

# Spectres of Müntzer at Sunrise / Greeting the 21st Century

Wu Ming

. . . A few months before the summit we started to write epic texts such as *From the Multitudes of Europe*... (and many more), you know, it was like an edict and it went: 'We are the peasants of the Jacquerie... We are the thirty-four thousand men that answered the call of Hans the Piper... We are the serfs, miners, fugitives, and deserters that joined Pugachev's Cossacks to overthrow the autocracy of Russia...' Then we pulled media stunts in order to create expectations for Genoa. An example: on a quiet springtime night, we put placards around the necks of the most visible statues in Bologna (guys like Garibaldi and other nineteenth-century national heroes), with messages encouraging all citizens to go to Genoa [...] We wanted to persuade as many people as possible to go to Genoa, and we ended up convincing as many people as possible to fall into a full-scale police ambush. Demonstrators were assaulted, beaten to a bloody pulp, arrested, even tortured. We didn't expect such mayhem. Nobody did. I regret we were so naïve and caught off-guard, although I think that was a crucial moment for the latest generation of activists. In a way, it was important to be there. That

experience has created bonds between a transnational multitude of human beings [...] We'll see the consequences of that 'being there' for a long time to come, on a grass roots, extended, long-tailed level.

– Wu Ming interviewed by Robert P. Baird,  
*Chicago Review* 52:2/3/4, October 2006

## **0. A PRESENT FROM THE MONKEYS**

It happened one chilly night of March 2001.

It happened in Nurio, state of Michoacán, Mexico, where all the indigenous tribes of the country were gathered to demand an Indian Rights Act. It was the third meeting of the National Indian Congress, largely a creation of the Zapatistas, those media-savvy poetic warriors who had seemingly appeared out of nowhere – out of the depths of time – seven years before. U2 were wrong, sometimes something changes on New Year's Day. Sometimes an army of balaclava-wearing Mayan peasants occupy a city and get their message across to millions of people. It occurred in San Cristóbal de las Casas, state of Chiapas, Mexico, on January 1, 1994.

And there we were, seven years later, in the darkness on the edge of Nurio. The Zapatistas were there, Subcomandante Marcos was there, for the indigenous meeting took place during the famous March of Dignity.

The March: throngs of people travelling on battered coaches covered thousands of miles, from the backwoods of Chiapas to the spectacularly crowded Zócalo, the biggest square in Mexico City. Twenty days of travel, twenty days of poetry delivered by Marcos in seven allegorical speeches called the 'Seven Keys'.

Nurio was a stop on that journey, and we, the Wu Ming collective, were there, at least some of us. Marcos and the Zap-

artists were accompanied by people from all parts of the world, a multifarious procession of journalists, activists, intellectuals, artists and parasites. We'd come all the way from Italy as members of a bizarre delegation the locals called 'los monos blancos', the white monkeys. That was a pun, as 'mono' is also Spanish for 'overalls'. Back at home, we were usually called 'le tute blanche', the white overalls. In a strange semantic twist, a work garment had temporarily become a symbol of civil disobedience, and many people wore overalls at demonstrations. We kept them on for the whole march, and they ceased being white long before we arrived in Mexico City. There was never any occasion for taking a bath; we were quite filthy.

Sometimes the intent in calling us 'monkeys' was derogatory and xenophobic, especially in the reactionary press, but we adopted the name ourselves and later wrote an allegorical little story, *The Fable of the White Monkey*, which started like this:

After many years Don Durito, the black beetle, decided to leave the forest. He called on all animals near and far, even those from beyond the sea, so they could accompany him to the city. Many beasts came down from the mountains, others came through the sea. The strangest one was a white monkey from a very far land. Her colour was in stark contrast with the colours of the earth, and she looked very odd. The other animals were amazed looking at her. Every day the white monkey plodded along on a hard ground, under a sunshine that her skin had never experienced. She was awkward and clumsy, but did anything she could to be helpful and prove that she wasn't out of place. Many times she arrived late at the scheduled stops, but she never failed to show up.

We looked like beggars, and yet – as is sometimes the case with beggars – there must have been something interesting about our ways, since the commanders of the Zapatista Army appointed us

as their bodyguards. No kidding. At a certain point during the march, we, the Italian *monos blancos*, became the commanders' security service. And what a sight we made!

