings and values. Following this perspective, translation

and traveling share a common ground: the ability to shift meanings that seem solidified.

Until I was 30 years old, I didn't travel at all since I didn't feel a real urgency to discuss

my system of values and routines. Learning how to live with a chronic disease pushed me

to step outside of my former lifestyle, and since then I have been almost exclusively

traveling in order to challenge my capability to adapt and to learn new strategies for

surviving. Though it was extremely repressive to accept that I couldn't keep old habits, it

has been revitalizing to transform them during different journeys and experiences. From

this perspective, my works express a metaphysical failure (the absence of a reliable

system of values that can be ideologically founded as "Truth") and concretely discover

how language can be used to change meanings and values, instead of defining

certainties or rules.

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[3] These considerations are grounded by Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man's writings on languages, allegory and translation. Specifically, Banjamin's "The Task of the Translator" and *The Origin of the Greek Tragic Drama*, and Paul de Man's '*Conclusions*'*: Walter Benjamin*'s '*The Task of the Translator.*

For example, one characterizing structural element that I often use in my videos is the long sequence shot. Since the beginning of the history of moving images, long sequence shots by the Lumiere brothers and Thomas Edison formulate a baseline for the representation of the "real". The first short movies by the Lumiere brothers were simply long sequence shots that were meant to communicate the illusion of reality to the viewer. In long sequence shots an absence of editing cuts simulates the temporal continuum that is commonly experienced as reality[4]. It is a cinematic device that traditionally extends the illusion of a never-ending present and a stable, subjective presence. In many of my works, the fragments from different time periods and sources complicate the conventional meaning of the long sequence shot, transforming it into an allegorical device that is related to an idea of history that is not based on progression and coherence. What is at stake for me in this is a possibility to evoke, through a device apparently based on continuity and linearity, fragmentation and contradictions.

Often I work collaboratively to realize my works. Working collaboratively is a further way to play with the multiplication of viewpoints of any given image, idea, or sound. In this way, the final work is the result of several negotiations and discussions regarding the different individualities at work. As the works usually have a very subjective approach, working in collaboration is a way to violate, starting from the very conception of a work, the idea of a fixed monolithic identity. Each collaboration happens organically and is based on its own logic, suited to the project. In some cases we each specialize (on shooting the images or creating the audio for example) and in other cases the entire effort is created together. Regardless, the conception of the work itself is the result of

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[4] For further reading on the long sequence shot and its capacity to represent an illusionary never-ending present, see MacDonald, "Putting all your Eggs", 240-254; and Pasolini 3-6.

constant discussion and consideration of the work as it progresses from idea to finished product.

Joining collaborative projects is a way to alter my personal subjectivity, through a process of negotiation with my different collaborators, that doesn't discuss further the concept of authorship, but aims to feed a process that combines different fragments from different sources. Charles Green, an art critic and historian, suggests "artistic collaboration is a special and obvious case of the manipulation of the figure of the artist, for at the very least collaboration involves a deliberately chosen alteration of artistic identity from individual to composite subjectivity" (Green IX). My way of collaborating doesn't regard the idea of working in a collective or a group of artists, and I usually change my collaborators through time. Long term and constant collaborations derive an artistic identity that is too fixed for my way of working. In the same way, the identity of a group, instead of those of the individuals constituting that group, would recreate that kind of "strong" and univocal perspective that I try to escape when I join collaborative projects.

An example of the way I try to collaborate with other artists and technicians can be found in Philippe Parreno. Since the 1990s he has been collaborating with many artists (Douglas Gordon, Maurizio Cattelan, Liam Gillin, Carsten Holler, Pierre Huyghe, etc.), some of whom don't usually collaborate. Parreno works collaboratively and individually and, especially considering the very variable nature of his collaborators, it's interesting to notice common aspects and ideas on both sides of these artists production. In his text *Postproduction*, theorist Nicholas Bourriaud states that Parreno's way of collaborating is usually expressed by the formula "Parreno & [collaborator]" (74).

This doesn't translate on the web, where you will (of course) see the artists listed in either order, sometimes with Parreno's name listed first, sometimes last. In my collaborative efforts, the artists involved are listed alphabetically, which is a small detail that expresses the significance of equality. There is no hierarchy in the final work, we are each given equal weight – not only in these fine details, but in the process of creation as well. Within a collaborative attempt, if only one person's individuality is being expressed, the project fails, which is why there can be a lot of false starts in the process along the way to developing new ideas with new people.

Collaboration, appropriation (using different fragments belonging to different sources and time spaces), and translation (mainly through subtitles) are devices that are recurrent throughout my recent works. I use them to subjectively explore a reality that can't be defined once-and-for-all. My works are neither for nor against meaning, rather they mean to provide a way to frame experiences in a more subjective and interrogative way.

These concerns, and the ways I address them in my works, are mirrored in the writing of this thesis. Each chapter addresses and explores movies, documentaries, experimental videos, contemporary art works, books, articles, and sound pieces that have influenced specific aspects of my research and recent works, as well as the way in which my work relates back to them. Ideas are developed through the combination of these fragments and elements that change their original meaning, becoming part of a further process of signification. Focusing on cinematic devices like voice-off, subtitles, and translation, I also express my current interest in languages that is very related to my condition as an immigrant in Canada.

1.   The Foreignness of Meaning: *I Usually Live Abroad*

Perhaps the most prominent and unifying aspect of my methodology can be understood in relation to the concept of allegory as expressed by Walter Benjamin. My works contain an allegorical instance that is essential in exploring the deceptive nature of the language I use and the meaning I can communicate with it. When I discuss my work in terms of allegories, I am specifically considering postmodern allegories[5] as something distant from traditional allegories. My video *I usually live abroad* is different than a traditional allegory in that it doesn't state a definite meaning that replaces the original meaning of the fragments I use, but it combines allegorically its elements in order to proliferate possible interpretations regarding them. Differently than in a traditional allegory, my work isn't a systematic interpretation of the crisis in Europe[6], but a way to connect the present situation with the past and to raise questions about it. The traditional political fragmentation among European countries is projecting its conflicts into the ongoing economic crisis. The absence of an effective and sharable political identity dramatically shows the contradiction of a community of countries based on economic interests: the euro appears to be the symptom of an ongoing disease originated by the fact that instead of supporting each other in facing the crisis, each European country seems to be focused exclusively on its own interests. In *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (1928) Benjamin states that allegory is a device to express, through the use of the fragment, a world in which it is impossible to establish any definitive meaning. Differently than a metaphor, an allegory doesn't state that A=B and it doesn't establish a

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[5] As defined by Jeremy Tambling in *Allegory (The New Critical Idiom)* (2004).
[6] Among other things, this determined my decision to come to Canada. In general, last year Italy produced the second most emigrants in the European Community. The crisis in Europe is a common ground that joins together personal, and collective contradictions regarding my country of origin.

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consecutive pattern in which we associate something specific with one other specific

thing, but often it creates a successive pattern open to several interpretations that

fracture instead of unifying any further meaning[7]. As Benjamin states, "[in allegories] one

and the same object can just as easily signify a virtue as a vice, and therefore more or

less anything" (Benjamin, "Tragic Drama" 174). My works function in a similar manner to

Benjamin's conception of allegories: they can continuously shift the meaning of the

original fragments through a process of combination that reveals the essential instability

of what we can signify through languages, and the failure for any language to reach an

organic unity.

Differently than a symbol that establishes an idealized vision of nature perfectly

joining different elements together, for Benjamin, allegory plays with changing identities

and values. Its essential medium is melancholy, a contemplative state in which we

consider the world, and ourselves, connected with the fatal contradiction represented by

death and the instability of time. Allegories reveal ''uncertain truths'' that deal with the

absence of an absolute "Truth". In this way, Benjamin reveals the inconsistency not only

of language and metaphysics founded on illusionary "Truth", but even that of any political

system that is ideologically founded. My formative years were in a time space in which

political ideologies were still influential; at the same time it was clear that these

ideologies were going to collapse and be incapable of contending with postmodern

reality. The breakdown of the Berlin Wall in 1989 has been, for my generation, the

seminal passage of change from the world of the previous generation (dominated by the

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[7] The classical approach to allegory defined by Christian writers like Saint Paul limited the potential propagation of meaning connected to allegory to a defined interpretation of the Old Testament whose literal meaning had to be interpreted as a figure of the New Testament. In Benjamin's approach allegory is not contained by any ideology and it doesn't establish any stable meaning.

conflict between communism and capitalism) to the contemporary world. I remember the enthusiastic reaction of my grandfather (who was a fascist during the Second World War) since with the breakdown of the Berlin Wall a new world dominated by only one ideology (capitalism) seemed to begin. For him, it was clear that finally there was only a winner and, differently than in the situation that produced the Cold War, a system of values with a global reach was beginning without the need for further wars. His optimistic, post-fascist perspective was clearly not effective in representing all the contradictions to come. Benjamin's perspective is a way for me to explore a postmodern reality in which never-the-less ideologies are still present, but seem totally incapable of explaining our fragmented reality. Languages, like historical events, face this metaphysical void and produce fragments that can't be unified but only reused and reinterpreted. Any stable meaning is just an illusion that exists in order to be interpreted and changed. For Benjamin, allegory can be evoked by a constellation of stars through which sailors interpret its unstable unity and changeable truth-values (Benjamin, *Tragic Drama* 34-6). My intention is to combine fragments belonging to different contexts in order to use them to create a new constellation that requalifies their original meanings. Like constellations and allegories, my works ask for active engagement from the viewer; they are not random cut-ups and are not finished without further layers of interpretation. Their literal meaning can be considered like a surface that hides further layers underneath.

In terms of its literal approach, *I usually live abroad* is a short, single channel video, whose imagery is a long sequence shot of fireworks exploding throughout the streets of a city. The point of view is from a high place, looking over the city, through

some tree branches that are occasionally made visible by the light of the fireworks. Identifying text appears in the screen indicating: *Naples, Italy. New Years Eve, 2012*. This text disappears and two further lines of text appear: *Not everything goes as you wish / to me it is worth it*. Shortly after, a voice-off[8] is heard with apparently corresponding subtitles. The subtitles tell a story[9] of Italian soldiers in the trenches during World War II being given orders by a German commander. Rather than doing as they are told ("*Soldiers, attack!*"), they interpret the voice in an aesthetic manner, one of them eventually responding to the commander: "*What a beautiful voice*". The German voice-off is provided by an Italian immigrant, and what she says is apparently nonsense: fragmented speech, rather than a dialogue, that eventually becomes singing. The words she says evoke the state of the current economy or are slang derogatory terms for Italians. At first, it is plausible that the subtitles are a direct translation of the voice-off, but as the story unfolds, the voice-off becomes more obviously separate from the subtitles, culminating in the voice singing a song (also from World War II) and laughing out of sync with the text.

