Introduction:
Performing Narrative across Media

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1. Of turns and returns: the travelling concepts of performance and narrative

Ours is an age of "travelling" concepts (Bal 2002), of repeated 'turns' and 'returns', of permeable spaces and fractured temporalities, a world of increasingly contentious geopolitical orders and borders, in which a vertiginous global expansion continually co-exists with multiple nodes of disparate disjunctures (Appadurai 1996; Bauman and Mauro 2015). In this volatile and yet overburdened scenario of relentless, and often traumatic, mobility of peoples and technologies, the entanglement of memory and oblivion uneasily impends on any critical endeavor calling attention, on the one hand, to the risks of the forgetful rhetoric of innovation and quick consumption and, on the other, to the vehement outburst of old and new violent epistemologies (Sasken 1999; Appadurai 2006)[1].

Once transitions replace locations and the provisional becomes permanent (one may think of the obsessive proliferation of overlapping prefixes such as 'multi', 'inter', 'post', 'trans', 'cross' today, alternatively turning and returning, and often replacing one another in much critical jargon) words and concepts also seem to jitter and fret, moving and changing so quickly that academic caution in embracing them all seems in order. All the more so,

[1] The debate on technology and globalisation has triggered an extensive body of interdisciplinary work since the inception of the notion of "technoculture" (Penley and Ross 1991) inspired by the seminal "cyborg manifesto" by Donna Haraway (1985). See, among many others, the insightful survey by Chambers and Terranova (2014).

when dealing with the risky elusiveness of moving targets, travelling concepts and shifting paradigms such as those at stake in the present issue. The compact formulation chosen as the title of this collection, *Performing Narrative across Media*, tries to privilege a broad interdisciplinary framework, that is the relations between narrative and media at large, through the critical lens of performance and performativity[2], here condensed in the continuous and ambiguous present tense (and sense) of 'performing'. With the collection's title we intend to capture the very core of instability, ambiguity and perspectival complexity that inhabits the heterogeneous and hybridised fields covered by those crucial connections: performing narrative immediately suggests not only action, movement, process and liminality rather than stable or fixed references but also a certain degree of playfulness and ambiguity between subject and object of any action or relation (due to the interchangeability between 'performing' and 'narrative' in the sequence).

From the very beginning, thus, the choice to focus on relations so intensely reactive to the critical conjuncture of contemporaneity especially within the humanities – relations involving turns (to performance, to narrative, to the digital) and returns (of orality, of storytelling) – has implied the effort to encourage as much as possible a distinctively inter-disciplinary, self-reflexive and integrated methodology based on the mutual cross-fertilisation of theory and practice, a methodology that is more responsive, in our eyes, to the current urge for continuously "working with concepts" (Bal 2009), especially if they are loaded (as in the present case) with a dense and often contentious history of 'travelling' across different disciplinary fields, from the performing arts to anthropology and sociology, from rhetoric and pragmatics to literary and cultural studies, and even further to marketing, economics, politics and medicine, just to name

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[2] On the cultural prominence of 'critical theory' cogently related with the discourse on performance and performativity see, among many others, Diamond (1996), Phelan and Lane (1998), Reinelt and Roach (2007), Caporale, Esposito, Ruggiero (2013). Obviously enough, one crucial moment for the development of this body of critical theory was Butler's deconstruction of gender categories through her concept of the performative (1990; 1993) drawing on Derrida's revision ([1972; 1977] 1988) of Austin's notion of performative utterances (1962). In this respect, another fundamental relation is between the performative turn, deconstruction and postmodernism (Auslander 2004).

the most prominent ones from contemporary critical discourse. Suffice it here to remember that Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson (2006: 173) frame their new 'performative' understanding of narrative "as both a making and a doing" with two crucial intuitions from Benjamin's 1937 well-known essay on "The Storyteller"[3]. Langellier and Peterson are intrigued by Benjamin's emphasis on the very "experience" exchanged between the storyteller and his audience: "the storyteller takes what he tells from experience — his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (in Langellier and Peterson 2006: 173). And the final words of their *Narrative Enquiry* article, accordingly, direct our attention to the subjunctive, or better 'hortatory' mode of the "counsel" to follow: "Following Benjamin, we can say that the performance turn in narrative studies offers counsel that 'is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding'" (p. 179)[4].