It was mostly performance art, more appearance than substance. Who knows what Marcos and the others had in mind when they chose us. Maybe they just wanted to pull a prank. Luckily, we didn't put on airs. (Well, at least not all the time.) And even if we had put on airs, the steady flow of insults from the reactionary media – and even president Vicente Fox himself – would have reminded us that we were dirty, raggedy, awkward, odd-looking monkeys.

You're not familiar with this river – Don Durito told the strange animal – but you've got big strong hands. You'll build the bridge to the other bank. The white monkey, thrilled by such responsibility, started to work with a will. She worked day and night, in the sun and the rain. In the meanwhile, the slanderous fox was spreading lies about her among the other beasts, and the parrots kept saying: – She isn't one of us. She doesn't belong here, she's got another colour. Don't trust her, the bridge she's building will collapse and you will drown!

The bear, the coyote, the black monkey and all the earth-coloured animals watched the monkey working and discussed among themselves:

– She comes from far away, but she's our friend. She's working so we can cross the river.

– But this isn't her river. We don't know who she really is, we can't trust her.

Then old Don Felix, the eagle that could see everything, said that Don Durito had assigned the task to the foreigner precisely because she was different and came from afar. For that reason, her work would have a greater meaning for all.

At last we reached Mexico City and basked in the reflected light of the Zapatistas. A correspondent from the left-wing daily paper *La Jornada* wrote:

On Saturday, March 11<sup>th</sup>, during the walk from Xochimilco to the Zócalo, the Italian monos blancos who escorted the Zapatista caravan caught a glimpse of a placard, one of the many the crowd used to communicate with the general command of the Zapatista army. That placard said: 'THE WHITE MONKEYS HAVE BALLS'. It was meant as a compensation for all the insults and smears which, in the previous days, had turned these Europeans into targets of a xenophobic campaign.

But let's go back to that cold night in Nurio. What happened in that bivouac on Mexico's central plateau? What happened that was so special?

Well, nothing much. Just a tiny gesture. While some campers were lighting the bonfire, one of us approached the Subcomandante and gave him a copy of our novel *Q*, which we'd written under the name 'Luther Blissett'. It was a copy of the Spanish-language edition. On the title page was a dedication:

For 'El Sub'  
as the struggle keeps us warm in a cold night,  
from a *mono blanco* (now of all the colours of the earth)  
who happens to be the author.

Marcos read those lines and looked stunned: – You're the author? And you're a *mono blanco*?

– Yes, I am. I wrote it together with three other guys, and they're *monos blancos* too.

He thanked our comrade, took the book and walked away.

When the bridge was half-built, Don Durito gathered all the animals on the bank of the river.

After that, he told the white monkey to go to the window, so everyone could see her. Then he addressed the animals and said: – She is building a good bridge, but she can't finish it alone. Nobody could do it without help.

The white monkey got puzzled and asked: – Then why did you put me to work alone?

Don Durito closed the window and allowed the white monkey to look in the glass. She stared at the reflected image and hardly recognized herself.

Her coat wasn't white anymore. Now it was of all the colours of the earth.

### **I. MARCOS, MÜNTZER AND Q (1994-99)**

'[...] I fought [...] alongside men who really thought they would put an end to injustice and wickedness on earth. There were thousands of us, we were an army. Our hope was shattered on the plain at Frankenhausen, on the fifteenth of May 1525. Then I abandoned a man to his fate, to the weapons of the lansquenets. I carried with me his bag full of letters, names and hopes. And the suspicion of having been betrayed, sold to the forces of the princes like a herd at a market.' It's still hard to utter the name. 'That man was Thomas Müntzer.'

I can't see him, but I sense his astonishment, perhaps the incredulity of someone who thinks he's talking to a ghost.

His voice is practically a whisper. 'You really fought with Thomas Müntzer?'

– Luther Blissett, Q

To this day, we don't know if Marcos ever had a chance to read the book. He's been supernaturally busy since then, and the

situation in Chiapas (indeed, in all of Mexico) seems to have worsened considerably. However, the gift had a precise meaning for us: it symbolized the completion of a cycle, from the sixteenth-century Peasants' War (the subject of the novel) to the Zapatista *Levantamiento* (Uprising).