Toward the end of the video, the refrain of an instrumental version of a famous pop song, Madonna's "Borderline" (1984), begins to play. As the music plays, karaoke style subtitles appear in the frame, with a pink highlight leading the viewer through the lyrics along with the music. The screen goes black and a low frequency hum (that was playing intermittently throughout the entire video, below the sounds of exploding fireworks, the German voice-off, and the pop song) is the final sound that ends the video.

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[8] Off camera or off-stage commentary that is similar to a voice-over (I will explain the nuances between the two further in Chapter 2).
[9] Originally written by Mladen Dolar.

I usually live abroad is like an enigmatic combination of fragments, belonging to different time periods that react with the long sequence shot of the fireworks in Naples[10]. A first step towards thinking of the allegorical content of the video is by considering the imagery of the video. Initially, the viewer sees the city and the fireworks – a time of celebration – but the point of view is situated far from the action. This distance invites the viewer to reconsider the fireworks as an image of happiness at the same time as it evokes the kind of melancholic drive that Benjamin connects with allegory.

This concept is also crucial to the work: melancholy is a state of inaction and alienation in which the subject contemplates the transient and contradictory nature of our experiences and the possibility of their disappearance. Under the influence of melancholy, objects can shift their conventional meaning and become allegories for the subject and they can reveal the void that threatens any presence in time. The indication that these fireworks are for New Years' heightens the sense of time passage and impermanence, and the impossibility to define a resolute meaning. Fireworks themselves can be allegorically thought of as a kind of melancholic device. They are subject to (very literal) fragmentation; they are blinking hypnotic lights that recall the impermanence of any presence. The light is there for only a moment and as it is fading, there are still other lights, from other fireworks, in a different moment in the process of fading.

Differently than a symbol, fireworks in *I usually live abroad* don't define a specific meaning regarding the context I explore in the video. Like allegories in the realm of thoughts, or ruins (following Benjamin's interpretation) in the realm of things, they doubt the possibility of thinking about historical events as something whose meaning can't be

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[10] The current situation represented by the images of the fireworks from last New Years Eve, World War II evoked by a song and a story from the war, and a pop song from the 1980s.

considered as stable and absolute but only partial and always ready to become

something else.

Last year in Naples, the citizens spent 40 million euros on fireworks for about a

one-hour New Years' fireworks display. It's a spontaneous and popular tradition, and

when they are exploding, it seems as though the fireworks could last forever. Obviously,

this is just a melancholic illusion. The following week, the city busses stopped running

(as the city ran out of money to pay for the gas). The long sequence shot of 2012 New

Years' fireworks in Naples evokes an image of happiness and celebration that relates to

one the biggest crises (both economical and political) of Italy's (relatively short) history

(founded in 1861) and the distance from the action is a symptom of the desire to

interpret what is going on instead of joining it. After the Romans, the country has always

been culturally fragmented. One way to consider this is thinking about the number of

dialects (in some cases completely different languages) still in use throughout Italy.

In this way, the sound of the fireworks and the peculiar perspective in the video

(looking through the branches) are a starting point to shift the original celebratory

meaning of the images into something that prefigures and contains fragments of war and

alienation. As the subtitles begin to tell the story of the soldiers in World War II, the

images read as both the celebratory gesture they were initially presented as, but also

begin to feel like a war zone, further expressed by the sound of the fireworks, the

constant explosions[11], near and far. Representing something like a war through images of

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[11] The fireworks audio was accentuated in the editing process.

fireworks is a way to impart a sense of irony which Paul de Man[12] considers another

essential state that, like melancholy, relates to allegory.

Fig. 1 Pennuti, Paolo. *I usually live abroad*. 2013. Video still.

Irony for de Man creates an interruption in the regular flow of the tropes that

constitute the language. The illusionary well-connected chain of tropes within a linear

narration is discussed by irony, which reveals the contradictions and disruptions among

the fragments that constitute it. Irony, similar to allegory, is a way to say something in

order to mean something else, creating a contradiction, an interruption in the well-

connected chain of statements of an apparently persuasive discourse.

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[12] A deconstuctionist literary critic and theorist, in the 1960s, de Man was one of the first literary theorists in the AngloAmerican world to reflect on Benjamin's theories with a special interest in the concepts of allegory and translation (Tambling 111).

In the case of irony, the meanings, other than the initial literal one, often contain meanings that are opposite from the "original" intention, and this creates a comical effect based on the association of contradictory meanings. Following this perspective, the images of the fireworks transmit an initial sense of happiness, supported by the subtitles that evoke a day of celebration. But then, the story of war, the voice-off, and the sounds of the explosions shift the tonal atmosphere of the video. Once the refrain of the pop song begins, the apparent meaning of the images shifts again. As the music plays and the karaoke subtitles enter the screen, the fireworks become a kind of pop backdrop. Like an image from a post card or advertisement, the work is no longer only about war or celebration, but also about excess and globalization.

The tonal atmosphere of *I usually live abroad* changes three times, producing variable interpretations of the same footage used. The possible meanings of the fireworks footage create an alternative kind of Kuleshov effect, an experiment, developed by a Russian filmmaker (Lev Kuleshov) in the 1920s. Kuleshov shows how the same close-up of an actor can produce a very different association from the viewer, depending on what it is edited next to in a sequence. I am interested in this experiment because it plays with the deceptive possibilities of editing or simply with the possibility to create very different meanings using a different approach to editing. The way I consider this effect in relation to my work involves, not only the editing of the images, but also the relationship between subtitles, voice-off, and images. The long sequence shot of the fireworks replaces the close up of the Russian actor, Ivan Mosjoukine, in the famous Kuleshov experiment from the '20s. The long sequence shot remains constant, differently than the text and audio, which present three very different ways of using subtitles. Like the close-up of the

Russian actor, the long sequence shot shifts its possible meanings in relationship with the different texts and audio that are edited with it.

The first part of the video uses subtitles to convey a personal thought, like a note in a diary or a post in a blog. The second, a joke about Italian soldiers, plays alongside a voice-off with a completely different meaning that reacts with it. Lastly, there are the karaoke subtitles of a popular 1980s American pop song. Each time, the images of the fireworks have a different potential meaning and can express specific emotions in the relationship with the different texts-voices. Initially they frame an apparently personal and intimate moment introduced by the subtitles. When the voice-off begins, the images evoke World War II in an ironic way through the interplay between the voice-off and the subtitles. In the last part of the video, the images become like a melancholic pop-backdrop, and they celebrate a period, the 1980s, in which the American dream was the main ideology and Italians couldn't imagine the current economic and political situation that has now come.

In *I usually live abroad*, these three parts are connected together and they address something about Italy and the crisis in Europe at the moment, as the structural and aesthetical components of the video create an atmosphere of uncertainty and foreign references so as to express the point of view of an immigrant. The subtitles that are present in the three parts of the video are a device that in itself refers to the foreignness that I try to represent in the video, in that "Subtitles are the marks of difference, the written words that visibly render the voice of another language and in such a way as to render the original foreign from the very start" (Balfour 532). A foreign atmosphere is the main link between the three parts of *I usually live abroad*, and I

deliberately decided not to use Italian - in a work that is focused on Italy - in order to evoke the identity crises of this originally fragmented country during this time of globalization. Italy's political credibility and economic independence is weak and increasingly influenced by the European Union, especially Germany. The piece also considers how Europe, even more than Italy, is historically characterized by an essential fragmentation and disparity that contradicts what the European community should represent as a whole. More than a defined identity regarding very different countries, the European Community seems to me an allegorical concept that expresses the lack of an organic unity. The ironic contradictions of the current economic crisis shows how fragile and weak the political union among the European countries is. In discussing an allegorical interpretation of *I usually live abroad* (that followed the production of the work itself) it is important to state that it is not the only one possible, and my works are deliberately open to misinterpretation since they don't state a definite meaning but rather evoke the absence of a univocal one.

The structure of *I usually live abroad* reflects this lack of organic unity of the political context I am representing. Instead of consistency, the images, the voice-off, and the texts introduce displaced fragments belonging to different time periods in which the country faces deep identity crises: World War II and Italian immigration after it, the colonization by American culture from the 1980s, and the present (2013)[13]. This idea of history behind *I usually live abroad* also relates to Benjamin's allegory. Literary theorist

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[13] World War II is addressed by the story of the soldiers, immigration after the war is present in the voice-off and the slang it uses, the proliferation of American culture, globally, is present in the karaoke subtitles and pop music, and the current moment is present in the images and text in the beginning of the video.

Jeremy Tambling, who writes extensively on Benjamin's conception of allegory, suggests the following regarding allegory as it relates to history:

> Piles of wreckage, or debris, recall the fragments and ruins that comprise baroque allegory. Perceiving history as a 'chain of events' unifies them and threatens to produce an ideal narrative; it resembles the thinking which produces the symbol, seeing history as telling a narratable story. History as a 'single catastrophe' repeated again and again refuses the idea of progress, and leaves nothing but fragments. (Tambling 103)

Interpreting Benjamin's idea of allegory, Tambling evokes his concept of history that excludes any progress and consequentiality while including contradiction and ruins. The structure of *I usually live abroad* reflects Benjamin's concept of history considered as something that continuously transforms the original meanings of the historical events without a clear goal to accomplish. The way I recombine historical sources in my videos is generally also connected to Benjamin's concept of history, that is, as a non-linear stratification of fragments. Some fragments are lost in the process while others are reused, and shifted into new contexts.

1.1 *Beyond Appropriation: Postproduction and Profanation of Cultural Forms*

In *I usually live abroad* different kind of fragments from different sources, like an old Italian joke from World War II, Madonna's 1980's power-pop ballad "Borderline" or the 2012 new years eve fireworks in Naples, are appropriated and recombined to express something about the ongoing economic and political crisis in Italy. Changing the original background of the fragments that I use, reframing their values and potential

meanings, is a recursive aspect of my practice that relates to my generational

background characterized by DJ (and remix) culture.

