

**Why we Post**  
**(About ourselves)**

**An Arts-Based Approach to  
Autobiographical Acts in Social Media**

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**Thesis presented for the award of PhD**  
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**(2 Volumes)**

**Vol 1**



## Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Signed:

(Candidate)

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Date: July 2018

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# **Why we Post (About ourselves). An Arts-Based Approach to Autobiographical Acts in Social Media**

By Ester T. Roura

## **Abstract**

Since the popularization of social media new forms of life storytelling combining the textual and the visual have emerged challenging traditional notions of Autobiography. These ‘new autobiographies’ are micro-stories of the self, characterized by being both dialogical and performative in nature, and instead of constituting discreet units they can be studied in terms of feeds and within the context of other (everyday) ‘materialities’, including embodied experience. These autobiographical acts are social, historic, and culturally charged, and therefore they tell us as much about the person doing the ‘telling’ as they do about the culture and society where they occur.

This inquiry seeks insights as to why a group of mature adults, without previous diary writing habits, have come to actively engage in autobiographical acts on social media. The question is empirically investigated through an experimental ethnographically grounded Arts-based artefact. This device takes the form of a polyphonic narrative, informed by Mikhail Bakhtin’s Dialogism and Erwin Goffman’s Dramaturgical Model but also by notions of *bricolage*, the everyday and embodied experience.

This thesis argues that for the participants in the research, social media has organically become an integral part of their everyday life and one more of the grounds on which they produce, perform, negotiate, reproduce, and claim identity. Albeit aiming for coherence their acts resist any attempt at a fixed autobiography and become contingent on the context in which they are authored and manifested, including that of embodied experience. Their autobiographical acts are situated in a universe of continuums between online and embodied experience, the present and the past, fact and fiction, front-stage and backstage, and an ‘ideal’ and a ‘disrupted’ biography; sometimes these acts comply with cultural templates and social expectations and others resist compartmentalization while contributing to map the world we live in.

The study’s original contributions to knowledge are first and foremost that it has given voice to the participants in the research and second that, by incorporating the tenets of Ethnography and Narrative Inquiry into an Arts-based form, the research has achieved deeper insights into the question while highlighting issues that are relevant to the wider community. The inquiry is also a call to embrace the complexity of lived experience and to move on to more creative ways of doing research by putting the people we study at the centre of the inquiry as fully fleshed human beings instead of discreet bytes of ‘data.’

For Mala

# PROLOGUE

## Introduction to the Research and Research Question

“Well you might know ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘when’ and ‘how’ I committed those crimes but what you really are craving about is knowing WHY I did it, and this my friend, this is always a tricky question. So why did I do it? Let me think. Em...”

The assassin in *Mr. Mercedes* (2017-Ep-09).

I began to write a diary in my teens. My diary however was not the typical journal but more a sort of commonplace book. For example I didn't make daily entries but rather at the whim of the moment. Sometimes I wrote full-length pages and at other times cryptic verses or just onomatopoeic words. I glued photographs and train tickets into the white folios, and also stuffed them with stickers and postcards. I made drawings of things, people and maps, and I also had some celebrities' autographs, including one from Vladimir Tachenko (a Russian basketball player) of which I was very proud (Fig-1). Anything could go into that diary. It was my private record of the mundane. My diary entries were all headed by: “Hola Diari” (Catalan for ‘Hello Diary’) like as if the blank pages were capable of listening to the words and sundries I was feeding them with. It was like having a conversation with someone I could trust. I suppose I could draw a parallel between my ‘Hello Diary’ and the ‘Hello World’ so characteristic of the Internet personal pages, except



accommodation, food and sightseeing). Like I did in my teenage diary, I made drawings and glued tickets, postcards and photographs to the pages.

I signed into *Facebook* for the first time in 2007 and into other social media platforms, for example *Linkedin* or *Academia.edu*, gradually thereafter. Although in all of them I have a sort of profile picture, usually an illustration, I rarely post any image of myself. I have to admit that I have always had an ambivalent relationship with social media as a means of autobiographical disclosure/personal inquiry. Even in its early days I had the impression that social media, compared to my diary, although quite similar in many ways, was not exactly the same. With my diary I could ‘talk’ ‘one-to-one’ in an intimate ‘dialogued soliloquy.’ This conversation with myself through the medium of the diary, always took place at the ‘backstage’ where my private thoughts were safe. However in social media the ‘talk’ takes place ‘one-to-many’, ‘many-to-one’ and ‘many-to-many’, as a public affair. It happens at the front stage and under the lights. It is a performance.

Performances generate promises, and in return they expect applause. In my opinion social media, as a site for life writing, failed to provide the intimate ‘zone’ for self-reflection offered by the diary. However, this inquiry has proved me wrong in this assumption. For many of the participants in this study social media offered the ‘illusion of intimacy’ and that was enough to make them feel better about themselves and about the world. Furthermore, I have come to understand that autobiography is not necessarily a product of an individual author but rather a generic fusion in which personal memories of events appear knitted with historical and cultural memory and in this sense autobiography is always a public affair.



Today lives appear as never-ending streams of images and text, apparently fragmented, but when looked at it as a whole they can suggest a will for coherence. When we create a profile in social media the first thing we are asked to do is to post (upload and share) a picture of ourselves and say something about us. These two modes of representation (textual and visual) are expressions of our identity and biographical disclosures. They are small stories of the self and snippets of life publicly shared that have the potential to offer powerful insights into personal and societal issues. These stories, which I have named ‘autobiographical acts’, borrowing the term from Elizabeth Bruss (1979), are constituted for and in relation to others with whom the authors, it can be presumed, share the same cultural touchstones. This research is interested in investigating the function that these online self-disclosure practices play in people’s lives, what the purpose of this practice is from an autobiographical point of view, and what the perceived benefits are from the perspective of its practitioners.

Autobiographical acts involve people in a present moment trying to organize an ever-evolving life story through integrating a re-storied past and an idealized future in order to provide life with some sort of purpose. The clues to unlock identity can be explored in the contexts in which it is produced and reproduced, including embodied experience, the places we inhabit, and society. For the practitioners, ‘the others’ act as if they were the witnesses of an ‘I’ being in the world, like a mirror, therefore when they share their stories they speak as much to an audience as they speak to themselves. In this manner online autobiographical acts benefit from both the liberating qualities of spontaneous talk and the reflective quality of writing.

## ***The Research Question***

Any question, a research question for instance, probably says more about who poses it than about who answers. In current times, at least in this part of the world, a growing number of people are sharing their life stories online and more specifically in social media outlets. New technologies make it easier than ever to organize and groom the tale of a lifetime. But why bother at all? This research explores a group of mature adults' self-referencing posts in social media and *argues* that for them these posts constitute identity claims and coping strategies and that the insights arising from this practice constitute valuable contributions to the understanding of current personal and societal issues. The inquiry begins with the question as to *why* a group of people from this cohort engages in online self-disclosure and investigates the *purpose* and *perceived benefits* derived from this activity, from the point of view of its practitioners.

## ***Why Autobiographical Acts?***

At the outset, this research considers these acts of online disclosure as autobiographical and 'the autobiographical' as grounded in the ontologies and epistemologies of the self and ultimately as the attempt to answer the primeval philosophical question of "*Who am I?*" In the context of this study self-referencing posts in social media are micro renditions of life events geared towards an audience and in this sense they are situated around the notions of selfhood, identity, autobiography and performance and subsequently termed as '*autobiographical acts*', to borrow Elizabeth Bruss' (1979) denomination. Autobiographical acts are small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2007), micro plots, utterances, mood statuses or interjections, that take the form of creative (textual and visual)

composites (e.g. photographs with captions) collages or videos posted in social media sites (e.g. *Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Youtube*) and are as much self-reflective as they are performative (Goffman, 1959).

### ***Why Mature Adults?***

The interest in the topic began with perplexity around the proliferation of confessional accounts in social media, not necessarily by teenagers but by mature adults, all well in their late thirties and beyond (researcher's cohort). Above all there was puzzlement in the observation that, in the majority of cases, these adult practitioners had never considered writing a diary before the widespread use of social media technologies, and despite an initial lack of interest in life-writing, they were now positively sharing their lives online and with different degrees of intimacy. For an old 'teenage diarist' like myself this was, to say the least, intriguing. I needed to find out why. After delving into the topic of online identity and confessional practices, it also became apparent that the cohorts chosen for this study (mature adults) were underrepresented in the literature, which tends to privilege either younger cohorts (children and teenagers) or elderly populations. Inquiring into these apparently overlooked age groups could be useful to learn new insights that could help inform the bigger picture of the way(s) we live today.

### ***The overall Theoretical Framework***

Autobiographical acts are assemblages of representations of interpretations of life. They are dialogical in nature (Bakhtin, (1981[1975])); situated in the context of the everyday and

emerge at any point in a universe of continuums: between online and embodied experience (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Pink et al, 2016; Ellingson, 2017), the present and the past, fact and fiction, *front-stage* (public) and *backstage* (private) (Goffman, 1959), and an ‘ideal’ and an ‘arrested’ biography. These online self-referential posts are sets of signifying cultural practices in which the intersections of history, culture and the personal might be effectively negotiated by the ‘autobiographers’ and their audiences (Bakhtin, op cit, Plummer, 1995). Sometimes these acts comply with cultural and societal templates and expectations and others resist compartmentalization while contributing to map the world we live in.

### ***Research Design and Methodology***

The question is *first* investigated through a literature review of different concepts of selfhood and identity informing autobiographical acts in social media. In this research autobiographical acts in social media are considered non-canonical renditions of Autobiography, understood as a genre belonging to Literature. Instead they are positioned, and historically contextualized, among a long tradition of creative self-referencing practices originating in the visual and performance arts but also in everyday social interaction. *Secondly* the question is empirically explored through an ethnographically grounded arts-based artefact that incorporates the tenets of Ethnography, Narrative Inquiry and Arts-based research into a narrative device called: the *polyphonic artefact*. The device is intended for the dynamic investigation of this practice and from the point of view of their practitioners. The function of the artefact is to unveil insights that might be overlooked through more traditional methods of research.

## ***The Polyphonic Artefact***

This device, which is experimental, takes the form of a polyphonic narrative, informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's (op cit) Dialogism and Erwin Goffman's (op cit) Dramaturgical Model but also by notions of *bricolage* (Levy-Strauss, 1966[1962]) the everyday, and embodied experience, while giving voice to the participants in the research. The polyphonic artefact is a dynamic rendition of what Geertz (1973, 1988) calls 'thick description.' The narrative device gathers the voices of the participants in the inquiry in composite characters inhabiting different scenarios (N=33) curated by the researcher. The researcher plays the role of the ghostwriter of their lives but the characters are the ones doing the talking. This strategy intentionally avoids the voice of the omniscient narrator, which is reserved for the exegesis (Vol 1), and therefore allows for the characters (participants) to bring their own analysis and interpretations to the research. The vignettes make sense as a single plot but they can also be read separately. At least that was the intention.

## ***Why Arts-based Research?***

Arts-based studies are methodological calls and 'texts' intending to leave an impression in a different space (Pelias, 2004:11). Therefore following the traditional linear structure of a thesis with the sequence: Introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion and conclusions poses a challenge because in this 'space' everything is weaved together in a complex tapestry. Nevertheless this document is an attempt to give some linear structure to a multilayered topic. In the artefact however, theory and method have come together with artistic inquiry. In the narration the creative process has worked in ways that cannot

be labelled either as theory or method because they are situated at the in-between, partaking and contributing to the building of knowledge of both, and therefore making difficult, if not impossible, the task of drawing a clean cut separation between them.

### ***Contributions to Knowledge***

The original contributions to knowledge brought by this study are first and foremost that it has given voice to the participants in the research and secondly that, by incorporating the tenets of Ethnography and Narrative Inquiry into an Arts-based form has achieved deeper insights into the question. The artefact, by opening the access to the backstage context of production of the autobiographical act, has unveiled everyday issues at the micro-level that can also be relevant for the wider community and which are still in need of a serious conversation, for example ageism and ventriloquism.

In contrast with scholarship on online identity favouring the study of social media platforms and their affordances, this research *de-centers* (sidelines) the media and considers autobiographical acts as discreet units that can be also studied in terms of feeds instead of discreet units and within the context of other (everyday) ‘materialities’, including embodied experience.

The inquiry is also a call to embrace the complexity of lived experience and to move on to more creative ways of doing research by for example putting the people we study at the centre of the inquiry as fully fledged human beings instead of discreet bytes of

‘data.’ It considers shifting the focus from ‘finding’ things to perhaps critically interpreting them (Markham, 2013b), while accepting the impossibility of explaining the whole of any situation and therefore also the possibility that some things are inexplicable, which may be a good thing.

### ***Thesis Guide and Chapter Outline***

The thesis is organized in two volumes. *Volume 1* is an exegesis and *Volume 2* is the polyphonic artefact, that is to say the ‘grounded fiction.’ It is the prerogative of the reader to decide the reading order of the thesis, however, there is no harm in pointing out that chapters 3 to 5, together with the artefact (Vol 2), work well as a unit independently from the rest of the dissertation (Chapters 1 and 2), which serve to further contextualize the practice-based inquiry, *first* historically, and *second* in relation to current literature on online identity. Chapter 5, which is the denouement of the insights gained with the research, works better read after the artefact, although the reader can always refer to the particular vignettes following the path of the discussion.

Regarding the artefact it has been mentioned previously that it works as a full plot but the vignettes can also be read individually. However, there is a caveat: as the device tries to mimic the flows of the Internet, the narrative is multilayered and the chronology reversed, with the exception of the prologue and the epilogue. Furthermore the narrative appears nested at times (Chinese boxes), and jumps into ‘timespace’ and ‘dreamscape’ loopholes at others. The full details of the artefact are deployed in Chapter 4. The following sections outline the chapters of the dissertation.

## ***Chapter 1: Authoring Ourselves***

This chapter attempts to define the autobiographical and situates autobiographical acts in social media in relation to notions of selfhood and identity. It reviews conceptualizations of the self and identity that are useful for understanding current renditions of the autobiographical in social media. In this research autobiographical acts are considered non-canonical renditions of the autobiographical, traditionally understood as a genre belonging to the discipline of Literature. They have been defined as creative practices combining the textual and the visual in which individuals claim and perform identity and in this sense they expand beyond Literature and enter the domains of the visual and performance arts and the social, including social media. There are three agents involved in the autobiographical act: 1) the authors or producers, which in the case of this study are a group of mature adults; 2) the coaxers or agent provocateurs of the story; and 3) the audiences, which with their co-presence, assessment and demands influence the autobiographical act as much as they are influenced by it.

Since the traditional print format, the boundaries of the autobiographical have evolved and have become blurred. Autobiographical accounts appear today in the form of personal pages or blogs and social media microblogs. However, autobiographical acts are much older than that and can be traced back as far as cave paintings. If selfhood and identity remain highly contested topics, there are as many autobiographically styled works as historical fashions and possible autobiographers. Nevertheless these acts share some commonalities through history. For instance there are simultaneous practices for interrogating the self and creative works that obey to a ‘will-to-form’ and a ‘will-to-tell’ and they are also characterized by personal reflection, memoir and life storytelling.



## ***Chapter 2: Authoring Ourselves in Social Media***

The chapter begins by reflecting on the difficulty of keeping pace with the literature dealing with social media and identity. It notes that new technologies of the self are constantly evolving and at an unprecedented pace. Due to its popularity, both social media and the literature about social media appear ever larger in scope. The literature is dynamic and fluid and therefore constantly changing shape according to economic and socio-political factors and cultural fashions. This chapter discusses three pioneering experiments of autobiographical disclosure, which can explain, in part, the allure of the Internet as a preferred site for ‘confessing’ or ‘sharing’ a life. The cases chosen are *Eliza*, a natural language computer program created in MIT in the early 1960’s, *JenniCam* (Jennifer Ringley) as the very first cam girl in history back in 1996, and *Quiet. We live in Public*, an art project created in the late 1990’s by dot.com entrepreneur and visionary Josh Harris.

A subsequent section in the chapter defines social media and its possibilities for the autobiographical followed by a brief discussion on the nature of online identity and its implications for the autobiographical. Further consideration is given to autobiographical acts and in relation to privacy, self-presentation and impression management, behavioral norms and cultures of taste. Finally the discussion moves away from early notions of technological determinism and pleads for identities and technology as being in constant movement, co-evolving and interacting with socio-political, economical and cultural scenarios.

### ***Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology***

The chapter begins unfolding the purpose and rationale for the study through a reprise of the research question and the issue of mature adults being underrepresented in the literature. Having noticed that the majority of studies concerned with social media in the Social Sciences were mostly based in content and discourse analysis methods, although not exclusively, a methodological gap is discussed regarding more innovative ways to approach online identity. The next section unravels the details of the iterative research design, which for clarity is divided in four phases, culminating in the Arts-based artefact. *Phase 1* was a literature review and a historical survey of non-canonical forms of autobiography. *Phase 2* a pilot study with N=5 participants in order to ‘test the terrain.’ In *Phase 3* ethnographical methods such as in-depth interviews, photo elicitation and focus groups, are reviewed and discussed in relation to the data set. Finally *Phase 4* refers to the implementation of Narrative Inquiry and Arts-based research into the polyphonic artefact.

The next section in the chapter deals with ethical considerations on doing research involving humans and the process of obtaining approval from the university Ethical Committee. Fieldwork best practices in relation to ethnographical inquiry follows. Then another segment is dedicated to the process and methods of selection of the participants, their demographics and social media habitus and the settings where the rapport and the interviews took place. A final section in the chapter is dedicated to balance the advantages and limitations of an arts-based research design and takes into consideration issues at a micro-level, such as the particularities of submitting this type of research for a PhD and whether traditional dissertation formats are suitable.

#### ***Chapter 4: The Polyphonic Artefact***

This chapter offers a detailed account of the content, structure and theoretical underpinnings of the *polyphonic artefact*, which is a storied form that can be best described as a ‘virtual reality’ or ‘grounded fiction.’ The first section discusses how the frameworks of Bakhtinian Dialogism and Goffman’s Dramaturgical Model have worked in synergy with notions of the everyday and embodied experience to inform the artefact, while situating it in a context of struggles between the producers of the autobiographical act, the agents’ provocateurs and the audiences.

The next section discusses the dramatic elements of the artefact such as plot, the use of time and space, dreams and symbolism and the individual voices of the composite characters, including that of the researcher. The voices are examined in their purpose and actions within the story and in what they accomplish for the research. A section discussing issues surrounding the ‘order of facts’ and the ‘order of fiction’ and their significance for this study follows. Finally, the last piece of the chapter poses some questions regarding problems derived from censorship and ownership of data, when what constitutes ‘data’ are the accounted life experiences of real people, which have been ‘gifted’ for the purpose of the research.

#### ***Chapter 5: Insights in Place of Findings and Conclusions. The Voice of the Researcher***

This chapter uses the voice of the researcher to present the insights arising from the artefact that are relevant to the question of what autobiographical acts accomplish for their practitioners, and to what extent they can contribute to inform and reflect on the world we live in today. The insights are organized in four sections. The *first* section deals with the idea of de-centering social media and situating online autobiographical acts as dialogically

constructed and performed, interwoven with everyday embodied experience and in a universe of continuums. It notes that users see social media more as communicative environments in which they flow from platform to platform in a polymedia scenario rather than discreet technologies with particular affordances. The *second* part discusses autobiographical acts as dialogically constituted and performed for an audience and explores the notions of ventriloquism (paradoxical appropriation of identity discourses); *bricolage* (autobiographical acts as assemblages based in abundance and remix); social media norms and etiquette, prosthetic memories (memories fabricated from content appearing in the media) and extraordinary events (a life presented in function of what is ‘tellable’ as opposed to what it is). *Thirdly* autobiographical acts are discussed regarding their position in a continuum between an ‘ideal’ and an ‘arrested’ biography. On the positive side of the continuum celebratory practices and ‘digital mantelpieces’ function as ‘rites of passage’ while tactics for increasing visibility and clout are examined in the context of a meritocratic scenario which privileges success and rejects failure. On the other side of the continuum autobiographical acts are discussed as strategies for coping with bodies in crisis: death and grieving, illness, old age and trauma and the end of youth. Finally, part *four* deals with autobiographical acts as acts of resistance under the Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque and the grotesque.

# CHAPTER 1

## AUTHORING OURSELVES

*"Know Thyself"*

Circa 2000 BC, engraved in a wall in Apollo's temple at Delphi

"We shape our tools and then our tools shape us"

Marshall McLuhan

When we give an account of ourselves in autobiographical terms, either in conversation, in writing or with other forms of expression, we engage in a process of biographical remembering organized into a narrative styled in cultural models (Bruner, 1990). Through autobiography we make sense of our experiences while our identity as authors is being articulated, examined, transformed and reaffirmed in the process. Many people through the centuries have rendered different expressions of the autobiographical. The sketched scenes left on a cave wall, the three hundred pages filled with words of Maya Angelou's *I know why the Caged Birds Sing* (2009[1969]) or Nan Goldin's collection of self-portraits in which she pictures her everyday struggles with domestic violence are obviously extremely contrasting acts of autobiography, nevertheless they all share a will to understand through the use of expressive devices (e.g. language, paint, photography).

Autobiography as a genre with a capital 'A' was appropriated by the discipline of literature and flourished after the invention of the printing press (Heehs, 2013). But since the traditional print format the boundaries of the literary genre have evolved and have

become blurred. Autobiographical accounts have moved into the visual and performance arts and lately have entered the digital domain in the form of personal pages, blogs and social media microblogs (Smith & Watson, 2001a, 2005; Steiner & Yang, 2004; Poletti & Rak, 2014; Rettberg, 2014). However, autobiographical acts are much older than that. Since the cave men our species have conveyed the autobiographical through different means. Although in antiquity personal stories were the prerogative of the wealthy and powerful and were displayed in public spaces as monuments to history, autobiographical acts also encountered a place in the arts in the form of self-portraits, and in the everyday in material displays of taste such as home mantelpieces, fashion, or in Victorian social gatherings in which personal accounts were shared aloud with others (Heehs, op cit).

This inquiry is interested in non-canonical autobiographical forms: visual texts and combinations of the textual and the visual dynamically deployed in ‘other spaces’, different from literature, and particularly on social media sites. These autobiographies, take the form of small stories about the self, produced in interaction, which don’t necessarily follow a linear narrative. Instead they can be approached backwards, sideways and in parallel and with less emphasis on a traditional chronology (Da Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2011). These forms of life storytelling are creative autobiographical forms with an accent on performance, in constant dialogue with otherness (others, history, culture) and they can take as many potential shapes as imaginable self-identities. In this scenario contemporary forms of autobiographical practice constitute essential modes of individualist agency (Mascuch, 1997) but in dialogue with their context of production, which in turn influences as much as it is influenced by them (Bourdieu, 1995; Bakhtin, op cit; Plummer, 1995). This inquiry refers to these ‘genres’ of the autobiographical as *autobiographical acts*,

borrowing the name from Elizabeth Bruss (1979). By choosing this nomenclature this research deliberately positions these autobiographies between ‘reflective acts’ and ‘performances’ and therefore between the private and the public, while situating them in relation to the context in which they are produced and reproduced (history, culture, society), including embodied experience.

This chapter explores the constitution of identity in autobiography as a complex difficult subject in a world where self-knowledge can only ever be a situational and contingent aspiration. It begins with an attempt to define autobiography and autobiographical acts and reviews theoretical concepts that are relevant to this inquiry while opening up the exploration of unconventional and contemporary expressions of the autobiographical in relation to available technologies. It also introduces social media as the preferred contemporary site for authoring the self, which will be discussed in more detail in a subsequent chapter. In this chapter, online autobiographical acts are situated as practices rooted in the ontologies and epistemologies of the self and also in history and cultural memory. It suggests the importance of looking into the conditions in which the autobiographical is produced and reproduced in order to understand the work and its author, and by extension the community to which he or she belongs. By acknowledging the different ‘languages’ of the autobiographical we might understand what has motivated it and relate to and be moved by it.

## 1.1- Attempting to define the Autobiographical

Since time immemorial humanity has been authoring the self in the form of cultural artefacts: paint, sculpture, architecture, writing, musical compositions, photographs, documentary and film. It has done so from the cradle to the grave and from the cave to the Internet. One of the most remarkable expressions of this ‘will to form’ is the first person account organized around a life timeline known as ‘autobiography.’ In Greek, *autos* means self, *bios* life, and *graphos* to scratch, write, record, draw or describe. Together, these words denote oneself-life-expression/representation. Autobiography can then be defined as the story of a person’s life, written and/or pictured by him/herself. French theorist Philippe Lejeune (1971) expands this definition to a retrospective narrative that someone makes of his/her own experience, placing the emphasis on his/her life and the history of his/her personality. In this sense, the *bios* becomes situational in an ongoing process of reflection (Smith & Watson, 2001b). For sociologist Alan Girard (1963) the autobiographical text tells us more about the ‘image’ or the ‘plan’ of the self rather than the thing itself. In this scenario, the author projects an image with readers (or audiences) in mind in a sort of dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981 [1975]).

A good example of the previous is the first person narrator in Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* (2009[1864]) which begins his account by telling the reader how unattractive but intelligent he is, and that in spite of his reclusive existence, sometimes he experiences epiphanies about the sublime things of the world and needs to tell someone about it. His narration is dialogical. It takes the form of a retort in which he makes a claim and then imagines the reader responding. Of course he himself is the one filling the



reader's lines, just like children do with imaginary friends or adults 'rehearsing' conversations. When the first part of his autobiography draws to a close, the author explains that he doesn't have any readers but that he will always have an imaginary audience. There is further suggestion that first-person writings (or indeed self-reporting using any media) are tools of self-construction: "not just accounts of what happened but ways of moulding the stuff of the past into models of what the writers wish to be" (Heehs, 2013:6). From this perspective, "writing an account of one's life is an act of self-creation" (ibid).

Traditionally, autobiography has been considered a genre belonging to the discipline of Literature and therefore tied to narrative. Making sense through narration remains at the basis of the construction of identity as claimed by psychological studies on *dysnarrativia* (impossibility to engage with stories) in which the condition impairs the sense of selfhood (Bruner, 2003:86). This research argues that autobiography, or at least acts of autobiography, can expand beyond literature and enter the domains of the visual arts and that of social interaction. In this mindset, activities in which people engage in order to reflect, show and tell about their lives to others, for example in conversation or in social media, can be considered autobiographical acts. This kind of autobiography as seen here goes beyond a linear narrative, it is dialogical and therefore performative and it is as private as it is a social practice.

The debate as to what constitutes autobiography started with the dilemma posed by the blurring of the boundaries of a genre evolving from the more traditional print format of the book, to autobiographical installations and performances by artists (Smith & Watson, 2001a), to later digital personal pages and now micro-blogging in social media. But non-

literary manifestations of the autobiographical are much, much older than that and some examples will be given in this chapter. Autobiographical books, journals, memoirs, diaries, blogs, documentaries, art installations, the story of a life told in an interview, Big Brother disclosures, posts, tweets, and so on can all be considered genres of the autobiographical. Although there is a fair amount of variety and overlap between them, all share the same concern for ‘me’ or ‘I’ as the main character of a story or utterance. Autobiographical inquiry begins necessarily with amnesia (a gap) and develops with subjectivity. Autobiographical subjectivity involves the processes of memory, experience, identity, place, embodiment and agency (Smith & Watson, 2001b). In the process of research, the fragmentary nature of subjectivity imposes its rules. After all, the object and the subject of the autobiography are both the same and not the same self. There are many plots to be told about a lifetime and many different storytelling occasions in which the whole enterprise calls for contextually designed and radically divergent narratives of identity (ibid).

### ***1.1.1- Autobiography as Grounded in the Ontologies and Epistemologies of the Self***

We might think that a simple definition of autobiography is that of a ‘self’ attempting to constitute ‘himself’. However ‘self’ is a philosophical category that has experienced various conceptualizations along the history of philosophical thought. Notions of selfhood and identity have significantly shifted along with historical periods influenced by and influencing the ways we perceive, construct and showcase identity as individuals and as social human subjects. In Classical Greece Plato, Aristotle and the Materialistic Atomists

planted the seeds for future theories about the self in the western world and further milestones were laid later by the Christian Churches and Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy until the XVII century, when a major changeover from philosophical and religious conceptualizations of the self gave way to social and scientific notions of personal identity. This trend has continued until the present day incorporating insights from Anthropology, Psychology and other disciplines within the Humanities and Social Sciences such as Cultural Studies or Queer Theory (Martin & Barresi, 2008).

The self has been challenged by 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers on the lines of Foucault and Derrida that have problematized the very existence of a personal identity by positioning the self in the field of discourse. The self by falling apart through postmodern deconstruction has also created the possibility for fiction. Therefore, historically constituted and finally set into pieces, one might think that the self has become pure subjectivity, ontologically different from the body, and a form rather than a substance that constitutes itself through fashioning practices (or technologies of the self) that are initially proposed, suggested or imposed by culture and society (Foucault, 1988a). However, and as we will see in this dissertation, it is neither one nor the other but both as sensory embodied experience that have also a role to play in the constitution of selfhood and the stories we tell about ourselves. The ‘visions’ of the self and identity are many and varied but looking at history what transpires is that the self remains at the centre of human preoccupation, as if it was some sort of *demiurge* (or device) capable of filling whatever humankind’s void is.

What history also tells us is that, and despite the persistent effort to make a single case for the self, this is proving to be an impossible task. At the onset, this research considers the autobiographical as grounded in the ontologies and epistemologies of the self

and ultimately as the attempt to answer the primeval philosophical question of “Who am I?” Historically, different philosophical concepts of individuality have contributed to the formulation of self-referencing discourses in autobiography but the presentation of an exhaustive survey falls outside the scope of this document and research, which is interested in contemporary renditions of the autobiographical. As previously noted the notion of autobiography explored in this inquiry is not restricted to the conventional parameters of the literary genre: textual linear life story or narrative told by an authoritative (and apparently ‘objective’) author, who is simultaneously object and subject of the autobiographical act (Steiner & Yang, 2004). Instead it takes autobiography as a practice grounded in the everyday sensory embodied experience and also as a field of significance, to use Bourdieu’s expression (1995), in which various discourses meet together in unconventional modes of representation that are to mirror less what an individual was than what he or she is becoming through the autobiographical act.

## **1.2- Autobiographical Acts**

Elizabeth Bruss (1979) coined the notion of ‘autobiographical acts’ and situated them in the context of a story told in time and place. This research takes this concept and re-situates it in a social media scenario in which the autobiographical is a self-referential act geared towards others and therefore is as much a performance (Goffman, 1959) as it is a generic fusion of representations of the self rooted in individual and cultural memory. These autobiographical acts are dialogically produced and reproduced (Bakhtin, (1981[1975]) in a universe of continuums (Erikson, 1980; McAdams et al 2006) between present and past, fact and fiction (Josselson, 1995), and online and offline embodied

experience (Miller, 2016; Pink et al. 2016; Ellingson, 2017).

Autobiographical acts are small stories, statements or utterances of the self. They can be about life events or emotional states and they are expressed either online or through other materialities: the body, a poem, a film, an art installation or a photograph. Social media posts for example and according to Di Fraia are “extroversions of psychological processes, through which every human being constantly produces and reproduces his identity” (2005:36). The autobiographical act is also rhetorical, engaged in an inquiry about identity, which is addressed to an audience and is anything but transparent (Smith & Watson, 2001b). Through autobiographical acts individuals often engage strategically in different pleas of the self expressed under social categories such as gender, ethnicity or age. For Bruss (op cit) individual sensibilities conveyed in autobiographical acts are shaped by the cultural context they inhabit. The story is always a ‘symbolic interaction’ (Mead, 1934) with the world, historically and culturally specific. For Plummer (1995) there are always at least three agents involved in the autobiographical act: the producer, the agent provocateurs and the audiences. I will come back to this point.

Specific examples of autobiographical acts are written diaries or journals, common place books, personal pages and blogs and when moving to the outskirts of the written language: home mantelpieces, textual and visual composites so frequent in social media, blogs, vlogs and any sort of self-referential work of art that can be found in art galleries and streets. Autobiographical acts can also take the form of stage performances, including TV interviews and reality shows; and if pushed, we can find expressions of the self almost anywhere, for example in the clothing we decide to wear or in the ‘I’ stories we share in conversation. Social media has become an archive of the everyday, although

autobiographical posts, when looked at it individually, might seem deceptively simple, even bland, in some cases taking a peek at the overall, as the empirical part of this study indicates, can betray an extraordinary ambition: that of figuring out what it is to be in one's own skin, or maybe what it is to be human.

The problem with biographical experience is that it is not a 'thing' we can find in isolation and to which we can go back and find it exactly as it was and where it was; it is rather an occasion which it is retrieved (or re-enacted) through the autobiographical act. Biography, is best understood as a series of events that are limited in space and time and happening in interaction with other events and objects, almost like particles in quantum physics that can only exist in collision with other particles. An embrace or a kiss at a birthday party are not discreet things we can describe in isolation because they can only exist in relation to bodies, to the greetings and gifts, the birthday cake or to the music at the party. Indeed in quantum theory particles can only exist, and therefore have meaning, when they hit something else.

### ***1.2.1 – Autobiographical Acts as Meaning Making Strategies***

Henry Murray (1938) and Alfred Adler (1964) suggested that the life of the subject has the structure of a story. They claimed that to be a person means to have history. Dan McAdams (1997) approached identity and personality through a narrative/dialogical conceptualization of the self as containing a multitude of selves in constant dialogue with each other. As per Erik Erikson (1980), identity involves knowing oneself and fitting into society. Hence a personal story should be developed in a way that satisfies both individual and social demands. This task is facilitated by role models (knowing what is expected from

oneself) and by *rites of passage*, for example from childhood to adulthood such as the Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the Jewish tradition, the 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday party or the school prom. Without this support the question of “Who am I?” can become a burden. Not knowing who one is might lead to disorientation and temporary identities like, for example, in the case of adolescents. After a period of ‘extended’ rite of passage in which the person tries on different identities, the adolescent is able to overcome his ‘identity crisis’ and enter adulthood.

Extending Erikson’s theory, McAdams (op cit) argues that this task does not end with the passing from adolescence to adulthood but that it spans until the end of life. Hence the self is in crisis on an ongoing basis. For McAdams the self engages in a continuous process of creation of personal myths in order to make sense of its life. Accordingly identity is a construction of a continuously evolving personal myth that integrates a re-storied past, a perceived present and what is expected from the future in order to procure a sense of unity and purpose. We are the stories we tell and according to the same author the period of childhood sets the narrative tone of the story. The child is exposed to his caregivers’ narratives and characterizations and will juggle with that until he forms a personal myth (McAdams, op cit). Then, similar to the Aristotelian (1920[circa 335 BC]) dramatic formula, the myth is constructed through nuclear episodes (plots), with highs and lows and turning points indicating progression, continuity and change in the self. Tellingly many of the participants alluded to their childhood as the anchor point from which the majority of their life ‘ruling principles’ stemmed.

Kenneth Gergen (1991) also sees the self or identity as the result of a life story in which the meanings have been negotiated with and the actions contributed by others.

Similarly Hermans, Kempen & Rijks (1993) building from James's (1918[1890]) make a distinction between 'I' and 'me', and Bakhtin's (1984[1972]) theory of the Polyphonic Novel, which will be further discussed in Chapter 4, and in the context of the empirical part of this study, conceptualize the *dialogical self*. In this account each 'me' in James, who is not an 'I' but a point of view in relation to the other, becomes a character in Bakhtin's polyphonic novel. Thus the self is authored in a continuous dialogue of embodied voices that are expressed as emerging from a personal position in relation to others.

For Ricoeur (in Gratton & Gifford, 2000) the self is a character in one's own story. In this sense, in an autobiographical context, self and author are in constant dialectical relation. Daniel Dennett (1991b) and later Gottschall (2012) claimed that humans are storytelling animals. We tell stories in everyday practices and in fiction. We learn how to fit in society, how to behave, how to plan and anticipate our actions through stories. Stories are 'forms' that give us the fabric of our world. According to Sir Herbert Read, the work of creating any sort of 'form' "is the measure of humanity's spiritual vision" (1972[1931]: 267). When that vision is communal it becomes religion, myth or ideology. When someone, an artist or anyone, creatively produces a drawing, a piece of writing, a photograph, a painting, a performance or a speech, that instance takes the tone, tempo and intensity from the community which the author is part of. But there is more than that; there is also an individual 'will-to-form.' The will-to-form is an "effort to order the world into meaning" (Burrell, 2013: 8).

There was a time when autobiographical acts were the prerogative of the affluent and mighty who, by this gesture, would 'set in stone' their own story and by doing so what



was to be constituted as history. They would do that with three concerns in mind: *first* to show their grandeur to subordinates and enemies, *second* to save themselves from oblivion and *third*, to make sure that the ‘right’ tale was told. Today we call it ‘alternative facts’<sup>1</sup>. These powerful warlords would surround themselves by scribes and artists commissioned to ‘translate’ their voice and desires into ‘matters of fact.’ Usually the support materials would have been ‘tangibles’ such as stone, metal, timber, papyrus and wool for the visual representations and wax, vellum and later paper for the textual. The tools that would inflict the stories into the hard and soft materials would vary depending on availability of resources and innovation. Interestingly with the invention of touch screens time seems to have gone back to the old wax tablets. But the warlords would also use ‘intangibles’ such as pulpit speeches or oral fables and legends about their epic quests.

In the domestic sphere we can account for private/public displays such as ancient Roman *Lares* and *Penates*, which were collections of small objects, including god-like figurines representing protective spirits that were cherished in the household and venerated by family and visitors. It can be said that *Lares* and *Penates* were the equivalent of contemporary mantelpieces. Every detail in a mantelpiece tells a story. A mantelpiece is the closest thing to a shrine of the everyday. Every single object has a provenance and a specific associated meaning, sometimes related to people or to other pieces in the same display. Every gadget or composition contains an intention and will-to-tell. Every arrangement is a narrated story (and a performance) in which the private self is manifested in everyday physical (or digital) artefacts representing slices of lived experience. Stories

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<sup>1</sup> Kellyanne Conway, US Councillor to President Trump, used this phrase during the Meet the Press interview on January, 22, 2017 to defend White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer in his discrepancies regarding the number of attendees at the President Inauguration.

and objects (material or digital) are projections of the self that “inhabit the intersection of the personal and the social” (Hurdley, 2006: 717).

The creations of each period tend to reflect mainstream or ruling ideologies. Levi-Strauss (in Berger, 2008:86 [1972]), reflecting on Renaissance art collections, argued that for instance the collection of paintings in a Florentine palace represented the recreated microcosm of the features of the world to which the owner of the collection was attached. Similarly, and in a contemporary scenario big data artist Jonathan Harris (2007), argues that the stories people tell about themselves on the Internet are manifestations of their preoccupations and a reflection of the times. He has been collecting life experiences from the Internet for many years now (although lately he has switched to a face-to-face mode) and building (software) tools to facilitate ordinary people to fulfil this human ‘natural’ inclination to make sense. He thinks that people are actually very similar but we have problems in seeing that. When we look at the world we see many gaps and the gaps are what defines us, he continues. There are language gaps, racial gaps, gender gaps, wealth and education gaps and religious gaps. “We like our gaps because they make us feel that we identify with something” (op cit, min: 0:40). Something bigger than ourselves, it could be argued.

Despite all these gaps the one thing we have in common is a very deep need to express ourselves. But the thing about self-expression is that there is traditionally been this imbalance between the desire that we have to express ourselves and the number of sympathetic friends who are willing to stand around and listen. (op cit, min 1:28).

Harris claims that the way we try to correct this imbalance is by creating. We make things that would take the textual form of a poem or caption, we paint or take photographs, we sing or compose musical pieces or we dance. Even gossiping is a creative avenue. This

is nothing new. What is new is that most of these acts of self-expression and self-understanding have moved to the Internet. “People have been leaving behind footprints, footprints that tell stories, their moments of self-expression” (op cit, min: 1:54). Harris has been writing programs that collect large sets of these digital footprints in order to draw conclusions on the thoughts, feelings and fears of the people who posted them.

Harris’s datasets are visually striking. Using the old school Anthropology strategy of passive observation his software *black boxes* lurk for ‘honest stories’ among blogs and social media statuses. This inquiry shares with Harris the aim of collecting stories of the self although the approach is quite different. After collecting hundreds of thousands of life stories Harris realized that the same archetypical events and feelings were depicted over and over. With some cultural differences it was all about weddings, parties, births, bereavements, graduations, first car (or horse), first kiss, happiness, sadness, love, heartbreak, loneliness, and so on.

### ***1.2.2 – Autobiographical Acts as Cultural Memory***

In the early 1980’s, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha started her autobiographical work *Dictee* (1982) with the following words: “*Pour quoi aller a la ligne?*” (Why to follow a straight line?). *Dictee* is structured in nine parts corresponding to nine Greek muses. Each part consists of references to the Classical characters and texts, descriptions about her personal struggle to voice her thoughts, captioned photographs, quotes from other people and apparently random letters. In this memoir Cha, who is an experienced performer and videographer, seems to borrow techniques from avant-garde film and theatre in making stylistic choices such as visual exposition, jagged cuts and jump shots (Anlin-Cheng, 2001)

to compose the story of a life that challenges any genre or style, resisting interpretation and labelling (Yi Kang et al, 1994). In a way her work pioneers the development of strategies that will become commonplace in contemporary life stories featuring on the Internet and specifically in social media, a model which is also replicated in the artefact (e.g intertextuality, abundance and remix).

Barthes in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1988, [1975]) explores the mystery of being both the subject and the object of an (im)possible autobiographical discourse. In this work he defines a new autobiographical strategy. It constitutes a self-portrait that refers not to the author but to the text as text, text that as it evolves, becomes the active context of previous texts in a Bakhtinian sense. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) coined the notion of *Heteroglossic Dialogism* to refer to the multiplicity of lingos through which subjectivity is enunciated. This approach applies for example to autobiographical subjects whose cultural origins or allegiances are multiple and conflicted (e.g. ‘gay’ in the case of Barthes, or ‘migrant’ in Theresa H.K. Cha’s). Heteroglossic Dialogism contests the notion of a monological, lone and introspective autobiographical subject. Bakhtin’s concept is very useful because it enables more flexible readings and inclusive approaches to autobiographical works. I will expand on this in Chapters 4 and 5 and in the context of the empirical ‘data.’ What should be taken from this is that if life accounts are constructions, and therefore creative acts obtained through the sum and recombination of multiple ‘texts’, then the autobiographical act acquires the aspect of a creative inquiry and a cultural artefact (Smith & Watson, 2001b: 125).

According to Nancy Miller, in the work *But Enough About Me* (2002), autobiography—and specifically memoir—are types of cultural memory. Autobiographical

acts are characterized by the use of the personal as a reflection of and as a construction of the self; however and simultaneously, the personal also forms part of a search for community and therefore is ascribed to a social context. In this sense autobiographical acts benefit from cultural memory, in that they include material aspects (such as texts or works of art) as much as social and personal aspects (such as practices or customs, thoughts, and emotions). The Bakhtinian framework of Dialogism can be seen at the root of Miller's argument. The implications of this idea for the storying of embodied experience into autobiographical accounts are then clear, as Max Saunders puts it: autobiography is a "generic fusion: instead of providing the greatest generic purity relying only on an act of memory for its source, [...] auto-biographers quote, copy, and re-style others' works" (2010:24). Therefore, autobiographical acts can be used as routes into cultural memory. Following this argument, the narrative device presented in the empirical part of this inquiry and which is set to explore the participants' own 'generic fusions', incorporates the same notion into its fabric. The polyphonic artefact is a construction that absorbs and recombines elements gathered from social media, field notes, interviews, conversations, news reports and cultural manifestations (such as direct quotes, references, or whole stories) and distorts settings and characters in order to '(dis)figure-out' what-has-happened but also to 'make a point' in a Labovian sense (2006).

Furthermore Birgit Neumann talks about 'fictions of memory' when individuals or cultures tell stories about their past intended to answer the questions: "Who am I?" or "Who are we?" "More often than not, they [life accounts] turn out to be an imaginative (re)construction of the past in response to current needs" (2005:10). "Life writing," she continues, "combine[s] the real and the imaginary, the remembered and the forgotten, and,

by means of narrative devices, imaginatively explore[s] the workings of memory, this offering new perspectives on the past” (ibid). Writing one’s own story requires ‘reading’ one’s own experience(s) within a context and then formulating and structuring it, creating coherence through a process of finding the relationships capable of connecting themes, while articulating them through language or other means. How then does this come to play in the autobiographical act? In Chapters 4 and 5 I shall try to answer this question empirically and in the context of the polyphonic artefact.

### ***1.2.3 – Autobiographical Acts as Performances***

George Herbert Mead saw the individuals as ‘coming to being’ or ‘becoming’ through interaction with others. In his theory known as *Symbolic Interactionism* human beings tend to ‘interpret’ and ‘define’ each other’s actions instead of merely reacting to them. Their response is thus based on the ‘meaning’ they attribute to these actions (Mead, 1934). Therefore, human interaction is ‘mediated’ by the use of [cultural] ‘symbols’ and their ‘interpretation’. Mead saw the self not in terms of a mind or a substance separated from the body but as something developing from a process of social interaction in which each individual aligns his actions to the actions of others while ascertaining their intentions. This is to say by comprehending the meaning of the others’ acts, the individual aligns his own action (Blummer, 1998).

In the game of playing social roles, individuals view themselves from the point of view of others. By attaining a ‘generalized other’ the individual reaches self-consciousness, and this is crucial to understand the massive engagement in social media.

For Mead, the game is an instrument of social control in which the individual functions and determines himself. Since society allows for many generalized others, individuals can relate to many different others at different times. “In theory there is no limit to the individual’s capacity to incorporate new-others into its dynamic self-structure. How individuals do this determines their social identity” (Marting & Barresi, op cit: 251). Similarly Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) claimed that consciousness of ‘self’ and ‘other’ are ‘co-dependent’ and lean on social meanings as they are articulated through language.

In the second half of the 20th century and drawing from Symbolic Interactionism, Erwin Goffman (1959) conceived a Dramaturgical Model in which identity is studied in terms of the different social roles individuals play in everyday life. This particular theory will be further discussed in Chapter 4 and in the context of the empirical part of this study. Following Goffman’s lead, Social and Developmental Psychology proposed the *Theory of Roles* to explain how the subject relates to his social environment. This model included concepts such as ‘role-playing’, ‘role-identification’ and conflict, and ‘self-monitoring’ (Ritzer, 2007). The underlying argument to these theories is that social relations are more fundamental in defining the self than individual characteristics.

Cultural Studies and Queer Theories, contributed to resituate subjectivity as a performance. They inquired into everyday forms of textuality including oral, visual and mixed media modes of self-representation. Feminist theories of representation questioned experience as a category of meaning and examined the political dynamics of the personal (Kristeva, 1986; Butler, 1990; Haraway, 1991). They focused on the body as a site of

cultural practice of embodiment and inscription. Haraway (op cit) for example, did not believe in a universal category of “woman” and advocated recognition of the differences between women.

In 1977 Cindy Sherman began her series of *#Untitled Film Stills*. Numbering a total of sixty-nine, Sherman displays an array of types in which she poses as different movie characters in scenes from B-series films. Her motivation was to explore female stereotypes and cinema clichés. In some of the photographs, she deliberately leaves some traces of the technique used to take them, such as the remote shutter release, in order to draw attention to the fact that the images are constructed. She plays a double role: as a photographer she is a voyeur and as a subject she is watched. She also disguises her own identity behind the actresses she plays, while denying them their own as they fade behind Sherman’s face and body. “Identity is constantly borrowed in this endless photographic role-playing, and any individual autobiography dissolves” (Steiner & Yang, op cit: 66).

Sherman endlessly refers to her identity as artistic subject. In the *#Untitled* series she uses performance as a strategy of self-knowledge and as a social comment. Her work takes on a special significance from a Feminist political point of view from which many females:

[...] struggle to articulate themselves as ‘authors’ rather than ‘objects’ of artistic creation and to intervene in the structures of voyeurism by which women’s bodies are subordinated to a gaze that is aligned with male subjects” (Smith & Watson, 2005: 69).

Through the act of picturing herself as a subject, Sherman seems to challenge two notions: *first* the traditional vision of the woman’s body as a speechless and dominated object, because she creates a particular narrative for every image and thus enables her



'characters' to speak out; and *second* the notion of a coherent and unique self. Similar argument is exhibited in Madonna's 1992 book simply entitled *Sex*. However there is a paradox in this reasoning: the exercise of control over one's own body as artistic subject (e.g. by imperfectly imitating female stereotypes as an act of resistance) seems to translate, most of the time, in renderings of the female body as an aesthetic object and therefore a commodity.

Sherman has often claimed that her works are not autobiographical and that she uses her own body as a material that has more to offer than her own personality (Steiner & Yang, op cit). Behind her no-self-portraits or masquerades, she is exposing the constructivity of gender (Butler, op cit). Following Luce Irigaray's theory of *Mimesis* (1985), the very possibility of repeating a negative view unfaithfully, suggests that women are something other than the view expressed. Therefore Sherman's repetitive *#Untitled Film Stills* can be seen as a form of resistance. When she imitates stereotypes of women and thus of herself, it is in order to expose and undermine them. According to this view, in her continuous masquerade, Sherman gets empowered and takes control by deliberately unveiling the lie of her self-portraits. Her lie is her truth. The truth that we can never know the subject behind the image 'that has not been.' This particular idea will be further discussed in Chapter 5, under the light of a Bakhtinian framework and in the context of the empirical evidence.

Polly Nor is another contemporary artist (illustrator) who also approaches the topic of female stereotyping but in a very different way. If in the *#Untitled* series Sherman uses ironically the same rhetoric and imagery she intends to criticize, Polly Nor employs an alternative view: the mundane and the grotesque (Bakhtin, 1968), concepts that will be

examined in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5. Nor's work explores identity performances in social media and claims that there is an anxiety behind the constant editing and filtering of images of the self through which people build a parallel ideal identity. In her work she shows what people choose to hide in social media: the dirty, chaotic and imperfect selves that make people human. For example in the work *The Devil wears Nada* (2015) she pictures a female masturbating but avoids any reference to a sexually attractive body (according to western cultural standards). Instead she pictures what is fleshy and instinctual, stripped of taboo or fetish. In this sense the devil could well be a representation of the libidinal pulsion of life, in psychoanalytic terms, while the rest of the body is a social wrap (Ego). Her illustrations picture characters at the *backstage* (Goffman, 1959) alone at home, careless and free to satisfy the urges of the body (Bakhtin, op cit). In the polyphonic artefact the performative front-stage and the grotesque backstage are explored by establishing a bridge between both scenarios and under the light of Bakhtin and Goffman theoretical frameworks.

Autobiographical acts as cultural artefacts and performances sustain the idea that identities are not fixed or essential attributes of the autobiographical subject, but rather are produced through cultural rules and interaction and thus remain contextual and provisional. In the following section I discuss the agents involved in the autobiographical act following Ken Plummer's tripartite model of the production of stories. This model includes authors/performers, coaxers and audiences.

## 1.3- Agents involved in the Autobiographical Act

Ken Plummer (1995: 21) argued that there are three kinds of agents involved in the production of a story: the producer/maker or performer; the coaxers, who are the persons, institutions or agent provocateurs of the story; and the consumers or audiences towards whom the story is geared and who interpret, and in some cases co-produce and complete it. A continuation I examine these in more detail and in the context of autobiographical acts.

### *1.3.1- Producer, Maker, Performer*

Let's consider the following fragments of dialogue from the film *Memento* (2000) by Christopher Nolan:

Leonard Shelby: I have to believe in a world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning, even if I can't remember them. I have to believe that when my eyes are closed, the world is still here. Do I believe the world is still here? Is it still out there? Yeah. We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are. I am not different. Now. Where was I?  
Memory can change the shape of a room; it can change the color of a car. And memories can be distorted. They're just an interpretation, they're not a record, and they're irrelevant if you have the facts.

Teddy: You don't know who you are anymore.

Leonard Shelby: Of course I do. I'm Leonard Shelby. I'm from San Francisco.

Teddy: No, that's who you were. Maybe it's time you started investigating yourself.

In the film, the protagonist, Leonard Shelby, has to deal with the condition of short-term memory. He remembers facts from his past life such as his profession, name or hometown, but he is unable to recall any event that took place in the immediate previous 24 hours. In order to manage his condition he devises a complex system for recording the

events he encounters. For instance, he only talks to people face-to-face so as to be able to gauge their true intentions from their body language. He takes snapshots of situations and people and writes numerous notes, and, when something strikes him as significant, he tattoos his body to make sure that the relevant information becomes permanent, like a sort of long term memory. The day after when Shelby tries to put together some sort of story or conclusion from the gathered data, these devices of representation enter the autobiographical act of Shelby looking at himself.

Shelby, as the autobiographer, is merely a cipher breaker as is the audience of the film. Like Shelby's experience of the day before is mediated through polaroids, notes and tattoos, our experiences are mediated (or filtered) through memory and language. Experience is highly embedded in the language of everyday sites of production of knowledge. Experience is also authoritative. In an autobiographical act, the author/maker signs with his/her name: "This is me", "this is my life", "nobody knows better than I". Dostoevsky's anonymous character in *Notes from the Underground* hints at the autobiographical in these terms:



Autobiographical acts involve people identifying themselves to an audience and hence differentiating themselves from others. Sometimes this identification takes the form of attributes, for example: "I am a woman", "I am black", "I am gay", "I am disabled". Dostoevsky's character chooses to remain anonymous thorough his narration, but he calls himself a "sick", "spiteful" "unattractive" man (op cit: 3). All the previous descriptors of identity are understood in opposition to others such as: 'man', 'white', 'straight', 'able',

'healthy', 'loveable', 'attractive' and all of them are contextual and can be contested. Thus we might accept that identity as constituted in autobiography is positively discursive and therefore constructed (Foucault, 2002[1966], Derrida, 1970). In this scenario identities are expected to shift depending on historical and political conditions but they can also inhabit intersection points, like the ones suggested by attributes such as 'mestizo', 'diaspora', 'nomadic', 'multicultural', 'outsider' or 'neutral.'

The body is also a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory is itself embodied. Our bodies shape deeply our sense of identity. Our bodies feel, perceive and internalize images and sensations. The body is performative and situated at a nexus of gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality and language (Butler, 1993) and also age. Cultural discourses also determine which parts of our bodies are to be paid attention to, or are for others to see. They determine when a body becomes visible or invisible or which aspects of it are meaningful. They set and impose standards of beauty, as every summer, in the almost ritualistic 'best and worst beach bodies' of the tabloid *Star*. The cultural meanings assigned to particular bodies affect the kind of stories people can tell. For example in *Close to the Knives: A Memory of Disintegration* (1991) artist David Wojnarovic explores the fear of diversity in America at the time of the AIDS pandemic. He deals with the issue of living and dying with the disease through refusing cultural stigmatization. Judith Butler (1993) realized that bodies could not be fixed as simple material of thought as they tend to speak of a world far beyond themselves. By exploring the body and embodiment as sites of production and knowledge, people negotiate, engage or contest deterministic cultural discourses that confine the body to particular sites.

So far It has been suggested that individuals tell stories about themselves through

available cultural scripts and that they are subject to a series of cultural patterns of self-presentation/representation, and therefore constituted through discursive practices. In this scenario, is it possible to expect some sort of agency? Does the individual have any control over the autobiographical act? There are many theories about agency. According to Althusser (1984), people are subjected to what institutional discourses and practices make of them, and free will or agency is no more than an illusion. However Bakhtin (1965) argues that through the carnivalesque and the grotesque people are able to upend these systems. Furthermore, Michel De Certeau (1984) described the strategy of *inhabitation* as the process through which individuals can create or superimpose their own system onto the system imposed. For instance, artists are well able to avoid censorship by deploying all sorts of tricks to disguise their ‘real’ intentions. They can create a ‘new language’ through clever use of rhetorical figures such as satire, irony or metaphors in order to render their messages unrecognizable to the censor. This was the case for many artists from Eastern Europe, such as Jan Švankmajer, who contested the dictatorial regime of his country (former Czechoslovakia) through humorous animations and surrealism (Hames, 2008). Similarly, in the artefact, some of the characters are able to cope with circumstances through carnivalesque strategies.

For Lyotard (1984), people construct their worlds through dynamic and ungovernable networks of language that constantly generate unexpected moves and countermoves. For Butler (1990) agency, like the body, is performative, although in our everyday life we reenact socially enforced norms, we also fail to fully conform and with this breach emerges the possibility of identity reconfigurations. With this state of play, it is far more helpful to approach the autobiographical act as a performative act. To look at experience, memory, identity, embodiment and agency is to begin to understand the

autobiographical subject in his/her nature as a performer. By analyzing the complexities of autobiographical acts, we are able to deepen our understanding of “what happens locally at the intersection between text and context” (Smith & Watson, 2001b: 48).

Carolyn Barros (2001) sees autobiography as a *narrative of transformation*. According to her, the crucial transformative autobiographical question is: “what happened to me?” and narrative is the act of telling (or showing) to oneself or to an audience what happened. Through the study of the different metamorphoses that are implanted, bounded, and framed by the author/maker, she demonstrates that change is the *operative metaphor* in autobiographical discourse. How does this apply to autobiographical acts? Autobiographical acts are the author’s inquiries (and processes) into self-knowing. Both the methods of inquiry and the self-knowledge yield changes or transformations over time and within cultural sites. The way individuals know themselves vary historically and from subject to subject. For instance, Saint Teresa de Jesus’ autobiographical act of self-knowing was to go through her inner geography. The performance of the *mystical ecstasy* opened to her the inner passage to self-knowledge.

Let’s consider French artist Orlan, whose latest works consist of performing plastic surgery changes to her body while live streaming the operations for an audience on the Internet. What is her system of self-knowledge? Does it aim to impact memory? She physically conditions her body and possibly her mental state too. By intervening in her body’s ‘geography’, she seems to suggest that people’s thoughts and the recollection upon which they rely, can somehow be tangibly shaped. Orlan constructs memory through a plurality of media that will ensure that something, her face and our feelings and desires as spectators, are transmitted and received (Orlan, 1996). Orlan is literally writing a text onto

her body. Orlan's autobiographical act lies in her self-produced imagery of a sacrificial body.

It becomes apparent that every autobiographer develops a particular system and structure of self-knowing. Some of these strategies are well entrenched in the literary genre but others experiment with other milieus of self-knowledge: physical transformation, the irrational, the supernatural, dreams, symbolism, interrogation of cultural forms and politics, and sometimes they can also refuse the possibility of self-knowledge, as Barthes did with his autobiography (1988[1975]). Autobiographers constantly innovate modalities of self-representation. Personal stories can be enacted and transmitted to an audience through historical, cultural or political multilayered discourses. They can also be performed through many media, from documentary to dance, to body art, installations, collages to cyber-art or even in conversation. Contemporary life storytellers are more than ever bodies in action (Butler, 1993). In the artefact examples of autobiographical acts abound and it appears that these acts become occasions to perform different issues such as: authority, guilt, success and failure, isolation, ageism, displacement, gender or sexuality and most of them seem to challenge any notion of authenticity contained in the autobiographical.

### ***1.3.2- Coaxers and Agent Provocateurs***

According to Plummer (1995) a coaxer is the person, institution or cultural imposition that induces the subject to tell his/her story. Their interventions can be either evident or invisible to the naked eye. Coaxers have the power to provoke stories from people. They elicit stories from other people by becoming listeners and questioners. They fathom, interview, and interrogate. They can be collaborative but also coercive. As Plummer puts



it: “they are the Sigmund Freuds, the Oprah Winfreys, the Shere Hites who probe for the personal narrative. They are the courtroom interrogators, the doctors, the therapists, and the tabloid journalists” (1997: 244). And in this case we should also add the researcher to the list.

Geographical locations are also sites contextualizing autobiography. Autobiographical acts can be highly coaxed by a specific place or *mise-en-scène*, which is situated in a determined historical moment, and a sociopolitical space in a culture. For instance, the work of Russian artist Llya Kabakov is highly influenced by place: the former Soviet Union. In many of his works the prime material of expression is rubbish. For him, waste has both personal and social significance. The place where he was living in the Soviet Union was an enormous littered space, which was also the physical expression of his mental make-up. In the installation *The Man who Flew into Space from his Apartment* (1981), which has a profound escapist theme, the artist connects the dirt in his studio with the dirt on the streets and with his everyday life in the Soviet Union (Steiner & Yang, 2004:132). Place influences the way the autobiographical is conceived, set, seen and understood. This variation applies also to the specific site of storytelling. An autobiographical act is different in the context of an art gallery in New York, in *Instagram* or in *Facebook*. Geographical location shapes the story being told. The struggles of stories with nation, family, culture, environment and politics intersect actively with place (Plummer, op cit).

For Alison Landsberg (2004[1995]) different forms of media have contributed to the formation of prosthetic personal memories, which don't come from lived experience, rather from the mediated experience of popular culture. It refers to the idea that constant

exposition to film, documentary, news or print media procures memories of narrative events produced by mass culture. Using the same notion of prosthetic memory, Celia Lury (1998) examined the role of photography in creating these types of memories concluding that people were able to recall mass produced memories as their own. Similarly, Susan Sontag (2003) noted how in the aftermath of September 11 memories of the event were more vivid in those who didn't experience it directly but who saw it on TV. Could this idea also explain why stories in social media appear to be mimicking that of celebrities or what is trendy at any particular moment? I will come back to this in Chapter 5 in the context of the artefact and in relation to the Bakhtinian notion of *Heteroglossic Dialogism* (1981[1975]).

According to Lury (op cit) continuity of consciousness and autobiographical memory are necessary to claim identity. However memory is a process that goes beyond the individual because it includes memories of the collective, which ultimately are the ones that hold groups together. For Lury the human brain cannot pull up memories at random as a computer would do. In the human brain memory works as a process of continuous recollection and reconstruction, and the means through which we access memories do not differentiate genuine lived experience from prosthetic memories or dreams. This is the reason, she claims, why sometimes we confuse dreams with reality.

While analyzing memories of Bloody Sunday, Derry born artist Willie Doherty realized that those who witnessed the events were unable to articulate clear memories about it, while people who saw the media version of events had a very clear picture of what happened. He then presented the notion of truth as heavily shaped by the dynamics of a mediated discourse and under the notion of 'false memory' (Doherty et al, 2002). In this

sense it can be argued that autobiographical acts are susceptible not only to bearing prosthetic memories but also to being mass-produced, for example in social media.

### ***1.3.3- Audiences***

The topic of audiences would demand a study in itself. This section is only a modest attempt to outline the active implication of the *co-presence* (Goffman, 1963) of the ‘consumer’ of the story in the autobiographical act. Audiences are always present in the sites of production of the autobiographical, either physically or virtually, including in the imagination of the producer. Audiences assess and demand, thereby actively influencing or experiencing what is produced. In art, performers can present their works with itineraries or instructions to be followed by the spectators; others will leave the audience completely suspended in a created landscape, plot or emotion. In this sense, these works reduce the distance between the artist and the spectator, the latter being compelled to respond to the performance (Smith & Watson, 2005). Today, in social media we have the templates of these itineraries and audiences can respond (or not) with likes, pokes and comments. However, there is no way to predict a determined reaction to a particular autobiographical act. Audiences are plural, heterogeneous, and for them certain discourses will make sense in different ways and at different moments. They come from diverse backgrounds, different experiences, geographies, histories and politics. Because they are also consumers, their reactions to the autobiographical will be influenced by cultural, social and political constructions with their pre-determined codes (ibid).

The meanings of these autobiographical acts are never fixed because both the producers and the audience have lives in progress, constantly shifting meanings along with

the context. Yoko Ono's performance *Cut Piece* (first performed in 1964 at the Sogetsu Art Centre in Tokyo, is a good example of symbiosis between performer and audience that can help to understand the relationship between producers and audiences in social media. Ono, in her performance, sat or knelt motionless on a stage and gave the audience one single instruction: "Cut". One by one, the spectators walked onto the stage and cut a piece of her garment. The performance was Ono's way of communicating her inner suffering through art. With this piece Ono asked her viewers to complete not just her work but also her identity. Ono performed this piece in different venues, obtaining very different reactions depending on the audience. While in Japan the audience behaved almost shyly; whereas London security had to protect her as the spectators would get too zealous, even violent, in their urge to acquire a piece of her dress (Concannon, 2008). There is a similar scenario featuring in the empirical part of this study in which *Youtube* followers demand 'cut pieces' of the protagonists of the story. Like in Ono's performance, the advent of digital media, including transmedia experimental film, and social media, alters the traditionally disempowering gaze and inherent voyeurism of the audience of classical narrative cinema, documentary and printed autobiography by allowing the interaction with the 'piece.'

Diane Charleson (2011) asks why audiences would put themselves in the position of being part of a performance or art installation. She finds that there might be a connection between this audience and the *flâneur*. The literal meaning of *flâneur* is someone who engages in aimless, pleasurable wandering as described by Walter Benjamin (2002). For Charleson (op cit: 21) "A *flâneur* brings into being a personal reading of a space, at once alienated, detached yet observant, casual, yet with a purposeful gaze." While for Benjamin the *flâneur* was a mere observer, for Charleston he or she plays an active role

of collecting, cataloguing and interpreting the work of art, which can be directly linked with storytelling. Her flâneur “wants to read a place [or art installation], become part of it and create their own story” (ibid). In a similar fashion can the audiences of the autobiographical act be considered the flâneurs of other people’s lives?

Certainly the term suggests a more proactive approach to the lives of others than that of a voyeur. In this sense the audience/flâneur impacts in the autobiographical act by influencing the inclusion or exclusion of certain content, narrative itineraries and intentionality. The fact that the audience is present (or perceived as present) when the autobiographical act takes place also contributes to minimize the distance between the producer and the implied consumer. What are then the implications of co-created autobiographical itineraries? Is the autobiographical act more the result of a collective enterprise rather than the attempt at self-knowledge and self-affirmation of a single individual? Lets explore this in more detail in the following section.

## **1.4 - *Autobiographical Acts and New ‘Identity Technologies’***

In 2003 The Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles presented autobiography not only as a genre in emergence, but as the one that could offer new contextual and theoretical approaches to the outworn canonical form. New autobiographical practices have some features in common with the traditional literary genre. They all claim relations between the

'autos', the 'bio' and the 'graph', that is to say the narrating subject, the events narrated and the process of recording these events. From these three stages Paul de Man (1984) clearly opts for the graph: the text as a set of rhetorical figures and a textual organization of what is autobiographical as an urge, an act and a position (in relation to the world/ to oneself), based on the convergence of the three basic elements of memory, metaphor and language. This justifies and explains the confluence of two subjects in the autobiographical act: the one that says 'I' (a sum of bios and autos) and the performative self (a sum of autos and graph). Or, in other words, the stake is between the embodied experiential self and the autobiographical self, which works like a mask that not only conceals the experienced self but also disfigures and reconstitutes it (ibid).

According to De Man (op cit) the beauty of autobiography lies not in the fact that it reveals some sort of truthful self-knowledge, but in the surprising discovery of the impossibility of any closure or completion of the textual (in a wide sense) systems involved in it. From this point of view, autobiography acquires an essential mission: that of stripping the masks, distorting the faces and establishing a tense dialogue between figuration (mimesis) and disfiguration (fiction). In this sense, autobiography would be as much a construction based on embodied experience, as it is a disfigurement (ibid). It is precisely in this vein that autobiography can be studied in its practice in social media.

Every medium has given rise to new forms of life storytelling. The invention of the printing press led to the development of literary autobiographies and the invention of the camera led to the development of self-portraits, art installations and biopics. All these media brought about production and distribution on an industrial scale while the recipient audiences or spectators were left passively to consume them, until the Internet came along

(Rose, 2011). The Internet disrupted the sequential narrative we grew used to. The Internet is non-linear thanks to the technologies of the World Wide Web and hyperlinking, and it is also participatory beyond the mere interaction with the interface. The Internet, and specifically social media, constantly prompts us to contribute, to join, to comment, to be there. The Internet is also an all-media medium. It allows for a combination of the textual, the visual and the auditory. And finally it is also immersive. The Internet is a *deep media*. Rose (op cit) claims that the stories told on the Internet can take us deeper than a thirty seconds spot, a forty-five minutes long TV episode or a two hours feature film because they can hook people continuously through for example daily tweets or status updates.