The Peasants' War was the biggest popular revolt of its time. It broke out at the heart of the Holy Roman Empire and was savagely repressed in 1525, one year before the Spanish conquistadores began their bloody invasion of southern Mexico which destroyed the Mayan civilization.

The Zapatista *Levantamiento* was the most inspiring peasant rebellion of our time. It began in southern Mexico on the initiative of Mayan activists and has had an influence on radical social conflict all across today's unholy empire.

Call it a chiasmus if you like.

The Peasants' War was a prefiguring event, in the same way its main agitator, Thomas Müntzer, was a prefiguring character. It was literally a *pre*-figuration because the social order that Müntzer and the revolutionary peasants envisioned was far ahead of their time; indeed, it's still ahead of *our* time. Yet it wasn't just a collective hallucination accompanied by bursts of mass violence. That's the conservative interpretation started by Martin Luther and refined by Norman Cohn, who described Müntzer as a forerunner of modern-day totalitarianism and Nazi madness. Bullshit. The peasants were far from crazy. They had social programmes (albeit crude ones) and concrete goals to achieve. Their needs were real and their political practices were rooted in the social reality of their time. Their achievements were tangible: towns were conquered, revolutionary councils were established and the power structure was shaken from the foundations up to the princes' rotting teeth. In a feudal territory fragmented into countless city-states, the Peasants' War was a boundless, national, pan-Germanic rebellion long before Germany came

to exist as a nation. The peasants' mistakes – both ideological and strategical – were immanent in that socio-historical context, but their politics had started to transcend it. They were defeated and massacred, but their legacy is still with us, buried in the ground beneath our feet, and it threatens to resurface every time the social order is challenged from the bottom up. As for the peasant leaders' rhetoric, it still resounds throughout the centuries.<sup>1</sup> In many ways and through many voices, Müntzer still speaks to us.

He certainly spoke to four countercultural activists at the end of 1995, two years after the news of the Levantamiento had crossed the Atlantic, inspiring a new phenomenon called the Luther Blissett Project.

In the early/mid Nineties the 'Luther Blissett' collective identity was created and adopted by an informal network of people (artists, hackers, and activists) interested in using the power of myths, and moving beyond agit-prop 'counter-information'. In Bologna, my circle of friends shared an obsession with the eternal return of such archetypal figures as folk heroes and tricksters. We spent our days exploring pop culture, studying the language of the Mexican Zapatistas, collecting stories of media hoaxes and communication guerrilla warfare since the 1920's (Berlin Dada stuff, futuristic soirées etc.), obsessively re-watching one particular movie, *Slap Shot* by George Roy Hill, starring Paul Newman as hockey player Reggie Dunlop. We liked Reggie Dunlop very much, he was the perfect trickster, the Anansi of African legends, the Coyote of Native American legends, Ulysses manipulating the cyclop's mind.

What if we could build our own 'Reggie Dunlop', a 'trickster with a thousand faces', a golem made of the clay of three rivers – the agit-prop tradition, folk mythology, and pop culture? What if we started a completely new



role play game, using all the media platforms available at the time to spread the legend of a new folk hero, a hero fueled-up by collective intelligence?

– Henry Jenkins III, ‘How *Slapshot* Inspired a Cultural Revolution: An Interview with the Wu Ming Foundation’, Confessions of an Aca/Fan weblog, October 2006

The communication strategies of the Zapatistas were a big influence on the Luther Blissett Project. References to El Sub and the EZLN can already be found in the early texts produced by Luther Blissett. What intrigued us most was the way the Zapatistas avoided framing their struggle in any of the hopelessly worn-out twentieth-century modes of thought, and refused old dichotomies such as Reformist vs Revolutionary, Vanguard vs Masses, Violence vs Non-violence, etc. The Zapatistas evidently belonged to the Left, but they refused any linear, traditional left-to-right scale thought, and in a way that had nothing to do with how some European fascists argue that they are ‘neither left nor right’. The Zapatista language moved away from stereotypical ‘third-worldism’: through creative reappropriation they turned old myths, folk tales, legends and prophecies into a vision that encompassed a new transnationalism (Huey P. Newton might have called it ‘Intercommunalism’). The ‘community’ that the Zapatistas talked about was an open one; it went beyond the boundaries of the ethnic groups they spoke for. ‘We are all Indians of the world’, they stated. They came from the most miserable corner of the known world, and yet they soon got in touch with rebels all around the globe.