Contemporary theorist and curator Nicholas Bourriaud's essay *Postproduction*

considers the way artists today (starting massively from the 1990s) recombine

preexisting elements of culture – everything from any kind of images, artworks, or books

to social forms (i.e., working on Sunday, playing a game, etc.). "The museum like the city

itself constitutes a catalogue of forms, postures, and images for artists - collective

equipment that everyone is in a position to use, not in order to be subjected to their

authority, but as tools to probe the contemporary world" (9).

Considering my practice, which is mainly based on an experimental approach to

documentary and cinema, my 'appropriation' begins with the footage I shoot – nothing is

staged, rather I capture what is happening around me without an intent of documenting

reality but generating new connections among its fragments. In this thesis, I consider

how cinematic tropes like voice-off, subtitles, and long sequence shots can be used in a

way to undermine their traditional values in mainstream cinema and television. Similar to

postproduction artists, my use of cultural forms doesn't refer only to the reinterpretation

of previous works or places, but they explore alternative uses of the cinematic tropes I

employ. In *I usually live abroad,* I used subtitles beyond their traditional role of a reliable

translation, voice-off beyond its authoritative and clarifying role, and the format of the

Kuleshov effect to interrupt the sense of continuity that is traditionally associated with the

long sequence shot. In this way, I appropriate the form of voice-off and subtitles just as

much as I am appropriating the joke and pop song - combining all of these elements

through editing. Bourriaud suggests:

What we usually call reality is a montage. But is the one we live in the only

possible one? From the same material (the everyday), we can produce different

versions of reality. Contemporary art thus presents itself as an alternative editing

table that shakes up social forms, reorganizes them, and inserts them into original

scenarios. The artist deprograms in order to reprogram suggesting that there are

other possible uses for the techniques and tools at our disposal. (Bourriaud 72)

Bourriaud distinguishes the difference between appropriation and postproduction

in terms of the inference of authorship – appropriation implies a clear view of the sources

origin, while postproduction moves "toward a culture of the use of forms, a culture of

constant activity of signs based on a collective idea: sharing" (9). Following this

perspective, I think that my use of appropriation corresponds more to how Bourriaud

defines the use of cultural forms present in postproduction practices than from a concept

of authorship. I am interested in the use value of fragments, how they can be adjusted

and transformed, far more than being faithful to their original meanings or ownership. For

Bourriaud contemporary art can have an essential value:

Art puts us in the presence of counter images, forms that question social forms. In

the face of the economic abstraction that makes daily life unreal or an absolute

weapon of techno-market power, artists reactivate forms by inhabiting them,

pirating private property and copyrights, brands and products, museum-bound

forms and signatures. If the downloading of forms (these samplings and remakes)

represents important concerns today, it is because these forms urge us to

consider global culture as a toolbox, an open narrative space rather than a

univocal narrative and a product line. Instead of prostrating ourselves before

works of the past, we can use them. (Bourriaud 93-94)

There is some resonance between these ideas related to the role of postproduction

artists in our society and those of the philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his text

Profanations (2005). In this essay, Agamben explores the concept of profanation which

is the removal of something from a separate (sacred) space in which its use is

inaccessible and returning it to a space of free use (73) not through neglect, but rather

through a new activity that transforms its value (76).

He gives the example of a cat playing with a ball of yarn as though it were a

mouse – the action recreates the predatory activity but does this as a game that shifts its

original purpose. The predatory act is opened up to new possible uses by its very

deactivation. "The game with the yarn liberates the mouse from being prey and the

predatory activity from being necessarily directed toward the capture and death of a

mouse. And yet, this play stages the very same behaviors that define hunting" (Agamben

86). The behavior of hunting is freed from its original purpose, even though the actions

themselves are identical whether in the original (hunting) or its emancipated form (playing

with yarn for example). This dismissal of the obligatory relationship of the means to an

end is what creates further potential from the action – opening it up to new uses

(Agamben 86). Agamben suggests:

"The activity that results from this thus becomes a pure means, that is, a praxis

that, while firmly maintaining its nature as a means, is emancipated from its

relationship to an end; it has joyously forgotten its goal and can now show itself

as such, as a means without an end. The creation of a new use is possible only by

deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative." (86)

This is the space where Agamben's profanation and Bourriaud's postproduction meet –

in the recognition that there is mass potential in the emancipation of forms, objects, and

ideas in combating the limiting constraints of the power structures inherent in daily life,

using cultural products as tools to reinvent new uses of them. Both theories rely on the

power of reconfiguring what already is, opening up new possible uses and realities; a

clear reference, especially for Bourriaud, is Duchamp's readymade.

Differently than for Agamben, Bouirraud's brand of reuse carries with it the

implication of intention or goal – the emancipation of forms through art comes with a goal

or intention attached, even if the goal is simply that of sharing art and new possibilities of

editing different fragments from realities. Profanation offers the opposite, inhabiting a

form without a goal is a way to emancipate that form. Play is a significant tool in

profaning an object, in play there is no clear goal or task at hand: "children, who play with

whatever old thing falls into their hands, make toys out of things that also belong to the

spheres of economics, war, law, and other activities that we are used to thinking of as

serious. All of a sudden, a car, a firearm, or a legal contract becomes a toy" (76). Even if

there are potential differences between Agamben's pure means and Bourriaud's

postproduction artists' counter images that question social forms, both the child (or the

cat) in Agamben, and the artist (for Bourriaud) seem able to reactivate a positive

approach to a reality whose forms can be reinvented through a playful approach.

I usually live abroad plays with Madonna's pop song in form and context. I use

the song, relying on its cultural baggage, to infuse in my video considerations about the

promise of the American dream from the 1980s and its relationship to the current

economic and political crisis in Europe. At the same time, the title and the lyrics of the

song can be ironically associated with the condition of thousands of Italians who are

working or looking for jobs abroad.[14] The original context of the song is intentionally

shifted into a different system of references that feed new possible meanings through the

editing of different fragments with the background of the fireworks.

1.2   *Structural Devices and Cinematic Tropes*

Among the artists that Bourriaud discusses in *Postproduction*, I was especially

interested in Philippe Parreno whose work starts from considering reality as structured

like a language, or a movie set that can be explored differently than mainstream television

and cinema. For "Parreno, the artwork represents the site of a negotiation between reality

and fiction, narrative and commentary" (Bourriaud 47). Bourriaud suggests that, in

Parreno's practice "it is often the commentary that produces forms rather than the

reverse: a scenario is dismantled so that a new one can be constructed" (74-75). In his

work in collaboration with Douglas Gordon, *Zidane: A 21ˢᵗ Century Portrait* (2006), the

scenario that is being dismantled is that of a soccer game star, and most of all, the

traditional representation in real time of an important soccer match[15].

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[14] In Europe, Italy has the second highest rate of emmigrants from 2012. In the past three years, more than one million jobs for workers under 35 years old have been lost. Italy has the worst unemployment rate in the European community after only Greece.

[15] The artists followed the legendary soccer player Zinédine Zidane through the duration of a soccer match. Seventeen cameras were situated around the stadium, following the players every move, from close up detail shots to long shots. The point of view shifts quickly and drastically, zooming from way up in the stands to inches from Zidane's face or shoe, and so on. What each shot has in common is that Zidane is at its centre, regardless of where the ball, or action of the game, is.

In the act of filming a sports match in a way that ignores the purpose of the match itself and rather focuses on not only one player, but the biggest celebrity player, Parreno and Gordon offer the viewer a way to think about the structure of a sports match in terms of its spectacular nature as well as its fetish and market functions. The sustained and intense focus on Zidane parallels the athlete's own intense focus on the soccer ball, and creates a portrait of the player that is unlike conventional portraits: there are no talking heads, no structured interviews or introductory pieces of information. The field of Parreno and Gordon's *Zidane*, like the fireworks in *I usually live abroad*, evokes a different way to think about the space of play. The structure of my video, characterized by the use of the long sequence shot, consists in three different parts that contrast with the idea of continuity usually associated with the long sequence shot. At the same time, the images of the fireworks shot from a panoramic point of view don't recall joy or celebration, but contain fragments evoking a condition of crisis that is like suspended in a dreamlike state. Watching *Zidane* is a different experience than viewing other televised or recorded soccer matches. Likewise, the fireworks in my video offer a singular experience of a public firework presentation. Where Gordon and Parreno focus so closely as to fragment the centre, I start with fragments at the core of the work, and develop them in such a way as to proliferate possible meanings and interpretations producing a non-linear combination of them.

In *Zidane*, almost all of the fragments that constitute the final editing follow the chronological development of the soccer match, but the way they are shot and edited, the peculiar use of subtitles in the first-person, the way sounds are selected and amplified in order to evoke a subjective perception of the event, alter the way we

perceive the development of the match that becomes the subjective, fragmented,

absorption of the main character, similar to a dreamlike condition in which it is not

possible to establish a linear order and in which a sense of totality fragments into pieces.

Consider these quotes by Zidane that are shown as subtitles in the film: "You don't

necessarily remember a match as an experience in 'real time". "My memories of matches

are fragmented".

For me, one of the most interesting aspects of this work is the representation of a

soccer match, with all of its strict rules, constraints, and conventions, in a completely

subjective manner. Their particular use of subtitles and audio goes beyond expressing a

straightforward meaning. They employ the structural devices in such a way as to put a

tension on the regular use of audio and subtitles, using them to evoke a very subjective

point of view – the opposite of documenting a fact in real time. The thoughts that appear

in the subtitles aren't strictly related to what is happening during the game, just as the

audio is fragmented evoking a suspended and dreamlike condition – neither the linear

sound of the commentator of a soccer match or a progression of thoughts that leads to a

clear point. The images that reveal the soccer match also constrict the viewer from

seeing most of the plays in the game. The match and the protagonist are fractured

together through the structural elements and the ways they are used.

For similar reasons I am interested in the work of Stan Douglas, especially his film

installation *Klatsassin* (2006), and the connections I see between it and my work.

Douglas commonly takes fragments and cinematic tropes as his starting point and,

through medium, structure, and installation, expresses a non-linear approach to narration.

In *Klatsassin*, he presents numerous versions of a single event to at once fracture and tell

the story of the incidents that started the Chilcotin War. It is the structure of the final

work that sets it apart. His film is made up of scenes that loop in random combinations;

each scene contains a character giving the viewer his version of the story. These are

combined ultimately showing the viewpoint of every character in every possible

combination with each other. In making *Klatsassin*, Douglas appropriates not only the

story of Klatsassin[16] but also the multi-perspective narrative structure of the film

Rashomon (1950), which he pushes to the furthest degree possible.