New combinations of the visual and the textual suggest a new multiplicity of autobiographical practices. For example multi-media autobiographical acts can establish a fresh and renovated nexus between the author, the life and the work. In the visual act, autobiography has also the ability to produce, from a performative point of view, an augmented subject effect and consequently a stronger suspension of disbelief about the subject's truthfulness (Guasch, 2009). What do contemporary multi-media autobiographical accounts look like? A first person narrator 'remembers' a life or fragments of it, and sets out to express it with new media tools. It may well happen that small pieces of life appear in the context of historical, political or social events that trigger them. Such an autobiography may consist of sketches, film, overlaying text and photographs, and these may be arranged incoherently, without any overriding pattern or context, like for example the previously discussed *Dictée* by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Some people might assume and create a multitude of identities, alter egos or personas through which they speak or act (e.g. Cindy Sherman). The most radical examples would be performing contradictory or hybrid roles: 'male-female', 'white-black', or even 'man-

machine.’ In these expressions, the boundary between fact and fiction is as blurred as it is in literature (Steiner & Yang, 2004). The new autobiographies challenge the traditional romantic self as a unique and transcendent subject, sequential narration, the relation between record and memory, the cult of Ego and the dialogue between place and memory, by meeting De Man’s notion of disfiguration (Guasch, op cit).

Moreover the potential of the multi-media discourse of the self as a highly dynamic text, provides autobiographers with a wider range of creative possibilities to narrate and construct a life story or a life moment. With the convergence of both the textual and the visual (and also the auditory in the case of video or podcasts), two different regimes become superimposed, one aesthetic (perspective, symmetry, proportion) and the other literary (plot, grammar, syntax). In these terms the reading of a multi-media autobiographical act becomes both “an act of aesthetic perception and an intellectual pursuit” (Eisner, 2003: 8). A further element to be taken into consideration here is “the tension between the experiential reality of subjectivity on the one hand and the available cultural forms for its expression on the other which always structures any engagement in autobiography” (Eakin, 1992: 88). Recognition of this tension might encourage producers to critically negotiate their choices of media depending on their personal inquiries and as a way of inhabiting the new autobiographical context.

Antecedents of the textual and the visual converging in autobiography already appeared in literary works such as Breton’s *Nadja* (1928) and Chan’s *Dictée* (op cit) or in early photographic works such as Bayard’s *Self-portrait as a drowned Man* (1840), in which he posed as the unfortunate victim of a drowning accident. In their article *The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography: Extravagant Lives, Extravagant Questions* (2001a), Julia



Watson and Sidonie Smith analyze the increasing importance given to self-portraiture in visual, installation and performance media, and the ways in which embodiment and subjectivity emerge in strikingly different terms, as compared to their expression in traditional autobiography. They use as exemplar Tracey's Emin project, *My Bed* (1998), submitted for the 1999 Turner Prize, which consisted of autobiographical memorabilia. This installation comprised a collection of drawings with captions such as: "I don't know what I want to do", "What it looks like to be alone", a quilt collage, home videos, and her rumpled bed displaying traces of her intimate life. With this confessional work Emin reveals intimate details from her life, engaging the viewer with her expressions of universal emotions:

Tracey shows us her own bed, in all its embarrassing glory. Empty booze bottles, fag butts, stained sheets, worn panties: the bloody aftermath of a nervous breakdown. By presenting her bed as art, Tracey Emin shares her most personal space, revealing she is as insecure and imperfect as the rest of the world. (Saatchi Gallery, 2011 [online]).

Emin's ability to integrate her personal life into her art enables the establishment of an exceptional degree of intimacy with the viewer. The embodied materiality of visual and performance media reframes both creative expression as a site of lived experience and literary based autobiography. Theorizing the autobiographical needs to be reconsidered and remade by contemporary practice in order to inquire into new self-reflexive narratives that link self-representation across multiple media.

Emin's assemblage enacts multiple autobiographical performances in both visual and verbal media, and suggests their permeable interface. The bed becomes a memory museum to a specific time and place in Emin's past." (Smith & Watson, op cit: 3).

Throughout the pre-production, production, performance and post-production of her piece of art, the artist oscillates between being a practitioner and a researcher, and in more than one sense an object and subject of her performance. “Deploying medium upon medium in this chronicling of moments in her life, Emin insists on the autobiographical as her artistic origin, performative identity, and preferred mode.” (Smith & Watson, op cit: 4). A person’s biography thus can be explored (by herself) through a method of inquiry involving a combination of theory (conceptualization) and creative practice (execution). Such a hybrid mode of examination might be a powerful tool for understanding but might also, in shifting the limits of personal disclosure and changing technologies of the self, account for a change in the relation between the autobiographer and his or her audience in terms of achieving insights that are not easily obtainable by other means. As it can be appreciated, the autobiographical act is not a simple endeavour. The autobiographical agent, the maker, becomes, in the act of creating, both the subject and the object of the inquiry and draws in the audience, who in turn participate and make decisions.

Can autobiographical acts in everyday life, including social media, work as signs to tell us something about the individual’s desires for self-understanding and self-determination? How does the combination of the visual and the textual in social media posts relate to the persona that both constructs and is constructed by them? To what exactly do these autobiographies refer and more importantly, what exactly these acts do for the producer (and for the audience)? Everyone projects a self-image, but one which rarely coincides with everybody else’s perception. We all carry memories from the past but they are quite often distortions of the real events, inventions of truth. For Susanna Egan (1999), while traditional autobiography originates with a question mark and tends to a resolution, textual and visual contemporary renditions deal with unresolved eventualities and

unassumed identities. Egan identifies critical life experiences as the triggers of autobiographical experimentation suggesting that there is a direct relationship between trauma and creative expression. Does then the proliferation of multi-media self-referential posts in social media suggest that western society is in crisis?

In her exploration of cinematic and performative renditions of the autobiographical Egan finds that they are dialogical in form as any attempt at meaning making necessarily involves the audience. In an account referring to the transformative possibilities of cinematic autobiographies, Egan states:

Making one's self visible or mapping identity are not only figures of speech but also tropes for recovery of understanding, which is always elusive. Because these genres foreground the plurality and processes of identity and of autobiography, they are also transformative; neither the person nor the text can reveal any single or final truth, but both can provide activities of interpretation, in which the reader is compelled to join [...] We become part of the map of interpretation (1999:226).

The exhibition *Life Logging* (2015), which took place in Dublin's Science Gallery, featured a series of personal chronicles of the mundane. One of the works consisted of hundreds of digital self-portraits taken daily by an individual during a period of many years. Another exhibition (2014) in Elmhurst Art Gallery in New York, showed a similar work by artist Suzanne Szucs which she started back in 1996, featuring a series of polaroids of herself. Furthermore a scene in the Italian film *The Great Beauty* (2013) portrayed a similar obsessive-compulsive action of photographing oneself everyday. In these three cases looking at the whole 'picture' from a distance is quite impressive. However, when taking a closer look most of the individual self-portraits strike as being quite dull and maybe this is the point. The series of photographs, both impress and deceive in their repetition. Nevertheless in a second close look it is possible to find the odd face

performing some sort of emotion (genuine or not).

It appears that common traits in contemporary forms of visual self-representation are not only the recurrence of theme (the mundane) and subject ('I') but also the frequency in which this happens (daily, many times a day). All previous three examples have in common the organization of pictures in a similar progression to that of the images appearing in social media sites such as *Instagram*. The images feature in a sort of retro-chronological narrative of the events of a life, an aspect that is also reflected in the empirical part of this study. According to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2014) new digital technologies have favoured a shift in our relationship to history and the passage of time. Despite continuing to interpret the world in historicist terms and according to a construction of time engineered during the Enlightenment, the actual construction of time is no longer historicist. For Gumbrecht, although we are not yet aware of it, we inhabit a "new unnamed space" in which the "closed future" and the "ever-available past" (digital footprints) converge to produce an "ever-broadening present of simultaneities" (op cit: [online, unpagged]).

Drawing from literary forms and the visual arts convergent autobiographical practices have been proliferating on the Internet at a booming pace. All these textual and visual self-representations are being studied in the intersection between Literary Criticism and Media Studies. Most of them take the form of blogs with thematic life narratives or memoirs. Examples are post-colonial testimonies, narratives of illness and mourning, violence and addiction, coming out gender based stories and celebrity memoirs, including blogs of recipes acting as occasions for the autobiographical. Life writing has long been

used in psychotherapy to deal with trauma and illness. In recent times there are groups such as *Guided Autobiography* (GAB) or the initiative *Do you Know* in which the guided practice of autobiography and life narrative are used to improve self-esteem and increase family and community bonds. In a study, Duke & Fivush (in Feiler, 2013) found that children with a stronger family narrative were more self-confident because they had a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves.

Biological behavioral research combined with computer engineering and imaging techniques is also recently focusing on the optimization of emotional and cognitive patterns through capturing and analyzing the ways in which we organize our lives as shown in the previously mentioned exhibition *Life-Logging* (2015). In the exhibition the shift in public health discourses from curative care to preventative care also becomes clear. The amount of devices and applications intended to monitor life-habits is favouring autobiographical practices oriented to interpret the way we live our lives and to implement corrective measures when needed. At a corporative and institutional level there is also a shift towards telling life narratives with the understanding that they facilitate the creation of bonds. For instance in the past the military sought cohesion through dehumanizing individuals. This was particularly well reflected in films like *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Today the trend is that the army spends more time designing team activities intended to build a sense of identity. Some of these activities involve telling the story of the organization. Private organizations such as businesses have incorporated the ‘family-tree narrative’ long ago in order to promote affiliation ties with employees (Feiler, 2013).

New autobiographical practices can also take the shape of stories narrated through applications such as *Guidedautobiography.com*, *WriteWords*, and *Personalhistorians.net*,

or personal photo books like *Blurb.com*. Some people might also inquire into the autobiographical through the medium of documentary and film; while others concentrate on logging life accounts on social media outlets such as *Tumblr* or *Facebook*. Social media, according to Smith & Watson (2005) invites new possibilities for digital self-invention through the remix and bricolage of images and texts from other sites in a sort of stream of consciousness. Micro-blogging, as it has come to be known, they suspect can lead to a greater dispersion of the self rather than its unification. Nevertheless, they admit, the growing archive of the mundane might eventually turn out to be a comforting vision for humanity.

#### ***1.4.1 Autobiographical Acts in Social Media***

What constitutes autobiographical acts in social media? In the context of this research autobiographical acts in social media are micro-stories about oneself creatively rendered through textual and visual means, including quotes, photographs, collages and video. Autobiographical acts in social media are small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2007) utterances of the self, micro plots, mood statuses, selfies and interjections, which are composites of fragments of a life posted in online outlets such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter* or *Youtube*. Autobiographical acts in social media are dialogical in nature, as much self-reflective as they are performative and they are situated in the context of the everyday and therefore they cannot possibly take place in isolation but in a universe of continuums: between past and present, fact and fiction, ‘I’ and ‘the other’, and online and offline embodied experience. These online self-referential posts are sets of signifying cultural practices in which the intersection of history, culture and the personal might be effectively negotiated by the ‘autobiographers’ and their audiences.

For example if we look at photo booth portraits originally taken by surrealist artists and later made popular among the general public, they show people making funny faces and grimaces. We cannot help seeing a parallelism with the way today we experiment with our smart phones reverse camera (Pellicer, 2010). Self-portraits have come a long way from classical paintings and the stylistically sophisticated staging of photographs in art galleries. Although there is a coexistence of forms, the wide-spread availability of digital technologies has allowed everyone to experiment and become their own photographer, inevitably transforming the landscape of self-portraiture. Some scholars claim that today's *selfie* (closely preceded by photo booths) is a true genre in its own right (Senft, 2013; Rettberg, 2014; Warfield, 2014). Before the technology of the smart phone, photographers who incorporated the camera into their self-portraits, were doing it with the intention of using the device to protect themselves from the viewers' gaze (Borzello, op cit: 142). With selfies the viewer is included in the space of the photograph, a convention epitomized by Annie Leibovitz's (2014) photograph of a mirror featuring Kim Kardashian taking a selfie with her baby in her arms while being photographed with an iPad by Kanye West .

According to Katie Warwick (in Rettberg, op cit: 9) "the outstretched arm is like a (forced) embrace, placing the viewer between the face of the person photographed and the camera". As selfies proliferate in social media, they appear, like the text, in an accumulative and serial fashion and as part of a series of life events. According to Rettberg (ibid: 33) to really understand social media as a genre we need to analyze it in terms of feeds, that is to say, we need to look at every status update or every selfie or photograph only as fragments of the story and as parts of a series. This argument plays strongly in favour of social media posts, including photographs and videos, being studied as narratives

and storytelling practices and in the case of self-referential posts, as autobiographical acts. This claim is also consistent with a paradigm of small stories proposed by Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2007) in which micro stories emerging dialogically in conversation are as crucial sites for performing identity as bigger ('master') narratives.

Social media as sites for the production (and reproduction) of the autobiographical operate a significant link between Textual and Visual Studies. The time seems just right for a critical confrontation with this innovative multi-media narrative space. The possibilities of the new forms of subjectivity might reconfigure habits of production and meaning-making due to the plasticity of the media. On the one hand the communicative elements in the autobiographical act encourage the form to occasionally create a closed ideological text by imposing on the audience a preferred meaning (agency). And on the other, rhetorical strategies such as juxtaposition or condensation and possibilities such as immersion or interaction are used to "visually change the point of view in a semantic space created by the ambiguous relationship between the word and the picture" (McAllister et al, 2001: 4). Although the quote originally refers to comic art, it might well apply to social media. Under this prism, every multi-media autobiographical act becomes a potentially polysemic text, a palimpsest, encouraging multiple interpretations, often in opposition to one another. If we look into self-referencing post in social media, we might find a new domain for exploration of individuals' concerns from critical, social and cultural points of view. In the following chapter these concerns are discussed in more detail.



## 1.5- Chapter Summary

This chapter defines and grounds the autobiographical in the ontologies and epistemologies of 'self' and 'identity'. It explores autobiographical practices as the attempts of a self to know himself/herself and partakes from the personal and the collective, including history and culture. This research is primarily concerned with non-canonical renditions of the autobiographical, traditionally understood as a genre belonging to the discipline of Literature. Instead, this study favours self-referential multi-media creative practices, which are shared with others. In this sense the autobiographical expands beyond Literature and enters the domains of the visual and performative arts and the social, including social media. Examples of 'other autobiographies' are textual and visual (also auditory) self-referencing micro-stories told and/or shown in conversation, the visual and performative arts and in social media, the latter being the focus of the research. The chapter argues that these multi-media expressions of the autobiographical are dialogical and performative in nature (Bakhtin, 1981[1975]; Goffman, 1959); as private as they are public; and as factual as they can be fictional. In this research this 'new' genre of autobiography has been termed as 'autobiographical acts', borrowing the expression from Elizabeth Bruss (1979).

Autobiographical acts have been discussed from the point of view of the producers (practitioners), the agent provocateurs (coaxers) and the audiences following Ken Plummer's tripartite model of the constitutive agents of a story (1995) and applied to autobiographical acts in social media. These acts are exercises of sense-making emerging from the 'will to form' (represent) and the 'will to tell' (share) and therefore, as previously noted, they are as much reflective as they are performative. The possibilities of these new

forms of subjectivity might reconfigure habits of production and meaning making due to the plasticity of the new media. Among its possibilities are on the one hand the imposition of preferred meanings by the producer of the autobiographical act and on the other, and due to the ambiguous relationship between text and image, the occasion for multiple interpretations by the audience. For reasons of limiting the scope of the dissertation, this chapter has presented only a small collection of autobiographical acts that were surveyed for the purpose of informing this research; nevertheless they offer valuable insights into the origins and historical transformations of the current widely extended practice of sharing lives online. There are as many autobiographically styled works as historical fashions and possible autobiographers. Fashions might change along with new ‘identity technologies’ but at the core of the practice lays the same concern and passion for understanding (making-sense) that brought the cave man to draw stick figures on rock walls.

The chapter concludes with the introduction of social media as the newest preferred medium for autobiographical expression, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. To really understand autobiographical acts in social media we need to analyze them in terms of feeds, this is to say, we need to look at every self-referential post (e.g. status update, selfie or photograph) as a fragment of a life story and as part of a series and in the context in which they are produced and reproduced, including embodied experience. The suggestion is that by looking into the conditions in which autobiographical acts are produced and enacted we can understand the work and its author, and by extension the community to which he or she belongs. By acknowledging the different ‘languages’ of the autobiographical we might understand what has motivated it and relate to and be moved by it.

## CHAPTER 2

### AUTHORING OURSELVES IN SOCIAL MEDIA

“Call me whatever you want, but you should remember, these days, when you are talking to one person you are talking to a thousand”  
(Zoe, *House of Cards*, 2014)

According to Nicola Miller (2006:61) “Identity refers to the idea of creating an environment in which the world acts as if it was our own reflection.” *Birdman or the unexpected virtue of ignorance* (2014) is a film about an actor trying to be reborn from his ashes (like the Phoenix) through the staging of a show on Broadway’s main street. In one of the crucial scenes of the movie his daughter asks him who does he thinks he is. She points to the fact that there is an entire world out there fighting every single day to be relevant and that he keeps ignoring it trying to do his own (allegedly outdated) thing. In her own words:

Things happen in a place that you ignore. A place that by the way has already forgotten about you. Who the fuck are you? You hate bloggers. You mock Twitter, you don’t even have a Facebook page! You are the one that doesn’t exist! You are just doing this because you are scared to death, like the rest of us, that you don’t matter. And do you know what? You are right. You don’t. It’s not important Ok? You are not important! Get used to it!

Is then social media that relevant in order to grasp a sense of being? If for Descartes existence summed up in the act of thinking, for the contemporary westerner perhaps the only proof of existence is that of featuring somewhere in a social media site. Which role social media plays in ‘authoring the self’? Is the medium the ‘massage’? (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). From the perspective of Social Psychology identity is defined by answers situated in a continuum between the personal and the social, to the basic question of “Who am I?” (Tajfel, 1981). Personal identity refers to personality traits and the way we relate to others (e.g. optimistic, extrovert) and social identity invokes group membership (e.g. woman, Irish, graduate). Chapter 1 has reviewed relevant literature establishing the link between conceptualizations of self and identity and performative practices of authoring the self that are situated outside the literary canon of autobiography, while surveying some of its manifestations. This chapter focuses on studies exploring social media as a new preferred site for authoring the self.

Scholarship on social media and identity is vast and not always in agreement. Keeping pace with the literature on the subject amounts to keeping pace with identity itself. Studies revolve around the following topics: identity and ethnicity, class, gender, privacy, self-presentation and representation, social and political impact, behaviour, cultures of taste, and activism and civic engagement among others. All the previous themes are related to one or more academic disciplines ranging from Sociology and Psychology to Linguistics and Anthropology, Media Studies and Cultural Studies or Law and Politics making the study of social media a necessarily multidisciplinary enterprise.

An area of cross-disciplinary studies mapping the self as a construction in real and virtual environments has come under the umbrella of ‘Persona Studies’ (Marshall, 2013).

Persona Studies is dedicated to the exploration of the public self and how different versions of identity appear in contemporary culture. Persona Studies depart from the assumption that we all negotiate and construct personas in every single social scenario we happen to be. The majority of research under this umbrella looks closer into particular work or leisure settings and the way they frame our public persona(s). The antecedents of this field can be found in Performance, Gender, Media and Cultural Studies; and also Celebrity and Public Personalities Studies; Biography, Autobiography and Life-writing; Internet and Game Identity Studies, Communication, Cultural Anthropology, Social Psychology, Sociology and Philosophy of the Self. It is also linked to studies in impression management, self-branding and the ‘quantified self’ through applications counting every single aspect of our lives: e.g. footsteps and heartbeats.

Due to the limited scope of this dissertation these studies cannot be presented in full in this document, which privileges instances that contribute to inform and explain the presence of the autobiographical in social media. Nevertheless some of this research is discussed in this section while other that has emerged in the context of the ‘data’ appears in the corresponding chapters. A *grosso modo* literature on identity and social media revolves around the idea of understanding to what extent the new technology contribute positively or negatively to new formations of the self. Most studies relate to young populations and deal with issues of self-presentation, sociality, privacy, gender and ethnicity. The following section attempts to establish a link between early experiments on personal disclosure on the Internet and current autobiographical acts in social media in that they can explain the appeal of ‘living in public.’

## 2.1- Autobiographical Acts on the Internet: Early Experiments

This section explores three cases involving digital technology and the then incipient Internet. They can be considered pioneering experiments in what later will become ubiquitous interactive autobiographical acts on social media outlets. The first case: *Eliza* refers to a natural language computer program created in MIT<sup>2</sup> in the early 1960's, which acted as a personal psychotherapist. The second: *JenniCam* (Jennifer Ringley) was the very first (known) cam girl in history back in 1996 and the third, *Quiet We live in Public* was an art project created in the late 1990's by dot.com Internet entrepreneur and visionary Josh Harris, which involved a hundred volunteers that were constantly recorded by cameras and their movements broadcast on the Internet during the period of a month. The three experiments have been chosen because each of them, in their own right, can shine a light into contemporary autobiographical practices on social media.

### 2.1.1-Eliza

Joseph Weizenbaum, from the Artificial Intelligence Lab in MIT devised *Eliza* with the idea of dismissing computer language as a viable instrument for communication. *Eliza* was one of the first interactive programs in existence way before personal computers and natural language processors became available to the general public. The software was able to simulate a conversation but was limited in the sense that it wasn't able to contextualize eventualities. In spite of its limitations *Eliza* was still able to create the illusion of a real conversation taking place. The most successful of *Eliza*'s scripts, which passed the Turing

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<sup>2</sup> Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Boston. Massachusetts.

test<sup>3</sup>, was that of a remote psychotherapist. Indeed and to Weizenbaum's surprise, which was set to demonstrate the contrary effect, people engaging with *Eliza* manifested satisfaction in the way she was 'capable to understand their feelings.' In reality what happened was that the computer just reflected back the user's statement creating the illusion (or delusion) of being heard by someone else. Weizenbaum also reported cases of users, including his own secretary, becoming emotionally attached to the computer and referring to it as a person (Weizenbaum, 1978).

The achievement of *Eliza*, regardless of the absence of an in-built context framework, fell on the capacity to manipulate words without consideration for the context and still offer the illusion of that context. It could be said that fortunetellers work in a similar way when they 'predict' or 'guess' events by reflecting back the words of their naïve customers by establishing the patterns that will give them the minimal information to respond in a credible way (Weizenbaum, op cit). The figure on the next page presents several screen shots with excerpts of a 'reflective' conversation with a contemporary JavaScript version of *Eliza* built by Norbert Landsteiner (2013). For example at the input: "I feel sad" the computer responds "Tell me more about such feelings" and at the input "I am sad" the answer is " I am sure it's not pleasant to be sad" but at the input "I have sad" which is grammatically incorrect, *Eliza* responds: "That's quite interesting." If we continue by saying: "sad is not interesting" she responds "That's interesting, please continue" and so on.

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<sup>3</sup> The Turing test, created in 1950 by Alan Turing tests the ability of a machine to show intelligence comparable to that of a human being.

What is *Eliza* telling us that might help to understand what the appeal of disclosing personal information on social media is? For example *Eliza* prompted their users with: “How do you do. Please tell me your problem.” Sometimes “Please tell me what is bothering you” and this was enough, with her fortuneteller’s trick, to hook the users to the point they were thinking they were actually talking to a real person. Today, even though users are more technology savvy than Weizenbaum’s subjects, when *Facebook* simply prompts: “What is on your mind?” the outcome is quite similar. The difference is that even if the majority of people today wouldn’t be fooled by *Eliza*, even if she was hiding behind the authority of a psychotherapist, social media contains the perfect script for responding to anyone’s inputs, whatever they are, because even if it can be accused of being superficial, social media contains a ‘contextually sensitive program’ (most of the time) which is made by embodied humans able to empathize (most of the time) and reflect back to the user. This effect, might allow people on the one hand to feel safer in their convictions or wrapped and encouraged in their circumstances but on the other it can also act as an *echo chamber* (Sustein, 2002, 2017) in which the individual is constantly projecting and reflected back by others, including the platform’s algorithm which will feed posts reinforcing the individual’s belief systems. Note that current experiments in AI (e.g. sex-bots like *Harmony* or care-bots for elderly people) work with similar premises to *Eliza* although to a different degree of sophistication.

### **2.1.2-JenniCam**

When Jennifer Ringley first set her camera in her college’s room back in 1996, she had to write ‘html’ to set a minimal personal page in order to show people how an ordinary life looked like in contrast with those of famous people. With time she acquired nine cameras,



which she situated strategically in her bedroom and synchronized to deliver a single still image every five minutes. That was enough to create an archive of Jennifer's everyday life in which she was seen studying, having friends in, washing her hair, sleeping, eating or making love with her boyfriend. Sometimes she would leave the room and the cameras would continue inspecting her notebooks, her clothes or her shopping lists in her absence. *JenniCam* broadcasted for nearly eight years.

According to Barry Smith (2005:91) *JenniCam* was “a running piece of improvised endurance theatre” in which the series of mundane images “always invited interpretations or begged questions” (ibid). For Jimroglou (1999) *JenniCam* is a performance displaying cyborg subjectivity in which the female body is constructed and gendered through technology as a site for knowledge production and pleasure:

[JenniCam] exposes more than just flesh. JenniCAM reveals cultural tensions surrounding epistemological conceptions of vision, gender, and identity and raises questions for future conversations regarding the role of technology in the representation and construction of gendered subjects (op cit: 439).

Ringley's audience was practically anyone that was interested and had an Internet connection. According to Theresa Senft (2008:2) *JenniCam* at its peak, in 1998, registered over 100 million hits per week. However, cam girls don't seem to last. Some might feel the pressure of a daily broadcast but there are other reasons which Senft (op cit) sums up as: *first* cultural saturation of webcams, *second* the widespread use of broadband technology and *third* the inception of social media which allowed for easy access to all sorts of content. However Senft sees *JenniCam* as a precursor of identity and community articulated through social media sites such as *MySpace*, *LiveJournal*, *Youtube* and *Facebook*. In an interview on David Letterman's *Late Show* at the high of her popularity

Ringley stated that her intention with *JenniCam* was to show that real life wasn't like the life presented on TV. She said that all those people with perfect hairdos and perfect lives weren't true. She claimed to be the real thing. In contrast with reality TV, which is heavily edited and thus shaping a particular narrative intended by the broadcaster, Ringley presented her life in real time and without obvious editing and in a sense leaving her autobiography open to different interpretations (Ringley, 1998).

Senft (op cit: 19) gives an example of the ambiguity of the 'real' presented through webcams in the story of another cam girl: Ana Voog. Apparently one day Voog was having a terrible headache, which brought her to tears. When her boyfriend arrived at the apartment she told him what was going on and he went to the pharmacy to get her some painkillers, while she continued to cry lying on the sofa. After the cameras posted images of this simple sequence of events (without the sound of their voices) Voog received several emails reprimanding the bad attitude of her boyfriend who had made her cry and then walked out on her. This anecdote is the perfect exemplar of how stories are constructed, or co-constructed rather, dialogically. In the absence of the full picture of the events the audience tend to fill the gaps with their own projections in order to complete the meaning. Furthermore, stories are as much about who shows/tells them as they are about those who see, read or hear them.

### ***2.1.3- Quiet: We Live in public***

You know what? No worries. Everybody is going to come because it's free and you can be on camera. That's how people are going to react to the Internet. At first they're going to like it. They're going to say it's free and this is my chance to have 15 minutes of fame. Every day and before they know it, they will be exploited. Their data will be mined and they will be living in public. It will affect their lives and they will be trapped in virtual boxes (Josh Harris, 1999).

Indeed, Josh Harris might ‘misfit’ many labels but he has the gift of being a seer. With our continuous seeing ourselves through technology we seem to have re-invented the wheel of human sociality. When it comes to self-exposure on social media, we are equally excited and horrified at the landscape unfolding before our eyes. But did we see it coming? Let’s go back a couple of decades for a moment, to the core of the dot.com revolution and subsequent implosion. Does anyone remember or ever heard of *Pseudo.com* the first ever Internet streamed TV? The company was founded by pioneer and maverick Josh Harris who, as early as the mid 1990’s, saw humanity massively moving towards virtual encounters. His premise was that if Andy Warhol had the vision of people aspiring to fifteen minutes fame, his own was that people in reality aspired to a continuous, never ending fifteen minutes of fame, and technology was there to give them (us) what we wanted (Timoner, 2009).

In the late 1990’s Harris developed a performance piece called *Quiet: we live in public* with the intention of studying the impact of media and technology on human identity and social interaction. The piece had an Orwellian/*Big Brother* feeling and consisted of a laboratory recreation of a totalitarian state under constant surveillance. Harris gathered over 100 volunteers in an underground space in New York and installed webcam and laser microphone software to follow their every single move. Every person was assigned a pod fitted with live video and screens in a set reminiscent of a Japanese capsule hotel or a beehive.

The circuit allowed for capturing and monitoring everything happening inside the pods. Other sets/installations were an interrogation room, the temple of fame (with a large dining table), the firing range (with real guns), the shower (transparent); and all of them were fitted with similar technology to the pods. The rule was that everything was recorded and streamed live. Harris' experiment doesn't seem too alien today if we take a look at applications such as Twitter's *Periscope*, created in 2014, which promises its customers "to see the world in real time through someone else's eyes" (*Periscope*, [online]), or the 'Youtubers' of the mundane, mushrooming everywhere, as explored in the empirical section of this document.

The experiment lasted thirty days at the turn of the millennium and by the time it was terminated by the New York police, Harris had managed to capture a 'snapshot' of the entire fabric of civilian life unfolding from a short-circuited social network and to demonstrate the price we pay for 'living in public.' With every new technology or application coming along on the lines of *Facebook*, *Instagram* or *Twitter* it becomes clear that privacy is something more and more elusive. Later Harris offered to public scrutiny his everyday domestic life (and his girlfriend's) in another compelling experiment in which nothing was left to the imagination and in which the 'audience' was able to interact with the couple through chats and webcams. One of the insights of this second experiment was that the constant exposure/disclosure of the details of their relationship stripped their intimacy of any meaningful values.

Both experiments feature in a documentary by Ondi Timoner (2009). The following fragment belongs to the documentary's press release kit:

With *Quiet: We Live in Public*, Harris proved how, in the affiliate future of standard life online, we will willingly trade our privacy for the connection and peer recognition we all deeply desire. Through his experiments, including another six-month stint living under 24-hour home security camera systems online which led him to experience nervous breakdown symptoms, Josh Harris displayed the demonstration effect of the price we will all pay for living in public.

What I had documented back then was a physical metaphor of how people would react to the Internet, which Josh predicted would eventually take over our lives. I finally saw what all of his work was about [...] Whether it was the neo-fascistic elements imposed at “Quiet” (which I later realized were done to raise the stakes and prove his point that people will do almost anything for fame) or his short animated piece *Launder My Head* – which he has always told me is at the core of his view on the future of media and the collective consciousness [...] The themes the film explores are the challenges the virtual world creates, increasingly, to our physical lives and the tension between the public and private, with the advent of life online.[...]

While the Internet is a powerful, wonderful tool in many ways, the frightening aspect is our addiction to it. [...] Josh not only saw it coming and predicted its power over us, but he showed us how we would react to it. He is both a visionary and a walking cautionary tale.

## 2.2- The Media that is Social

boyd & Ellison (2007:1) define social media as web-based services that allow individuals to:

(1) Construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

According to a 2015 Statista report on global social media usage, its worldwide penetration is ever increasing. Due to the high levels of seepage and the inclusion of mobile technology, current discussions tend to focus on the study of the social impact of social media in the quality of everyday life, including issues of privacy as well concepts of digital identity and online sociability (Ellison et al, 2007). In terms of scholarship, many studies about social media tend to be site centred (boyd & Ellison, 2007; boyd, 2008;

Papacharissi, 2008, 2011; Krotoski, 2009; Miller, 2011; Senft, 2013); popular choices are: *Friendster*, *MySpace*, *Orkut*, *LiveJournal*, *Cyworld* (Korea), *4Chan*, *RenRen*, *QQ* (China), *Twitter*, *Second Life* and *Facebook*, by far the most popular. Other research focuses on the technology and social participation and power relations (Castells, 2001, 2004; Carpentier, 2011; Fenton, 2012; Siaper, 2012; Fuchs, 2014) and other on the consequences of the technology on the individual (Turkle, 1995, 2003, 2012; Nakamura, 2002; Krotoski, 2013). Studies emerging from the discipline of Anthropology tend to propose de-centring the media and contextualizing it as an everyday practice in combination with other materialities (Markham, 2013a; Miller, 2016; Pink et al 2016). This inquiry adheres to this latest model.

The main features of social media platforms are the initiation and maintenance of existing interpersonal relationships and sharing information. They enable communication among ever-widening circles of contacts and invite convergence among separate activities such as email, messaging, website creation, diaries, photo albums, and music/video uploading and downloading. From the user's point of view social media allows for creating as well as receiving content, which extends far beyond choosing what is ready-made and mass produced. According to Livingstone (2009) social media is also reframing the very language of social relationships as today, people construct their 'profile', make it 'public' or 'private', they 'comment' or 'message' their 'top friends' on their 'wall', they 'block' or 'add' people to their network, and so forth.

When we are on the media that is social, we mix friends with work colleagues and family. We make personal statements, display our moods and self-promote our abilities. We share private life events and make them of public interest. We measure and administer

friendships, interests and cup cake recipes. When we are actively in the media we are using the greatest ever tool for managing sociability and our own autobiography. But how has all this started? We have already discussed some pioneering experiments but when the media really became social was around 2004, when one of the most successful enterprises of the last decades was cooking in the dorms of Harvard University: *The Facebook*. *Facebook* lead to a new style of online relationship (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Around the same time other sites, initially intended for micro-blogging<sup>4</sup> user generated content, such as *Flickr* (2004), *Youtube* (2005) or *Tumblr* (2007) and later *Pinterest* (2010) among others, began to act themselves as social networking sites, following *Facebook*'s model.

The main areas of interest in social media research and identity, which are relevant to this study are: 'self- presentation' and 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959), privacy, identification with taste cultures and behavioural norms and netiquette<sup>5</sup>. boyd and Heer (2006) in a study on *Friendster*, in which they analyzed user profiles as conversational pieces, argued that these profiles were the foundations for a networked identity performance. Mansfield et al (2012) highlighted co-creation of content, inter-connectivity and participation. Other scholars interpret the display of public connections as signs of identity (tell me who your friends are and I will tell you who you are). In this sense the number of friends and their popularity are signs of clout and status (Cassidy, 2006). In some sense online networking mirrors and reinforces everyday offline rules of sociability (Donath, 2007). What a profile and their connections project to an audience amounts to the credibility of that person. Furthermore, Donath (op cit) argues, the particular design of a platform will promote a particular self-presentation and interaction

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<sup>4</sup> Small size broadcast.

<sup>5</sup> Online etiquette.

culture. Stutzman (2006) for instance studied how particular social networking architectures facilitated specific ways of personal disclosure. Gross and Acquisti (2005) analyzed how individuals protected privacy on *Facebook* and concluded that most people share publicly all their information (the default settings are open) and that very few take the time to modify them. This has changed as we become increasingly aware of the issues arising from indiscriminately sharing our personal information online. In *Youtube* accounts for instance, different levels of privacy are used to signal different degrees of closeness in relationships and to show empathy or inclusion among contacts (Lange, 2007).

Liu et al (2006) found that displays of interest in *Friendster* and *MySpace* were dedicatedly crafted in order to demonstrate particular tastes or cultural affiliations. Fono & Raynes Goldie (2006) argued that due to the lack of further relational cues participants in social media establish their own codes for communication through likes, interests and closeness of association. In ego-centred networks such as *Facebook* or *Friendster*, users manage and adapt the network rules and affordances to fit their own personal, cultural and social scenarios (boyd, 2006). For example regarding degrees of friendship, *Facebook* and also *LinkedIn* allow for the classification of contacts into ‘close friends’, ‘work colleagues’, ‘family’ and so on. In addition social media displays such as ‘wall posts’, ‘profile pictures’, ‘likes’, ‘cultural tastes’, ‘affiliations’ and ‘events’ act as a sort of personality projection device giving clues about the character of the owner of the account to the rest of the network (Walther et al, 2008).

Outside the western world, social networks such as *Cyworld* in Korea are architecturally designed to follow the cultural traditions of its members (Kim & Yun, 2007). What transpire from these studies is that social media architecture and affordances



are not necessarily determining the behaviour of its members rather they suggest genres of behaviour produced through mutual influence between members and technology. A good example is *Twitter*, which is designed to facilitate a ‘global conversation.’ According to the company mission statement, “ [*Twitter*] gives everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly without barriers” (Twitter, 2004, [online]). However, what users do with that ‘power’, for instance regarding their choice of topic and language, doesn’t seem to be of much concern for Twitter Inc.

Papacharissi (2009:201) examines “the symbolic representations of everyday communicative routines” that social media afford in order to understand the effects of virtual architecture in human relationships. She identified four different themes or constructs in which social networks are built around as sociocultural spaces. *First*, the blurring of the boundaries between public and private. *Second*, self-presentation in privately public and publically private spaces. *Third*, preference cultures, inclusion and exclusion. And *Fourth*, tightness, looseness and the organic development of behavioural norms. The sections 2.3 to 2.6 in this chapter are built following Papacharissi’s classification. Although *Facebook*, *LinkedIn* and *AsmallWorld* might have different goals, ultimately what all of them have in common is that they allow for self-presentation, impression management and connection building but also “they become successful when using structural features to create symbolic codes that facilitate communication and create what Castells termed a culture of real virtuality” (ibid).

Social media is clearly about interacting socially but it is also about how people peruse what it offers in order to project and reflect upon ‘themselves’ in an autobiographical context. Sharing any post with personal connotations, emotional states or

a self-portrait (or selfie) are autobiographical acts of self-presentation (impression management) and self-representation, which will be received and interpreted by others in the social context of the media (Thumin, 2012). For Rettberg (2014: 12) “we encounter other people in social media as texts” and “from our perspective their self-expression is self-representation”. The visual arts have foreseen practically all forms of self-expression that today populate social media. Web blogs and social media feeds can be seen as streams of micro-narratives. With every comment and every photograph, the author expresses a facet of himself or herself. This retro-chronological logic is afforded (and filtered) by the social media platform and socio-cultural context as much is becoming internalized in our ‘new’ habits of reading and sharing online.

Lives appear as never ending streams of images and text, apparently fragmented, but when looked at it as a whole they can suggest a will for coherence. When we create a profile in social media the first thing we are asked to do is to upload a picture of ourselves and say something. These two modes are expressions of identity and forms of self-representation. The choices made and the frequency with which pictures are changed and the statements are made say something about people and their circumstances. Like everything in social media these expressions-representations are serial and cumulative communications. Profile pictures sometimes show the individual as part of a group thus signalling social affiliation. Other times the individual doesn’t appear as such but as a fragment of a body or as an avatar. Also pictures and ‘about’ statements can be playful and funny or serious like in some cases of Catalan’s diaspora in which the flag appears as signalling a separatist national identity.

Early text-only based Internet communities such as MUD’s or diary communities

already highlighted the social aspects of sharing personal information. Back then the relationship between real and virtual bodies was completely different from contemporary social media communities. With the unavailability of sharing photographs, the Internet was disembodied and anonymized (Turkle, 1995, Markham, 1998). It wasn't until the arrival of webcams and high-speed broadband that allowed for the uploading of images and video that the body could be present (Senft, 2008). Originally *My(Space)* and *You(tube)* were intended to broadcast *your(self)* while *Face(book)* was to show people's faces in gated university communities. Hence, the body was no longer hidden. On the contrary, body imaging and beyond constitutes the primary content of most of the contemporary social media sites, and especially on platforms such as *Facebook*, *Youtube*, *We Heart It*, *Tumblr* or *Instagram*, in which autobiographical acts often feature.

### ***2.2.1 - Beyond Technological Determinism***

Social media are technologies designed with intrinsic affordances that promote some uses while discouraging others (Buckingham, 2008). Social media affords the juxtaposition of different modes of representation on one single stage: the screen. De Certeau's notion of space as "practiced space" (1984:117) is useful to explain the dialectics involved in social media as spaces of production (and re-production) of the self. To paraphrase him, the users transform the rules of engagement of the social network in the same way "as the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers." Different social media platforms set the boundaries for different 'styles' of autobiographical engagement. Yet ultimately the users themselves appropriate (inhabit) the space to their own needs and interests (Lefevre, 1991).

In social media, according to Annette Markham, reality is co-created through conversation. In this sense people “write the self into being” (Markham, 2013 [online, unpagged]). However, to “recognize our own existence in any meaningful way, we must be responded to” (ibid). In Markham’s argument we can see the footprint of Mead’s Symbolic Interactionism, Lacan’s Psychoanalysis, Erikson’s Psychosocial Development and Bakhtin’s Dialogism as discussed in Chapter 1. Jill Walker Rettberg (2014: 14) argues that when individuals comment or share pictures in social media they primarily engage in social communication but when they merely lurk or follow them they position themselves as an audience of traditional readers (or voyeurs) that sees ‘the other’ as a ‘text’ to be interpreted rather than as a living human being. Interestingly this point gives some food for thought for researchers involved in the study of social media practices, in the sense of seeing participants as fully fleshed collaborators, instead of being reduced to ‘texts’ or ‘data’ (Markham, op cit), a point which will be further stressed in the methodology chapter.

For Eugenia Siapera (2008) the specific affordances of the technology lead the path to particular kinds of subjectivity, which she differentiates from that of letters or confessionals (one to one intimacy) or mass media (one to many). For the same author (2012) in this new media scenario, although the subjects are presumably autonomous in expressing their inner thoughts, ideas, experiences and opinions, in a word managing their own identity, there is not a clean-cut separation from the others. Therefore in social media the autonomy of ‘the author’ is collaborative: through liking and commenting, a feedback loop with others is established rendering a self in a constant process of revision. This account also seems to suggest that the degree of agency of the author can be best gauged by looking at the social context in which the autobiographical act is produced and

reproduced rather than at the media used *per se*. The media allows for social interaction but doesn't dictate how this interaction should be enacted. This argument is also consistent with Plummer's tripartite model of agency in the production of a story discussed in the previous chapter.

Thomson (2005) claims that subjectivity in social media is involved in power struggles that open the door to new battles: those of 'visibility' and 'popularity'. For him the quest for recognition in social media has led to tactics for increasing both. From this perspective having a presence online for the sake of popularity might just override the initial aim of producing and sharing creative content. For Reed (2005) people narrate themselves through their online activity to the extent that the self becomes the blogged self. In this scenario and drawing from Debord (1967) and Poster (1995) the self would be caught in the dialectic between control and the loss of it. While a subject has almost total discretion over its posts, the minute they go online that control is lost. Autobiographical acts then tend to acquire a life of their own in the sense that they can be quoted, re-posted, re-mixed and re-tweeted across the broader network.

Theories of identity gender, race and technology (Cyber and Techno Feminism) expose the ways in which gender and race are performed and inscribed in new technologies. Some early studies investigated how online technology facilitated the liberation of gender and race from the boundaries of biology and dominant discourses (Butler, 1993; Rodino, 1997; Danet, 1998; O' Brien, 1999), while others found the opposite (Gill, 2002, Nakamura, 2002). Their findings suggested that new technologies either favoured or constrained agency. More recent research on blogging and social media suggests that, in opposition to MUDs or *Second Life* types of environment where the

imaginary is preeminent, blogs and social media are grounded in everyday life offering little room for identity experimentation (Van Doorn et al, 2007). With all this in mind, is there room to think that the technological design of social media determines the autobiographical act? Beyond technological determinism the suggestion is that human behaviour co-evolves with human made tools (Hayles, 2012). Social media, as a technology of the self, has the ability to shape autobiographical acts as much as living in a particular society and culture does, as will be discussed in the following sections.

### **2.3- Social Media and the Public and the Private**

Overwhelmed by the increasing pressure of the Versailles court, Marie-Antoinette is said to have had an incessant need for privacy. To fulfill this desire she used to hide away in *Le petit Trianon*, a small neoclassical building tucked away from the gaze of the palatial inhabitants. The building was a house of intimacy and solitary enjoyment. It was designed to prevent any sort of interaction with any unsolicited guest, including the servants. To that end the dining table was conceived to be raised and lowered mechanically on demand through the floorboards of the dining room, in order to avoid any contact with the maids. Similarly, Marie-Antoinette's boudoir could be hidden away through a mechanism of mirrored panels that would obscure the windows at her will.

The architectural functionality of social media is nothing close to that of *Le Petit Trianon*. If anything, its design choices have the quality of removing or at least modifying the boundaries between the public and the private. Lets picture for a moment the set of *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003). The film shows a black-box theatre sort of stage in which

all the sets (nine so far) are delimited with chalk coal and coexist simultaneously. The action takes place with the actors moving sequentially from set to set while being followed by the camera. The bareness of the stage serves to focus the attention on the performance and the storytelling but it also confronts us with the artificiality of the situation. Meyrowitz (1986) also used an architectural metaphor to explain a scenario in which the boundaries between the private and the public were unclear. He pictured a world without walls delimiting rooms, offices or bathrooms, a world in which, like in *Dogville*, different situations would merge “changing the situational geography of social life” (op cit: 6). In this world individuals would need to adjust their behaviour so as to make it appropriate to the distinct situations. As a result, Meyrowitz claims, the individual is bound to lack situational grounding, or a sense of place.

In social media distinctions between private and public are emphasized through the criteria of membership, access and ‘control’ over disclosure but not all platforms are the same. For instance *Facebook*, which is mainly used for a wide range of activities and social interaction, has a very open architecture to the point of allowing advertisers to access members’ information, contrasting with *ASmallWorld* that only grants access through invitation privileges. In this case it would seem that *ASmallWorld* is a sort of *petit Trianon* among the Versailles cyberspace in which the ‘sense of place’ has possibly been restored. The more gated the social network the more the sense of place and the lesser the visibility and accessibility of its members (Papacharissi, 2009). *Facebook*, in opening up its gates to third parties (advertisers), often jeopardizes its member’s privacy. Hence different gating designs leads to different modes of interaction (ibid).

## 2.4- Social Media and Self-presentation and Impression Management

Many scholars have turned to Goffman's Dramaturgical Model (1959) which argues that human interaction depends on context and audience to explain online self-presentation and specifically personal pages and social media (Dominick, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002a, 2002b; Walker, 2000; Donath, 2007; Donath & boyd, 2004). For Donath & boyd (op cit) the online environment is ideal for self-presentation performances. Individuals enjoy some sort of control over textual and visual cues that allow them to choreograph and bricolage the exact amount of 'face' they wish to 'give off' (Goffman, op cit). Donath (2007) has analyzed how the cues given are also intended to maintain a certain level of accuracy that would translate into perceived authenticity. For example 'face' is presented through a display of friends and cultural taste as mentioned in section 2.2. This is what Donath & boyd (op cit) have called 'public displays of connection.' Friends give contextual cues about the social circles the individual wishes to be associated with, like popular or VIP connections; also with tastes, social habits and character. *Facebook* for instance affords selective displays of friends allowing for further micromanaging self-presentation and *LinkedIn* suggests professional performance by offering self-presentation templates similar to CV's and insisting on the importance of displaying work and educational affiliations.

Occasionally losing the 'face' could also be staged for authenticity, especially in open social networks such as *Facebook*. If our profiles feel too perfect or crafted they could come across as 'fake' hence sometimes 'mistakes' are made on purpose to grant verisimilitude, for example in staged humorous situations in which the owner of the



profile ridicules himself or herself as clumsy during a ski trip (Davis, 1992; Goffman, 1959; Liu, 2007). Finally, stage props in the form of applications such as ‘pokes’, ‘quizzes’, ‘virtual book shelves’, ‘film’ and ‘music libraries’ or ‘flirting applets’ (all of which are part of what I have termed *virtual mantelpieces*) facilitate the construction of our best-flambouyant- selves. All these props constitute our dramatic range, our multiplicity of faces, and our situational and versatile identity. “Operating as a virtual wardrobe, these applications or props fleetingly support a performance of the self, only soon to be replaced by the next most popular add-on” (Papacharissi, 2009:212).

## **2.5- Social Media and Identification with Taste Cultures**

In everyday life we often manifest affinity for material things such as particular brands or styles of clothing or preferred music and in doing so we also express our cultural identity (Gans, 1999[1974]). These choices in the same way they identify us with particular taste cultures and likeminded individuals, also pull us apart from diversity. According to Liu (2007) social media offer ‘customization templates’ for the structuring and signalling of a particular taste ethos. The simple fact of joining a particular network presupposes a taste. By joining *LinkedIn* we align ourselves to a particular meritocratic bill (e.g. display of job titles with great attention to detail) while signaling technological literacy and computer-friendly occupations, which incidentally are all white collar. Hence we make also a statement of class.

*Facebook* profiles for example, show taste in the way they are crafted. Some of them feel cluttered and full of amateurish pictures while others are highly styled. Members also debate about the latest TV program and review books, films and games while showing

pictures of the restaurant and the meal they just have had before going to the *Electric Picnic* festival, and of course, their Hunter wellies. In this sense, if taste cultures carry a socio-economic component (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1984[1979]) and an aesthetic common ground, which can be connected with class (Gans, op cit) it is important to note that the discourse of social media as the ‘great democratizer’ is, to say the least, delusional as online performances of the self tend to reproduce the offline spheres of taste and culture (Papacharissi, 2009: 213).

## **2.6- Social Media and Behavioral Norms**

This section expands on the notion of situational (technological) determinism (or causality) as a result of co-presence in the sense that individuals tend to adjust their behaviour depending on the cues received from others (Fono & Raines-Goldie, 2006). In this context the absence of cues is also considered a cue. In everyday interaction we consider these cues as ‘formal’ or ‘informal’ or in Goffman’s (1963) terms ‘tight’ or ‘loose.’ He gives a few instances of that. An example is the difference of ‘looseness’ between American and French streets. It appears that in France people can eat while walking and talking and can enjoy a meal in the street outside a cafe while in the States (in the 1960’s) people linked this behaviour to holiday times. Goffman discusses advantages and inconveniences of tightness and looseness. Tight social occasions provide ‘extreme situational orientation’. Because these occasions are highly ritualized the individual can perform according to role while leaving the mind “wonderfully free to wander” (op cit: 208). However, loose situations such as a party require the individual to be constantly alert looking for cues to re-adjust his/her behaviour.

Thus looser networks such as Facebook does require users to be more mindful of interaction, looking for cues to adjust their behavior and providing cues for others to adapt theirs. Individuals who would like to signal that interaction be more formally oriented on their Facebook pages may produce minimal pages, simply organized with few (if any) application add-ons. Similarly, individuals with more loosely spatially organized pages could invite more interaction from others (Papacharissi, 2009:214).

As per contrast, in *LinkedIn* the design is tied to formality so its members' behaviour becomes quite rigid. Profiles tend to be static and interaction is minimal. *Twitter* on the other hand might impose a barrier regarding the number of characters that can be used (140) but to date doesn't have conversational restrictions. In *Twitter* social norms are left to its users' whims and decorum. Social media has the quality to echo and amplify what we attain through the senses and what we imagine and therefore generate a different order of time and place emerging from its particular rules of engagement. Ultimately it's the decision of the user to 'inhabit' (De Certeau, op cit) the media which is social, to suit his or her own purposes. With tight networks the users do not question right or wrong, they just conform to the given settings, but in a loose network the individuals constantly negotiate the rules of engagement within certain parameters. Although *Facebook* is not entirely neutral as it offers a set of affordances sympathetic with particular behaviours, manoeuvring within these parameters is the user's decision. The question is to what extent these 'orchestral manoeuvres' conform or deviate from available online/offline social templates? This question is further discussed in Chapter 5 and in the context of this research's empirical evidence.

## 2.7-Chapter Summary

This chapter begins by reflecting on the difficulty of keeping pace with the amount of literature dealing with social media. It notes that both social media and literature about social media are dynamic and fluid and therefore constantly evolving and interacting with economical, socio-political, and cultural factors. It discusses three pioneering experiments of networked autobiographical acts in order to illuminate today's ubiquitous self-disclosure practices in social media. The cases chosen are *Eliza*, a natural language computer program acting as a personal psychotherapist, *JenniCam* (Jennifer Ringley), the very first cam girl in history, and *Quiet We live in Public*, an art project involving a hundred volunteers constantly monitored by cameras and their actions broadcast on the Internet.

Research on social media and identity emerging from a multitude of disciplines tends to cluster in inquiries regarding identity and privacy, self-presentation and impression management, cultures of taste and behavioural norms. For reasons of scope many studies on online identity have been left out privileging those that can be useful for understanding which way social media facilitates authoring the self. Nevertheless further relevant scholarship is unraveled in the remaining chapters both in the contexts of the methodological approach to this study and the insights gained from the empirical 'data.' So far identity is constructed through the tools that are available to us. Social media offers these resources while operating in a scenario of both historical continuity and change. Some studies see the pairing of identity and digital technologies as liberating from constraints of the past and thus emancipatory, while others find that the opposite is true. For all that, identities and technology are in constant movement, co-evolving and interacting with socio-political, economical and cultural circumstances.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In 1952 Erwin Schrodinger gave a lecture in Dublin in which, before starting he warned the audience that what he was about to say would sound ‘lunatic’: his equations were telling different stories, not alternatively but simultaneously. He was referring to the ‘multiverse’. The concept was proposed in order to explain the nature of existence. However, even if science through empirical methods seeks to answer the questions posed by existence, and should keep doing so, a final explanation remains elusive (Deutsch, 2011: 310). Kant noted that there are two possible conceptions of the world we intend to study: one that assumes that the world is independent of any observer and therefore susceptible to objective study and the opposite view which proposes that the world exists inside the mind of the observer and therefore the subject of study becomes a form of introspection and of conceptual analysis (Kant, 2001[1793]).

As stressed in Chapter 1, people (and subsequently societies) make sense of their lives by constructing stories, which is an interpretive process (Ricoeur, 1991). Autobiographical acts in social media, as storytelling practices, are characterized by a

combination of the textual and the visual and produced with the audiences in mind, which in turn co-participate in the creative act (boyd & Ellison, 2007; boyd, 2008; Papacharissi, 2011); in this sense ‘autobiographing’ in social media has a performative quality (Goffman, 1959; Markham, 2013). If the main concern for this project was understanding how people make sense of their online autobiographical acts then the methodological approach had to be fundamentally phenomenological. This perspective seeks new insights into the qualities of what is observed, in contrast with a positivist view which seeks to prove a hypothesis through experimental verification and then through the generalization and replicability of results (Patton, 2002). A phenomenological paradigm would see events as mutually constitutive, and thus multidimensional, and the insights gained from the research should be seen as specific to the context of the particular study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The methodology employed for this study ranged from heuristic methods such as a historical survey of autobiographical acts, a pilot study and situational maps to ethnographical methods such as participatory observation with fieldnotes and memo taking. It included in-depth, conversational and walking interviews (and focus groups), in which what was said, either by the participant or the researcher, was attended to in its narrative performativity, this is to say bringing in silences, body language, tonal and volume changes along with the possible impact of the presence of the researcher. (Polkinghorne, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). During interviews and conversations visual posts were retrieved (elicitation) and interpreted jointly with the informant in their narrative quality: this is to say interrogating what stories particular images were telling and why (Clandinin, 2006; Rose, 2007; Riessman, 2008; Pink, 2013).

This complex path sourced the ‘data’ which is presented in the form of an arts-based multinarrative (polyphonic) artefact, curated by the researcher and enacted by the composite voices of the informants, either interacting between them or in a ‘dialogued soliloquy’. This chapter presents step by step the methodological process of this study, including its purpose and rationale, the iterative design and combination of methods, ethical considerations, the selection of participants and their demographics and social media habitus, and also the settings in which the research took place and the limits of the design. Whilst in a subsequent chapter what is discussed in detail is how the different methods played together in conjunction with a theoretical framework to produce a polyphonic artefact able to provide insights that would answer the research question.

### **3.1- Study Purpose and Rationale**

The purpose of this inquiry is to look for insights on ‘why’ people belonging to cohorts who grew up without digital technology and without previous diary writing habits have come to actively engage in autobiographical practices which in the context of this study have been defined as ongoing micro acts of life storytelling, combining the textual and the visual, on social media sites such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter* or *Youtube*. Furthermore, ‘to what extent’ their everyday (embodied) life, including that running at the

‘backstage’<sup>6</sup>, is inscribed into these practices and ‘what’ is this doing for them, in the sense of how they benefit from it or add value to their lives. It also seeks insights into social issues derived or highlighted by these practices that might be relevant to the wider community.

Perhaps it would not be unreasonable to accept the assertion that a question says more about who poses it than about who answers it. The researcher’s interest in the topic began with her perplexity regarding the proliferation of confessional accounts in social media, not necessarily by teenagers but by mature adults, all well in their late 30’s and beyond (the researcher’s cohort). Above all there was puzzlement in the observation that, in the majority of cases, these adult practitioners had never considered to write a diary before the widespread growth of social media technologies and despite an initial lack of interest in journaling, they were now openly sharing their lives online and with different degrees of intimacy. The question was ‘why’ were they doing that? How come? To what purpose? Was it perhaps the expectation of an almost immediate reaction from an invisible audience? Maybe they were charmed by that and grew a need for it? Or were they genuine attempts at self-actualization? Maybe their interest was purely instrumental, for example self-promotion or self-indulgence? If it was so, what could be learnt from it?

Of the people who at the beginning (informally) answered some of the above questions, the majority would say that they “didn’t know why”, because “it was possible” or because it was “normal”, after all “everybody was doing it.” Indeed, according to

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<sup>6</sup> In Goffman’s terms (1959) what is hidden from the public.



Internet stats: social media usage is increasing worldwide and among older populations (Ofcom, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2017; Statista, 2017). However, these cohorts tend to be under represented in the literature, which tends to favour younger generations of which the majority are children or college students (Turkle, 1995, 1997, 2011; boyd & Heer, 2006; boyd, 2007, 2008, boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe 2007; Ellison & boyd 2013, Livingston, 2009); populations in perceived disadvantage due for example to immigration, gender issues or disability (Kendall, 1996; Rodino, 1997; Danet, 1998; O'Brien, 1999; Nakamura, 2002; Van Zoonen 2007; Cardenas, 2010; Wajcman 2010; Komito, 2011, Holmes & O'Loughlin, 2014); and in older adults, as learning tools or to improve sociability in contexts of isolation (Xie et al 2012; Leist, 2013; ). In this sense this inquiry contributes to fill the gap for this mature, middle-aged generation, which without precedent, has taken to the Internet to disclose their lives.

The rationale for this study can be best grasped by taking the lead of Ruthellen Josselson when she says that people are not molecules (even if they are made of them) and therefore they cannot be objectively described. To understand whole people it is not enough to isolate few factors and to trace their effects in order to elucidate universals. It might be useful to profile potential consumers for the market or for designing policy but this strategy is limited because it “effaces the intending individual” (Josselson, 1995: 29), which is the ‘autobiographing’ subject. Instead Josselson proposes ‘empathy’ and ‘narrative’ as “routes to imagining what is real in whole people in their own world” (ibid) and this is what constitutes the ‘gap’, which this study is aiming to ‘fill’ and the ‘problem’ it’s trying to ‘solve.’ In this sense, the research contribution resides in the way method is played in order to ‘imagine’ the reality of a small group of social media autobiographers.

Yet 'imagining' is all we can do beyond embodied experience and in this 'act of imagination' we always fail to exist in the imperfect dimension we call the 'here and now.'

### **3.2- Research Design and Ethical Considerations**

In Chapter 1 we have seen that what differentiates online autobiographical acts from canonical forms of (literary) autobiography is mainly their performative aspect, the creative use of mixed media and the possibilities for co-creation \_because they occur in a public field of production in which this practice is organized (Bourdieu, 1993; Plummer, 1995). In my opinion the study of the performative self through autobiographical acts in social media goes beyond quantifying self-occurrences and calls for mixed methods. By including the study of qualitative dimensions in which personal raw data is communicated through social media, for example analyzing creative enhancements of images, the use of literary quotes and poems and the uploading of music or videos; but also interrogating why this is happening in the first place can change the way in which the complexity of individual and social life can be addressed. The result of these creative disclosures is not a straightforward life narrative but one that has been manipulated to perform as seen previously. Online autobiographers seem to intentionally include or exclude information hoping to "flesh out the sensory, emotional and kinesthetic aspects of narrative" (Jones, 2006:69) In this way 'text' and audience, including the researcher, "come together and inform one another" (Denzin, 2004:24).

### ***3.2.1- Research Design***

The research design consists of a multimethod approach which was the result of an iterative process: *First*, an extensive historical review of self-referencing acts resulted in a brief survey of non-canonical forms of autobiography in order to position ‘new’ autobiographical practices in social media among other similar works. *Second* a pilot study was conducted with the purpose of gaining further insight on the matter, complementing and adding a degree of systematization to the initial (more informal) observations. The pilot also contributed to open up new methodological avenues, not taken on board previously, and consequently originating a shift from the original approach to the research and subsequently the research design. I will come back to this. The themes retrieved from the pilot were mainly used to counterbalance the participants’ own perceptions on the matter that arose during interviews and informal encounters. *Third* ethnography methods informed the field work developed during the period of over two years from Spring 2014 to Autumn 2016. This process took place on an ongoing basis, meaning that every occasion counted as possible source of ‘data’ in which the researcher scribbled notes in notebooks which were then transcribed into a digital journal.

During that time, and with their explicit permission, the researcher ‘friended’, ‘connected’ or ‘followed’ the participants’ online profiles in *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, *Youtube* and *Whatsapp* but also in their embodied experience. For example participants were ‘shadowed’ at work; there were invitations to family meals; visits at home, at the hospital, nursing home and hospice; there were nights out; two short trips; several ‘walking’ and ‘coffee’ encounters, a wake and a funeral; but also there were formal sessions in which focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted and the participants’ online material commented upon. Interviews were then systematically

transcribed, numbering the sentences and including contextual information. Later the narratives were scrutinized in their performativity, this is to say, in what they accomplished (Clandinin & Connolly, 2004; Riessman, 2008). Finally, the *fourth* phase of this design consisted of presenting the ethnographical data or ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1988), dynamically, in the form of a narrated ‘virtual reality’ or ‘grounded fiction’ termed the ‘polyphonic artefact.’

The polyphonic artefact (Vol 2) is the attempt at blending the voices of the participants in a polyphony of short stories curated by the researcher, capable of mimicking, including its reverse chronology, the flows and contingencies of their autobiographical acts in social media, while inscribing them into the everyday embodied experience.

RESEARCH DESIGN			
PHASE	ACTION	PURPOSE	OUTCOME
PHASE 1	Historical Review of self-referencing acts.	To position “new” online Autobiographical practices.	Minority report of Autobiography.
PHASE 2	Pilot Study.	To “test the terrain”; To source possible questions for interviews.	1 <sup>st</sup> Shift towards ethnographical methods.
PHASE 3	Ethnographical methods.	Gather “data” and further contextualize online autobiographical practices	2 <sup>nd</sup> Shift towards narrative inquiry and arts based research
PHASE 4	Narrative and Arts based research methods.	To present “whole persons” (Josselson, 1995) by contextualizing the autobiographical act.	Polyphonic Artefact.  Insights on the research question.

Fig-2  
Research Design.

### ***3.2.2- Ethical considerations***

Initially, this study was meant to be more straight forward than it turned out to be and a simple note for the Ethics Committee of the University was submitted with the expectation in mind that approval to proceed would follow. However, the Committee, rightly so, declined on the grounds that the methods proposed, including linking with participants online profiles, interviews and focus groups, were highly intrusive and due to the nature of the study sensitive issues would be addressed. The researcher had wrongly assumed that because all the informants were mature adults and in apparent possession of their full mental capacity, volunteering for the study and freely sharing life experiences online, they couldn't be considered especially vulnerable. Nonetheless soon it became apparent that due to the nature of ethnographical methods, which favour close rapport between informants and researcher, a fuller Ethics review had to be sought.

A new document incorporating the guidelines of *The Association of Internet researchers* (AoIR, 2012[2002]) regarding Internet research, was submitted to complement the Helsinki declaration on the International Ethical guidelines for biomedical research involving human subjects (WMA, 2013[1961]). In this second attempt the researcher assessed higher risks for the study that included nuances such as to what extent the participants agreed to interaction that may be used for research purposes; if the research purpose, design and methodology balanced possible conflicts between participant and researcher perceptions of what was 'public/private' and 'sensitive/non-sensitive'; if the dissemination of the 'findings' (insights for this research) protected the confidentiality of the persons involved in the study and if particular contents were ever to be linked to the person, this would result in any sort of physical, psychological or moral harm. This time

the Ethics Committee sent its approval (Appendix A). A small victory taking on board that the challenges posed by this research had only just begun.

It is not an easy task to gain access to *backstage* information unless there is a strong steady labour of building rapport with the participants. This mutual understanding sometimes calls for a *quid pro quo*: something for something. It also demands to be ready to listen, unexpected things, sometimes not very pleasant, and over all it means that the researcher is in no position to be objective, which does not equate to being uncritical. There are further questions the researcher needs to answer, for example her willingness to spend great amounts of time with the participants, often personal time. To what extent is she ready to humble herself in order to listen to the participants voices before jumping to conclusions based on her own background knowledge, preference and prejudice? Furthermore is she prepared to recognize failure? To give in? to empathize? to feel? All the while being critical of herself and of the others? If the researcher could answer these questions honestly and follow through then something interesting could happen. The next step just grew organically.

Common practice is that the researcher has the last word based on the interpretation of the 'data' provided by the 'informants.' However, what if the participants were to play a bigger role and 'upgrade' from purely informants to 'co-makers' of the research? Additionally what if the researcher was to study these autobiographical acts in social media from the point of view of the people involved in it? How would it be to walk in their shoes? How to convey that? The disciplines of Ethnography and Narrative Analysis, which in conjunction with and informing an arts-based practice facilitated the

scaffolding to make that possible. From this point of view this research can be considered experimental or at least can be seen as occupying a position on the outskirts of orthodox academia. Yet nothing in it is new as it has been done before, in different ways and with different topics. I will return to this later.

### *3.2.2.1 - Confidentiality and Anonymity*

Following AoIR and Dublin City University Ethics Committee guidelines simple measures to preserve the confidentiality of the informants were taken at early stages. For example the use of pseudonyms for names and codes for locations, and keeping the real names separated from the fieldnotes and all the documentation in print and digital formats encrypted and locked in the University. Nevertheless, and after further reflection upon writing the document for the Ethics Committee, there were still some loose threads, for example qualms regarding cloud technology for storage, analysis and retrieval of sensitive data. Regardless of its recent popularity and encouragement to be used, especially when dealing with big datasets (which makes perfect sense), the researcher had a personal negative experience in which her own DNA information, donated for a study in a different institution, was lost due to a ‘glitch in the system.’ Hence, due to technology mishaps that cannot be controlled by the researcher a decision was made to use more traditional, even old fashioned, tools: analogic notebooks (paper and pen), digital spreadsheets and portable hard drives. The concern for preserving the anonymity of the participants was also a contributory factor to building a ‘virtual reality’ with their composite voices. Regarding visual material, it was disguised through the darkening of compromised areas, and in other instances, when this was not possible an alternative image (a drawing or a collage) was provided \_ examples of this can be found in Chapter 5 and throughout the artefact.

To further comply with ethical best practice, the curated versions of the participants' stories were presented to them in order to be annotated. With this action the researcher sought the participants' approval on the one hand and further insight on the other. This step was taken with the aim to ensure that the participants' visions were accurately reflected in the narration and also to reassure them that measures had been taken to protect their identities. To the researcher's surprise many participants weren't as much concerned with the preservation of their own anonymity as she was. They were quite happy with just changing their real names and others even manifested that they wouldn't mind to feature as themselves, which the researcher found quite interesting specially in the case of sensitive stories.

However the question of 'deductive disclosure' came to the fore when during an informal encounter involving third parties, one of the participants referred to herself by the pseudonym given to her in 'the thesis'. As the story involved third parties there was a possibility that, by proxy, other individuals could be identified. A decision was made then to use pronouns instead of names and, when that wasn't possible, more general categories such as: 'sister', 'daughter', 'father', 'neighbour.' This choice was also stylistic. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) noted that anonymity should be preserved even if the informants wish to be identified, first because it is unknown how many people will access our research and second because nobody exists in isolation. Both remarks make perfect sense in the current context of online hyperconnectivity. During the process of curating and re-writing the stories, the use of pronouns proved to be useful in order to drag the researcher inside the participants' minds in an exercise of empathy. It will be an achievement if this process can also take place in the readers' mind.