The Zapatistas’ strategy of communication was based on the refusal of traditional, camera-craving leaders. In the early days of the Levantamiento, Marcos stated: ‘I don’t exist, I’m just the frame of the window.’ He explained that ‘Marcos’ was just an alias, and he was a just a ‘sub-commander’, a spokesperson for

the Indios. He asserted that everybody could be Marcos, which was the meaning of the balaclavas that the Zapatistas wore: the revolution has no face because it has all faces. 'If you want to see the face under the balaclava, grab a mirror and look at yourself,' Marcos said.

That's where Luther Blissett originated. Commentators have speculated on the alleged 'situationist origins' of the project (a dead-end street if there ever was one), whereas the truth was under everyone's nose. The example set by the Zapatistas helped the LBP refine its purpose: to snatch the use of myths out of the hands of reactionaries.

The Luther Blissett Project was roughly a Five Year Plan, and it lasted from 1994 to 1999. Hundreds of people all over Italy, and in some other countries, adopted the name and contributed to media hoaxes, radio programmes, fanzines, videos, street theatre, performance art, radical politics and theoretical writings. At least fifty agitators remained active in Bologna from beginning to end. In 1995 some of them started to play with the idea of writing a historical novel. That novel was to become *Q*.

As charged as we were with fresh Zapatista suggestions, we almost immediately thought of recounting a peasant insurrection, nay, the mother of all modern insurrections, peasant or not.

We already knew about Müntzer. One member of the Project had briefly belonged to a marxist group where reading Friedrich Engels's *The Peasant War in Germany* was little short of mandatory. And it may sound strange for a Catholic country, but Italy has an interesting tradition of studies on Müntzer and the radical wings of the Reformation. Müntzer's sermons were first published in Italian in 1970. During the Seventies, a highly politicized decade in Italy, the figure of Müntzer was intensely studied and discussed. In such a crucial year as 1989, scholars from different parts of Europe (including the soon-to-

collapse East Germany) came to Ferrara – about twenty miles from Bologna – and took part in a conference called ‘Thomas Müntzer and the Revolution of the Common Man’.

But why tell that story once again? Why write a historical novel on such an anachronistic subject? What meaning could Thomas Müntzer and the Peasants’ War have in the ‘roaring 1990s’? ‘Communism’ had been defeated, ‘democracy’ had won, belief in free trade was undisputed, to the extent that the French called it *la pensée unique*, ‘the only thought’.<sup>2</sup> Market-centric ‘neoliberal’ ideology was triumphant. Did we really want to write a novel on some long-forgotten proto-communist bums?

Yes, we did. In times of counterrevolutionary hybris, at the peak of ‘the greediest decade in history’ (as Joseph Stiglitz called it), we thought such a book was more necessary than ever.

Very soon, we came across a work by German playwright Dieter Forte, a 1970 drama entitled *Luther, Müntzer and the Bookkeepers of the Reformation*. It was an explicit allegory of the 1968 movement in West Germany. That text had a powerful effect on us. It kickstarted the writing process.

To tell the truth, the Peasants’ War and Müntzer’s preaching were just the beginning of the story we would tell. Q covers more than thirty years of European history, from 1517, when Luther nailed his ninety-five theses on the door of the Wittenberg cathedral, to the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. Those tumultuous years have provided historians and storytellers with a host of models and first attempts prefiguring practically every revolutionary strategy and tactic that was to follow. If we listen attentively to what the sixteenth century has to say, we encounter anarchists, proto-hippies, utopian socialists, hardcore Leninists, mystical Maoists, mad Stalinists, the Red Brigades, the Angry Brigade, the Weathermen, Emmett Grogan, punk rock, Pol Pot and Comrade Gonzalo (of Peru’s Shining Path guerrilla movement). Also, we find all kinds of

bardy. Instead of talking about the book, we raved about what had just happened at the WTO summit. We felt it was the beginning of something big.

