

In Search of Belonging: a Cinematic Voyage
Alla Ricerca dell'appartenenza : Un Viaggio Cinematografico
Live Audio-Video Performance by Julie Meitz

My performance was conceived for the IO Project 2009. The IO Project is an investigation about ontology in a village called Macchiagodena which is part of the Molise region in Italy. This project encourages various Artists to participate in the investigation by emerging themselves and their various practices of art within the village and with its residents. The project produces workshops, lectures, exhibits and live performances which are free to the public.

This was my third wonderful year participating in the project. The first two years, I made videos in the workshops and performed live as a VJ; Video Jockey mixing live visuals to DJs/Musicians. This year I ventured into a live audio-visual (AV) performance – a first attempt at working with audio ‘live’, and with a new application for both audio and video.

My Discoveries / The Concept

Theme: A cinematic exploration about family, immigration and a sense of belonging, touching on Neo-Realism & Post-Realism.

My theme came about after an unexpected, touching discovery of the wordless picture book, “The Arrival”, by Shaun Tan. I was drawn to this book particularly because it was a wordless adventure of an emigrant attempting to live in an unknown country; since moving from North America to France, I could relate to it in some respects.

At the same time, I was thinking about what I wanted to do for the IO Project 2009. The IO Project’s theme in 2008 was about “Family Life”, and in 2007, when it first started, it focused on the Photographer Frank Monaco and his book, “Women of Molise”.

So, before my arrival in 2007, I read about Frank Monaco:

“Frank Monaco grew up hearing his mother's stories about her native village, Cantulpo, in the Molise, a mountainous, wild and terribly poor region of southern Italy [she had immigrated to New York]. In 1950, Monaco traveled to the Molise, and took pictures to send his mother. A son's loving gesture soon turned into an extensive project, and Monaco documented the village and its inhabitants with tremendous intimacy and grace...”¹

And with the book, “The Arrival”, I read about Shaun Tan:

Shaun Tan “...my father came to Australia from Malaysia in 1960 to study architecture, where he met my mother...Dad’s [past] stories are sketchy, and usually focus on specific details, as is the way of most anecdotes – the unpalatable food, too cold or too hot

¹ Publishers Weekly : <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA73104.html?q=woman+of+molise>

weather, amusing misunderstandings, difficult isolation...Growing up I did have a vague sense of separateness, an unclear notion of identity or detachment from roots...”²

It was interesting to discover that both Shaun and Frank each had an emigrant parent who shared past stories which influenced their art. It also added an underlying “Family Life” context to my project.

Around the same time, I watched the film, “The Village” by M. Knight Shylama. It was about a village from a different time period existing in current times, yet unknown and isolated from current times. The people responsible for this village attempted to create a utopian society, away from current violence. However, they created false stories of beasts bordering the village in order to keep the new generations from leaving and discovering the current times.

Then I began searching for content involving immigration and family - via internet, library, and family stories. Since the project was for Italy, I wanted to focus on various Italian films and music. However, it was also about immigration in general, so I also used some American and French films and music (Actually, this project could continue evolving, with different material from other countries, made for other countries).

The Structure

I decided to use Shaun Tan’s book, “The Arrival”, as an intermittent narrative structure and intertwined related and contrasting films and music around it. Side note: His book had so many wonderful sections that I didn’t use because of not having enough time and for not having found the appropriate context to compare and/or contrast it to.

Final Result / Original Intention

In some respects, my project relied on the audience being familiar with the films I chose to use and the Italian language. My original intention was to try and attempt what Shaun did with his book - excluding words and relying on images to convey the meaning. However, I did not have the time to experiment with this, but I plan to try in the future.

Some Sections Explained

The beginning of my performance starts with the beginning chapter of Shaun’s book with the man of the family packing his suitcase for his voyage into the unknown country, with the accompanying music from Ennio Morricone in Sergio Leone’s film, “Once Upon a Time in the West”³. Then it immediately fades into an excerpt from the “The Village”, with a man unlocking and opening a box, with the accompanying Mafia song, “Omerta”⁴ which translates to “The Law of Silence”.