With this cautionary preamble in mind, our introduction is meant only to trace some routes and junctures of 'traffic' between a number of theories and practices which are debated and contextualised in the specific contributions that follow.

Over the last decades, a growing interest in performance

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[3] The programmatic title of their article, "The Performative Turn in Narrative Studies", is thus unfolded in self-reflexive, embodied, situational terms: "Performance turns up in narrative studies at the confluence of two ways of understanding narrative: that is, narrative is both a making and a doing — both *poiesis* and *praxis* [...]. The performance turn situates narrative. The turn to performance requires that narrative studies attend to the bodies of participants as well as to bodies of knowledge, to the materiality and the situationality of narrative practices, and to the ordering of multiple discourses that operate in multilevel strategies and tactics" (Langellier and Peterson 2006: 173; 179).

[4] As is well known, Benjamin, writing his essay in the thirties of the past century, had imagined the disappearance of the storyteller, in line with the strong 'anti-narrative' inclination of those crucial decades. Despite this wrong prediction, he had well intuited that the core of the question concerns the storyteller's act of authenticating a shared "experience", which, even today, when storytelling has strongly returned to centre stage, remains one of the controversial key-words in the debate: one may think of the craving for 'real' stories (the proliferation of hybridised forms such as bio-fiction, docu-theatre, and infotainment, to name but a few), or the very theory of experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 1999) and the recurring issues of liveness, spectrality and virtuality (see Phelan 1993; Auslander 1999).

discourse – with its emphasis on bodies, actions and events, that is, on human experience, practices and affections – has emerged, deliberately trespassing theatre boundaries and extending to other disciplines, including cultural and narrative studies[5]. This stress on praxis and transformation, indeed, lends itself very well to exploring the multi-layered and fluid constructedness of identity and culture in the contemporary digital environment. If the 'performance turn' has played a relevant part in highlighting the interstitial, processual and translational dimension of any cultural production (Bhabha 1994), it is especially the vertiginous diffusion of electronic media in the new millennium which has largely contributed to a renewed inter-disciplinary focus on the interactive, performative and affective aspects of all kinds of narrations[6]. Today narratives – whether they are novels or hypertexts, art exhibitions or cultural events, videogames or political campaigns, travelogues or even company profiles – are more and more frequently spread over multiple platforms and media, calling for a renewed and probably unprecedented interest in the ancient art of storytelling, both as an instinctive need of humankind, capable of infinite mutations and adaptations, and a 'situated' cultural and performative practice under the constant disruptive threat of medial dispersal.

Indeed if, on the one hand, the very all-human capability of reading and narrating both the world and the self as a linear, coherent and connected sequence of events and memories seems to be questioned – especially considering the 'flickering conditions' of digital interaction (Hayles 1999) –, at the same time, though, it is impossible not to recognise everywhere the obdurate presence

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[5] The bibliography on this is obviously extensive and rapidly increasing, from the pioneering work by Turner and Schechner rooted in their fruitful cross-fertilisation between theatre and anthropology since the seventies to the many different lines of development traced in the last four decades, among many others, by Blau (1990), Conquergood (1995; 2002), Carlson (1996), McKenzie (2001), besides the scholars already mentioned in the previous notes.