Rather than following a linear approach, *Klatsassin's* story is told through the

looping combinations of each characters recollections and perspectives. Like *I usually

live abroad,* the events are presented in a way that accentuates subjective viewpoints

stimulating different interpretations. In my video this is done through the tension placed

on translation, through the subtitles and audio becoming more obviously separate from

each other as the video progresses and the images of the fireworks which shift in tone

and association throughout the work. This lack of cohesion invites the viewer to fill, with

his or her own interpretation, the disruption that the narration of the video contains.

Douglas doesn't offer any final resolution or clear idea of what really happened,

the range of perspectives, contrasting with each other in content and form, create the

impossibility of a clear story and instead leave the viewer with an unstable idea of what

might have happened. The work remains about a historic story, using the structure of a

cult movie, but also, through the way he emphasizes structure, becomes about the flaws

inherent in time and memory, and the confines of traditional narrative film. Likewise, *I

usually live abroad* uses cinematic tropes which normally convey truth and objectivity in

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[16] Klatsassin was a Tsilhqot'in chief, the war was between his tribe and settlers.

such a subjective way as to convey both the limits in the way these tropes, specifically

subtitles and voice-off, are traditionally used, and also offers an alternate way to evoke a

historical and political context.

2. Voice-Off – Beyond Authority and Objectivity: *Paolino*, and *I Usually Live Abroad*

"Voice-over" or "voice-off[17]" (off-camera or off-stage commentary) is the use of a

voice whose source is not visible within the frame. These two expressions are often used

interchangeably; however, I define a subtle difference between them in order to discuss

the traditional use of this cinematic device. Voice-over can be associated with what is

traditionally considered the voice of truth or authority whose source is in a transcendent

space outside the frame. Alternatively, I would like to consider the voice-off as something

not necessarily linked with any authoritative power but simply coming from outside the

frame, and without a predefined position. How can the relationship between voice-off

and images be addressed with regard to the realms of authority and objectivity? How

can voice-off be used in order to express fragmented identities?

I will consider my recent works *Paolino*[18] and *I usually live abroad,* in terms of

their subjective use of voice-off, in order to explore ideas of objectivity and authority and

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[17] This is not to be confused with off screen voice, which is a voice that, even if it doesn't belong to an element visible within the frame, it still belongs to the same space evoked by the elements within the frame. Differently, voice-off is a voice that comes from a space that is qualitatively different from the one evoked by the frame.

[18] *Paolino* exists in two versions as a sound piece: an English version with two English pupils who each read the fable in English (as a performance in a gallery space) and an Italian audio version in which each of the students belonging to a grade 6 class read a fragment of the fable. *Paolino* also exists as an artist book (8-12 year old Italian students transcribed manually an English translation of the fable). I decided to create multiple versions and fragment the possible meanings of the work to express an idea of subjectivity that, instead of representing a defined "whole," produce a proliferation of identities. Paolino is not only the

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to fragment the concept of a monolithic, singular identity. Voice-off evokes what is hidden and not immediately present in the images without trying to describe or reveal it (as compared to the voice-over). It opens up a dynamic dialogue among the inner components of the image (sound and vision) that can produce unexpected and ironic meanings instead of defining a singular one.

My recent works *Paolino* and *I usually live abroad* use voices in order to play a game with the viewer based on uncertainty and interpretation, in which off-frame voices evoke not the omniscient "voice of God" but the intimate and immanent conditions of subjects within the works who are experiencing transformations that effect their provisional identities. The voice-off in *I usually live abroad* refers to the condition of an Italian immigrant; *Paolino*, the child in Carlo Michelstaedter's fable, is rejecting adulthood and the educational process. Both works focus on identities that, for different reasons, are under a process of transformation.

Voice-over is conventionally associated with an invisible character or narrator who is separated from what is going on in the images and who has a dominant and objective point of view on what is truth and correct in the narration (i.e., the voice of God or the voice of the omniscient narrator). By contrast, voice-off can be fragmented in multiple voices and characters and it doesn't necessarily belong to a transcendent space. Instead of a single transcendent voice coming from an ideal space, I am interested in immanent multiple voices that evoke, from outside of the frame, fragmented identities rather than objective narrators. When discussing my recent works, I prefer to use the term voice-off

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individual character of the Michelstaedter fable, but becomes a collective character that refers to a certain way of experiencing the educational process.

in order to clarify this more subjective perspective that is splintered and unstable, a term

that will be further defined in the next section of this chapter.

2.1 *Beyond the Definition of Voice-Over as the Voice of Authority and Objectivity*

In a famous scene from the film *The Great Dictator* (1940), Adenoid Hynkel

(Charlie Chaplin) gives a speech in a style that clearly evokes Hitler and Nazism, but his

language is a nonexistent language that only sounds like German. We can't understand

what he is saying even though his aggressive voice and his body language are clear

clues as to his violent political message. But the traditional voice-over of an English

translator apparently provides the senseless voice of the dictator with a meaning in a

kind of simultaneous translation. After a while, the viewer can't avoid considering that the

translation is not only wrong, but definitely in contrast with the self-explanatory meaning

of the dictator's performance. The translation of the speech should be considered

reliable following a classic cinematic approach, but Chaplin uses this device in a

completely different way. In *A Voice and Nothing More*, philosopher Mladen Dolar writes:

> The paradox of the scene is that we have two versions, the dictator's speech and
>
> its translation, but we don't understand the one, yet nevertheless know that the
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> other is false. Still we know perfectly well what is going on: the very discrepancy
>
> between the two versions provides the exact clue: it is in the mirroring of the two
>
> versions that the object dictator appears. (115)

Chaplin creates a short-circuit, a faulty connection between the speech of the dictator

and the voice-over of the translator in order that the viewer is stimulated by evidence to

consider the voice-over of the translator - which is usually true and reliable in a movie - as

something surprisingly false. The viewer is invited to become active: one has to refuse the authority and objectivity usually associated with voice-over. The viewer is asked to doubt what he or she is listening to in order to create alternative connections between the voice-off of the translator and Chaplin's voice. The disruption between them generates new meanings with the active collaboration of the viewer. The traditional voice-over becomes an absurd voice-off which evokes, for an active viewer, a different meaning than the one expressed by the translating voice.

Similarly, in the work *I usually live abroad,* the German voice-off, whose meaning is incongruent with the English subtitles, plays an ironic game with them. For example, while the subtitles are telling a story of soldiers in the trenches during the Second World War, they say "Soldiers, attack!". The voice-off sings some lines from a famous song (by Marlene Dietrich) belonging to the same time period "Europa…Europa…lalalala". In other moments of the video, the German voice-off (which belongs to an Italian immigrant) uses German slang denigrating Italian immigrants. In contrast, the English subtitles narrate a story of some Italian soldiers who disobeyed a German commander during the Second World War. The combination between voice-off and subtitles produces an ironic effect regarding the different ways of "being Italian".

Using an ironic relationship between the voice-off and the subtitles, *I usually live abroad* recalls *The Great Dictator*'s speech and its use of mis-translation. My video invites the viewer to consider something like a fracture or a conflict expressed through the use of cinematic tropes that instead of a faithful translation evokes the actual European situation in which Germany is pressuring Italy about its financial issues. The misconnection between voice-off and subtitles is a way to consider conflicts within the

European Community whose identity is experiencing a deep crisis. At the same time, the

relationship between what is said by the voice-off and what is written in the subtitles

transforms the meanings of the original sources and is integral to the allegorical intent of

the video. For a viewer who doesn't speak German, what remains clear is a disruption

between the voice-off and the subtitles. He or she can also understand that the topic is

about Europe since the voice-off repeats "Europa" a number of times.

2.2   *Acousmatic Voices*

In *The Testament of Doctor Mabuse* (1933), Fritz Lang challenged, in a different

way, a similar prejudice related to voice-over as the voice of authority and power. In

Lang's movie, the evil master, Mabuse, is a terrifying voice hidden behind a screen.

Towards the end of the movie it is revealed that this powerful voice is generated by a

mere gramophone hidden behind a door. Lang inverted the concept of voice-over as a

voice of power, authority, and objectivity to turn it into something completely different,

simply a gimmick. The voice of power finally shows itself and its artificial nature: it is just

a mechanical voice.

Mabuse's voice in the movie can be considered as an example of acousmatic

sound. Sound theorist Michel Chion's analysis of voice-over is based on the term

"acousmatic," which he revived from composer and writer Pierre Schaeffer's writing

Traitè des Objects Musicaux (1966). The etymology of the word "acousmatic" dates

back to ancient Greek times when uninitiated disciples of Pythagoras were forced to

spend five years in silence listening to their Master speaking behind a curtain "so that the

sight of the speaker wouldn't distract [the students] from the message. This interdiction

against looking, which transforms the Master, God or Spirit into an acousmatic voice permeates a great number of religious traditions" (Chion 19). Acousmatic sounds today are the basis of our mode of listening through things like phones, computers, and radio.

Beginning in 1982, Chion established a theory of voice-over as the voice of authority and power; his theory, based on the concept of acousmatic sound, can be considered the traditional conceptualization of voice-over in cinema language. I challenge this approach to voice-over in *Paolino* which contains acousmatic voices who read a fable about rejecting authority or power, instead of perpetrating them. The hidden voices of the children, instead of revealing truths, remind the viewer of similar educational experiences. In the fable *Paolino*, written in 1906 by the Italian philosopher Carlo Michelstaedter, the main character is a child whom we witness growing up. The adults are teaching Paolino how to behave like a man but he begins to question their system of rules and their contradictions. The performative version of the work (conceived in collaboration with Elisa Ferrari), involved the presence of two children (ages 10 and 14) reading a fable in the Concourse Gallery at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. The children were physically outside of the gallery in the boardroom located above the entrance of the exhibition space. Through the window, they were only partially visible to the viewers but their faces remained hidden while their voices were amplified and audible inside the gallery.

Paolino reinterprets the habit of the Pythagorean sect, who used to hide the Master behind a curtain; moreover it plays with the authoritative value that is traditionally associated with acousmatic sounds and voice-over. In our work, there is no hidden Master whose acousmatic voice can reveal truths but instead we ask the viewer to listen

to the fragility of the voice-off of the children as a way to cast doubts on institutional

truths. *Paolino* reminds the viewers of that special moment in childhood when we deeply

understand that what we are learning contains contradictions, and that the education we

are receiving can lead us far from our intimate desires. The children reading the fable are

hidden but the viewers are aware of their presence because of the sound of their voices

in the exhibition space. The sound moves from the outside of the exhibition space, to the

inside, evoking a kind of negative space – outside the frame of the exhibition. Similar to

The Testament of Dr. Mabuse, the spectator becomes conscious that the acousmatic

voice being listened to doesn't belong to any transcendent and omniscient entity.

