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IOCOSE: In the Long Run

«Every lie creates a parallel world: the world in which it's true.»
Momus¹

It opens with the signature music to the BBC News, followed by a touching portrait in images of the pop star Madonna. «Good evening. In this special edition we will look back at the unexpected death of one of the greatest pop artist of all times. This morning, at 3:47 am in New York City, Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone passed away», says an anchorman decked out in mourning. The start of *In the Long Run* (2010), the latest work from the Italian collective IOCOSE, is unequivocal: the video unequivocally reveals its status as an ambiguous artefact. Just what are we watching? A recording of an authentic BBC news item, and therefore the report of the death of Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone? An obituary prepped for the eventuality, somehow leaked from the broadcaster's archives? An artfully constructed fake? These hypotheses alternate in our minds for the length of the video, seeking confirmation or denial in the smallest details, in the slipups or inconsistencies in the video. The details regarding Madonna's death offered by the anchorman, and the report that follows lend weight to the hypothesis that this is a factual event, consequently reported on by the BBC, while the appearance here and there of "green screen", the background used for digitally editing images and videos or creating backdrops gives the impression of an "unfinished" product, made public before the finishing touches; lastly, habitual BBC viewers might wonder why, in all these years, they have never seen that particular reporter before, or why the company would have given an item of that kind to an office geek, clearly very self-conscious in front of the camera, rather than its top journo.

All of these doubts are resolved at the end of the long video, when a note of cognitive dissonance is introduced that gives the lie to all our hypotheses: after the final greeting («We'll be back soon»), the opening notes of *Like a Virgin* play, while the presenter continues to speak. A few seconds later, the closing credits roll, informing us that what we have just seen is the work of IOCOSE, produced by a Slovenian contemporary art institute and played by actors.

The fact that we experience this in an artistic context has the power to mitigate the feeling of uneasiness it generates. Art, after all, remains true to Aristotle's description: a trauma experienced in a context that removes the danger and renders it cathartic. In rhetorical terms, the trauma we are exposed to by *In the Long Run* is a possible event that has not actually happened, reported to us as if a real fact. Moreover, to achieve the "consistency of reality" *In the Long Run* adopts the narrative device of the "document", with an entirely realistic use of the mechanisms of a medium, that by our common consent, is authorised to tell us about reality: the television news. Similar strategies have often been adopted by artists, directors and narrators to induce that suspension of disbelief that alone leads to catharsis, but only in a few cases has the mimesis been so complete that the ambiguity of the artefact actually becomes dangerous, creating drama. The most sensational case was that of *The War of the Worlds*, the radio drama directed by Orson Welles and broadcast by CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) in October 1938. The first 40 minutes of the show took the form of fictitious news flashes about aliens landing on the earth. Together with other elements (Welles' talent, the efficacy of the adaptation and the absence of commercial breaks) this induced a state of panic in an unknown number of listeners, convinced

they really were being informed of the arrival of belligerent Martians. This happened despite the fact that the show was part of a series dedicated to theatre (the Mercury Theatre on the Air) and was an adaptation of a famous science fiction novel, *The War of the Worlds* (1898) by H. G. Wells.² The news report format and the medium with which it was broadcast were sufficient to transform an ambiguous artefact into a fact. Even now, listening to that recording sends a shiver down your spine that a “normal” work of art does not: which proves that an ambiguous artefact remains so over time, regardless of the fact that its true nature has been demonstrated.

A similar sensation arises when looking through the phoney *New York Times* that was distributed to passers-by by groups of activists on the streets of New York, on the morning of 12 November 2008. The action, orchestrated by a network that included the collective The Yes Men and the Antiadvertising Agency, had the political intent of eliciting the newly elected president Barack Obama to come through on his election campaign promises, and the artistic intent of causing a collective sigh of relief after the dark years of the George Bush Jr. administration: «Iraq war ends», ran the cover headline.³

With respect to these two examples, as I write *In the Long Run* is obviously missing one key element: a public response based the ambiguous artefact being accepted as fact for a given period of time. No-one has yet found themselves in the position of having to publicly deny Madonna’s death, as happened in 1938 for the alien invasion and in 2008 for the end of the war in Iraq. This is not because IOCOSE is not capable of making the public believe in its falsification. Its brief but adventurous career demonstrates the contrary. In 2006 IOCOSE opened a site that invited compassionate visitors to adopt a dog in the third world. Though the project was a paradoxical and caustic satire on animal rights taken to extremes, on the one hand, and the hypocrisy behind many acts of compassion on the other, many visitors were taken in on both counts, believing it more opportune to adopt a mongrel from the favelas than a third world child. Two years later IOCOSE organised a virulent spamming campaign “in favour” of the Italian Partito Democratico (Democratic Party), an exposé of the progressive degeneration of political propaganda. The fallout from this came in the form of hundreds of emails lambasting the PD and its leadership candidate Walter Veltroni, showing just how credible the political use of spam is and, in the words of the artists, revealing the negligible difference between electoral rhetoric and Viagra adverts.

With *In the Long Run*, meanwhile, IOCOSE set about presenting a fake fragment of reality as an artistic original. Yet this does not make it any less dangerous, quite the opposite. Compared to a common or garden virus, a virus disguised as a vitamin has the undoubted advantage that it can be administered by a doctor. It can remain dormant, and survive for longer. And it can strike when we least expect it.