And it grew to be very big indeed. Very soon, the new movement erupted into a worldwide challenge to the global institutions regulating 'free markets' from the top down: the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and other bloodsuckers.

The year 2000 was a time of intense organization, protest and disruption of important summits. The most relevant demonstrations took place in Prague at the end of September, when thousands of demonstrators ridiculed an IMF/WB joint meeting. We were there as well.

At a certain point, the movement decided that the showdown – the litmus test of its strength – would be in the third week of July 2001 in Genoa, Northern Italy, where a G8 summit was scheduled. It would be the first G8 summit since the election of George W. Bush as president of the US, and the first with right-wing clown Silvio Berlusconi as Italian premier and grinning host of the event.

In April 2001, people from all parts of North America gathered in Quebec City to protest against the FTAA treaty. The marches were colourful and radical; the protest was imaginative and multifarious. Many different strands of radicalism twisted together to form ropes, not only metaphorical but also *literal* ropes, with grappling hooks attached to pull down the 'Wall of Shame' (the fence surrounding the summit area). We were there, too, and we thought it was a useful experience, as well as a good omen for Genoa.

In the meantime, curious things were happening in Italy and elsewhere. At demonstrations you saw people resembling Bibendum, the Michelin Man: they wore helmets, white boiler suits and, under the suits, any kind of bodily protection they could find: shoulder pads, shin-guards, life-jackets, cushions, even sheets of packing foam. You'd see hundreds of those funny fig-

ures holding big plastic shields or mobile barricades made of tyres, marching towards the coppers in a phalanx-like formation. They had no offensive weapons, only inventive ways of preventing the truncheons from smashing their bones. It was called 'padded civil disobedience', or 'civil disobedience *all'italiana*'. There was something distinctly 'Blissett-like' in that puzzling practice, and we soon started cooperating with those people, mostly orphans of the orphans of the old *Autonomia* movement.

The white overalls are not a uniform, and the images they conjure up should never be of a militaristic kind. That would be a big political mistake.

The white overalls do not fix an identity, nor they have to do with belonging to a group or a troop. The white overalls are a tool. One should never say: 'I belong to the white overalls,' but: 'I'm wearing white overalls.'

White overalls are awkward and clumsy, many times they have been compared to Michelin Men. They can't help laughing at each other, and when the police charge they can't run, they're easy targets, it's like hitting a cow in a corridor [...] The performances in white overalls are aimed at tickling the throats of jolly people [...] Their slogans are ironical in a warm way: the words 'Peace & Love' are associated with pictures of riots, and they chant 'We're coming! / Hey, bastards, we're coming!' on the chorus of *Guantanamo* as they march with both hands raised, perfectly aware that they're going to be clubbed, and none of them will fight back.

The narratives that the white overalls produce about themselves are self-sarcastic, e.g. *The Fable of the White Monkey* [...] The white overalls are consciously ludicrous, that's been their advantage so far. When they cease to be ludicrous, we'll have to find another tool.

– Wu Ming 1, 'An Open Letter to  
*Limes Magazine*' (unpublished), June 2001

It wasn't the only strange phenomenon we detected in those days, for the ghost of Thomas Müntzer (none other!) was reappearing in unexpected places.

There was some kind of short circuit between Q and the movement. Thanks to word of mouth and the Internet, the novel had become an international bestseller. We began to see Müntzer's sentence, '*Omnia sunt communia*' ('All things are to be shared') on banners and placards. We began to see quotations from Q used by activists as email signatures. In forums dedicated to the movement, people would adopt such aliases as 'Magister Thomas' or 'Gert-from-the-Well'. It was only the beginning of a strange, controversial, troublesome relationship between our literary efforts and the ongoing struggle. In the months leading up to the Genoa showdown, the names 'Wu Ming' and 'Wu Ming Foundation' came to be associated more with 'agit-prop' activities than our literary output. It was mainly our fault, as we plunged into the struggle so deeply that it became difficult to avoid confusion of roles. For example, even if it had no byline, everybody knew we were responsible for the epic appeal known as *From The Multitudes of Europe...*, which in the spring and early summer of 2001 was constantly forwarded, printed on leaflets and in journals, broadcast on the radio, scribbled on walls and so on.