[6] As usual, there is a large, growing body of work on this: among many others, a medium-oriented approach to narrative is discussed in Ryan (2004), Hayles (2012), Ryan and Thon (2014). Another insightful study is Ulmer (2002). On the crucial concept of remediation see Bolter and Grusin (1999), on performativity and narratology see Berns (2009). For a useful survey of this extensive field see Esposito, Piga, Ruggiero (2014).

of a basic narrative drive which gives life to an endless, almost obsessive, proliferation of stories, albeit a mostly fragmentary, chaotic and ever-changing one in the new transmedia environment. Any kind of creative work, once enhanced by the complex networks of contemporary media, is intrinsically, *literally* to be intended no longer as a given *product*, but as an ongoing 'emergent' *process* at an intersection between porous media boundaries, in which the affective dimension activated by bodily involvement with computer interfaces meets the re-creative and re-distributive affordances allowed by the Internet and social media sharing. And it is in this new participative environment (Jenkins 2006) that storytelling is nowadays on the move, rapidly 'travelling' across all sorts of cultural fields and gaining an unparalleled affective and collective bearing[7], despite its ephemeral and tenuous ties. In Salman Rushdie's memorable recapitulation (2010: 34), "Man is the Storytelling Animal, and [...] in stories are his identity, his meaning, and his lifeblood".

Given this protean and transitional context, the present collection has aimed to investigate both larger-scale performative issues (such as relationality, identity, agency, repertoire/archive, heritage) and specific medial configurations (multi-dimensionality, interactivity, the biography/fiction nexus, participation *vs.* alienation, authorship in transmedia textual clusters) related to narrative as enhanced and/or performed today across a wide range of cross-fertilising arts, forms, media and disciplines. In the selection of the articles gathered here we have endeavoured to offer as many examples as possible of the richness and heterogeneity of the topic, and to order them according to three possible (and somehow overlapping) 'travel agendas' of reading which further discriminate the respective prominent conceptual frameworks: the first mainly focuses on multimodality, hybridisation and adaptation, the second interrogates situated bodies and medial dispersal, and

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[7] Narrative has always triggered an impressive bulk and variety of studies. In this limited space, here we need to remember the seminal contribution from the cognitive approach (Bruner 1986; 2003) and two recent companions (Phelan and Rabinowitz 2005; Herman 2007). For the rapid ascension of storytelling in the contemporary age see also the provocative studies by Salmon (2007) and Gottschall (2012).

the third engages visuality, cultural memory and loss. Even though most contributions offer case-studies from the 21st century, a couple of them (Martino and Pireddu) deal with less recent artworks (from the memorable decade between 1970 and 1980), thus providing some useful insights into the complex development of the present trends.

Last but not least, we have aimed to foster a sustained interdisciplinary dialogue between different methodologies, affiliations and areas of expertise, here ranging from sociolinguistics to literary and cultural studies, from the performing arts to music and creative writing. In all probability this has always meant to privilege the 'inter-ship', the 'in-betweenness', the very intersections between those arts and disciplines as spaces radically 'open' both for ongoing, situated actions of re-membrance and transformation and for ritualised re-enactment charged with indelible convivial affects.

2. Trespassing genre and convention: multimodality, hybridisation, adaptation

The article which opens our issue, "Adapting 'Real-life' Material: Metatheatrical Configurations of Authorship and Ownership of Story in Contemporary British Verbatim Theatre", by **Márta Minier**, perceives verbatim drama as an adaptive form and emphasises that its 'recorded delivery' version is an ostensibly intermedial adaptation process. Looking at three metatheatrical examples of verbatim drama (a subgenre within the broader generic family of documentary theatre), namely David Hare's *The Power of Yes* (2009), Alecky Blythe's *Little Revolution* (2014) and Chris Goode's *Monkey Bars* (2012), Minier argues that the weaving of author/interview figures into the dramaturgical fabric of these generic hybrids between journalism and theatre foregrounds the aspect of artifice and multimodal story-weaving within the plays. By dramatising the gathering, selection and arrangement of material inherent in the adaptation process the plays highlight that the 'real-life' material presented to audiences is very much authored in the way adaptations tend to be: with reliance on pre-existing text or texts (and, especially in the case of 'recorded delivery', not necessarily or exclusively written forms of textuality) which are mostly untraceable to the educated theatre-goer or reader, according to current practices in producing work in the genre.