Let’s come up with an example. I first encountered *In the Long Run* thanks to a series of fragments on Youtube. To work on the project together the four members of the group, all based in different parts of Europe, uploaded clips to an anonymous account, using random file names to guarantee invisibility while on this public platform. The first video, *123asd*, was merely a short excerpt of the third scene in the news studio, followed by the report on Madonna’s life titled “Death of a Star”. Across the bottom of the video, alongside circumstantial text such as “Madonna was born in 1958”, ran technical indications such as “If ready check life file 2010.txt” and “More statement”. There were no closing credits. Let’s imagine a Madonna fan comes across the video. He is Portuguese and has never watched the BBC news. For him that short video is

just one of the many fragments of reality that Youtube dishes up on a daily basis. Shocked, he posts the video to his Facebook page. Many of his friends are Madonna fans. One of them, a Canadian girl who also blogs about her idol, is a member of various groups and forums to keep up with all the latest Madonna news. The video does the rounds and gets people talking: «that journalist has never worked for BBC News», «no newspapers have published the news», «Perez Hilton has just published a photo of Madonna taken a week later»⁴, «it was raining that night in New York», that kind of thing. But the more doubts grow over the authenticity of the video, the more the net community mobilises to find out who is behind it. Visits increase exponentially and the clip gets into the charts of Youtube's most watched videos. An editor at an American TV station notices it and, keen to be the first – or rather the second – to break the news, prepares a report for prime time airing. A fan sees it and in desperation throws herself off the 20th floor of the skyscraper where she works as a cleaner. Madonna's press people are forced to issue a statement declaring that the diva is alive and well. The relatives of the dead fan sue the BBC for manslaughter. Etcetera etcetera.

Obviously this is just one possible version of events, and a decidedly improbable one at that. Yet nothing prevents it from taking place. Perhaps it is already happening; it has already happened in many other cases. The phenomenon is known as an “Internet meme”⁵, and could be described as “media objects” (for the most part videos) that would probably have been destined for invisibility and then for some bizarre reason go viral, becoming “facts” and contaminating other media, and at times even entering spoken language. If this does not happen to *In the Long Run* now, and in this way, it could always happen in the future. This possibility persists thanks to the concept of the opening quote: every lie creates a parallel world: the world in which that lie is true. The false news report of Madonna's death is but the start of a new story, a new trace that “in the long run”, could have unexpected consequences.

At this point it might be legitimate to wonder: why, if they did not intend to circulate it as a lie, did they concoct such a credible fake? Herein, I think, lies the crux of the question, the core meaning of *In the Long Run*. The work springs from a dual consideration. On one hand, the Situationist mantra according to which reality has become an «immense accumulation of spectacles»⁶, namely the idea that we actually experience a large part of what we define as reality in mediated form. This is now radically redefining the traditional relationship between reality and simulation, in forms even more extreme than those described by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulations* (1984). «The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory»⁷, Baudrillard wrote, describing the relationship between reality and its representation. Today, in the light of 9/11, the internet and virtual worlds, we are obliged to reconsider this relationship in any case. Today, the map has become part of the territory: the media *is* our reality, or at least a substantial part of it.⁸

It comes as no surprise, then, that much of the “reality” that the media offers up is prepackaged. Richard Grusin calls it “premediation”. According to Grusin, «the logic of premediation [...] insists that the future itself is also already mediated, and that with the right technologies [...] the future can be remediated before it happens.»⁹ This phenomenon manifested itself in the badges that forecast the demise of the Bush era, and that began to circulate long before the fateful date emblazoned on them («1/20/09. The End of an Error»). Or the widespread practice in the press and TV of preparing celebrity obituaries long before the actual death takes place. The online encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* offers a long list of “premature obituaries”. For our purposes the case

of CNN is particularly significant: in 2003 the station uploaded various pre-obits to the development area of its site, without password protection, including those of figures like Fidel Castro, Dick Cheney, Nelson Mandela, Bob Hope, Gerald Ford, Pope John Paul II and Ronald Reagan.¹⁰

While the logic of remediation can help us understand the phenomenon of re-enactment, the logic of premediation can shed new light on the bizarre artefact that goes by the name of *In the Long Run*. The video “premediates” a future event that is already scripted, not only because death – that of Madonna, or anyone else – is inevitable; not only because in some television studio somewhere there is a programme that will be retouched and served up when it does eventually happen; but also because when it does the report will follow the IOCOSE format almost to the letter, as this is the standard formula used in these circumstances: the announcement of the death, the emotional commentary, an in-depth report on the sad event, the reactions of public figures, an analysis of the celebrity, his or her life and contradictions, and the reactions and comments of fans and admirers. Which means that the fact, in the minds of millions of viewers who follow it in the media without experiencing it directly, will take this exact form.

«We'll be back soon.»

Translated from Italian by Anna Carruthers.

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Notes

1. Momus, *The Book of Scotlands*, Sternberg Press, Solution 11 / 167, Berlin 2009.
2. Among the most recent studies, cfr. Richard J. Hand, *Terror on the Air!: Horror Radio in America, 1931–1952*, Jefferson, North Carolina, Macfarland & Company 2006.
3. Cfr. <http://www.nytimes-se.com/>.
4. Perez Hilton (<http://perezhilton.com/>) is one of the best-known and most popular celebrity gossip websites.
5. For some examples of memes, cfr. the Internet Meme Database (<http://knowyourmeme.com/>).
6. Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle*, Paris, Gallimard 1992.
7. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, New York, Semiotext[e], 1983, p. 2.
8. Cfr. Domenico Quaranta, “Reality is Overrated. When Media Go Beyond Simulation”, in *Artpulse Magazine*, Issue 3, March – May 2010.
9. Richard Grusin, “Premediazione”, in *Duellanti*, n.8, luglio 2004. Cfr. also Richard Grusin, “La fine di un errore”, in *Rolling Stone*, 29 August 2008, available online at <http://www.rollingstonemagazine.it/archivio/richard-grusin-la-fine-di-un-errore>.
10. Cfr. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_premature_obituaries.