² Shaun Tan’s website: <http://www.shauntan.net/books.html> & <http://extranet.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/LLAE/viewpoint/>

³ Ennio Morricone’s compilation CD, “Once Upon a Time in the West”, track no. 1

⁴ CD: Il Canto di Malavita: The Music of the Mafia, <http://www.malavita.com/>

In Shaun's book, the country the man migrates to seems to be a better place, despite various issues he encounters. However, that is not always the case and sometimes a new place is not that different from the place one has left. This seemed to be the situation with "The Village", when one of its own villagers becomes violent after discovering the lies of the beasts. At this point in the film, the man behind the idea of the village is now in doubt of his utopian society and in reflection, returns to his box of past violent memories, the place he and the others left behind.

At this early point in my performance, I fade-out before we see what is in the box and I use the Mafia song as a metaphorical link to the concept of fear that the village constantly preached to each new generation, "Those we do not speak of...[the beasts]". At the end of my performance, I return to this scene again to reveal what he does see in the box (I also intertwine parts of, "Once Upon a Time in the West" of the family being shot and from, "The Village", of the girl being pursued by the 'false' beast – neo-realism & post-realism).

However, this is a rather abstract opening, particularly if one has not seen the film, and even so, still abstract. Yet I was trying to express, in a metaphorical way, the closing of the suitcase in pursuit of a better place in conjunction with the opening of the box that one may return to where one left off.

Throughout my performance, I use other excerpts from, "The Village". Continuing with the first chapter of Shaun's book, the mother and daughter leave together with the father to take him to the train station to say "goodbye" (immigration to the new country). As they walk through the streets, there are these ominous dark creature appearances hovering above them throughout their city. As the little girl looks up at them, I mix-in the scene where the creator of the village finally reveals the falsehood of the beasts to his daughter. And thus we see a young woman (who is partially blind) slowly reaching out to touch the claws of the beast which is merely a costume.

Again, abstract, but metaphorically playing with the concept of real fear as opposed to manufactured fear, a touch on neo-realism and post-realism.

With this section I faded in the music piece by Christophe Charles, "Undirected" (CD: Sur-Terre.Net), and I also repeated (scratch-jumped) when she touches the beast's claws and screams.

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Shaun's book focuses on the man and his adventures in the new country. In my performance, I intertwine from time to time the women and children left behind.

"At that time [1950], many of the men of Molise had emigrated, and until they earned enough to send for their families, the women were left behind to work, look after their children, pray and survive"¹

In a few sections, I use the photographs of Frank Monaco. And over the women working in the rice fields in the film, “Bitter Rice” by Giuseppe De Santis, I mix live Frank’s photographs of the women of Molise working in the fields. When the women in the film began fighting with each other, I used both a color and distortion effect live and faded in and out abstract music of anguished moaning by, Musica Elettronica Viva, an early 1969 experimental electronic music group formed in Italy. When they finally stop and a woman speaks about another woman who is a clandestine, I use the Mafia song, “The Traitor”, “I Cunfidenti”.⁴

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I dedicated a ‘photograph’ section in my project to the kind residents of Macchiagodena and to the Molise region. In this section there are drawing-photos of various immigrant faces from Shaun’s book, photos of people from present and past Macchiagodena, and some who emigrated from there, and of my mother-in-law’s Italian parents who emigrated from northern Italy to southern France.

The music for this section is from a compilation CD called “Hot Women: Women Singers from torrid regions of the world (taken from old 78 rpm records)”, compiled by R. Crumb. The Sicilian singer is Rosina Trubia Gioiosa (track no. 9). Crumb states that in the 1920’s & 30’s, several American record companies were issuing hundreds of ethnic records aimed at large immigrant populations from southern Italy and Sicily living in cities such as New York, Chicago, Boston, etc.