Quite obviously, Müntzer was one of the ancestors claimed by the 'narrating we' of the edict: 'We are the army of peasants and miners that followed Thomas Müntzer. [...] The Lansquenets exterminated us in Thuringia, Müntzer was torn to pieces by the headsman, and yet nobody could deny it: all that belonged to the earth, to the earth would return.'

The text is a declaration of war. A political and historical war, but also a trans-historical and trans-political one. The powerful of the Earth gathered in Genoa for the G8 summit, as well as their educated and overpaid consultants and collaborators, shall not have to face the 'people of Seattle', the stu-

dents, the thugs of the social centres plus some poor sods and freaks strumming guitars or breaking windows. Or rather, all those people will be there, but together with them, behind them, *inside* them an immense Army of the Dead will be marching. And the text calls on those fallen ones, it makes a list of those troops covered with the dust of centuries and dispersed by the wind of history, with the epic punctiliousness of Homer's 'Catalogue of Ships'.

– Historian Franco Cardini,  
*L'Espresso* magazine, June 22, 2001

We also wrote or co-wrote plenty of other texts (including *The Fable of the White Monkey*), as well as scripts for street performances and media stunts.

Looking back, we think that Müntzer's ghost appeared at the centre of the mobilization because a general metaphor was taking shape in its midst: empire was described more and more often as a castle besieged by a manifold army of peasants. That metaphor recurs in several texts and speeches. Sometimes it's explicit, very often it's only implied, but it's there. Its emergence was influenced by several factors:

1. The summits were invariably held in heavily militarized areas (sometimes called 'red zones'), which conjured up images of a regime under siege by protesters. Demonstrations took the form of 'blockades': the more the power wanted to keep the people out and away, the more the people forced the powerful to meet in ridiculously over-fortified garrisons. Metaphorically speaking, they closed themselves into castles.

2. The movement had a firmly held (and loudly stated) ecological stance, and the struggle against Genetically Modified Organisms was diffuse, especially in Europe. In France, José Bové's Confédération Paysanne (Peasant Confederation) was very active in destroying GMO crops and trashing McDonald's restaurants.

3. The popularity of the Zapatistas – a rural, peasant movement – was reaching ever new heights among activists in Europe and North America.

4. The movement's World Forum repeatedly took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil, a country where a radical peasant movement – the Movimento Sem Terra – was active and widespread.

Although it was inspiring and effective, the metaphor was a misrepresentation. There was no real siege going on, as you can't besiege a power that's everywhere and whose main manifestation is a constant flow of electrons from stock exchange to stock exchange.

That misrepresentation would prove fatal in Genoa. We were mistaking the power's formal ceremonies for the power itself. We were making the same mistake Müntzer and the German peasants had made. We had chosen one battleground for our supposed field-day. We were all heading to Frankenhäusen.

### **3. FRANKENSTEIN IN FRANKENHAUSEN (2001–2009)**

'How long have you been on the run?'

[...] 'I told you, ever since priests and prophets claimed a hold of my life. I fought with Müntzer and the peasants against the princes. Anabaptist in the madness that was Münster. Purveyor of divine justice with Jan Batenburg. Companion of Eloi Pruystinck among the free spirits of Antwerp. A different faith each time, always the same enemies, one defeat.'

– Luther Blissett, Q

Thomas Müntzer spoke to us, but we couldn't understand his words. It wasn't a blessing, but a warning.

It is impossible to disclaim the responsibility the Wu Ming collective had, at least in Italy. We were among the most zeal-



ous in urging people to go to Genoa, and helped to steer the movement into the ambush. After the bloodbath, it took quite a while – and a lot of reflection on our part – to understand our own specific errors in the context of the general errors made by the movement.

We had underestimated the enemy, and overestimated ourselves. Clearly, something had gone wrong with the practice of ‘mythopoesis’ or ‘myth-making from the bottom up’, which was – and still is – at the core of our philosophy.