### 3.2.2.2- *Seeking Participant's Feedback*

For some of the participants the stories didn't quite work in conveying their point of view and changes had to be made. Sometimes jointly face-to-face and others through email threads or Skype. Some of the inaccuracies were at the level of the mood and tone of the curated story, which for example was told in a lighter or graver voice than intended when initially shared with the researcher. Other modifications were related to direct quotes incorporated into the text that had to be paraphrased in order to make them less obvious. Also captured logs had to be conveniently disguised. The images in the form of screen shots and videos posed a problem specifically when involving third parties from the informant's own network. Blurring faces and blacking out names and locations was an option but in the case of videos that was complicated. Tracking down everybody in the picture or video in order to ask their permission to be used in the dissertation proved to be quite difficult in practice and it didn't solve the problem of identification by proxy (LeCompte and Schensul, op cit; Boellstorff et al, 2012). Also in some cases images belonging to their posts, even if they had been previously shared publicly online and commented upon during interviews, for some reason, and within the context of the stories, suddenly didn't feel right and the participants asked to either take them down or to be modified. These particulars are further stressed in section 4.5 in the following chapter.

As noted in previous paragraphs consideration has to be given to the implications of linking with the participants' social networks (either online or offline). In both cases close rapport with the participants suggests that personal networks might be inappropriately exposed, say in *Facebook* or *Twitter* (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 146) but also in physical life. It is very difficult to establish from the initial stages of the research what

will the degree of closeness be with the participants. In this particular study it grew organically and to different degrees depending on their disposition. As the selection of the participants derived from a method of snowballing, a certain level of trust was automatically assumed by both parties. While being ‘relations of relations’ facilitated breaking the ice, it also meant that when the encounter happened this was already ‘pre-informed’ and inevitably ‘pre-judiced’ by the mutual acquaintance and also by the expectations generated by the respective social media profiles.

### *3.2.2.3- The Researcher’s Investment in Social Media*

The principle of ethnographical work is that researchers seek to embed themselves in the communities they want to study by investing time and energy in there. But this particular researcher sometimes confused her informants with the time she invested online. Some participants seemed to resent the fact that she had quite ‘passive’ online profiles. Indeed, the research question arose because this researcher couldn’t figure out what the allure of disclosing personal/private biographical information online was, but at the same time was fascinated by it, which practically positioned her on the ‘voyeuristic’ side of the spectrum. In this sense her online profiles show very little public activity, limiting her level of investment to short communications with friends and contacts through either private messaging or engaging with private groups for example in *Whatsapp* but with a particular purpose such as a short term project. Confronted with this issue the researcher proposed that she was willing to interact more frequently online with the participants but that the interaction would be limited to commenting on or maybe liking something she would find interesting. The researcher made clear that she wouldn’t be publishing her photos or intimate thoughts in *Facebook* or elsewhere because it didn’t come naturally to her to do

that and because that was the reason why she was doing the research in the first place. If the participants were feeling uncomfortable with the arrangement they could withdraw from the research. Fortunately nobody did. With time and the offline building up of the relationship the issue seemed to soften.

#### *3.2.2.4- Taking Leave from the Research*

Taking leave from the research is also an issue. The researcher wanted to avoid becoming involved in people's lives and then, after obtaining what she wanted, cut her ties with them and that was that. However, it is difficult to avoid this. No matter the degree of entanglement there is a moment in which the research comes to an end and the rapport with the informants, specially during the frantic period of writing up the dissertation, thins out. It helps to let the participants know that the 'mission' is coming to a closure and inviting them to keep in touch (LeCompte and Schensul, op cit; Iphophen, 2011). Contact with the participants that have become friends persists and with others the possibility of connecting online through *Facebook* or *Whatsapp* eases the process. With some the relation has become similar to that with distant relatives and with others is still ongoing. In any case the researcher intends to send everyone a summary of the insights gained from their stories.

#### *3.2.2.5- The Issue of 'Data'*

What remains is to put on the table for discussion what to do with the 'data' obtained by ethnographical means. This particular research is bound under Dublin City University Ethical Review Institutional Board to destroy all the raw data once the research is

completed while the recordings should be erased after a year. There are opposite views regarding making ethnographical data available to other researchers (Hulme 2003a, 2003b; Iphophen, op cit). Traditionally, ethnographical accounts have been criticized for their lack of transparency in the process inbetween the data collection and the production and dissemination of the findings (black box model). The figure of the ethnographer situated either within or outside the text has also caused a few blisters. It is always going to be a balancing act between preserving the identity of the participants and unveiling the insights arising from a deeply engaged work. As ethnographies are not laboratory experiments, they are hardly replicable. Still the tenets of a culture, the stories being told should give an accurate portrayal no matter who tells it:

An ethnography is an interpretation; it is neither God's truth nor the final word. Yet this does not casts us into a posmodern morass in which all interpretations are equal [...] the fact that the value of ethnographical research is not predicated on replication does not mean there are no standards for assessment. It is up to us, ethically, as scholars to create, seek out, propagate, and defend adequate standards (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 149).

### **3.3- Methods**

In this study the researcher's initial approach to problem solving was informed in great measure by Heuristics. From the Greek, Heuristics means 'discovery.' Classical examples of heuristics at work are the use of 'trial and error' to, for example, readjust a research design (Polya, 1945) or avail of readily accessible information such as historical records, intuitive judgment, profiling and prototyping, myths or common sense (Pearl, 1983:7). Heuristics are useful to calculate the chances of an occurrence, for example that tomorrow the Sun will rise. However Daniel Kahneman and Tversky (1974) noted that heuristics has

its biases. For instance, heuristics will allow a judge to pass judgment only on the basis of his knowledge of precedent trials instead of looking at the uniqueness of his case. Interestingly Kahneman and Tversky (op cit) use several metaphors (heuristic strategy) to argue this particular point. According to Abbott (2004) social scientists seek three kinds of explanations: pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic and gather data through different methods: ethnography, surveys, record-based analysis, and history. With all this in mind the researcher started her search for the azimuth.

### ***3.3.1- Survey of Non-canonical Forms of Autobiography***

A historical survey was conducted in order to position online autobiographical acts at the outskirts of literary creation. As stressed in Chapter 1, which features some of the works surveyed, life accounts have moved into the visual and performance arts and lately have entered the digital domain in the form of personal pages or blogs and social media microblogs. By placing current online autobiographical acts in an historical context what was achieved was to demonstrate that self-reflective acts are as old as humanity and that they are creatively styled with the means at hand depending on the historical context and the fashions of the time. What may seem obvious to more experienced scholars was a first hand revelation for this researcher. Through the almost archaeological work of surveying autobiographical acts in different historical periods she realized that personal accounts are gathered not only from personal memories of experienced events but also from collective and cultural memory and therefore confirming Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism.

### ***3.3.2- Pilot Study***

Following an heuristic approach the researcher intended to prototype her research design. A pilot study was conducted at the beginning of the inquiry in order to test if the research design was adequate to answer the research question. In this mini-study 5 informants were recruited through a snowballing respondent-driven process. The initial design consisted of questionnaires, content and discourse analysis of social media posts and in-depth interviews, transcribed and analyzed thematically in order to look for patterns across cases (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000). During this period situational/mind maps (Clarke, 2005) were constantly sketched, always shifting shape, in order to position what was emerging from the 'data' in the context of a literature review (Appendix F).

Content and discourse analysis are widely used in news analysis and journalism and both methods can prove complementary. While content analysis focuses on the quantitative aspect of word occurrences (Krippendorff, 2004:17), for instance specific words that people would tend to repeat while disclosing personal information in *Facebook*; critical discourse analysis interprets the context in which these words appear (Fairclough, 1995) for example in the aftermath of a particularly traumatic or joyful event. Content analysis is often used for mapping large texts. It is based on identifier categories. It looks into particular choices of words to locate, for example, the political or ideological position of the subject in relation to a social issue (Krippendorff, op cit). With critical discourse analysis the inquiry can be further stretched to find out extra meanings by analyzing, for example, what words are never used. For instance in social media, negative words are rarely used unless in a hatred scenario and this can be extended to unflattering pictures and so on. The words and the quotes people choose to share contribute to add meaning. For

example a person using as his/her *Facebook* background image a picture of his/her own library could yield further information by looking into the titles she chooses to show in that particular picture (Fairclough, op cit).

Content analysis on the other hand could help mapping, which kind of recurrent themes appear in someone's profile and across the board (Krippendorff, op cit), for instance reoccurrence of topics such as 'illness', 'youth' or 'babies'. Some women seem to appear online as role models of motherhood by sharing thoughtful comments on education and pictures with their children having fun, helping out with home-work or baking in the kitchen. Others prefer to come across as concerned with climate change by liking, sharing or commenting on particular instances on the subject matter, for example endorsing a particular eco-friendly product or criticizing fracking practices in Ireland. Content analysis relies on frequency. More frequency means more importance. However, it tends to overlook the context in which this frequency occurs. As the messages in social media seem to be tailored to an audience, content analysis could miss the background of the production of a particular text (Bourdieu, 1993). For instance the person posting about climate change could be trying to convey a 'front-stage' persona (Goffman, 1959) consistent with his/her recent job as Environmental consultant. By using critical discourse analysis (or indeed an ethnographical approach) more context information can be retrieved. With critical discourse analysis it is possible to inquire into people's position in the world, into the ideologies behind the language they use and into underplaying powers. It looks into agency and it seeks, ultimately, emancipation. The words and the images individuals decide to share can link them to different ideologies and stereotypes of which they might not even be aware (Fairclough, 1995, Hansen & Cottle, 1998; Barker & Galasinski, 2003).

With the participants informed consent (Appendix B), a sample of their micro-stories was scrapped from their social media profiles and a questionnaire with some closed questions: mostly demographics and internet habits; and some other open questions; mostly about motivations and rewards was sent by email. After returning the filled questionnaire the participants were invited to an interview, 'in depth' (Appendix C). With all the 'data' obtained some 'themes' (e.g. success or travel) were 'found' and 'scrutinized' in order to identify reoccurrences (Krippendorff, 2004) and also critically analyzed in order to identify socially constructed discourses embedded in people's conversations (e.g. Men are bad with domestic tasks) (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1997, Laclau & Mouffle, 2013). The plan was that after obtaining insights from the interpretation of the interviews the researcher would create 'personas' and 'scenarios', which in turn would produce further insights on the research question.

However the 'results' were describing 'whats' of online autobiographical acts but not quite 'why'. The 'why' had to be either deduced from the data or the researcher had to try harder. It was all very interesting 'detached' data but not really insightful in the sense of explaining why people were driven to share their life online and to what extent they benefited from the practice. Furthermore, in the interviews the stories appeared very polished and the researcher was suspicious that the informants were either presenting only their best face or telling the interviewer what they thought she wanted to hear. The participants' claims of identity were assertive, quite settled. In a way they seemed to mimick their online practice, as if they were acting with an audience (the researcher) in mind. By contrast, and after the interviews were over, the majority opened up and their (off the record) stories became less rigid and in a sense more revealing. The impression is that



there was something missing in those initial interviews: the ‘depth of field’, the depth that can be acquired only through rapport. It was then when the consideration of incorporating ethnographical methods to the design started to grow. Nevertheless the themes that emerged in the pilot proved useful for counteracting latter insights.

### ***3.3.3- Ethnographical Methods***

This section is about the researcher trying to grasp the meanings attached to the participants’ everyday activities. Ethnography was originally used as a compendium of research tools in Cultural Anthropology around the 1800’s and 1900’s. Some of its methods and practices have been adopted and adapted by other disciplines in the Social Sciences, from Sociology to Journalism or Marketing and Art (Bernard, 1988). The advantage of using ethnographical methodology is that the researcher must make the compromise of putting aside (“unlearn” in Arendt’s terms in Knott, 2014: 11) her own presumptions in order to conquer anew insights in her topic of interest. The question of power relations between researcher and informants can also be smoothed by a methodology based on a deeper rapport between the actors involved in the inquiry.

Ethnographical Methods par excellence are observation (passive and participant), interviews and surveys. Participant observation involves the researcher immersion into a particular community in order to obtain deep knowledge about their uses and customs. It is also known as fieldwork in which the researcher will take extensive note of what she sees and of her interactions with the subjects of study in their ‘natural’ setting. This type of ‘intervention’ can prove quite useful to identify dissonance between what people say and

what they actually do (Bernard, op cit). Today we talk about Digital or Cyber Ethnography when the ethnographic research takes place in cyber space instead of a physical community. The digital fieldwork includes people in their digital fields of production, in Bourdieu's (1993) sense, which applied to this study means social media. For example some ethnographical works study 'tribes' or 'clusters' of followers organized around individual persons (actor-network) or topics of interest in sites such as *Facebook* or *Linkedin*. The task of the cyber-ethnographer is to find out the 'idioms' and 'customs' of these 'cyber-natives' (natives in the tribal sense) in their own 'cyber-communities' (Bernard, 2005).

Although Cyber-anthropology as such is still incipient, researchers of all walks increasingly tend to use digital tools in digital environments to conduct their inquiries, as great part of human social life seems to gradually shift over cyber-space. However, despite the 'technologization' of the fieldwork humans are still humans and their behavior can be as interesting or ludicrous online as it is off-line (Bernard, op cit). There are no standard ethnographical or cyber-ethnographical tools but there are best ways and common places. In the emerging discipline of cyber-ethnography some studies are custom made and tied to corporations, which, through financial aide, enable the design and development of new software tools. For example danah boyd, at the time of writing this, is employed by Microsoft Research England and works with code programmers to mine and discover pattern behaviors in the digital space (boyd, 2017[online]). Also, previously mentioned Jonathan Harris (2015), a programmer himself, develops engines, which are able to quantify and display big data in the form of stunning graphics, a trend known as 'datavisualization.'

A relatively recent corpus of ethnographical research focuses on studying the integration of digital technologies into everyday life. Some studies point to the diversity of appropriation of digital technologies depending on the context, for example Daniel Miller (2011) researched the specific qualities of the ‘Trinidadian Internet’ in the Caribbean Island. Other studies analyzed the emergence of particular technologies such as the mobile phone, the webcam or video recorders and how they were incorporated into the everyday life of communities and households where they were used (Horst & Miller, 2006; Pertierra, 2009; Miller & Sinanan, 2014) and others studied virtual worlds such as *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft* (Boellstorff, 2008; Nardi, 2010).

### *3.3.3.1- Interviews*

Interviewing involves asking questions of individuals or groups and getting answers back. Interviews can be face-to-face or mediated (phone, webcam). They can be structured, semi-structured, unstructured, informal, in-depth and take place with focus groups (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). However there is not a clear-cut line between them as they often can overlap during the research process. In the following paragraphs I explain the type of interviews that were conducted in this study.

#### ***Unstructured Interviews***

This type of interview suited an agenda of discussion with the participants but also helped the researcher to find new insights on her topic of interest. However with this modality it was necessary to organize further interviews with the same participants in order to clarify different aspects that emerged only after the interviews were either annotated in the research diary or transcribed when tape-recorded. Being participant-centered, these

interviews provided a chance to test preliminary understandings on the research topic (assumptions) but also facilitated material valuable for designing more structured interviews or surveys in case they were needed (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Unstructured doesn't mean random. This type of interview also operates under an interview guide (see Appendix C) and it has to be seen rather as a conversation with a purpose than a sequence of predetermined questions with their answers. It can offer deeper understandings of a 'not-yet-fully-understood' situation (Cohen & Crabtree, op cit). This modality was the preferred one for this study. It included walking and coffee interviews, conversations at work and during other activities such as cooking but also sessions of deep rapport with the participants. During these exchanges co-construction of knowledge with the actors and with the scenario in which the interview took place occurred (Mason, 2002a) mirroring the on-line co-construction of the autobiographical. These interviews are further discussed under the section creative in-depth interviewing.

Informal interviews (e.g. during shopping) took place within the field of observation in which the researcher had casual conversations (in situ) with the participants. This modality of interview took part mainly during the initial process of building rapport with them but also at a later stage when the need for uncovering themes previously overlooked by the researcher arose (Cohen & Crabtree, op cit). According to the same authors, the benefits of informal interviews is that they can happen anytime without previous scheduling, as they are perceived as natural conversations and thus contribute to a relaxed exchange of information and building of trust between the researcher and the participants.

### *In- depth Interviews*

In-depth or unstructured interviews are broadly used in ethnography and in qualitative research in general. This modality of interview seems quite adequate for an inquiry in which the autobiographical is the principal focus. In-depth interviews have been described as “ a conversation with a purpose” (Webb & Webb, 1932: 130). The nature of the contract between the researcher and the interviewee depends on the way the interview is approached strategically. According to Kvale (1996:3-4) one of these approaches falls into the social science model in which knowledge is a given. This notion is explained by the metaphor of the researcher as a miner digging data but without contaminating it. A second approach is the metaphor of the traveler, based on the constructivist model in which knowledge is not given but produced and negotiated (ibid).

This research aligns with the second option in which the researcher has ‘moved’ along with the subject-participant. In this case the researcher has been active and consequently has added meaning to the conversation (Kvale, op cit). This quality prompts to question the validity of the data retrieved. For Kvale besides constructivist positions, feminist and postmodernist approaches have also influenced the views about interviews focusing in the way reality is constructed through the process of the interview. The researcher moves away from traditional positions to emphasize free expression and the transformative power of the interview (ibid).

Heuristic approaches take on board the interviewer experience and see the process as collaborative (Douglas and Moustakas, 1985). Like with constructivism, biographical

and narrative approaches are interested in the cultural conditions in which personal accounts are produced (Miller, 2000). These interviews focus either on whole life narratives or on specific events in a life and participants are given *carte blanche* in the crafting of their own stories. I will come back to this. However even in the case of (auto)biographical interviews there is some degree of stage control. As a collaborative/reciprocated process the researcher has to continuously manage the flow of the conversation. To that effect an interview guide was designed (Appendix C)) especially for using, if needed, during the first encounters.

The staging for the interview began from the arrival. The researcher had to put herself in the role of guest of the participant's narrative (independently of the setting in which the interview took place) to make him/her feel comfortable. Once this was achieved, the next step was to explain the purpose of the research and seeking consent (Appendix B). Followed by the use of some opening questions in order to break the ice while collecting some contextual information in a notebook. The next step was to shape the interview by discovering thoughts or feelings behind the narration and digging deeper into it. Characteristically, questions were oriented to content mapping and content mining. In the first case the questions were designed to open up the territory, for instance: "Where was this photo taken?" while content mining questions were designed to explore beneath the surface of what was said (the detail that lies beneath). For example: "When whoever posted that comment how did you respond?" Or "How did you feel when...?" "What effect did that have on you?" "What makes you say that?" And so on (Legard et al, 2003). Observation was ongoing and continued even after the tape recorder was switched off.

With this modality of interview the subjects have the opportunity to construct a narrative and to raise issues that matter to them. It is based on the co-construction of knowledge which in turn cannot be separated from the context in which it's produced (Mason, 2002a). Therefore the data generated by this interview should be seen as interactive and contextual, further inviting reflection on the researcher's influence in the process. All sorts of talks are co-produced (Goffman, 1963, 1981). Even if the researcher only asks a few initial trigger questions the mere setting up of an interview has an influence on the outcome (Tinggaard, 2009: 1510). Furthermore the presentation of documents and forms (plain statement, consent etc) to be signed by the participant (even if they have been read beforehand) also contribute to break the illusion of a natural conversation.

Truly qualitative interviewing always involves creativity. If we assume that knowledge is co-constructed then we should ask ourselves 'how' that knowledge is constructed. Social reality is multidimensional and this means that researchers should constantly look for ways to capture its complexity and to attune with its needs and experiences (Kvale, op cit). Elicitation from online material proved useful in these interviews. It helped to facilitate the access to personal meanings, stories, contradictions and nuances of the complex online social life. The interviews were tape-recorded and the technique of non-interruption while taking on-the fly (reflective) notes (sensations, puzzlements) was used in order to engage in an ongoing interpretive process. As stressed previously this is a biographical (narrative) interpretative method with minimal intervention on the part of the researcher. It begins with a narrative inducing question (or image) and then allows space for the subject to tell his or her story (Jones, 2003:62). The

interviews were then transcribed in their totality; including performative aspects such as pauses, voice inflexions or laughter, and also the researcher's interventions (Riessman, 2008). The interviews were listened to on repeated occasions and the notes reviewed constantly in order to 'get into the skin' of the participants as an exercise of empathy (Josselson, 1995).

Jones (op cit.) suggests focusing on two dimensions: the *told life* and the *lived life*. In this case the told life is the combination of the visual and textual productions in social media and what is told in the interview (the front-stage; the tip of the iceberg). The lived life is expressed with the way the body moves, through the addition of hesitancies, repetitions, contradictions and pauses. "Through hypothesizing how the lived life informs the told story, the case history is then finally constructed from the two separate threads of the lived story and the told story" (Jones, op cit: 63). According to Jones this method contributes to distill the essence, which might be veiled through traditional interview techniques.

### ***Use of Elicitation Techniques for Interviews***

Images and photographs from social media were the main materials used to complement the interviews. Images are used either to trigger responses, to assess a situation or as a means of displaying results. In the past, visual methods were widely used in Anthropology and Sociology but limited to survey, coding or counting responses to visual stimulus. For example some studies employed photographic surveys in order to help researchers to categorize the quality of housing in environmental studies (Harper, 2002). Today the



tendency is to use images in order to explore how the participants make meanings of them (Pink, 2012). This method is known as *photo elicitation* (Frith et al, 2005). For instance in the same environmental study, photographs of old and new houses were later used to assess how subjects adapted to new environments. In this study screen shots from the participants timelines prompted memories and elicited more variety of responses making the interviews richer. Despite being a method widely used among psychologists and anthropologists photo elicitation has its detractors. Critics doubt the validity of images, as they are ambiguous and open to different interpretations. But the acceptance of visual methodologies has been growing steadily since there is a shift occurring in the Social Sciences towards exploring meaning making and the construction of multiple truths (or realities) influenced by situational, cultural and social factors (Guillemin, 2004, Pink, op cit).

Beyond words, the use of visual methods is very useful, for instance it improves accessibility: not everybody is able to express verbally (e.g. speech impairment) and not every experience is best expressed narratively. Besides the already described uses, images can give more control to the participants and bring forward issues and elicit details and emotions important to them that could have been overlooked by the researcher (Bagnoli, 2009). For example in a study on prostate cancer the use of this method situated the participants in the role of expert while giving difficult details of their illness over 'emotion free' photographs (Olliffe & Bottorff, 2007). In this inquiry a series of tweets on the subject of abortion were employed in the same way during a focus group session.

Visual data was articulated into significance by asking when it was produced and to

what end. One approach was inquiring about the production of a particular image, the image itself and the relationship between the image (e.g. a post in *Facebook*) and the intended audience (Rose, 2001). Another approach was analyzing the process through which the image was constructed at the *backstage* (Goffman, 1959). And also consideration was given to what was disclosed and what was not (Fritz et al, op cit). Questions on the researcher's personal motivations in choosing particular sets of images for elicitation have also to be asked. The use of images and posts in social media as stressed in a previous section can pose ethical questions. Even if the subjects are willingly participating in the research the need for confidentiality, issues regarding copyright ownership and potential negative outcomes after making posts public remain present. I will come back to this.

### ***Focus Groups***

Focus Groups are semi-structured group interviews. They originated around the 1940's when Merton and Fiske used them to conduct audience studies (in Cohen & Crabtree, op cit). They consist of organized conversations conducted by a researcher intended to obtain ideas, opinions and perceptions revolving around a particular topic (Morgan, 1997). Beyond this definition there are differences in the ways researchers perceive the adequacy and use of focus groups. These differences can be grouped in perceptions regarding the status of the focus group as a methodology on the one hand, and opinions on the adequacy of the unit of analysis defined by the researcher on the other (Freeman, 2009b).

For Morgan (1998) and Stewart et al (2007), focus groups are either auxiliary ways

to obtain data or interpretive aids for quantitative research. While Puchta & Potter (2004) consider focus groups as valuable tools for obtaining meaningful data in their own right. Regarding what is analyzed in a focus group, marketing experts look into the synergy between the dynamics of the group and the questions posed and moderated by the researcher. What is then accounted for is the collection of insights arising from the group considered as a unit of analysis (Morgan, op cit:1). Furthermore, the concern goes beyond merely studying the content generated by the participants (what) by looking into the way (how) this content is generated (Freeman, op cit).

At the beginning of this study, right after the pilot study, two focus groups were organized, one in the campus and the second in a community centre. The size, in both cases, was of six people, complete strangers. In the first all the participants were engaged in some sort of online ‘autobiographing’ while in the other only half of them were. Regarding gender, in both half were male and the other half female. However there are suggestions that same sex groups work best as the participants feel more comfortable (Mauthner, 1997). Consideration was given to the fact that the gender of the researcher might also influence the outcome of the focus group if they were to be same sex groups. During the sessions, which lasted just over an hour and were tape-recorded with the participants’ consent, image elicitation (posts from social media conveniently anonymized) were used in order to promote interaction and deeper insights (Eder & Fingerson, 2003). In both groups the same question was asked: “Why do you think people of your generation post about themselves online? What do you think is the benefit of it?” In both focus groups the participants occupied the position of ‘expert.’

Focus groups are mainly used to investigate new research areas or to explore topics difficult to access or sensitive in nature (Cohen & Crabtree, op cit). For example in this research, focus groups proved useful to explore dissonances regarding online self-perception through instigating an *expert* debate on somebody else's profiles. Other of the main benefits of using focus groups was that a great amount of 'focused data' was produced in a short period of time. They also provided material to compare participants' experiences and opinions and see disagreements and common ground.

### ***3.3.4- Narrative Inquiry as Arts-based Method***

Narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting, stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there is nowhere nor has been a people without narrative...it is simply there like life itself (Barthes, 1977: 79).

Arts-based studies are methodological calls and 'texts' intending to leave an impression in a different space. "They collect in the body: an ache, a fist, a soup" (Pelias 2004:11). Morley (2006:88) suggests that literary and narrative practices can be seen as methodologies for understanding the world we live in. Finley (1998) wrote a play featuring composite characters based on homeless people he interviewed in New Orleans. Morley (op cit) draws on the work of artists such as Krzysztof Wodiczko, which uses fiction and rhetoric as devices to interrogate institutional power structures. Yvonna S. Lincoln (in Denzin et al, 2003) wrote a performance from ethnographically obtained data on the subject of the silences generated around September 11. Paulina Sameshima's bildungsroman *Seeing Red a Pedagogy of a Parallax* (2007) was a PhD dissertation written in epistolary form which was later published as a novel. For Frank (2000:485)

“fiction is a problem-solving strategy”. In her ethnographical work *The management of hunger* (ibid) she creates composite characters informed by her experience in the field, including her own impressions. In her own words: “there is a possibility of portraying a complexity of lived experience in fiction that might not always come across in a theoretical explication” (ibid:483). But the topic of interpreting the complex texture of reality through literary representation is not new. When Balzac (2016 [1831]) chose random people with ordinary lives and made them the subjects of tragic representation he opened the way for modern realism. Already Plato in *The Republic* (380 BC) discussed how *mimesis*<sup>7</sup> was taking over reality and Dante Alighieri (2010 [1320]: 3) assured that he presented “true reality” in his *Divina Commedia*.

In the Christian Middle ages reality would be seen as part of the divine plan in which all happenings are a reflection of it. At the core of literary or dramatic representation resides the ‘obligation’ of simulating life (Auerbach, 1968). Sofocles’ *Antigone* was analyzed by Hegel as a representation of the conflict between state and individual in which each has a claim to justice (in Grene & Lattimore, 1991). In 1936 Federico Garcia Lorca wrote *La casa de Bernarda Alba*<sup>8</sup> in which he offered a portrayal of the situation of women in rural Spain. On a deeper level the play explores the conflict between repression and passion and how men influence the life of women. Arthur’s Miller 1949 play *Death of a Salesman* deals with unemployment, middle age crisis and intergenerational problems and it has universal appeal taking on board the amount of representations all over the world and in different languages including Yiddish and Chinese (Hays & Nicholson, 2008). The 1959

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<sup>7</sup> Imitation. Representation.

<sup>8</sup> Bernarda Alba’s Home.

Hollywood film *Imitation of Life*, adaptation of the 1933 Fannie Hurst's novel of the same name, deals with issues of class, race and gender.

Serbian author, Danilo Kiš, marked his early stories with realism. In his work *A tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976), Kiš resorted to an unorthodox method in literature but that, interestingly, strikes as something quite common of the creative process in social media in which the plots are clearly derived or just 'borrowed' from already-existing literary and non literary sources. By employing the technique of *textual transposition* the plots are integrated into his work. The result is a collage of borrowed /ripped off fragments that serve as a base for a critique of the Stalinist regime. Another interesting work by Kiš is *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* (1983) in which he deals with the idea of accounting for the biography of every ordinary life lived since 1789, which could apply to *Facebook* since 2004. In *The Encyclopedia* the author tries to "piece together the hybrid identity of the Balkans" (Cornis-Pope, 2004:39); and this attempt "is mediated through contradictory strategies (documentary, myth, imaginary projection, meta-fictional allusions and references) that cannot provide narrative coherences or certitudes" (ibid:50).

There is a distinction between arts-informed research (Knowles & Cole, 2008) in which the methodology infuses the language and processes of the arts in order to enhance the understanding of the complexities of the human condition and arts-based research which involves the actual making of artistic productions (Leavy, 2009; Barone & Eisner, 2012). As qualitative methodology, arts-based research is also grounded on the collection of reactions to textual and visual material and makes use of artistic processes and forms in various stages of the research process (ibid). An early example of arts-based research

could be the famous Rorschach test in which the patients' personality was examined through their responses to a series of inkblots (Mons, 1950). In this case Rorschach uses the images as a stimuli and the responses as data. Photo elicitation, previously discussed, is another example of this technique. Material collection is another aspect of this type of research. Objects, trinkets and places can be used to elicit responses by offering a systematic approach to engaging in a denotative and connotative reading of these objects in one physical space. In this research all these elements are brought together in order to understand the complex structure of the participants' reality inscribed in their autobiographical acts.

### ***3.3.4.1- Why Stories?***

Stories in the shape of novels, plays, films, role-plays or games can be useful for depicting individual and collective situations in an arts-based research context. The examples previously discussed are telling us about how people see, understand and deal with the world around them. There are many reasons why stories are told and passed down to generations from oral tradition to the most sophisticated multimedia storytelling device. Stories strengthen communities and provide common understanding. Stories often reflect the beliefs of the people that share them. And their popularity depends upon underlying ideologies (Andrews, Squire & Tambokou, 2008). By telling and listening (or reading or watching) people feel reassured about particular constructions of the world. People's fears, yearnings or desires all find their way in the stories being told. These narratives play the 'healing' role of confirming what is believed to be the truth (ibid). Therefore, there is reassurance in the act of telling a story.

Stories also provide moral guidance on how people should conduct themselves (myths, legends, fairy tales, American Idol or the employer of the year in Tesco). Stories explain how the world works, for example the stock market in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) or that some things never change in *Nymphomaniac* (2013). Stories also obey to pure entertainment purposes (TV sit-coms) or to pass on history and knowledge (documentaries, History Channel). Regardless of the motive why they are told storytelling remains a strong part of human everyday life (Andrews et al, op cit).

Narrative analysis can be traced back as far as Aristotle's *Poetics* and it has traditionally been seen as part of literary studies. It is not until the 1980's that social studies began considering narrative as a suitable method of inquiry into society (Riessman, 2008). For Cognitive Psychology narrative is a way of thinking, a way of encoding information, which is essential to the way we represent the world (Bruner, 1987). Narrative is a way of epistemology and this is because humans are interpretive beings. We live in a flow of experience, we extract some things and then we cogitate about them and make sense of it through narrative. Our memories are cut out pieces on that flow of existence and what gets picked up becomes of importance (ibid). The question is: Why we choose some pieces and not others? Narrative inquiry is based on the idea that humans have a need to understand and give meaning to their lives and that they do it through storytelling (Andrews et al, op cit). This qualitative method of research is grounded in Interpretive Hermeneutics and Phenomenology and involves the gathering of different 'texts' (visual, written, multimedia, oral) and focuses on the meanings that individuals and groups attribute to their experiences, seeking to render "insights that (benefit) the complexity of human lives" (Josselson, 2006:4).



Narrative inquiry from a critical point of view goes beyond the pure gathering of stories and looks into the ways in which a story is constructed, who are the agents involved in the story and why, what does the story accomplish or deliver and also what are the cultural discourses underlying the story (or taken for granted), (Riessman & Speedy, 2007). In this sense narrative inquiry appears quite close to critical discourse analysis, which presents a similar emancipatory agenda (Meyer & Wodak, 2009). For instance autobiographical inquiry makes stories from a lived past. In this process we engage in a retroactive review and ‘linguaging’ of the past, and consequently induce some sort of modification (Bochner, 2007:203). In the process of filling the gaps we attribute intentions and meanings to former events under a present context or state of mind (Landsberg, 2004, Doherty et. al, 2002). Yet, it is often only retrospectively that we come to understand and give meaning to these events (Polkinghorne, 1995). Memory “is far from uniquely autobiographical [...] it is grounded in what is tellable” (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003: 118). In this sense, we should ask: what is the purpose of the meanings that are added to the gaps? It seems to suggest that the individual might not have necessarily experienced the events as described, rather that in the re-telling to an audience (sharing) particular (different) meanings are attributed.

Narration intends to find meaning(s) in context under the assumption that they are never fixed. We develop meanings of experiences featuring in the chronology of our lives. Sometimes we tell them and others we write them in a diary or journal (or post in social media). Also other non-verbal languages can narrate: gaze, body posture, images and so on and all can be ‘read’ by others. Narrative needs context and *the other* (even the imagined

other). Narratives are best studied in their relational (conversational) practice. There is always an audience receiving information given by us, interpreting and responding to the material produced and shared. Even when we write a diary it is a dialogical practice.

### ***3.3.4.2- Organizing Narrative Data***

Narrative inquiry can gather and analyze stories by using a variety of approaches: narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995), structural narrative analysis (Lavov, 1982), dialogic/performance analysis (Riessman, 2008) and fictionalized representation (Clough, 2002). This research considers all these approaches to be inclusive and benefits from aspects of all of them. For example Polkinghorne (op cit) attends to the *field of production* of the story chronologically and diachronically, this is to say the present context in which the story is constructed and its historical continuity and this is reflected in the artefact where present and past co-exist informing each other. He also distinguishes between narrative analysis and analysis of narratives. The *first* consists of shaping data in a narrative form, with a beginning, middle and end and the *second* consist of identifying themes across data that appear in a narrative form in the subject's discourse. In this research both approaches have been applied.

Furthermore, 'data' arising from the participants' stories was organized through a method of smoothing which consisted of identifying the material directly related with the research questions<sup>9</sup> and separate what was irrelevant or redundant to be studied at a late stage (Polkinghorne, op cit). Also Labov's (op cit) system, known as *thematic or*

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<sup>9</sup> Why do we post about ourselves? What are the perceived benefits? How can autobiographical acts inform about personal and societal issues?

*synchronic organization*, was followed and proved useful to identify major themes or patterns in the stories told by the participants. This approach uses an evaluation model that organizes data through questions: ‘what’, ‘who’, ‘when’, ‘where’ not only in an abstract manner but also as a form of orientation and assessment practice leading to further questions such as: “and then what happened?” and a *coda* which is the final curated narrative, in this case the stories told in the artefact.

For Riessman (2008) a narrative is a performed dialogue with *the other* (another individual or oneself, as a form of rumination). This notion shows some connections with ontological and epistemological positions described in the two previous Chapters, for example and particularly relevant for this inquiry: Bahktinian dialogism and Goffman’s dramaturgical approach. For Riessman (op cit), along with Bruner’s (1987) structural analysis, narratives are viewed as the way people make sense of their reality (what the story do for them) as well as the strategies people use for creating and sharing meanings. This approach focuses on how individuals interpret the events in their own life and how these are shaped into a coherent narrative to be presented to themselves and to others. Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2007) distinguishes between *grand* and *small stories*. While the first are usually autobiographical accounts traditionally studied by narrative inquiry, small stories refer to everyday constructions of stories shared in casual conversation that are also remarkable scenarios for subjectivity. This research attends to both whose boundaries (if any) appear blurred in the autobiographical act.

There are many pathways of organizing narrative data for interpretation and they all depend on the research questions and the researcher’s ontological position. However,

there are some common traits such as organizing the stories in sections or stanzas, identifying recurrent themes and codification. Ultimately interpretation of narrative data will also depend on epistemological positions. For example from a logical-deductive point of view, the researcher will be looking for criteria of internal and external validation in the data, thus the type of narration that will be considered is that commonly understood as scientific discourse. However, as is the case of the inquiry that concerns us here, if the researcher positions herself into paradigms or theories such as Ethnography, Arts-based research and Narrative Analysis, the criteria won't be 'validation' but 'lived experience', which involves: emotion, subjectivity, reflexivity, cultural texts and practices, deconstruction and so on (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). In this case the researcher is theoretically informed by historical analysis, symbolic interactionism, cultural memory, bricolage and dialogism and the type of narration studied is autobiography.

Narrative analysis in the human sciences refers to a family of approaches to diverse kinds of text, which have in common a storied form. As nations and governments construct preferred narratives about history, so do social movements, organizations, scientists, other professionals, ethnic/racial groups, and individuals in stories of experience. What makes such diverse texts "narrative" is sequence and consequence: events are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience. Storytellers interpret the world and experience in it; they often create moral tales—how the world should be. Narratives represent storied ways of knowing and communicating. (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997 in Riessman [entry], 2004 [online])

### **3.4- Participants**

The sample of 46 participants was diverse in nature but all had in common having been in contact with digital technology at a later stage in life (late thirties to sixties). This is to say:

they were analogous before becoming digital or analogo-digital rather. Another trait they shared was that all were engaging in some form of life-storytelling or microblogging in social media sites mainly: *Facebook, Instagram Twitter* and *Youtube*, with the exception of three individuals who participated in a focus group. A third commonality was that they never had the habit of writing a diary before the advent of digital technologies.

### ***3.4.1- Selection***

Taking on board the above mentioned three criteria, the participants were recruited through a process known as *snowball sampling* or *respondent-driven sampling* initiating from the researcher's own network. In this sense the majority of participants were referrals. This sampling method is well established in social and ethnographic research when seeking for expert insights from specific populations (Heckathorn, 2002). According to Morgan (2008: 816) "Snowball sampling uses recommendations to find people with the specific range of skills that has been determined as being useful."

In the spring of 2014 the researcher asked her acquaintances if any of their contacts matched the required criteria for the study and if they would like to volunteer to participate in the study. The researcher's e-mail was given to facilitate a first contact on the part of the willing participant. Subsequently the researcher sent a brief overview of the study by e-mail and proposed different dates for a first face-to-face encounter. When this was agreed upon the researcher explained with more detail the purpose of the study and supplied a Plain Language Statement in print for the participants to examine. Afterwards the researcher made available the rest of relevant documentation: Consent Form and Confidentiality Agreement (Appendix, B). Thereafter researcher and participants linked their respective profiles in social media.

The respondents were given time and opportunities to carefully inspect the information given and ask any questions they might have had. When the first preliminary face-to-face encounter was not possible the process took place through Skype and e-mail. Once the volunteers' consent was obtained, subsequent meetings were organized and the degree of involvement of each participant with the research grew organically from there. During the period of Spring 2015 to Autumn 2016 new referrals were incorporated to the project, including relatives and acquaintances of previously recruited informants.

### ***3.4.2- Demographics***

The sample's demographics were as follows: the total number of participants was of 46 of which 34 were involved in more than one occasion and 12 participated exclusively in two separate focus groups (6 and 6). Of the 34 most closely involved participants, 7 had a deeper rapport with the researcher compared with the rest. The contact was ongoing and they allowed her to enter their inner circles in several occasions. Of the 27 left, 18 were interviewed in depth on one occasion and 9 were interviewed on more than one occasion, first in depth and then more informally: for example walking, in a cafe, at work, or on Skype. Ages ranged from 36 to 67 years old, with a bigger frequency of ages around the middle values [41-45]. Of them 26 were biologically female and 20 male. Countries of origin were diverse but their habitual residence was Ireland and in the continent Spain, France and Germany. The incorporation of participants living in different countries wasn't initially planned and it is based on the responses received to volunteer to participate in the study. This scenario posed the question of whether the comparative analysis of autobiographical acts was pertinent. Taking on board that the research questions were oriented to obtain insights on the informants' autobiographical acts in the common ground

of social media and also for reasons of scope comparative analysis was discarded. However in the artefact the diverse origin of the participants is reflected in their composite characterizations and in the ‘internationalization’ of the composite territories represented in the vignettes.

Of the participants living in Ireland and Spain, some, a minority, lived in rural areas and the rest lived in large cities. Over half of the sample had some college education, with one fourth of the total having completed an academic or professional degree. They all had from ‘proficient’ to ‘good’ to ‘some’ level of computer literacy. The participants with the higher level of skill managed confidently imaging software such as Photoshop and Illustrator. One third of the group could be considered middle class professionals while the rest were working as employees in more or less steady jobs with the exception of six unemployed<sup>10</sup> people at the moment of the research. Of the participants, just over half of them (25) were single by choice or circumstance. Of them, 18 lived alone and 7 in shared households, with either a housemate or a child. Of the rest, 14 were married or coupled with first or second chance partners; 4 of them were childless, 2 had adult children living at home, 3 had adult children living outside the home and 5 had small children. Of the rest of the total, 6 were divorced or separated living alone and only one had children living with the other partner. One person was a widower. One of the participants passed away during the time this study took place.

There is a caveat regarding this sample. Taking on board that all agreed to volunteer for the research and that a particular profile of person was sought, it is not

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<sup>10</sup> The term unemployed is used cautiously here as the situation of ‘unemployment’ was circumstantial: retirement, illness or self-employed with unsteady job.

statistically representative. Therefore making generalizations from the insights obtained from this study would be inappropriate. “The participants agreed to tell the researcher their stories” and to welcome her into their everyday lives “for their own reasons” (Sankar & Gubrium, 1994:15). It might be the case that the participants found in the call the befitting medium to express themselves so it is possible that some of the very personal, almost intimate ‘gifted’ disclosures are not representative of the sentiment of a wider population using social media but of the people that were willing to participate in a study of these characteristics in the first place.

### ***3.4.3- Chosen Cohort, Relationship with Technology and Social Media Habitus***

Although I labelled the participants as ‘mature adults’ and this may suggest or automatically signal a difference with perhaps younger (or older) generations in their relationship with technology and social media in particular, this divide is unintended.



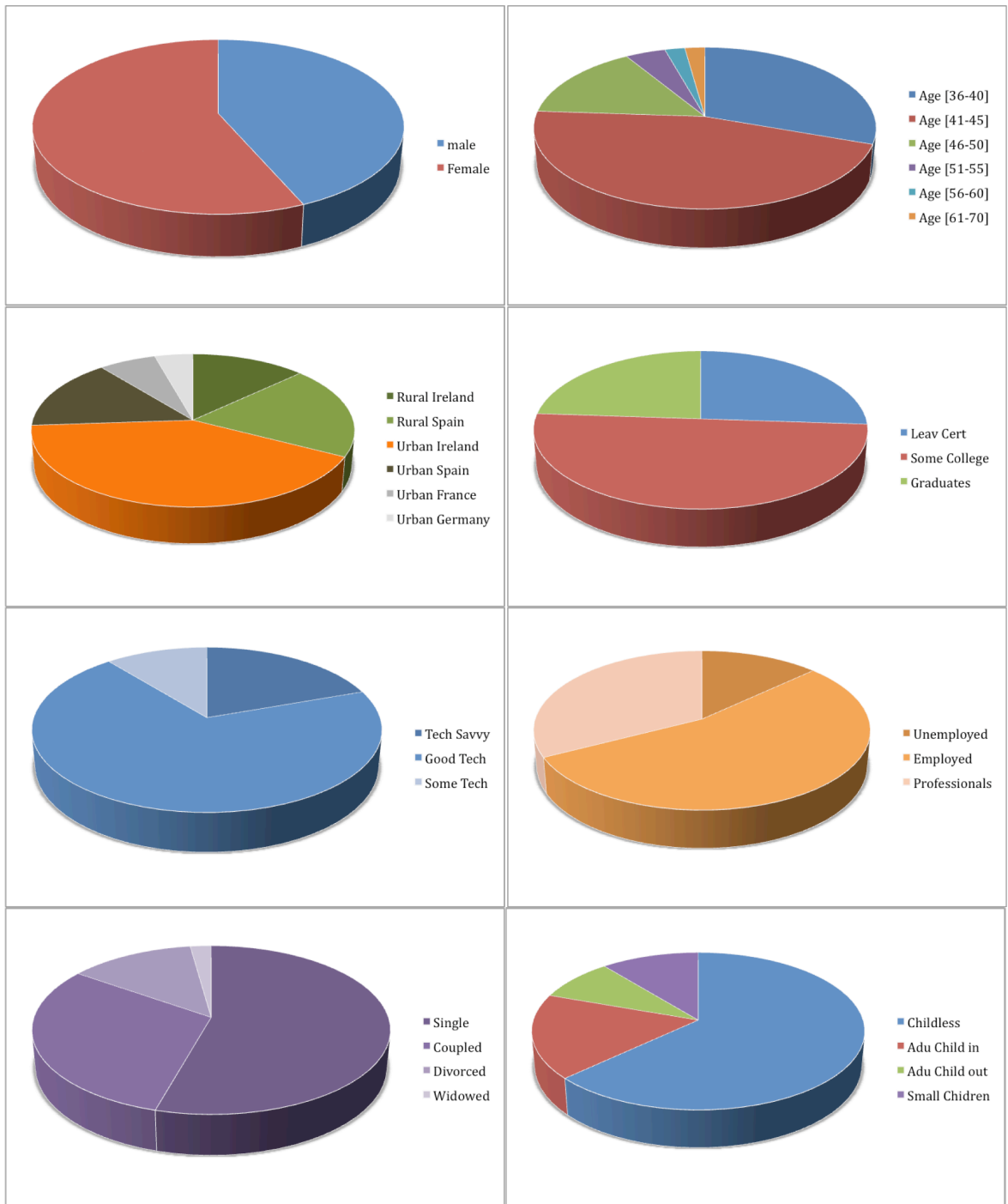


Fig-3  
Above. Representation of sample demographics.

The grouping of the participants under this label simply serves to categorize them under a series of common attributes that make them relate to each other biologically, historically and culturally. The researcher, incidentally belonging to the same cohort, also identifies with these common grounds. For example biological age, even if we may feel forever young as Dylan's tale goes, is a feature that influences our existence whether we like it or not.

A changing body, changes the way we appreciate existence (e.g. new sleep patterns, a new ache), also changes the way we are perceived by others (e.g. too old for a job) or at least the way we think we are perceived by others (e.g. unattractive). In the study some of the participants have a very difficult relationship with the body and this is expressed in their autobiographical acts, which in turn are represented in the resulting artefact. Historical and cultural references are also an important common trait among the participants and if autobiography is the result of a dialogue between personal, historical and cultural memory as argued in Chapter 1, it makes sense to assume that individuals born in similar epochs share similar reference points, although their ontologies may well be very different, and it is in this vein that the participants are grouped under the umbrella 'mature adults' and by no means to make a claim regarding this cohort.

#### *3.4.3.1- Participants' Relationship with Technology*

Back in 2013 the Irish short documentary *Analogue People in a Digital Age* painted a surreal portrait of the day of the switch over from analogical to digital TV. Taking that day as an example the piece explores the angst of being a 'tweener' (individual caught between

two eras). But is there a reason for that angst? The characters of the film are the least amused, the most overwhelmed by the 'big switch'. But is there such a big shift? The makers and producers of autobiographical acts that participated in this study were born in the mid-1950's and early 1960's up to late 1970's. They may be labelled as *Tweeners* or *X's*, as opposed to Millennials. They are the researcher's generation\_ if we accept such a thing as a descriptor\_ and as stated in the previous section this researcher relate to them in the attributes we share.

The participants can be described as computer pioneers (some of them), voracious consumers, yuppies and neo-hippies. The participants saw the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Desert Storm and the Balkans war on TV. According to Ross (2014) this age group tends to hate rules, they are individualistic and cynical outsiders, they love holding the remote control but dislike authority, and they also bought the firsts home computers, video games, Indy music and cable TV. They also rushed to sign in when the first social media outlets appeared on the market. Many of the participants had their first taste with *MySpace* and turned later to *Facebook* and/or *Instagram* and *Youtube*.

In the early 2000's educator Mark Prensky observed that 'new generations' were born into an environment permeated by digital technology and this necessarily made them to experience life in a different way than their 'analogical' educators. For this author and also for Tapscott (2009) the new generations are able to receive and process information really fast. They bloom on instant gratification and frequent remuneration. They have a taste for random access to information facilitated through multilayered texts or hypertext. They are inclined to multitasking and their levels of attention are extensive rather than intensive. They prefer images and sounds to words and they love virtual networking and digital games. Prensky called this new engineering of the human species 'digital natives'. But Prensky's argument seems to imply than older generations are unable for example to process information really fast or to like random access to information. For the participants this wasn't the case as they also presented most of the characteristics attributed by Prensky to younger generations in relation to new technologies.

Gilbert Simondon (1964) and Bernard Stiegler (2005) argued that humans co-evolve with the environment in which they are integrated. In this regard, Katherine Hayles, in her book *How we Think* (2012), conceptualizes as technogenesis the process in which technological amplification goes hand in hand with neurological and social change. If we look at what people do in their everyday life for example, traveling by train the proportion of adults (digital immigrants) jollily playing away with their gadgets or just reading a book or dozing with their heads against the window, amounts to the number of teenagers doing exactly the same. In a classroom or workplace scenario the proportions are also similar. There is some enthusiasm towards new technologies also in the parenting generations. Various studies indicate that older adults are increasingly motivated to learn and manage efficiently new technologies and by doing so get closer to their children's generation (Livingston & Haddon, 2009; Smith, 2011; Tamme & Siibak, 2012).

Susan Herring (2008) criticizes the legitimacy of the digital divide argument. She claims that the label ‘digital generation’ widely used in scholarship and popular culture is in reality an ‘exonym’ chosen by adults to illustrate age-based differences in the use of new technologies (op cit, pp: 78). From her point of view Prensky’s classification doesn’t take on board that the current generations, both older and younger, are transitional as the two of them are simultaneously exposed and inhabiting one and the other side of the threshold as the simple observation of everyday life demonstrates. Therefore, the true ‘digital native’ generation is yet to be born.

In a further critique of Prensky’s argument, Herring makes the obvious point that most of the digital scene is designed and under the control of the parenting generation, which includes media producers but also scholars, which construct and shape the discourse of the younger cohorts. At this point Herring advocates for a change of paradigm in generational scholarship. She proposes a changeover from the mystification of new technologies and their affordances to the understanding of how generations appropriate and become through technology.

#### *3.4.3.2- Participants’ Social Media Habitus*

The informants at the time of the research, and with the exception of three people who participated exclusively in a focus group, were actively engaging in social media, everyday. For them social media constituted part of their daily routine, as much as brushing their teeth or having breakfast. The amount of investment (in hours/day) varied depending on the function the participants attributed to the different platforms. At the lower part of the spectrum they would engage for a minimum of an hour a day while at the top they would engage for 8 hours or more. All these numbers should be taken with caution as at times they wouldn’t engage at all while at others they would go over their ‘average limit.’

Also it is problematic to discuss their engagement in terms of particular platforms as they often navigated from site to site depending on the type of message they wanted to get across in a polymedia scenario (Miller & Madianou, 2012). For example some participants preferred *Facebook* as their platform to share and reflect upon life events, while others used *Twitter* or *Instagram*. Other participants used all three platforms for similar purpose. Some traded with their life by posting domestic videos on *Youtube* while others changed from posting every detail of their lives (e.g. “Hello world. I am going to have a shower.”) in *Facebook*, *Twitter* or *Instagram* to exclusively promote their work. For the latter the dedication was often the equivalent of a work day. For the participants for which social media constituted their point of contact with a new reality in their lives (e.g. biographical disruption through illness or trauma) their investment was similar to those making a business affair of autobiographical acts in social media. In the artefact these nuances are re-presented as they were presented in ‘real life’ during the time the ethnography took place.

#### **3.4.4- Settings**

Researchers like Miller (2011, 2016), Madianou and Miller (2012), Ito et al (2010), Hjorth and Arnold (2013), Boellstorff (2008) and Nardi (2010) among many others, have noted that digital technologies have become just other places in which we move about in everyday life, and that we use them not only to communicate among us “but also to dwell” (Pink et al, 2016:65). This inquiry took place in two major settings: the cyberspace, a place of virtuality, and physical locations, in which the embodied presence of the participant and the researcher met. Of the first, the ‘places’ were social media platforms such as *Facebook*,

*Instagram, Whatsapp, Youtube, and Twitter* and of the second, places were: rural and urban Ireland and Spain and urban France and Germany although, and as stressed in the previous section 3.3.2, geographical diversity wasn't planned and comparative analysis was discarded for the reasons given. As descriptions of 'dwelled' social media sites appear in Chapter 2 in this section only physical locations are discussed.

Of the participants living in rural Ireland the majority commuted daily for work to major town centres, whilst a minority worked locally in the tourism industry. Of the group living in Spain only a minority were locals (all working in the hospitality sector) while the rest had migrated from urban areas in search of a more *idyllic* life. Of this group, all were freelance professionals or early 'retirees' and their nationalities were Spanish and British. Most of the participants living in rural settings knew each other to diverse degrees although this wasn't intended. It just came about due to the size of the locations, both under 1000 habitants in the old town districts. Both rural locations were 'off the beaten trail' tourist destinations and had lively arty community meeting points. In the case of Ireland a small arts and crafts centre and two local pubs and in the case of Spain a small quirky hotel with a piano bar in the basement which at times was also used as art gallery and space for workshops such as yoga and meditation, painting or Thai cuisine (anything really).

Urban spaces were major capital cities and the settings in which the interaction took place varied, among others: the university campus; community centres; coffee shops and restaurants; workplaces; a nursing home and a hospice; music and dance festivals, public transport and private households. In some cases the rapport with the participants

lasted beyond discreet encounters. On two occasions the researcher accompanied the participants on trips lasting from three days to about a week and on another a traveller (couchsurfer) stayed at the researcher's house for a period of approximately three weeks. The majority of the locations in which the rapport and the data collection took place (either through participant observation or interviews) were chosen by the participants. The researcher stayed in the settings outside Dublin on repeated occasions and for periods ranging from three days to a fortnight to a month and a half. The total time spent doing fieldwork in Spain amounted to approximately four and a half months, a month and a week in France and a fortnight in Germany, while the major part of the fieldwork took place in Ireland.

#### **4.5- Advantages and Limitations of the Research Design**

According to Nelson Goodman (1984) there is only one world and many ways of seeing it. I should add that there are as many worlds as ways to see them and that humanity has invented different forms of representation to be able to make sense of them. Mathematics is a form, science is a form and art is a form. Each form of representation has its own affordances and limitations. Here, the main purpose of this narrative arts-based inquiry is “not to find final meanings but to open the floor to significant further questions.” For “the purpose of art is to lay bare the questions which have been hidden by the answers” (Baldwin, 1962: 17).

The main premise on which an arts-based research is pinned is that of any



perspective of the world is necessarily partial. The purpose of engaging in this type of research is clearly not the pursuit of ‘findings’ and implementing ‘recommendations’ but rather enabling to see aspects of the world that might have been overlooked through other traditional methods of research. Incorporating this kind of research might open alternative perceptions and interpretations regarding the ways in which people engage in autobiographical storytelling in social media outside mainstream interpretative discourses (e.g. statistics, content, discourse analysis). Every method and every researcher have their own biases regarding ‘the world’ and what is said is as important as what remains unsaid (by choice). Arts-based research has the potential to involve, not only cognitively but also emotionally, an audience in the ‘completion of texts’ and as a result can generate conversations about what is happening and what is represented. This can facilitate the examination of values previously overlooked by other forms of discourse (Baldwin, op cit).

Arts-based research is inherently qualitative. When we make a distinction between ‘temperature’ and ‘heat’ the first meaning belongs to the quantified universe while the second belongs to the sensory experience. Conventional languages of quantification validate the first: Celsius or Fahrenheit. The second will depend on qualities. Room temperature can be objectively at 20 degrees Celsius but the sensed temperature will vary depending on our health (we might have a fever), emotional state (we might be feeling irritable and warm or sad and cool) and so on. Quantification describes magnitudes and qualification nuances. Quantification tends to simplify and nuance tends to complicate.

We can see the difference in the following example: the information arising from

the analysis of an American unemployment statistic of the late 1940's will give figures regarding the age of the unemployed, whether they are married and have children, they live in town or suburban areas and their level of education and then use them to draw some general social policy to tackle this issue. If on the other hand we consider the previously mentioned play by Arthur Miller, *Death of a Sales Man* (1959), the same issue becomes even more multidimensional. It has the potential to start a conversation by bringing to the fore themes such as the sustainability of the so-called *American dream*, motifs like behavioral patterns for example the tendency of the protagonist to the mystification of people he considers 'superior.' Symbols such as the rubber hose (a stage prop) making the protagonist's suicide attempt constantly present and ironically showing his inability to provide for the family (he tried to kill himself by inhaling gas, but ironically he cannot afford to pay the gas bills).

The point of arts-based inquiry is to enable new conversations resulting from the presentation of new angles regarding aspects of the social world while inviting their re-examination. In traditional quantitative and qualitative research it is paramount to deal with random sampling in order to guarantee validity but in the case of arts-based research this is not necessary as it aims not to discover patterns but rather to promote insights through the use of expressive devices. The arts are just another method to understand the human condition but instead of being interested in looking for 'truths' or 'certitudes' they look for perplexities (Barone & Eisner, 2012). Arts-based research can provide the means of getting inside a context to bridge psychological and physical realities, produce unpredictable information and promote longer, more detailed interviews compared to traditional formats. As for Paul Celan art will set us free because it is the way to our own narrowness

(Waldrop, 2003).

Despite the excitement of working in an arts-based project there is always some uneasiness derived from self-doubt regarding the 'artistic value' of the artefact produced, this is to say: does it have enough quality to stand alone as an artistic piece? In addition there is always some nervousness, specially at PhD level, that even though this modality has been acknowledged by the institution within which it is produced, there is a pressure to accommodate more conventional standards of research, for example in the format of a written dissertation in which 'findings', 'analysis', 'conclusions' and 'recommendations' are demanded even if this particular form doesn't necessarily suit the arts practice and therefore, sometimes, contributes to defeat the purpose of the piece, or to say the least, duplicate the work. Other pressures such as time, funding and the capacity of the study to be traded into journal publications also play their part. This suggests that although at the outside there is a discourse of acceptance regarding arts-based practices at the *backstage* academic institutions still resist to see the links between artistic inquiry and formal research.

### 3.6- Chapter summary

This chapter begins unfolding the purpose and rationale for the study. The research intends to answer the question of why people belonging to a generation before the arrival of digital technology has come to actively engage in autobiographical practices (defined here as ongoing micro acts of life storytelling combining the textual and the visual) in social media sites. What is this doing for them and what can this practice tell us about the wider society?

The explanation of the rationale for the inquiry begins with the researcher's own concern after observing the increase of confessional practices in online outlets among members of her own cohort, principally because she couldn't see the allure of doing so. After an initial literature review on the topic of online identity the researcher spotted a gap in the sense that mature adults were under represented in the studies which tended to favour younger generations and also in the methodological approaches which were mostly based on content and discourse analysis although not exclusively.

The research design consisted of an historical survey of autobiographical acts in order to position the actual practice under study. After conducting a pilot study the researcher realized that ethnographical and narrative methods, initially overlooked, would prove more useful to answer a 'why' type of question. The researcher recruited a group of 46 adults through a respondent-driven technique, connected with them online and offline and then invited them to reflect on their own practice in order to find new insights and ultimately render a 'sense of the times' through their inputs. During an almost three years

rapport between the researcher and the participants many sorts of encounters took place in different settings ranging from informal walking interviews to focus groups and in-depth interviews with elicitation techniques. With the data obtained through ethnographical methods the researcher curated an arts-based multinarrative artefact with their stories. The compilation was then presented to the participants to be annotated.

In compliance with Ethics standards the research design was submitted and obtained the approval of the institution's Ethical Review board. The document incorporated the new guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR, 2002, 2012) to complement the Helsinki declaration on experimentation with human subjects. In order to observe research best practice a number of measures were taken including the protection of the confidentiality of the informants by anonymizing their names and re-storying their accounts, also the way data was treated and stored, and making the informants participate in the generation of data. A final section in this chapter is dedicated to balancing the advantages and limitations of an arts-based research design and takes into consideration issues at the micro-level such as the particularities of submitting this type of research for a PhD and whether traditional dissertation formats are suitable.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE POLYPHONIC ARTEFACT

“Art is meant to upset, science reassures.”

attributed to George Braque

George's Braque quote “Art is meant to upset; science reassures” sums up the spirit of the methodological approach operating at the core of this research. The statement is an assumption, probably based on Braque's personal experience, if we are to speculate. The proposition is as valid as its opposite: that science upsets and art reassures. It can work both ways and at different degrees between them. Yet another assumption. But Braque, among many other things, was a *bricoleur*, a collagist. Thorough his life he focussed on searching and experimenting with means that would allow him to contemplate different perspectives, for example colour and texture or space and materials. Braque, as well Picasso, back in 1912, started making compositions by gluing different shapes and types of paper together but Braque went a step further and began to cut pieces from magazines and newspapers and apply pigmented sands or stencil typography onto his ‘landscapes.’ The results were so tucked away from figurativism that his works became abstract patterns

representing the essence of the things depicted rather than their iconographic representations. He was also interested in showing how things looked over time and in different places (Gombrich, 2007 [1995]).

Braque was an inspiration. This study ‘cuts pieces’ from different methodological options and ‘glues’ them together in a multimethod approach which leads to the production of a narrative artefact, a ‘virtual reality’, as the means to answering the research question. As stressed in the previous chapter the methodological assemblage builds on the tenets of Ethnography, Narrative Inquiry and Arts-based research. The latter, in turn, also building on the principles of Ethnography but also on those of Oral History and Qualitative Interviews (Leavy, 2009:27). This choice of methods is not gratuitous, it has come about after a long period of contingencies and iterations in which initial decisions were changed and trial and error, prototyping, redefining and readjusting were the order of the day. This ongoing struggle ultimately stems from the realization that the methodological, analytical and theoretical avenues we decide to take are bound to produce different outcomes and this imposes a great level of responsibility on the researcher (Pink, 2015).

Some approaches to research prefer to explore human affairs in terms of separateness or binaries and others in terms of relations (Pink, op cit). For example, when studying the outcomes of technological change, some perspectives attribute them to technology (technological determinism) while others to social categories (social determinism). Bruno Latour (2007) argues that neither the sociological nor the technological are to be privileged and questions the authority of scientific knowledge in defining *the social*. He pleads for the need to examine what is assembled under the

umbrella of society in his *sociology of associations* which is best known as the Actor-network Theory in which he refuses the notion of *social forces* and proposes to study instead all the factors involved in *the social* at the same level, including ‘actants’ (inanimate objects).

According to Deleuze and Guattari (2004[1980]) knowledge is rhizomatic, with no beginning or end and without hierarchies of cause and effect. Therefore research happens in a scenario of multiplicity, with different entry and exit points regarding data representation and interpretation. This means that knowledge is a negotiation with mutable goals and premises and ultimately yields a personal view of the world that might be adhered to or substantiated in collaboration with others (Cormier, 2008). Similarly and stemming from lived experience, movements of translation and rotation develop in the poliphonic artefact. Like in physics translation signifies the movement of an object in relation to others while rotation is the movement of an object in relation to itself. There is a linear text but the story unfolds at different levels aiming for a circular or spiral shape. In the text there is a constant shift between a ‘You’ and an ‘I’ which aspires to a more complex relationship with the reader. Can the reader make the text its own? The borderline between what is diegetical (within the story) and meta-textual (exegesis) is also porous.

In the artefact, planes such as time, space, memory, experience, emotion, and imagination shift around a central point: the death of a mother. It all comes down to facilitating the passage from the linear structure of a text to the circular, or elliptical nature of lived experience; which is what the artefact tries to unveil, in like manner light reveals the spectrum of colour by changing position from one shade to the next. The ‘rhythm’ of



the artefact is movement and this is what ultimately affirms its form, which is no longer dependent on the the autobiographical text *per se* but on its very nature (how it has come about). Continuing with the previous analogy, with movement, light inciding for example in a painting, becomes a yellow and then a green and a green becomes a red which then becomes an orange and later a blue. The movement of the light is what exposes the colour in the spectrum. Similarly the movements of translation and rotation taking place in the artefact expose (hopefully) the insights sought in this study.

The method of inquiry is deliberately eclectic and brings together dynamically, various elements from Literature, Fine Arts, Sociology, Media and Film Studies, Ethnography, Philosophy, Ethics, Aesthetics and Physical Sciences to name a few, in and for the artefact, and in order to explore autobiographical acts in social media in an innovative way while at the same time mimicking the context collapse that characterizes the Internet. The device, in its journey and in the outcome, provided the ‘zone’ in which the researcher was able to immerse herself in the in-between ideation and lived experience in order to understand and ‘make-sense’ of the autobiographical acts of the participants in the research. However, and as it will be argued, not only the attempt at making sense of this practice was a bigger task than initially presumed, including fears of irrelevance and concerns about its reception among the academic community, but also it opened up the Pandora’s box of the unexpected, for example: Is it possible to make no sense?

This chapter offers a detailed account of the polyphonic artefact. What it is, how it was constructed and what are its theoretical underpinnings, while its outcomes will be discussed in a subsequent chapter. It also examines questions that emerged during its

making and were either overlooked or underestimated in the initial stages of the research such as censor and ownership of data and problems arising from the blurred boundaries between fact and fiction.

#### **4.1- Artefact Overview**

Volume two is a ‘single case’ construct of a family’s (collective) autobiography. The ‘case’ is built from the data obtained through ethnographical means and re-storied around the event of the death of a mother. The artefact is in a sense archetypical however, it is not designed with generalization in mind. It provides a series of snapshots or vignettes of the experiences of the participants and intends to offer insights into personal and societal issues reflected in their autobiographical acts. The ‘data’ is presented dynamically and shaped as a narrative device called ‘the polyphonic artefact’ which can be best described as a ‘virtual reality’ or ‘grounded fiction.’ The device is polyphonic because it blends the voices of the participants in a series of interconnected short stories curated by the researcher. The vignettes, that can be read in the given order or arbitrarily, mimic the flows and contingencies of autobiographical acts in social media, including its reverse chronology, while inscribing them into everyday embodied experience.

In the narrative the composite voices of the informants are curated into characters that are part of the same networks: family, friends, co-workers and acquaintances. They move across physical spaces: house, work, pub, shop, hospital, or public transport in the same way that they move accross social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Instagam*,

*Twitter, Whatsapp* or *Youtube* and technology devices such as mobile phones, desktop computer or assistive technology. The characters also wander between a told present and a remembered past. Like in the Internet, time and space collapse in the narration. The narrative artefact ‘tells’ life but at the same time tries to convey how lived experience is felt. It also attempts to open up new channels capable of laying bare less told and less heard parts of autobiographical acts expressed in social media outlets, although it doesn’t try to fix<sup>11</sup> them.

The narrative is situated in a composite scenario grounded in the experiences of the participants (told by them and observed by the researcher). In this collaged plot, members of a family confront the death of the mother and while doing so they confront themselves in the present and in the past. Dramatization is employed as a tool to explore and express the participants’ points of view. In this sense the artefact is articulated around their voices that come together in the voices of the *mother* (before her death), a prodigal son who is a *wanderer* forced/allowed to return in order to attend the funeral, a *daughter* who is close to the *mother* and has taken care of her until the end; an estranged *father*; the son’s two previous relationships: a *girlfriend* from his youth whom he re-encounters in startling circumstances and his *wife*, who is in the process of divorcing him; and finally, the mother’s next door *neighbour* and closest friend. Other (secondary) characters such as acquaintances, co-workers, managers or friends appear as characterization aids by replying to the main voices. The different voices are in constant dialogue either with each other or ruminating in a *dialogued soliloquy*. The voice of the researcher, although it is not made explicit in the text, inevitably runs all along in the background, ghostwriting from a

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<sup>11</sup> In the sense of arresting in time or space.

position of empathy, and on the surface takes the form of poetic and rhetorical strategies in order to link and merge the multitude of stories into a single (polyphonic) narrative.