In her contribution entitled "Dissonant Fabulation: Subverting Online Genres to Effect Socio-Cognitive Dissonance" **R. Lyle Skains** explores dissonant fabulations, examples of an emerging online genre that masquerades as realist but instead is fictional, and typically parodistic or ironic. A phenomenon of the participatory culture associated with social media, dissonant fabulations may, among others, take the form of fake product reviews or customer service discourse published online. While engaging with the stylistic and structural conventions of these reviews, dissonant fabulations take part in social and political discourse, subvert the status quo and invite their receivers to join social and political debates, whether they are about gender, capitalist consumption or other matters. Through an analysis of Amazon.com reviews of BIC Cristal For Her pens and the fake Target customer service Facebook profile "Ask ForHelp" Skains presents us with an intriguing hybrid genre at the intersection of social and commercial textualities.

The article by **Pierpaolo Martino**, "From George Orwell to David Bowie: Performing Dystopian Narratives in the *Diamond Dogs* Album and Show", discusses performative aspects of multimodality and dissonant hybridity in connection with pop music and glam subculture. Drawing on Bakhtin's felicitous notion of dialogism and Barthes' seminal approach to 'image-music-text', the Italian scholar details the glamorous mix of theatricality, avant-garde techniques and the intricate web of literary resonances at work in both Bowie's album and live show *Diamond Dogs* (1974), inspired by Orwell's famous dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Accordingly, the album's songs and cover as well as the complex visual and histrionic display of the live show are intriguingly discussed as a colossal multidimensional narrative in which the core of dystopia is ironically and ambiguously recalled and dismantled to give way – through Bowie's multiple voices, masks, and echoes – to youth discontents and cultural disintegration.

Then a forceful study of intergeneric and plural narrative on the very threshold of biography and fiction is offered in **Rosemary Kay**'s article, "Hybridised Genres: Accessing Spaces Conventional Biography Cannot Reach", which examines both in scholarly and creative terms the semi-fictional language/texture she experimented with as the author of the acclaimed book *Between Two Eternities* (2010). Translated into several languages and made into an award-

winning film (*This Little Life* 2003), the brave and distressing story of the author's premature baby is told from the unexpected perspective of the neonate himself in terms of the baby's stream of consciousness rendered in adult language, thus calling for a deep blending of fictional tropes, imaginative leaps and factual records (such as parental diaries and medical notes) in order to 'more fully' access the 'truth' of Saul's sensorial and affective life. First, Kay contextualises the biography/fiction nexus within the present craving for 'real' stories and the concomitant growing popularity of biofiction on page, stage and screen available on multiple media platforms. Then she discusses her authorial adoption of a plurality of genres as a multi-intentional strategy to better accommodate the painful and traumatic matter at stake and to elicit a more nuanced and reflective feedback from the audience.

3. Dramatising identity on stage and page: situated bodies and medial dispersal

This section opens with the article by **Alessandra Ruggiero**, "Performing Rituals of Self-Narration: Benjamin Zephaniah's Storytelling", which focuses on the controversial career of Benjamin Zephaniah, one of the leading and most versatile figures on the scene of contemporary British performance poetry. Ruggiero studies his career through the critical lens of both performance and postcolonial studies. His lifelong practice of poetry is seen to embody a performative conception of his authorial role in terms of an ongoing work in progress, a live process not only nurtured by 'street politics' and the equally militant legacy of Jamaican dub tradition, but also strategically shared with his heterogeneous audience through a plethora of diasporic platforms (from 'live' stages such as pubs or other public venues to the larger screens of national TV programmes, authorial websites and both mainstream and small independent publishing circuits). On the whole, his case represents both the eloquent resurgence of ritualised forms of self-narration favoured by the advent of electronic media – here inflected as a communal empowered repertoire (Taylor 2003) – and the tense contradictions attending the risky self-exposure of postcolonial writers under the biased scrutiny of celebrity culture and industry (Huggan 1994; Ponzanesi 2014).