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In the section where the man arrives in the new country and is inspected, I mixed live effects and excerpts from Yamina Benguigui’s documentary, “Mémoires D’immigrés : L’héritage Maghrébin” - the movements of the hand communicating, and “The Village” - the classroom. Since moving to France, I could relate to this part of not understanding the language, feeling a bit lost and child like again. I wanted to extend on this part, but didn’t have the time.

I used the Italian-English electronica/trip-hop/jazz group called 9 Lazy 9 for this section (CD: ‘Sweet Jones’, track no. 2, “Code”, Ninja Tune label).

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The next section I feel I need to address is that of Shaun’s character when he is working in a factory and meets an older man who begins to talk to him about his past as a soldier, marching off to war. Within part of this story, Shaun expresses the “going off to war” by focusing on their legs, walking from calm to more turmoil terrains. At this point I cut to a close-up of soldier’s feet running through puddles in the rain, then to seeing these soldiers entering a bombed city where they come across a stranded French family who begs them to take their child (Steven Spielberg’s film, “Saving Private Ryan”).

After my performance, a couple of people told me that they did not understand why I cut to this war film, and to me it seemed obvious based on what I described above. In my eyes, Shaun's book appears more like a story board to a film. However, maybe my transformations of his sketches of the soldiers legs - the pages scanned, manipulated in Photoshop and then made into video - were not clear enough and/or too abrupt to make the connection. Maybe it was because I used live visual effects over the scene of the soldiers before they march off to war which then obscured the notion that they were indeed soldiers. Or maybe it's due to the fact that it's a picture book and one has time to look at the drawings, reflect, and flip back the page.

During this section, I faded in and out the music from 9 Lazy 9 called, "PoundStretcher" (CD: 'Sweet Jones'). I also repeated (scratch-jumped) certain lines of dialogue within the "Saving Private Ryan" section.

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Since I'm a Visual Artist who has always struggled with language, I will stop at this point. However, one can contact me for further information or questions at julie.meitz@free.fr (<http://julie.meitz.free.fr>)

Excerpts from the picture book:

"The Arrival" – Shaun Tan

Excerpts from Feature Films & Documentaries:

Bitter Rice - Giuseppe De Santis
The bicycle Thief - Vittorio De Sica
Once Upon a Time in the West - Sergio Leone
The Village - M. Knight Shylama
Saving Private Ryan - Steven Spielberg
Mémoires D'immigrés : l'héritage maghrébin - Yamina Benguigui
Récits d'Ellis Island - Robert Bober
The Straight Story - David Lynch
Gangs of New York - Martin Scorsese
Le cheval d'Orgueil - Claude Chabrol
Je De Mémoire - Paris : Kyrnéa International
Video : Macchiagodena/Molise - Julie Meitz

Excerpts from Music & Recordings:

Riccardo Tesi Banditaliana - Thapsos & Luna
Aldo Romano & Henri Texier - Just Jazz
9 Lazy 9 - Electric Lazyland & Sweet Jones

Il canto di Malavita : La Musica della Mafia - Mazza Music & Sbrano Niemerski Braun
Kulturprojekte GbR (Germany)
James Newton Howard & Hilary Hahn - "The Village"
Ennio Morricone - " Once Upon a Time in the West"
Hot Women Singers (78 rpms) : Rosina Trubia Gioiosa
Angelo Badalamenti - "The Straight Story"
Marvin Gaye - What's Going On
Funk Off - Jazz On
Nino Rota - "Amarcord"
Chants et Danses d'Italie (Archives da Alan Lomax)
Musica Elettronica Viva - Leave the City & The Sound Pool
Christophe Charles - Undirected (Sur-Terre.Net)
Dolce Italia : Paolo Conte - "Via con me"

Photos Used by Photographers:

Frank Monaco, Claudio Vitale, Pierre Beillas and others unknown

Photos of Residents from:

Macchiagodena (Molise) and Piniolo, Italy
Lourmarin, France
And others unknown

Dedicated to:

IO Project 2007-2009
Shaun Tan & Frank Monaco
All Filmmakers

The Families: Meitz, Beillas & Macchiagodena (Molise)

...and the moon and stars above...

Special Thanks to:

The city of Macchiagodena