Differently than in Lang's movie the acousmatic trick is not related only to a mechanical

device, but to an educational process based not on criticality, but on a system of stable

and fixed inviolable rules.

     We are interested in the inner contradiction that constitutes this work: on one

hand it is the attempt to perform a fable critical of education, on the other hand, it enacts

an educational process (the children were trained to perform the fable and the exhibition

space belongs to an art school). The performance invites the audience to reflect upon

contradictions of the education process and its effects on those who are subjected to it.

2.3   *Voice-off as a Way to Express Subjective Views*

     Cinema theorist Laura Rascaroli's maintains that the voice-off[19] can reflect a

personal, individual, point of view in non-fictional movies and film essays. Instead of

considering the extra-diegetic voice as belonging to a separate space from the images,

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[19] Rascaroli uses the term voice-over without differentiating it from voice-off; I will use voice-off and voice-over following the differentiation that I offered at the beginning of this paper.

Rascaroli proposes that the voice-off creates an interstitial space for a negotiation between the spoken text and the viewers (*Personal Camera* 49). Instead of a separation between the viewer and the voice-over that is supposed to reveal "the truth" to the viewer (like the voice of a master to a disciple) voice-off introduces a dynamic relationship between the unstable meaning of the spoken subject and the possible interpretations of the viewers. Rascaroli invites the audience to reflect on subjective values – "dramatic norms of performance, technical norms of recording and grain of the voice" (Rascaroli, *Personal Camera* 49) – rather than on the cognitive possibilities, which had been at the center of cinematic debate in the 1970s and 1980s. Through the use of multiple voices in *Paolino,* the subjective qualities of the voice-off are multiplied[20] as the viewer deals with the identity of a singular character who speaks through different voices. Especially in the audio (Italian) version of *Paolino* the voice-off uses 27 student voices that read Michelstaedter's fable and each of the students read a fragment of the fable. The voices were then edited together to tell the full story. The identity of the protagonist is fragmented like the snippets of the fable. Each of the students is a possible Paolino and the fable becomes a collective, sonic portrait of the class. The use of multiple voices alludes to a collective character that expresses the experience of being under an educational process. The aesthetic singularity of each voice multiplies the possible perspectives on the ways in which we undergo education.

One of my intentions in this work is to question the monolithic and objective use of voice-over, both in fictional and non-fictional movies, by using 27 voices with different

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[20] Different qualities such as the grain of a voice, intonation, and pronunciation evoke different emotional tones which interweave together and are evoked by each voice (ie. frightened or detached, energetic or bored, calm or panicked).

aesthetic qualities (grain, tone etc.). I was interested in the sonic nuances of the voices

of the students as a symptom of their subjective approaches to the same experience.

Rascaroli suggests the voice-off here can be used to convey a subjective identity,

complicated by the aesthetic differences of each voice. Using multiple voice offs I tried to

feed a possible association between the viewer's educational experiences and the one in

the fable. Michelstaedter's narration is fragmented by multiple voices, transforming

Paolino into a collective experience played by the students. Being under an educational

process can't be interpreted and defined once-and-for-all as it is connected to very

subjective factors. Paolino is extreme in his rejection of the educational process and for

me it was interesting, through the reading of the students, to evoke the different

viewpoints of those who accept this process.

2.4   "Che Bella Voce!": the Voice as an Aesthetic Object

In his essay *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006), Mladen Dolar interprets the

following story to focus attention on a specific potentiality of the voice that is related to

its aesthetic value:

> There is a story which goes like this: In the middle of a battle, there is a company
> of Italian soldiers in the trenches, and an Italian commander who issues the
> command "Soldiers, attack!" But nothing happens, nobody moves. So the
> commander gets angry and shouts louder: "Soldiers, attack!" At which point there
> is a response, a tiny voice rising from the trenches, saying appreciatively '*Che
> bella voce!*' "What a beautiful voice!"[21] (Dolar 3)

In this amusing tale, the aesthetic pleasure represented by the voice of the General

becomes a way for the soldiers to subvert the orders of the General. The answer of the

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[21] This is the same story that appears in the subtitles of *I usually live abroad*, while the German voice-off is
playing.

soldier produces a short circuit between the voice of the General and its literal meaning. The aesthetic value of the voice of the General allows the soldiers to focus on the sound of the voice and suspend their judgment about the meaning of the order. This example in which a voice which is supposed to represent authority is of interest as a starting point, but it is more so where the voice of a general turns into something completely different, an aesthetic subjective sound, a mere voice. Instead of a coherent and stable meaning, a voice as a sonic object is something that requires interpretation beyond the apparent significance of what it is saying. For *Paolino,* and *I usually live abroad* I looked for voices considered first of all as sounds. My intention was to recreate an aesthetic relationship with the viewers without suggesting a predetermined meaning.

In this way, voice-off offers the viewer further subjective perspectives that are not necessarily explained by the images or other elements of my videos. It creates a dynamic dialogue within the components of the video itself without communicating a defined meaning. In my works, I use voice-off as a way to foster the possible translations of the work, rather than reinforce the more traditional authoritative use of voice-off. This traditional conception of voice-off is contradicted through a number methods that ask the viewer to become actively critical: revealing voice-off that is incongruent with its translation (as in *I usually live abroad*); using acousmatic sound to cast doubt on institutional certainties (as in the performative version of *Paolino*) and using multiple voice-offs to express the same experience and in so doing emphasizing the way aesthetic qualities of a voice (and its treatment) effect the viewer's reception (as in the audio version of *Paolino*). *Paolino,* and *I usually live abroad* are an attempt to explore unstable and uncertain conditions and to open up an interstitial space between the

voice-off and the personal experiences of the viewer. They express fragmented identities and contradictory points of view using voice-off beyond the boundaries of authority and truth, in an open dialogue with an active listener.

3.   SUBTITLES – The Task of the Translator: *I Usually Live Abroad* and

** *7 Billion***

In my work, the question as to how can subtitles be used beyond the realm of a "faithful" translation is a central one, as they are one of the most promising cinematic devices with which to explore the fragmentation of meanings, times, and spaces in our contemporary society in the way we currently share information. Subtitles started with the introduction of the "talkies" in the early thirties. At that time, subtitles were a phenomenon that concerned only the movies, but after World War II, they became common on television programs as well. The first essay about subtitling appeared only in 1957[22] and still after forty years, only a small number of papers had been published on the subject (McMahon 33). In the last fifteen years the situation has changed, but even if "there has been a boom in academic translation studies programs worldwide" (McMahon 33), scholars seem still almost exclusively focused on subtitles as a form of translation, and I haven't found any clear reference for an alternative approach to subtitling. This consideration of subtitles as only translation is unable to explain, for example, the use of subtitles in television and news programs that go beyond the limits of the translation to add layers of information that are not contained by any other element in the frame.

The traditional role of subtitles as a form of translation expresses a rigid and strict

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[22] See Simon Lak, *Le Sous-titrage de films: Sa technique, son esthétique.*

connection between the meanings of what is said by the voices and their subsequent

translation. The syncing between the voice-off and the subtitles invites the viewer to

accept the subtitles as a faithful translation, without further questioning their associations

and connections. Some of my recent works such as *I usually live abroad* and *7 Billion*

open up the limits of this relationship using subtitles as not necessarily a translation of

what is said by the voice-off. In this way I use subtitles and voice-off to question the

unreliable idea of a faithful translation and to produce, instead of a translation, multiple

associations that the viewer can recombine in his or her own way. Asking the viewer to

doubt the translation in these experimental works also casts doubt on the more

traditional works using subtitles as a kind of "true" interpretation.

3.1   *Subtitles as Aesthetic Objects that Can Subvert their Traditional Role as a Form of Translation*

My interest in subtitles runs concurrently with my interest in voice off. Subtitles,

like voice off, can deal with the negative space of the frame, something that can be

associated and that reacts with the images, but is not contained by them. I would like to

consider, as I did with voice off, subtitles first of all as aesthetic objects; a device that

belongs to the language of video and film images. Instead of the meaning that they can

communicate, in this section I will concentrate on their "physical" presence inside the

frame.

In the final minutes of the experimental video *Secondary Currents* (1982) by Peter Rose,

there are parts in which the subtitles become more than words, they are no longer

expressing textual meaning, but become simply images constituted by letters that don't

refer to intelligible words. It is interesting to note that in the last seconds of the frames,

letters disembodied from words flicker by as though they are the end of the film reel; it is