By ‘myth’ we never meant a false story, the most banal and superficial use of the term. We always used the word to signify a narrative with a great symbolic value, a narrative whose meaning is understood and shared within a community (e.g., a social movement) whose members tell it to one another. We’ve always been interested in stories that create bonds between human beings. Communities continuously share such stories and, as they share them, they (hopefully) keep them alive and inspiring. Ongoing narration makes them evolve, because what happens in the present changes the way we recollect the past. As a result, those tales are modified according to the context and acquire ~~new~~ symbolic/metaphorical meanings. Myths provide us with examples to follow or reject, give us a sense of continuity or discontinuity with the past, and allow us to imagine a future. It’s the way our mind works, and we couldn’t live without them. Our brains are ‘wired’ to process reality through narratives, metaphors and allegories.

At a certain point, a metaphor may suffer sclerosis and become less and less useful, until it gets void of all meaning, a disgusting cliché, an obstacle to the growth of inspiring stories. When this happens, people have to veer off, looking for other words and images.

Revolutionary and progressive movements have always found their own metaphors and myths. Most of the time these myths outlive their usefulness and become alienating. Rigor mortis sets

in, language becomes wooden, metaphors end up enslaving the people instead of setting them free. The subsequent generation often reacts by negating the past and developing iconoclastic attitudes. The vanguard of each generation of radicals describe the myths they inherit as nothing more than false stories. Some demand that the radical discourse be 'de-mythologized', be it in the name of Reason, 'political correctness', nihilism or even plain stupidity (as in the argument that myths are intrinsically fascist).

No one can erase mythological thought from human communication, because it's embedded in the circuitry of our brains. Cognitive scientists and linguists such as George Lakoff are proving that beyond doubt. We think through metaphors and narratives.

Every iconoclasm eventually generates a new iconophilia, against which new iconoclasts will rage. The cycle will be endless if we don't understand the way these narratives work. The trouble with myths is not their intrinsic falsehood, truth ... or 'truthiness'. The trouble with myths is that they sclerotize easily if we take them for granted. The flow of tales must be kept fresh and lively; we have to tell stories by ever-changing means, angles and points of view, give our tales constant exercise so they don't harden and darken and clog our brains.

This, of course, is an extremely hard task, for several reasons.

First of all, it's too easy to underestimate the dangers of working with myths. One always runs the risk of playing Dr Frankenstein or, even worse, Henry Ford. We can't create a myth at will, as though on an assembly line, or evoke it artificially in some closed laboratory. To be more exact: we could, but it would have unpleasant consequences.

Expanding some observations by Károly Kerényi, Italian mythologist Furio Jesi drew a sharp distinction between a 'genuine' approach to myths and a forced evocation of myths for a specific (usually political) purpose. Think of Mussolini describ-

ing the 1937 invasion of Abyssinia as ‘the reappearance of the Empire on the fateful hills of Rome’. Kerényi and Jesi called the latter strategy ‘technification of myths’.

Technified myth is always addressed to those Kerényi called ‘the sleeping ones’, i.e., people whose critical attitude is dormant, because the powerful images conveyed by the technifiers have overwhelmed their consciousness and invaded their subconscious. For example, we may ‘fall asleep’ during the incredibly beautiful first half-hour of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* (1938).

On the contrary, a ‘genuine’ approach to myths requires staying awake and being willing to listen. We have to ask questions and listen to what myths have to say, we have to study myths, go looking for them in their territories, with humbleness and respect, without trying to capture them and forcibly bring them to our world and our present. It is a pilgrimage, not a safari.

Technified myth is always ‘false consciousness’, even when we think we’re using it to a good purpose. In an essay entitled ‘Literature and Myth’, Jesi asked himself: ‘Is it possible to induce the people to behave in a certain way – thanks to the power exerted by suitable evocations of myths – and then induce them to criticize the mythical motives of their behaviour?’ He answered himself: ‘It seems practically impossible.’

In the heyday of the alter-globalization movement (from autumn 1999 to summer 2001), we tried to operate in the space between the adverb ‘practically’ and the adjective ‘impossible’. We tried to use the adverb to break open the adjective. We deemed Jesi’s answer too pessimistic. We thought that ‘opening the laboratory’ and showing the people how we processed ‘mythologemes’ – i.e. the basic conceptual units, the metaphoric ‘kernels’ of mythological narratives – was enough to provide the people with the tools of criticism. ‘Correct distance’ from a myth was our chimera: not too close, lest we fall into a stupor, but not so far that we no longer feel its power. It was a difficult balance to maintain, and in fact we didn’t maintain it.