In her analysis of Canadian writer Douglas Coupland's *Generation A* (2009) **Lucia Esposito** focuses on how living "autobiographically" (Eakin 2008) on the numerous platforms of the digital world contributes to the dissolution and dilution of the self, as Coupland's novel powerfully suggests. Esposito's title – "What is Your Story Now? Life Narrative under Threat in Douglas Coupland's 'Extreme Present'" – captures a slight sense of humanist doom from the novel over how the fragmentary modes of online self-narration occupy the place of the celebration of individualism through grand narratives that literary forms of the pre-digital era nurtured. In Coupland's vision, in the online world where personal blog histories and "auto-tweetographies" (McNeil 2014) fracture the self we are "merely one unit among seven billion other units" (Coupland cited in Esposito). When writing about how the contemporary *cloudgänger*, as imaginatively termed by Coupland (2013), repeatedly constructs metaversions of themselves Esposito relies on Dennet's (1991) particularly illuminating concept, namely that human consciousness is made of several drafts. The novel leads Esposito to perceive a future of technological performance brought about by a proliferation of (fragmentary) online self-narratives rather than embodied performance.

In her article, "Drama on the Move: Intermedial Dialogue in Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information*", **Sara Soncini** also deals with fragmentary textuality. Soncini engages with how the British dramatist's 2012 play responding to the challenges posed by digital culture experiments with the possibilities and boundaries of the theatrical medium. As the case study demonstrates, theatre as a hypermedium that incorporates other media (Kattenbelt 2010) has the capacity to help us understand the digital turn, to get to grips with the information age. With a premiere at the Royal Court, a post-WWII hub of theatrical experimentation in Britain, Churchill's seemingly loosely structured play that captures the fragmentary nature of the digital world also involves a self-reflexive exploration of the medium in an intermedial context. Focusing on thematic clusters as opposed to reproducing a version of the dramatic arc of Aristotelian drama, Churchill's play and its initial production directed by James McDonald offer a mimesis of sorts of the contemporary digital world, while asking audience members to be co-creators of the work.

With the contribution by **Mariacristina Cavecchi**, "Tim Crouch's 'Transplant': *ENGLAND*'s Performing Narrative in Art Galleries", the focus shifts to another powerful case of intermedial staging in contemporary British theatre, to be found in *ENGLAND* (2007) by Tim Crouch, a playwright of the new millennium, who has devoted special attention to the relations between visual culture, the performative act of storytelling and the huge pressures exerted by mediatised late capitalist markets. Starting from the telling subtitle of the work, *A Play for Galleries*, the article carefully details the provocative interchange and ambiguous traffic between the presumed abstract, empty space of art collections and museums (the White Cube by O'Doherty 1999) and the messy, lively stuff of theatre as experienced in unpredictable ways by the audience in their physical and imaginative engagement with the pictures either evoked or on display and with the dramatic need for a heart transplant at the core of the story. A distinctive focus is accordingly maintained on both the explicit and implicit expectations that the play's numerous references to exponents of Young British Art (and their predilection for the theme of decay and disease) elicit as well as on the very site-specificity of the setting corresponding to the playwright's ongoing reflection on the complex bond between actors and spectators.

4. **Processing memory between words and images: fragmentation and remembrance in multi-media narrative**

In "'Talking Pictures': Digital Storytelling and Performance in Heritage Communication" **Silvia Pireddu** explores the digital story as a contemporary multimedia genre with close attention paid to its lineage. She perceives it to be situated at the intersection of heritage practices and digital communication. Pireddu's more specific focus when mapping a network of influences is on the work of photographer and participatory media expert Daniel Meadows, whose combination of images and narration in examples of community-focused projects, for instance The Free Photographic Omnibus, foregrounds authenticity as integral to the art form. Trained at the Manchester School of Art, 'radical' photographer Meadows documented the lives of the 'common people' by taking portraits and collecting personal testimonies – a method Pireddu

identifies as a precursor for the 3-5 minute digital story of our day. When tracing the most significant influences on Meadows' style itself Pireddu sheds light on Ivan Illich's ideas as presented in *Tools for Conviviality* (1975). Today's digital story as performed heritage facilitates empowerment in self-representation for the participating subject who is involved in processes of decontextualisation (of personal objects, memories) and recontextualisation leading to the creation of the digital story. Refashioning individual stories as personal objects for memory, digital stories utilise what Pireddu regards as biographemes in Barthesian terms. In contemporary digital stories multiple actants are involved, and the subjects are active co-creators.