like the final agony of a language that tries to express something without being able to
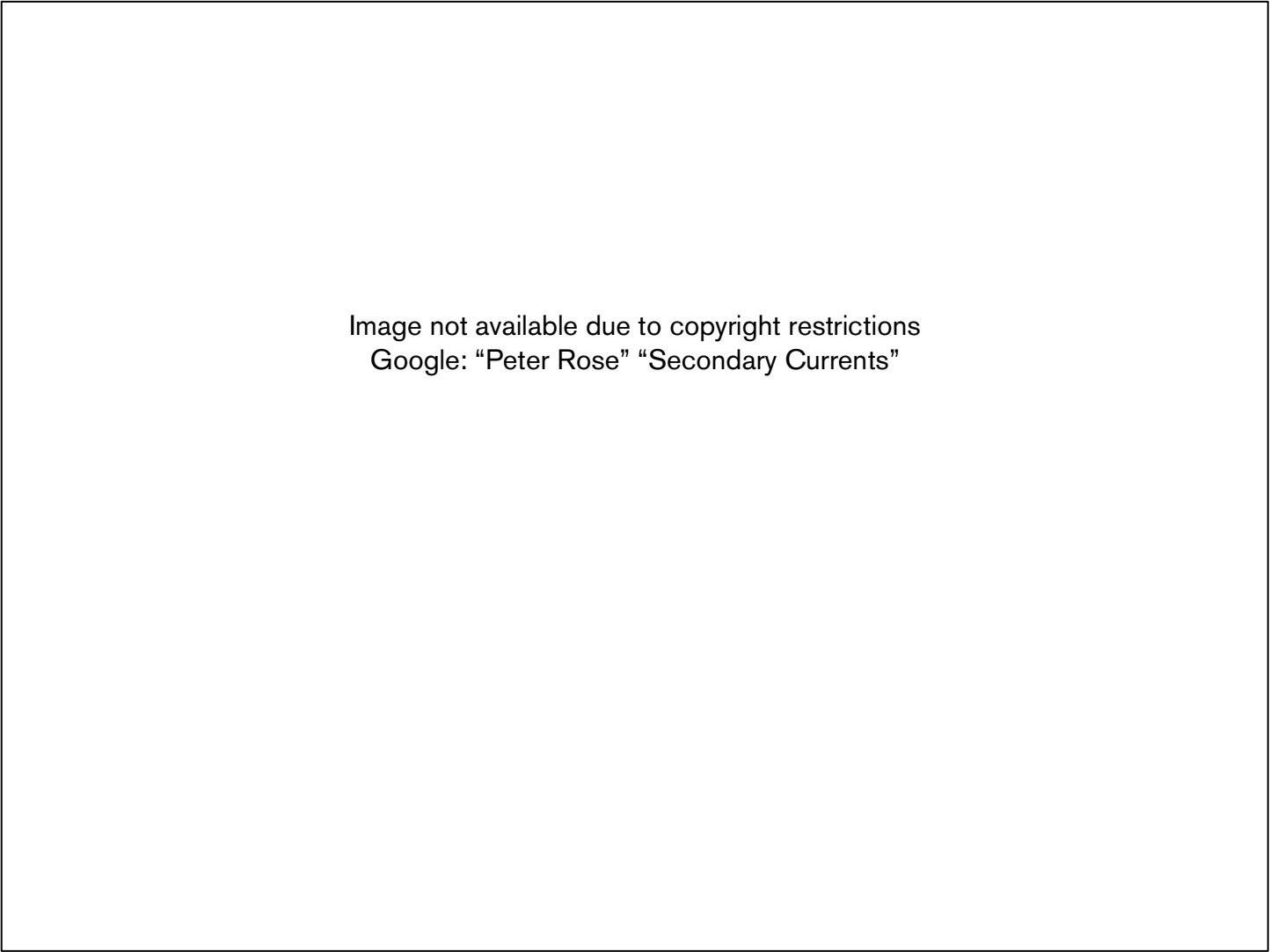
properly do it.

Image not available due to copyright restrictions
Google: "Peter Rose" "Secondary Currents"

Fig. 2 Rose, Peter. *Secondary Currents*. 1982. Video still

What is left before the silence are just linguistic signs without a specific meaning.

In this experimental movie, the subtitles also become images, with the exception of the

end in which there are the real letters of the reel. In both cases, the presence of the text

evokes something beyond the literal meaning, something that alludes to the disruption between the signifier and the signified, so that the viewer has to look at them as mysterious words that have to be interpreted.

In *Secondary Currents*, the text becomes an aesthetic object, no longer representing any defined meaning and I have found Rose's piece very influential for its unconventional use of voice off and subtitles as aesthetic objects. Some of my recent works have built on this kind of approach, but rather than exploring only voice-off and subtitles as aesthetic objects, they use this to explore a situation (the economic crisis in Europe) whose meaning can't be defined once-and-for-all. For instance, the karaoke subtitles of *I usually live abroad* also become aesthetic objects within the frame, rather than simply text transmitting a specific linguistic meaning. The coloured karaoke-style subtitles, associated with the long sequence shot of the fireworks in Naples, aesthetically transform the image into a moving postcard. My intention here is to evoke a period, the 1980s ("Borderline" is not by chance a song from the 1980s) in which wealth, unlike now, seemed like a possibility for many Italian people. The postcard style image is an ironic way to recall the past in order to express something about the current situation and the presence of the subtitles is also a way to invite the viewer to interpret it. As colourful, physical objects the karaoke subtitles alter the geometry, composition, and emotional tone of the images.

The karaoke-style subtitles not only transform the images of fireworks into a kind of 1980s pop postcard, but they attempt to stimulate a performing act from the viewer, as karaoke subtitles usually do. They function similarly to a musical score or, more in

Just try to understand

Fig. 3 Pennuti, Paolo. *I usually live abroad*. 2013. Video still

general, a relational device, which can produce different versions from the same strings

of texts, regardless of the meaning they express. This device is used in the work so that

each viewer can engage in a singular experience with the video and so will have the song

in their mind and sing along in a different way, recalling personal experiences related to

the song. The relationship between the images and the karaoke subtitles is mediated by

the individual reactions of the viewers "performing" the song. These possible versions of

the karaoke "performance" in *I usually live abroad*, refer to the fragmented identity of the

whole video using some structural components of cinematic language instead of a linear

narration or a description of facts. Nevertheless, my goal is not to involve the viewers in a

relational game; rather, I invite them to generate a critical approach to the regular use of

subtitles in movies and television through the use of subtitles that are only apparently

related to a translation. What is at stake is not a specific meaning to communicate (the

content of the song), but the possibility to use a structural component of the language (the karaoke subtitles) to question its regular use and the way it produces meaning.

This question of the production of meaning is an important concept to my work as a whole. In the following passage, Paul de Man analyzes the disruption between what Benjamin in *The Task of the Translator* calls "das Gemeinte," - to mean - and "Art des Meinens," - the way to mean - (de Man 40) stating how language influences the meaning we try to produce through it.

> [T]he problem is precisely that, whereas the meaning-function is certainly intentional, it is not a priori certain at all the mode of meaning, the way in which I mean, is intentional in any way. The way in which I can try to mean is dependent upon linguistic properties that are not only [not] made by me, because I depend on the language as it exists for the devices which I will be using, it is as such not made by us as historical beings, it is perhaps not even made by humans at all…if language is not necessarily human–if we obey the law, if we function within language, and purely in terms of language–there can be no intent; there may be an intent of meaning, but there is no intent in the purely formal way in which we will use language independently of the sense or the meaning (de Man 39).

In this passage, de Man considers how our possibility to mean something depends on languages that have properties and rules that are not created by us, but that deeply influence what we try to mean. Questioning the structural components of the languages that I use is a way to re-discuss the rules and the properties of them such that, even if they are not created by me, I can play beyond the conventional ways of using them. More than simply philosophical, I would define my approach as poetic, considering poetry as a

way to play with the language following a different perspective that is not first of all

conceptual, but aesthetic. De Man comments on Benjamin's example related to the fact

that to mean "bread" it is possible to use the German word *brot* or the French word *pain*.

In both cases, what we intend to mean is the same, but the way we are meaning using

different languages, can produce a "discrepancy between the intent to name bread and

the word bread itself, in its materiality, as a device of meaning" (de Man 40).

Following this perspective, translating itself reveals the limit of interchangability for

words belonging to different languages, showing the impossibility to fill the disruption

between the signifier and the signified. It seems that a "faithful" translation is possible

only for a completely passive interpreter since for Benjamin, any historic language misses

the possibility to define a stable meaning – a stable relationship between the signifier

and the signified – and the pure language – which would be able to fill the separation

between what we mean and the way in which we mean it – remains a utopia. The

absence of this pure language corresponds to a fragmentation and a proliferation of the

ways we intend meaning. This absence is also a symptom of the impossibility of all

languages to express something certain and objective (Benjamin, *The Task* 74).

> There it is a matter of showing that in cognition there could be no objectivity, not
>
> even a claim to it, if it dealt with images of reality; here it can be demonstrated
>
> that no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness
>
> to the original. For in its afterlife – which could not be called that if it were not a
>
> transformation and a renewal of something living – the original undergoes a
>
> change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process
>
> (Benjamin, *The Task* 73).

What is at stake for me in this passage is the fact that Benjamin bases translation, instead of on a kind of likeness to the original, on a difference. Translating activates a process of meaning that can't be fixed but is under a process of change. In this way, even words with a "fixed meaning" can be interpreted in a way that transforms the original significance.

The karaoke subtitles in *I usually live abroad* are synced with a cover (that is only an instrumental version) of the original song "Borderline" by Madonna. In this perspective, the viewers are requested to "perform" something that is already a translation. The process that I try to activate, quoting Madonna's song, relates to several interpretations of the original that reveals slippages in the original meaning of it. In the karaoke subtitles of *I usually live abroad*, for me what is relevant is highlighting the use of a cinematic device to produce a fragmentation of meaning that the regular use of subtitles in movies and television would fill with an apparently univocal translation.

3.2   *Running Subtitles as an Aesthetic Device and as a Symptom of our Current Way of Transmitting Meaning*

In my video *7 Billion* (2013) (in collaboration with Liz Knox), a frantic long sequence shot of a poppy field contains words that appear and disappear in the centre of the frame, producing the text of the video. The text relates to our limits to retain information and the current state of the over-abundance of information we are faced with each day. The text invites the viewer to accept these limits conserving the possibility to be focused on singular experiences, of fragments and details, accepting the impossibility to have an exhaustive understanding. The text says in full:

If you calculate how long it would take /To look at the faces of the people on earth /One by one /Second by second /You would need over 221 years /Too many faces for a single life /Regardless, who wastes time considering this? / Who knows how many people you have looked at? /How many seconds have you spent on this? /Now an ad is playing that asks /Can your dog smile?