Cole & Knowles (2001: 214) ascertain that inquiry into life history acquainted with the arts “is research that seeks to understand the complex relationships between individuals’ lives and the contexts within which their lives are shaped and expressed.” When people tell their life story to others, either in the form of letters or through micro-posts in social media (or through everyday rapport) they use autobiography as a strategy to reflect on their own lives, and in the process of ‘telling’ (to another), autobiography becomes both a private and a public enterprise (De Cosson & Irwin, 2004). Note the emphasis on the telling, which positions autobiographical acts in social media at the in-between of a meaning-making practice and a (dialogical) speech act (Lanigan, 1988). The study of autobiographical acts in this manner recognizes the role of individual and collective interpretation while acknowledging that these interpretations can never be fixed and therefore are in a permanent state of becoming (De Cosson & Irwin, op cit). For Richardson (1999, 2002) documenting ethnographical research through creative analytical practices are valid representations of the social and for Denzin & Lincoln (2011) the storytelling imagination is pedagogical and liberating. In the artefact the form facilitates the opportunities for content and function, in this way using an alternative format to the traditional thesis allows for opening up new ‘zones’ of inquiry.

## 4.2- The Meeting of Method, Art and Theory

This section unfolds the main theoretical underpinnings, which combined with synergy informed the artefact. Instead of surveying particular theoretical schools or methods here the discussion focuses on their shared questions and claims, and to what extent these have been implemented in the artefact. The following approaches are quite similar in many ways, each of them with its own nuances and particular emphasis. The device doesn't strictly adhere to any of them individually, rather it flows like crystals in a crucible of colored prisms. Continuing with the multi-method strategy adopted in the research design, the artefact also profits from *bricolage* to theoretically sustain the grounds on which it operates. The tenets of narrative, performance and the context of production, constituted the scaffolding that allowed weaving different renditions of the autobiographical encountered during the fieldwork, resulting in a tapestry of 'data' threaded in storied form. Note that the theoretical foundations hold together the form while also informing the content.

At a meta-level, both narrative and performance are fields plagued with theories in which diverse disciplines, including Anthropology, Sociology and Psychology, all emanating from classic Philosophy, collaborate and compete in labelling human affairs. Several of these approaches have been surveyed in previous chapters and many others haven't been included for reasons of either scope or affinity. But of the array of theories, and at a micro-level, some resonated the most and proved most useful for this enterprise.

### ***4.2.1- Bricolage as Strategy***

*Bricolage* in this context refers to an interdisciplinary approach to theory and method meeting in the artefact, which in turn *bricolages* stories emerging from *bricolaged* expressions of the autobiographical. Bricolage is used here in Levy-Strauss terms, which in *The Savage Mind* (1966[1962]) describes a handy-person that reaches for the tools at hand in order to complete a task to the best of his or her capacity. Although some connotations of the word include cunning or trickery, which go back as far as Hermes communicating ambiguously with the Gods (Kinheloe, 2001), this inquiry assumes that *bricolage* is ‘what we do’ anyway. Starting from authoring the telling (and showing) of our own lives in order to make sense of what happens to us; to rationalizing the whole universe in ways that our human intellect can understand. Therefore what we call ‘data’ is in reality a construction of other people’s constructions as anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it (1973:9). This comment is not to dismiss the great body of knowledge accumulated over centuries in many human disciplines but to settle once and for all the question as to whether the artefact, that is the reason why it is called artefact in the first place, is a construction. Yes, it is, an expressionistic one perhaps because it absorbs and recombines elements gathered from interviews, conversations and social media such as direct quotes, references or whole stories and distorts settings and characters in order to anonymize data but also to make a point.

Indeed, all writing is a ‘fiction,’ and cannot be otherwise as language is incapable of bridging the gap between sensuous experience and interpretation. “If hermeneutics came to connote the ambiguity and slipperiness of textual meaning, then bricolage can also imply the fictive and imaginative elements of the presentation of all formal research”

(Kincheloe, op cit: 680). In this sense the most honest of the sciences is Art and within, Literature. Nobel prize winner Gao Xingjian (2008) makes a case for Literature telling the truth under the mask of fiction. Not to mention Donna Haraway (2011) and the hordes of feminist and non-feminist speculative ‘fabulators’ in the Natural Sciences, Physics and Mathematics, who are miles ahead and far bolder than this artefact.

Moving back to the initial point and according to Denzin & Lincoln (2000) bricolage is not a superficial and un-disciplinary safe-passage to research but rather a recognition of its dialectical nature, which promotes the synergy between different approaches and disciplines. In this sense bricolage pleads for the convergence of different methods of inquiry and the diversity of philosophical and theoretical ‘knowledges’ encountered during the iterative process of researching. By employing the strategy of bricolage it was possible to gain richer insights into the complexities of research on the one hand and into the topic of study on the other.

#### ***4.2.2- Situating the Artefact in the Context of Everyday Practices***

Within the ‘world’ of the polyphonic artefact autobiographical acts in social media constitute practices positioned within the everyday. In this setting, the artefact purposely ‘de-centers’ social media as the focus of the narrative in order to recognize the ways in which the technology is inseparable from everyday embodied life, which includes other activities, feelings and materialities through which these platforms are experienced (Couldry, 2012; Leder Mackley & Pink, 2013). By de-centering the media this study acknowledges that social media is only a part of a wider setting that constitutes the

everyday. To understand the role that social media practices play in people's lives we also need to understand other aspects as 'the digital' appears entangled with other things. As Pink et al (2016:11) argue:

By keeping the place of digital media in research relational to other elements and domains of the research topic, site and methods, we are able to understand the digital as a part of something wider, rather than situating it at the center of our work. This, we propose, inevitably enriches both the ways in which we study digital media [...] and the ways in which these studies create insights into the digital impacts on other strands and elements that constitute everyday environments, experiences, activities and relationships.

Analytical frameworks such as *Media Ecologies* (Horst, 2010), *Communicative Ecologies* (Lennie & Tacchi, 2013) and *Polymedia* (Madianou & Miller, 2012) question the study of digital media platforms in their affordances and instead propose to attend to practice and context. Online forms of expression such as photography (Ito et al, 2010) are studied in relation to genres of participation or scenarios and repertoires (Hjorth & Arnold, 2013; Kendal et al., 2012). The study of practices appeared as a response to an interest in how the micro-level everyday human actions and habits were maintained and shaped through time and how these influenced the macro-level. The practice paradigm counts with several theoretical approaches that can be divided into early studies such as those of Bourdieu (1977) and De Certeau (1984) and more recent studies emerging from the disciplines of Media and Sociology, with scholars such as Couldry & McArthy (2004), which theorize media as a practice, or Alan Warde (2005) which uses practice to conceptualize consumption and culture. Cultural Studies have inquired into meaning making and resistance (from minorities, Feminism) in popular media practices (De Certeau, 1984; McRobbie, 1991) while Cultural Anthropology is concerned with understanding the practices through which life is lived (Ortner, 1984). However, in spite of the wide interest that everyday practices have generated among the academic



community and according to Pink (2012:42) these studies are not all in agreement and “in some cases they have been opposed.” Nevertheless this study adheres to the claim that social media, at least for the autobiographical, is best studied as part of something bigger rather than focusing on the particular platforms’ affordances.

### ***4.2.3- Situating the Artefact in the Context of Embodied Experience***

Embodied, sensuous experience exists in a flux and it is never quite fixed. In a biographical context bodies happen in a continuum between what we have termed as the cycle of birth and death in which birth is the continuation of previous embryonic and atomic states but also the beginning of death. After the body dies another process begins: that of decomposition and so on in an endless samsara<sup>12</sup>. A body experiences ‘normal’ developmental changes such as growth and ageing but also ‘abnormal’ ones caused by accident or illness, for example losing a limb or having a nervous breakdown like the characters in the narrative. Furthermore there are scenarios in which the body is not presently experienced, this is to say, is unconscious, for example while sleeping or after passing out. In other situations there might be a presence but we don’t know or understand it from an outsiders’ point of view, for instance in comatose states or late stages of diseases such as Cerebral Palsy, Motor Neurone Disease or Alzheimer’s (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth, 1999).

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<sup>12</sup> In Buddhism and Hinduism life in the material world is bound to a continuous cycle of death and rebirth.

Studies from Foucauldian and Feminist perspectives explore how bodies become routinized through habit, which comes with experienced life (Joyce, 2007: 45) for example engaging with other materialities such as the house, the workplace and the products of labour (Butler, 1990; Grosz, 1994). Practices associated with the Internet such as online autobiographical acts bring to the fore the question if the body is always the place where identity is located. Today, and thanks to technology, the body can be present in its absence: being public in private (streaming videos from home) or intimate in isolation (with a boyfriend in Whatsapp) and sometimes even in the afterlife, if not for oneself, at least for others, for example in ‘communications’ with the deceased in order to maintain bonds and make sense while grieving (de Vries & Ruthenford, 2004; Daggett, 2005; Degroot, 2012). All of which are scenarios presented dynamically in the artefact.

Bodies perform constantly during everyday mundane tasks and in order to do that they require *sensory knowing* which in turn sustains identity practices and a sense of place or *emplacement* (Pink, 2015: 53). For example we ‘make home’ by choosing specific objects for the mantelpiece. A framed photograph of our childhood might constitute an identity *actant* for childhood nostalgia. We also make home in a relational performance when we bake cup-cakes in the kitchen with our children. For Brady “the embodied self is performed relationally through foodmaking” (cited in Ellingson, 2017:71). Bodies also feel and perform in the street, at work, in the gym and while engaging with technology. Already Donna Haraway in her *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991[1984]) noted that the boundaries between the body and technology were becoming blurred. One of the most clear examples is that of using technology as extensions of ourselves. The mobile phone as an extension of our brain and memory, the camera as an extension of our eyes, the microphone as an

extension of our voice. Most evident is the case of prosthetics which also features in one of the stories in the artefact.

Researching embodied experience as it happens, in the everyday, is complicated. Life as experienced is unattainable for research in the sense that fixing it, even temporarily, through analysis is impossible. It is like sending to the lab a small sample of sea water. We are able to obtain the values for the sample and presume (and hope) for the health of the sea to stay the same as when we took the sample, but this is not necessarily the case. Things can change very quickly: a sudden change in temperature, an oil spill. Like water we exist in a continuous flux. The characters in the artefact are bodies with thoughts, memories and emotions that are always in the process of becoming. They flow in a continuum in which their attempts to fix their identity always fail. Through autobiographical acts they affirm: “this is me”; “this is what I do”; “this is how I look like” ;“this is what I love”; “ this is what I have, want, etc...” and so on. And they say it to *the other*: other people (visible or invisible, dead or alive), they say it to themselves (dialogued soliloquy), places, incidents, actants, projects. While doing so their lives, like a stream or the sea, elapse in endless rearrangements. The artefact is an attempt to represent this dynamism through expressive and rhetorical means, through dialogue, through objects and animals, through the collapse of time and space, life and death. But inevitably the attempt falls short as Magritte cleverly noted: “Ceci n’est pas une Pipe.”

When we do qualitative research we capture details of only tiny slices of time yet we present our findings as though we have faithfully represented who our participants *are* and what they *do* or at least how they were and what they did during our period of data collection. Yet regardless of the period of data collection, it is simply not true that participant's bodies, identities, practices, cultures and contexts remained constant [...] one goal of doing embodiment is to attempt to capture (or at least acknowledge) flux as it happens, in moments of transition and change. Try to show processes not just outcomes [...] arguably narrative and personal reflection are the genres more easily mobilized for dynamic portrayals (Ellingson, 2017: 76, emphasis in the original).

From Anthropological and Feminist perspectives and despite arguments around gender and race belonging to the field of discourse, there is a dimension that remains which makes differences possible and that is of the biological sex of a body (Moore, 1994:12). Therefore body and gender (or race) are not neutral but adhered to a particular condition of existence. Even if we accept the notion that gender and race are socially constructed categories, the link between *gender* or *race* and biology has come to be naturalized and this can be traced back to particular cultural reactions to childbirth, menstruation or pregnancy (Moore, op cit; Ortner, op cit; Rosaldo, 1994). The task of feminist perspectives from the point of view of embodiment has been, and still is, to denaturalize this connection (Joyce, op cit). However, when the philosophy of the Enlightenment gave preference to the mind over the body, this suggested that the body was subordinated to the mind, establishing it as superior and therefore more valuable.

Phenomenological approaches to experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Csordas, 1994) proposed instead a whole person, freed from the body-mind hierarchy and ungendered. However feminist positions “had struggled to find a perspective on embodied experience that avoids essentialism” (Joyce op cit: 47) which identifies bodies with collective singularities (Braidotti, 1991) such as gender and race but also ‘age’ and ‘disability’,

singularities that are revealed in the artefact. Far from returning to essentialism, what is really needed is acknowledging the body and relating to the world [the other] from there [the body] (Braidotti, op cit, Moore, op cit), and this is the context in which autobiographical acts in social media are positioned in the artefact scenario.

#### ***4.2.4- Situating the Artefact as a Polyphonic Narrative in a Bakhtinian Framework***

The polyphonic artefact is a way of seeing data. For Bakhtin a ‘genre’ is a ‘way of seeing.’ It is neither a ‘form’ nor an ‘ideology’ but rather a ‘form-shaping ideology’ or “a special kind of creative activity embodying a specific sense of experience” (Morson & Emerson, 1990:282). This notion, which he names *Chronotope*, links with the previous section and emphasises the importance of time and space. For the voices to reflect ‘true’ experience they must be positioned at particular times in particular places. Bakhtin compares two forms of storytelling: the narrative of *Epics*, characterized by presenting a single point of view, with that of a *Polyphonic Novel* in which different points of view are expressed. A key concept of his theory and particularly useful to this research, is that of *Dialogism*. In this theory every utterance is articulated through a relation with *otherness* ( with other individuals, culture, history, body, time, and space) from conversational talk to artistic creation, including autobiographical acts or a PhD dissertation. It occurs in an ongoing chain of statement-response-repetition-quotation in which every new utterance assumes earlier expressions and anticipates new responses (Bakhtin, 1986). These strings of

*adressivity* and *answerability* are therefore *dialogical* and historically *contingent*, this is to say embedded in a particular historic, cultural and social context.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky Poetics* Bakhtin states: “I live in a world of others’ words” (1984 : 143). Either speech or other more complex genres such as Literature, Art or scientific reports are knitted through *heteroglossia* (appropriated or borrowed from words and artistic expressions of others) and therefore fundamentally *polyphonic*. (Bakhtin: 1992: 284). In the artefact polyphonic heteroglossia manifests at two different levels: *first* at the level of the content in which other’s stories are re-storied and *second* in the form in which, as a stylistic strategy ‘others’ words’ are incorporated (poetry, music, images) in order to mimic the flows of social media but also those of everyday life. In turn both levels are composites of ‘composed worlds of others’ words’, images and memories, emanating from either ‘imagined’, ‘told’ or ‘observed’ lived experience or ‘appropriated’ from cultural productions, scripts and patterns in an endless recontextualization. For example the voice of the *wanderer*, through polyphonic heteroglossia becomes an ‘inter-experienced’ story with an ‘intertextual exposition’ in the sense that it is a synthesis of different participant’s points of view, including that of the researcher, and also cultural referents. When he tells the story of his failure to accomplish a particular work project, that story is a conglomerate of different informants’ stories of failure, plus cultural references of failure such as Balzac’s *Unknown Masterpiece* ((2016 [1831])).

In *Speech genres and other late essays* (1986:88-89) Bakhtin notes that the words of a language belong to no one yet we identify particular chains of words with particular individuals because these are creatively assimilated, although filled with ‘dialogical

overtones', and infused with the particularities of the context in which they are produced. The 'author' might have rights over the word but 'the other', be this a listener or a reader or the ones from whom he has 'borrowed' his words, have rights too, after all words belong to no one (ibid:121-122). Language is overpopulated with intentionality and lies in-between one-self and the other. When we appropriate a word we take it from someone else and re-contextualize it to make it our own (ibid: 294). In this sense *Dialogism* suggests incompleteness and un-closeness because it always incites new chains of meaning. There is neither a first nor a last word because the dialogic is boundless. Every past meaning is reborn in dialogue (ibid: 170). "Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken" (Bakhtin, 1984: 166).

Another crucial concept in Bakhtin's theory is the notion of the *Carnavalesque* (Bakhtin, 1965). Which, applied to texts, allows rupturing with oppressive forms clearing the way for the imagination and ultimately becoming emancipatory. In this sense the carnivalesque is brought into play in both the participants' autobiographical acts and the researcher's writing. The carnivalesque suggests liberation from norms and embracing humour and chaos. It also ties up with the notion of subverting the 'normal' paths of life, for example in the context of the artefact, a body in crisis cosplays<sup>13</sup> as a superhero after losing a limb. According to Rojek "Carnival plucks 'play'<sup>14</sup> from the periphery of everyday life and places it at the centre. This manoeuvre allows people to let off steam. In carnival pent-up emotions are released and 'play' is the lord of all he surveys " (2007:17). For

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<sup>13</sup> Costume Play.

<sup>14</sup> Inverted commas in the original.

Bakhtin carnival has a therapeutic effect of releasing the tensions accumulated in societies and cultures in which situations of unfairness, for example in relation to resources, are perceived. In Volume 2 the character of the *mother*, afflicted with a degenerative illness, acts like a clown during an outing. Carnival is her way to cope.

In the artefact the Bakhtinian framework is useful in the first place because it allows the different voices of the participants to speak and tell their stories without adhering to a single interpretation made by the researcher. In this way no particular point of view is privileged and all the voices compete for their own 'regime of truth', including that of the researcher. The polyphonic model offers rich social vignettes and allows for exploring and understanding values and beliefs (Morson & Emerson, 1990). In the opposite model, the epic tale, the researcher would have put through her own point of view outside other considerations. She would have produced an ordered and complete story, from introduction to conclusion; she might have to do this in the exegesis but not in the artefact.

In the polyphony the characters are set free to speak in their own terms and as shockingly as they please directly to the reader; this is to say without the mediation of the writer of the text. Furthermore the world within the polyphonic artefact is not complete, despite expressing *a sense of an ending* with the *mother's* voice, the story is incomplete and imperfect, without any formal closure. Although the impulses for continuity and ending exist, the story may begin and finish at almost any moment (Bakhtin, 1981 [1975]:31). In the carnivalesque the participants/characters are active. Openness is celebrated and the hierarchy between the researcher and them is or should be invisible. Norms are reversed when for example, in focus groups they 'upgrade' and become expert



analysts; or when during formal interviews or on-the-go encounters, they claim their *quid-pro-quo* and ask personal questions of the researcher such as “how many kids do you have?” or “for how long have you been in Ireland?” The exegesis is the norm, the polyphonic artefact is the unofficial version, a counter-narrative in which different views, styles and languages are valued (ibid:7).

The use of diverse voices is not new in research. Studies inquiring power relations and conflict and resistance have reached for the Bakhtinian framework (Tanaka, 1997; Jones, 2001; Kim, 2006). Kim for example, used five different voices to “interrogate the nature of dominant stories” in education settings (Kim, op cit: 11). In the study she also reflected on the voice of the researcher acknowledging that although the voices occupy a position of relativity between one another, the researcher ultimately “relays a fable clearly meant to impart meaning and assist the reader in weighing the various narratives or perspectives” (Leavy 2009:29). Hence any curatorial practice amounts to ‘saying the last word’ and therefore contradicting the principle of openness in dialogism, but this is not necessarily the case because in Bakhtin’s terms, the ‘last word’ of the researcher will be reborn in the reception of her work (by a supervisor or an examiner), which in turn can be contested (by another member of the panel) and so on ad infinitum.

#### ***4.2.5- Situating the Artefact in a Dramaturgical Model***

Paraphrasing theatre director and author Peter Brook (1990:11) talking about the discipline of theatre: a person, everyman or everywoman, steps onto an empty stage whilst someone else is watching and this is all it takes for a performance to start. Goffman (1959) studied the everyday performativity (playing different roles) of human actions in micro-society. Of this framework the notion of *impression management*, with the related concepts of *front-stage* and *backstage*, are particularly useful in complementing and re-affirming Bakhtin's model in the sense that every utterance, that we now know is necessarily directed to *the other*, is also necessarily performative. According to Goffman (op cit) we make efforts to appear in a particular light in front of others; this is to say, to give a particular impression at the front-stage however, we engage in behaviours at the backstage, which we don't necessarily wish to share with others although they might surface reflecting in our everyday practices such as speech acts, artistic expressions or autobiographical accounts in social media. In the artefact, the reader is given a peek look into the unrevealed life of the characters (backstage) by allowing access to their intimate thoughts and secret memories, while conveying a sense of immediacy or closeness with the character (empathy) by avoiding the interference of an all-seeing/all-knowing narrator through the combined use of the pronouns 'You' and 'I.'

For Goffman (op cit) self-presentation is a performance that takes place in multiple stages. The performance is a *face* and we have as many faces as contextual situations we are involved in. Faces can also be intentional or unintentional. The first are *expressions given* (e.g. a selfie in social media) and the second *expressions given off* (e.g. a photograph revealing a place where we are not supposed to be). A performance articulated around

giving a face can be understood as an information game: “a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation and rediscovery” (ibid: 13). In order to help the performance, the *front stage* provides us with a series of aiding props that will constitute our furniture or *expressive equipment*, which fundamentally aim to conceal our naked or *backstage* self (ibid). In the artefact the transition between front-stage and backstage is fluid.

As seen in Chapter 2 many scholars have resorted to *performativity* to explain self-presentation in online environments and specifically in personal pages and social networking contexts (Dominick, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002a, 2002b; Walker, 2000; Donath, 2007; Donath & boyd, 2004). Social media is ideal for self-presentation performances. Individuals manage textual and visual cues with certain level of biographical accuracy that allow them to choreograph the exact amount of face they wish to give. For example, face is presented through the display of friends and cultural taste. Friends give contextual cues about the social circles the individual wishes to be associated with, like popular or VIP connections; but also preferences, social habits and character. In a sense these displays function like mantelpieces in which individuals showcase the best bits of their life for others to see. In the artefact this aspect features prominently in the story entitled *Klout*.

#### ***4.2.6- Situating the Artefact in a Context of Struggles***

This point has been extensively reviewed in Chapter 1 (1.3) and in this section is discussed in relation to the artefact in which the characters’ autobiographical acts are never fixed but contingent. Either in everyday embodied experience or in everyday cyberspace autobiographical acts happen in a scenario of ‘struggles’ against which they are played: this is to say, dialectically between the producers of the autobiographical, the agent

provocateurs and the audiences (Plummer 1995). At this point we encounter again Bakhtin's dialogism but also notions of embodiment and performance.

In the artefact every voice writes (tells and shares) her own story: "This is me"; "This is my life." Like the character without name in Dostoevsky's novel, previously discussed, these characters don't have names, even if a name could provide a guarantee of authenticity for an audience, these characters present and identify themselves through attributes: "I am successful"; "I am guilty." These identifying traits are contextual, contested and contingent because they are embedded in the stories they tell through available cultural scripts and patterns of self-presentation (Goffman, op cit). For example in the case of the character of the *neighbour* her way of doing things clashes with her son-in-law because they come from different places: geographically, generationally and in their levels of digital literacy. Furthermore the characters don't have names because they are 'everyman' and 'everywoman' and their authority resides in the power of the pronouns 'I' and 'You' which tell their story from the inside out (I) and vice versa (You). In this manner their identity belongs in part to the sphere of discourse and in part to sensorial embodied experience.

Their embodied experience is also site of autobiographical knowledge because in feeling and perceiving they shape their identity, for example through pain and trauma. Their bodies also perform at a nexus of gender, age and class (Butler, 1993), which in turn provide yet more attributes with which to identify themselves, sometimes in dissonance with an audience. For example the youthfulness felt by the character of the *mother* is contested by others, who insist on placing her in the body of an old person in a clear

example of how cultural discourses can determine the meaning of a body and its visibility or invisibility. However she refuses stigmatization and in a carnivalesque manoeuvre she resorts to irony in order to cope. Other characters also confront being fixed by cultural norms, the *daughter* by exploring her changing body through the medium of photography, and the *wanderer* by wandering. In this way the characters re-invent themselves through performativity (Butler, op cit). Hence, are the characters the agents of their own autobiographies?

The answer to that question would be negative for Althusser (1971) but for Bakhtin (1965) the characters can always re-appropriate their autobiography either through *noise* with carnival or symbiosis by inhabiting the system like in Michel de Certeau (1984). For Lyotard (1984) they would create their own worlds in which to generate moves and countermoves (e.g. the stories of *Sally-katana* or *Circe Unbound*). The solution lies somewhere in the intersection between text and context (Smith & Watson, 2001a). Each character develops its own system and structures of self-knowing. For some it has to do with the body, for instance through physical/virtual transformation (e.g. healing, plastic surgery, filters in *Instagram*) and for others, it occurs through changing the way of life (e.g. the *father* forming a musical band). Sometimes they can even refuse the possibility of self-knowledge (e.g. the story *The right to be uninteresting*). The artefact takes a close look at these attempts as they become occasions for exploring different issues such as ageism, invisibility or guilt, while at the same time posing a challenge to the notion of authenticity as being attached to the autobiographical (Fludernik, 1996).

Following Plummer (1995), the agent provocateurs of the autobiographical act are

the person(s), institution or cultural impositions that induce the subject to tell his/her story. Their intervention can be either obvious (e.g. a researcher asking questions) or invisible to the naked eye (fear). These agents provoke, elicit, fathom and interrogate stories from people and they can be either collaborative (friend) or coercive (police). Geography can also contextualize autobiographical acts, for example in one of the stories in the artefact the geography of the cliffs triggers the reaction of the *mother*. In the landscape she sees an occasion to flee her illness. Then a picture is taken, posted on *Facebook* and later retrieved at her funeral. Place influences the way the autobiographical is conceived, set, seen and understood. Therefore an autobiographical act will manifest differently in a research interview, during a walk, or in *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *Twitter*.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Alison Landsberg (op cit) coined the notion of *prosthetic memory* as a strategy for explaining how different forms of media have contributed to the formation of personal memories. These memories don't arise from lived experience rather from mediated cultural products. The constant exposition to media procures the memory of events that have never been experienced. In the artefact, stories such as *Paris* and *Zombies*, deal with memories being sourced as much from embodied experience as from the media. For Landsberg the media alters our notion of experience because it brings dramatic relief, while providing the contents that will allow for filling possible memory gaps and therefore helping to 'make-sense' of particular events.

In the story *Sally-Katana* the character's autobiographical act is the incorporation of two opposing fictional characters (*Sally* and *Katana*) in order to regain some coherence in an otherwise 'dysfunctional' biography. Social media brings the occasion for mass-

producing memories through imitation of successful profiles, for example celebrities (Senft, 2013), or ‘visible’ stories of hardship (Couser, 2012). Furthermore but at a different level of analysis a question remains if whether the memories retrieved in any autobiographical account, including those produced in a research situation, for example an interview, come from lived experience or imagined lived experience. Yet another occasion for challenging authenticity as an attribute of autobiography. It probably doesn’t matter if the account is authentic or not. What really matter is that we make it a dramatic act because it’s more appealing to an audience; an aspect that confirms autobiographical acts performativity.

Studying the reception of autobiographical acts would take another inquiry entirely. In this study audiences are taken on board only in their role of contributors, with their co-presence, to the autobiographical act. In social media, as in embodied social interaction every individual performs for someone in the audience (visible or invisible). Audiences assess and demand and therefore influence what is produced. In the artefact the characters of the *wanderer* and his *wife* shape their online interventions according to their followers’ taste and in order to maintain their clout, which is ever increasing thanks to the viewers’ likes, comments and pokes. However there is no way to predict the audience’s reaction to a particular autobiographical act. In the artefact, when the *wanderer* posts online a work achievement, unaware that his *sister* had just commented on their mother’s declining health condition in the same outlet, an awkward situation occurs, which can be compared to a wardrobe malfunction and therefore a loss of face in public and in Goffman’s terms. When he realizes the bad timing error he resorts to *diseventualization* (Žižek, 2014), this is to say deleting or hiding the post from public view in an attempt to minimize the damage.

This point will be further discussed in the next chapter.

The possibility of interactivity in social media platforms has empowered the audience in a similar way that ‘liveness’ has empowered theatre audiences compared to those of cinema. It has taken them out of the traditional passive and voyeuristic position of the spectator by giving them the right of reply. Therefore authors, autobiographical acts and audiences cohabit in the same space of production. The fact that the audience is present, or perceived as present, during the performance of the autobiographical act contributes to shaping it. This might have great implications for the stories we tell about ourselves, again challenging any notion of truth regarding autobiography. The stories in the artefact were collectively created (and therefore performed) thus the question of authenticity remains. Were the participants telling true experiences or were they crafting them for the ‘needy’ ear of the researcher? Does it matter? After all the *truth* of the teller is always in the tale: in what is told and what is untold (Lawrence, 2003).

## **4.3- The Polyphonic Artefact: Dramatic Elements**

### ***4.3.1- The Story***

The story is structured along thirty three sections, including a prologue and an epilogue for the sole purpose of readability, otherwise it would have been presented as a continuous stream, without headlines or breaks. In the following graphic (Fig-14) the sections have been organized in a timeline for clarity. Prologue, epilogue and a greater number of vignettes are lead by the voice of the *wanderer*. However this decision doesn’t make him, necessarily, the protagonist of the story and the others his chorus. On the contrary, each



voice is situated at the centre of his or her own network and this centre shifts depending on whoever does the talking, independently of which character has introduced the vignette. For example in the scenario *Regarding the pain of others*, which by the way is a reference to Susan Sontag's title (2003), the voices of the passengers in a shutter bus all talk at the same level as the *wanderer*, without any of them being more important than others.

# ARTEFACT TIMELINE

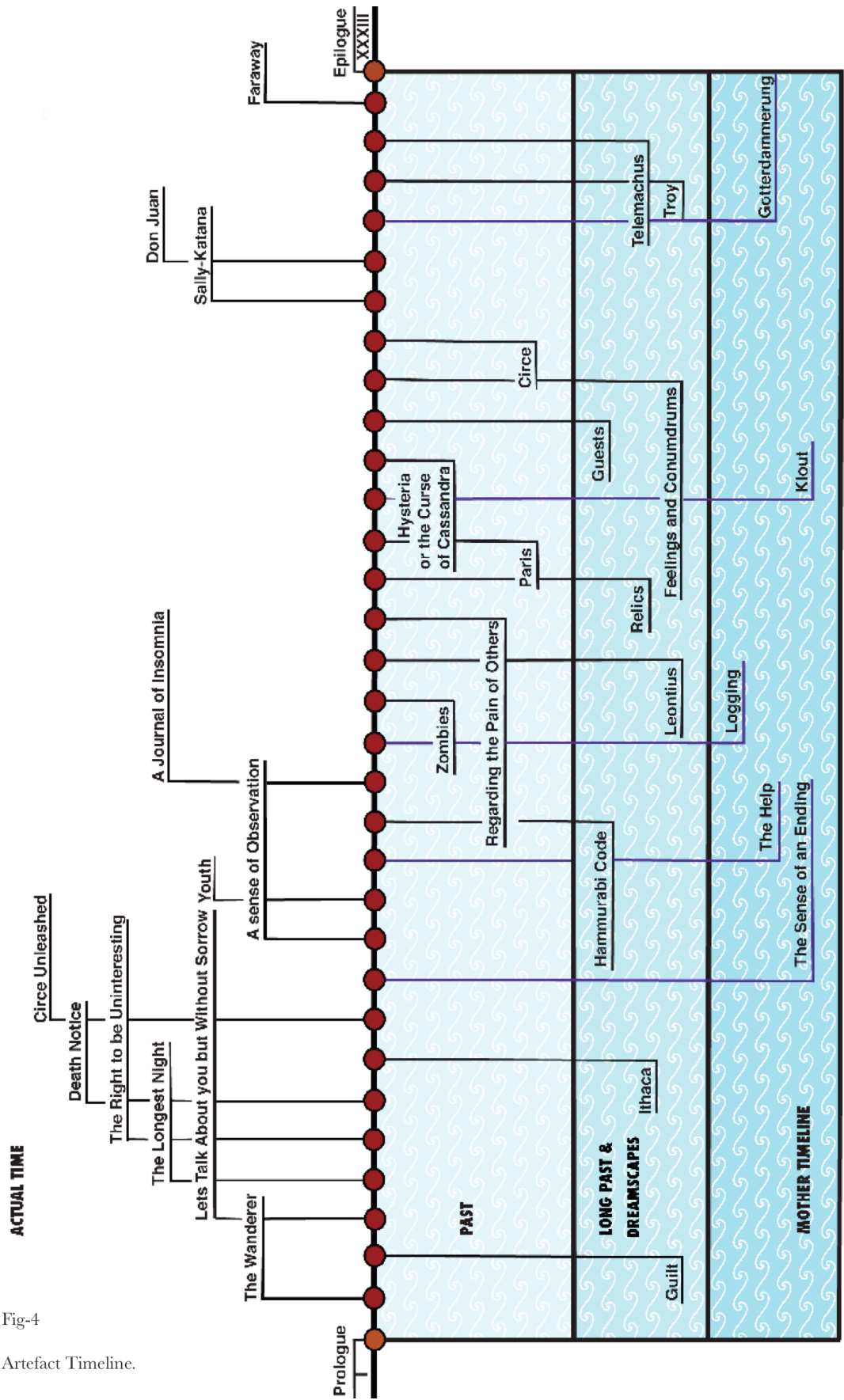


Fig-4

Artefact Timeline.

In the story a *mother* dies after a long crippling illness that has truncated her career and convoluted her personal life. A *father* decides to become a singer-songwriter after a frustrating career in a ‘sitting’ job. A divorced and childless *daughter* deals with her changing body while caring for her sick mother. A *son* wanders about different human and material geographies without ever quite finding his place. Meanwhile his *wife* decides to divorce him and start a new business venture. They are all members of an estranged family tracing and retracing their personal journeys (present and past, online and offline) and converging in the mother’s funeral along with friends and acquaintances.

#### ***4.3.2- Timespaces***

Time splinters at each moment into the past and the present making a curve in space. Time and space are dynamic and can only exist in relation to each other. There is no difference between time and dimensions of space, except in the consciousness of the characters. For physicist Michio Kaku (2008) consciousness is a set of feedback loops necessary to create a model of our place in space in relation to others and in relation to time. The polyphonic narrative unfolds in a variety of online and offline everyday places and at different times in which the life of the characters happens, is told, imagined or reminisced in a series of stories within stories, nested like Chinese boxes. The characters are all experiencing some sort of crisis, which impels them to reformulate their identity in a constant flow of ‘ceasing(s)’ and ‘becoming(s).’ Their estate of being is parallel by the style of the narration. The polyphony elapses in free-association through multilayered *timespaces*, much like a stream of consciousness in order to represent ongoingness, fluidity, context collapsing and reverse chronology, all characteristics of the Internet, but also in order to imitate life in its complexities.

The *mother's* story is articulated between her memories from the theatre and her past and current life at home as a sick woman, her logs on *Facebook* and her *Sense of an ending* at the hospice. After she dies her thread is picked up by her *daughter*, who announces her passing on *Facebook* and organizes the funeral while trying to reach her *brother/wanderer* who has gone 'off of the radar', after a nervous breakdown, to an unspecified island without Internet. The *daughter/sister* is seen in the everyday: at work dealing with awkward situations, in the morning at home choosing what to wear and at night logging into a chatroom for insomniacs, visiting her sick mother and keeping her company while baking cup cakes. We see her during her childhood at the grandparents house and during her youth when she has to travel abroad for a secret abortion and also accompanying her mother to one of her routine facial make-over trips.

The *brother* is also the *prodigal son: a wanderer*. He emigrated to the antipodes and managed to make a living as an Internet chef under the guidance of his social media savvy *wife* until all went wrong. In the story we encounter the *wanderer* reversing the journey he undertook many years ago in order to attend his *mother's* funeral. He makes his way to the airport first by taxi and then in a friends' car with a screaming baby at the back. By the whims of physics his journey begins and ends the same day: 16 June. He boards the first plane and then he continues with a series of actual and down memory lane stop overs in which he reminisces about his childhood going to a 'tapas bar' with his grandfather; visiting a sanctuary in France with his grandmother; a recent visit to Paris; his iPad, Wifi, Facebook and Youtube predicaments and the distant memory of a 'tweeting ghost' in a small village during All Saints day.

The *father* muses about his work frustrations while sitting at his desk, looking at the park below his window, and fantasizing of a better life. On the other side of the world the *son's ex-wife* chats with a friend while preparing food in the kitchen for her birthday party and waiting for the guests to arrive. Prosecco and company trigger memories of her marriage which reinforce but at the same time challenge her decision to file for divorce. The friends toast to friendship and new life avenues and they record their first video for a new channel in *Youtube*. Meanwhile the *daughter* and a *neighbour* both 'chat' to the *mother's* corpse during the wake. The *daughter* musing about the meaning of life and the *neighbour* about holiday pictures and selfies, online 'wardrobe malfunctions' and the visit of two cousins from the village.

#### 4.3.2.1- *Front Stage and Backstage*

In the dramaturgical framework (Goffman, 1959) *front-stage* refers to the characters' actions polished for public consumption. These comprise their social media posts, their *Whatsapp* texts and their face-to-face encounters and conversations. *Front-stage* productions are marked by tradition, social norms, ethics, politeness, hierarchy, fashion and so on, which are encoded in the characters' brains and define their social interactions. For example when the *mother* posts a picture of a volcano in *Facebook* as a way to express her emotional state she is using a socially acceptable euphemism for an eruption of rage, while at the same time demonstrating a good sense of humour and aesthetic criteria.

The processes taking place in a hideaway from public scrutiny run at the *backstage*. In the artefact they manifest mainly with the characters' self-reflective talk, which I have

termed: *dialogued soliloquy*. In this hideaway social filters are not necessary: rage is rage, disgust is disgust and love is love. For example in the story in which the *daughter* reflects on the act of killing (*Feelings and conundrums*), the emotions are raw. However, and from a psychoanalytic point of view (Freud, (2010[1920])), there is a caveat: this *backstage* is susceptible of being ‘purified’ by defense mechanisms, which the ‘I’ (self, ego) would operate in order to make sense and more palatable certain doings usually perceived, unconsciously, as immoral. Only dreams, slippages of the mind and *déjà vues*<sup>15</sup> can permeate the mind free from filters (ibid). This might perfectly be the case but this research cannot afford this avenue for at least a couple of reasons: first, the absence of an adequate qualification for psychoanalytical analysis, which could be interesting, and second scope.

#### 4.3.2.2- *Dreamscapes*

Dreamscapes are places of abstraction where the characters travel to or inhabit at different points in the narration. They are surreal worlds painted in the minds of the characters and they are as real as they are fictitious. They are all situated at the *backstage* informing and shaping their actual experience. In the artefact dreamscapes are the lands of memory, fantasy and dreams. These are borderless spaces in constant flow, irrupting and disrupting the present, which in turn contains the stressors capable of triggering them. For instance when the *wanderer* refers to the occurrence of a sudden memory as the result of a

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<sup>15</sup> Already seen.

‘proustian manoeuvre’, clearly referring to Proust’s episode in which he is launched into a memory trip after tasting a madeleine<sup>16</sup> (Proust, (2006[1913])).

In the artefact instances of dreamscapes are childhood memories such as the ones portrayed in the vignettes *Hammurabi code* or *Relics*; the *mother’s* dream in *Götterdämmerung*; and the magic realism in *Guests*. In the artefact dreamscapes are motifs that create their own intimate space. They are places of evasion and accomplishment where lucid moments can take place but also episodes of reflection and overcoming. Its function, like in fairy tales and fantasy worlds, is that of revealing something to the character, perhaps a moral lesson. They contain symbolic elements such as the ‘dog’ in the story *Guests*, which we see reappearing in *Feelings and conundrums*. Since the Bronze Age dogs have been depicted in association with attributes of guidance, love and fidelity but also as a symbol of social status. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, only his dog recognizes *Ulysses* on his return to Ithaca and in Egypt dogs, represented by the figure of the god *Anubis*, guided the souls to the *Hall of Truth* to be judged by *Osiris* (Thurston, 1997). Bachelard calls these spaces “poetic reverberations” and according to him their function is momentarily fusing the positions of reader and writer in an attempt to facilitate the latter speaking the text as if it were his or her own (1994[1958]:7).

### **4.3.3- Polyphony**

Polyphony is a musical style that combines, simultaneously, different individual melodies in harmony. Polyphony in the context of this work is understood *first* as *Heteroglossic*

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<sup>16</sup> Small cake, cup-cake, muffin.

*Dialogism* in a Bakhtinian framework (1981[1975]) in which every utterance (word, image, impression) is the result of an endless chain of recontextualizations and therefore any voice, including that of the researcher while typing this document, is a composite of voices. *Second*, polyphony is used musically in the interplay of voices in simultaneous dialogue, either with each other or with themselves, in a dialogued soliloquy. In this sense dialogue works as a mode of storytelling involving an immediate exchange between actors and audience. During this exchange “meaning is imparted, negotiated and multiplied” (Leavy, 2009:261) in a symbolic interaction (Mead, 1934). Dialogue is performed (Goffman, 1959), is a form of representation (or storytelling) and at the same time is a tool for inquiry in which the ‘data’ is transformed into ‘dramatic plots’ and the participants into ‘characters’ (Leavy, op cit). To further clarify this point, the polyphonic artefact corresponds to what in Anthropology is called the ‘thick description’<sup>17</sup> (Geertz, 1988).

In the artefact we can hear seven main voices: *mother, son-brother-wanderer, daughter-sister, father, ex-girlfriend, wife-ex-wife* and *neighbour*. Other voices play a role of counteracting the main characters and finally there is the researcher’s voice as unifying instrument. Every character is set in motion with a main purpose; a series of obstacles and a resolution but this has to be understood as circumstantial and therefore susceptible to change. The characters are constructed in a way in which we don’t know what is factual, prosthetic, imagined or exaggerated thus bringing to the fore the debate of the nature of identity and challenging notions of authenticity regarding autobiography, but also and at the macro-level, the ‘truth’ of historical and epistemological discourses (Smith & Watson, 2001a; Leavy, 2009).

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<sup>17</sup> Approach to research catering for the informants’ attributed meaning and socio cultural context to the behavior studied.



#### 4.3.2.1- *The Voice of the Mother*

The *mother* is in her late sixties. She married and had her two children at a very young age. She is a woman with a priority: her career as an opera singer but her dream is soon truncated by a disease, which like the chords in a Wagner opera manifests in crescendo. Deprived of her dream she finds consolation first in denial, and when her body lets her down she takes to social media in pursuance of the fame she couldn't achieve in the theatre. But this also will be taken away from her when she loses her voice and ultimately dies. By the end of her life she resorts to irony as a way of regaining control. Her family and friends resent her in one way or another but she doesn't understand why, after all she has always wanted the best for everybody. The purpose of the *mother* is to live forever. Her obstacle is her illness. Her resolution is death.

#### 4.3.2.2- *The Voice of the Son/Wanderer*

The *wanderer* is the *prodigal son*. He left his homeland in pursuance of a life, which kept eluding him. In the story we see the *wanderer* in his journey back home to attend his mother's funeral. He has mixed feelings about her. During the journey memories of people and places return to confront him. The *wanderer* is an eternal boy. In his impossibility to mature he wanders. His arrested development stems from the impossibility of sticking to something for too long (people, projects, jobs, places) while feeling guilty for it but unable to break the vicious circle. He loves and fears his mother; he resents her for her absences during his childhood and teens, which he contested by eating to excess. He also feels guilty for having let her down on the only occasion he was left in charge during a critical family situation. We know, he has 'had' many women, which he has treated like commodities

but only two have managed to leave a mark. Both women are performers and strong, like his mother. Both relationships have failed because the women perceived lack of involvement on his part.

The *wanderer* is both a tragic and a pathetic figure, like perhaps the rest of his family. He compares himself with *Odysseus* but his heroic journey is closer to a parody set in the tradition of grand travel narratives, more similar to De Maistre's *Voyage outour ma chambre* (2003[1794]) than Homers' epic tale. His tragedy doesn't follow Aristotle's rules of poetics (1920[circa 335 BC]). He is not a noble figure with a tragic flaw, which after a reversal of fortune achieves his moment of recognition (or illumination). He is more a character from the *Comedia dell' Arte*. Through his journey he remains the same and if any, his merit resides in accepting that his position in the world is that of continuing to wander and search. In this sense he might be a figure of failure in a meritocratic context but at the same time, his lack of success is liberating, an achievement in itself and therefore tragic. The purpose of the *wanderer* is to find a purpose. His obstacles are the impossibility to stick to something and guilt. His resolution is the acceptance of his condition.

#### 4.3.3.3- *The Voice of the Daughter/Sister*

We encounter the *sister* as a caring *daughter*, settled in an everyday job, which is not her best bet, but it is quite close. She is serious, responsible and with high morals. We don't know much about her past besides that she had killed three times, that she had been

harassed at work although she is well able to fend for herself and that she is divorced. We also know that she is an insomniac and that ageing is bothering her. The *sister-daughter* is in a way very similar to the *wanderer*. She doesn't have a place in life either. She remains a girl living vicariously through her mother, whom she also dreads, but unlike her brother, her fear comes from admiration. She finds her role in life through 'mothering' her sick mother; and although she is tired and resents her for having wasted her own life in hers, she is also devastated after her death because she has lost her *raison d' être*. She uses social media as a way to cope with grief. By maintaining her mother 'alive' she can also continue performing her 'best self.' The purpose of the *sister/daughter* is to care. Her obstacles are the death of the mother, guilt for her abortion and the impossibility to bear a child. Her resolution is maintaining her mother/child alive.

#### 4.3.3.4- *The Voice of the Father/Husband*

The father is an unrealized poet. He married very young. We don't know for sure but probably they married after she [the *mother*] got pregnant. At the time he managed to take and maintain a steady job while supporting his wife's artistic endeavours. He genuinely admired her and also felt guilty because her pregnancy slowed down her career. Soon it became apparent who the breadwinner was. While she was touring he was in charge of the house but we don't know to what extent he took care of the two small children, as they seem to be at their grandparent's house. We know the couple divorced somewhere along the way, although we don't know exactly why or in which terms. It can be presumed that the divergent lifestyles and maybe third parties contributed to the separation. Just before

the news of the death of his ex-wife reaches him; he goes through an existential crisis during which he balances his life. He realizes that his purpose in life: a sitting job and caring for an anyway estranged family, has failed. Her death triggers his liberation because he sees his own end reflected in hers. His resolution lies in recasting himself as a singer songwriter, an old repressed dream.

#### *4.3.3.5- The Voice of the Ex-girlfriend*

She has been through a terrible experience (terrorist attack) in which she has allegedly lost her partner. She meets the *wanderer* in the aftermath, a few weeks later, and in their conversation we learn about her traumatic experience. It is left unclear if her memories arise from lived experience or are composed from the fragments presented in the media. Her purpose is to forget. Her obstacle is the pressure to remember in order to make sense of what has happened to her but she seems to contest that view. Her resolution is carnival: she constructs a false/prosthetic memory in order to please others (ironically) but she is aware of what she is doing; unlikely, in her opinion, other accounts circulating on the media (including social media) that are unaware that their memories are cut from a socially acceptable and culturally aestheticized template of pain.

#### *4.3.3.6- The Voice of the Wife-ex-Wife*

The purpose of the *wife-ex-wife* is achieving clout and with that a comfortable lifestyle. Her obstacle is falling in love with the wrong business partner. The marriage falls apart

because of his aloofness (as perceived by her), an alleged infidelity and an episode of physical violence. Her resolution is to be reborn from her ashes by creating a new branch of the business, this time without her husband. It is not clear if they will couple again but she doesn't need him anymore to realize her dreams.

#### 4.3.3.7-*The Voice of the Neighbour*

The *neighbour* is the most unlikely of the friends for the *mother*, however she is the only one sticking with her until the end. She represents genuine friendship, extending beyond socio-economic, educational and taste affinities. She is the only one treating the *mother* as an adult able to make her own decisions (e.g. getting drunk against doctor's orders). Both friends have realized that life can only happen 'now' and that the biggest fallacy of occidental societies is that of 'preparing for life' as if life was something to be continuously deferred. While the *neighbour* affirms her right to be 'uninteresting', the *mother*, aware that it is too late for her, instead of "hanging on in quiet desperation (is the English way)"<sup>18</sup> she laughs at herself.

#### 4.3.2.8- *Other Voices*

Other voices play the role of giving the replica to the main characters by expressing their own points of view as in the case of *Sally-Katana*, who after losing a leg, contests being

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<sup>18</sup> Verse from *Time* from the Pink Floyd album *The dark side of the Moon* (1973)

labeled as a ‘disabled’ person and exercises a new kind of agency through cosplaying<sup>19</sup>. She is not only a well able person but she also goes beyond herself by contributing to render a service to society by campaigning in favor of land mine victims. Other voices are also the passengers in the Parisian navette<sup>20</sup>, who contribute with their dialogue to bring to the fore diverse international issues, or the *wife’s* friends, who play the role of helpers through showing support and listening to her.

#### *4.3.3.9- The Voice of the Researcher*

Ultimately the researcher is the ghostwriter of the biographies (autobiographies) of the participants in the research. What was expected with this exercise is that through the ‘re-storying’ of the key elements of the participants’ stories new insights on the research question could be yielded. The method draws some of the postulates of Ethnography and Narrative Inquiry and “results in a story that is derived directly from the data collected and also shaped in collaboration with the research participant” (Leavy, 2009:35). This method inevitably suggests that the researcher occupies a position within the text, if not necessarily in an explicit way, in the act of writing the researcher influences the meanings created through this process. “Although traditionally presenting themselves as invisible [...] all social researchers, are implicitly interwoven into their final representations in many ways” (ibid: 36). In this context the researcher can be compared to a medium voicing the pleas of the informants while retaining her own voice.

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<sup>19</sup> Costume-play representing different characters, usually from fiction.

<sup>20</sup> Shuttle bus.

Re-storying 'data' has increased in popularity since the idea of the impossibility of total detachment on the part of the social scientist has become more acceptable as a result of the positivist paradigm being challenged by Feminism, Postmodernism, Poststructuralism and Cultural Studies (Leavy, op cit: 36). The advantage of this method is that it is able to evoke emotion arising from insights resulting in a "me too" sort of recognition. In short: it allows for catharsis. The characterizations or composites contribute to situate the narrative(s) within a particular historic-socio-cultural scenario, which is inhabited as much by the participants as it is by the researcher as is discussed in the following section.

#### ***4.3.4- Intertextuality***

Intertextuality or Heteroglossic Dialogism is the making or 'trademark' of the artefact. The term was introduced by Julia Kristeva in her development of Bahktin's theory of Dialogism and defined as words being an intersection of other words (1980: 66). In this sense texts are not self-contained systems but differential and historical and shaped by imprints of 'otherness.' There are many theoretical approaches to the concept of intertextuality from Literary Criticism, Linguistics and other disciplines, however they won't be reviewed here for reasons of scope. Just to mention Barthes' contribution in that the meaning of a text is not to be found in the text but in the network of texts invoked in the act of reading (and writing) and therefore rendering the text open to multiple interpretations (Kristeva, 1986).

I have discussed so far the polyphony of voices, which are composites of the participants' voices and that of the researcher, but there are other voices and these come from cultural productions, which in turn are concocted within socio-political-historic contexts. The artefact is plagued with 'otherness.' For example references to literary characters or authors, media works, allusions to fine art and fragments of musical pieces. In the artefact direct quotations from other works appear in blue and unreferenced within the text, to avoid breaking the flow of the story, however, they are given a number, which indicates the source text in a list at the end of the volume. The function of intertextuality in the artefact is both symbolic and stylistic and it is also part of the creative process of the researcher. Examples of intertextuality within the artefact are given in the following paragraphs.

Many works and authors have been referenced in the text: Dostoevsky, Proust, Joyce, Balzac, Beckett, Camus, Dalí, Picasso, Braque, Wagner, Lorca, Ferran Adrià and Joan Roca but also History, symbols, the Classical world and mythology: Sisyphus, Cassandra, Ulysses, Circe, Leontius. Their presence in the text indicates how dialogism performs. All the references originated in the combined dialogue between the participants and the researcher 'word of words' (Heteroglossic Dialogism). For example the name *wanderer* is a reference, and homage, to both an anonymous Anglo-Saxon poem with the same name found in the book of Exeter (10th century) and to *Odysseus* in Homer's and Joyce's narratives. The *wanderer* shares with them the heroic qualities of the older texts and the anti-heroic qualities of Leopold Bloom<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Name of the protagonist in James Joyce narrative.



Further references to these texts stem directly from the fieldwork, for instance the *mother's* reading of Molly Bloom's <sup>22</sup>monologue in the park was read, in 'real life', by one of the participants on the occasion of Bloom's day celebrations in one of the urban settings on the 16 of June; which in turn was the date chosen to initiate the *wanderer's* journey back to 'Ithaca', to attend his mother's funeral. In another instance and during a 'real life' house gathering, a participant performed a version of *A Most Disgusting Song* by Rodríguez as a way of representing his and his friends' state of mind, but also because he had recently seen a documentary about the life of the singer in which the song featured. In the text this occasion is reflected in the *father's* vignette when stanzas from the lyrics of the song (in blue) appear intercalated with the narration and contribute to add meaning to the story. A different tune featuring in the scenario *The Longest Night* also originated in the field. At other times references were introduced as symbols in order to represent situations more poignantly for example in the story *Götterdämmerung*, which in English means 'the downfall of the gods' Wagner's opera is used to parallel the *mother's* imminent physical decline and posterior death.

The former are only a few representative examples of intertextuality within the artefact and what can be accomplished by using it as a dramatic and stylistic strategy. A complete and exhaustive discussion on the artefact's intertextuality is out of the question. It would call for a tangential path of inquiry, perhaps in the context of Literary Criticism, but that would fall outside the purpose and scope of this study. The artefact, in the context of this research, is a creative way of inquiring and a form of presenting 'data' dynamically.

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<sup>22</sup> Name of Leopold Bloom's wife in Joyce's *Ulysses*.

### ***4.3.5- Images***

The short stories in the artefact appear headed by small images (illustrations, photographs and series of video stills). The images were a late addition and play the double role of on the one hand, and by means of their size, reaffirming the ‘smallness’ of the stories being told and on the other imitating the combinations of image and text characteristic of social media autobiographical acts. Their function is to illustrate and complement the narration. Sometimes they are pure expressions of the sentiment of a particular vignette (e.g. black square in the *Death Notice* story, Prometheus’ liver being eaten by an eagle in *Guilt*, or the big eye in *A sense of Observation*) and others, they show a particular aspect of what is being told (e.g. the running chicken in *Hammurabi Code*). Of the series of images some came directly from the field, this is to say: from the participants’ social media feeds, their family albums or their home mantelpieces, and were chosen in conjunction with them (e.g. the image of the singer Leif Garret in *Telemachus*, the insomnia meme in *A Journal of Insomnia*, the communion card in *The Help*, St Catherine Laboure’s relic in *Relics* or the series of video stills in *Circe Unleashed*). Other images correspond to recreations made by the researcher in order to protect the participants’ and their networks anonymity (e.g. the boy bitten by a swan in *The Longest Night*). The images appear purposely untitled and uncommented on in order to highlight the ambiguity of the relationship between image and text in social media. In the artefact the uncaptioned images allow for the reader to complete their meaning in the same way that an audience in social media completes the meaning of the autobiographical act.

## 4.4 -The Question of Fact v Fiction

Inevitably this method will pose questions regarding the dichotomies between scientific and Arts-based approaches and between the order of *facts* and the order of *fiction*. Maybe the question to ask is what can be accomplished with grounded fiction. Ethnographers have largely used storied data, including co-created stories, at different stages of the research process (Denzin, 1992, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Harrington, 1997; Payne, 1996; Richardson, 1993). These stories can be both a way of representation but also the form that the ethnography takes like in Katherine Frank's work discussed in Chapter 3. Elements of narrative, fiction and autobiography often appear intermingled in experimental ethnography. For Frank, the use of fiction in a research is justified "when factual representation obscures possible alternate representations" (cited in Leavy, 2009:43). This is to say when the presentation of a finite set of 'findings' and 'conclusions' creates the false impression of 'truth' (ibid). Fiction on the other hand has the potential to portray lived experience in a more 'truthful' way while reaching wider audiences (Diversi, 1998, Frank, 2000).

The strongest critique of the use of fictional elements as practice and data representation are trustworthiness and subjectivity but these concerns are based on a positivist paradigm which authorizes the notion of *truth* as opposed to *fiction* without considering that there are truths to be found in fiction, for example in fairy tales and myths (Campbell, (1991[1988]); Jung, (1978[1964])) or in Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940). Perhaps it is time to question this duality and see it as an artificially constructed binary.

Maybe these two orders serve to legitimize predominant discourses and power relations and should be contested (Leavy, 2009:43). For Rinehart (1998) the use of fictionalized ethnographical accounts might be more effective in conveying certain aspects of lived experience, not only to wider audiences but also to academics because instead of placing ‘data’ into existing paradigms that could limit the appreciation of alternative interpretations, these accounts get to both the cognitive and the affective ‘truth’ of lived experience by using techniques such as ‘points of view’, ‘flash-forward-and-back’ and ‘internal monologue.’

A way to minimize possible concerns in the readers of experimental research is transparency. For example being clear when a character is a composite or when a plotline has been created. In the artefact the characters are composites of real people and the stories are composites of the stories they told, however the main plot is an assemblage and therefore a fiction created in order to bind together the participants’ voices in a narrative that could make sense to a reader while making the point it was set to make. The ‘family’ in the artefact doesn’t exist but it could well be any family. This setting is a way to “explore serious issues, as experienced and perceived by individuals, while placing those issues in a larger socio-historical context” (Leavy, 2009: 51).

## 4.5- The Question of Censorship and Ownership of 'Data'

The source material of this research, obtained through ethnographical methods are the participants' stories: personal accounts, images, memories, expressions of feelings and representations and they are all 'owned' by them. However, in the act of participation they 'gift' them to the researcher. When somebody talks about their everyday chores, friendships, family, health issues, a purposeless life or the inability to maintain a relationship, they disclose intimacies describing the quality of their lived experience. Then, and as part of the research process, these experiences are termed as *data* and therefore susceptible to be coded, classified interpreted, anonymized and disseminated by the researcher and sometimes the funding institution, which have curated the 'data' in order to share it with interested parties (Iphofen, 2011). This process is directly linked to Ethics, discussed in Chapter 3, but also to degrees of control over the data.

After the curatorial process the researcher produces 'new data' or rather 'new arrangements of data', from which new knowledge is attained, usually through strategies of reduction. On the way the uniqueness of original individual contributions is lost because *first* it is impossible to fully reproduce it in whole, this is to say including every aspect and nuance, and *second* because the researcher inevitably leaves her imprint in the 'act of interpretation' and 're-presentation.' Therefore the researcher needs to constantly gauge and acknowledge how much of the original 'data' and how much of her own account emerges in the knowledge produced and accept accountability for it (Holland, 1999).

For example, and according to Grinyer (2002) sometimes participants waive anonymity in order to retain ownership of the data they have donated to the researcher. During this research one of the participants insisted on having a copy of the recorded interview, to which the researcher agreed taking it as part of the natural *quid pro quo*. But later when the section of the narration in which the participant's story featured, obviously decontextualized and recontextualized in the composite scenario, and was presented to be annotated, the participant urged to tell the account exactly as it was (referring to the recording as proof) while using his/her real name. Fortunately and after a short discussion the issue of inadvertently implicating third parties was brought to the fore and this seemed to settle the question. However, it also raised the question of how far the participants' intervention can be stretched out. Ultimately who will benefit from the research they contributed to produce? How are questions of 'censorship' and 'ownership' to be dealt with? In this particular case, and to the disappointment of the participant, the story finally didn't make it to the final editing but this was only one occurrence. What would have happened if everybody had wanted to change everything?

According to Iphofen (op cit) if the participant doesn't play a part in the analysis then he or she can't claim ownership either. But what happens if the analysis, or insights rather, are sought in collaboration with the participant? For Iphofen the power balance between volunteers and researcher is ethically necessary and the ultimate proof of the power of the participant is knowing that he or she can withdraw at any moment from the investigation. For Iphofen the degree of involvement of the participants in a research depends on the goals and design of the inquiry and is not ethically compulsory. However some questions remain. Do we do research *with* the participants or *about* them? In both

cases different problems may arise, for example that we don't represent their views correctly or that they might have opinions on how the research should be done. As Iphofen states, if anything the issue of ownership of data pictures the tensions between methodology and Ethics (ibid). The question remains open.

## 4.6- Chapter Summary

This chapter offers a detailed account of the content, structure and theoretical underpinnings of the *polyphonic artefact*, which is a storied form that can be best described as a *virtual reality* or *grounded fiction*. The first section discusses how the frameworks of Bakhtinian Dialogism and Goffman's Dramaturgical Model have worked in synergy with notions of the everyday and embodied experience to inform and provide the theoretical scaffolding for the artefact, while ascribing it in a context of struggles between the producers of the autobiographical act, its agent provocateurs and the audiences. In the artefact theory and method have come together with art, which has contributed to the rendering of the artefact through the implementation of dramatic, visual and poetic elements. In the narration the creative process has worked in ways that cannot be labelled either as theory or method because they are situated at the in-between, partaking and contributing to the building of knowledge of both, and therefore making difficult, if not impossible, the task of drawing a clean cut separation between them.

In the next segment dramatic elements such as plot, the use of time and space, dreams and symbolism are discussed in the context of the artefact along with the voices of

the composite characters, including that of the researcher and its implications. The voices are examined individually in their purpose and actions within the story and in what they accomplish for the research. A section discussing issues surrounding the ‘order of facts’ and the ‘order of fiction’ and their significance for this study follows and concludes with the idea that the frontier between both (if any) is necessarily porous. Finally, the last piece of the chapter poses some questions regarding problems derived from censorship and ownership of data when what constitutes ‘data’ are the accounted life experiences of real people, which have been ‘gifted’ for the purpose of the research. In any case there are no final solutions but balancing acts between Ethics and methodology.



# CHAPTER 5

## INSIGHTS

### IN PLACE OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

#### The Voice of the Researcher

“Traduttore Traditore.”<sup>23</sup>

“What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.”

Heisenberg, 1959

A particular reality, an object for example, appears very different depending on the lens with which we choose (or are given) to look at it: our previous knowledge or our beliefs. It depends also on many other factors such as lighting or position: too close and it looks pixilated, too far away and we see it blurred. It also depends on the health of our sensory receptors and of our behaviour (and that of others) towards it. The stories gathered in this dissertation are joint actions. The people telling them, including the researcher, are all “saturated in historical existence” (Bakhtin, 1994:19). What brought the researcher to ask the questions and what brought the participants to engage with the inquiry? What were their stories about? What was revealed or hidden in the telling? What did the respondents

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<sup>23</sup> Translator Traitor

think the researcher wanted from them? Why did many participants prefer to talk about almost anything but their posts on social media, which were given an almost casual treatment during the different encounters with the researcher? How much of the stories they told was a performance, previously rehearsed for the researcher? What is the nature of the relationship between face-to-face encounters, screen shots from social media, interview recordings and transcripts, and field notes with actual life? And how was the researcher to write about it? Was it about their voices or was it about the researcher's? Subsequently and once read by others, what multiple interpretations will the text lead to? To what extent can this study benefit anyone: researcher, participant, reader, and wider community? Will this work open up new avenues? Methodological cautions or nuances perhaps?

Before facing of an examination, the main question this dissertation is bound to answer is that of its scholarly value. What is the purpose of having gathered all these stories? "Unreflective knowledge is hard to justify. Research accounts cannot simply be understood as direct copies of an assumed reality" (Plummer, 1995: 12). Hence, what is this dissertation doing and to what extent does it contribute to build on the scholarship on the topic it is investigating? At this point I shall refer again to Bakhtin's voice. For this author the task of understanding doesn't amount to simply pinpointing identity (understood here as sameness) but rather recognizing a novel form (Bakhtin, op cit: 33). Although in this chapter I shall adopt the *interpretive* voice of the researcher, the meaning of every single word of mine can only be understood not as a discreet unit (with meaning in itself) but instead belonging to its position in an heteroglossic context because "no single utterance is free from behaviour, history or ideology" (Bakhtin, op cit: 33). What I mean by that is that ultimately *interpretation* is never individual, nor original but the result of a polyphony. Singularity, if any, should be sought in the form not in the content.

How then to understand, interpret and translate a polyphony into a single voice in a linear text? There is much more than a “text playing hide and seek” with an interpreter (Riessman, 2008:115). In addition to a particular content there is a social complexity in the act of telling: to a social network, to a TV presenter, to a researcher in the field, to an examiner in the boardroom. A story firmly told in the third person, like the one I am bound to do in this chapter is, to say the least, problematic. Common in the journalistic and academic styles, nevertheless it tends to depersonalize its protagonists, which is another way of saying *the other* (Plummer, 1995). The participants are more than words or discourses. There is too much emphasis on reducing the complexity of human life to ‘texts’ to be interpreted because it is the only way we can organize life’s chaos. “If *text* can be a useful metaphor for social life it must be made clear that those *texts* are socially produced in social contexts by embodied concrete people experiencing the thoughts and feelings of everyday life” (Plummer, op cit:16).

All stories are political and they are told with an agenda in mind, including this one (obtaining a PhD). In this chapter the voice of the researcher will be heard in her interpretive performance, this is to say in the act of analyzing the insights she has learned from the polyphony of voices gathered in this study. Also, further understandings that have emerged at the meta-level of the research, will be discussed in this chapter, for example the notion that all knowledge is dialogical and therefore a product of historical bricolage. Finally it goes without saying that this way of reporting represents a departure from more traditional ways of presenting research. In this study there is no real differentiation between method, findings and discussion. Together, the polyphonic artefact and the exegesis, including this section on insights all constitute *the story* and *the research*.

Following Bakhtin's concept of *Polyphony* (1985) once more, the writing is nested and adopts as many voices as possible readings. Please be my guest.

## **5.1 – Autobiographical Acts in Social Media are not Discreet Units but De-centred Everyday Practices Interwoven with Embodied Experience in a Universe of Continuums**

As stressed in previous chapters, autobiographical acts in social media are practices (acts through which life is lived) positioned in the everyday and as such appear de-centred so as to make the point that in order to understand the role these practices play in peoples' lives (what they do for them) we need also to understand how they are part of a wider fabric together with other aspects (Morley, 2006; Couldry, 2012; Leder Mackley & Pink, 2013), including that of embodied experience (Mauss, 1968(1935); Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Csordas, 1994; Butler, 1993; Latour, 2007; Ellingson, 2017). Considering autobiographical acts as everyday practices embedded in embodied experience stem from the concern about how and why human activities and habits are formed and perpetuated over time and how they can either impact or inform about the wider community (Bourdieu, 1977; De Certeau, 1984; Couldry, 2004; Postill, 2010; Pink, 2012).

Following this line of inquiry, digital technology doesn't seem to command in the artefact. Although social media is ubiquitously present in the characters' everyday lives it appears as another *actant* (Ellingson, 2017:23) coexisting with other everyday (analogical





intensity of birth) would manifest as genuine emotion (display of crying). Therefore, and according to this theory, there is a hierarchical sequence between the sensorial experience and the cognitive experience. Maybe it is just a matter of a split second, but it is enough to suggest that this small difference might set a possible subsequent action in one or another direction and manifest either as an impulsive behaviour (ranting online, shouting and screaming or stepping over an unseen toddler) or a rationalized one (posting pictures of volcanoes in eruption as a way of meeting social etiquette while still functioning as a rant).

The *form* of the artefact mimics that of the everyday engagement of the participants with social media. Hence stories featuring social media scenarios are as present in the narrative as they are absent or merely playing in the background. Initially, this was perceived by the researcher as reluctance to talk on the part of the participants. It was wrongly interpreted as a situation in which things weren't going according to plan and it was attributed to the need for reinforcement of the rapport with the participants. However, and as the relationship with the participants progressed, their interest in 'social media talk' actually decreased, instead their stories started to become more and more personal. But what at the beginning was seen as an obstacle to the research ended up 'making' the research.

Katherine K. Riessman (2008) wisely notes that when things don't go according to plan, is the 'data' speaking, so this researcher decided to listen: the limited presence of 'social media talk' must have meant something. Indeed its absence was actually opening up the possibilities of 'other talks' and therefore insights beyond this practice. The study might have started with a question in mind: why these people engaged in autobiographical

acts online and what was this doing for them but it ended up not with a list of reasons but rather a collection of insights regarding the way we live today. In this sense online autobiographical acts are symptomatic of an era. In this manner, by de-centring social media, its position in the context of everyday life was revealed.