In the contribution by **Francesco Cattani**, "Collage and Decollage: A Multi-Media Approach to Black and Asian British Identity", the discourse turns to the transnational and transcultural prominence of a significant body of contemporary multi-coded narrative which is precariously rooted in the diasporic experience of black and Asian British communities as dislocated and translated subjects within contemporary UK. Relying upon seminal postcolonial theory (among others, Rushdie's "stereoscopic vision", 1982, and Stuart Hall's notion of "cut-and-mix", 1989), the Italian scholar identifies a multi-media approach based on a relentless process of hybridisation, disarticulation and rearticulation of a variety of sources and influences. This strategy is anchored both in these communities' sense of dispersed ancestral legacies and their recent colonial 'lessons', both of which provide a common toolbox black and Asian artists and writers may share in their creative and critical endeavour to come to terms with the traumatic experience of loss. The examples discussed range from Hanif Kureishi and The Singh Twins to Yinka Shonibare and Ferdinand Dennis, highlighting in each case the distinctive strategies at work in their chaotic, deceitful and inventive overlapping of different temporalities and geographies.

Anna Maria Cimitile's article, "Montage Epic in John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*: The Politics and Aesthetics of Multiscreen Narrative" takes Marie-Laure Ryan's statement as a premise: "Narrative is not limited to written or oral storytelling. It is a mental representation that can be evoked by many media and many types of signs" (Ryan 2002: 583). Cimitile's article discusses black British visual

artist Akomfrah's multiscreen montage epic, *Vertigo Sea* (2015), contextualising it in the theory of transmedial narratives and in the history of the multiscreen video art. Having premiered at the 56th Venice Biennale, Akomfrah's montage epic references philosophy and a world canon of literature, beyond drawing on a rich visual archive of black British history. The plurality of perspectives offered by *Vertigo Sea* sits well in the tradition of multiscreen montage work that has flourished since the 1990s as a form questioning master narratives and fixed political positions as well as testing generic and media boundaries. Akomfrah has an interest in the 'counterpast' (Akomfrah 2015), in the assemblage of fragments that gives us an alternative insight into the history of the black diaspora as well as climate change and global warming, with sea images conjuring up associations to do with both history and ecology. This bricolage at the same time exposes us to an unorthodox handling of time, memory (and forgetting) and movement in a digital narrative. As Cimitile argues, the hybrid film essay invites audience members to co-create the piece through their various spectating strategies. While a version of what we might call a narrator figure appears on the screen, the spectator encounters interruption, disruption and incongruity in their reception process rather than linearity.

The closing article by **C. Maria Laudando**, "Of Trees and Flipbooks: Multi-media Wounded Passages in William Kentridge's *Second-hand Reading*", offers a recapitulation of the affective, political and medial issues revolving around the memory/oblivion nexus as powerfully inflected by the renowned South-African artist in his recent constellation of works titled *Second-hand Reading* (2013). This multi-media miscellany of preliminary drawings, flipbooks, lectures, sculptures and video installations not only confirms Kentridge's lifelong involvement with the 'interregnum' of post-apartheid South Africa and of our transitional age at large but also marks a sort of mesmerising autobiographical excavation of the multiple ways in which images and words turn and return, can be opposed and juxtaposed, hidden and unveiled, torn and repaired, in an ongoing metamorphic process of improvisation and experimentation between visual and verbal, drawing and writing, narrative and antinarrative. In tune with his incessant re-drawing of a contingent, 'practical epistemology' between theory and action (elsewhere envisaged as a 'grammar of performance'), the poignant flipbooks in the *Second-hand Reading*

video installation magically turn the yellowish pages of obsolescent encyclopaedic texts into a (back)stage of uncanny transformations and migrations of the words themselves with their inevitable charge of fugitive memories and creative mistranslations, simultaneously working as deep intimations of estrangement and engagement.

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