We were unable to maintain the balance because the problem is also: who is the artificer of mythopoesis, the evocator, the obstetrician? It should be up to a whole movement or community or social class to handle myths and keep them on the move. No particular group can appoint itself to that office. At the end of the day, we ended up being 'officials' assigned to manipulate metaphors and evoke myths. Our role became a quasi-specialized one. An agit-prop cell. A combo of spin doctors. Sure, *From the Multitudes of Europe...* could make your nerves sing; it made you feel like going to Genoa right away, but that was not enough. We never looked for ways to 'criticize the mythical motives of our behaviour'. 'Practically' never cracked 'impossible'.

At present, there is no alternative to carrying on with the work. We have to continue exploring myths in a way that's not instrumental. We have to understand the nature of myths without wishing to reduce their complexity and without testing their aerodynamic properties in the wind tunnel of politics.

What happened in Genoa was not a 'military' defeat: it was a cultural catastrophe. The tragedy was not only being defeated in the street (which it was). The tragedy was being defeated as a cultural wave. After Genoa, the movement was no longer able to communicate in effective ways, and the media sucked all our blood.

July 20, 2001. That Friday afternoon, on that long street called Via Tolemaide, nobody wore white overalls. A few days before, we all decided to extend the practice of 'padded civil disobedience' as widely as possible. Even such an open symbol as the overalls would stand in the way of that purpose. The *tute bianche* were increasingly being described as an organization, a separate – albeit large – group, and the 'Bibendum' tactic ran the risk of being associated exclusively with those activists. That's why we all decided not to wear the overalls in Genoa. Thus, it was only as a reference to a shared practice that the

marchers pouring out of the Carlini Stadium described themselves as ‘the disobedients’.

Then the *carabinieri* murdered Carlo Giuliani, and all demonstrations disbanded because of overwhelming police brutality. Thousands of people had to fight their way back to the stadium, like the Warriors gang returning to Coney Island.

That night we felt like pigeon-shooting targets. Everybody was scared, yet we had to respond and take the streets again. At that point, our only hope was that as many people as possible would come to Genoa to show their solidarity. The next day, 300,000 people turned up to save our sorry arses. They were not hardcore militants; the hardcore militants were already in town. They were ordinary people with progressive feelings, outraged by the carnage they’d seen on TV. We will be grateful to that multitude for as long as we live. That Saturday afternoon, we committed to never betray those people. Salvation lay in being open-minded, honest and comprehensible. Salvation lay in keeping away from sectarianism.

It was then that we instinctively started to work on a new mythologem, one that would imply the criticism of the previous ones: Genoa as Frankenhausem.

A guy eavesdropping our conversation asked: – Who the fuck is this Frank Enhausen you keep talking about?

Less than two months after Genoa came the terror attacks of September 11. The situation in the country and in the world got much tougher, and the metaphor of the ‘siege’ was turned upside down. In 2003 the Italian movement was already in a deep crisis. Not even mass mobilization against the war on Iraq could infuse new energy into its body. At last, it regressed to a marginal presence, a presence occupying the semantic space of traditional far-leftist discourse. The usual boring role played by boring rules. A bunch of ‘professional revolutionaries’ took over what was left, made all kinds of mistakes and proved to be immensely inadequate for the task. Fossilized sub-Leninist tac-

tics and strategies resurfaced. A lot of time and energy was dissipated in intra-group identity wars. Meetings became pathetic cockfights. The majority of sensitive, 'unregimented' activists (especially women) got bored and quit. We were among those who quit.

In the meanwhile, a self-professed vanguard of the *ex-tute bianche* had embarked on new projects that we regarded as grotesque, projects whose description is clearly beyond the scope of this text. The collaboration between us and that network had lasted little more than a year. So passes a glory of this world.

Since then, we have devoted our time and effort to tightening the bolts of our literary project, writing new novels and essays, and expanding our presence in culture and the cultural industry.

We didn't give up the struggle, far from it, but never again will we play Frankenstein with technified myths.

We keep going, and Don Durito's army of animals keep going, and no defeat is definitive, and hearts are still beating.

*July 2008–October 2009*