Social media was only a part of the participants' lives and it would have been inaccurate or misleading to present it otherwise. The 'error' became one of the insights regarding autobiographical acts online: that in order to understand their purpose and what they are doing for their practitioners it was necessary to step outside of them as discreet practices and see them in dialogue with their context. Basically the task was to 'de-pixilate' and 'de-blur' them by bringing them into focus from the adequate distance/proximity. In other words, silence was needed to understand the music.

### ***5.1.1- Users Inhabit Social Media Platforms because they see them as Social Communicative Environments rather than Discrete Technologies with Particular Affordances***

Online autobiographical acts avail of social media platforms as communicative environments with certain affordances rather than as discrete technologies, in this sense the emphasis is not on the particular affordances of the medium but on what this medium can do socially for the people using it (Madianou & Miller, 2011). Therefore we see how the users flow organically from medium to medium depending on the sought outcome: for example *Whatsapp* for immediacy: like when the *wanderer* 'whatsapp's his friend in Paris:



“I will be there in ten”, he texts; in this case the platform is used purely for quick free texting. *Instagram*, *Facebook* and *Snapchat* are used to stage and share a particular memory, mood or event. Episodes in the artefact are: the swan biting the kid in the park, posting an erupting volcano to vent an emotion of rage and seek comfort in the public reaction, giving the fingers to friends while going on holidays just to make them jealous; or tweeting an abortion trip to start a conversation on the issue. This free-flowing motion from one medium to another is similar to what we do in conversation. Moving from one gathering to the next, like in speech acts, online autobiographical acts are re-casted for different media, audiences and expected reactions (Goffman, 1981) but also depending on their perceived instrumental or emotional benefits. This argument is consistent with a theory of *Polymedia*, claimed by Madianou & Miller (op cit), which is concerned with the social and emotional sequence of choosing among different platforms.

In the artefact navigating a polymedia environment influences the way interaction is performed and experienced. However the choice of platforms for conveying the autobiographical depends not solely on their particular affordances, but on the way they are perceived to provide social, emotional and moral benefits to their users. For example when the *mother* is incapable of socializing due to her illness, she reaches out for her followers in *Facebook*. The fans provide her with a sense of communion, not only by means of social interaction but also in their emotional and moral support. We see another instance of this in the story *Hysteria or the Curse of Cassandra* when the *daughter's* rejected suitor finds vindication through the assassination of her character in *Twitter*, mirroring his previous conversation with a group of men in the after party.

In addition to the previous argument, users ‘inhabit’ (De Certeau, 1984) social media platforms for autobiographical purposes, in the same way people make of a house a ‘home’ by incorporating identity markers such as family photographs on the mantelpiece or decorating it to suit a particular taste. It all amounts to the statement: “this is me.” Similarly, social media communicative environments are also ‘decorated’ with “this is me” statements, which in turn are ‘styled’ to appeal to particular audiences. When the *daughter* admits shifting from personal posts to more business oriented ones, she does so with the agenda in mind of attracting a certain group of people that are related with the arts. Her aim is obtaining future commissions or publicity for her artworks.

## **5.2 Autobiographical Acts are Dialogically Constituted and Performed for an Audience**

Autobiographical acts are practices acting like a language in conversation. In the artefact they “become ways in which people reflect and understand themselves” (Pink et al, 2016: 65) and they do it in interaction with others. In this manner “identities are dynamically constituted in relationships and performed with and for audiences” (Riessman, 2008: 137). Autobiographical acts in social media (and elsewhere) are never ‘solo acts.’ Even in the case of reflexivity, which is a ‘self’ addressing ‘himself’, it does so in a relational way in what I have called a *dialogued soliloquy*. Seemingly and as stressed in the previous chapter, individual utterances cannot be solipsistic and anachronistic but necessarily co-produced and historically charged (Bakhtin, (1981[1975])). As we have seen, this idea is also integrated in Plummer’s (1995) tripartite model of storytelling agency, which in turn

is used in this study to position autobiographical acts in a context of struggles between an author, the agent provocateurs and the audiences. Personal stories are social artefacts telling us as much about the person doing the telling as they do about the culture and society where they occur (Riessman, 2008: 105).

The characters in the artefact project and display impressions of themselves on to others but also negotiate 'who they are' with them. "Form and meaning emerge between people in social and historical particularity in a dialogic environment" (Riessman, op cit: 107). Without the dialogue with others, there is no self. In their autobiographical acts, the characters anticipate others' responses while creating an expectation in them. Emotionally their disclosures are permeated by the intensity (affect) of the promise of other's words and reactions about themselves. Furthermore when the characters engage in dialogued soliloquy, with self-criticisms and loopholes to the ethical and metaphysical (e.g. *Hammurabi Code, Feelings and Conundrums*) they do so in a dialogue with a radical alterity or *Big Other* if I were to use psychoanalytic terminology. The Lacanian notion of *Big Other* (1981[1968]) refers to an invisible and anonymous authority of power and knowledge that can be equated to God, Nature, History, Science, Society or State (Evans, 1996: 133). But this *Big Other* can also be an incarnation of the *Real* which is unfathomably unknowable and at the same time frighteningly close (Lacan, op cit) like for example obscure aspects of oneself like the ability to kill in determined circumstances.

In this scenario the characters address themselves polemically and with value judgments, which they direct to the personal but also to the universal, and in this way *the self* appears refracted in the series of philosophical-stylistic loopholes in which the

Bakhtinian dialogical dimension is epitomized. In the artefact this substantiates in vignettes such as that of the *wanderer* comparing his predicament to that of Xavier de Maistre's (2003[1794]) tour around his room or alluding to his *unknown masterpiece* or *Mary of Egypt* in a clear reference to Balzac's tale *The Unknown Masterpiece* (2016 [1831]). At a meta-textual level, discussed in the previous chapter in the section on intertextuality, it can be argued that the character of the *wanderer* 'becomes' in dialogue with Homer's *Odysseus*, with the Anglo-Saxon poem in the book of Exeter, with Joyce's *Dedalus* and *Leopold Bloom* in *Ulysses* (1998 [1922]) and also with Dostoevsky's "spiteful sick man" protagonist of *Notes from the Underground* (2009[1864]) of which the *mother* also partakes in her sarcastic carnivalesque attitude.

### ***5.2. 1- Dialogism and Ventriloquism***

Another theoretically interesting nuance deriving from dialogism is the way in which some of the characters 'borrow' voices in a paradoxical manner. For example the *daughter* loathe her mother's 'beauty trips' and despises her obsession with staying young. However for the *mother* staying young means working in the theatre and we know that for her work amounts to her purpose in life. The *daughter* on the other hand falls into the trap of projecting on to her mother what is in her: the obsession for attaining youth, or at least stop aging. Her acts betray her, for example in the project of taking a daily self-portrait. In the autobiographical act of attaining youth through photographs or manifesting revulsion for the change in quality of her skin and hair or through the act of 'killing' herself in the gym; she 'appropriates' the dominant ageist voice (Bakhtin, (1981[1975]); Plummer, 1995) which is clearly 'audible' in her comment of what annoyed her the most about being groped by the company's manager was that her ass: "wasn't grabbable anymore", clearly

alluding to the sagging skin. Similar contradictions can be observed everyday. Often females adopt patriarchal voices when they self-monitor or criticize each other for what they are wearing, the shape of their bodies or whether an outfit is ‘too young’ to be wore by someone.

Having said that the opposite is also true: the voice of ‘female empowerment’ often appears to appropriate the voices of the ‘male gaze’ or that of ‘patriarchy’ by for example using the female sexualized body or sexual fetishes to achieve (greater?) goals: for instance when the *wanderer’s wife*, a supposedly intelligent business woman, attracts him as her business partner by seducing him feeding a canapé to his mouth in front of everybody in the story *Circe*. With this act she ‘empowers’ herself through fitting into the stereotype of femme fatale or *Mata-Hari* of sorts. Another instance is when the friends in the dinner party featuring in the vignette *Circe Unleashed* call themselves ‘bitches’ and ‘witches.’ Furthermore when the *neighbor* (*The right to be Uninteresting*) discloses to her village’s cousins her family’s ‘dirty laundry’ she is appropriating the stereotypical voice of the village gossip, which she despises, as she makes clear when noting that in the village the ones that remained are waiting for the ones that left to fail.

Examples abound in the everyday at the micro-level but also at the macro-level: the fashion or film industries employ the ‘female liberation’ voice, while simultaneously exploiting the female body as a sexual object for consumption, for example by perpetuating the uber-sexual female stereotype (porn and comic) disguised as a superhero in a Hollywood blockbuster. In like manner advertisements (Volkswagen) sell cars by using a sexy female CEO, even if she has a male secretary. The roles might be reversed or

extended but ‘female’ and ‘sexuality’ appear almost always in the same line; with the exception of the aging female, in which case alluding to her sexuality is utterly undesirable, to judge by the amount of popular jokes and puns involving ridicule older women.

Despite some trends in fashion and cosmetic industries that use older models to advertise their products (M&S, Dove) they do so through *ventriloquism* (Bakhtin, 1981 [1975]:299), Schneider, 2016) thus totally missing the point when in order to avoid ‘ageist’ stereotyping they resort to represent older women as ‘sexy’ and using ‘anti-aging’ creams. This raises once more the question of why ‘sexiness’ and ‘youth’ are still the most valued female attributes. Other scenarios in which appropriation/ventriloquism takes place, just to name a few, are fast food companies or pharmaceuticals appropriating the ‘healthy lifestyle’ voice to sell processed food for busy families (Maggi) or sugar coated tablet vitamins to students preparing for exams (Berocca); Alcoholic beverage companies appropriating the voice of ‘sport’ (Heineken), or privileged voices appropriating those of ‘equality’ and ‘democracy’ in virtually every single government of the western world. Exemplar cases in the literature supporting the theory of ventriloquism are for instance Lyn Mikel Brown (1998) ethnography on preadolescent girls in Maine appropriating an anti-feminine patriarchal voice as a way of voicing their anger and frustration towards un-empathetic female teachers in their school. Also the more recent Schneider at all (2016) study of ventriloquism in the Coal Industry in which the corporate voice is masked as a citizenship voice by attaching the corporate voice on to front groups that cause the false impression of wide social support for the coal industry.

Autobiographical acts dialogically performed appear in fragments, followed by threads in which each speaker contributes a part and the next agrees, expands or corrects and so contribute to the dramatization of the event. These interventions are not neutral but overpopulated with intentions. When analyzing them, the question to ask in the context of this study, is what do they accomplish? When the friends in *Circe Unleashed*, or the *daughter* or the *neighbour* appropriate (or naturalize) discourses that are ‘other’ (e.g. patriarchy) what is this doing for them? Is it a conscious act? Is it their way to resist dominant expectations of femininity in the first two cases, and expectations of success as an immigrant in the second? These can only be guesses. There is also a difference between inadvertently ventriloquizing other voices and doing it on purpose like in the case of the Coal Corporation, marketing companies or politicians.

Individuals can also appropriate other voices with an agenda in mind, for example the *mother*’s acquaintance building clout through adopting an ecofriendly discourse. The *daughter* does it too but in her case she really believes in eco sustainability but at the same time she is unable to follow through and keeps falling into the old habits of putting all sorts of rubbish into the same bin, which serves as a metaphor that parallels her attitude in life. What is there to interpret when the appropriation of other voices occurs without being aware of the individual? Is it the case that these historical voices are ‘unconsciously’ ventriloquized because they are so deeply rooted in our ‘make-up’ that they keep emerging despite social change? Or are they ways to express frustration and disappointment for what is perceived as a dissonance between what is expected and what is actually achievable? For example when expectations of good education being the platform for success in life are met by the personal experience of unemployment.

### ***5.2.2- Identity as a Labour of Bricolage in a Polyphonic Context***

According to Ricoeur (1991, 1992) any autobiography is a labour of *bricolage* constituted by a dialogue between sameness, otherness, and change in a historical and cultural context. Autobiography is a montage of heterogeneous elements set to bridge gaps between ‘what-it-was’, ‘what-it-is’ and ‘what-is-projected.’ Autobiographical acts are set in a quest for an impossible unitary totality, which is subverted by the dialogical. As we have seen any life story begins with amnesia and ‘becomes’ with dialogical encounters with ‘otherness’ and this meeting is always a process, this is to say ever evolving and incomplete. The characters ‘tell’ their stories in a complex assemblage of fractured, sometimes disparate, textual and visual acts in a dialogue that creates multilayered possibilities of meaning and position.

In this context we see in the artefact how every single personal story is a collective work of works. Every single character appears de-centred in their told life, as the engineer of his or her autobiography, because as ‘authors’ of the ‘auto’ they cannot exist outside language and therefore outside bricolage. This notion is consistent with Mackrour’s (2014) study on female bloggers that found that these writers were appropriating the web through ‘abundance’ and ‘remix.’ Writing in the web means being present, creating, participating, and sharing content with others in a constant creative flow. This style of writing often takes the form of a remix, a collage created from one or several cultural productions (Heteroglossic Dialogism). It can also take the form of an identity remix, that is, a way to explore an aspect of their personality and to test new forms of content creation.



Like Mackrour's bloggers the characters borrow, produce and reproduce stories to define themselves, crucially after biographical disruption, for example when *Sally-Katana* tinkers with her new identity as a cosplayer after losing a leg and tries a new one as a cause-player. *Bricolage* involves the deconstruction of an existing identity and the recombination of the resulting constitutive parts into a different one. Because every assumed identity induces new modes of action, *bricolage* opens up the possibility for new lines of existence (and subsistence). This point will be further explored in section 5.3 in which autobiographical acts are discussed as strategies for biographical continuity.

### ***5.2.3- Autobiographical Acts are subjected to Socio-Cultural Norms and Etiquette(s)***

Some studies interrogate to what extent online practices have modified or moulded offline social norms and practices. For example, for Van Dijck (2013:49) on *Facebook*: "The massive adoption of the 'Like' button has turned personal data sharing by third parties into an accepted practice in the online universe; Hence, the 'Like' button epitomizes the profound modification of a social norm." Also for Meikle (2016) *Facebook's* discourse of 'sharing' and the introduction of the 'timeline' and 'help' sections with advice such as: 'how to share a feeling' has prompted people to disclose biographical information to friends and third parties (e.g. companies, public) that would have previously been unacceptable. This is a price the majority is happy to pay for visibility (as predicted by Josh Harris as discussed in Chapter 2). The question is whether seeking visibility is something new and if this is the case, what does it accomplish?

This study, as discussed in section 5.1, doesn't treat online and offline autobiographical practices as discreet units, rather it situates them in a continuum in the context of everyday embodied experience. This makes difficult any claim regarding the 'hierarchy of instigation' of the rules of engagement in any online platform. I am inclined to think that social norms and habits change organically within the wider context rather than attribute the change to the affordances of a particular social media platform as Micha Cardenas's study *Becoming a Dragon* (2012) illustrates. In her study on transgender transition, she posed as a dragon in *Second Life* and as such she was denied access to an 'exclusive club' because they didn't admit dragons, only people. The club in question was an 'open-minded' BDSM<sup>24</sup> community. On a first reading this could be interpreted as offline etiquette being also implemented online but on a second reading, it might just be the case that the group thought of themselves as being 'open-minded' regarding humans but they had yet to reach the stage in which they could consider an animal, a dragon, an equal. It just comes to my mind the way natural history museums were conceived in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in which the display of stuffed specimens of pygmies was 'normal' (Davies, 2003).

In the artefact when the *son in law* complains to the *neighbour* that herself and her friend, the *mother*, are using social media in ways that are not meant for it: either being too banal by posting pictures of meals: "today only idiots do that" as the *father* points out on a different occasion; or being too gruesome by posting details of the illness: "social media is meant for entertainment." We see in the vignettes that the purposes for which social media is used are (again) situated in a continuum ranging from pure 'silly-con' entertainment,

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<sup>24</sup> Bondage, Dominance, Sadism and Masochism.

like when the *wanderer* manifests that sometimes he posts just to entertain his friends, to 'life and death' engagements as strategies to cope with traumatic events. It appears that in the list of utilities attributed to social media we can find all the colours of the spectrum.

In the more apparently casual or banal side of the continuum we find 'optimism by default', 'happy-go-lucky utterances', 'likes' and 'love emoticons' but also permanently 'positive statuses' and the 'grotesque', which more often than not tends to be ways to confront more serious issues (Freud, (2010[1920])). On this side of the continuum unlikeable things are allowed to be liked, the grotesque is beautiful and people smile and pose like celebrities in the pictures. Holiday landscapes and food are always amazing. Parties and celebrations are always fun. People are aware that most of their autobiographical statements are embellished but this is not too different to wearing make up, dressing up for an occasion or colouring a story to make it more likable or entertaining. Every utterance has its own audience and in this sense the 'rules of engagement' appear self-regulating. They become elastic and evolve historically. Platforms rarely impose any control over what is posted, with the exception of apology of the terrorism and types of hate speech, which are outside the scope of this dissertation.

In the artefact it also transpires that social etiquette online has yet to reach full globalization. There is no etiquette but etiquettes in plural as the rules of engagement vary for different people or groups. In another scenario the *father* expresses his disgust regarding his daughter grieving online. The previous is an example consistent with Death Studies inquiries indicating socio-cultural variations in grieving and memorialization

netiquette<sup>25</sup> (Acker & Brubaker, 2014; DeGroot, 2014; Borrits-Sabra, 2017). In the artefact there are two critical examples of breach of etiquette: the first is when the *neighbour* vents intimate family matters online. She trespasses the traditional family norm of keeping the ‘dirty laundry’ inside the home’s walls when she gossips with her cousins from the village about his grandson wetting the bed and his son in law not being able to ‘function’ (sexually we assume). The medium chosen in this case is of little relevance *per se* because although her predicament reaches the other side of the globe, the real damage is made at the level of the village, as we can understand when she points out the envy dynamics characterizing the relationship between the villagers who left in search of a better life and the ones who remained.

Another example of breach of etiquette is when the *wanderer* celebrates his Michelin star while his sister announces the worsening of the *mother’s* condition. The coincidence of the two events prompts him to *dis-eventalize* his announcement out of embarrassment hiding it from his timeline. Slavoj Žižek’s (2014) uses this notion at a macro-level to refer to social media scrubbing by governments but in the artefact we can also see it working at the micro-level. According to Žižek scrubbers make sure that our feeds are perfectly filtered from debris such as the usual social taboos and ISIS’ beheadings. After all some room must be made for the commercials. For Žižek in the act of ‘removing the event’ resides the betrayal of the Internet and of our digital culture altogether (Burnham, 2015). At the micro-level I wouldn’t consider it a betrayal but rather a reflection of how our online-offline social life is closely intertwined.

In the artefact the platforms’ ‘stage’ is used by some to celebrate and by others as a

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<sup>25</sup> Social etiquette in online environments.

sort of confessional or therapy device. Sometimes the characters feel compelled to look for sympathy 'out there' like in *A Journal of Insomnia*. On other occasions they might be in a bad mood or feeling especially cynical about the world so they would share an outburst (erupting volcanoes). At other times they would say something perceived as meaningful or post an 'attractive' picture of themselves, to later find out that there was very little interest on the part of the audience. Repentant, people would *dis-ventalize* themselves. But the opposite is also true, people sometimes show themselves in events in which they never took part (prosthetic memories) while others will select and construct extraordinary stories to please an audience.

#### ***5.2.4- Prosthetic Memories and Extraordinary Events***

As mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2 Alison Landsberg (1995) employed the notion of prosthetic memory as a strategy to explain how different forms of media contribute to the formation of personal memories. Prosthetic memories don't arise from lived experience but from experience mediated through popular culture. She claims that the constant exposure to cultural artefacts procures memories to people. Similarly, and also mentioned previously, Susan Sontag (2003) notes how in the aftermath of September the 11 memories of the event were more vivid in those who weren't there as was the case with second hand witnesses of Bloody Sunday, studied by artist Willy Doherty under the notion of *false memory* (1993).

In the artefact the character suffering from post-traumatic amnesia, which appears in the stories *Paris* and *Zombies* is capable to fill the gaps in her biographical memory through the vivid accounts of the media. Autobiographically she 'incarnates' these memories through the cathartic act of posting on *Facebook* a photograph of her

bloodstained dress captioned by a personal story *bricolaged* from media reports. In another level of analysis, the choice of imagery coincides in many ways with the choice of the *daughter* when she posts the dead mother's white nightgown, especially as can be interpreted as a dialogically learned aesthetic cue. However in *Paris/Zombies* the prosthetic re-enactment of the forgotten experience also constitutes an act of resistance (a parody) against the general expectation that making sense is the only option for healing, unlike in the examples discussed by Landsberg, Sontag and Doherty. By entering the domain of the *carnavalesque* (Bakhtin, 1986), which is discussed in more detail in section 5.4, this autobiographical act 'appropriates' the assumption of a human necessity for making sense and at the same time renders it absurd. In other words: sometimes things don't make sense and perhaps this is all that it is.

Observing social media timelines or attending to conversations in pubs or shops we might think that everyday mundane life is full of extraordinary events. "Anything new?" "What is up today?" We ask each other regularly. Then we would quickly access our memory archive to retrieve something worth mentioning. It is like we are looking to bring life to life. In autobiography life is anticipated and told as a series of *extraordinary events*. For Labov (2006) answering any of the previous questions requires a process of 'narrative pre-construction' in which events are selected depending on their 'reportability,' this is to say, whether they carry enough social interest. However there is a catch: the more reportable the event the less credible (Labov, op cit). In this sense an extraordinary event can be perceived as sensationalist or attention seeking by an audience, who instead of being impressed by it, can receive it with a blunt: "So what?" Nevertheless it is not uncommon to come across events which can only be described as larger than life.

According to Pandolfi (1991: 453) “everyday experience can only be remembered and anticipated through events that interrupt the ordinary course of events.” Extraordinary events can often appear in conjunction with ordinary ones, the function of which might be, for example, to introduce or characterize the narration but also to veil the actions for which the storyteller might feel guilty. In the artefact the process of inferring ‘repressed’ meanings from the narrative appears minimized in the bluntness of the characters, which amounts to seeing them at the *backstage*. What constitute autobiographical acts worth re-enacting therefore share, are the disruptive milestones that overwhelm the rhythms of the ordinary. Extraordinary events can be both satisfactory and unsatisfactory. The firsts will procure pleasure while the seconds are bearers of pain. In stories about illness both aspects can be present in the autobiographical act. On the one hand the story unfolds as an emotional display of pain, while on the other there is a possibility for a new identity.

The participants might have told what was important for them or what they thought might be interesting for the researcher. The researcher chose to curate particular stories because they either resonated with her in their poignancy or common grounds, or because she estimated they would be of the interest to a readership, or because they were instrumentally useful to make a point. The opposite situation can also be true: that the ordinary appears as extraordinary. The clue is in the notion of ‘appearance.’ In the story *Circe* the ordinary (domestic) life of the characters *appears* as extraordinary. In *Youtube* the characters make a big deal of their everyday actions and they are rewarded for it with an ever-increasing following and monies to be made. This phenomenon can also be seen in the success of celebrity magazines, soap operas and reality shows such as *Big Brother* in which the mundane is given the position of a *celebratory event*. In soap operas for example





seem oriented, might be 'abnormal' in life terms. In the next section some not-so-extraordinary life events are examined in more detail.

### 5.3- Autobiographical Acts are situated in a Continuum between an Ideal and a Disrupted Biography

In this section Autobiographical acts are discussed as sense-making strategies in order to bring narrative coherence to a pre-narrative 'incoherent' life. Autobiographical acts are deployed in a continuum between a *proper* or *ideal* biography and an *arrested* or *truncated* biography in which a disrupted identity project calls to be re-written. Virginia Woolf (1927: 202) noted that a life is not a string of happenings perfectly arranged like a series of lamps in a street but a "luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (pp: 5) and this is everyone's challenge. To make a 'good story' for themselves the characters micromanage their lives to fit their 'ideal project' which includes pleasing others (family, partner, boss, institutions, friends). But at the outset, what is more important, a good story or a good life? The characters strive for both but sometimes, like in the case of the *mother*, the only thing that is left is a good story.

### ***5.3.1- Autobiographical acts as Celebratory Practices and ‘Mantelpieces’ in the ‘Ideal Biography’ Side of the Continuum***

In the story *The Right to be Uninteresting* the character of the *neighbour* sums up what her autobiographical acts in social media do for her: she shares just for the pleasure of doing it. What makes her happy surely will make others happy too. She has already a healthy social life with plenty of activities, coffee and conversation with family, friends and neighbours alike. When she is persuaded by her friend (the *mother*) to get into social media she is first puzzled: “Why don’t you come to my home and have a coffee?” but eventually she embraces it as one more of the many occasions for interaction. After all “everybody is doing it.” She also sees an advantage in the media as a means to get in touch with the cousins from the village (for free).

The neighbour shares online her best and her more mundane moments: her new outfit at a wedding, her holidays with her grandchildren in Benidorm, or her paella dish in a tourist restaurant. She basically acts the same online as offline and this causes her some trouble when she ‘inadvertently’ posts some family intimacies unaware of the possibilities of the media for reaching out to people exponentially. However it is unclear how naive she is about it because as she points out she is no fool about people liking her picture with the peacock dress when everything in it is black (backlit picture) or when she comments on the gossip going on in the village. Similarly at home she would have photographs or memorabilia displayed on the mantelpiece and she would let visitors have a look and comment on it. She would clean the house and dress up better to welcome guests at home and when offering them coffee she would use her best crockery. This level of staging would probably decrease with familiarity when the need to make a good impression would

not be so imperative. With familiarity social interaction is more relaxed as is the dress code. It is fine to drink tea from ordinary teacups and pour the milk straight from the plastic bottle. Also the photo album with blurred pictures (taken by the nephew) will be shown.

On the mantelpiece, exposed to the 'invited public eye' there would be a display of properly lit pictures, maybe studio photographs, and in any case they will be flattering. There would also be something worthy of comment (extraordinary event) or showcased such as a local tournament trophy, a picture from graduation day or a black and white picture taken on her wedding day. Every object would be an *actant* with a tale attached to it and she would be ready to tell the story when asked by a guest. In another scenario the *daughter* intends to display her mother's ashes on the mantelpiece and even wear them in a locket. During the funeral, the coffin in the church, and the urn with the ashes in the pub, are both placed in prominent places. In a different story a company commissions a mural artwork that will sum up the company mission statement and will be displayed behind the main reception area. In *Facebook* someone will upload a family photograph portraying a happy occasion in which a bookshelf at the back will show the world their intellectual/cultural tastes, perhaps inadvertently. These analogical and digital mantelpieces are focal points occupying a position between the public and the private.

This insight is consistent with Rachel Hurdley's (2006) study on British domestic objects and mantelpieces. For Hurdley experiences of the self, autobiographical acts in this study are manifested (performed) through the display of objects on mantelpieces, which inhabit the in-between the personal and the social. With dialogism, actors account for

themselves through the possession and display of objects, in relation to others (people, history, other objects and so on). The same argument applies to celebratory showcases (either online or offline) in which, photographs, dress codes or forms of speech account for life milestones and render them as testimonies of successful ‘rites of passage’, for example communions, birthdays, graduations or weddings.

In the story *The Help*, the episode of the girl learning piano in order to perform on her 21 birthday, is an example of how a celebration display works at the *front-stage* and at the *backstage* in which two important messages are communicated (online and offline) to friends and relatives: ‘the girl is 21’ (thus marriageable) and ‘we made it.’ In this scenario playing piano and being able to throw a party are displays of wealth and therefore of a superior status than when they left their country of origin, which is consistent with Madianou & Miller’s (2012) study on Internet use among migrant communities. The picture of the little brother of the girl wearing expensive headphones, on his communion card, and the observation made by the *neighbour* in a different story regarding envious villagers also mirror the episode of the piano.

Homes, places of celebration and social media are sites in which identity is dialogically performed. Most celebratory autobiographical acts appear to adjust to socially acceptable scripts and patterns. Regarding imagery, photographs tend to be stylized according to the canon for these occasions. Unfortunately the discussion cannot be extended to the analysis of the content of celebratory displays because it is outside the scope of this study, which is more interested in the function they play in people’s lives. For the characters in the polyphonic artefact celebratory displays serve as re-affirmation

mechanisms of belonging to a community as worthy members. As such they strive to fulfil their community expectations in what is perceived as ‘natural’ progression (rituals of passage). According to Christian Fuchs (2014:40) communities are rooted in consensus of will, values and beliefs, morality, family and kinship and feelings of togetherness. Mantelpieces are focal points bringing attention to particular aspects of their identity they wish to highlight to their communities (and to themselves). Sometimes they might even function as ‘pedestals’ on which they exhibit themselves as the heroes of their own drama show: for example the graduation day photo, the picture of the boy’s wound after being bitten by a swan in one of the stories, or the portrait with the trophy lion hunted down in the Kalahari.

### ***5.3.2- Autobiographical Acts as Strategies for Increasing Visibility and Clout in the ‘Ideal Biography’ Side of the Continuum***

This section deals with the commodification of the autobiographical as a means of increasing visibility and clout. In this scenario the dialogical self becomes an economic unit. Exemplar stories within the artefact are *Klout and Circe*, while a *Sense of Observation* and *The Right to be Uninteresting* function as opposing voices. This is to say, resisting playing the game of curating a project of an ‘interesting life’ in order to gain visibility and influence. Further discussion on ‘interestibility’ can be found in the voice of the *neighbour* in the story *The Right to be Uninteresting* (Volume 2). The term ‘clout’ is used here to refer to the capacity of someone to create impact in a network. In the context of this study it is understood as the capacity to acquire social visibility and influence through autobiographical acts.

Thomson (2005) claims that subjectivity in social media is subject to power struggles and these open the door to new battles: those of visibility and popularity. The quest for recognition on social media has led to tactics for increasing both of them. From this perspective having a presence online for the sake of popularity might just override an initial aim of producing and sharing reflective and creative content about the self. Applications such as *Klout*, launched in 2008, offer diagnoses on social media influence while publishing updated rankings of people with higher c(k)lout. To date and according to this service, Barack Obama still ranks as the most powerful presence in social media (interestingly beating Donald Trump), followed by singer Justin Bieber and actress Zoey Deschanel. Other ranking services are *Technorati* that grades the hundred most authoritative blogs on the web while *Digg* evaluates the most popular posts. In the story *Klout* the *mother* comments on how her PR manager, an ex-journalist, increased her clout by using the tactics of including aspects of her private life into the news she was reporting in order to offer new raw and immersive experiences of the news to her audience. In *Klout* audiences of followers are managed as if they were fans. The *mother*, the *artist*, the *manager*, the *wanderer* and his *wife*, the *daughter* and *Sally-Katana* act as micro-celebrities, although some are 'microer' than others, all navigate their audiences strategically.

For Theresa Senft (2008: 25) micro-celebrities cultivate the technique of increasing popularity through a constant active presence on several social media outlets: posting, commenting, blogging and tweeting. They maintain a flow of ongoing communication with their followers by for example giving feedback or liking their comments. In this way they use social media as PR agencies or marketers. In Twitter for

example they target specific audiences through the use of ‘hashtags’<sup>26</sup>. Goffman’s dramaturgy (1959) is useful to explain why people need to navigate different audiences strategically in order to maintain or increase popularity. In the context of impression management, preferred self-images can be upheld for the scrutiny of others, which in turn will feed back self-monitoring. It is worth noting that like in ‘real life’, online autobiographical acts don’t occur in isolation. In the artefact social media streams (e.g. the *mother* or the *wife*) appear as a mixture of personal and informative content in which they project their taste. We don’t know if the characters use any application to rank themselves but their ability to manage and attract attention might be interpreted as a sign of and a need for social status. The issue is that the demand for self-expression/self-knowledge invoked in the autobiographical act might be conflicted by the branding exercise in the sense that the pledge of the first might be defeated by the second.

Guy Debord (1964) studied the proliferation of mass media and theorized about the society of the spectacle. In his argument the subjects position themselves into consuming the images produced by the media. Drawing from Debord autobiographical acts in social media situate its producers as brands to be consumed and under constant revision by others and by themselves. Family life is commodified and constantly evaluated and devaluated depending on family and ‘market’ fluctuations aspect which is made clear in the artefact in the story *Circe*. The story is consistent with a Foucauldian (1991: 194) point of view by which the power inscribed (in social media), as a technology of the self, is both ‘oppressing’, because it ‘styles’ selves according to hegemonic rules, and ‘capacitating’ in the fact that users can actively write, perform and re-write subjectivity.

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<sup>26</sup> Keywords preceded by the # sign

In the TV series Black Mirror (2016) an episode pictures a ‘dystopian’ world in which everything is rated. The story features a girl obsessed with achieving a ranking over ‘4,5’, which is the measure of success and the entry point for all kinds of ‘privileges’ such as renting a home. In order to achieve the desired score the girl must conform to social expectations at all times and by doing that she begins to lose herself, as is pointed out by her brother in one of the scenes. Then something goes terribly wrong in her perfect plan: a random event, which functions as a ‘black swan’ propels her to nosedive to the bottom of the ranking, which literally amounts to social death. What is striking is that although in the episode the scoring system takes place through social media (Internet voting) it is not too different from that of a traditional capitalist model of meritocracy. What I mean is that if we take the social media component out of the equation what remains is the way we have been living, anyway, before the dot.com revolution. What the technology has achieved is an amplification effect, rendering injustice more evident than ever.

In the artefact, selves appear ‘styled’ on merit and success. But with the exception of the *mother*, and characters such as the *artist* or the *wanderer’s wife*, the rest all seem to be struggling with failure or rather what is perceived as failure. The *neighbour* complains about feeling inadequate when comparing herself to the *mother* but she eventually manages to overcome this feeling. Unlike the *wanderer*, the *daughter* and the *father*, who seem caught in endless loops of success and failure. The characters of *Sally- Katana* and the *neighbour* have escaped the meritocratic trap and they succeed through the act of ‘de-self-centring’ themselves. The *father* and the *wanderer* also ultimately vanquish, one inside the general scheme of success by finding a different, more personally rewarding, professional activity (singing stories), and the other by means of nihilism: admitting that he doesn’t care about (social) success. Contrary to the *daughter*, who remains caught, with the cry: “I am an orphan!” (After the mother’s wake) she reinitiates the cycle of perpetual wandering and in this sense appropriates the role of the *wanderer*. She is left without a purpose or with an impossible one, permanently out of reach. We don’t know if she will



eventually overcome because her story is left hanging, unlike the *mother's*, who performs the ultimate act when she dies.

According to Christian Fuchs (2014) and consistent with Plummer's (1995) tripartite model of agency, social media has a technological level but it is more than a technology, it is a techno-social system based on what Giddens (1984) calls the duality of structure and agency.

The Internet consists of both a technological infrastructure and (inter)acting humans. It is not a network of computer networks, but a network that interconnects social networks and technological networks of computer networks. The Internet both "enables and constrains" human ideas and activity and is the result of productive social communication and cooperation processes (Fuchs, op cit: 37).

If anything, what the artefact highlights is a dominant meritocratic voice in the society we live in. The idea of 'self-made', 'self-centred' supermen and superwomen whose hard work is rewarded with possessions and influence is at the top of the scale in western society. CV's appear highly staged and every little achievement is squeezed in and magnified to a ridiculous degree because the competition is fierce. Job titles tend to grow in reputation but rarely in skill or results. It is usual to find small firms with only a few employees in which everyone is a director or a supervisor of a department. In this context, scenarios of failure are never rewarded even if they can be profoundly liberating (Beckett: 1983). Failure is rarely seen as the product of inequality but as the result and proof of the individual's 'inability to achieve.' Meritocracy applies not only to jobs but it extends to other scenarios in life (e.g. acquiring property).

Autobiographical acts are sometimes strategically geared towards increasing clout

but others function as forms to look for validation. Without a mirror we are unable to see our own faces. Without the other, we do not exist. Jose Saramago in *Blindness* (1999[1995]) made the point that if in a world of blindness a single person remained sighted, this person would be as blind as the rest as she wouldn't have anybody to see her. To conclude this section I am just going to quote an insight given by *Eve*, the infamous protagonist of *All about Eve* (1950) on the nature and allure of the stage, that perhaps also explains part of the popularity of social media:

So little? So little, did you say? Oh why, if there's nothing else, there's applause; I've listened backstage to people applaud. It's like... like waves of love coming over the footlights and wrapping you up. Imagine, to know every night different hundreds of people love you; they smile, their eyes shine, you please them, they want you, you belong. Just that alone is worth anything.

### ***5.3.3- Autobiographical Acts as Strategies for Coping with Biographical Disruption***

In the artefact we see the *mother's* identity shifting from being a 'successful artist' with clout, to an 'ill' and 'disabled' person, to a 'dead body', 'ashes in an urn' and finally a 'name in a poem', and a 'memory in *Facebook*.' The moment she becomes fatally ill she 'loses herself' and therefore she is "lost for others" as she puts it. Her body might still be there but for others she has become an object without a presence. In an attempt to regain visibility she puts on 'shows' that are staged to attract attention and persuade her audience. When she describes in minute detail her medical treatment she is acting out a scene of a story for her followers. We presume that she has first experienced the treatment and acted as a patient for the hospital staff, and then she has re-enacted that experience for her contacts in *Facebook*. She is the heroine of her own drama and the rest: her daughter, her neighbour and the help, are the supporting cast, and then there is the audience.

Every new utterance becomes a new scene in the play and the way it is performed, for example through the use of capital letters or exclamation marks or by posting photographs of the hospital, the use of onomatopoeic words or by switching tenses, all are signs of her agency (Fig-17). The ‘vivid’ display accomplishes the goal of persuading others of her suffering but at the same time ‘repairs the damage’ produced by the illness. If anything, the story of the *mother* gives a great insight of how autobiographical acts, at the micro-level are used strategically to counteract the macro-level affecting a biography. Buried in her story, and also in that of other characters, we see issues affecting the greater community. An interrupted biography starts usually with a body in crisis, be this experiences of death and bereavement, trauma, illness, aging or hopelessness. At the centre of the crisis is the loss of purpose. At times people go on and recast themselves while others succumb to death or despair.

### *5.3.3.1- Death and Grieving*

The stories of the *mother* and the *ex-girlfriend*, with the themes of death and trauma, are exemplars that expose the paradox in our society in which living people can be considered socially dead while dead people are being kept alive. The emphasis here, more than ever, is on the body. In the first case we encounter ill, differently able and aged bodies and in the second bodies that had ‘bad deaths’ for example those deceased before their time (babies, children or youngsters) and those who have lost their lives by means of terrorism, disasters or suicide. This section is about biographical experiences surrounding death. According to Hallam et al (1999:4) “If, as social theorists contend, the body is a key site within which the self is realized, arguably, it is precisely towards the period of its deterioration and disposal that we should train our eye.”

When the *mother* senses the moment of her death, she is overcome by ‘affect’, this is to say by the intensity of this feeling but as stressed before, inevitably her last words fall short in trying to explain it. From the outside death is an incident that happens to all living beings at a moment in time. To the dead, the *mother*, it manifests as a final halt in her biography and for those that are still alive, her children and relations, as a ritualized course of action. In this sense death is an ascertainable physical transformation and a social performance/spectacle (Hallam et al, op cit). Death also belongs to the land of mystery because no matter how many third party accounts, experiments, graphics or observations we might deploy about it, it remains a black box for the living. We simply don’t know what it means to die for the dying. Here I could easily apply the pun that the dead bring their secret to the grave resisting interpretation and any claim of a single truth. And this is all there is. What remains for those alive is grief and the solace brought by religious and social rituals and sundries, including that of online memorialization, all of which ultimately function as *memento mori*.

The four leagues of Azrael are: natural causes, homicide, accidental death and suicide. Death from natural causes occurs when the body ceases to function of its own accord often due to illness or old age. In general this is considered a ‘good death’ (Levi-Strauss, (2012[1955]:214)) especially if it comes to pass consistently with what is expected. When a human life is deliberately taken by others (homicide) it is a very ‘bad death.’ Accidental death refers to unintended loss of life by means of misadventure or manslaughter. Inside this category would fall deaths by traffic, at work or sports accidents, mishaps, natural catastrophes and death by involuntary violence. These are also bad deaths but to a lesser degree than murder.

Finally, death by suicide is the worst of the possible causes of death. Suicide intentional quiescence surprises us off guard and beyond being a health issue it can be considered a philosophical problem as argued by Albert Camus in *The myth of Sisyphus* (2013[1942]). Suicide often occurs by drug overdose, by inducing bleeding through cutting one's own wrists or by jumping from a bridge or in front a vehicle, frequently a train, underground or a car and also by murder-suicide to which I will come back later. But there are other types of death which are rarely seen as such by relatives and society in general. These are the 'living dead.' The living dead are individuals that can be either physically alive but socially dead or physically dead and socially alive (Hallam, et al 1999: 7).

There is a difference between a good death and a bad one. One might say that a good death goes unnoticed. A good death is generally speaking treated with indifference except by those left to mourn. A bad death, on the contrary, comes with a big tail that shakes the living. In both cases, mourners are often stigmatized. In olden times it was considered very bad luck to cross paths with a widow or widower to the extent that often they would be interred alive with their loved ones. In ancient Egypt it was considered an honour to be buried with the Pharaoh although there are no testimonials left to corroborate this point. Not that long ago widows had to warn others of their presence by striking the trees they would encounter on their way with a stick. It was also believed that the trees would die shortly thereafter (Bremmer et al, 2002 [1995]).

Today people's minds are less 'imaginative.' Signs of sympathy towards the mourners abound in the form of handshakes or taps on the shoulder during a funeral or warm messages in pre-made stationery and social media. In the artefact the banality of

these solidarity acts is portrayed in the story *The Longest Night*, which pictures the night of the *mother's* wake. After the ceremony, pregnant with gestures on the part of the attendees, the *daughter* is left to grieve alone. This is not always the case and it will depend of the closeness of the ties between members of a family or community. For example in Ireland and Spain relations tend to cluster around the mourner while in Denmark everybody tend to withdraw after the funeral. It also varies between rural and urban areas and depending on the social position of the grieving family. In some cases the bereaved person prefers to be left alone to grieve while in others people busy themselves with work or crave for company. Is there any correlation between community closeness and using social media as a grieving instrument? In the artefact it is not clear.

In the same vignette we see the *daughter* turning to *Facebook* in an attempt to fill the gap left by her mother's death but we don't know if it is out of lack of social support or her personal preference. What we know is that she shouts: "I am an orphan!" suggesting that she is in need of some form of release and/or support. Initially she reaches for social media for practical reasons (posting the death notice) because with a minimal intervention she achieves the greatest impact (to inform everybody at once). Later she curates her raw feelings into performative e-motions apt for social consumption. Likewise, and during the wake, she maintains composure (face), in front of the other mourners. The 'official' death notice appears stylized with a picture of white lilies, probably a symbol of purity. Later she seems to make art of her pain by posting a picture of her mother's nightgown (Fig-18). I will come back to this.

We could interpret that with the previous autobiographical acts she is trying to conjure the pain as in magical ritual. They don't mean necessarily, or exclusively, that she is looking for the attention and support of an audience but rather that she is stretching her mothers' life and by extension, her role as a caring daughter. In the cry "I am an orphan!" is revealed the deep crisis of the moment: the loss of purpose. In the unfolding *Zombies*, the wanderer's ex-girlfriend posts in *Facebook* a picture of a white dress stained with the blood of the innocents. In another story (*Feelings and...*) a girl travelling abroad to get an abortion posts on *Twitter* a picture of her blood stained sheets (after the intervention) as testimony to the fact that there is no turning back. The pictures are symbolically charged and culturally aesthetized in order to get the message across by using a rhetoric easily understandable by a community sharing the same repertoires (Swidler, 1986, 2001).

At other times the dead are left in peace and their bodies placed physically apart from the living. They are to be visited every once in a while and gifted with flowers or cakes as seen in *Guests*. Their graves are cleaned. The dead in turn also let the living go on with their business. However, occasionally the dead and the living seem to co-exist in strange arrangements. One of such arrangements is the invocation and presence of ghosts interfering with the living: for example in vignettes such as that of the 'tweeting' ghost, or in *Regarding..* or in the case of victims of terrorism, holocaust or disasters, the dead are maintained alive for solace but also to be 'consumed' by the living. The roots of such an arrangement can be found in necrophagy and cannibalism in which the body of the dead becomes literally an object to consume. According to Levi-Strauss: "Cannibalism and necrophagy are based upon the wish to annex for oneself the merits and capacities of the dead." (2012[1955]:217).

If death can be seen as the ultimate lack of accountability, what happens when the boundaries between the living and the dead are trespassed (or blurred) to feed the living even if it is on behalf of the dead? Usually ghost stories bear consequences for the living. Ryle's notion of the *ghost in the machine* might be today more relevant than ever, leaving God and Descartes to congratulate themselves and each other for succeeding in finally materialize the greatest dogma of Philosophy: that of dualism. According to this doctrine "The body and the mind are ordinarily harnessed together, but after the death of the body the mind may continue to exist and function" (Ryle, 2002 [1948]:11). In any case the dead are left without a voice except for the ones wishing to perpetuate them for their own reasons.

The story *Relics* mirrors that of social media and media reports today. In this part of the world Christianity has traditionally created bridges between the living and the dead. The belief in Saints remaining among mortals through fragments of their body parts is one of them. According to Binski (1996: 78) shrines were powerful visual displays acting as healing devices. Today it can be argued that social media plays a similar function. Early scholarship on online memorialization is framed around social media as an informal setting to manifest and share grief and also to maintain social bonds with the dead (Roberts, 2004). In cyberspace, the dead, like the Christian Saints, are shrined, displayed in 'glass boxes' that keep them close but also separated from the living. In this way, the dead are integrated into the living social life safely (Hutchings, 2012). In the artefact an example is the *daughter* managing her mother's social media profile after her death.



Similarly, the relatives of the victims of terrorism integrate their dead in their own online social practices. After all death is a social event. While the bodies of the sick and dying are warehoused in hospices and the bodies of the dead are hidden (Miller & Gwynne, 1972) their memory is celebrated and re-positioned in everyday life through specific places of celebration such as cemeteries, roadside and cyber-shrines. In this sense death is not the end of personhood because the dead continue to be socially re-created by their peers in life in these places (Veale, 2004). Extreme examples are those of Diana of Wales and Elvis Presley. Recent scholarship see in these practices the implication that life persists beyond biology (Marwick & Ellison, 2012). At the basis of this idea sits the long human yearning for eternity since ancient times. By no means is life beyond the body something brought about by digital technology but rather by human memory processes. Every time an ancestor is recalled or new cultural historical and archaeological pieces of information emerge, the dead continue to be collectively constructed. Every time someone dusts the old family album or finds an object belonging to the dead, reads a will or meets someone that knew a different side of the deceased person, the dead are again brought to life in a new light.

The vignette *Leontius* deals with the issue of whether it is ethical to expose the bodies of the dead to the sight of the living. In the story *Leontius* claims that humans cannot resist the sight of the macabre because it is both a reassurance that “this is not me” and the affirmation that “this will be me” and therefore invites reflection on our own mortality. One of the most formidable renderings of the macabre is the medieval transi tomb in which the body is represented in both its modalities: as a social entity in the form of a perfectly polished effigy, and as a biological body in decay. In the transi tomb both

aspects are made visible (Llewellyn, 1991). While the contemplating public can see the process of decomposition of the body taking place below, the social representation of the dead is kept intact in the sculpted figure that rests on the superior part of the monument. In a double exposition the sculpture above distances the intensity of death by offering an idealized representation polished for social consumption while the decomposing body below debunks this illusion.

When Diana of Wales died, and this was way before the Internet boom, her wounded, dead body was kept away from the public eye while her public body (celebrity and role model) was widely displayed in the media. Furthermore, and similar to those of Diana, images of western people that had perished in ‘bad deaths’ (terrorism, natural disasters) appear pictured in the media ‘before’ the situation, for example the smiling faces of [#rechercheParis](#), unlike Omayra, the Columbian girl (see *Regarding...* in the artefact) or the three year old Sirian boy washed up on an Aegean beach, which are displayed in all their poignancy. I would argue that despite a general *front-stage* sentiment of repugnance regarding the exhibition of the bodies of the dead, *backstage* there is still a fascination with the defenseless and exposed body and western societies have solved the problem by bringing ‘the other’ to occupy the place ‘below’ as a sort of remediation of the transi tomb and therefore preserving its social function.

There are many and amazing histories of death but the one that matters here is when death, the dead, enter the autobiography of the living. This is not an easy piece to play with because it doesn’t come as a polished category ready for interpretation (Hallam et al, op cit). It is rather messy and intricate. There isn’t such a thing as a clear separation between online and offline manifestations of mourning besides the chosen media to

express grief, just as there isn't much difference between personal and collective ways to memorialize. In the artefact the episodes of death and mourning are attempts to investigate these autobiographical avenues from the point of view of those that have experienced them while conveying the complexity of its fabric, which encompasses different levels: historical, symbolic, personal, social, aesthetic, performative and ethical. In the artefact the stories of the dead deal with 'exemplar categories' of death and are presented in the way they have been purposely conjured up by the living.

### 5.3.3.2- *Illness, Old Age and Trauma*

Thomas Couser (2012) coined the notion of 'autopathography' to describe a modality of the autobiographical taking place in social media, which consist of accounts of illness and hardship. Often criticized by peers these autopathographies are characterized by streams of images and text describing experiences of illness and pain. In a way they resemble letters or diaries but they have a conversational character. Some scholars see these autobiographical acts as fitting the profile of micro-celebrity (Senft, 2008: 25) suggesting that this practice serves the purpose of attracting the attention of an audience in order to increase popularity. However for Marwick (2013) using the tools of celebrity to analyze ordinary people's confessional posts is problematic because they are more vulnerable in the sense that they lack the protection of a PR agency behind them. In the artefact the stories of illness and trauma seem geared towards the reconstruction or renewal of a shattered identity rather than promotion and they appear to seek conversation and support rather than celebrity.

Illness and trauma are forms of death: social death, but they are also gateways to new re-casted lives. The characters of both the *mother* with her illness and the *daughter*

feeling her body crumbling with age are reminiscent of Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (2008[1915]). There is a constant tension between their desires and needs and the demands and limitations of their 'new' bodies, while struggling to communicate their anguish to others, who in the case of the *mother* grow increasingly unable to understand her. *Logging* and the *Help* scenarios deal with the problem of to what extent the body of an ill person is owned by herself, once it has been voiced by the medical establishment as a 'patient.'

In the episode *Logging* we see the *mother* still retaining some control, which she uses actively in order to paint her own picture of being ill, beyond medical labels. With her detailed accounts of the treatment received she exposes, and rebels against the violence of medicine and her illness. Her harsh expositions are a way to engage an audience with her suffering and a way to bridge what is local with what is universal. Her words are her personal testimony (emotion) and the pictures including medical objects are the proof of the scarring inflicted by the medical establishment. For her talking about her illness online amounts to re-gaining control over her body. Although some audiences might be shocked and put off by the rawness of her accounts, and therefore unable to react even with negative comments, the exercise is still valid in what is gained: herself.

Furthermore, by discussing her treatment online with other people with similar conditions or who are just interested in what she has to say, she also brings herself to examine and challenge doctors and nurses. For many people the opinion of a doctor is like hearing God's voice but not for her. When she senses she is about to die she knows what is best for herself. She wishes for greater doses of morphine or in the worst-case scenario a knife cutting her throat. The story also brings to the fore the debate of euthanasia. How far

is too far in prolonging a life? The episode the *Help* exposes the loss of personhood that a degenerative illness entails. Losing control of bodily functions is generally perceived as humiliating and this worsens with the way people surrounding the ill treat them, often inadvertently. For example with excess paternalism at times, addressing them like if they were five years old; or just ignoring their opinion, for instance when families make decisions in their behalf but without their consent. Many times the rationale behind these actions is to avoid upsetting the ill person, however and as it transpires from the *mother's* story, she might be ill or even incapacitated, but she is well able to realize what's going on around her.

This insight is consistent with studies on narratives of cancer, for example Susan Bell's (2002) discussion on artist Jo Spence's autobiographical photographs. In her work the artist portrays different stages of her illness that serve to unmask everyday normalized institutionalized practices and codes attached to female and sick bodies, while resisting normative narratives of illness. For Langellier & Peterson (2004:218) the cancer sufferer "answers the call of the ill body for a voice with a complex and contradictory narrative performance" and both "constructs and deconstructs a normative [breast] cancer narrative." Both studies along with the story of the *mother* seem to conform to and resist normalization, but even resistance can be a form of conformity. Narratives of illness, per se, are not necessarily liberating or repressive but depending on the context in which they are performed they can either contribute to the healing process and/or fulfil social expectations. The *mother* sums up this caveat in a single sentence in which she describes the feeling of being ill in a social context: "A place where you have to permanently smile because you cannot escape."

Issues associated with old age, such as illness, senility, loneliness and fear of death are long known but today the difference is that in developed countries, with greater life expectancy, this problem involves an increasing number of people and societies don't seem to be able to cope. If anything these episodes provide some food for thought regarding the way elderly and sick people are socially perceived and treated. The insight should reach beyond particular malpractices capable of being fixed with more supervision, bigger budgets or newer policies; it is about deeper rooted social attitudes such as the naturalization of practices that are by no means natural, for example taking people from their homes when they are sick or old and placing them in institutions until they die, or prolonging life beyond wish or dignity. If the ill and the elderly were incorporated into families and communities, they might be "spuriously retaining the illusion of a surviving self" (Hallam et al., 1999:207) either via the body or via 'enselvement', which the *mother* achieves through her autobiographical acts. However, if we consider terminally ill or elderly people socially dead, as seems to be the case when we institutionalize them, make decisions on their behalf, or even when we 'mourn' the person that they once were what we do is objectify and store them (Miller & Gwynne, 1972). Let's hear the mother's voice:

So they are determined to sell your house in the sun. What about if you last so long that they have to sell this one too? Will they put you in an institution then? Oh God! Don't let them do that! You cannot think of anything worse than that. A place where you have to permanently smile because you cannot escape. Like now you must learn how to smile all the time because when you depend constantly on everybody else, this is what you do, you cry smiling. You have seen that. In hospices, in nursing homes, in cancer wards, they don't smile because they are happy or content; they smile because it is the only way they can afford to cry. Besides it helps everybody else. But this is not the worst that can happen. Imagine if you were dispossessed!

In the story *A Journal of Insomnia* the *daughter* deals with "the sting of anxiety" which deprives her from sleeping. According to the US National Sleep Foundation (1990) during sleep time is when the body undergoes a restorative process, which is vital for maintaining a sound cognitive performance, memory and moods. But she is unable to bring

herself into this state. Instead she surfs the Internet and ends up in a chat room. What does she accomplish with that? On the one hand she explores and fills 'empty time' by logging about her condition and on the other she finds a community of likeminded sleepless people. However the pressure to create a steady stream of appealing posts in order to maintain the nocturnal conversation going is too much and she gives up. But her insomnia is more telling than that. It can be assumed that sleeping is a solitary activity, but it is also a social one when for example we share a room or bed with others. In this scenario, and if I were to analyze her insomnia with the mind of a psychotherapist, it could be the case that she is using it as a mechanism for providing her with the intimacy she lacks. Her chat room companions act as ideal bed partners until of course they turn out to be too demanding (or too emotionally close) and she leaves them.

We don't know if she might be following a pattern of severing her intimate partners when they get too serious. The fact that she did it once in her youth, as we are told in the story *Feelings and Conundrums*, doesn't mean that she is doing it in her adult life. We just don't have enough information. What we know however is that she doesn't give any hint about her adult friendships and also that she is estranged from her husband and the rest of the family, with the exception of her mother. In the same story she recalls killing a puppy dog. As stressed in the previous chapter, the figure of the dog symbolizes loyalty, fidelity and love and, in Egyptian mythology, the guide to the *Hall of Truth* in which the souls will be judged by a superior entity (God *Osiris*). In the story, killing the puppy dog mirrors her abortion and symbolizes erasing love and loyalty from her life. In her adult life, and probably the origin of her anxiety, is guilt which prompts her to make a sacrifice and take care of a tyrannical mother, as an expiatory exercise. When the mother dies she loses the opportunity to continue 'purging her sins' before entering the *Hall of Truth*. Although

tempting, I shall stop here and refrain from further pursuing this analytical vein in order to avoid going off on a tangent. However speculative, this exercise might bring us closer to an understanding of what her autobiographical acts accomplish for her. Just to add that it is interesting (and telling) that she cares to mention the story of the little singer whose video went viral in *Youtube* and who, when asked about her feelings regarding the success of her performance said: “I felt loved.” Why would she bring up this story if she, herself, wasn’t craving for love but also dreading the inevitable loss of it?

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Trauma is another form of social death. In this case caused by the inability to retrieve and articulate a particularly painful ‘affect.’ In the story *Zombies* we encounter a character, who has witnessed a terrorist attack and is struggling to come to terms with the horrific experience. In a previous section I have mentioned how she manages to construct a prosthetic memory of the event, which functions as a crutch enabling her to go on with her life while satisfying social expectations regarding victims of terrorism. The stories *Regarding the Pain of Others* and *Leontious* deal with the notion of a shocked or traumatized society in search of catharsis through observing the pain of others and it is to this matter that I turn to now.

The previous vignettes propose the thesis that traumatized communities’ are both paralyzed and brought alive by misfortune and that rituals celebrating the dead by bringing them alive (e.g. social media memorialization) contribute instead to concealing and distancing the phenomena of death from the living. In this way what has been intensely real for the dead is equally intensely unreal (fictionalized) for the alive (Bronfen, 1992:



45); a point which also comes across when the *mother* is trying to figure out what being dead actually feels like and concludes that death, for the living, is something that can only be ‘gessedly represented.’ In *Paris*, a group of travellers engage in conversation during a bus journey in which they react and reflect upon the terrorist attack that killed hundreds of fellow citizens in November 2015. In a dialogical scenario the travellers voice different points of view regarding the way the event is dealt with by people and the media. As they reflect locally, they recall similar situations occurred in different times around the world. While the *old man* complains about the media carnage others bring up cases in which naming and ‘using’ the dead contribute to claiming social justice, for example in the case of the Sichuan Tofu schools in China.

The story follows the thread of the Twitter hashtag *#rechercheParis* in which the initially posted pictures of the disappeared became the pictures of the deceased. Many comments of commiseration from the general public follow those initial posts by relatives and friends. Some posts are old memories of events shared with the victims, usually photographs of celebrations, others are anonymous voices identifying with the sentiment of loss. These expressions in social media bear some similarity with manifestations of the public in the aftermath of natural disasters: First the shock, then the attention, and then the ritualized reactions. The question is: of ‘who’ are these posts about? The dead or the living? I would argue that they are always about the living: the traumatized living. According to (Bronfen, op cit: 46) “an objectified form mitigates the violence posed by the real. Hence such a transformation can be seen as a personal or cultural strategy of self-preservation.” In the artefact:

There is hunger for stories, portraits of the event. A non-stop feed of impressions sprouting everywhere: TV, papers, social media. It is in everybody's heads, mouths, bodies, streets, staircases, corridors, shops, waiting rooms, cafes and workplaces, the radio, in profile pages [...] Through horror the good citizens wake up from the stupefying inertia of the everyday, some angry some dulcified. The paradox of death becoming the bringer of life.

Despite the abundance of representations, the intensity of the experience can hardly be apprehended through either storytelling or photographs because horror is an affect, a feeling from within. For Sontag horror is a temperature, it is maybe a colour but it doesn't necessarily have a beginning, a middle or an end. "No committee of Guardians is going to ration horror, to keep fresh its ability to shock. And the horrors themselves are not going to abate. There is a reality that exists independent of the attempts to weaken its authority" (Sontag, 2003:97). For horror sometimes works as a machine under some sort of command, be this nature, a totalitarian regime or an ideology. Arendt in her chronicle on Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem (1963) reports on the 'banality of evil' which is nothing else than pure mediocrity inscribed in the finely tuned machinery of a bureaucratic and totalitarian regime, accomplishing more by the mere compliance of its members than by any other imaginable means. The 'evil' of Eichmann lies not in an inner iniquity but in his 'inability to think.' This is why when we see the faces of 'evil terrorists' we don't understand. They look like any of us, they might have had a life similar to ours or we might become them, this we don't know.

Communities are stuck with the inability to make sense and at the same time are mobilized outside the safety of the mundane. The 'lazy' bodies of the welfare state stretch out and "do something as if in the movement they could find the antidote to disheartenment" one of the characters says. She is reading a report on natural catastrophes. She adds: "As if the act of rebuilding what was destroyed or repairing a wrongdoing or injustice, the pain could be smothered." But the *angry man* cuts across: "until of course

policy makers intervene by bringing in experts and preventing people doing what their stress hormones set them to do: the deed that would allow the community to heal.” I would argue that what destroys communities is impotence which generates a sense of emptiness, a void.

### *5.3.3.3 - End of Youth*

In this section I examine how autobiographical acts are used, mainly by women, as survival strategies to cope with both a body experiencing the crisis of the end of youth and the perceived general attitude that imposes the need to stay and look youthful forever. This suggests that the aging body is experienced both from within and from without. From within it is felt as a biological process with some easily observable characteristics such as the decline in general fitness, gray hair, wrinkles and sagging skin and other issues hidden from the naked eye such as a lower heart rate, stiffer arteries, or hypertension. Aging is part of the natural evolution of the body and although one might wish to remain forever young it is a matter of fact that there is no turning back and probably the best we can do is accept it and embrace it ‘with grace.’ However, this doesn’t seem to be the case, at least in the developed world. If just out of curiosity we launch a search in Google with the word ‘aging’ the majority of retrievals will refer to strategies and nonsensical ways to postpone or disguise aging: “Learn how to fix the 9 worst signs of aging” a website promises. Of all the illustrative pictures given none of them is of a man. It is clear that the message is aimed at women. But men nowadays also get their fair share, to judge by the amount of middle-aged men crowding gyms and running out of breath in cities and parks as featured in the story: *A sense of Observation*. Hence, how does aging look from the outside?

Back in 1991, Germaine Greer warned of the different experience of aging in men and women in her groundbreaking book *The Change*. In the book she gives a detailed account of menopause and aging beyond medical jargon and surveys how it is perceived historically and culturally. In the picture she draws, women get the worst deal. We might agree that things are changing for the better for the women on this side of the world, for example attitudes towards education and work opportunities or the way the female body is perceived have surely improved. However, the only way to find out how much these attitudes have changed beyond well-intentioned discourses is through daily interaction with people. Greer, in a controversial lecture given in Cardiff University (November, 2015), claimed that modern Feminism is ageist because it only concentrates on young women of reproductive age and the illusory idea that emancipation consists in equality with men. For Greer these are very conservative goals. For example regarding equality it doesn't make sense thinking that the existence of women soldiers is an improvement on the way things were because the whole concept of an army is totally insane, considering that war is ultimately, and always, perpetrated against vulnerable civilian populations.

In the artefact, and twenty-six years after the publication of *The Change*, things at the micro-level remain more or less the same. The majority of the characters are in their middle age and when confronted with the perspective of aging they show contrasting approaches depending on whether they are male or female or on their social status. While the *wanderer* and the *father* solve their crisis, the first by 'collecting' younger women and the second by forming a musical band, for females the story is very different. Trapped inside a body, unrecognized from the inside, and which is in turn rejected on the outside (socially) one of the characters resorts to plastic surgery (the *mother*) and the other

(*daughter*) to obsessively photographing herself in an attempt to attain the unattainable. The character of the *neighbour* however, also a female, experiences aging in a very different way. She doesn't need her peer's approval to age and she approaches her later stage in life with grace. Her cultural and ethnographic background might be different from that of the rest of the characters, although it is not made explicit in her story. In any case we see diverse autobiographical approaches to the same biographical event.

The aging body appears located within historically and culturally positioned discourses that can also affect the inner body experience, as perceived by oneself. This insight is consistent with Bryan Turner's argument that in western society the ageing body is recorded and reflected upon through technologies such as photography, but because there is a difficulty in accepting the ageing process, a dissonance appears between the inner self and the image of the body (1995:250). The body is always in the process of becoming because changes constantly occur (naturally) but social and cultural influences also leave their imprint through socially structured practices (Mauss, 1973[1934]) such as diet, body shaping with weight exercises, tattooing or plastic surgery.

In the Social Sciences the body is at the centre of the agency/structure debate. For Goffman (1959) and also for Giddens (1991) the individual is an agent able to manage the body as he or she wishes in order to put on particular performances geared towards others. However this claim doesn't seem to take into account the premise of a body stripped of control, for example vulnerable elders or terminally ill bodies as we have seen in previous sections. This caveat would also include unconscious bodies and bodies with cognitive impairments. At this point Foucault's notion of the 'docile body' subjected to macro-

structural powers is quite useful (1991). In the artefact we see how both perspectives apply. On the one hand there is a sensual experience of the body (Hallam et al., 1999; Pink, 2015 [2009]); Ellingson, 2017) and its agency (Goffman, 1959; Giddens, 1991, Butler, 2005) and on the other there is the influence of historical, political and socio-cultural powers in the way the body is perceived and represented by its holder and by society (Foucault, 1991; Bourdieu, 1993; Butler, 1993; Plummer, 1995), but all together converge in a constant dialogue (Bakhtin, (1981[1975])) in which the individual is perpetually 'becoming' while geared towards an ideal. The body and its context of struggles remind of a Mr. Culbuto<sup>27</sup> of sorts, a hybrid figure half human half roly-poly toy which exists in a continuum of positions arising from movements of rotation and translation.

#### **5.4- Autobiographical Acts as Acts of Resistance: Carnival and the Grotesque**

Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) employed the notion of *Carnival* to explain the origins of the *Polyphonic Novel*. Carnival is a way to unleash taboo feelings and a strategy for skipping the limits of what is politically correct. If according to Simonton (2012:82) a negative premise for a life story is disheartening and generally unpopular, humour and the grotesque seem good options to communicate to an audience the darkest aspects of a biography. Through carnival some characters in the artefact assume the rupture of their ideal life project and resist its compartmentalization into pigeonhole categories such as 'failure', 'illness', 'old age' or 'amputee.' Through the carnivalesque the 'ordered' world is turned upside down and muddled; nothing is taken at face value and general assumptions are

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<sup>27</sup> Monsieur Culbuto is a human roly-poly toy created thirty years ago by the French theatre company Dynamogene.

contested. Furthermore everything is brought to the same dialogical level, therefore eliminating leagues and hierarchies. Authoritative voices are stripped of privilege and a gay<sup>28</sup> mindset is decreed by the polyphony of alternative voices. Only in this scenario of resistance can true emancipatory change take place. For Bakhtin (op cit) the origin of carnival can be found in the ancient art of the satire in which the three distinct official categories of *Heaven*, *Earth* and *Underworld* meet in equal terms subverting any logic, with the exception of that of carnival. The result of this encounter is ambiguity, that is the seed of the polyphonic novel in which the characters are set free to speak on their own terms and as shockingly as they please directly to the reader; this is to say without the mediation of the writer of the text. In carnival ambiguity amounts to the possibility of freedom and emancipation.

In the artefact we encounter carnival in several instances, some have already been pointed out and others are explored in this section. For Bakhtin (op cit) the carnivalesque has different dimensions, which reminds one of some observable characteristics of the Internet. The first of them is ‘free interaction’, followed by ‘eccentricity’, ‘misalliances’ and ‘sacrilege.’ For Bakhtin all these dimensions are theatrical expressions of experienced life translated into sensuous ritualistic performances. The first of them refers to the free interaction between people that would be unlikely to come together in ‘normal’ circumstances. For example, and using medieval iconography: the Pope or a Prince with a peasant. In the artefact we encounter the unlikely friendship between the *neighbour* and the *mother*, which turns out to be the one with the strongest ties because they don’t need to prove anything to each other. Theirs is a relationship built on pure equality. They just like (and love) each other as is made patent by the neighbour’s talk during the wake:

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<sup>28</sup> Happy.

But you see, the real disaster is that you are gone forever and your pictures on Facebook, even if I can keep looking at them until the lord decides to take me with him, those pictures are not you. I just really liked you as you were and I will miss you so much dear friend.

Texts in the Social Sciences tend to refer to ‘online communities’ however in the artefact there aren’t such things as enclosed communities, rather we see flows of people moving from one world to another in the same way they move from one media to other. For example the *wanderer* doesn’t need to belong to a community of cosplayers in order to establish a relationship (online and offline) with *Sally-Katana*. For Pink et al. (2016: 120) there is a “ [...] problematic status of popular digital media studies metaphors such as ‘community’ and ‘network’ [*these concepts*] have had a chequered career in the social sciences owing to their vagueness, normativity and overexposure.”