Over fast-paced images of poppies in a field, this text also races by, appearing on the screen word-by-word (an average of 8 frames-per-word). The images look almost as though they are a stop-motion animation (due to the speed of the camera moving through the field, and the shutter setting). This aesthetic approach is paralleled by the content of the text, which suggests the impossibility of controlling the speed and quantity of information that surrounds us.
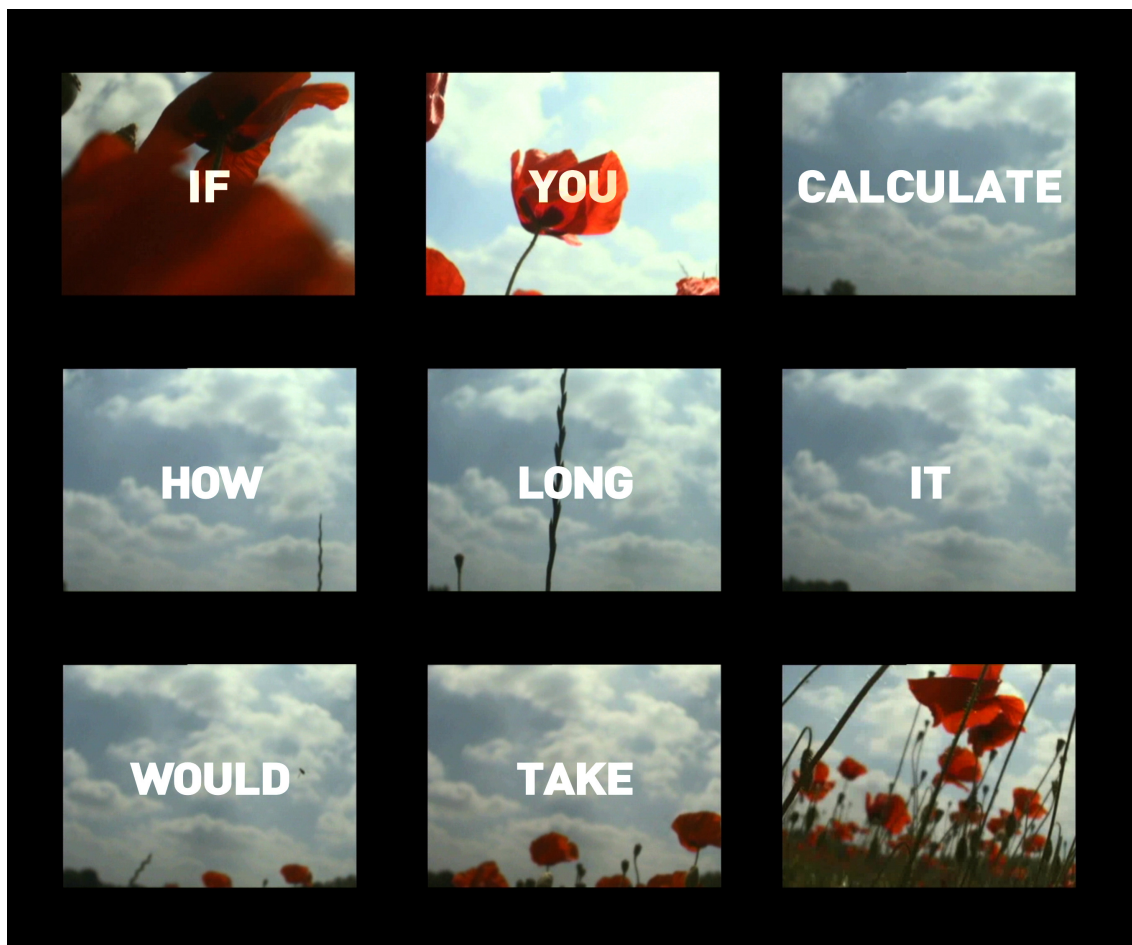

Fig 4 Knox, Liz and Paolo Pennuti. 7 Billion. 2013. Nine video stills.

The predominant role played traditionally by images in the composition of the frame is violated for several seconds during the video by the centrality and large size of the letters. Once again, I use the text not only as a device to communicate meaning, but as a material presence that alters the power relationship between the elements that constitute the totality of the frame. An aesthetic change in the way something is communicated is something that doesn't only concern the style of the communication, but is also a shifting of the meaning of what is communicated. In *7 Billion*, we initially used traditional subtitles in the bottom of the frame. They were not frantic at all, just regular subtitles that were like reporting personal notes. Using large letters in the centre of the frame, frenetically succeeding each other word-by-word, we were not only looking for an aesthetic change in the framing of the text, but for a general shifting from a more personal to a more collective atmosphere for the video. Big letters in the centre of the frame are reminiscent of the aesthetic of political propaganda that is often quoted in Jean-Luc Godard's movies[23]. In his 2004 essay "A New Line in the Geometry", Eric Cazdyn invites the reader to consider how the use of the running subtitles for television news, starting from the Gulf War, has changed the television's compositional aesthetic.

> The pornographic aesthetic is one in which the active content monopolizes the absolute centrality of the frame to the marginalization of everything else; the body that exists in the center of the frame – the talking head of the broadcaster, the implosion of the buildings, the copulating couple, the advertised product – pushes-out, crowds-out, snuffs-out significant elements of the shot…but the

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[23] Godard's movie *La Chinoise* (1967) is a good example. In this movie, texts with a very similar aesthetic are edited with the images. This was a reference we used in defining the visuals of *7 billion*, differently than Godard, the text is juxtaposed with the images and not separated.

running subtitle challenges the compositional fact of television; it returns the

relation to the equation – the relation between text and image, between the

margin of the frames and the centre, between the different speeds of information

delivery, and between multiple narrative lines. (405-6)

Cazdyn considers the development of subtitles as a "dominant mainstream distraction"

for North American television viewers, and a symptom of the fragmentation and

proliferation of news, in a society in which too much is usually happening at once and in

which the running subtitles[24] are an "aesthetic strategy" that provide running multiple

real-time updates that would be simply impossible to perform for a single reporter (404-

5). Similarly, what could not be grasped by only the meaning of the text in 7 *Billion* can

be experienced on an aesthetic level because of the style of the subtitles. This is a

recursive strategy in my practice, using structural components in order to evoke

meanings that are not clearly stated or represented by a narration or a documentation of

facts, but by a critical approach to the cinematic devices I employ.

For Cazdyn, the relationship between the slower pace of the news read by the

reporter and the faster speed of the running subtitles represents the current

contradiction in our society between the local and the global, the national and the

transnational, showing the excess of contradictory and fragmented information that we

collectively share (417). The alternative use of text associated with images on television

becomes, independent from the meaning of what the text has to communicate, an

allegorical way to evoke a contradictory and fragmented condition that is expressed

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[24] Cazdyn uses the term running subtitles with a very general meaning, including what could be better defined as "the crawl" or "the scroll" as in the case of CNN or news broadcasts.

through the use of subtitles first of all as aesthetic objects that subvert the composition

of the frame.

3.3   *Beyond a Faithful Translation*

Subtitles in movies, with very few exceptions, are totally devoted to translating the

verbal content of the movie but they are not conceived in order to have a critical

approach to translation, something that reveals the complexities of translating itself.

Especially when subtitles are well done, they are synced in such a way with the voices of

the actors that the viewer can feel, as little as possible, the disruption between the

languages involved and the slippages of meanings. How is it possible to create this

illusion of correspondence between the signifier (the voice in the movie) and the signified

(the subtitles)?

Since the beginning of subtitling in the 1930s (coinciding with the advent of the

"talkies") the spotter[25] is responsible for syncing the subtitles with the images and

dialogue in order to produce a perceptive connection and fill the natural disruption of

meaning among different languages. In *I usually live abroad*, I simulate translation

through spotting in order to activate questions about how meaning and truth are

conveyed through a traditional use of subtitles and voice-off. Playing with the disruption

between these two cinematic devices, my video refers to the current situation in Europe,

in which, more than an organic unity, there are conflicts and fragmented views. Although

the subtitles are temporarily synchronized with the fragments of the speech, as though

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[25] The spotter watches the film and decides exactly when each line of dialogue begins and ends, following
specific rules, based on the consumability of the movie. Independent of their meaning, subtitles cannot
exceed a certain number of characters and have to simulate a correspondence with the timing of the
dialogue.

they are a smooth spotting, from the beginning, someone who knows German can understand that the subtitles are not a real translation. For the other viewers, it is only possible to fully understand this after a while, but without any further doubt as the subtitles start to be out of sync with the voice and the illusion generated by the spotting fades.

In *I usually live abroad* I employ spotting to discuss this cinematic strategy as a way to produce an unreliable connection between what is said by the actors and what is written in the subtitles as an Italian immigrant living in Berlin provides the accented German voice off in this video. She speaks using German words and slang that are common derogatory terms for Italians. These words have been especially common starting from the 1970s, when, like now, there was consistent immigration from Italy to Germany. The words she uses are apparently nonsense; they are like fragments of speech or sudden thoughts. The voice-off and the subtitles are fragments from the past that ironically evoke the present situation in Europe and the conflicted relationship between a larger more powerful country (in this case Germany) and a country with less economic and political sway (Italy).

The full text (Fig. 6) should illustrate this, showing both the German voice off, its "correct" English translation, and the English subtitles:

1) Voice Off (German) - Ah mensch! Ah verdammt!

(English translation) Ah, man! Ah damn!

Subtitles - There is a story that goes like this

2) VO - Die katzelmacher! Die ganze Europa! Na ja, die ganze Europa!

The Katzelmacher![26] The whole Europe! Well, the whole Europe

SUB - There is a company of Italian soldiers in the trenches.

3) VO - Die katzelmacher… warscheinlich…

The Katzelmacher… probably

SUB - And there is an Italian commander who issues the command

4) VO - Die weltanschauung… warscheinlich…

The weltanschauung[27]… probably …

SUB - "Soldiers, attack!"

5) VO - Der spaghettifresser, die ganze Europa… mit dire…aufidersen. Kamrad ich komm so gleich

The spaghetti eater, the whole Europe … with you … goodbye. Comrade it's time to leave.

SUB - But nothing happens, nobody moves.

6) VO - Okonimisch? Okologisch? Warscheinlich…

Economy? Ecology? Probably…

SUB - So the commander gets angry and shouts even louder

7) VO - Europa…Europa…lalalala

SUB - "Soldiers, attack!"

Fig. 5 Gatelli, Catia and Paolo Pennuti. Script from I usually live abroad, 2013

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[26] Katzelmacher: a derogatory term for Italians ("kitten makers") evokes the growth of Italian immigrants.
[27] Meaning the philosophical vision of the world.

In relation to this effect, it is interesting to notice that one of the words in the title of Benjamin's essay about translation, "Aufgabe," is a German word that can express not only the concept of "task," but even the (almost opposite) concept of "defeat". Beginning with his title, Benjamin plays with the contradictory process of translation, and its essential failure to be a faithful reproduction of the original. Benjamin's essay theorizes an approach to translation that is exactly the opposite of the one perpetrated by subtitling in movies – in which the aesthetic illusion of spotting anaesthetizes any critical thoughts about the ongoing process of translation.

A similar experimental use of spotting can be seen in the film *Contempt*[28] (1963), by Jean-Luc Godard. In the movie, the character of the Italian translator sometimes translates anticipating the speech of the person she is translating for, or in any case, she translates in a way that exceeds the meaning of the original violating the basic rules of spotting and the illusion of a reliable translation. At a certain point, the character playing an American film producer complains that he was forced to sell his studios and that the new owner will build a five-and-ten-cent store in its place. The translator translates from English to French: "C'est la fin du cinéma" *it's the end of cinema*. This is an interesting example in which the translators own subjectivity is embedded in the process of translating. Differently than a literal translation, a subjective one doesn't aim to be a faithful reproduction of the original but rather adds something that transforms it. In my works, the way I recombine fragments that belong to real experiences is generally based not on objectivity, but on allegorical instances that shift the original meanings.

In his afterword for the text *Subtitles: The Foreignness of Film* (2004), Ian Balfour

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[28] *Contempt* is a movie about the production of a film version of the Odyssey and it is based on a novel by an Italian writer (*Il Disprezzo* by Alberto Moravia) that Godard decided to adapt for the screen.

considers *Contempt* and Godard's particular way of playing with the foreignness of translation in the film.

> Not a literal translation in any sense, it does nonetheless convey a version of the original while going well beyond it, to a resonant allegorical pronouncement on the precarious state of cinema itself. The films internal 'subtitles' precede the actual subtitles to come, raising all the problems of translation in advance of their inevitable re-staging in the circulation of the film as foreign…subtitles are the marks of difference, the written words that visibly render the voice of another language, and in such a way as to render the original foreign from the very start. The final word of *Contempt*: SILENZIO. (Balfour 532)

Beyond spotting, what I find important in *Contempt*, is that the movie, starting with its experimental use of subtitles, is all about translation and the disruption between the original and its interpretation. This is something that relates to my work, not only in its considering the relationship between voice-off and subtitles, but more in general, in the way I shift the original meanings of the fragments I combine in my work. What I express is the inevitable failure of establishing a definitive and univocal meaning, and the importance of joining an unstable relationship among fragments belonging to different contexts.

Not by chance, *Contempt* represents different failures[29] and it seems to reflect what Benjamin evokes in *The Task of the Translator*, with the image of the vessel:

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[29] Also not by chance, the movie is a love story, about a love that is falling apart through misunderstandings stemming from the impossibility to really communicate.

Fragments of a vessel, in order to be articulated together must follow one another in the smallest detail. So, instead of making itself similar to the meaning, to the Sinn [Sense] of the original, the translation must rather, lovingly and in detail, in its own language, form itself according to the manner of meaning (*Art des Meinens*) to make both recognizable as the broken parts of the greater language, just as fragments are the broken parts of the vessel (Benjamin [Jacobs trans.] qtd in de Man 43).

De Man, analyzing this passage, notes that institutional French and English translations betray an essential concept that Benjamin is trying to show: the impossibility that is contained in the original itself and that regards any further translation to reconstruct the whole vessel (43). Translations for Benjamin are fragments that cannot constitute a totality, as they cannot express a stable meaning. De Man notes how the concept of translation in Benjamin can be related to the one of allegory since they both reveal the impossibility for any historical language to define a stable meaning. Translation (Aufgabe) brings different kinds of failure in trying to interpret the original, revealing a fatal contradiction contained within the language: the impossibility to state any presence but only an essential void. Historical languages evoke something that remains outside of history and human capabilities: the absence of a pure language that can express the truth, a stable connection between what we intend to mean and the way we mean, between the original and its interpretation/translation.

De Man insists that translations for Benjamin are not metaphors that produce "a unifying pattern in which things become one by resemblance", rather they open up a successive pattern in which the relationship between the way in which we mean and

what we mean is necessarily unstable and produces a slippage of meaning each time

something is translated or interpreted (43). In my works such as *I usually live abroad*, I

use subtitles and voice off to play with a fake translation in order to connect fragments

belonging to different time-space. My intention is not to make these fragments into a

straightforward metaphor of the current crisis in Italy, but to proliferate an open pattern of

possible interpretations of it. For example, the images of the fireworks are not intended to

have a predefined and univocal meaning. They are images of celebration taken from a

detached point of view. They can be interpreted as a way to simply show a folkloric event

or they could be ironically interpreted as something connected with the economic crises.

They should also be seen as images of a city outside of the common parameters of

control. In this thesis, I interpret *I usually live abroad* through focusing my attention on

the economic crisis, but this is only one of the possible layers that regards those images.

The organic, apparently natural intent that founds mainstream cinema and documentary

uses subtitles and translation to state exactly the opposite – to represent the illusion of

meaning and totality. My works explore an opposite approach, which I have previously

defined as a neo-allegorical one that keeps contradictions, and the fragmentary nature of

meaning, at the forefront as a way to generate a different process of signification,

structurally based on the different cinematic devices I use.

Conclusion

In his historical review of the concept of allegory, Tambling states that "the main

difference between traditional allegory and "postmodern" allegory is that whereas the

first assumes a system of thought which may be extracted from the allegorical level of the

work, the latter does not; there may be scraps of meaning, but no assumption can be made of an underlying coherent meaning" (142). My works function as postmodern allegory does, differently than symbols they don't associate one original meaning with a new one, but rather reveal the impossibility of establishing an organic unity of meaning, proliferating the possible interpretation of the fragments I use. Following this perspective, my works refer to the historic breakdown of ideologies; their fixed values and meanings seem incapable of interpreting contemporary reality. At the same time, my intent is not to support relativity. What is at stake for me is not simply that it doesn't seem so easy anymore to establish truth, but that looking at the languages we use can be a way to explore individual possibilities to generate new (uncertain) meanings. Traditional allegories are ideological in that they use a system of fixed values to interpret one text in order to substitute its original meaning with a new one. One good example of this is St. Paul's using the *Old Testament* as an allegory of the Truths revealed by the *New Testament*. Traditional allegories are ideological since they replace old meaning and truth with new ones, without discussing the process of interpretation that they open up by shifting the original meaning of the fragments that they interpret. They betray what is crucial in the language that regards the impossibility to fix the meaning of a word or a trope since these are constantly changing through time and space. Further, they hide the impossibility for the language to communicate any absolute truth. Like symbols or static metaphors, they define a new meaning that depends on a new system of values that is still closed and refuses to accept the impossibility to establish any absolute Truth, any certain meaning, but only to proliferate the interpretation.

The process of producing allegories, like that of translating, potentially never ends. As Tambling states:

> If art is now "anti-aesthetic", it cannot think symbolically, or say that a concept can be expressed through a symbolic object. This makes postmodern art allegorical; the image is no longer thought of as describing, or representing, a pre-existent world. The fragment stands for anything, nor is there anything but fragments, whose being declares the absence in them of inherent meaning, since [quoting Benjamin] "any person, any object, any relationship, can mean absolutely anything else". (Tambling 143)

Following this concept, in my works I juxtapose different time-spaces, not to represent or describe a pre-existing organic world, but to create relationships among different fragments of it, shifting them into new contexts. The long sequence shot, as the cinematic device that apparently doesn't contain interruption and simulates a never-ending presence, is used allegorically in my recent works in order to reveal what it tries to hide: the impossibility for any presence not to fade into an absence; an absence that relates to our human condition, and to the lack of a stable referent within the language. Instead of representing an ideal continuous presence, for example, in *I usually live abroad* fireworks are in themselves an image of something precarious that will fade quickly. Following this perspective, the long sequence shot of the fireworks refers to what is behind a moment of collective celebration in which everything can seem eternal. In *7 Billion* the long sequence shot of the poppy field is so frenetic and, together with the text, expresses the anxiety of being with limited time in a context full of signs to be interpreted. I used long sequence shots in my recent works to evoke a different kind of

duration that de Man connects with an allegorical approach where "duration has the illusion of continuity that it knows to be illusionary" (Tambling 115); duration becomes a way to evoke its own unreliability. The long sequence shots of *I usually live abroad* and *7 billion* are all presenting something that is going to fade, their temporary presence evoking the absence of any ideal never-ending presence[30].

Even if the media I use (video, photography, sound recording) are usually considered mimetic – a reproduction of something that already exists – my works are collections of fragments that don't document real events, but transform their original meanings. At the same time, I don't employ structures that are typical of well-connected narrations. Instead of representing or describing a chain of events that moves from a beginning towards an end, my works can reveal that the connections among the elements that constitute a traditional narration are only apparently strong and firm. In the process of allegory, shifting the meaning of the fragments that connect through time undoes not only narration, but also identity and any structure produced within the language that supports the illusionary idea of a stable totality. In *I usually live abroad*, my intent is combining fragments belonging to different time-spaces in order to express the

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[30] An example of the use of long sequence shots that evoke this sort of impermanence is James Benning's film *Casting a Glance* (2007). The work by this experimental filmmaker is usually based on collections of long sequence shots of different cityscape and landscapes. I find Benning's work inspiring because his approach reminds me of a very documentaristic form of cinema that has a completely different intention: instead of documenting reality, Benning's work creates allegories of landscapes using images of reality in order to express political and conceptual interpretations of the American landscapes he explores. For *Casting a Glance* he visited Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) earthwork sixteen times over the course of two years. Each trip corresponds with a long sequence shot that makes the video. The sixteen shots show the unpredictable and fluctuating nature of the jetty. In some shots the jetty is covered, in others it is completely visible, not only the level of the water, but even the tides, weather, and seasons, together with the occasional visitors of the jetty, constantly modify the identity of the spiral jetty. Benning's film of Smithson's work is reminiscent of Benjamin's idea that there is not linear progress in history and not fixed truth. The sixteen moments that Benning shot create an allegory of impermanence and instability that regards any historical object throughout time. Each moment represents only a possible view of a natural landscape whose defining characteristics continuously change. The editing of the sixteen moments, instead of creating an organic and complete view of the jetty, shows the impossibility of representing that.

complexity of the ongoing situation, which is the product of contradictions and conflicts accumulated through history.

In Benjamin's allegorical interpretation of the painting *Angelus Novus* (1920) by Paul Klee, history isn't a reminder of the certainty of progress, or of a linear and well-connected narration of events, but proliferates a process of fragmentation and ruins whose meaning can't be fixed within any ideological Truth.

> His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin, *Tragic Drama* 259-260)

Considering the future, my intention is to continue working with *I usually live abroad*, exploring as an immigrant, from a detached point of view, the development of the economic and political crisis in my home country: as with *Paolino*[31], there could be multiple versions of the work. Differently than *Paolino*, *I usually live abroad* doesn't refer to a specific story but to a specific kind of melancholic and ironic perspective on my home country that the detached view, through the branches of the long sequence shot of the fireworks, embodies as a first version of this work.

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[31] which exists as two sound pieces and an artist book.

Even while I am still working on my skills with the English language, my Italian friends complain when I speak with them in Italian because I'm getting an accent. This increasing uncertainty that I am experiencing using, not only English but Italian as well, is another interesting starting point from which to explore changing identities and unfaithful translations in my work going forward.

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