Another characteristic of the carnival is that eccentric behaviour is accepted and backstage behaviours can be revealed without fear of censure or critique. In the artefact there are many of these instances. The *mother*’s clowning by the cliffs, her jokes about her decay and imminent death and her sarcasm are her loopholes from which she resists what is happening to her. She doesn’t have anything to lose; therefore she leaves everything in the open in radical disclosure. Another occasion for eccentricity is the childhood story of the chicken and the maternal grandfather’s utopian world (*Hammurabi...*), which serves to unmask some absurdities in ours, or the story of the paternal great grandfather, which highlights the relativity of what is socially right. Furthermore the philosophical simplicity of the *neighbour* offering her quirky version of what is interesting or the *artist* hiding the



figurine of the devil inside the toilet cistern foregrounding the banality of evil. Eccentricity allows for trespassing boundaries without consequences.

Misalliances are also allowed in carnival. Everything that in the ‘proper’ world must be separated in carnival is reunited: The young meets the old; the heavenly meets the earthly. The *mother* is a child. The *daughter* is her mother. The dead are alive. The present becomes the past or the day of yesterday becomes today when moving time zones. Also chronologies are reversed, like in social media, and reality and dream worlds meet. By these means truncated biographies are able to move forward through the autobiographical act of re-casting new identities. For example when human and machine meet in *Sally-Katana*.

After losing her leg *Sally-Katana* finds a new identity as a cosplayer. Cosplay is short for ‘costume play’ and has come to identify a gaming subculture of fans of Japanese Manga, who dress up like their comic heroes. For girls cosplay has grown to penetrate the highly masculine world of computer games and ‘upgrading’ from mere consumers to designers and producers. Cosplay provides also a way to explore self-expression through make up and costume-making and a way to meet likeminded people. Cosplayers enjoy age, race and gender flexibility and break the boundaries of the body proper. In cosplay the costume is the personality of the bearer not biology. In this sense “cosplaying allows for the breaking of stereotypes” (Pink et al., 2016: 118).

*Sally-Katana* breaks many stereotypes, including expectations within the world of cosplaying. On the one hand her characters don't belong to Japanese Manga but to western creations: *Sally* is a Tim Burton's character from *The Nightmare before Christmas* (1993) and *Katana*, although representing a Japanese heroine, was originally created by one of the Warner Bros partners, CD comics in 1983, and recreated for the 2016 US *Suicidal Squad* film. *Sally-Katana* conveys the opposition between the vulnerability of a rag doll made of cut pieces and the strength of a ninja. Furthermore her prosthetic leg reunites human and machine in a perfect cyborg arrangement. In this sense she incarnates the possibilities of technology expressed by Donna Haraway (1991). For Haraway the cyborg is a metaphor for people constantly reinventing themselves through technology, be this a prosthesis, social media or cosplay.

Another characteristic of the carnival is the possibility of the sacrilegious going unpunished. The sacrilegious refers to the profanation of anything held sacred and is materialized through verbal (blasphemy) or physical (desecration) irreverence. In the artefact some incidents are bordering on the sacrilegious, for example when the boy in the story *Guests* steals flowers from the dead to sell to the living, the *Twitter* ghost, or when the teenage girls play and take selfies among the graves in the same story, although in their case the transgression doesn't go unpunished. In the story *Relics*, the *wanderer*-child point of view makes some blasphemous remarks regarding the workings of sanctity and in *Regarding...* the anecdote of tourists stealing bones from the killing fields in Cambodia is told. Furthermore the attitude of the *mother* regarding her own death could be considered sacrilegious or irreverent from a Catholic point of view. Interestingly carnival originally

was a profane celebration that took place before Lent and was tolerated by the Church even if it challenged its morale (Giroux, 2008).

A category inside the carnival is the grotesque. The grotesque refers to obscenity, excess, laughter and bizarre and absurd irony. Associated with excess food, vomit and defecation, the grotesque is the celebration of the expansiveness of the body. In the grotesque the backstage is brought under the stage lights and obscenely exhibited to the world. A good example of the grotesque, discussed in Cioux (op cit), is Buñuel's movie *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974), which breaks bourgeois conventions through a series of vaguely related short stories based on chance encounters in which topics such as defecation in public, paedophilia, incest, death penalty and sex feature in the open. In the artefact instances of the grotesque are the *mother's* detailed account of her medical procedures or on a lighter note the dinner party celebrating the (ex)*wife's* birthday in which excess laughter, probably as a consequence of excess drinking, is the tonic. The *wanderer's* fulsomeness after the separation and the broadcasting of his private life on *Youtube* also fit into the grotesque, the latter with a caveat. Bakhtin's formulation of the carnivalesque refers to the liberating possibilities of what is maverick in order to contest superstructures, but broadcasting the everyday on *Youtube* is a way of conforming to them by commodifying the backstage.

Today broadcasting the mundane doesn't amount to 'defecating in public' in the same way that it meant back in the 1970's, because it cannot be considered transgressive anymore and because it trades with the spectators' voyeurism not with their emancipation. In a confessional society, bringing the backstage into the front-stage has become the

'norm' and also an 'economy.' The same applies to carnivalesque manifestations of civil rights movements, such as for example the LGBTQ Pride parade, which is seeking the support of 'gold sponsors' such as IBM, Sky or Microsoft in a manoeuvre of 'appropriation' as discussed in the previous section 5.2.1. In the Dublin LGBTQ Pride Parade website, appear arguments for attracting capital such as: "Companies who have advertised with Dublin 'Pride Guide' have reported an increase in sales and tend to advertise each year." Or "The LGBT Tourism sector may now be worth as much as 13% of our booming hospitality economy in the wake of the Yes vote in May's same-sex marriage referendum." (Dublinpride, 2017).

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The single question: **why do we post?** Has certainly not yielded a single answer. Instead I have come across a wide range of motivations and expected benefits derived from this practice and from the point of view of its practitioners. In short posting online about oneself accomplishes different things for different people, ranging from the most banal to the poignant. What this study hasn't been able to answer is as to why this people without previous diary writing habits decided to engage in online autobiographical acts. What triggered the change, if any? In asking the question directly the majority would say: "because it was possible", because "everybody was doing it" or "I don't know." In the absence of other answers I can only speculate or accept those as genuine valid responses. Why have most of us moved from taking pictures with a camera to 'snapshotting' with our smart phones? Why instead of telephoning do we 'whatsapp'? Because it is there. Because it is easy. Because it is cheap (or free) or because we want what our neighbour has. Perhaps for the participants in the research autobiographical acts manifested anyway in

natural conversation. Because today social media offers the possibility of an ongoing conversation with the world, they just found the perfect outlet for doing what they were doing anyway, while increasing exponentially their visibility.

## **5.5- Chapter Summary**

This chapter uses the voice of the researcher to present the insights gained with the artefact that are relevant to the question as to what autobiographical acts accomplish for their practitioners and to what extent they can contribute to inform and reflect on the world we live in. Engaging with theoretical conceptions such as the everyday, embodiment, dialogism, and performativity the chapter begins by de-centring social media and situating online autobiographical acts as dialogically constructed and performed practices interwoven with everyday embodied experience and in a universe of continuums. Autobiographical acts flow from media to media, from backstage to front-stage, past and present, fact and fiction and fluctuate between idealistic notions of a life and disappointing halts. Autobiographical acts are curated expressions of *bricolaged* identities set at times to conform and at other times to contest social rules and expectations. In the act of creation practitioners sometimes cherry pick extraordinary events in order to impress an audience and others resort to fabrications, prosthetic memories and ventriloquism.

On the ‘ideal project of a life’ side of the continuum celebratory practices such as birthday parties and ‘mantelpieces’, together with plans for incrementing clout, are examined in the context of the artefact as tools for recording life milestones, rites of passage and strategies for increasing visibility. On the other side of the continuum: in

situations of identity crisis, like for example illness, grief or feelings of failure, autobiographical acts function as both semi-spontaneous speech acts and meaning making tools. They accomplish the triple purpose of releasing anxiety (venting), looking for support, and coming to terms with the loss of identity. For the practitioners ‘the others’ act as if they were the witnesses of an ‘I’ being in the world, like a mirror, therefore when they share their stories, they speak as much to an audience as they speak to themselves in a dialogued soliloquy. In this manner, online autobiographical acts benefit from both the liberating qualities of spontaneous talk and the reflexive quality of writing.

The last section of the chapter deals with the possibilities of the autobiographical as a form of resistance. Exemplars from the artefact are examined through the Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque and the grotesque. Through carnival the characters assume the rupture of their ‘ideal life project’ and resist social labels such as ‘failure’, ‘ill’ or ‘disabled’ through the use of strategies such as free interaction with unlike fellows, eccentricity, misalliances and irreverence. The grotesque refers to the total freedom of the body and it is associated with the blatant exposure of social taboos. For Bakhtin all these dimensions are theatrical expressions of experienced life translated into sensuous ritualistic performances.

The single question of “why do we post?” has not yielded a single answer. Social media do different things for different people. What is unclear is why people without previous diary writing habits are now openly engaging in online self-disclosure. The reasons given are because the possibility is there or for no-reason in particular. If we are to speculate, and given the conversational nature of social media, it can be argued that these

practitioners have found a new outlet for what they were doing anyway in natural conversation, with the additional advantage of increasing exponentially the reach for their stories. This argument strongly plays in favor of the performativity of the autobiographical.

## EPILOGUE

Since the popularization of social media new forms of life storytelling combining the textual and the visual have emerged challenging traditional definitions of Autobiography. New technologies make it easier than ever to organize and groom the tale of a lifetime. This research began with the question as to *why* a group of mature adults engaged in autobiographical acts on social media, and investigated the *purpose* and *perceived benefits* derived from this activity, and from the point of view of its practitioners. The question was empirically explored through an experimental ethnographically grounded Arts-based device called the ‘polyphonic artefact.’

This dissertation *argues* that for the participants in this study, social media has become an integral part of their everyday life and one more of the grounds on which they produce, perform, negotiate, reproduce, and claim identity through their autobiographical acts. Albeit aiming for coherence these acts resist any attempt at a fixed autobiography and become contingent on the context in which they are authored and manifested, including that of embodied experience. This study first and foremost has given voice to the participants in the research while making a case for ethnographically grounded fiction as a strong innovative method of inquiry into personal and societal issues.

The participants’ autobiographical acts are situated in a universe of continuums between online and embodied experience, the present and the past, fact and fiction, front-stage and backstage, and an ‘ideal’ and a ‘disrupted’ biography; sometimes these acts comply with cultural templates and social expectations and others resist



compartmentalization while contributing to map the world we live in. In this sense, and in the context of this research, autobiographical acts appear deceptively simple. Like the tip of an iceberg, autobiographical acts are flags into deeper processes taking place at the backstage of the participants' everyday life, while offering valuable information about the way we live today.

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The researcher's interest in the topic began with her perplexity regarding the proliferation of confessional accounts in social media, not necessarily by teenagers but by mature adults, all well into their late 30's and beyond (the researcher's cohort). The researcher, being an ex-diarist herself, was puzzled by the observation that, in the majority of the cases consulted, these adult practitioners had never considered writing a diary before the widespread use of social media technologies, and despite an initial lack of interest in writing a diary, they were now openly sharing their lives online and with different degrees of intimacy. The question was *why* were they doing that and to what purpose did that serve?

According to Internet stats: social media usage is increasing worldwide and among older populations (Ofcom, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2017; Statista, 2017). However, these cohorts tend to be under represented in the literature, which tends to favour younger generations of which the majority are children or college students, although not exclusively as in the case of ethnographies that cut across generations (e.g. Trinidadian use of *Facebook* by Daniel Miller, 2011). By studying these cohorts (mature adults mainly 40-45) this research contributes to fill a 'generational gap' in the literature.

Existing scholarship on younger populations (and also on disadvantaged minorities) appears mainly oriented to offering recommendations that will promote

changes in attitudes regarding new technologies and Internet regulatory policies. In contrast, while learning from these studies, this inquiry was more interested in reflecting upon a particular widespread practice and from the point of view of its practitioners. In this sense the emphasis is put on what insights can be learned from this practice that can be useful to inform the bigger picture of the way(s) we live today and in turn inspire further research. This inquiry however doesn't make any universal claim regarding mature adults. They were considered as a broad group that was categorized as such regarding their everyday habits and practices and also because of their historical and cultural common grounds, aspects that are reflected in their autobiographical acts.

The question as to why this group of mature adults were posting about their lives online was *first* investigated through a historical review of notions of selfhood and identity and a survey of non-canonical forms of autobiography, understood as technologies for 'writing' and 'picturing' the self from cave paintings to the Internet, amid a review of current scholarship on social media and identity. The literature review and the survey facilitated positioning these 'new' practices in the context of a 'natural' progression of the genre of autobiography paralleling that of innovation and availability of technologies of the self. *Second* an empirical study combining the tenets of Ethnography, Arts-based research and Narrative Inquiry rendered a grounded fiction called 'the polyphonic artefact.' This device took the form of a polyphonic narrative capable of dynamically bringing together the voices of the participants in the research while positioning them in the context of production of their autobiographical acts. The artefact was theoretically informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogism (op cit) and Erwin Goffman's Dramaturgical

Model (op cit) but also by notions of *bricolage* (Levy-Strauss, op cit), the everyday (De Certeau, op cit) and embodied experience (Josselsson, Hallam et al, Ellingson, all op cit).

This research considers the autobiographical as grounded in the ontologies and epistemologies of the self and identity. Self and identity are highly ambiguous and contested topics. Theorizations of selfhood vary depending on geographical, historic, cultural, social and political contexts. To date, the main conceptualizations situate the self either as a ‘no-self’, as a unitary entity in communion with God and/or Nature, or as fragmented and continuously in the process of becoming in relation to ‘others.’ The concept still remains at the heart of philosophical inquiry. Autobiographical acts can be summed up as attempts of a ‘self’ to constitute him/herself via the externalization (front-stage) of internal and backstage processes, and by doing so constantly producing and reproducing an identity in relation to ‘otherness’ (other people, history, cultural memory).

Autobiographical acts are sense-making strategies and performances and they are as much private as they are public enterprises. As cultural artefacts and performances they sustain the idea that identities are not fixed or essential attributes of the autobiographical subject, but rather are produced through cultural rules and interaction and thus remain contextual and provisional. Autobiographical acts involve the dynamic engagement of three agents: the author or producer, the coaxers that are the agent provocateurs of the story (triggers) and the audiences, which contribute to the autobiographical with their co-presence, either real or perceived.

The study of Autobiographical acts in social media in the context of this inquiry is positioned at the fringes of current/most recent literature on online identity in the Social Sciences. This research shares with the Social Sciences many of its topics of interest: identity, privacy, self-presentation and impression management, behavioral norms and cultures of taste as discussed in Chapter 2, and it is also theoretically informed by many of its conceptualizations and methods (e.g. Symbolic Interactionism, Affect Theory, Dramaturgical Model). However, the approach is very different, somewhat experimental and utterly multidisciplinary. While the Social Sciences tend to frame online identity around particular platforms as ‘technologies of the self’ and their affordances, this research *de-centers* the media and studies autobiographical acts as everyday practices interwoven with other ‘materialities’, including that of embodied experience. In this sense, theoretically but also ontologically, this inquiry occupies a position closer to voices within the disciplines of Anthropology, Narrative Inquiry and Arts-based research, which advocate more nuanced ways of conducting research, which include fostering subjectivity while still being critical, and seeing informants as ‘flesh and bones’ human beings instead of discrete bytes of ‘data’ or ‘texts’ to be read or decoded. But above all the research embraces the complexity of the world that it is trying to understand.

Identity is constructed through the tools that are available to us. Social media offers these resources while operating in a scenario of both historical continuity and change. Some studies in the literature see the pairing of identity and digital technologies as liberating from constraints of the past and thus emancipating, while other studies find that the opposite is true. Nevertheless identities and technology are in constant movement, co-evolving and interacting with socio-political, economical and cultural contexts, including

that of embodied experience. It is difficult to make any predictions regarding outcomes and it is even more complicated to make any binary statement (positive or negative) regarding social media technologies and its long-term influence on human identity. This research questions early notions of technological determinism and pleads for identities and technology as being in constant movement, co-evolving and interacting with socio-political, economical and cultural scenarios.

From cave paintings to the Internet, textual and visual renditions of the self, outside the literary canon of Autobiography, abound and remain the testimonials of the old human yearning to know *Thyself*. These autobiographical acts are exercises in sense-making emerging from the ‘will to form’ (represent) and the ‘will to tell’ (share) and therefore they are as much reflective as they are performative. There are as many autobiographically styled works as historical fashions and possible autobiographers. Autobiographical acts in social media occupy the position of being the ‘newest’ preferred site to render the autobiographical and due to their ubiquity contribute to ‘normalize’ personal disclosure. Fashions might change but at the core of the practice remains the same concern and passion for understanding (making-sense) that brought the cave man to draw stick figures on cave walls. However, what new technologies, including social media, might have brought about are the possibilities, and also the problems, derived from blurring the boundaries between human reflectivity and human instrumentalization. In other words, between making sense and becoming commodities to be consumed.

To really understand autobiographical acts in social media we need to analyze them in terms of feeds, that is to say, we need to look at every self-referential post (e.g. status

update, *selfie* or photograph) as a fragment of a life story and as a part of a series and in the context in which they are produced and reproduced, including the body. The suggestion is that by looking into the conditions of production and reproduction of the autobiographical we can understand the work and its author, and by extension the community to which he or she belongs. By acknowledging the different ‘languages’ of the autobiographical we might understand what has motivated it and relate to and be moved by it [the autobiographical] and this is what this methodological approach has attempted to make possible.

As ethnographically informed inquiries are not laboratory experiments, they are hardly replicable. Still the tenets of a culture, the stories being told should give an accurate portrayal regardless of who tells them. Ethnography is always an interpretation of others’ interpretations and in this sense it is problematic to give a final word on any issue. Taking on board that a particular profile of person was sought for this research and that the participants all agreed to volunteer for their own reasons, making generalizations from the insights obtained from this study would be inappropriate. Arts-based inquiry is not set to find final meanings but to open the floor to significant further questions, for “the purpose of art is to lay bare the questions which have been hidden by the answers” (Baldwin, 1962: 17). Any perspective on the world is necessarily partial. The purpose of engaging with this type of research is clearly not the pursuit of ‘findings’ and the implementation of ‘recommendations’ but rather to enable aspects of the world that might have been overlooked through other traditional methods of research to be seen. Every method and every researcher have their own biases regarding ‘the world’ and what is said is as important as what remains unsaid. Arts-based research has the potential to involve, not only cognitively but also emotionally, an audience (reader, examiner) in the ‘completion of texts’ and as a result can generate conversations about what is happening and what is

represented.

What has transpired from this Arts-based method is that autobiographical acts in social media are not discreet units but de-centered everyday practices interwoven with embodied experience in a universe of continuums. Users inhabit social media flowing from site to site because they see them more as communicative environments than discreet technologies with particular affordances and, in this sense, the media occupies a more relative position in the life of people than the literature on the topic seems to suggest. To understand the role these practices play in peoples' lives we need to understand how they are part of a wider fabric together with other aspects, including embodied experience. The emphasis is on what the medium can do personally and socially for its users.

Autobiographical acts are like 'speech acts' and therefore performances and they are also meaning-making strategies, hence they are self-reflective activities. They are social artefacts telling us as much about the person doing the telling as they do about the culture and society where they occur. They are dialogically constituted (assembled from a 'world of words') and performed for an audience. They are practices acting like a language in conversation, which at least involve three agents: the producer of the act, the agent provocateurs (persons, institutions, backstage) and the audiences. Therefore autobiographical acts are necessarily co-produced and historic and culturally charged. Examples of that are yielded by the concepts of identity *bricolage* (result of abundance and remix), ventriloquism (paradoxical appropriation of discourses), prosthetic memories (media influencing the formation of memories) and preferences for telling extraordinary events (communities dictating what is 'tellable') and compliance (or resistance) to social

norms and etiquette. For all the previous, it can be argued that autobiographical acts, particularly those performed in social media, are susceptible not only to bear ‘prosthetic’ memories but also to be mass-produced.

The autobiographical acts of the group of adults participating in this research are situated in a continuum between an ‘ideal’ and a ‘disrupted’ bios (in the sense of living existence) in which the project of a life is called to be re-cast under new circumstances. In this manner autobiographical acts constitute sense-making strategies in order to bring narrative coherence to a pre-narrative ‘incoherent’ life. In the ideal or ‘proper’ side of the continuum we encounter celebratory practices, which function as rites of passage, and ‘mantelpieces’, which act as identity focal points occupying a position between the public and the private. On the same side of the continuum we encounter self-promoting autobiographical acts, which play the role of procuring instrumental/material benefits for the practitioner, often rendering him or her as a commodity to be consumed.

In the opposite side of the continuum autobiographical acts are strategies for coping with painful and traumatic experiences such as grief, illness and aging. In those cases they can either achieve keeping the dead alive through digital memorialization or maintain the illusion of control over a messy existence. Beyond autobiographical acts this insight raises very important questions on attitudes regarding the pain of others and malpractices in the care of the sick and the elderly while also exposing deeply rooted stereotypes regarding ‘disabled’ and aging bodies.

Autobiographical acts work at times as acts of resistance often driven by the rhetoric of the carnivalesque and the grotesque. Carnival is a way to unleash taboo feelings



and a strategy for skipping the limits of what is politically correct. The darkest aspects of a biography (failure, guilt, backstage behaviour) are brought into the open through subversion and positioned side by side with authoritative voices contesting them and stripping them of privilege, thereby bringing the possibility of freedom and emancipation. Resistance takes the forms of free interaction with unlikely partners, misalliances, eccentricity, and sacrilege. All these dimensions are theatrical expressions of experienced life translated into sensuous ritualistic performances. A modality of the carnivalesque is the grotesque, which refers to obscenity, excess, laughter and bizarre and absurd irony and is associated with and celebrates the expansiveness of the body. In the grotesque the backstage is brought under the spotlight (e.g. imperfect bodies, details of a medical treatment) and obscenely exhibited to the world. Needless to say the grotesque can only work as emancipatory practice if the subject retains full agency over the autobiographical act. However, there is a caveat: for example broadcasting the trivia of domestic life on sites such as *Youtube* is a way of conforming to superstructures by commoditizing the backstage. Today broadcasting the mundane doesn't amount to 'defecating in public' in the same way that it meant for example back in the 1970's because it cannot be considered transgressive anymore and because it trades with the spectators' voyeurism and not with their emancipation. In a confessional society, bringing the backstage to the front-stage is becoming the 'norm' and also an 'economy.'

There is no one single answer as to why we post about ourselves on social media. Social media do different things for different people. What is unclear is why people without previous diary writing habits are now openly engaging in online self-disclosure. The reasons given are because the facility is there or for no reason in particular. Given the

conversational nature of social media, it can be argued that these practitioners have found in social media a new outlet for what they were doing anyway in natural conversation, with the additional advantage of increasing exponentially the reach of their stories. This argument plays in favour of the performativity of the autobiographical. Indeed autobiography is more than ever a public affair.

## **Beyond Autobiographical Acts**

Having reached this point it is time to reflect upon what this long, at times joyful, but mostly painful process achieves beyond autobiographical acts. Let's go back in time just for a moment and let's picture ourselves sitting around a bonfire engaged in conversation with others. We happen to be talking about recent local events such as a new baby being born, or maybe gossiping about two strangers that have recently stopped by, the cycles of nature and the movement of the stars and we are also pondering if this year the gods will be benevolent with the harvest and whether when we die they will allow us to join them at the Great Pearly Gates or at Valhalla. Fast-forward and we are still engaging in similar conversations, for example in family gatherings, in the pub with parishioners or indeed on social media. Some of the ancient concerns might have been lost, perhaps we don't care anymore about gods but sure we have celebrities. We continue gossiping about strangers and friends and we are still concerned about how the weather and the trajectory of stellar bodies will affect our agriculture and our moods. What remains at the core of these conversations is the human urge for understanding, and therefore making sense of what

goes on in the world but also the need for communicating with others. This is why we express ourselves through art and storytelling (will-to-form and will-to-tell).

Artists and poets, philosophers and later scientist have posed many questions over the centuries: What is the origin of the stars? What is the nature of beauty? What is the self? What is consciousness? Some discussions have fallen into oblivion while others are still being asked. What is the self? How come we have not been able to answer this question, of all possible question, in this ‘the best of all possible worlds?’<sup>29</sup> By now we should have already realized that, and as Schrödinger (1952) pointed out, equations tell different stories, not alternatively but simultaneously. Like our equations, scientists, and specifically social scientists, tend to live in bubble worlds structured by what Goffman (1974) termed ‘invisible frames’ built by specific social contexts that at best tint and at worst corset the way we interpret the world.

According to Markham (2013b) what once were methodological choices become routines and naturalized habits of doing things. If frames can be useful tools they can be also very limiting. Frames have a great impact on the way we think about the nature of reality, people and society. This inquiry through dialogism but also through carnival has attempted, if not to fully break this researcher’s frames (surely I have more than a few), to widen the perspective of the study of a very topical and historically recurrent subject. By first de-centering the media and then combining simultaneously different ‘equations’, what was intended was to achieve a more nuanced approach to human identity capable of *first* revealing with more accuracy the position that social media occupies in this group of

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<sup>29</sup> Reference to Leibniz (1710) and Voltaire (1759).

adults' everyday lives and *second* aiming for insights into the complexity of human subjectivity instead of looking for reductive categories.

Embracing complexity suggests complication because we love our shortcuts. We couldn't cope otherwise. Our memory is limited and there is only a fraction of the information that reaches us everyday that we can deal with. However, reducing experience to mere assemblages of digital data packed in boxes ready to be analyzed carries the risk of turning everything into data, including people (Markham, op cit). If any approach to research cannot avoid a certain degree of framing, for the same reason that a map as big as the territory wouldn't make sense, it is important to note that the new complexities brought about by new ways of existence pose a challenge to current methods for investigating the social and call for inventive ways to 'disentangle the web.' This inquiry, situated at the periphery of the work done by the Social Sciences but highly informed by them, is a modest attempt at breaching and resisting ontological and methodological naturalizations. This research has to be seen more as a *process*, which has combined different existing methods that have converged on and culminated in the polyphonic artefact, which itself functions as a dynamic modality of *thick description* in Geertz (1973, 1988) terms, while incorporating the voices of the participants. In this way this inquiry has committed to subjectivity, processes, empathy and insights instead of findings, conclusions, detachment and data.

## Limits of the Research

As noted previously ethnographically informed inquiries are not laboratory experiments and therefore one of the *limits* of this research is that it is hardly replicable. Nevertheless it still should offer an accurate portrait of what it's trying to study. One way to minimize this shortcoming was to allow the participants' input into the process of 're-storying' the stories they told to the researcher. Despite the previous statement, the polyphonic artefact will always be an interpretation of others' interpretations and in this sense difficult to contextualize in terms of 'findings' and 'conclusions.' Also, and taking on board that a particular profile of person was sought and that the participants had their own reasons for volunteering in the inquiry, making any sort of generalization from the insights would be inappropriate.

Despite the excitement of working on an Arts-based project there is always some uneasiness derived from self-doubt regarding the 'artistic value' of the artefact produced. In addition there is always some nervousness, specially at PhD level, that even though this modality has been acknowledged by the university, there is a pressure to accommodate to more conventional standards of research, that is to say in the format of a written dissertation in which 'findings', 'analysis', 'conclusions' and 'recommendations' are expected even if this particular form isn't necessarily suitable to the creative practice and therefore, at worst defeats the purpose of the method, and at best duplicates the work. Other pressures such as time, funding, and the capacity of the study to be submitted for journal publications also play their part. This suggests that although at the outset there is a discourse of acceptance regarding Arts-based practices, at the 'backstage' academic institutions still resist seeing the links between artistic inquiry and formal research.

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Beyond autobiographical acts the picture painted by this research is that of a group of mostly anxious people constantly trying to re-cast their lives to fit idealistic expectations built around values such as success, popularity, fitness, youth, bliss and immortality; some of them conforming and others dissenting with social and cultural scripts but nevertheless all aiming for some sort of coherence or resolution. How is that reflecting on the way we live today? Popular psychologist Alain de Botton (2004) already pointed out that we are living with a 'status anxiety' and this might very well be the case. In the artefact we see the characters 'becoming' rather than 'being', like as if life was something to be permanently deferred. We study to better our professional opportunities in life, we aim for better bodies, we work in jobs we don't like hoping for something better to come, or we save money for a car or for those holidays. We seem to constantly plan for the future, gear our actions towards what is to come, which we hope will be better than what we already have.

When life strikes, "in life terms" as one of the characters notes, and disrupts our plans we are first shocked, then angry (or sad) and finally we crave to restore the lost order. When we are sick or when we get old we lose control over ourselves. We are then under the management of families and relatives, the state and institutions or the medical establishment which label us as 'patients' or 'service users.' In other cases they remember us as the people we were and not the people we are (e.g. Alzheimer). This is unfortunately the picture of the long-awaited future for the majority of us. We live in democratic societies but inequality is rampant. Governments and privileged sectors tend to fill their mouths with conveniently 'appropriated' discourses. Ventriloquism is the order of the day. We have surely improved in many regards but fighting sexism with female super-heroes

that look more like porn stars, or fighting ageism with older models selling anti-wrinkle creams, or promoting healthy living by recommending processed foods and unnecessary medication are, to say the least, poor achievements. These are only a small sample of the many issues raised by the artefact, which renders as absurd many aspects of the way we live today that are in need of serious discussion, or as it is customary to say, further research. However, and in all their relevance, we cannot lose sight of the wider perspective from which many of these issues remain ‘first world’ problems, to use the cliché.

## Contributions and Afterword

The study’s ‘original’<sup>30</sup> contributions to knowledge are *first* and foremost that it has given voice to the participants to the research, and *second* that by incorporating the tenets of Ethnography and Narrative Analysis into an Arts-based form, the inquiry, through de-centering the media and situating it in the context of the everyday among other practices and materialities, has achieved deeper insights into personal and societal issues, many of which are (still) in need of serious discussion (e.g. human relationships, institutional care, ageism or narratives of success as seen in the artefact). The study is also a call to move on to more creative and innovative ways of doing research, by including alternative ‘ways of seeing’ and by putting the people we study at the centre of the inquiry as real human beings instead of discreet bytes of ‘data’, while considering shifting the focus from ‘finding’ things to perhaps critically interpreting them but accepting the impossibility of explaining the whole of any situation and therefore also the possibility that some things surpass our limited understanding. In this regard perhaps we should pose the question as to

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<sup>30</sup> ‘Original’ as a word in a world of words as in dialogism.

what is the primary responsibility of research. According to mathematician David Ruelle:

The answer to that question is clear: science is completely amoral and completely irresponsible. Individual scientists act according to their own individual sense of moral responsibility (or lack of it), but they act as humans, not as representatives of Science. [...] what before was called Nature (with a capital N) is now called our environment and it is further downgraded to be our junkyard. It is the fault of science? Science can indeed help destroying Nature [...] but also can help in assessing pollution: the decisions are all human. Science answers questions [sometimes] but does not make decisions (Ruelle, 1991:165).

The primary value of this study is that it calls for positive change in the way we do research via the inclusion of creative methodologies as a means to broaden our perspective(s) of the world(s) we study. This value is provided *first* by thinking the question ‘sideways’, this is to say cutting across patterns instead of ‘vertically.’ In other words, in place of building up or digging down information from a basis, both well-established systems for apprehending knowledge about the world, this research looks into different places (e.g. backstage, dreamscapes). In this sense this approach facilitates the inclusivity of ‘other’ perceptions of the world. The polyphonic artefact is another ‘way of seeing data’; it is a tool for perception that favours the language of creativity, without rejecting the language of logic. This path has more to do with exploration and possibilities, than with findings and absolute truths. Conceptual art, irony, and humour are examples of sideways tracking. They go ‘off the tracks’ and by doing so they are capable of opening portals that bring ‘new’ insights into ‘old’ problems.

The polyphonic artefact is an innovative way of processing information and therefore another avenue for the perception of the problem leading to new insights. If, as previously mentioned, we operate through interpretative frames or similarly through “logic bubbles” (de Bono, 1993: 60) we can expect to make perfectly logical interpretive choices



that will confirm, most of the time, our views of the world which, in turn, inevitably, will comply with our social and cultural touchstones. After completing and submitting a literature review for the transfer from my PhD track to a ‘proper’ PhD status and completing a Pilot study with a small sample of participants, I was confronted with the dilemma, common to many scholars, of whether I was allowing the ‘data to speak’ or I was perceiving in the data what I saw in the literature. I knew that this wasn’t going to work. I needed to ‘unlearn’ what I read in order to open up to the participant’s stories.

I had to go sideways first to then be able to see anew the connections between the literature and the ‘data’ (Chapter 5) and subsequently learn from the process. The artefact provided the ‘zone’ where I was able to think outside my ‘logic bubble’ and attend to those I intended to study. But that in itself wasn’t enough. As frames and bubbles are powerful forces of attraction, I also needed to ask the participants’ feedback in the re-telling of their stories to make sure that their views were portrayed accurately. It was a very long and painstaking process but also full of joy and discovery. I met wonderful ordinary/extraordinary people with ordinary/extraordinary lives and the constant rapport with this reality kept me grounded (and very busy). The artefact liberated me from my own narrowness, by allowing me to operate from different positions simultaneously (the points of view of the participants), and thereby my perspective became strengthened. If initially this study was set to investigate the purpose of autobiographical acts in social media by a group of mature adults, in the process it became apparent that it wasn’t only about social media but about the complexity of the human condition.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A:

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath  
Dublin City University



27th October 2015

Ms Ester Toribio-Roura  
School of Communications

**REC Reference:** DCUREC/2015/205  
**Proposal Title:** Becoming In Social Media  
**Applicant(s):** Ms Ester Toribio-Roura, Dr Declan Tuite

Dear Ester,

Further to expedited review, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this research proposal.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Dónal O'Mathúna'.

**Dr Dónal O'Mathúna**  
Chairperson  
DCU Research Ethics Committee



**Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht**  
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,  
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## **APPENDIX B:**

### **DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY**

#### **Plain Language Statement, Confidentiality and consent form**

**Title of the Study:** Becoming in Social Media (working title)

**School:** School of Communications, Dublin City University. Campus Glasnevin, Dublin 9

**Area:** Multimedia

**Principal Investigator:** Ester T. Roura

**Contact details:**

Email: [ester.toribioroura3@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:ester.toribioroura3@mail.dcu.ie)

Mobile: 3530864051382

**Supervision:** Dr. Declan Tuite

#### **Purpose of the Research**

This project is concerned with WHY and HOW people belonging to a generation not born into digital technology actively engage in self-presentation practices in social media sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and others.

The research is interested in how publicly shared posts combining text and image that portray the individuals themselves as protagonists of the events depicted are created and to what effect.

It questions what are the rewards in the sense of gain or satisfaction that

engaging with this activity gives and what it is gained and what it is lost in the process when comparing to a time previous to the widespread of digital ways to socialize.

It also questions HOW this can affect or be of relevance to the wider community.

### **What participation involves**

Participation in the research involves knowledge that the researcher will look into the participants' public profiles (visible to anyone) in their chosen networks.

Preferably (but not necessary) the participant will link with the researcher through these networks. For example as a "friend" in Facebook, as a "contact" in LinkedIn or as a "follower" in Instagram. ALTERNATIVELY the participants can choose to cherry pick among their own posts the ones to show to the researcher for further analysis.

The participants will be also asked to take part in an INTERVIEW/CONVERSATION with open questions regarding their use and perceptions of social media as individuals and as members of the wider community. ALTERNATIVELY the participant can be part of a FOCUS GROUP (only 6 participants needed) debating the same subjects.

Interviews will be tape-recorded and focus group video-recorded with the participant's permission. The estimated time commitment for participating in the



study is from 45 min. to 2 hours for interviews and 1 hour and a half for focus groups.

Interviews will take place in the participant's preferred location and date while the Focus Group will take place in the grounds of Dublin City University in a time and date agreed upon by all the parties involved.

### **Risks, Costs and Benefits**

There are no risks arising from the participation in this study greater than those encountered in everyday life.

There is no cost for participating in the study beyond the fare for transportation to Dublin City University Campus.

The study may not benefit the participants other than offering a space for reflection on digital modes of communication and assessing in which way they themselves and the communities of which they are part profit from them. On the other hand what will be learnt from the study should provide meaningful insights to the field of the humanities and social sciences and the wider community in general.

### **Data Confidentiality and Legal Limitations**

The privacy rights of the participants in relation to the processing of their personal data are protected

under the Data Protection Acts, 1988 and 2003. However participants should be aware that confidentiality can only be protected and guaranteed within the limitations of the law.

The principal investigator will be the only party with access and accountable for the data collected in this research study and will put measures in place to protect confidentiality. To that effect the principal investigator AGREES TO:

1. Collect and analyze the data (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts, text, photographs, audio, video) alone.
2. Keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts, text, photographs, audio, video) secure.
3. Delete all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts, text, photographs, audio, video) once the investigation is completed. After 1 year all the recordings will be destroyed.
4. Protect participants' actual names and personal data. Pseudonyms will be used if direct references are required.

**Confirmation that participation in this study is voluntary**

I, the participant, understand that participation in this study is voluntary and that I might withdraw from the Research Study at any point.

**YES/NO**

**Confirmation of particulars as highlighted in the plain language statement**

Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question that applies to your level of participation in this study)

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)

**YES/NO**

I understand the information provided

**YES/NO**

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study

**YES/NO**

I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions

**YES/NO**

I am aware that my online public profile will be followed by the principal researcher

**YES/NO**

I am aware that my interview will be audiotaped

**YES/NO**

I am aware that my participation in the Focus Group will be video/audiotaped

**YES/NO**

**Once the study is completed the willing participants will receive a report of the conclusions and benefits arising from the investigation.**

#### **Signatures**

I have read and understood the information in this form. The researcher has answered my questions and concerns, and I have a copy of this document. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Participant's Signature:

---

Name in Block Capitals:

---

Principal Investigator:

---

Name in Block Capitals:

---

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support,

Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

### **APPENDIX 3:**

## **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

*This guide is just orientative. The aim of the interview is to look for the participant's insights. Questions are open. Different questions might arise during the interview process. The interview will take place preferably in the place and time chosen by the participant. Similar questions/themes will be treated during the focus group session*

### **1. SETTING UP THE INTERVIEW**

#### **- 1.1- Researcher introduction and project overview:**

- *Hi... As explained in (previous contact)...The purpose of this research is...to inquiry in autobiographical practices in social media. To gain insights on why and how people engage in life storytelling in social media platforms. How the textual and the visual (including audio and video) is combined and crafted to create a stories of the self. How, with who and why are these*

*stories shared and what this practices do for the person involved. What people think they do for the community.*

- *Explain why the participant has been chosen (age cohort)*
- *State the expected duration of the interview (45min.-2h)*

- 1.2 - Introduce plain language statement, Informed consent and confidentiality agreement forms

*Both, the researcher and the participant sign the forms. A copy is given to the participant. This gesture should signify mutual trust.*

- 1.3 – Ask the participant to confirm if is still ok to audiotape the interview (this is a reminder as this particular will be agreed upon previous to the interview situation)

## 2. DURING THE INTERVIEW. POSSIBLE THEMES/QUESTIONS.

2.1- The style of the interview is more conversational than a question/answer session but in order to center the conversation here is the list of subjects/questions intended to guide that conversation (This questions may be ammended as part of the iteration process)

2.2- Suggested Subjects to talk about / Questions (not necessarily all, not necessarily in this order)

- *Please confirm that you came to digital technology in adult age.*
- *Please state your preferred social networks.*

-

- *How many hours/day/weekly you spend actively engaged with technology? How your engagement with social media compare to your engagement with TV? Radio? Game playing? (\*)This can be asked in previous questionnaire and then just ask to comment during interview)*
- *And with non-virtual activities and Face-to-face socializing? (\*)*

- *How this daily routine compare to your everyday before the internet?*
- *Do you consider yourself an early adopter of new digital technology or you rather are a late comer? (\*\*) Follow with some Probe question)*
- *Are you rather a mobile or a desktop Internaut? (\*\*)*
- *When did you first start engaging in digital life-storytelling in social media? How did it happen? It was something progressive, suggested etc...*
- *Have you ever write a diary, journal or memory or engaged in any form of autobiographical storytelling before the digital era? Why? Can you explain/expand (\*\*)*
- *In which digital life-storytelling practices are you currently (have you been) involved besides social media? (Blogs, vlogs, personal web pages...)*
- *Which are your preferred platforms and why? Could you define each of them using a single word or short sentence? A color? A feeling? (\*\*)*
- *Which social media platforms are you using with more frequency for life-storytelling? Why? Which are the advantages and inconveniences of each of them in your experience?*
- *Is there a significant difference between your previous analogical autobiographical practices and your current experience with social networks? (\*\*)*
- *What do you miss and what it is unnecessary in social media? (\*\*)*
- *What is your preferred mode of expression: textual, visual, a combination of both? Can you give examples?*
- *What are the most frequent activities in which you engage in social media: friending; Storytelling; Browsing news updates;*

*browsing friends updates, styling your own profile; interacting with contacts? (\*)*

- *In which sort of activities are you more happy to engage in social media? (\*\*)*
- *In which way do you style your own profile?. For instance: Profile pictures; quotas; particular posts including text, image, video etc...(\*\*)*
- *Do you use particular filters, software etc.. to enhance the images? Why? (\*\*)*
- *Do you follow any particular tendency, fashion, role model, etc.. why? (\*\*)*
- *Do you role-play when engaging in life storytelling? Are you always the same or rather you like to change personas from time to time? (\*\*)*
- *How different/similar are you online/offline? (\*\*)*
- *What do you learn about yourself from life-storytelling in social media? And about the others? (\*\*)*
- *How that makes you feel? (\*\*) (empowered, in control preassured etc... but don't suggest)*
- *Which kind of posts are you most likely to respond to? Why? (\*\*)*
- *Which kind of posts are you most likely to ignore. Why? (\*\*)*
- *Have You ever deleted a post? What is the reason? (\*\*)*
- *Have you ever regretted posting something in somebody else's wall? Why? What did you do about it? (\*\*)*
- *When you post something in particular do you have some expectation regarding its reception? If the reception is not as expected how this makes you feel? (\*\*)*
- *Are you Editing crafting posts to please or to target specific audiences? Why do you think it is important to do so? In which way do you benefit? (\*\*)*
- *What is social media doing for You ? professionally, personally. Can you give examples? (\*\*)*
- *How that makes you feel? (\*\*) (empowered, in control preassured etc... but don't suggest)*

- *How do you see your profile comparing to others? In relation to style, information shared, general impressions etc...(\*\*)  
Can you describe it with a single word? Can you name “types” of profiles on social media?*
- *How do you see younger generations regarding social media involvement and in which way do you consider yourself similar/different to them? Can you explain? (\*\*)*
- *Could you pick 5 key autobiographical posts in the whole Facebook?LinkedIn etc... timeline? Can you explain what these posts convey and why it is important that they are there? (\*\*)*
- *Which criteria do you use to craft/choose a particular profile image? What the profile image should convey in each different platform? Why? (\*\*)*
- *Which criteria do you use to craft/choose a particular profile image? What the background image in facebook should convey? Why? (\*\*)*
- *Which criteria do you use to craft/choose a particular image for your wall? (\*\*)*
- *What is not acceptable in social media? For example in Facebook, LinkedIn, etc...Can you explain? (\*\*)*
- *What would you do if social media platforms where to be shut down?*
- *Does what happens with your personal information once is posted in social media (where it is stored, who can see it) bothers you? What do you do about it?*
- *If you where a character in the film of the story of your life. Which character would you be? Which character you would rather be? (\*\*)*
- *How do you see you telling your own story in the future? (\*\*)*
- *More...*

### 2.3- Probe questions:

- Would you give me an example?*
- *Can you please elaborate?*



- *Would you explain this further?*
- *I am not sure I understand what are you saying*
- *Is there anything else?*

### 3. CONCLUDING THE INTERVIEW

*3.1- Ask the interviewee if he/she has anything else to ad. Offer the possibility to contact the researcher in the case of willing to share new insights or having new questions/concerns regarding the research project. Ask if the participant wishes to receive a report of the conclusions of the study once this is finished.*

### 4. AFTER THE INTERVIEW

4.1- Take observational notes of the setting and of anything significant that has happened during the interview. *E. G. Interruptions, silences, awkward moments, difficulty in closing the interview, duration, avoidances, preferred subjects, avoided subjects, body language, other people present or around, children, pets, use of mobile phones or other devices during the interview, etc...*

4.2- Researcher self evaluation. *E. G: hability to conduct the interview; I am letting the participant to express freely or I am leading too much the interview, how do I feel, has the conversation flown etc...*

4.3- Transcribe the interview

4.4.- Verify information given in the interview if necessary

4.4 Send a complimentary note/email to each participant thanking them for their collaboration with the study.

## APPENDIX D:

### APPENDIX

#### Analyzing content template

IMAGE-TEXT/VIDEO-SOUND I ANALYSIS	
<b>Image &amp; Text (or video/sound) Reference :</b> e.g. Img-022	
<b>Source:</b> e.g. Facebook	
	
<b>0 Likes 4 comments 0 shares</b>	
<b>Title/Heading:</b> e.g. <i>A journal of Insomnia</i>	
<b>Text/Caption:</b> e.g. “[omitted] I stopped sleeping 26 of January 2015 I have been unable to sleep [omitted]”	
Also include #hashtags when convenient.	
<b>Author:</b> Coded name of who posted the content. [omitted]	
<b>Date:</b> 10 April 2015	

<p><b>Time:</b> Night</p> <p><b>Location (where the event described happens):</b> e.g. Dublin</p> <p><b>Immediate Context:</b> e.g. What was going on that pre-ceded or prompted the post: A tight work deadline.</p>
<b>DENOTATIVE LEVEL OF ANALYSIS</b>
<b>1 . Content Analysis:</b>
<p><i>1.1. Literal Content (what is in the image/text/video/sound)</i></p> <p>e.g. Pitch black square with the number 3:24 in the centre in digital orange bright numbers mimicking the screen of a digital alarm clock.</p> <p><i>1.2 .Expressive Content ( Attributes beyond the literal image, e.g. Atmosphere)</i></p> <p>e.g. It is an early hour in the morning</p>
<p><i>1.2. Colour</i></p> <p>e.g. Black and orange</p>
<p><i>1.3. Light</i></p> <p>e.g. the digital numbers are glowing in the middle of an otherwise pitch black square.</p>
<b>2. Compositional Analysis:</b>
<p><i>2.1. Spatial organization and focus (How actually the elements are distributed on the picture. The set)</i></p> <p>e.g. The numbers are the focus, are bright and right in the centre</p>
<p><i>2.2. Perspective</i></p> <p>e.g. the vanishing point is in the centre</p>
<b>CONNOTATIVE LEVEL OF ANALYSIS</b>
<p><b>3. 1<sup>st</sup> layer of meaning</b> (Meaning beyond the literal, the intention of the portrayal, ideology)</p> <p>e.g. The contrast between the darkness and the light suggest at least two opposed readings. Darkness and light as sleep and awake or death and life and also being one part of the other or contained in the other.</p> <p>Intends to communicate a state of anxiety maybe looking for support</p> <p>Diegesis</p> <p>Metadiegesis</p>

#### 4. 2<sup>nd</sup> Level of meaning (ideology and myth)

e.g.

Diegesis : the narrator world is disrupted as something *abnormal* appears: insomnia. The abnormality is expressed through the randomness of waking up always at the same time. With the series of photographs being the same and making the time of the awakening something central in the narrative. Repetition is used as a rhetorical figure.

The fact that there is very little or no reception contributes to the feeling of isolation experienced by the insomniac. Being awake when everybody else is sleep  
The only person interacting is a fellow insomniac, with relates to the experience and compares it to hers. There is no mention of stress being produced by a deadline or similar but can be reads in this way. It turns to be accurate with the reality of the situation but it could also be “prosthetic”. You are supposed to be completely stressed out when on a tight deadline, otherwise you must be doing something wrong (Myth)

#### **APPENDIX E:**

##### EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW/CONVERSATION TRANSCRIPTION

INFORMANT: [omitted]

AGE: 53

GENDER: Male

LANGUAGE: English

PLACE: The informants' house in [omitted]

DATE: 21-11-2015

DURATION: 2:04:44

I=Interviewee

R=Researcher

[... ..] signifies a super long pause (odd type)

[... ..] signifies a very long pause

[...] signifies a long pause

[..] signifies a lesser pause

color code: **Green:** themes; **Red:** Researcher comments & common grounds with other informants

### *Initial Observations*

The encounter took place at the informant's house. It is a warm and sunny November afternoon. As instructed I knock into the basement door of the magnificent Georgian house. After a few seconds the informant opens the door and invites me in. I enter into an ample kitchen/sitting room. At the kitchen table an old man is looking at rugby pictures in an iPad. It is the informant's elderly father. I am introduced to the gentleman and we interchange a few social niceties. Meanwhile the informant asks me if I would care for tea and biscuits to "entertain" our interview and I accept. When the concoction is ready is time to work. The informant tells me that we are to have the interview somewhere else. He says something to the man and indicates me to follow him upstairs to the drawing room. We go to the next level of the house through a chestnut (I think) staircase, which sits against a dark blue wall pocketed with colorful paintings. When we enter the room the first thing I notice is the light and second that everything there belonged to another time from the furniture to the last detail in the mantelpiece. It was like time traveling if it wasn't for our inadequate outfits and the iPhone I deposited on top of the tea table in order to record the conversation. Before the interview began I had the "delicacy" to swallow (engullir) two dark chocolate Mcvittie's . This is how it went:

### *Transcription*

01	R	(pressing the recorder after asking permission) You will forget about this in a while...
02	I	I don't mind
03	R	So...

04	I	You know.. I always kept a notebook. Always a paper notebook and I still do but, you know things like Facebook or bookmarking things, you know you don't have to read immediately..you just put a bookmark them and
05	I	Maybe never go back to them or maybe sometimes you, you eh..sometimes, you know I look through my bookmarks to see what is there or to remember things...
06	I	Even ideas that you are thinking about
07	I	You know it was quite good to..to record, I mean, the history of youtube videos and if you get interested in a particular strain of things you can continue along that train and then get...em..and then go over the tangent, to know the tangent as well
08	I	Is like I remember I used o play just..em..mess around with the dictionary, you just go look up at the dictionary and then always tells you maybe to go to another word..
09	I	So I just followed through the dictionary so like a book that seems infinite (INFINITE BOOK)
10	I	And you go to this little journeys through it
11	R	Like a flow
12	I	Yeah, yeah...and eh... that is what I would say about the Internet it is just so easy
13	I	I mean it really is just a button
14	I	And then there is the fact of sharing your opinion..and then seen if you get likes or shares and all that kind of thing. That's sort of...approval that people are getting isnt it? (Validation)
15	I	Yes, it is Approval
16	R	And is this giving you something in particular?..some what are you gaining with this?
17	I	Vindication (Vindication)
18	R	Vindication..Okay
19	I	In a small way, you know, that at least someone agrees with you about something or...shares your sense of humour or shares your em..political thing or can be anything you know? (Likemindeness)
20	R	And what happened before? How did you seek vindication?
21	I	How did I get this thing vindication? Well it wasn't so easily available
22	R	Okay

23	I	Actually, I mean, I am not sure how real that vindication it is, you don't really thing that,
24	I	for example people that depend on social media for advertising now and public relations just it..it doesn't work as well as radio or television there is an illusion that works (Illusion that social media works (?) but [omitted]. Yes but she does loads of "field work")
25	R	Uhu
26	I	You know and the..is that the vindication is only temporary it is only for a split second you know. It was easy for that person to give you that vindication (Fleeting/brief vindication) so it means very little (lost of value of words/concepts)
27	I	You know, they don't have to go to any effort (culture of the effortless)
28	I	So, they might just casually like something (Casual)
29	I	You know, you don't know the reasons..people are in a good mood that day or in a bad mood that day so it is..I mean if you are looking for pure data that's is not pure data (Descontextualization (also [omitted]). No pure data)
30	R	Uhu
31	I	I wouldn't think so
32	I	You can't actually depen on...I was actually watching a program on the setting of Google (clears his throat) and one of the ways they started advertising was just with google artwork...which was just a little thing, you know it is like a little...em newsfeed besides whatever your search is all about and then sponsored search results
33	I	And that must have been a good thing for advertising companies because you are definitely targetting your audience, your market..your audience for that market because you know that somebody is looking already for something like that
34	R	Okay
35	I	So that is the other side. That must be very good for advertisers
36	R	Yeah because somehow everything you post there is giving them, the advertisers keywords about your taste
37	I	Yeah, there is another point as well I mean, a lot of people are afraid of advertising like that. You are being profiled which is what people basically..that is the end product of that you know (Profiling/ commoditizing)
38	I	We are getting profiled by what we are interested in, looking for or reading or anything

39	I	But I have to say..I imagine that, I imagine that as a sort of that they are actually building a version of me (A VERSION OF ME BUILT BY SOCIAL MEDIA AND ADVERTISEMENT)
40	R	(giggles) okay
41	I	You know..so I am not particularly afraid of this thing you know because..I would never do internet banking, because..I don't need to.. so there is nothing really...particularly private either or..I don't know you know...but eh...
42	R	And how is this profiling work for you? Are you trying to portrait a particular persona or?
43	I	If I am trying to make it up?
44	R	No no no, no necessarily..
45	I	Yeah, because sometimes it does occur to me... and I start looking at right wing websites..and imagine, suddenly google whatever algorithms are looking at me and they are going to say oh hey hang on a second? (Mislead the algorithms. Practices of resistance)
46	I	Look what is looking at now! Then maybe to fuck up their..because I think enough a lot of data analysis... seems to me, inevitably is going to be concern, is going to be...colored by what questions you ask and what assumptions you make (On data colouring and assumptions)
47	I	You know, you have to make assumptions, even by questions or even the direction you are looking at the data from, you know, point of view that's an assumption
48	I	So that, that could be quite fun to play with, you know
49	R	I have done this actually, trying...
50	I	I think everybody does, I mean, [omitted]or [omitted] or, putting a photograph of yourself, something or you know you can
51	I	It is that kind of thing that you can make up, you can make, you can re-make yourself as an internet person, you know em...it's, I don't know (Recasting)
52	R	And is there any satisfaction in that, or advantage?
53	I	.....No, actually, no really..but (laughs)
54	R	(laughs)
55	I	Maybe to know, knowing that somewhat whats going on..and just weath (?) just weath to be alive to the situation you know to certain level anyway (Awareness of what is going on)
56	I	But no, no satisfaction, but you could, actually, potentially invent, invent something that would be targetting making money or making something or a



		political statement
57	I	But for now I am just playing around with it
58	R	And at a personal level is there any..insatisfaction?
59	I	.....In what?
60	R	In..I don't know maybe regarding feedback that you could either get or no...
61	I	Well, again is part of vindication you know. If you make a piece of art and lots of people like it on this...its I mean, to get that many likes going into a real gallery, that has maybe ten people visiting a day..
62	R	Uhu

[continues]

## FIELDNOTES

[BEGINNING ANOM EXCERPTS FOR APPENDIX]

**Nursing home 1-** The building has been recently renovated and looks quite pleasant to the eye. It has separate wings for men and women with separate (by sex) common areas. The majority of the front line staff is sourced from agencies; some of them are trainees from nursing schools. The staff works twelve hours shift, three or four days in a row and one or two days off. The staff complains about the rosters. They vary, often meeting the needs of the administrative staff before those of the frontline care staff. Once a week the more mobile residents would enjoy two hours workshops with an art therapist with whom they would do some felt work or painting and also with a music therapist who would play the piano for an hour or so and they would sing popular songs, always the same ones. Besides those 2-3 hours per week the activities of the residents consist of long hours sitting in front the TV set, the visit of a hairdresser once per month and the Sunday mass for all (including Protestants, Jews, Atheistic and Agnostics?).

[omitted] Some of the staff complaint that despite the amount of hours there is no time or room to engage with the residents outside washing and feeding them or turning on or raise the volume of the TV [Indeed I have observed this: A young caregiver is combing the hair of one of the residents and they are having a chat about how lovely the resident's hair used to be. The caregiver has a luscious long black mane and the resident admires it. They continue chatting in this terms when one of the senior staff approaches the young (trainee?)

and tells her to move on, as there is a lot to do. Then, apart from the resident she tells her that there is no time for chit-chat [omitted] In another occasion I ask a member of the staff how often they have meaningful conversations with the residents and she answers: “What do you mean?” smiles and carries on hanging the laundry in a line. I want to ask what the residents think about it but I am not allowed because ‘officially’ I can only interview one of the residents. ‘My resident’ doesn’t think this is the case. For her everybody is lovely and they do what they can. Except ‘such’ and ‘such’ which she points to with her chin. But I observe. I shouldn’t but I do. It is there. I am again going on the tangent. But is there before my eyes. Let’s ‘tangent’ then [omitted] I am afraid that what is perceived as any special attention to the residents, like for example talking to them just for the sake of having a chat, without involving any other task been performed with their body, it is being discouraged by senior staff members. In short the residents, and the staff, are dehumanized. It this another PhD? Well, yes.

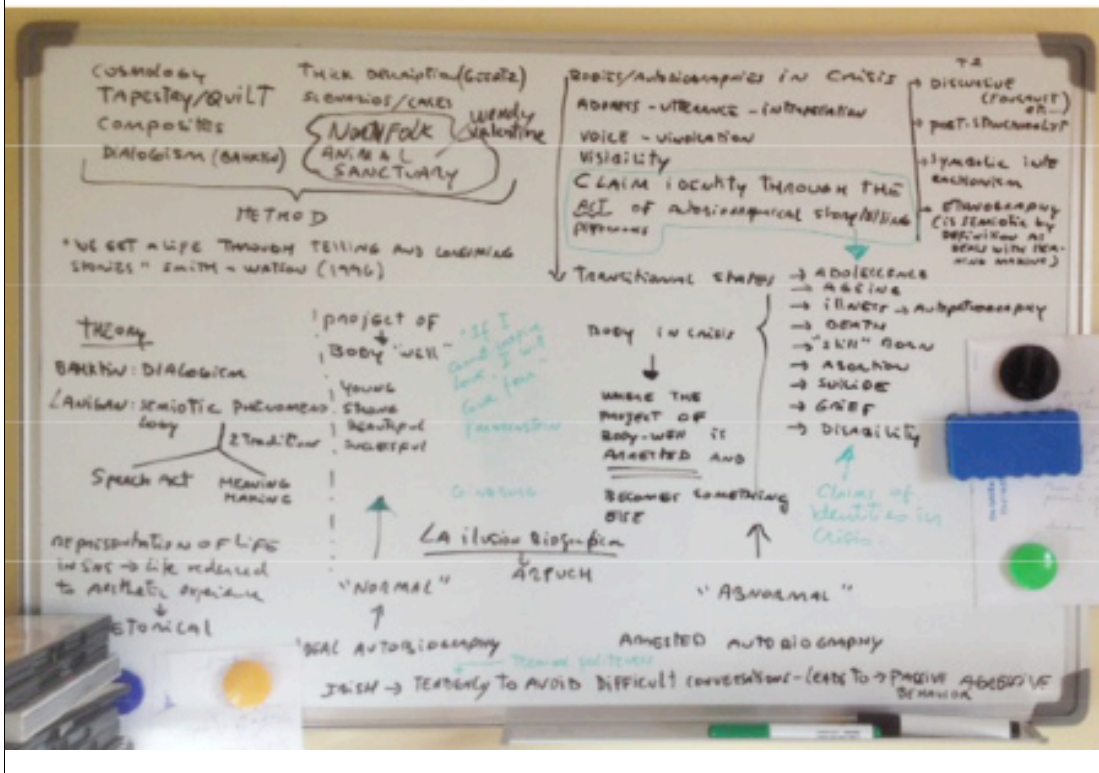
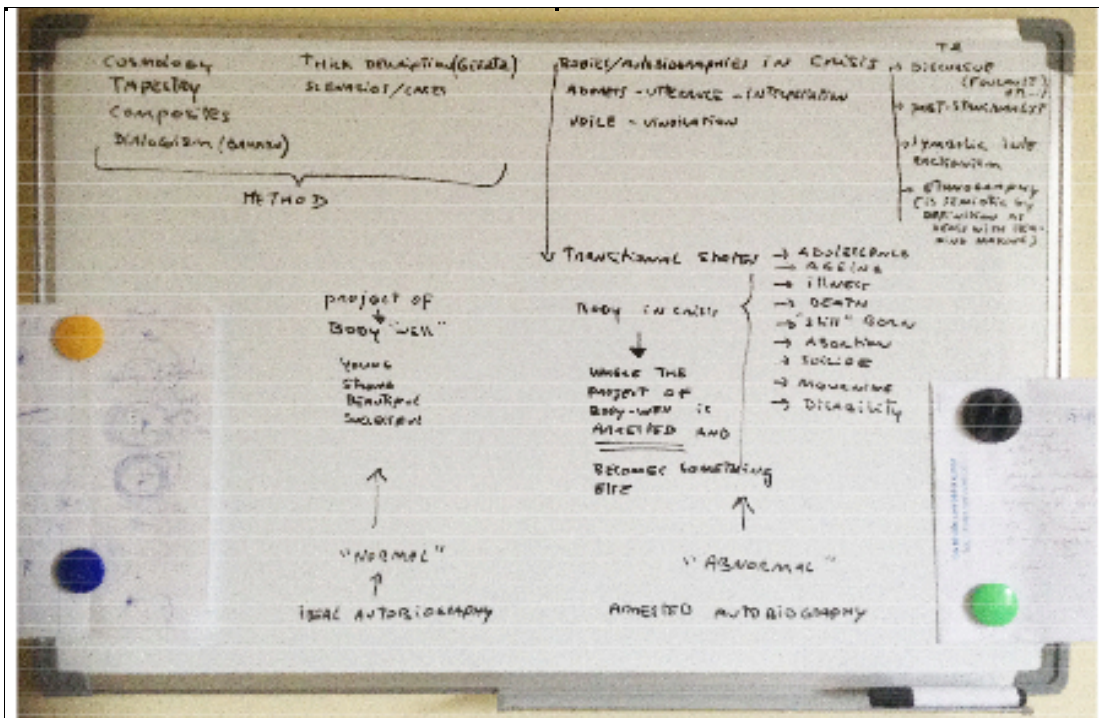
**Nursing home 2-** It is state of the art, so I am told. The residents are both male and female. Dormitories and showers are separated but they share common areas. People seem happy here although it might be my own mood as the building is quite colorful. The residents look like busy bees. Some men play board games while some ladies are knitting. The rest read papers or magazines, watch TV or stare at nothing, perhaps inside them(selves). They have a daily choice of exercise routines, including dance, and also art and music therapy. The outings seem more frequent than in the other nursing home but also the weather is being better [omitted]. Some of the residents complain that they have to do silly things (referring to some activities) [omitted] the staff sometimes act as if they were talking to small children. I find it quite distressing.

[omitted] When the families visit once a week, usually after the football match of their own offspring, they bring their elder for a Sunday roast and before the sun sets they are back under the care of the institution. Why are they there at all? Sometimes residents suffer from Alzheimer's or dementia and are in need of constant medical attention and others families just don't have the time, strength or resources to keep they elder (or ill) at home.

[omitted] **home-** Although she is at home she has to bear with some 'institutionalized' behavior on the part of the home caregivers. But in comparison being cared for at home outplays being in an institution were the voice of the patient is generally muted. Here too in many ways but not so much. Here the workers are delighted to 'waste' time talking [omitted] the family is also forgetting she is here, they talk about her like if she wasn't present. Why? I am sure they are not aware of it. They are good people. What that means, anyway? Good, bad. Danger. Don't go to the tangent again [omitted].

[END ANOM EXTRACTS FOR APPENDIX]







**Why we Post**  
**(About ourselves)**

**An Arts-Based Approach to  
Autobiographical Acts in Social Media**

**Ester T. Roura**

**BSc Hons, MPhil**

**Thesis presented for the award of PhD**  
**School of Communications, Dublin City University**  
**Supervisor: Dr Declan Tuite**

**July 2018**

**(2 Volumes)**

**Vol 2**





## Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed:  (Candidate)

ID No. : 13212581

Date: July 2018

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First and foremost my gratitude goes to the participants in the research who generously ‘gifted’ their stories and their time and welcomed me into their lives. Thank you for the many insights, for the emotions, for the tears and laughter, for the stimulating conversations and also for the music, the images and photographs, for the exquisite and not-so-exquisite meals, for the walks, short trips and cups of tea. Thank you to all those who kept in touch and offered their invaluable friendship. Thank you to those that had to leave for the far beyond land. I would like to thank my Supervisor Dr. Declan Tuite for his patience, advice, guidance and time dedicated to review my dissertation and in particular for his good spirited disposition. My thanks go also to Brenda, my colleague in DCU for listening to my ‘crazy elocutions’ and for her sharp comments. I also thank my friends from the Geological Survey of Ireland, Silvia and ‘Little’ Xavi for their suggestions on how to organize the field notes. Thank you to my family and friends for their support and understanding. Thank you Mala from the very bottom of my heart.

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For Mala



# THE POLYPHONIC ARTeFACT

## [disclaimer]

All the stories, people (living and dead) and events portrayed in this section are based in real stories, people (living and dead) and events. Any resemblance with a work of fiction is not intended by the author and is either a coincidence or the product of the reader own troubled imagination. <sup>(0)</sup>

SUPERSCRIPT:

() Black for Footnotes: Translation or definition of words from a language different than English.

() Blue for Endnotes: References, citations and comments on other works. Intertextuality. Heteroglossic dialogism.

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## PREAMBLE (Vol 2)

This volume is a 'single case' construct of a family [collective] autobiography. The 'case' is built from the stories generated by 46 participants during a period of over two years of ethnographical work and re-storied in conjunction with them around the event of the death of a mother. The choice of a family plot was agreed upon with the participants. This scenario seemed the one to what everyone could relate, including the researcher. For the majority of the participants family and childhood constituted the backbone of their identity and this manifested across the board through frequent references to childhood and adolescence and relationships with family members and friends.

This volume provides a snapshot of the experiences of the participants in the form of a series of interlinked composite scenarios in which their online and offline everyday life is re-created. The purpose of the vignettes is to creatively delve for insights into personal and societal issues affecting the participants while providing the context in which their autobiographical acts in social media take place. This inquiry argues that personal and societal issues are reflected in or indicated by the participants' autobiographical acts in social media. The 'data' (e.g. interview transcripts, fieldnotes) is presented dynamically in this volume and shaped as a narrative device called 'the Polyphonic Artefact', which can be best described as a 'virtual reality' or 'grounded fiction.' The device is polyphonic because it blends the voices of the participants in a series of interconnected short stories curated by the researcher and annotated by them. The vignettes, which can be read in the given order or arbitrarily, mimic the flows and contingencies of autobiographical acts in social media, including its reverse chronology, while inscribing them into everyday embodied experience.



In the narrative the voices of the informants are curated into composite characters (*mother, son-wanderer, daughter, father, wife, neighbour* etc...) that are part of the same networks: family, friends, co-workers and acquaintances. They move across physical spaces: house, work, pub, hospital, or public transport in the same way that they move across social media platforms such as *Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Whatsapp* or *Youtube* and technology devices such as mobile phones, desktop computers or assistive technology. The characters also navigate between a 'told' present and a 'remembered' past. Like on the Internet, time and space collapse in the narration. The narrative artefact 'tells' life, but at the same time tries to convey how lived experience is felt as it happens. It also attempts to open up new channels capable of laying bare less told and less heard parts of autobiographical acts expressed in social media outlets, this is to say, what goes on at the 'backstage' as defined by Goffman (1959).

Polyphony also refers to composite voices stemming from cultural productions, which in turn are concocted within socio-political-historic contexts. In this sense the artefact is plagued with 'otherness.' For example references to literary characters or authors, media works, allusions to fine art and fragments of musical pieces. In the artefact direct quotations from other works appear in blue and unreferenced within the text, to avoid breaking the flow of the story, however, they are given a number, which indicates the source text in a list at the end of the volume. The function of intertextuality in the artefact is both symbolic and stylistic and it is also part of the creative process of the researcher.

The polyphonic narrative, although it employs dramatization, rhetorical figures and intertextuality: all strategies employed in literary fiction, should be taken as a creative approach to understand the participants' autobiographical acts, rather than a piece of

literary fiction. Dramatization, rhetoric, images and intertextuality are employed as tools to explore and express the participants' points of view. The different voices are in constant dialogue either with each other, ruminating in a dialogued soliloquy, or with cultural and historical references as defined by a Bakhtinian framework. The voice of the researcher, although it is not made explicit within the text, inevitably runs all along in the background, ghostwriting from a position of empathy, and explicitly brought to life on the form of 'poetic reverberations' (Bachelard, 2014) intended to link and merge the multitude of stories into a single (polyphonic) narrative.

This volume is the defined 'zone' of encounter between participants and researcher and the place where negotiation, co-creation and ultimately mutual understanding occurs. Some stories appear humorous, while others are hard to take in, some are poignant and others may appear tedious or even dull to a literary connoisseur, but it must be clarified that the stories are not written for entertainment purposes. They are the result of a compromise with the participants and sometimes it was felt that some 'narrative tones' were more appropriate than others to tell their stories, and consequently this had to be respected.

The stories appear headed by small images (illustrations, photographs and series of video stills). The images were a late addition to the artefact and play the double role of, on the one hand, and by their actual size, reaffirming the 'smallness' of the stories being told, and on the other, mimicking the combinations of image and text characteristic of social media autobiographical posts. Their function is to illustrate and complement the narration. Sometimes they are pure expressions of the sentiment of a particular vignette (e.g. black square in *A Sense of an Ending* story, the liver of Prometheus' being eaten by an

eagle in *Guilt*, or the big eye in *A Sense of Observation*) and in others, they show a particular aspect of what is being told ( e.g. the running chicken in *Hammurabi Code*, the menstrual blood in *Hysteria or the Curse of Cassandra*). Of the series of images, some of them came directly from the field, this is to say: from the participants' social media feeds, their family albums, or their home mantelpieces, and were chosen in conjunction with them (e.g. the image of the singer Leif Garret in *Telemachus*, the insomnia meme in *A Journal of Insomnia*, the communion card in *The Help*, St Catherine Laboure's relic in *Relics* or the series of video stills in *Circe Unleashed*). Other images correspond to recreations made by the researcher and, in some cases, in order to protect the participants' and their networks anonymity (e.g the boy bitten by a swan in *The Longest Night*). The images appear purposely untitled and uncommented on in order to highlight the ambiguity of the relationship between image and text in social media. The uncaptioned images allow the reader to complete their meaning, in the same way than an audience in social media completes the meaning of the autobiographical act.



# I

## PROLOGUE

### The Beginning of a Journey

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace. <sup>(1)</sup>

Every journey departs or joins in from somewhere. Not necessarily a point alpha or zero but a beginning nevertheless. Every journey is called to an end but it is never really over, done or set in stone. Arrested perhaps but never finished. Experience tells that even the journey of a lifetime extends beyond the individual's body and goes on in the samsara of birth and death. And then there are memories, in which events and peoples are continuously renewed by those who think and re-think them. Mankind likes its bedrocks though. Prisoners of a sort of Sisyphian trap, humankind rolls its stones uphill and chisels them away with words in the hope the rocks will understand and remain still. Maybe there is a mundane reason for this carry-on such as having some peace of mind. But rocks are not into the business of listening, in fact they never do. The so-called postmoderns had already hinted in that direction, so did the classics with the wrath of their gods; but also quantum mechanics and Bob Dylan with his little twists of fate. It must be admitted: some things resist attainability and any effort in that

direction, inevitably, will paint a partial and short-lived picture. I am like the man who brought along a brick to show the world the way his house had looked <sup>(2)</sup>. How to explain yourself then? how are you to paint this unknown masterpiece <sup>(3)</sup>, the self, without losing yourself in the attempt ?

The beginning of a journey can be located at any point. Could very well start in *media res*<sup>1</sup> and take the shape of an idea, and before that, maybe something you have felt but you cannot put into words. Say the rudiment of an intuition. But this intuition is never just an instant. It is a flow. It is ever transformed. Maybe after a while you can amplify that rudiment with words that justify it in a pragmatic way but this is not a guarantee of a better understanding. Sometimes words are counterproductive. They tend to fit pre-existing schemata. The question is: how to unlearn <sup>(4)</sup> them and see the world anew? With the fresh mind of a small child or that of an outsider, say an accidental tourist or that of an anthropologist in Mars <sup>(5)</sup>.

The beginning of a journey therefore must stem from the place in which the idea is felt. It is in that space of flowing playfulness in which everything is possible and nothing set in stone that some understanding might occur. Note the conditional. Once you met a man who was pushing not a stone like Sisyphus, but a block of ice along the streets of a capital city near the equator until it melted into water and then evaporated into nothing. When he surprised you staring at him quizzically and in disbelief, he just stared back at you and said in a nonchalant manner: “Sometimes doing something leads to nothing” <sup>(6)</sup>, then he

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<sup>1</sup> Latin for “the middle point”

shook your hand and left. Your hand was wet but the sun dried it before you had the time to reach for the back of your trousers and wipe it. He had a point you thought.

The beginning of this journey was felt in the flow of the whole world entering your being. Oozing, pervasive like fog, the flux gradually veiling any tactile sense of intimacy with the other and at the end of the day, by extension and reflexion, with yourself. *If today's connectivity allows for the constant onslaught of images and narratives filling your everyday's blanks, this also makes you long for something that can hold your attention* <sup>(7)</sup>. You pass them fragments with an almost empty mind, for they have the quality of bringing you to a meditative state. Like the monk counting his rosary's beads while intoning a mantra. The mantra-song of nothingness. The black-hole of too much which becomes less than a little if you fail to notice what is going on. And 'what is going on' is not necessarily to be found in 'what is there' but in what 'fails to be there.' You have also been curious about empty spaces, the blank around shapes, the silence around music. So, what is the noise not saying or not showing? Would you ever find out? Maybe it doesn't want to be found. Maybe it is best like this. How disappointing ! Well, sure. Things do not always go according to plan.

Think in *what she said about what is going on from Monday to Tuesday.* <sup>(8a)</sup> She said if you look into anyone on an ordinary day you will see how he or she receives, just as you do, a shower of impressions some more memorable than others but that as they fall they will shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday in which the important moments, those that can capture your attention, will come not here where you want them to be but perhaps there. But if you, or anyone, is set to make sense of a life you must follow some conventions, possibly those of narrative, otherwise you will fail to make others to understand.

However, mind that a life is not a string of happenings perfectly arranged like a series of lamps in a street but a “luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” <sup>(8b)</sup> and this is your challenge. Everyone’s challenge.

But what is the best way to tell a story about life? Is there a best way? Any story, and at a first glance, is either a ‘re-enactment’ or a ‘handicraft’ of something that has-happened, real or imaginary, and by means of translation or codification into the form of a language or idiom: be this English, comic strips or music. Stories are created by re-collection and by art-ifice. Personal stories for example, those that refer to what has happened to an individual: ‘me’, ‘you’, ‘him’ or ‘her.’ They are all been thrown out there, say the Internet, the street, the shop, the stage. Sometimes they are thrown as life happens; sometimes they are unleashed only after arduous crafting. Life can be improvised but stories are always rehearsed.

To make a ‘good story’ for themselves, some people would micromanage their life to please others, an audience. Perhaps the family, a partner, a boss or an institution or perhaps a crowd in a concert; maybe it is about pleasing a Super-Ego in Freud’s terms or the king ghost in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. But at the onlook, what is more important, to have a good story or to have a good life? A well known dramatist, back in the eighteen hundreds, Sir Henry Taylor, said once that a “good story” is in fact the best recipe for inauthenticity.

<sup>(9)</sup> Point contested by at least two others, namely D.H. Lawrence and Oscar Wilde, who saw in the story told, in the act of masking, the precise proof of veracity. <sup>(10)</sup> For in the way we mask or in the motives of the masking we will find our true character.



## II

### The Wanderer

Tell me muse of the man of many ways, who wandered far after sacking the holy city of Troy. Many were the men whose lands he saw, whose minds he learned, and many too were the sorrows of his heart upon the open sea, striving for his own life and the safe return home of his dear comrades.<sup>(1)</sup>

I am the Wanderer. As Odysseus I am a man of many ways. I can also ascertain that I am a man of many shapes. I am taller and handsomer than the average man but still a head shorter than my father, and notably less imposing. Never mind the curse inflicted upon my body by the tropes of time and my own neglect. I am a transformer or a shape shifter since the day I was born. A never completed project. Not because I am a perfectionist but as a matter of fact. This is what it is. I am a nihilist (or anomic) by reckoning and an outdated romantic-essentialist by punctual pragmatic realization. And by this I mean that although my rational brain tells me that this life of mine, and by extension that of man, is ultimately purposeless, besides feeding an infinite cycle of creation and destruction, sometimes I catch a glimpse of the world revealing itself for an instant and then quickly going away like the landscape behind the glass window in a moving train. Then everything reverts to an original state of anomie. I don't know if it has always been this way, but it is the way I experience life.



I am as courageous and as fearful as anyone else at one point. As social and as antisocial as any other person. I am clever and I am plain stupid. Vain and careless. I can easily go berserk or remain as calm as a Buddhist monk. As a man of many wiles I am well able to get away with murder if I put my heart and soul in it. But I usually don't. I am everyman. I also live a step away from myself. I have a reputation for having achieved things only once in life. And this is not the result of any sort of personal challenge or lack of interest. It just happens this way. Life keeps bringing me occasions, little tastes of opportunity and then takes them back immediately as if they weren't meant for me. It is like walking over a loose rope all the time. No time to relax and sit back to enjoy the view. Yet sometimes I think that this is the only thing I can do. Relax, sit back and enjoy the view.

But I do get stressed too with the constant wander. If I weren't to blame fate for this, I could put it down to my total lack of patience and excessive interest in almost everything and nothing at all. I am totally inconsistent. Although on second thoughts this fact has proved to be a constant. And I don't mean things like buying bread or having a shower. Of course I have visited twice the same baker and bought a similar piece of sourdough twice. I also shower occasionally. What I mean is that I can only push myself to do complex things, the sort of things that require learning and sacrifice, only once. I suffer so much with the recurring thought that I am not good for anything in particular. Not that I am good for nothing. Some things I can do very well. For example pizza. Nevertheless sometimes my condition strikes me as meaningful when looking at the bigger picture of the universe. For example, I can only bring myself to be alive once. So does everybody else.

The things I have done once have gone either very well, to my surprise, or terribly wrong. Love and marriage: wrong; parachutism: right; cheese souffle: right; scuba diving: wrong, climbing the third tallest mountain in the world and reaching the last camp without any food other than greasy cookies, no oxygen or special training: right; I am very proud of that ‘only once’ occasion. I had to stop at 6.585 meters. But taking on board that I only went for a walk and never intended to summit, that was quite an impressive achievement. I just meant to go for a stroll but I kept walking. I was lucky I suppose. On the way down, things were more complicated as the weather started changing for worst and I had eaten all the cookies. Being the son of a bitch that I am, I happened to stumble upon a team of Russian scientists studying a subtropical species of moths. They fed me with rice bamboo and sweet tea with yak milk. They were ex-astronauts of the ex-Soviet Union recycled to entomologists. Technically they had rescued me but I am proud of my achievement nevertheless. I cannot repeat it loud enough.



### III

## **Guilt**

It was only after the funeral that it hit me. Like a sudden slap on the face. It was there. What I most dreaded I knew was bound to fall upon me: a big bottomless hole right beneath the end tip of the sternum sandwiched between the ribs cage, the diaphragm and the liver. Perhaps inside the liver itself. This is as close I can get to define with words the experience of

heartbreak with the nuance that I can actually feel it in the liver although I never heard of a liverbreak. My emptiness is sorrow mingling with guilt. I can think of a picture I saw once of Prometheus tied up to a rock with his liver being pecked out by a big bird. Apparently his liver would grow back every night to be devoured again by the eagle during the day in a recurrent cycle. The emblem was captioned with Latin verses and headed by a motto: “ Qua supra nos, nihil ad nos” (That which is above us is nothing to us).

I was never quite close to her. When I was a kid she was there of course to dress and feed me but I was always under the impression that I was more a disturbance than anything else. Once she bluntly blamed me for ruining her figure. I couldn't understand what she meant by that. Another time she said that I was too fat. Yes, I was a chubby child. I was so happy then. I could relate joy with the succulent Sundays with grandpa, my mother's father, a quite grande fellow himself. He would take me out of the house in the morning and instead of going to Mass we would go to the local pub and have calamari with tomato sauce, battered squid, homemade potato chips, green olives stuffed with anchovies and Coca-Cola for me and a Campari for him. That was our body of Christ.

After the Mass was over we would collect the prayer sheet of the day and head back home where grandma would greet us with a big tray of meat cannelloni for starters and Ox stew with mushrooms as main course and a crème brûlée as a dessert. The menu remained unchanged for as far as I remember. Later in life I became a chef. A quite accomplished one. In my youth I travelled the world working in cruise ships and then I settled in the Antipodes where I met my wife, ex-wife now, and together ran a very successful business. I was the alma mater of the deconstruction of the Caffè Marocchino. It became a social media hit. Of course

I copied Ferran Adrià who started deconstructing everything, including himself, back in the 1990's, and who in turn copied Derrida who was already deconstructing in the late 1960's and preceded by the medieval alchemists.

The question was to be as far from home as possible. I had always played the role of the poor boy obliged to emigrate for work and terribly missing home. I even have a full Instagram album of *saudades*<sup>2</sup> for the motherland. Once, when I was seventeen, my mother was sick in bed with a terrible migraine and we were waiting for the doctor to call into the house. Dad had to go to work and as it was summer and I was doing close to nothing he asked me to keep an eye on her and look after the doctor when he arrived. I think my sister must have been in a youth camp or something like that at the time. The case is that I was in charge. I stood there by the door looking at the ceiling for a while until it became too boring to bear. I went then to my bedroom to finish reading my latest Manara acquisition; which I had secretly bought and kept hidden from my parents; it was called *The Odyssey*, and belonged to the Giuseppe Bergman series. A hit in the seventies and eighties. After a couple of pages I could feel the urge of my hormones taking possession of my persona. I couldn't. Not now. My mother was lying two doors away and the doctor was about to call.

I did. When my dad came back from work that evening I couldn't find a suitable explanation for missing the doctor's call and I lied like a coward: "I have checked on her, I have checked on her, I swear!" I pleaded with him. And then I had the cheek to add: "And the doctor never called." My father just looked at me without uttering a word and his silence hit me on the side of the face. He then went to the hall where the phone was and started dialing

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<sup>2</sup> Longings, in Portuguese.

the number for an ambulance. My mother must have ran a high fever; she was sweaty, her nose had a bleed and she had passed out. That is what he said to the person on the other side of the line.

She spent five weeks in hospital. She had surgery to release the pressure on the brain. Her hair was completely shaved and she wore a huge scar on the right side of her head. When the ambulance left I was astonished. I stood there, by the doorbell for hours. I was numbed. Eventually I ventured into her bedroom and I could see splatters of blood everywhere. The sheets were red and red were the portions of the wall where she had left the imprint of her hands before collapsing to the floor where my dad found her, god knows how many hours later since it had happened. The blood sprinkles became like a presence to put me in my place. Everyday I could find new ones: on the floor, under the bed, on the alarm clock, under the pillow, as my father made me clean them all after he found out I missed the doctor. Stupid, stupid!.

After my mother passed away this was the first memory that came to my mind. It was as vivid as if it had just happened the day before. Don't ask me why but later I found myself looking into the old family album. I needed to find a particular picture. I found it. There she was. Sitting on her hospital bed, with the bandaged head, just after the operation. A nurse took the photograph. That day was the day my mother regained consciousness and she asked us to pose together with her: dad, my sister, grandma and I. I am the only one looking away. Now, with the proof of my guilt in my hands I experienced the impulse to confess to the world what I had done but I couldn't. I wanted to post it on Instagram or on Facebook and tell everybody the fraud I was but I didn't. Actually I did but with a private setting. Maybe one day I will find the courage. Maybe I won't. Maybe it doesn't matter after all.



## IV

### **Let's Talk About You but Without Sorrow**

*17 June 2017*

Let's talk about her but without sorrow. Simply lets talk about her. Let's talk about how she left us; let's talk about her painful and slow dead. Let's talk about her things, her likings, what she loved and what she hated. Let's talk about what she did and what she said and what she felt. Let's talk about her but without sorrow. Let's talk now and we will see how gradually she will become so much in us that there won't be need to remember her because little by little she will become in us: a gesture, a word, a flavor, or a gaze that flow without saying or without thinking.<sup>(12)</sup>

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After mom passed away I reached for the phone and messaged everybody, called everybody, posted on Facebook. I needed to shout: " MY MOTHER IS DEAD! I AM AN ORPHAN! " When she went I felt... I don't know how I felt. Empty? It felt unreal. It didn't register immediately. I would be doing anything and then think, oh I must tell mom about such and such... but of course I couldn't. Bizarre uh? Then I would see her sitting on her favourite chair or dream about her. After she passed away I felt compelled to write and to tell everybody about her and about my feelings about her. The pain was excruciating and weird. I

changed my Facebook banner into a pure black block and then, out of the blue I started posting pictures of her things, linked to memories, moments we shared. I also changed my profile picture on Whatsapp. I put the picture my brother took of me holding tight the urn with her ashes and then I posted it too into Facebook. Dad was disgusted. It was horrible. He said I didn't have any decorum. But I got a lot of support and I found that comforting. Of course the pain was still there but it made it more bearable.

Just before and during the funeral I was too absorbed with the arrangements to feel anything but a void. Lets say that I functioned. I posted a picture of white roses and the details of the ceremony so everyone could attend if they wanted to. Many people came, some who had never met her but they knew me: some girlfriends and work colleagues. They felt sorry for me. It was nice that they came. It was nice all the support I got, at the funeral, on Facebook. She was cremated and her ashes kept at home in an urn, at the center of the mantelpiece, over the fireplace. I separated a few ounces for the necklaces. Then I took a handful and filled a blister, I didn't tell my father, and on Earth day, three months after her passing, I disposed her ashes in a recently planted tree. A sequoia. I asked one of my friends to take a video and then I posted it on Facebook . I am sorry dad but this is the way it is and she would have loved it.

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A few hours have lapsed since the funeral. Earlier today the three of us gathered under the cypresses, next to the crematorium, in the graveyard, a little tucked away from the others, which were starting to make a move to give us some space and to ensure a stool at the local pub. Our heads lowered to the ground and contrasting with the trees pointing to the heavens, full of vitality, like knowing that they can well live for over five hundred years, unlike us. My

sister holding the urn containing my mother's ashes, cuddling it like if it were a baby. "Can you take a picture of me with mom?" she asked looking at me. "Oh for god's sake!" my father grumbled. "What?" My sister replied. "Is this going to be for your Internet?" dad said. "It is not of your concern" she said. "Guys, guys, let's have the party in peace.." I said. "Take the goddamned picture would you?" she said. "Sure" I answered. Friends and relatives were already waiting for us in the pub. "Shall we make a move?" I said. They nodded in agreement but none of us moved. It was like if we were petrified or stuck to the ground.

"How are you doing dad?" I asked while sweeping the ground gravel with my foot and without lifting my head "Now that I think about it. I have had so many things to do, urgent matters to attend to, that I have overlooked the fact that I am going to die. I am so clueless! I had stupidly forgotten about this project: 'life' and I must fix it without delay. I shall gather all my willpower and start dying rationally and with enthusiasm. I know everybody would like my death to be as presentable as my life." He said, his head still down and hiding half a smile. "You mean more presentable than mom's?" my sister snapped. "NO, God, this is not what I mean. I am just thinking these days... Leaving with dignity and without much noise." I could see my sister frowning. It appeared she was about to say something but only silence followed. "Shall we go?" I insisted.

In the pub, just under a dozen of friends and relatives, drinks on hand chat lively, the rest have left after the funeral. They are talking anecdotes and laughing between stories. One of mum's closest friends, the neighbour next door, and the only one staying till the end, is explaining an outing they went to when my mother was already in a wheelchair but still well able to speak and write: "...And then she would say: could you please wheel me closer to the



edge? I really want to tumble and finish it all in style.” “Where was that?” Dad intervenes. “That was in Dun Angus.” The woman says. “That was one of her favourite spots.” another adds “Have you been there?” a first cousin asks while looking at my sister and I. “ I am afraid I haven’t,” I confess. “It has a breathtaking cliff, it is in the West”; “I see” I say without much enthusiasm. I am not impressed in the least by either Western landscapes or my mother’s love for drama.

“She posted it online” my sister says joining the conversation and leaving the urn with the ashes on the table prepared for the occasion with pictures of my mother, flowers and a glass of prosecco with a strawberry inside. ‘Of course she did” dad mutters. My sister rolls her eyes. The comment doesn’t prevent her producing a phone and clicking on the Facebook icon on the screen. After the application is launched she scrolls for a while and stops at a picture of my mother sitting on her wheelchair, smiling and pointing to the void opening behind her. Indeed she was at the edge of a cliff all wrapped in Gore-Tex, her nose as red as a tomato cherry. A series of posts with more pictures of the day and dark humourous comments completes the thread. In one of them she was pretending to be already dead, with her tongue sticking out of her mouth and her neck bent to one side and her arm pretending to hold a rope. “She was such a clown wasn’t she?” my sister says with pride. All laugh but my father and I. “Another round of drinks!” Dad orders, I guess hoping to change the subject. But my sister keeps on going with the Facebook feeds.

My mother had to stop posting on her own when, unfortunately, she lost herself to the crippling illness. Her last post coincided with the day I got my star. When I posted it on Facebook to let the world know with great fanfare that I had entered the Michelin club, my

sister's message also reached the world through my wall: "Mommy is losing her battle with [omitted] and she no longer will be able to communicate directly to you. I thank you all for your best wishes on her behalf"; which made the proximity of both breaking news awkward, to say the least. I didn't realize until some close friends whatsapped me to congratulate me for the Michelin star and also to feel sorry for my mom. This is how I learnt about the development of her estate. I then called home and hid my own post. Perhaps it was the other way round. Anyway this didn't prevent others sharing it and the entire affair ended up with great embarrassment for my part. I was mortified.

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The pictures taken by the cliff were your mother's last performance, and probably the last time she was truly present. Recent posts showing in her feed are tributes from friends and relatives but most are posts by your sister, who is now curating her profile so that she can live on. But who of the two? you wonder. Earlier on, in the graveyard, you have discussed the need for her to stop doing that. To let her go but she won't have it. "You haven't been there with her everyday! You can let go! I can't. I don't want to!" she shouted with tears in her eyes. "I agree with him dear. It's the best for you " Dad convened with you (for once) while massaging her back. "You both are really something else!. You, are the least with the right to tell me what to do!. I knew her inside out and I know she would want me to continue her legacy! You both left her a long time ago! DO NOT dare to tell me what to do!". She was right. You turned your head away from her at the age of seventeen in that picture on the hospital and never looked back.

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The scrolling continues. You have noticed these days that the moment someone produces a phone to show something the conversation immediately shifts towards the object shown online: let this be a video, a meme, a photograph. Then it triggers a chain reaction in which everyone seems to have something on their phones worth to talk about. For a while it is like this. Twelve mourners moving about the space like excited bees gathering around the artefact, taking turns sharing the latest novelty that would satisfy their peckishness for news. Hence from Mom's suicidal performance by the edge of the cliff the conversation downgrades, or upgrades depending on the point of view, to property prices and the latest by Donald Trump.

The evening goes by quickly between pints and Internet puns until the bell tolls announcing one o'clock. The mourning bees get again excited buzzing towards the bar, which is now experiencing the busiest time of the night. Smart phones and their applications are soon forgotten and when the buzzing busy bees return to the hive with the booze, Mom is again the central theme of conversation. All are now gathering around the mantelpiece presided by her ashes, sharing deep existential thoughts distilled by the alcohol: That life is for real and we get the picture quite late. "Here, here." That she took life by the horns. "Here, here." That she wanted to leave a trace and among great applause. "All raised!. Let's toast!" That getting old, dying, were just dimensions of theatre for her. That she always had her spirits raising high despite the script she was given. "Here, here." "Ladies and gentlemen, it is 2AM" the barman announces. "Yup" Says the first cousin. "Time to make a move I guess" says another man, "Thank you all for coming" are my sister's words. "Good night to all" are Dad's. The farewell goes on for a while. Like before in the graveyard nobody seems to be able to move despite the best intentions.

Eventually we all leave. We hug outside the pub and keep chatting until the last ‘bee’ is accommodated in a taxi heading back to town. I linger for a while in the dark; smoking a cigarette borrowed from a patron. I had smoked away all my reserves. It’s been a long day. I am not precisely in the mood to get in a taxi and go back to my hotel room. I look around; the Moon is in last quarter but it is quite bright. Dawn will come soon so I decide that I might just walk. This sounds about right. I take a deep breath before starting the journey. The fresh air of the morning filling my polluted lungs causes a fit of cough followed by an expulsion of phlegm, which I ditch to the side of the road. I start walking. “Ahhh” My aching chest, my heart racing like mad. Will I make it to town? “Yes, I say yes, I will yes”.<sup>(13)</sup>



## V

### **The Longest Night**

“Resignation dear. ” “ What I said: Call me if you need anything.” “If I think I visited her only a couple of months ago...” “When they told me I couldn’t believe it! ” “ Courage...” “Take care...” “ What time you said is the funeral tomorrow?” The parade of unexpressive faces continues. It is like a flow. Standing by the door, my legs feel heavy. My hands hurting after shaking so many of others, my lips aching after kissing the air besides so many faces, my throat scarred after so many “Thank you”, “Thank you” to such and such. People are never the same but the density keeps increasing. At the beginning of the night it is all too conventional.

Long gray faces and awkwardness, but by the second hour after midnight, when tiredness has taken hold, a crazy laughter breaks the lull. It is my uncle. The lunatic of my father has just made a joke. Other's laughter follows. The tension has just dissipated. They talk to each other, tea is being drunk and sandwiches eaten.

You always wanted to have a wake before you died. You just wanted to lie there in a coffin, just as you are doing now, and listen to what people have to say about you. A bit of a cliché if you don't mind me to say. Let me seat as close as I can and listen. Let me be your ears, mother. Two neighbours are sitting on the opposite side of the coffin. They are looking at me. "I have never seen before a dead with such color." I nod in agreement with a sort of strange pride. "And how calm she seems..." I nod again. "She doesn't look dead at all." I look at you mother. Your rosy face and your red lips, the blue gown you liked so much and your hair combed back. A heavy perfume of lilies filling my nostrils. I think I am going to sneeze but instead I feel tears running down my cheeks, then a river, and later the flood, how tedious. "Oh dear!" A woman I don't recognise comes close to me and offers me a kleenex. "Here..." Then she pats my shoulder. "That's it. That's better." I remember her now. She was a friend of yours, mother. "When I was told. I couldn't believe it! I didn't know she was so sick, otherwise..." She leaves the sentence hanging and takes a sip from her tea. I nod again.

Bulging shadows approach the coffin from all flanks. All seem to bear some attraction towards my persona, as if I was a magnet or a queen bee. They all gather around me to touch me, to infuse me with their breaths. Some even bend their bodies to squeeze me. A tall and dark familiar figure approaches. "Is your brother here?" "Hey Dad." "No, not yet...he is on his way... I couldn't find him..." I say. "Well, lets hope he can make it..." I nod and indicate

him to get closer. Then I whisper to his ear: "What was the uncle laughing about? What did you tell him?" "Oh just an old bad joke I heard on your grandmother's funeral. I thought it just would work as well..." "Tell me." "I was just making the remark that at least your mother would sleep home tonight..." "It's not funny!" "Come on...she would have loved it!" "Father, you are such a moron."

Friends and neighbours shift continuously around the refreshments table. They chat animatedly at times, eating in silence at others. They look in my direction at intervals. I know they are talking about me or about my mother. When they realize I am watching them, they wave hello. Invariably one of them would disentangle from the conversation is having to bring me some snacks or fresh tea. "Are you alright dear? Here, have something to eat." "I am not hungry, thank you." "But you should..." "I will eat later..." "You should get some rest..." "I am fine, I never sleep anyway." "The night is long... I will wait until you come back..." "I am fine, thank you." When they run out of words they excuse themselves, then somebody else comes to take their place. "Are you alright dear? Here, have something to eat." "I am not hungry, thank you." "But you should..." "I will eat later..." "You should get some rest..." "I am fine, I don't need to sleep." "The night is long... I will wait until you come back..." "I am fine."

A neighbour in particular, a good friend of your mother, is sitting on the other side of the coffin, opposite to me, she won't take her eyes off me. It is like if she is waiting for me to have a moment of weakness to jump to my aid and offer something: a word of comfort, a handkerchief or a pat on the shoulder. Tonight I have seen her crying at times, with short choppy sobs, then she dries her tears with clumsiness and saves the kleenex, as she might need

it again, in a fold on the sleeve of her sweater. Who would have thought that she would be the one that would continue visiting you after the rest of the world disappeared, mother? You had thousands of self declared friends, admirers, and followers but as you used to say they had stronger tongues than feelings. A few of those quick to praise are now here, they have had the audacity to make an appearance. Some people would never miss a parade. Would it be true, mother, that life gives back what you have given?

I can see you looking at yourself from above and complaining about the make-up. Let me smooth the whiteness with some bare minerals I have here. There you are. Let me blur a little bit this blush. Here. That's better. One second mother. There you are. The trouble they go to make you look like yourself. To erase the traces of death. I guess it is my fault they made you up like a doll. I gave them the picture we took the day of your birthday, yes, that's the one, the one we took in the pizzeria, a few years ago. Yes, the one we celebrated after the show and you kept your make up on because we were running late for the table. What was the performance of? Oh yes, *The Mikado*, you were starring as Yum Yum. I don't know what I was thinking. You looked ravishing though, so pale, your porcelain skin.

Look at that woman over there mother. That's right, the blond with the bird's nest hairdo. I haven't seen her in ages!. What is she doing here? Shush, She is coming over. I cannot believe she is crying like if she had lost the love of her life. She will ruin you! Stop crying over my mother's body! There comes the other one too. She is giving her a handkerchief. Poor woman. But this one, shame on her. She shouldn't be crying. I should be the only one allowed to cry ! Some people don't have manners. Look at her, and the attention

she is getting now. Enough is enough! “Are you all right dear? I am sure my mother would appreciate a more cheerful night ...” I dare to say. “Here, here.” some people concur.

I can see my father, my uncle and other men breaking from a gathering and going outside. They return after few minutes with some gear. They are due to play tomorrow at the funeral but they would do it just now too. My father decided to form a band with some silver foxes, not long ago, after having an existential crisis. He always wanted to sing stories like Laurie Anderson but he never gave himself the opportunity to do it seriously as he was sucked, in early life, by the flow of the everyday and the fear to disappoint. I can relate to him. “Fortunately for you folks, this is not one of my tunes but one of my dearest once-upon-a-time wife favourite songs. What are words if not useless if you don’t tell them to anyone? Let the strings begin, then the voice. This is to you love: Samhradh Samhradh.” The men sing:  
Samhradh, samhradh /Samhradh, samhradh/ [...] /Samhradh,  
samhradh/ Samhradh, samhradh/ Is cé bhainfeadh dinn é? /Samhradh,  
samhradh/ Is cé bhainfeadh dinn é? / Is cé bhainfeadh dinn é? / Ó lui na  
gréine.<sup>3 (14)</sup>

Words are useless if you don’t tell them to anyone, he says. Well mother, let me tell you something . Let me tell you that I am glad you went. This wasn’t life. For any of us. Not that I had A life in capital letters. I had rather a series of lives put in a straight line from end to end. We had had good days together, we didn’t see them because they went unnoticed, veiled by the banality of the everyday, but I know that I wished that life would neither stop or continue. What now? I have come to yet another end. Tell me, what now? Before coming here I went to your room and I stole your nightgown from the laundry trolley and your

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<sup>3</sup> Summer, summer / summer, summer / [...] / Summer, summer / summer, summer / And who’d take it from us? / Summer, summer / And who’d take it from us? / And who’d take it from us? / From the setting of the sun



hairbrush from the bathroom cupboard. I put it in a plastic bag from the supermarket, hid it in my handbag and brought it home. I sat on my bed, in the dark, and cuddled it tight until it hurt. I sniffed the fabric like a bloodhound. What came up to my nostrils and straight to my brain was the strange mixture of life and dead all concentrated in a mere piece of cotton wearing your imprint. Sindonem<sup>4</sup>. A formula made of your body scent; medicament; the two drops of perfume you always used to put in your clothes and that I continued to put when you couldn't anymore; traces of washing powder and softener; skin cells and body fluids; sweat. I couldn't put it away. With your nightgown close to my heart, I picked your hairbrush and I brushed my own hair with it. Then I picked the hairs, yours and mine, trapped in the bristles and made a hank. I began to play with the soft ball, I smelled it and I pinned it back. I left it on the sidebed table. Then I put the nightgown over the bed and took the hairbrush and put it on top. I took a picture and I posted it on Facebook: "Mammy doesn't need these any more. R.I.P. Always in my heart. Xx."

If parents have the power to make you, the opposite is also true. They have the power to break you. Parents, because they are just people, and because they are the people you must rely on when you are a child, they rarely come across as flat, although there might be some exceptions. To me, mother, you came the full round from genius to the outrageous. Kind at times, terrifying at others. Silly, funny, severe, authoritarian, aloof, caring. The full collection of synonyms and antonyms applicable to motherhood. You made a legend of yourself. As you do. You kept growing your story at the cost of ours, perhaps at the cost of truth. But what is the truth if not another story? When you are small you see things going on, perhaps the times are difficult, perhaps there is too much conflict, too much aggression, but you don't allow

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<sup>4</sup> The shroud in which Christ was wrapped after his dead.

yourself to see. You blind yourself as a measure of protection. It is a survival strategy.

It is not only the end of Spring and the beginning of Summer but also the day after the day you decided to come to this world, many years ago. I have always found fascinating how some people seem to have an inner skill for timing. That you decided to die the day after you were born it must have some significance in the wider plan of the universe. It could be just chance? Or your natural inclination for a particular sort of beauty. This will be written in your epitaph: Born on the 13 of June 1950, died 14 of June 2017, funeral rites took place on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June. Bloomsday. Bet you planned it this way. I am going to post it. Wait. Not today. Do you remember the year you were invited to read Molly Bloom's soliloquy at the park? the cousins came over from America with their children, the girl was eight and the boy eleven at the time, and we all dressed up in costume for the occasion. That day I helped you into the improvised stage, under a Victorian canopy, your right leg had started to fail and you were helping yourself with a crutch but the long period skirt you were wearing made it quite difficult so I gave you my arm and you leaned on me during the reading without punctuation in which you grasped for air at the end but it was glorious nevertheless:

...Yes 16 years ago my God after that long kiss I near lost my breath yes he said I was a flower of the mountain yes so we are flowers all a woman's body yes that was one true thing he said in his life and the sun shines for you today yes[...]Yes and all the queer little streets and the pink and blue and yellow houses and the rose gardens and the Jessamine and geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a girl where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked

him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.<sup>(15)</sup>

“How awesome!” “Awesome!” the cousins shouted and applauded afterwards. They must have taken thousands of pictures and recorded hundreds of videos with their smart phones, that day. The children would inconveniently ask questions about their aunt’s reading: “What is she saying...?” “Shush and listen” “Breasts! She said breasts!” “Hihihih” “Shush! You two!” “What is to laugh about the word ‘breast’? Do you laugh at an ‘elbow’ or at a ‘knee?’” The cousins couldn’t understand what was all the fuss about. I remember you winking at the kids. The cousins had always been very open about sexual education and everything else; after all they were Californians. But their children seemed to have become infected by the prudishness of the local environment. “Come closer lets take a selfie!” One of the cousins took the picture with the selfie stick. “Share it!” I said “Me too!” you said, “I will” the cousin said.

Immediately after the photo was taken the four of us spend a few minutes on our own posting the pictures and making comments on our respective social networks: “An ordinary day at the park”; “Mom at her best”; “Holy Molly: Yes, yes, yes!” while the children were messing around trying to torture a swan. The unfortunate bird happened to be incubating her eggs on the bank of the artificial lake by the canopy where we were, and she didn’t look very happy with the children’s advances. All of the sudden, and quickly twisting the neck towards the offenders, the swan produced first an admonitory noise and then attacked. She managed to bite the boy in the calf. The girl, who, frightened, had started crying, broke into a nervous laughter after realizing that she was safe and the boy had been bitten. The kid started to

complain exaggeratedly in order to attract our attention. He was twisting grotesquely his body in pain: “Au, au, au!” The more he complained, the louder the laughter of the girl. The drama went on for a while until the boy, humiliated, grabbed a pebble from the ground with the intention of throwing it to the swan but you, mother, prevented him from doing so by placing your crutch over the hand holding the stones, while giving him one of your murderous looks. It worked out because he immediately retreated.

“Are these birds safe?” One of the cousins asked. “Do they carry rabies of something?” I remember thinking that the boy was more likely to carry the rabies but I didn’t say anything. You rolled your eyes and sentenced “They are controlled by the DSPCA, unlike these ones...” you said pointing to the children with the crutch. One of the cousins, the mother of the boy, who, if anything, was a master on conflict avoidance, immediately reacted with a sympathetic: “Oh look! You are the only boy in America bitten by an Irish swan! Lets take a picture and show it to Dad” This observation seemed to please the boy so the swan’s war was settled. The cousin took a picture of the wound while the boy was stretching the skin of his calf, with his two hands, to make it look bigger. He did then pout at the camera. She took a few pictures until they were happy with the result and then she published it on her Facebook feed with the caption: “My poor baby have been attacked by a murderous swan!”

The cousins and us took pictures and made video clips of everything as the day went by. We posted it online immediately after, or during, or even before the occasion, always seizing the moment. Every silly happening was enough a motive for celebration and we wanted to tell the world. We were happy go lucky those days. Like the time I did the Camino with a couple of friends from work. That was ages ago, gosh. I think I just had started with

Facebook. I had such a great time and we took so many pictures that I just wanted to show them, to recommend the experience to everybody. No ulterior motive, no deep analysis, just pure, genuine, wish to pass on all that joy to my friends and family. But that was only at the beginning, and then it became more business like. I must have learned it from you. Although I have noticed that many people has gone this route now. My brother for example, never mind his wife. It wasn't anymore about recording events as they were happening, for fun or just for the sake of doing it, it became instrumental, purposeful: to sell or showcase work or to present yourself as a commodity. I have never been completely at ease with that but it seems to work for many people. It makes you stupid not being there or not trying anyway.

I have already whatsapped the cousins with the news mother. They won't make it to the funeral and they are so sorry for that but they asked if we could send them a video of the funeral mass. The undertakers said that they have a live streaming service, which is in promotion at the moment, but I said to them that it would be of no use to the cousins because of the time difference. I couldn't ask them to be awake at these untimely hours. They told me that they record and edit videos too. They can burn as many copies as we like in CD's, they told me, or they can give us a link to the clip stored in the cloud. I told them I would take both options. What do you think? I like the idea of having the physical CD and give it to people afterwards. They also do medallions or miniature urns in which the ashes of the deceased can be shared with relatives and acquaintances. They are ideal for the mantelpiece. Besides, the designs are lovely! I have the catalogue. I think mother we could afford to do something different from the typical memorial card. I ordered them as well though, you are not to worry, and I put a death notice on the paper and on RIP.com too, so it is all sorted.

You won't be forgotten mother. You should be delighted. I have also reserved the function room of the venue you wanted, so all is settled for the party. I hope you are pleased.

Oh look, the cousin has changed her profile picture on whatsapp. She has now a photo of the baby. Before she had a picture of the ultrasound scan. Look, isn't she cute? It all went very well. She gave birth in water. She didn't even need the epidural. Can you believe it? Her husband filmed the delivery. She sent me a little clip on whatsapp. Only the nice bits, of course. Look mother. Isn't that great? What a cutie! Most of my friends have done the same. As they enter motherhood they change their profile picture and put a photo of the baby instead. I have seen some doing it on Facebook too but they are the least. I think there is a growing concern about what pedophile rings can do with their children's images. Some only post pictures of the back of the baby or the baby inside the pram clothed from head to toe and always accompanied by someone, or a photo of the baby's hands or feet. Full photos of the baby or more intimate family occasions with babies are most likely to be shared only to close friends in whatsapp these days. But I remember there was a time when people just snapped pictures away without thinking.

Once I had a friend posting pictures of her daughter in Facebook, constantly. Didn't I tell you about it? One day she posted a snapshot of the kid naked and liking an ice-lolly in the sitting room. There is nothing strange with that. It was the sort of picture you would take in the intimacy of your home in a lazy summer afternoon. The typical picture to save inside the pages of the family album, only that she posted it on Facebook. She posted it to friends and to friends of friends but nowadays you don't really know who your friends are. I felt that I had to say something to her, so I sent a private message and told her that maybe she was inadvertently

putting her daughter at risk and she was so surprised at the fact that she hadn't thought about it, that she is still thanking me for it. She told me she was so proud of her daughter growing and doing so well that she just wanted to share her happiness with everybody. Fortunately people are learning. There is of course the odd exception but not so many these days. Yes mother, that's the one, the one that married the eldest son of the vet's sister in the village, one and the same. No, mother, I am not aware of any recent death in the village. It might be the case, of course. I can check it for you. It is so easy nowadays. Why? Are you looking for company or something?

I can see the sunraising, and this is not a petty thing, mother. Soon the longest night will come to an end, like everything else this night too will pass. And the cries and the laughter, the words and the silences, the music and the jokes they too will pass. The litany of munching, drinking, pouring, smoking outside, pissing outside, pissing inside, washing the face, sweating, smelling, drinking coffee, drinking tea, checking whatsapp, more laughter, humidity, candles, smoke, flowers, whispering, checking Facebook, increasing density in the air, checking the weather forecast. Hope it doesn't rain for the funeral. Soon the last of them will leave and there will be only you and I, mother. And then only you and the undertakers until we meet again in the church. I need a shower, you will excuse me. "We will take her now if is that ok with you." " Sure, I need to go home anyway." "Just a moment!" "Who dares? Brother?" "Sister."



## VI

### **The Right to be Uninteresting**

I would have always thought that I would go before you. Well it won't happen now. My fate is to follow you. For how many years we have known each other dear friend? How many times I had admired and how many times I had envied you? Since you gifted me with your friendship, it has been a rollercoaster for me for I am a simple person. I am a normal, not particularly interesting, human being and you are the goddess of Olympus in Earth, the Cyberspace and now, who knows if your divinity has also reached the Heavens or Hell. But I am sure in either case you will make yourself at home, and even if there is nothing hereafter and we all end up been devoured by maggots and this is all that it is, I am pretty sure your maggots will be brighter than mine, yours will be glowworms.

You got me into Facebook even if we lived next to each other. But you insisted that I should get a profile and post pictures and whatever I wanted so you could see how I was doing. "Why don't you come over and we have coffee and a chat and then I will show you the pictures of the holidays with my grandchildren in Benidorm?" I would say. "Don't be a dinosaur!" you would invariably reply. So, with the help of my daughter, who had her own Facebook, I set up mine. As a profile picture she put the picture that was taken of me at her wedding. I looked very nice that day, with my green and gold peacock pattern dress and a



lovely headscarf. I think I look happy in that picture. It is difficult to distinguish my features because my skin looks so dark in the backlit picture that all you can see are my teeth protruding from a mass of blackness. My nephew, a lousy photographer, who unfortunately was put in charge of taking the pictures of the wedding by his Dad, my big brother and boss of the whole clan, took the photograph. But it mustn't have been that bad because you, my daughter and son-in-law, and all my 12 friends liked it and told me I looked gorgeous. I knew you were all taking the piss because you couldn't see how I looked but it was nice anyway. A bit of ego busting mustn't be that bad.

Soon I got used to the computer and the Internet and I liked it very much. I contacted with two cousins from the village and we could chat about our lives, theirs there and mine here. Then one day my daughter told me that it wasn't necessary for me to air all the dirty laundry of the family in public. At the beginning I didn't know what she meant by that but now I do. I asked my cousins if they would remember any old remedy from home to prevent my grandson from wetting the bed at night. He was spending some nights at home and I was tired of changing the sheets every single day. I am not a young person you know and everything adds up. "The dirty laundry should be washed at home!" She said to me. "Precisely. Why don't you do it yourself?" I protested. She said that I was right, she shouldn't have vented to her friends either about her husband being uninterested and posting those pictures of the Bondi guys in their swim trunks. "Really? He doesn't..." I asked innocently and out of concern for my daughter "God sakes mother! Leave it! would ya?" Then I wrote to my cousins asking if they would know any old remedy from home to help my son in law with his little problem. I started to get messages from people I didn't know. They came from South Africa, from Canada, from the Netherlands, from Italy and even from neighbors from back

home I had not spoken to since I left or I had never spoken to them before. They were all very nice. But now I know that I shouldn't have done it. You said that it was hilarious and you sent me a smiley 'Ha-Ha' face. I replied you with another 'Ha-Ha.' But there was no much Ha-Ha after that.

The second time we went to Benidorm I didn't bring my camera. I didn't need to because I had a Samsung Galaxy S with a tiny camera inside. You gave it to me. Remember? At the beginning I didn't know what to do with the yoke but you taught me. I learned how to take pictures and post them online. I even got an Instagram account because the pictures looked prettier but then I got tired of it because I couldn't decide which filter looked the best. I remember you loved Instagram. You and your daughter were taking them selfies all the time. I saw them on Facebook and I liked them all. We supported each other, yes we did. You liked my things and I liked yours. This is what friends do. My daughter also takes selfies. She says she is tired of her life and that her husband is tired too. She says that one day he will make it big on the Internet and she will then quit her job and the commuting. I told you about it, remember? I told you the day my cousins came from the village with the grappa<sup>5</sup>. I can still feel it in my head! You too gave it a go! We took a selfie to mark the occasion but we kept it for ourselves. Pssh. Top secret.

I still take selfies but I don't post them anymore, I would be embarrassed, at my age, can you picture it? But I take photographs of the children, all the time, especially when we are on holidays. When we went to Benidorm I took pictures of the beach, pictures of the hotel, pictures of the swimming pool, pictures of the restaurants, pictures of the paellas, pictures of

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<sup>5</sup> Highly alcoholic drink originally from Italy.

the chips, pictures of the inflatable bananas, pictures of the shops, pictures of the bikinis in the shops, pictures of the shop assistants, pictures of dogs and cats and even a picture of a cockatoo that said “Bon dia” to us every day in the morning and ignored us in the afternoon or evening. Maybe the cockatoo didn’t have the words, but she made funny noises all the time nevertheless. Oh yes, I did take a selfie actually, but that was with the whole family and everybody liked it.

It was a lot of fun. My son-in-law told me that the only interesting thing about social media was that it was entertaining. He didn’t mind when people talked ‘whales’, ‘politics’ or ‘cancer’ but he liked the banter the most. When you started posting about your illness he said that Facebook wasn’t meant for that. “What is it meant for then?” I asked him. “I don’t know. It doesn’t say. Well it says that it is for connecting. In the movie *The Social Network* they use it for spying and rate college girls.” He said. “Really? And what else?” I insisted out of curiosity. “Well, It is not meant to pester everybody with a full running account of your day, with your meals or your showers or your worries.” “Oh. But my friends like it.” I said. But then he went on to say that the only thing people really care about is being amused or pampered and also that you agree with them. “But I care about my friend’s illness or my cousins’ weddings and my nephews communions. I care about their birthdays and I like to congratulate them and see their pictures.” I defended myself. “And you care about gossip too, don’t you?” He cut across. I was going to say something but he was quicker than me. “Don’t!” he said extending his arm and showing me the palm of his hand clearly indicating that I should shut up. I did, but that conversation got me thinking about boundaries.

What are the limits of social media ‘talk’? What can be done and what cannot? How to single out what is ‘information,’ ‘gossip,’ ‘rants,’ ‘banter,’ ‘intimacy,’ ‘entertainment,’ ‘reality’ or ‘fiction’? All these things mean different things for different people. Of course there must be rules, some etiquette, but that depends also of every community and the diversity of ways they organize and control themselves and each another. I use Facebook as I please and to the best of my knowledge. I do normal things in my life and sometimes I share them because I want to: “Look at what I am doing now. Look at this picture of my grandson’s first teeth.” If I get people liking it is just a bonus and if I don’t, well I don’t really think too much about it. It is their loss. For me it is very casual. I know that for you was vital and that was the reason why you wanted me to join, because you felt that it was very important to have a voice but for me it is just a way to have nice photo albums and to show them to the cousins in the village or to you. It is also a nice inexpensive way to keep in touch. Maybe one day I will find a more interesting use for it but I doubt it, as I am not an interesting person.

I saw, with time, that looking at you made me look at myself and compare. I started feeling inadequate. My life was so normal compared to yours. I didn’t go to places. Well I do go once a year to Benidorm but that it isn’t Milan or Paris, is it? I don’t have elegant dinner parties with girlfriends in Barcelona or vacations in the Emerald Coast. I can only post about normal, banal boring things. But most of the people do too. Don’t they? Why it is so important to have an amazing life? What’s wrong with the everyday? But they make you feel this way, don’t they? Inadequate. It is all there before your eyes, all these happy lives, and all those victories. I remember experiencing something similar when visiting the village. The minute I set foot on the shop or the community center a pack of parishioners would start scrutinizing me. Invariably an interrogation would take place, ruthlessly, for they must find

out everything about my achievements (or failures rather) in life, for example the properties I should have own or the moneys I should have earned or the education I should have given to my children. The bottom line was looking for a reaffirmation of their own lives. A proof that they made the right choice by staying in the village; that they did well. That leaving wasn't a warrant for a better life. And then I would feel inadequate and I would tell my life in hyperbolic terms in order to feel better about myself, but also because I wanted to throw them out their pedestals.

But all that business of comparing oneself with others got me thinking. Why should I feel bad about being the way I am? What it is really at the core of this 'interestingibility' versus 'uninterestingibility'? Well, I thought, people do tend to pay attention to things perceived as interesting and ignore others seen as uninteresting. Also interesting and uninteresting people are equally attracted to interesting things or interesting people. It seems that interesting is something worth your time and uninteresting is something that is preying on it, something to avoid or something that you have to swallow. People find interesting or uninteresting different things and different people. Also people sometimes show interest for something when it has been declared as being interesting by someone they find interesting, otherwise they wouldn't have taken any interest. The thinking about 'interestingibility' would complicate the more I would think about it. But I would find the whole process quite interesting. Wouldn't be the case simply that things are interesting or uninteresting to me rather than per se? It seems there is a sort of general agreement on what makes something interesting but this agreement, interestingly, is quite lousy. For example insurance companies tend to find old people quite uninteresting but I am pretty sure undertakers are very much interested in us.

Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that it is not such a big deal for me. The whole lot. That I am ok with it. Your life was your life and my life is my life. We lived in very different ways yet we met somewhere in the middle and something beautiful grew up between us, my friend. And if one day Facebook disappears I will put again my pictures in albums and I will talk to my friends and family on the telephone or I will invite them to dinner. Just like I am doing now. I know that for you and for your daughter the single thought of it meant disaster. But you see, the real disaster is that you are gone forever and your pictures on Facebook, even if I can keep looking at them until the Lord decides to take me with him, those pictures are not you. I just really liked you as you were and I will miss you so much dear friend.



## VII

### Death Notice

“Hello? Its you?” [...] “I am your sister in law.” [...] “Do you know where my brother is? I cannot reach him.” [...] “I must speak to him, my mother has just passed away...” [...] “Can you tell me where he is? His whereabouts?” [...] “I must speak to him!. The undertakers say...” (cry) [...] “Do you have any other number for him?” [...] “Yeah, that was the first thing I did but he is not receiving the messages. His phone might be down or, you know him, maybe he has disconnected everything...” [...] “He migh be with some friends, somewhere. Someone must know something...” [...] “Do you know any of his close friends or even work

colleagues..?” [...] “I am amazed! I cannot believe that we are in the era of hyperconnectivity and I am not able to contact my brother and tell him that my Mother has passed away!” [...] “Could you text me the numbers of these friends please? I am so sorry to bother you. I appreciate...” [...] “Would you come?” [...] “When I think she never met my niece...” [...] “I know, she would have liked to have you both at her funeral.” [...] “Don’t worry about my brother. He won’t bother you. I will keep him at bay...” [...] “Will you try to make it?” [...] “Thank you so much!” [...] “Take care dear and thank you, hugs and kisses to my niece.” [...] “bye, bye, bye bye...” [...] “bye bye bye...” [...] “bye.”



## VIII

### Ithaca

Home again. The plane has finally embraced the runway after bouncing twice on the tarmac, slightly rising again, like if trying to avoid its final destination. The harsh breaking has propelled me forward, forcing me to grab the back of the front seat, thus avoiding striking my face. The passengers have started moving about but clumsily, annoying one another. Opening the overhead compartments and extracting their luggages and shopping bags, knocking down jackets and toys over other passengers heads. Children start screaming. We might have arrived but a long boring wait still lies ahead. Getting out of a plane is so tedious. When I was young I remember being bored all the time. Probably I was as bored as I am today. The only difference is that now, having reached the middle point of my life and if I am lucky to avail of

the other half, I see something consequential in the inconsequentiality of boredom that I couldn't bring myself to grasp in my youth. Does this make me happier? Absolutely no. Contented? Maybe. Sometimes I wish I could be bored forever.

My grandfather, my father's father, used to say: "Best bored than tired." He was a man of great principle. Yes, only the one: Himself. He had a very strict upbringing. His father was a chief miner in the Puglia<sup>6</sup> marble district and his character was as dry and square as the landscape of the open quarries. He would go every single day to work, including Sunday. He worked without truce but also without a clear war to fight for. The mine was his man's den. He would do anything; even overwork, in order to delay the time to go back to the house. At least in the mine, although counterintuitive, he could breath.

The house, contrary to the mine, he found it to have an oppressive atmosphere. It wasn't my father's great-grandmother's fault, not even my grandfather's or my grandfather's sister fault, both small children back then. The couple just had fallen apart and he had fallen in love with a local beauty. Not to state the obvious but their love was impossible. She was a puritan and he was a man of principles. Not like my grandfather. He had proper, grand principles. Not necessarily religious principles but those of the highest of the moral standards. At the time divorce wasn't an option and the only way for him to marry his beloved was if he were to become a widower. But my grandfathers' mother was disappointingly healthy.

So widowhood was out of question. The only other option to get rid of an unwanted wife, without great consequence for the one left behind, and disturbingly popular at the time,

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<sup>6</sup> Region in the South of Italy.



was to commit a crime of passion. The plan was to catch the wife in-fraganti-delito <sup>7</sup>of adultery and kill her in order to save the honour of the family. Being a cornuto<sup>8</sup> was considered as bad of a crime than murder. Judges would give very lenient prison sentences to the dishonoured husbands and they would be out of jail in two or three years. More importantly, when they returned to their home towns, the neighbors would receive them in crowd's praise, as the Caesar coming back from a victorious battle. But that option was also out of question as my grandfather's mother was disappointingly faithful.

Fatally, the problem solved itself. It turned that what gave life to my grandfather's father also killed him: He had overdone breathing. The dust particles of marble suspended in the air deposited in his lungs, like layers of lime sediment at the bottom of a lake. He died on a Sunday afternoon having been vomiting blood and phlegm for several hours. Failing to return home that night, my grandfather's mother sent word to a miner's friend and he went to the mine with others to look out for him. They found him on a pool of blood the following morning. He was leaning on top of a square of marble and the blood was tracing the grooves of the stone forming several rivers and a delta near his heart. It was like if the blood was going in instead of coming out of his body. A week later, to the villagers' surprise, the local beauty took her own life. Fate had done the deed he couldn't bring himself to do. He was definitely divorced from his wife, now a widower, and himself, who knows if he ever attained his dream.

From a very early age my grandfather knew what he wasn't going to do with his life: work like a lunatic. "Best bored than tired." And since then this motto has been transmitted patrilineally from my grandfather to me (unfortunately skipping my own father) and from me

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<sup>7</sup> Red-handed.

<sup>8</sup> Cheated on, cuckold.

to my future son(s) and son(s) of my sons to be. Amen. Mostly I have had great regard for my grandfather's maxim, inclination that was met with great disgust by my parents, specially by my mother. Yes, I didn't suffer from the Oedipal condition and yes I have always been sort of fearful of her to the extent that in my worse nightmares she would present herself as a furious Medea wielding a knife over my head before thrushing it into my heart. I remember watching two renditions of the myth. The first was a Passolini film in which the character of Medea was played by a tragic Maria Callas and the second, many years later, in Siracusa's Greek theatre.

On this second occasion the solemnity of the play was disrupted by a kitten, which invading the stage had started running up and down the set until he halted right in front of the actor playing the part of Jason, which was in the middle of a crucial declamation. The kitten then looked up at him and started meowing like giving the replica to the speech, or rather protesting it. Predictably, the audience exploded in laughter and although the poor actor tried to keep the composure and the sombre tone required in a tragedy of that calibre, it was impossible to regain momentum. I remember feeling sorry for the poor man and the rest of the cast but I also remember that the joviality never left the faces in the fourth wall. The rest of the night was glorious. The anecdote was a thousand times amplified, re-colored, stretched, re-enacted by those who experienced the happening and by those which didn't but heard about it from us. The gravitas of the occasion was broken and with it any tension that any of us, in the audience, might have had at that moment in time. We were all truly happy that night. This is a good memory.

That was many years ago. If it had happened today we would still be happy but we would probably manifest it in a different way. Instead of telling and retelling the story over a few

drinks in the theatre's foyer we might have reached for our phones and record it and then post it on Youtube or Facebook and then It would have gone viral making more people happy. Or we would have taken a selfie with the cat meowing to Jason as a backdrop. Who knows? It doesn't make much a difference. A good moment is always best in communion.



## IX

### **Circe Unleashed**

“Hello? Who is this?” [...] “Oh it is you? How...” [...] “No, I don't know where he is...” [...] “Oh God, I am so sorry to hear that...” [...] “Well, you know if I knew I would tell you, don't I?” [...] “Ok, ok, calm down. Let me think...” [...] “Have you tried Whatsapp or Facebook?” [...] “I see. Yes, yes.” [...] “Hum...” [...] “I can give you the number of a couple of friends that might be able to find him?” [...] “Yes, it is ridiculous isn't it?” [...] “Not at all, not at all!” [...]

“I don’t think we will make it taking on board...”[...] “Yes, such a shame they never had a chance to meet. It is so sad.” [...] “I see...” [...] “Well, let me think about it...” [...] “Let me know if I can help in any other way.” [...] “You take care too.” [...] “bye, bye, bye bye...” [...] “bye bye bye...” [...] “bye.”

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“Well, well, well. The man himself being the man himself.” “Who was that?” “My sister in law. My mother in law has passed away and she cannot reach my husband.” “Oh, that’s terrible! What are you going to do?” “Nothing. It is not that we were best friends. Were we? I will send her a couple of numbers. Friends of his. They might be able to find him for her.” “He is such a volatile character isn’t he?” “Erratic, unpredictable and volatile to be precise.” “Hahahha!” “Hahahha!” “He couldn’t stay put for a while. Could he? He had to put on a circus when the only thing he had to do was to stay away for a while. Do nothing. Just stay put for a few weeks and maybe we could have talked the things over and perhaps give us another opportunity. But he had to ruin everything. Had he not? For God’s sakes! He is almost double my age and I am his mother!” “Dear...” “Oh God! I didn’t mean it! What do you think, should I go to the funeral?” “Well, this is up to you...” “What I am to do there? She didn’t bother to come to our wedding. Or did she? And what about my daughter?” “Well, she was already sick wasn’t she?” “Not for the wedding, no...” “Maybe she was already sick and she wouldn’t tell anyone...” “Come on, she was an attention seeker, was she not?” “You know what they say: it takes one to recognize another one” “Come on. You know it was different. I was trying to make a living, also for him and for my daughter! Was I not?” “If you say so.” “And you? With who are you?” “Always with you.” “Are you being cynical?” “Are you being paranoid?” “Hahahah.” “Hahahaah.”

“Come on. A little top up for the birthay girl? “ “Of course. Lets hope there is still some wine left for dinner if not the others will have to drink...” “Water kefir?” “Hahahah!” “Hahahah!” “Do you remember that day?” “How can I forget. It went viral!” “You were both very inspired that day. Both and a half actually!” “That was one of our first live streaming videos from the fish bowl. I was in the third month of my pregnancy and still feeling queasy at times...” “And there was the man himself in full swing, demonstrating a lavish vegan-non-alcoholic birthday celebration meal specially designed for pregnant women...” “And the idea was to have a toast at the end with a champagne substitute...” “The golden and sparkling kefir!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!”

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It is your daughter's third birthday. The cake is waiting in the fridge. He is about to arrive. He is coming back from a convention in Paris. The minute he crosses the threshold you know something is wrong. He wears the word “guilty” written on his forehead. He kisses you in the cheek but deliberately avoids your gaze. Today he is showing especial affection for the kid in the way a person gives all it's attention to someone or to something to shy from someone or something else: You. He is clearly avoiding you. You know what to do. While he is busy with the kid you go to the bedroom and look for signs in his luggage, which is lying open on top of the bed. Nothing. You slip your hands into his jacket's pockets. Nothing. But you know that something is off. You wait. The moment will find you. You act as if nothing is happening and celebrate your daughter's birthday.

You hear his phone blipping a couple of times. You observe him. His gestures, his anxiety. He excuses himself: “I am going out for a cigarette.” “Yes, you do that.” He is out in

the balcony, he is texting. His face brightens up. A smile. More blips. A wider smile, then a somber look as he meets your gaze across the door glass pane. Then a smile and a head movement as indicating that he is coming back inside. He extinguishes the cigarette in a flowerpot. You hate it when he does that. He is back in. The phone blips once more. He goes to the bathroom. The phone knows everything. At night, in bed, he kisses you goodnight, he is tired and you know he won't touch you. Predictably he turns around so you can see his back. Your eyes wide open staring at the ceiling. Just wait. When he is deep sleep you sneak out of the bed. Your body moving slowly, precisely, relentless like a snake. His phone lying on top of his bedside table. You reach for it. You whisper to the phone and the phone tells you everything. You want to spit all over his face but you sneak back inside the sheets instead. In the morning you say nothing. Nothing the morning after and the ones that follow. You will have your moment.

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Blip, blip . “Oh, here are the others. They are downstairs.” “Hello? Yes, come in.” “[...]” “It is open?” “The girls are here...” “How is the roast doing?” “Should be ready in five.” “I will start preping the salad then...” “Cheers darling!” “Hello girls! Come in, come in...” “Hello!” “Hello!” “Kiss, kiss.” “Shall I fetch you a drink?” “Please.” “We only have water kefir...” “Oh for gods’s sake..!” “Are you serious?” “Absolutely. This house is a health haven...” “Couldn’t you make it a health hell for one day?” “What is that you are drinking then..?” “Non-alcoholic Shiraz?” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “What’s the story with the water kefir then?” “We were just reminiscing about the day she got sick in public.” “Ah..that’s right. I remember that...that was brilliantly em...” “Disgusting?” “ I didn’t want to say but yes, it was gruesome.” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “It did work though, did it not?”

“How are you by the way?” “More veggies?” “Sure, thanks!” “They are delicious!” “At least you improved your cooking skills...” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “I am okay...sad at times.” “Do you miss him?” “I miss the life we had together...” “Oh?” “I mean, when the things were good...but him, I am not sure I miss him...” “Well, he made a mess...” “He did, did he not?” “He doesn’t deserve you...” “What possessed him to vent everything over the Internet in that way?” “Well, you were venting everything anyway...” “No, we weren’t! That’s what people think. In fact we were very precious about our private life. I was anyway, was I not?” “Wee...ell, if you say so...” “ Tell me then, how many times have you seen us fighting online?” “... None, actually.” “Did you actually fight?” “All the time. But the editing wasn’t accidental.” “Illuminate us...” “I wanted to show that a positive family life was possible. I wanted us to be inspirational.” “And now you are going to say that this was your plan for world peace...” “Yeah, why not? And we were the model to follow!”

“Well, it didn’t turned that way...” “He lost it.” “And accusing you of kidnapping your own child on Facebook!” “Yeah, that was an overstatement to say the least.” “ But you asked for a restraining order...” “Yes, I had to. He went crazy. I was afraid of what he could do to us...” “Of course, you needed to protect yourself and your daughter...How is she by the way?” “She is fine, she is with my mother for the week end. She keeps asking where daddy is...” “What are you going to do..?” “I don’t know. One part of me wants to forget about everything and make up with him but another part is still very angry with him.” “Has he apologized?” “To me a milion times...but I want him to do it online. To clear everything with the followers. Maybe start again...a new channel.” “He ruined the business with the circus about the child didn’t he?” “Oh stop! He would accuse me of many things! All false! Exaggerations! I deserve a public apology!” “Well, that would give you some publicity...” “ It

would actually. I could even grow the business further...but he doesn't want to hear about it...he is determined to go off the grid." "And he is been quite successful to judge from his sister's call earlier on..." "What do you mean, did she call you...what for?" "Yes, she called earlier on." "She was wondering if I would know where to find him..." "Really?" "You are joking me?" "Nope. His mom has passed away..." "Oh dear..." "OMG!" "So sad!" "What did you do?" "She gave her the number of a couple of his mates and she will ask them to find him."

"Of course, I suppose he is not your business anymore..." "He is still your husband though..." "Yes, on paper but not in obligation..." "Still..." "I won't go to the funeral if this is what you are wondering..." "Ah?" "Well, I wasn't in particularly good terms with his mother so..." "She didn't come to your wedding, did she?" "Neither had she ever met her granddaughter..." "Really?" "That's so wrong!" "Yeah, Families!" "Yep, you can say that. Outside the fish bowl was carnage..." "Families are given, we don't chose them but we can chose to escape from them." "This is what he did. He escaped from his family there and then he escaped from his family here." "Well, you will just have to get used to the idea that it is over..." "It will take time but you will be fine."

"More chicken?" "No, I am full thank you." "You are a strong woman..." "Yes, you are...wonder woman!" "No, I am not!" "Yes! You are!!!" "Yes! You are!!!" "Yes! You are!!!" "This is what my followers say too...they say this experience has empowered me but I am not so sure about it..." "Of course it has. Right girls?" "Of course! You are stronger than ever now!" "I'm sorry but I am not completely convinced that exposing oneself, being completely naked in front of everyone is a way of exercising power..." "Well, I was never really naked. I



applied my own censorship rules, you know?” “But also it could be the case that showing your vulnerability is a way of showing your strenght...” “Really? Tell this to an antelope being chased by a lion in the savannah...” “Yeah, sounds like cheap self-help literature.” “Maybe, but I was more thinking of... you know the way small dogs turn over and pretend to be submissive in front of bigger dogs? It is a survival skill.” “I suppose you are right. It can work both ways. The million dollar question is finding the right moment in which it will work for you...Doesn't it?”

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When you split he left you naked all right but in a very different and unsuspected way. In an impulse, he defriended you on Facebook. What was he thinking? You felt humiliated. That was worse than a slap on the face. It was like if the world had come to an end. It might seem banal but it is not. He not only obliterated you from his life in this way but he also erased your own because any single picture, comment, video or anything you shared in common disappeared from your timeline. He stole your life and in which way! He didn't think of it for sure. It was uncalculated, visceral, product of a moment of rage. The life you had built together just banished. But you won't have it. Then you went back to your files and after an arduous work of archaeology, you restored your life for yourself and for your concerned followers.

“What I don't understand is how do you make time for social media?” “Really? What do you mean by making time?” “I see it with myself. I have two small children and I am working. My days and nights are completely full. I cannot even think of spending two minutes online.” “But this is not the case. The channel is work for me. I just happen to work at home,

with my family. We are a company.” “And you are the CEO!” “Hahahaha!” “Hahahaha!” “I wish!” “I have children too and I work and I have my Facebook.” “Yeah, another wonder woman!” “It wasn’t you that posted those funny images of your children wearing clothes the wrong side or jackets without jumpers underneath?” “Yeah, that was me.” “Hahahaha!” “Hahahaha!” “That was the unintended consequences of my husband helping out with the kids.” “Hahahaha!” “Yeah, that gave you time to post about it on Facebook!” “Of course. What I would never know for sure is if he is genuinely useless or if he just pretends to be so he doesn’t have to help me next time.” “That’s another million Aussie dollars question...” “Maybe we just expect them to be in the wrong and they just fulfill our prophesy.” “Yeah...” “I don’t agree!” “At least you have the time to muse and amuse about it on Facebook. I certainly don’t.” “I suppose the question is what do you do with your down time.” “Down time? I don’t even know what that is!” “I mean, when you have respite, whatever, say two minutes in the in-between sending your children to school and starting to work, or at night, once they are in bed, the time before you go to sleep...” “Or the time you are commuting...” “What? What’s your point?” “The point is: What do you do with that time?” “Em... Nothing I suppose, two, five, ten minutes is not much, is it?” “Some people just go online.” “There you are.” “What do you mean? And is this good or bad?” “It is either good or bad I suppose. It is up to you.” “I like updating my Facebook, others maybe like going to the gym.” “Or reading.” “Or talking with their husbands.” “Only when they are not plugged to the iPad or watching soccer!” “Some people manage to do everything at once.” “Men can’t!” “Well, I can’t either!” “The whole spectrum!” “For example now we are talking... this is down time spend talking.” “And celebrating!” “And drinking!”

“Let’s toast!” “For the birthay girl!” “For the birthay girl!” “It will pass, you will see...don’t you worry.” “You have us anyway, you are not alone...” “ So lucky I am! You bunch of bitches!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “To freedom!” “To freedom!” “Cheers!” “Cheers!” “Salute!” “Slainte!” “I have an idea! Lets immortalize this moment of pure bitch power! Lets take a video of this very moment and let’s freeze it in time!” “The housewife is dead! The artist is born!” “That’s the spirit!” ”Long life to the artist!” “God save the artist!” “God save the artist!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “This is what we are going to do: You girls pretend you are about to make a toast...” “But we are making a toast!” “Shut up!” “The idea is to perform a toast...” “Ah, so this is the way it works...?” “Some of you can be standing and some others sitting. You could light a cigarette too...I will film around you. It will be like a painting in which everything is still except the wine and the smoke coming out of the cigarette...” “Beau-ti-ful!” “This will be the first video of my new channel: *Of Friends & Witches: A diary of an ex- howfie.*” “Howfie?” “Short for housewife!” “Hahahah!” “Hahaha!” “Wow! Genius!” “I like it!” “Let’s do it!” “Let’s!” “To the howfies!” “To the howfies!” “Down with the Kardashians!” “Down with the Kardashians!” “Listen Kasdashians! We are not afraid of mundanity!” “Power to the anti-glamour!” “To the howfies!” “To the witches!” “Hahaahah!” “To the witches!” “To Saint Youtube!” “Hahaahah!” “To Saint Instagram!” “To Saint Instagram!” “Maybe you could send this to the funeral, as your act of presence” “That was mean!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “Hahaahah!” “Pssss! Silence! and... Rolling!”



X

## **The Sense of an Ending**

Death is the beginning of everything. You are dead before you die, from the very moment you are born. The moment your body begins to crack and you are not in control anymore, you are dead. Everything and everybody's actions are then geared towards that moment. The moment of your expiration. There are many ways to talk about death. Our time is brief and the light of the day gets mixed up with the darkness of the night. You can talk about it from the point of view of its mystery or from the fear it produces you, from love or from sorrow but death is always the beginning of everything in the sense that is what gives meaning to life.

One day you begin to feel the whole weight of the world over your shoulders. Something is quite not right. You get tired more than often with everyday ordinary activities, the ones you would have done before without a blink. Then, little by little, peeling an orange or lacing your shoes becomes a burden. You think it will pass but it doesn't. One day you decide is time to know. You don't want to know. Your family, your daughter, talks you into it. She wouldn't take it any other way. You must know. It is for the best. But still you don't want to know because you know it too well. It is a sort of sixth sense. Anyway, you go to the doctor and you learn your prognosis. Not good. The disease turns to be of the degenerative type. Early onset. So what? It doesn't make it less aggressive, less final.

You are too young to let it go and too old to fight for a lost war. You know it. After that, how many times have you tried to imagine what is about to unfold? You already have had a couple of brushes with death but this time is different. You don't really want to live beyond the point of losing control of your own body. Can you picture it? You will end up being fed through a set of tubes and incontinent. Not something to look forward to. But already you don't have a choice or a voice. Done and dusted. Somebody else is taking over. Decisions are being made behind your back. Doctors, nurses, your (ex) husband, your family, the insurance company. All terrified with the prospects. Your body also decides behind your back. Your legs for example. One day they just decide to stop holding you. If you were to stand you would collapse like a dummy made of felt and without wires.

Then you take over for that one last time. One day you feel compelled to write about it and you post it on your Facebook. "Two month ago I was diagnosed with [omitted] but here I am still holding onto this bitch. Not sure until when. I love you all." Then you get an avalanche of sympathy and support from your "friends", the closest ones and also from distant acquaintances and you feel like wrapped in cotton. It is just nice. Your ex-husband hated it. "Why she has to do that? Is the family not enough support for her?" He asked once to my daughter.

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"Mom found some comfort on Facebook but my dad couldn't understand it. He is totally against it. He is a very private person."

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You have always been the extroverted type. If your life as you know is bound to end soon you better do it in style.

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“Mom started posting almost every day. When she wasn’t too tired or too sick to do so. It became almost like a ritual. Well it is a ritual now for me anyway. I also started posting about her and our visits to the hospital and when she couldn’t speak or move anymore I started wishing her a happy birthday or a happy mother’s day. I couldn’t talk to her directly as she wasn’t able to understand me anymore so I went to Facebook.”

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Your closest friends would visit you at the beginning but you soon realize that the frequency of visits is indirectly proportional to the degeneration of your body. Only one remains. You wouldn’t have expected her to be the one but there you go. Reality check. You start fading away. You are not capable of uttering a sound now and what before gave you voice: the possibility of speaking with your hands, the tips of your fingers hitting the keyboard is no more, as you lost them too. Broken glass runs inside your veins. If you are a stranger to yourself how can you expect others to relate to this new person? Probably they cannot cope with the moody beast you have become. All your needs are now so basic: Food. You long for food. Perhaps they feel uneasy because they don’t know what to say or what to do. If they just knew that being here is enough! Anyway, one day you try hard to imagine what is to be dead. It is a paradoxical exercise nevertheless. The moment you picture your own death you put yourself as a spectator and therefore capable of seeing and reflecting upon it, which is quite different from the actual experience.

But is it possible to grasp the experience of one's own death? Can you experience yourself sleeping without dreams or having passed out? You can do it from the outside like an onlooker but not from the inside. What is to be asleep, unconscious or dead? You can see yourself from above like in a Weegee <sup>(16)</sup> photograph. Ten feet above the ground. Your children and friends are all around. Your daughter holding your hand and playing with your wedding ring. The priest have given you the last rites. You don't want him to be there. You have always heard that one dies alone but this doesn't seem to be the case. The room couldn't be more crowded. And the episodes of your illness and near death are all splashed over social media so the whole universe is here with you. This room might be the closest thing to a black hole. Very comforting. Isn't it? Well, not really. Shit.

Then you try harder. Some books your have read or some movie you have watched or some stories you have heard might help with this one. You know it is coming. Now, and still inside the Weegee's picture, you see yourself pulling your daughter's arm towards you, the gesture, a desperate useless attempt of clinging to this life. But this life of yours all of the sudden feels like a sneeze stuck in your nose and you cannot wait anymore for the phenomenal ending. At the same time you don't want this building up to stop. Then you just cannot take it anymore. The gates are all open and all the fluids of your body run free and careless. Every ounce of your emaciated tissue feels numb and alive and then it hits and the explosion brings you to a free fall and you feel weightless and you cry and laugh inside as if there was no difference. "So that's what it is!" he suddenly exclaimed aloud. "What joy!"<sup>(17)</sup> Well at least you would like it to be this way.



## XI

### A Sense of Observation

If I were to look around I would meet with people that never realized that the sense of taste is different in different parts of the mouth or that a perfume is more fragrant on a cold sunny day or on older skin.<sup>(18)</sup> Or that plugs and switches work differently in different parts of the world but that almost all share humanoid features; or that radiation creates monsters in Japan and superheroes in North America, both supernatural forces; or that graduation day pictures are most likely to end up being retrieved at your funeral but you never think about it when posing for them; or that every survey is skewed to people willing to participate in a survey; that nobody has ever been able to design a room without a function<sup>(19)</sup> or that in some countries people prefer to live behind curtains while in others they don't even know they exist; <sup>(20)</sup> that even if people are different in different parts of the world, almost all human beings are capable of laughing and crying and have a sense of birth, love and death been something important. And that everybody talk about themselves with others at some point in time or that everybody, everything, is different yet everybody, everything, is the same, at least at atomic level.

I've played every kind of gig there is to play now/ I've played faggot bars, hooker bars, motorcycle funerals/ In opera houses, concert halls, halfway houses.

Well I found that in all these places that I've played/ All the people that I've played for are the same people/ So if you'll listen,



maybe you'll see someone you know in this song.

A most disgusting song.<sup>(21)</sup>

If I try hard I can come up with more examples of poor sense of observation. I, myself, have an average sense of observation; nowadays most of my moments of awareness come from browsing the Internet, which I practice as a sort of meditation. Before I would meditate by watching *Big Brother* or by 'reading' the tabloids' front covers display while queuing at the supermarket. For me it amounts to mental yoga. A way of coping. An escape. I once said it to my wife who gave me the looks: "What do you need to escape from?" she said. We divorced soon afterwards but this is another story. If I am to continue with the argument of the wide spread lack of a sense of observation I should be talking about the value of photographs or the meaning behind sartorial decisions.

They say the best way to take a photograph in order to capture the essence of a person is to shoot when they are off guard but I think the contrary is also true. You can understand character through their conscious and premeditated choices. Fashion for example. You can tell when someone is trying to make an impression for the way they dress up. If they are making an effort it means that they care, most likely about others' opinion but also, perhaps, that they want to be liked. I am not really into social media but I can see, like an outsider, what is going on. My daughter, for instance, or my ex-wife, they both make an effort in the way they present themselves. They have 'ideal selves' and they work very hard to materialize it in some way, for example by staging their pictures. They do it for themselves and also in order to impress others. However, all this paraphernalia is nothing more than a way to reveal. By camouflaging among props they show precisely what they are trying to conceal. When my ex-wife would put

too much make up in her face in order to cover up possible skin flaws (flaws that only she could see by the way...) it only achieved the contrary effect, this is to say: to make them more visible. It is quite absurd if you think about it.

I often observe the absurdity of my life. Absurdity, which, if I might say, I share with a big chunk of the world population: the so-called western middle/working class, however it is little observed, I mean, for real, taking it all in and doing something radical about it: “It is like claiming you are going to quit Facebook but you never quite bring yourself to do it.” I hear someone in the office saying once. I, and probably you too, spend most of my days with my bottom glued to an ergonomic chair (ergonomic my ass: there isn’t anything ergonomic about a chair\_ for starting the sitting four-shape posture is totally unnatural). Typing word after word on a computer keyboard; surfing page after page on the Internet; opening, skimming, ignoring, answering emails, Whatsapping, getting distracted, listening to the radio, reading the paper on the iPad, drinking coffee, swallowing junk food, sometimes organic salads, sweets and nuts, chocolate, liking picture after picture even if you don’t give a damn: “Oh look at him, he won another award or she is again on holidays!”. I am not even digital! Fidgeting, tapping on the desk, hating my co-workers for typing too loud, for whispering; picking my nose, cleaning my ear from excess wax and looking at the body’s secretion with a sort of affection. The guy next to me just shouted: “Today is the greatest day of my life: my son is born. 3.5 kilos!” ”Congratulations!!!” say the whole office at the unison. What do they care? I know I don’t when it is yours, his, her child. But this is mine and it is the best!

The local diddy bop pimp comes in/  
Acting limp he sits down with a grin/  
Next to a girl that has never been chased/  
The bartender wipes a smile off his face/  
The delegates cross the floor/  
Curtsy and promenade

through the doors/ And slowly the evening begins.<sup>(21)</sup>

Outside, from my office's window I can see the sun shining above in the sky and below, plants growing and dogs barking, children running and screaming with joy, sometimes with fear, being bullied, bullying, people in tracksuits drinking cheap cider or Lucozade and smoking, I assume pot or heroin. Young lovers dreadfully eating each others' faces at lunch time. Teenage pregnancies wearing fake tan. Pale students going for an exam. People with cancer raising their flags even if they don't want to: " We are strong. We are survivors! Role models for all! " Gothics, hipsters, wanabees, Youtube rising stars. Polyamorists. Japanese tourists taking photographs and suffering simultaneously from Sthendal and Paris syndromes. Italians and Spaniards shouting in packs. Stray dogs, stray cats. An elderly woman is pushing a walker in one direction while a Jack Russell pulls on the opposite one; a middle aged man trying to burn his belly fat after seeing a health reality show and oblivious that he is about to have a heart attack, probably during the Sunday's match, sitting on the stand while cheering his favourite team. Anything goes to combat obliteration: blue hair, design glasses on parchment faces, swollen lips and brand new breasts like Babylons, hair implants and whatnots. And loads of cats too. Oh I have already said that. People! give me more for the rap!

And there's Jimmy "Bad Luck" Butts Who's just crazy about them East Lafayette weekend sluts. Talking is the lawyer in crumpled up shirt And everyone's drinking the detergents That cannot remove their hurts.

While the Mafia provides your drugs, Your government will provide the shrugs, And your national guard will supply the slugs, So they sit all satisfied.

And there's old playboy Ralph Who's always been shorter than himself, And there's a man with his chin in his hand, Who knows more than he'll ever understand. (21)

The anorexic with blonde extensions and a blog. She is an influencer. The depressed with suicidal thoughts. He is now occupied with a screen test for the ultimate act, soon to be broadcast in Live.me or Facebook Live. He will make it too to national TV at the nine o'clock news. A yellow vigil march to follow. A professor will call him a copycat and will recommend preventative policies, which the health department will interpret as a call for overmedication. Who copies who? The pharmacist rubs her hands. Who? The pharmacist. Warhol is stirring in his grave, laughing out loud: "I told you so. 15 minutes of fame." What? What about the fame of Gawa? (22) Who? Today she has created a couple of jobs. Fame has. The pharmacist too. The Machiavellian party's whip believes the meat trade overrules human rights and sends a Whatsapp to the expert working group: "The gain justifies the meat." The exasperating forever optimist will tell a man with a bleeding jugular that everything will be all right. So they go all satisfied.

Modern stay-at-home dads pushing double prams carrying their IVF children and looking abashed. They have just been in a toddler and mother workshop and had the most surreal experience of their life. Pictures are posted online. They are now heading home to tell their working-outside-home wives all about it: "Did you have a good time love?" "Wonderful. I cannot wait for the next session." In the evening they will cook together an organic meal with produce from the organic farmers market, bought the previous Saturday, four times more expensive than in Lidl. The plan is avoiding the baddies that come with extensive agriculture. Then, on the Sundays they will have cappuccinos with soya milk and gluten free brownies in

that expensive coffee shop ran by an invariably absent celebrity chef. They might uncouple soon, unable to cope with the coolness of life. The custody of the children will be given to the working wives. Meanwhile the exiled dads will retreat to a corner to rejoice with the spirits of the time: the gym, a six-pack or a Facebook campaign. They all gather in the park down below my office block to eat their lunches. Such are the affordances of such a vast playground. So they go all satisfied.

Yeah, every night it's the same old thing/ Getting high, getting drunk, getting horny/ At the Inn-Between, again.

And there's the bearded schoolboy with the wooden eyes/ Who at every scented skirt whispers up and sighs/ And there's a teacher that will kiss you in French/ Who could never give love, could only fearfully clench

Yeah, people every night it's the same old thing/ Getting pacified, ossified, affectionate at Mr. Flood's party, again.<sup>(21)</sup>

Before getting into the office in the morning I have been sitting in the car for over forty minutes to bridge the distance between my bank owned house and my boss owned office. I will do the inverse journey later in the evening. After eight hours of 'sitting bull' I run. I run for forty-five minutes in a treadmill before a TV screen, inside a smelly gym surrounded by sweaty people that have been sitting in an office for eight hours watching at a computer screen, after sitting in their cars for forty minutes, and now run for forty-five minutes before a TV screen. If the weather is pleasant I run in the park below my office block. I run for thirty minutes because being outdoors increases the difficulty of the task. When I run outside I can

feel the cold air filling my lungs and as a consequence my breath soon falls short. Running on the tarmac I notice every inch of my body and it hurts. I know the hardness of the surface kills my joints but it is easier than running on pasture, and most importantly: it is legal. I run as if it was for my life over the heavy man-made grey carpet, meanwhile, and from the corner of my eyes, I can see the signs of civilization passing by: “Keep out of the grass.” ; “Pick up after your dog!”, “Danger: Toxocara.”

And there's the militant with his store-bought soul/  
There's someone here who's almost a virgin I've been told/  
And there's Linda glass-made who speaks of the past/  
Who genuflects, salutes, signs the cross and stands at half mast.<sup>(21)</sup>

All seems designed *contra natura*<sup>9</sup> and with great praise for repetition. When I was a child I remember sitting in a pram or in a toddler high chair; then I progressed to seating on a motorbike and then to the seat of a car. I sat through school and college and ended up sitting in the office's 'ergonomic' chair. I waited at airports and uncountable places sitting on Eames's chairs. I sat in the cinema to watch films, in the couch in front of the TV and in the kitchen's IKEA steel frame chair to have dinner. I have seen in Facebook pictures of my ex-wife framed by a wooden sitting room chair at the hospice. She was seated in line next to someone's brothers and sisters, elderly mothers, fathers and childless relatives. All of them democratically watching the same TV show. I saw also photographs of the same group sitting in oratory chairs and benches during Mass, including atheists and *n' importe quois*<sup>10</sup>. I have seen others staring at the ceiling while sitting in metal and leather wheel chairs and people sitting in their beds being hoisted to white plastic shower chairs with little wheels and spinned along blue

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<sup>9</sup> Against nature.

<sup>10</sup> Whatever.

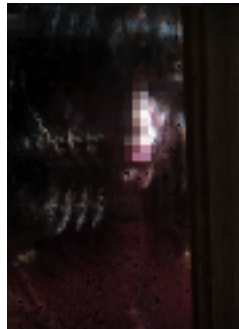
corridors. All this sitting setting breaks my heart. I remember that back in the late 1960's and early 1970's the good thing to do for my generation was getting a 'sitting job', which meant working in an office instead of ploughing the field or as a clerk in a store. I really envy plumbers and hairdressers now. My wife, my ex-wife, she was a pioneer. An office job! She would laugh at me. She could have the life she wanted because I had an office job; but this is another story.

We are now living the illusion of a digital era but it still feels very much like industrialism with its dreadful machinist designs. Who has come up with the computer shape? He should be executed! The question is that we tend to overlook the immediate everyday things because they strike us as unimportant. What is the value of studying them? If we think hard enough we might see how the root from which all Humankind trouble stems is this lack of observation skill. It is for me anyway. How am I to face the everyday struggle if I don't notice (and with noticing comes understanding) what is going on? *Bottom line, for me it is all about existential angst: establishing a meaningful framework around my existence which I know, deep inside, is only and by extension the life of others.*

*How to avoid the question of who am I or why am I? Sometimes it hits me and it is like if I was on a stage in front a lot of people expecting me to come up with something interesting. If I start to doubt about the meaning of myself standing on that stage how will I ever reach the point of saying anything worth to mention? This is my struggle and this is the question. Here I am. Do I have anything interesting to tell you? This is my fear. The fear that perhaps there is nothing. That I have got nothing to contribute. And this is an image of failure and I want to explore this aspect of life. <sup>(23)</sup> My fate cannot be sitting forever in a chair. I always*

wanted to sing stories like Laurie Anderson. Even if I fail I will play them at weddings and at funerals, and in little stages in small town festivals. I am not humble. I do not care about fame and riches but I do care about purpose. I have reached the point where I have been able to establish some sort of meaning for myself because I have created a fitting narrative around my life, however, deep inside I know that the point of meaning is in essence unattainable, and therefore an illusion.

Yeah, they're all here, the Tiny Tims and the Uncle Toms/ Redheads, brunettes, brownettes and the dyed haired blondes/ Who talk to dogs, chase broads and have hopes of being mobbed/ Who mislay their dreams and later claim that they were robbed. And every night it's going to be the same old thing/ Getting high, getting drunk, getting horny/ Lost, even, at Martha's Vineyard, again...<sup>(21)</sup>



## XII

### Youth

Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire.<sup>(24)</sup>

The world unfortunately is real. And you, unfortunately, are yourself. You have come to that retrospective stage in life in which you evaluate the journey you have completed and measure



it against what is left. And what transpires is that you have been living like serving a prison sentence. How long can you keep up like this? Every day watching her body and your time consuming. Her body getting smaller and thinner. Watching her vanishing amounts to looking into your own reflection in a mirror. You are also disappearing. You see your eyes in hers and her wounds in yours. You can see her cracked skin and then you look at your own cracks, uncountable streams under your small puffed eyes and above your upper lip: the dreaded barcode. All signs of decrepitude. You want to scream: “Stop!” You don’t have anybody to turn to, yet you have the whole world at the tips of your fingers. You look at the mirror and take a picture of your own reflexion, the proof of your existence. You then apply an Instagram craquelure filter and add the following caption: “Cracked.”

Prey to chronic sleep deprivation you surf, unsparingly, the Internet at night. Chatting to strangers. Then you wake up in the morning, tired from the lack of sleep, and take a cold shower, expecting that the shock will awake you for the day. You feel your dry skin brushing against the towel. Then you rub it with shea butter but the damage is already done. Next you drink your coffee and eat a slice of hard sourdough bread with butter while checking your Facebook updates. Like every morning, you think you should breakfast healthier: porridge or fresh fruits perhaps, but the next day you don’t feel like it, neither the following morning. It is always the comforting butter. Getting dressed is a drag. You throw all your clothes over the bed and pause for a minute or two, unable to make a choice. Unvariably you will pick the outfit with darker colours in an attempt to tackle, at least visually, the so called middle age spread.

Middle age also “spreads” in other malignant ways. For example the impoverishment

of the quality of the hair. What can you do with your hair? You have shortened it in the hope that the pruning would benefit a healthier growth but this remains to be seen. It doesn't look too bad though. At least it is practical for dyeing it at home as the feared yellowish-white strands of hair have also made their presence noticed. When you were young you remember being intrigued by women cutting their manes and going blond when reaching certain age. You wrongly attributed that to a lack of originality or simply bad taste, it never occurred to you that it was out of necessity. Anyway, despite the body's collapse the every day show must go on: going to work; missing the bus; arriving late; clocking out even later; checking with the nurse, visiting mom once or twice a week, baking on the weekends, taking pictures, writing comments on social media et cetera. Fast forward or rewind, it doesn't seem to make any difference.

You might have thought every day to be the same, but you are wrong. In the everyday change hides beneath the layer of tedium, but it is only a trick for every new day is different from the previous one. You cannot see it in the beginning, for example in your youth, because you are too arrogant or too stupid to see beyond the surface of things. At least you were. "That older people are wiser than young people is a myth" a bright young artist told you once. He might have been right. But you were so anodyne that you fitted the stereotype. You were young, arrogant and stupid and therefore conformist. The others were old, but that wasn't going to happen to you. The others died but not you. So especial you were.

Well, it is happening now. You might not be wiser, but you are pretty sure of one thing : you are older, and this is the single empirical fact that proves a theory of accumulative change: you cannot perceive the small degrees of variation in the skin of your face, your hands,

elbows and knees, in your moods, taste and worries but one day awareness comes as a sudden realization. Then you start noticing that you cannot do anymore the same things you liked to do because in spite of trying so hard to remain the same, you are a different whole person. For example, before you couldn't make an issue of anything at a planetary level because the planet was you. You were so self-centered in your own way that nothing else was of the matter. Now life, after a few blows of the hammer, has opened up a gap to show you, in all its cruel splendour, that at the end there are not big pearly gates, no apocalypse, not even a faint final sound coming out of the fleshy lips of the cherubims. Life will just disappear one day, painfully, and you hate your mother so much for making it so obvious.

You feel a strange mixture of compassion and guilt: "I hate you. I love you. I fear you. I admire you." You wonder all the time if you will inherit the same genetical defects that are causing her illness. Why couldn't we just go quickly? Bang! Today we are alive and well, tomorrow we are dead. Simple and clean. No pain. You are so alone and you cannot talk to her anymore. She cannot recognize you. At times she is like a small child asking for a cuddle and at other times she turns into a monster. Ill hearted and infectious like the plague. She had those episodes too when you were small but she would usually charge against your brother, who would always defy her. Nevertheless in those moments you would try to make yourself invisible because if she couldn't see you, she couldn't hurt you either. During those explosions her eyes turned small and black like small and black buttons. In those moments you could also see your own eyes, in hers. Your caged fury.

So you are not young anymore. And the worst is the realization that the only body you have allowed yourself to cuddle in the last times is that of a sick woman. Your youth has

slipped out and you are alone, who is going to want you now? “Apologies, mother. I don’t mean it. It is not your fault that I am such an idiot. It is not your fault that I thought that becoming somebody was the most important thing in the world. That I obliterated my child because I was afraid of what you and father would say to me; I should have known better.” Look at you now, holding her hand. Take a deep breath and laugh at yourself. You also married the first man that laid his eyes on you because he told you he was somebody, so low was the opinion you had of yourself. It didn’t last.

You now take pictures of yourself constantly. You must capture this strange elusive body. You remember how much you despised your mother’s obsession with hers. She would say: “I look at myself in the mirror and the only thing I can say is that that person is not me.” Now you are in the same predicament. You take pictures and apply the filters that will bring back the illusion of youth. Trapped in this alien body that goes its own way no matter how hard you try to attain it. Because you are still a girl inside, but you are not allowed to be. Everything around you is built for youth. You could kill yourself in a gym or plump your skin with expensive treatments like your mother did but you know it is tantalizing. “I take pictures to know myself. Because I do not recognize my face or my body anymore.” Rembrandt too painted selfportraits all his life and the last he did was at the age of 63, just three months before he died. Did he know that that portrait was going to be his last? You saw that portrait in an exhibition you attended recently. You had seen it before, in a study trip, but it was only now that you were able to grasp its message, in all its poignancy, for the first time. Because now you are turning him. Because now you are turning her. The mirror of paradoxes.

“Once I met a man who took a picture of himself once a day for forty five years. I

curated the exhibition of the 16425 polaroids. The pictures filled all the walls of the museum and we had to put extra panels at the centre of the rooms. I was so taken by his commitment that I decided to do the same but of course at a personal level. I had already missed so many years but what I did was first dusting off the old family photo albums and then I asked everybody I knew from the past if they would have any photos of me. Facebook was crucial. I collected a fair amount of pictures in a very short time. Then I classified them by year and set up a gallery in Facebook, but it is still private [...] At the same time I started taking selfies with the iPhone. I have now a huge collection, over 700 pictures. I have more than enough for *Throw back Thursday* #TBT. I am using always the same framing, with different backgrounds, hairstyles or facial expressions but all are three quarter. Similar to those of the photo booths or mug shots. One day I might make my own art project with it.” Your ex-husband once asked what was the purpose of doing this. “It is art. It is a way of knowing myself and a way to get hold of my self. But maybe you don’t understand...” “Oh...” he said, and then he left.

There are many strategies for clinging to yourself. Your mother, for example, used to fly once a month to a clinic in the continent. She insisted that you should accompany her because it was time for you to benefit from the new science of freezing time. You would always refuse with the argument that you were trying to live a healthy lifestyle (liar) and that plastic surgery wasn’t precisely in your bucket list. But you went eventually, she was one for making arguments work in her favour and you were weak and therefore easy to seduce. She booked a week end at a Spa for your birthday. As a form of special mother and daughter celebration but the truth is that she would have gone anyway as her follow up treatment was due around those dates and that was her top priority in life in that moment. Oddly enough she ruled that social media was out of the question and that both of you should forget about mobile phones and

Wifi. You were somehow flattered that, for once, your mother wanted to share a little secret only with you. It didn't occur to you that she might have had ulterior motives.

The plan for you was to choose a la carte body and facial treatments, which came with the promise of taking ten years out of you. God love her. So you patiently listened to the experts' advise and finally agreed to try a couple of non-invasive treatments. Namely a full body massage and a facial, which included radiofrequency and currents to your skin that felt like being wired to an electric chair, in order to stimulate the production of collagen, the youth protein. Your mother would get everything a body can afford without crossing the threshold of the grotesque: massages, currents, fillers, laser, peptids/botox, plasma, Japanese wires, you name it. All veiled versions of some sort of Medieval torture. If she hasn't had fallen ill, who knows if she might have gone too far. But she never did. How painful it must have been for her seeing her precious body crumble under the malaise.

She spend a fortune in treatments and she invariably would file them as expenses for Revenue, which was the only 'body' on Earth to know about it, besides you, of course. In spite being most of the time a public person, prone to vent every aspect of her life, she would keep this particular a secret. That was the main reason why she was going abroad. Once the director of the Spa asked her as a friend on Facebook and also if she would give a 'like' to the page of the company. She just pretended not having seen the requests, just in case someone might make the connection. She used to complain about how expensive it was to get a job nowadays and she was right. Would she have looked her own age, she would probably had got less parts to play. She was right filing the bills for her tax returns too. She would also say that if transgender operations shall be subsidised by the State at some point under psychological

grounds then youth treatments should too because a person had the right to work. You would say to her that it wasn't exactly the same but she wouldn't have it: "I am traumatized by aging. I am not allowed to work because there are no old women parts to play." Well, she had a point.



## XIII

### The Help

It's been a while since you have fallen ill. Your daughter is having a meeting about you with your manager and your lawyer. Your son is probably on Skype with them. It is happening right now. Possibly the only "family event" to which they forgot to send you an invitation. Perhaps you didn't want to be invited after all and maybe they sensed it. They couldn't bring themselves to ask "Mother, friend, you are ill and you are not going to get better. What do you want us to do? You are wetting your pants and need to be fed like a child, what do you want us to do?" See nothing, say nothing, and hear nothing. The three monkeys. Nothing in life can prepare you for this.

The 'council of the young' have concurred that the best thing to do for the moment is to keep you at home and organize some around-the-clock help. You are not too inclined to having strangers at home messing with your things but you must admit that it is for the best.

After all they have their own lives, your daughter, your friends, your son. The 'council' has also decided to sell your holiday home to pay for the help. That will do. "She won't need it anyway." But you love that house! Maybe you would like to die there, on a sunny day, instead of here where it always rains. Maybe you would like to be buried there, in the sunny graveyard by the sea, or in the garden, under the magnolia or cremated and your ashes scattered among the anemones. Hey you! Take me to the South!

So they are determined to sell your house in the sun. What about if you last so long that they have to sell this one too? Will they put you in an institution then? Oh God! Don't let them do that! You cannot think of anything worse than that. A place where you have to permanently smile because you cannot escape. Like now you must learn how to smile all the times because when you depend constantly on everybody else, this is what you do, you cry smiling. You have seen that. In hospices, in nursing homes, in cancer wards they don't smile because they are happy or content. They smile because it is the only way they can afford to cry. Besides it helps everybody else. But this is not the worst that can happen. Imagine if you were dispossessed! What would come to you if you didn't have this house or children? Although procreation is not always the best guarantee for geriatric care. In a sense you are lucky. All set then. Go on children, get me the help.

None of you could have predicted how complicated a task would be to get a full time carer. A real first world catastrophe! Well, it is a bigger blow than not being famous, or being fat, single at thirty five or having nothing to wear to a party. Your issue lies, in the scale of western calamities, in the in-between being party dressless and homeless. A caring carer like the way you cared for the children when they were small. You were so young then, you were a



kid yourself. They never appreciated your sacrifice. How much you missed them. So you end up having a procession of nurses each from their own mother. Meaning that they have different personalities and instead of them adapting to you, which would be the easiest thing to do, you have to fashion yourself to please them in order to avoid disappointment. But you will keep smiling. There is not much you can do about it. Actually there is. You have your own resistance little tactics. For example you can refuse to eat. Before it was so different. When things didn't go as smoothly as they should, you vented everything online. It made you feel so good; for a couple of minutes.

Monday is sweet, caring and lazy. Sometimes when she has had a row with her boyfriend on the Sunday she delays her tasks, for example shopping or preparing your food because she is engaged in a fight with him; in Facetime. You cannot even make yourself a cup of tea, never mind preparing a sandwich or cooking. The only thing you can do is staring at her and smile. Invariably she smiles back. "I have to go." She says to the boyfriend and then hangs up. Then she approaches you, fixes your hair with a dexterous rapid hand movement and then she rushes with the mush, which is most of the time disgusting and makes your face twist. Feeling bad, she gives you a crushed Ferrero Rocher; as a form of apology. If you only liked milk chocolate with nuts! Besides it makes you choke. You are more into the dark side. But what are you to say? she is nice. You keep smiling. She smiles back at you.

Tuesday talks all the time. On the phone, to your neighbours and to you. It is entertaining, now that you cannot entertain yourself. These days you are unable to work on your Facebook diary. You wanted to write a memoir too. She switches on the TV. The news is on. The volume must be quite loud as you can feel the vibrations penetrating your brain.

Something terrible is going on. You see people covered with blood, some running, others lying on the streets. She changes the channel. It is a talk show. Some young actress is being interviewed in an orange couch by a bearded man. He must be saying something funny because she starts laughing. She then explains to you the joke. Oh God, what is she saying now? She keeps talking. Sometimes you have a pounding headache and every sound coming your way feels like a dart. But she is nice too. Sometimes she is all smiles and puts fresh flowers in a vase. Then she tells you that she is going to get married to a wonderful man that will make her “real happy”. LOL.

Wednesday is the best one. She is petite, glides her way about and doesn't talk much. She does her job up to perfection and she too smiles all the time. You like the way she combs the little hair you have left. You had a lovely mane but now is more like a barbed wire. Your lovely hair! Long gone! Now even the scar from an old surgery can be seen. You might even think she is an angel of some sorts. Sometimes you see a glittering halo emanating from her head. Thinking about it, the supernatural effect might well be produced by an increase in the medication. You recall the doctor saying two blues, one white and two reds. But you think you just took three blues, two whites and three reds. Who cares? Red or blue pill <sup>(25)</sup>. Bring it in. Wednesday is also Thursday. I am glad you are back dear. “Thank you madam.” She can read your mind. On Thursdays your head floats above the clouds and this brings you laughter. Laughter brings you wet pants. Wet pants brings you shame. Shame brings you ill temper. Ill temper makes her cry and slam the door. “I am leaving!” You just have to wait for a few minutes. Then slowly she opens the door again and comes inside the room, her head down. I am glad you are back dear. “Thank you madam”.

Friday, once a month, in the morning, your daughter brings you to the hospital for a routine check up. Then you spend the rest of the day together. She brings you to the theatre or to a museum and then you have a nice meal somewhere in town. On Fridays you dress up a little bit and also wear a little make-up. When your daughter arrives, if you are in the mood, she will take a selfie and she will post it on your Facebook feed and then in hers. Then she tells you how much everybody is missing you and that they send you their love. The rest of the day goes by doing different things: being strolled out, listening to your daughter, watching TV, listening to music, posing for snapshots, looking at the Facebook feed, looking at pictures in Instagram or Pinterest. Sometimes, before, when you were more able than you are now you would do things just for the sake of posting them online and see what happens, like the day you made up the story of acquiring the patent of a new indelible lipstick. You even got a few orders! Anything to save you from oblivion.

The weeks the hospital check-up is not due, you were meant to be on your own until your daughter finished work. She would usually come around five pm. But now, for the last couple of months, you cannot be left alone anymore. You have reached the next stage: twenty-four by seven care. Now the night caregiver has to leave a little bit later. She cleans and dresses you up and then she gives you breakfast and changes your diapers again. Sometimes. She keeps you company until mid-morning when she then has to go. Your neighbour next door is aware of this. It has been arranged that she will keep an eye (or two) on you until your daughter arrives. She will knock on your door first and then will open with her key, then she will peep her head in for a little while. She will then approach you and rub your shoulders or stroke your hair gently, just to make sure you know she is there for you and that you are all right. You are always all right. You smile. She smiles back. You don't want to trouble her; she has

enough on her plate. She babysits her daughter's children. Three boys: a baby of about ten months, a toddler, and a six years old.

The daughter is a deputy manager in some mobile phone company; she has to commute for over two hours a day and she is always tired. The daughter's husband was a social media content analyst in a multinational but now is a film director and part-time stand-up comedian. He has never made a film in his life but he is the CEO of his own Youtube channel. He is now directing small videos featuring his own jokes. Apparently he can make a living with it pretty soon and retire her daughter from work. That's the plan. "But in my opinion it is always others that make a living over this sort of things" your neighbour told you once. "Now he needs to be left alone in the house to write the scripts and record his performances. That's why I have the kids because they were messing at the house. Can you imagine? But I don't mind. I love them. When my daughter comes home instead of relaxing she has to take care of the children and make dinner. Can you believe it? But apparently there are millions to be made of it. I haven't seen any yet!" She laughed. "Your son was doing something like that a while ago. Wasn't he? Since you got me in the Internet I have got into so much trouble. Do you remember?" She said. You smiled. She is very funny.

One Friday she was free because her daughter had the day off. So she had invited her two cousins from the village for the weekend. The two cousins were two happy-go-lucky women in their sixties, twins; both wearing colorful XXX size print dresses. "We brought you something to die for." she said. They came in with a bottle of liquor with a split in the middle. One of the halves contained a green liquid and the other a yellow one. We knocked down the double bill in no time and took a selfie to commemorate the event. My neighbor said that she

wouldn't post it online because her cousins weren't supposed to be in town or drinking. You were fine with that; you weren't supposed to drink either. Alcohol is supposed to interfere with the medication. Does it really matter? Let's shush then. What happens in the house stays in the house. You had a good time. You don't know what the liquor was but it was warm. You are now looking at that picture, in your mind.

On Saturdays comes a fellow. He is gas but he is also clueless. He is as clumsy as well intentioned. Besides nobody has thought how you might feel about having a man bathing, dressing and undressing your battered body, sometimes changing wet and shitted pants. Last week he put your diaper on your back instead of where it should be and you ended up dirtying yourself and everything else around you. Your skirt, the wheelchair and even the floor. You were mortified, but your face kept smiling. "Oh look at you dirty girl, look what you have done!" He said in a sticky-sweet tone. Then he patted my back. He never gets angry. He always smiles too but this doesn't ease your humiliation. "I know a man is not ideal but we are fortunate we could get someone for the weekends..." Your daughter said to assure you. You try! You allow him to dress you up one day! You shout with your eyes. "I am looking for someone else already but it is not easy..." Poor daughter. I am such a burden. A positive thought: soon I won't be able to notice who's changing my diapers.

On Sundays, if your daughter cannot make it, the fellow's wife comes by. You profoundly dislike her. She is all smiles and good words but you sense she is a hypocrite. She is always talking about her daughter's piano lessons. "Would it be so nice if she could practice more often!" she says while looking languidly at the upright wooden Pleyer you have in the drawing room reconverted to bedroom. You know where she is going with this: she either

wants you to allow the girl to practice here or to gift the piano to her. Maybe you could sell it to her. You are not able to play anyway. “She will be soon eighteen and I am organizing a big party for her” she tells you. Apparently the eighteen’s party is a big thing. You gather that being able to play piano is huge too.

She tells you that she has invited and paid for few relatives’ plane tickets to come over and attend the event. “She must learn to perform a piece up to perfection for the day of the party.” Her insistence makes you think that it is about showing the others that they have made it. Like in those living abroad TV shows in which everyone is successful. You had a sort of proof of that when she brought you her little son’s communion card. The card showed all the traditional features of a communion card but there was something off in the picture. The child, instead of wearing the typical communion suit and holding a prayer book and a rosary, he was wearing a Superdry aviator jacket and Sony MDR-1000X headphones. He was caught in the act of playing with an Xbox, or pretending to, as he was looking straight to the camera with half a smile. On second thoughts perhaps it is more hypocritical to set the child to look like a saint in the card and then splash it in a party anyway. You decide to give her the benefit of the doubt.

One day, when your daughter arrives she explains to her that her teenager needs to practice piano. Then you point to the piano and nod affirmatively with your head. “Ok. She can come next Sunday. I will be around.” “Thank you, thank you so much. My daughter will be so happy!” The following Sundays, two in a row the girl comes to practice. She is either good or bad but you can tell that she would rather be somewhere else on a Sunday afternoon. Your daughter gives her a couple of tips. She told you that although she was looking forward

to the party she was mortified with the prospect of having to perform before friends and relatives. You felt sorry for her. When the time came your daughter and yourself were invited to the party but you couldn't attend because you weren't feeling too well that day but they posted a picture online in which they had the thought of tagging you. Maybe you let go a couple of tears that day.

Usually you spend the Sundays with your daughter. She is a good daughter. She doesn't have a family of her own and now it is too late. She doesn't seem too bothered though. You hope she is not anyway. She doesn't talk about it. Before she would talk about her work. She is a fine artist, she does portraits and abstracts, and she works in a Museum. She had had two group and a solo exhibition. She also uses Facebook and Instagram to showcase her work. She did a couple of portraits of you, when you weren't sick. She said she wanted to draw you again but she doesn't seem to find the time or the energy to do so. Poor daughter. Lately she started to talk with certain frequency about climate change and rescuing animals. It is intriguing because she doesn't know how to recycle properly or have any pets. She says she is supporting many campaigns and that she finds Twitter to be a better platform for campaigning.

You won't go near Twitter but you have seen her sharing or liking some articles or videos on Facebook but you haven't seen her writing any article or attending any demonstration. Maybe she has but she hasn't told you. Maybe she does something in Twitter. She shares pictures and portraits of herself alone, with friends or with me. She posts about her travels or comments on how she is feeling. She is also maintaining your Facebook feed. She has over four thousand friends. You have over five thousand and uncountable followers since

you started logging about your illness. On Sundays you do the same things you do once a month on Fridays, except for the hospital part. If the weather is bad you might just stay indoors and ask her to write something in your wall or to read a book aloud or watch TV. She has told you that the only time she reads from a book is when she is reading to you. She says that she reads everything online. Articles mainly. You did the same in recent times, as social media was your only window to the world. Now you cannot even do that without assistance. But before, social media never prevented you from reading books. She says she spends most of her down time on social media. Meaning that she doesn't have down time at all. She is always active, even at night as she has insomnia. She says she has deleted her Facebook app from the phone a couple of times but she ends up putting it back again. She says it is like a bad marriage.

Sometimes she bakes on Sundays. She will then go to your son's Youtube channel. He is not posting new recipes anymore but the old videos are still there. You watched his wedding in Youtube too. You were long estranged from him but his girlfriend sent you an invitation which you declined politely. You saw your granddaughter in Youtube. You wanted to go and meet her but this time your body didn't allow you. You wonder if he would come around and visit you with the girl before it is too late. Anyway, you watch the videos because they are easier to understand than instruction manuals or recipe books. Somebody should do the same with IKEA furniture if it hasn't been done. You might suggest the idea to your neighbour's son-in-law, the failed Youtuber. When the baking is done your daughter might as well post a picture on Facebook. If the cake besides tasting looks also good she might adventure Instagram and think in something nice to say. When the children were small and you were at home you would also bake cakes with them. The roles have reversed.



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“Mam has taken a turn for the worse. I am very sad. The only thing I can do is to make her comfortable and pray.”



## XIV

### **Hammurabi Code**

Two flight attendants slide the cart containing the dinner meal down the aisle. There is a choice between meats and vegetarian dishes. If someone has special food requirements they must indicate so by ticking a box on the menu print-out, previously handled to us. There are some vegan options, some gluten free options, allergen options and whatnos. Our relation to food is of great entitlement. Specially when it comes to the consumption of animal produce. My grandfather, my mother’s father, had a theory: a man shouldn’t be allowed to taste any animal meat until he proves capable of hunting it, killing it, prepare it and eat it. He was adamant. He was also very fond of the Hammurabi code<sup>(26)</sup>. That was slightly extremist of him but I can only say that he had a point. In his theory people should be allowed to buy their meat at the butchers only once they have had learned what the consumption of animal produce involves, but not before. He claimed that this learning should approximately take place between the ages of eight and fifteen and boys and girls should equally go through it. He would dispense small growing children who could be fed meat by they parents once in a while but only in their most vulnerable stages of growth, which according to him were the ages

between two and seven. He assumed that before two years of age children should be exclusively breast fed.

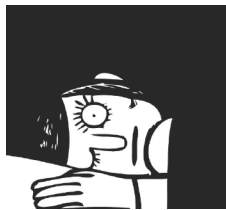
A similar approach applied to vegetable produce. Every child must have had learned how to cultivate his/her own vegetables and observe the transformations the plants go through before been allowed to buy and consume bagged salads or chopped peppers from supermarkets. The theory involved learning hunting, gardening and also cooking and construction skills. In his ideal world, families, communities and schools had the duty of being involved in childrens' education together. Rules and policies had always to arise from the bottom to the top and maintain a perfect feedback loop. The setting was as follows: communities should provide safe ecosystems for children to be 'launched' to life. The ecosystems would consist of a network of landplots no less than ten thousand square meters and expandable depending of the breadth of the community. The ideal plot would have to enclose a forest, farmland, access to drinkable water and fisheries (man-made reservoir, river, lake or seashore), kitchen and flower gardens and wild and free range animals. Also the allotments would have to be equipped with a headquarter building, which would be used for different social and logistic functions, including storage, education and administration, the latter although unavoidable, it would be reduced to its minimum expression not to fall into old bureaucracy. The space would be constantly monitored by supervising parents and teachers in a roster basis. Companies would be obliged by law to liberate their workers for social service for periods of time no longer than six month in a row, while maintaining their employees payment, for the greater good.

As my mother was always away and my father, well, he was away too but in another sense we, my sister and I, ended up being my grandfather's little experiment. He would test his theory on us despite my grandmother's most fervent opposition. So one day, my sister at the age of eleven and I at the age of six, were left in my grandparents' country home with the existential duty to overcome our first true rite of passage. There we were, both in the middle of the patio, child size daggers in hand and with a couple of chickens running around us, which we were supposed to catch, kill, defeather, cook and eat. My sister and I looked at each other and started to cry and call my grandmother. To our dismay she had gone in a shopping day-trip to the capital. We did what we could. We managed between the two of us to get hold of one of the chickens and while I sat on top of the poor animal my sister slit its throat with the baby hunter's knife. The chicken had managed to escape, even with the head half hanging from the neck, and had ran towards the flowerbeds surrounding the patio's perimeter leaving a Pollock style trail of blood behind. Stumbling against the roses the bird gave a couple of spins before fatally falling on top of grandma's petunias. The chicken was finally dead.

"We did it! We did it!" I shouted in elation before running to fetch the prey like a hound smelling blood. Meanwhile my sister was still standing, holding the knife on her right hand and a lost look in her eyes. She was catatonic. My grandad went towards her and gave her a couple of smacks on the cheeks until she awoke from her stupor and started crying again. I moved towards her holding the chicken by the legs. I shouted: "Feathers, feathers!" Then we had to submerge the bird in boiling water before plucking its feathers. My sister didn't want to do it and continued crying. Then I started chasing after her swinging the bird in front of me with my arms outstretched: "Feathers, feathers!" I was laughing, amusing on her fear. When eventually she calmed down, we put the chicken inside the pot. Meanwhile grandad had been

looking at us at a distance, frowning every now and then and then staring at nothingness in tight concentration before taking his field notes.

The moment the feathers made contact with the boiling water I felt an avalanche of arcades originating at the pylorus and running through my oesophagus towards my mouth from where the contents of my stomach were expelled to the outside world. The stench was unbearable. My sister couldn't stop laughing then. After being crying for a while her sinuses were completely blocked so she couldn't smell the vapours emanating from the plucking pot. She got her revenge. That evening when grandma arrived we surprised her with dinner. We made chicken with peppers and beer and boiled rice on the side. The three of us had set the table with a fine tablecloth and candles. Grandma was over the moon and I remember this as one of the happiest days of my childhood. I might just try to get some sleep now.



## XV

### **A Journal of Insomnia**

These days you find yourself unable to sleep. You dread bedtime as you dread failure. Every gesture is driven not by ambition but by anxiety. Every day. Every night. However, in the dark hours of the night it is worst because of the silence. You fear bedtime because it is then when the sting of anxiety comes upon you. The situation has been going on for a while now. You eat lettuce for dinner because it has narcotic properties. If your grandmother were still alive she

would have given you something stronger: opium. She had a couple of plants in the backyard. It was her way to avoid the visits to the dentist when her wisdom tooth stung. When you were a little girl, she slept for three days in a row. Everybody thought she was dead. But she wasn't. Every now and then she would stir in her bed and burst into laughter in her sleep. She had no idea it was a criminal offence to consume opiates. She survived the civil war in spite of being in the wrong side of the conflict, so she didn't care much about the law. Conversely, you visit the Chinese doctor in a regular basis, even though he prescribes revolting medicines and stabs you with long needles for 60 quid per hour. After a while you stop drinking exciting beverages such as coffee, tea or coke. Then you decide to ban yourself from any sort of excitement in the belief that it would all be for the best. But of course it doesn't make any difference.

After two months, fifteen days, twelve hours and uncountable revolutions of your body inside and above the sheets, unable to find a good sleeping position, is time to confront the harrowing truth: you are officially an insomniac. You start then keeping a diary about it, in Facebook and Instagram. This activity consists mainly of making compositions combining text and image in which the image illustrates the text or viceversa. Each one captioning the other. The idea is to convey a mood or let the post to be the mood itself. "Why do I do this? I am not too sure about it, but it helps." It is as if with this sort of imaginary dialogue, you could conjure insomnia, let alone greater anxieties or tumults going on inside your head. The images you fabricate are either collages from pictures found on google images or images made from scratch in Photoshop. Then you have to tell someone about it: "Look what is happening to me!" , "Can you help?" So you share these compositions on social media for friends and strangers alike to see. You label your works under hashtags such as

#realinsomnianotheffeeshop, #Iloveagoodnightsleep, #countingsheep . What is important is to reach out as much as possible.

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You have done this for a period of time. At the beginning it was fun and you loved shaking off your insomnia all over and seeing other peoples' reactions, solidarities and common grounds. You actually thrived on it. You were not alone. But posting about insomnia soon falls short without innovation. You risk to miss yourself and your audience by becoming repetitive. Unfortunately insomnia is repetitive. It is the same impossibility of stopping a ruminating brain over and over again. Like in *Groundhog Day* in which Bill Murray finds himself stuck in a time loop on February the second. Maybe the condition is meant to be an allegory of life's eternal recurrence. Maybe a Facebook timeline is that too. A repetition of meaningless events in which to project everyday your own circumstantial meaning. Either a way of growing or the way to hell. Or nothing at all. Buddhists believe that it takes ten thousand years for a soul to evolve. For Garcia Marquez it takes a hundred years of solitude. "Why do I do that?"

Why do you do that? You don't really know. It is done out of an impulse and then it becomes a pattern. What does it do for you? Certainly it doesn't cure insomnia. However it gives you something to kill the time before the time (without sleep) kills you <sup>(27)</sup>. You manage to find avowal in the staging and sympathy and comfort in people's comments. Somebody cares and you feel wrapped. You feel loved. How were you feeling loved before social media? Maybe a phone call or the odd letter, perhaps a chat over afternoon tea or a glass of wine. But if every cloud has a silver lining the opposite is also true and as soon you lose your 'audience', say because your haven't posted in a while because you haven't felt like doing it, or because

they have grown tired from your lack of innovation; the house of cards collapses. What once made you feel good, now makes you feel bad. “Why they don’t respond anymore? Have I done something wrong?” Then you begin thinking that maybe you should curate your posts more carefully. Who are you trying to please or impress? Why? It started as something enjoyable that made you feel better about your impossibility to sleep but it is becoming something else. To what end? Obviously it doesn’t serve the purpose you intended it for. Can you stop? Well this is the question. You decide it is time to move on.

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“I did post about my insomnia for a period of over three months. In Facebook: eighteen status posts in total, plus one insomnia themed profile picture and also the appropriate banner picture. In Instagram I just posted the same I had posted on Facebook but without the profile picture and without the background image. Actually it went the other way around. First Instagram and then Facebook.” The enterprise wasn’t quite successful after all. You ended up hiding the posts from the public and friends and out of embarrassment. Later, you suppose, you started busying yourself with other matters and decided to kill the project all together. You still couldn’t sleep though. So at night you engaged in different activities, mostly browsing the cyberspace, hunting for bargains in Ebay. But you also polished your shoes, ironed your shirts and prepared scalding cups of hot chocolate with valeriana drops, burning your palate every time by sipping too soon . You have always overdone the temperature and the amount of cocoa in your hot chocolates, probably as a reaction to the quasi-cold-almost-white hot chocolate you get in town. One night you even flossed your teeth for the first time ever, and you hated it.

“One day I came accross a community of insomme people on the Internet and joined for a while until it also got repetitive and consequently I left.” The community was a sort of transmedia collaborative game-experiment which allowed you to share your story with other sleepless loners. The Internet never sleeps. A nine years old girl, with a mild disability, is being interviewed on the TV’s Saturday chat show. Apparently her video singing a classic Leonard Cohen theme from the 1970’s went viral on Youtube. The presenter asks her what is her reaction to the public great reception of her performance. She replies nonchalantly with a smile: “I feel loved.”

Is feeling loved a human necessity, an entitlement, or it is the result of years of decimononic Romanticism brainwashing, actualized by Hollywood rom-com blockbusters? Probably a little bit of everything. Love as the feeling of attachment to another human being, like the human cub with her mother, and love as a “discursive fact” as claimed by Foucault. You don’t know for sure which one it is but life gives you some clues. You too loved the attention even if you would only admit it *en petit commitee*.



## XVI

### Logging

You needed a way to unleash your anger. It is so unfair. You are not anymore who you want to be. You are losing yourself. You begin to post as a way to hold onto your old self but as the



illness progresses you realize that this is going to be a tantalizing task. You know this is a lost battle. No matter what you do, you can never go back. What has been it is no more. Posting on social media gives you a means to come to terms with the person you are becoming: a terminally ill individual. It is a way of reaching out from you to yourself and from yourself to others. It is a possibility of vindication. You want so much to survive. Survival is at the core of your being but your body is against your will.

The comfort coming from others, thousands of followers showing how they care for you, the words and pictures of those going through similar situations, they form part of your means of survival: through recognition, through acceptance. In this sense there isn't much of a difference between you and the person, which through constantly taking self-portraits, shows them to the world in an attempt, perhaps, of attaining her own image, her own youth. You know somebody like that. The illness has truncated, arrested, the good story of your life. Which life are you going to live now? You are not to produce anymore the good Memoir of all good and bad things past but something entirely different. You are now set to write your own Auto-patho-graphy instead. You have many followers encouraging you, while others, a minority, despise what you are doing. Your ex-husband for example. "Bad taste" they say. But the majority of people consider you a hero. They 'talk' to you in these terms anyway: that you are "inspiring", that you are "brave" and "heroic", that you are "helping others in the same situation." The truth being you have enough on your plate trying to help yourself, but you let them have it.

At the beginning of the illness your posts were very blunt. They were based in pure anger. After every stroke your moods became darker and your rage more evident. Your PR

agent advised you to avoid venting openly on social media because it didn't look good and it wouldn't help you anyway. But he was wrong. Cursing and ranting made you feel so good. You became isolated at home and you wanted to reach out. You hated everybody, yet you wanted to have people around. "Instead of cursing, so inelegant if I might say, you could help other people in similar situations to come to terms with their illnesses, with nice words. Why don't be an hero, a martyr, instead?. Trust me. It pays off. " One day he said to you. But you didn't want to come to terms with anything and you didn't care about other peoples' opinions, besides you were no martyr or saviour. You cared about yourself. That's not entirely true. You had considered suicide but you changed your mind. You couldn't inflict that into your daughter. You didn't want to cause her more pain. Instead you joked, you laughed louder and louder, like a crazy person and over all you cursed. Oh yes, you cursed: "Mother, do you really have to do that? I can get you some Marijuana you know? " So you went from ranting in 'public' to ranting to 'friends' and 'friends of friends' to ranting to 'only me' in Facebook or ranting in private to close friends via Whatsapp.

Rants and curses are quite interesting. For you they are a way of rationalizing madness. People in general don't get it, until it gets them. In Facebook people rarely sympathize or react at all to raw cursing, especially your friends, and especially when it is about a personal matter brought into the open. It is like shouting in the street. Here people don't shout in the street unless they are drunk, crazy or uneducated. But you have seen that in other countries it is different. For example, in your holiday town, it is usual for mothers to shout from the balconies of the high-rise buildings to their children playing in the street that dinner is ready. But not in here. Maybe we don't built high-rises to prevent mothers shouting. Maybe we also invented the art of polite conversation with the intention of hiding bodily noises. We

talk about our day at work or gossip about our neighbours during meals, not because we give a damn, we would prefer to eat in silence, but because in this way we avoid listening to the sound of mastication.

We like a good story too, especially when it ends badly. In your opinion it all has to do with the 'Victorianism' rotten business, which is still very much in force. Oh yes. So if instead of ranting you were to post a picture of an erupting volcano, even if the caption was the worst curse ever, they would take it as a joke and like, comment or laugh at it. So from then on, any time you needed to scream, you posted a volcano. You had even started the volcano series: Stromboli, Krakatoa, Eyjafjallajökull. The greater the disappointment, the greater the eruption. You had also considered signing for a Twitter account. After all it is the closest thing to a high-rise building.

Between volcanoes you did some serious logging too: "Last week I had a fall. My legs just went. I was shopping at the high street and I had this terrible attack of migraine. My sight blurred and then I collapsed. I had bought a pair of salon shoes like these ones. Yes, they were red too! To go with a lovely red gown! The case is that a gentleman attended me on the street while another called the ambulance. I want to thank my unknown rescuers. It was another one of my too-many strokes. In the confusion I lost the bag with the shoes. A real tragedy! Please if someone hears anything about it or finds it. Do let me know!" The shoes appeared only two hours later.

"Today I woke up with my belly the size I was when I was about to give birth. I went to the hospital to get a parecentesis (to get the fluids pumped out). Three needles of different

gauge are inserted in the abdomen to numb through to the fluid pocket. Then a catheter, attached to a drainage bag, is inserted to draw out the lymph. But this is just a routine procedure, not as bad as it sounds. Thank you for your support.”

“With my team we are working on a plan. For the ones that just joined this forum, I am now prostrated in a wheel chair and I am going to need some extra-help. I am getting weaker as the time goes by and anything, from preparing food to eating or going to the bathroom is burdensome. We are making this place more suitable. It needs to be simpler and with wider doors so I can move freely with the wheelchair. I won’t need my Cleopatra’s bathtub anymore so my daughter has suggested that I put it on e-Bay. Do not be shy! Safety handrails are being put in place in the new wet room as I speak and my bedroom is now down in the drawing room. Love the change! Planning an excursion for Easter weekend. Hope to have the strength. Love.” The trip was memorable. You were laughing your pain away. You managed to put a rein to your bad mood to the expense of allowing the maniac that now lives inside you to surface. You were making jokes and pretending to wheel yourself off the cliff or to die by suffocation with your scarf. You would have killed yourself that day but your daughter stopped you. She smiled at you and then she kissed your forehead. Your girlfriends took many pictures of the event. You were crying in your laughter. You missed the opportunity of a good death.

The day of the cliff was the last time you went out. “ I haven’t posted for a while now. You all know that in my case no news doesn’t necessarily means good news. This is my daughter writing on my behalf for I am now unable to use my hands to strike the keyboard. I will soon be unable to talk to her or to the machine, to talk to anybody at all as my words are

starting to slur. My eyesight is also going. The view from my window is now a Turner. Not a bad thing taking on board I got it for free. Tomorrow I might not be here. Do not hope for me, as it is pointless. Wish me courage and heavy drugs. Thank you.” That very night, when you were helped into bed, a round circle of urine was left on the wheelchair cushion, foresawing that you were definitely gone.



## XVII

### Zombies

There she is. As aforetime, already there. Sitting across the road, smoking, outside *La Bodega Café*. From your point of view she appears framed by the gap left between the métro entrance and the hanging sign. But quickly she vanishes, gone in the fleeting moment in which a blue Renault Kangoo crosses in front of you blocking her from your sight, only to resurface immediately again in all her smoke puffing splendour. The sun has finally decided to break through the clouds and there she is, her eyes closed and taking in all the sun a face can afford. Her legs are slightly spread. Inelegant and careless. The cigarette is now smoking itself in the border of the ashtray, keeping company to an equally unattended cup of coffee. Suddenly, as if telepathically noticing your presence, she lowers her head and meets your eyes: “Hey connard<sup>11</sup>!” she shouts while waving towards you. She gets up from her seat: “Come here! Hurry up” she indicates. You think in a similar situation but in reverse. That of her pushing

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<sup>11</sup> Stupid

you away, centuries ago. Although it feels like yesterday. “Go, enjoy the life and don’t come back until you are a man” she had said cryptically. Well, you could say you are now a man. “Look at you! You are très belle!” You lie. She looks like if a train had ran her over. The pale skin, the face swollen and the dark circles and fine wrinkles under her eyes are not a good sign. Her hair is now blond and shorter but she is still very much herself. The tragic beauty you fell for many years ago. “You are always late!” she protests. “You look horrible!” She lies too. Once the mood for the ‘date’ is set, you hug each other tightly, with hope and hurt.

“How are you doing lassie?” you smile at her. “Uhu, lassie? You have really being brainwashed by the Kiwis! I am glad you came.” She says returning the smile. “Aussies actually. You can talk frog!” “Same moron!” she snaps. “Are we okay here? Wouldn’t you prefer to go inside or somewhere else quieter?” you say. “Somewhere else safer you mean?” She points out. “No. It is not what I meant.” You lie. Yes, this is exactly what you meant. “Lightning never strikes twice in the same place.” She sentences trying to reassure you. But you are not so keen about it. It just doesn’t make sense. You still remember how back home a thunderbolt struck the phone lines leaving a black trail on the walls and then a second one launched the artefact through the air. “There is always room for chaos” is the only thing you bring yourself to say. “Indeed...” she concurs. She wants to stay outside anyway. You stay. She will have the same. Same for you too. “Deux cafés s’il vous plaît...et deux verres de l’ eau.”<sup>12</sup> she orders.

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She doesn’t have a clear memory of it. All she can manage is recalling the flickering white lights, the kind you are advised to avoid if you suffer from epileptic seizures, and a

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<sup>12</sup> Two coffees please ... and two glasses of water.

strong smell of iron and sulphur. Maybe this is what the scent of hell is like. Then the embrace of a muttered and pervasive sound as if coming from an underwater world. Like drowning in a sonic fog of sorts if this were possible. And then an absurd thought: a totally new discernment of the notion of death metal. She shudders at the consideration. “Why do I have this ridiculous recurrent thought?” If she could snap a single picture of that night, that would be the notion of that all were innocent. But as the days go by many questions are being asked and speculation is on the order of the day.

“Something has happened to everyone but if you ask me: \_What happened to you? I don’t have a clear answer.” “Are you okay? Can you hear me? Can you speak?” The paramedic said while checking my pulse, then he asked: “Are you hurt? Can you count to ten? Can you walk?” The police asked me: “Can you describe what happened? Can you give more details?” The journalist: “How did it feel to be there? would you give an interview for my channel? For my paper? what is your story? ” “The councillor tells me that I should take my time while advising that talking will do me good. That I need to get it out of my chest. That I am allowed to scream. The latter might not be such a bad idea if it wasn’t the case that I have lost my voice.” She says to you. She has lost the ability to articulate with language what’s happened to her. Only the overpowering smell of iron and a permanent nausea in her stomach persists.

Eyes for sight: she would have seen flashing lights and the crowd dancing in the fashion of the Maasai warriors from the Amboseli, although less colorful. Ears for hearing: whispers, voices with different pitches and intensities, chants and death growls, then a final roar. Thereupon absolute silence. She would have been listening to the black nothingness

spreading its wings beyond, above, next, close and finally tightly into her. Finality is all that matters here. Nose for smell: gas and metal pouring straight from Dante's Inferno. Body for touch: she would have been lying face down on the cold and rough dirty floor. She would have felt the weight and chill coming from an arm wrapped around her naked shoulders. She would have sensed as another inconvenience the stickiness of the dense liquid soaking her white dress. Warm at first, then glacial.

She would have stayed quiet lying on the cold surface. She would have wanted to ask him how he was doing but she would have remained silent instead. She would have been paused in that frozen frame. Her body would have shut down and become as rigid as a slab. She would have stopped breathing until someone would have tapped her on the shoulder and then she would have died a thousand times. Later a friendly voice would have pulled her back from the depths of Thule where she was hiding. And next she would have gasped for air and the slab would have become flesh again. Presently she would have looked around and her elation soon would have become misery. She would have been surrounded by stone bodies, permanently arrested in their immobility. Then she would have been left alone to lick the most terrible of the wounds. The realization that he, him, her lover would have been dead. Yes, this might have been the case she tells herself satisfied. And then both, he and she, would have been heroes before the rest of the world. But the truth is that she doesn't remember anything.

She tells you that she felt compelled to make an effort for the dead but also for the living. She began harvesting prosthetic impressions of what might have happened to her or rather how it might have looked like if she were to be accurate. She started shaping the story of



her experience from others' accounts, from the cues given by the psychotherapist treating her, from the news reports she would hear or read and also from friends and relatives' opinions of the facts. She looked into the mirror pool of stories told by people that were there and had eyes to see and ears to hear and the stories of those that weren't there but somehow felt that they could contribute to the collective pang.

She then tells you that she went about veiling her social media profile picture with the French flag like everybody else and began to scroll to the downs of humanity in Facebook. She wouldn't have paid much attention to the content though. The scrolling would have amounted to counting the beads that would bring her to the desired meditative trance. "I was striving for numbness, you know." She says. "Then something happened." She continues. "I took my dress, still stained with blood and took a picture of it. Then I copied fragments of testimonials found on the Internet and I captioned the photograph with them. Finally I had the longed-for story everybody wanted."

"Look at my face." She craves. "Do you see any emotion appearing in it? Look at my body. My gestures are robotic, mathematical. I behave like a machine. Like a woman with a blurred face, or with an invisible face over which any mask can be worn. If by chance I meet my reflection in a mirror, I think it belongs to somebody else. Someone that might or might not exist. And the days go by, cheating nothingness, cheating the woman that doesn't exist." After a long pause she continues. "*Il faut changer la vie*<sup>(28)</sup><sup>13</sup>. I am afraid of myself for I believe madness is the only way out. The only possible revolution. *Il faut faire sortir*

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<sup>13</sup> It is necessary to change the life.

les morts de leurs tombes<sup>(28)</sup><sup>14</sup>. Nobody knows what madness is able to do. I am the one that lives on without having any meaning. *Celui qui vivra n' ayant aucun sens.* <sup>(29)</sup> <sup>15</sup>

“You don’t know what to say or what to do. Disarmed, you kiss her. First on the forehead, then in the cheek and the neck and after you brush her soft lips in yours. Then you kiss, your fingers tangled in the independent republic of her hair. “Let’s go.”



## XVIII

### Leontious

In *The Republic* Plato has Socrates explain the story of Leontious, who coming across the bodies of some criminals lying on the ground next to their executioner he couldn’t help but approach the scene and have a look, despite being appalled by the thought. Realizing his weakness he covered his eyes and turned away but the struggle was too much and eventually swivelled back to look at the dead. However this time his gaze was met by the sarcastic eyes of the hangman who burst into laughter and started to curse and scold him for feasting his eyes at the sight. The mind is sometimes overpowered by reprehensible desires which are the most difficult to put aside. Then the person becomes angry at this portion of his own nature.

The dead talk back to us. From the memorials we build. From the stories we pull from

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<sup>14</sup> It is necessary to get the dead out of their graves.

<sup>15</sup> That who lives without having meaning.

memories and objects that once were touched by them. We might be struck and disheartened by disaster and life loss but at the same time we feel alive when this happens because it takes us out of the quotidian stupor. The nuances are different when the grief is local. But in any case we need to actually do something: we help, we create and re-create rituals, we devise aesthetic occasions, pictures, mementos. Memento mori.

The shuttle bus leaves you somewhere along rue de Sévigné. You wave goodbye to your fellow passengers. They wave goodbye back to you. When you descend the driver indicates the way you should take for the métro. “There?” You said pointing in the same direction. “Voilà, tout droite, tout droite...”<sup>16</sup> she sais. “Et après?” You further inquire. “Après? après c'est tout! Allez, allez...”<sup>17</sup> dismissing you with her hand and abruptly closing the pneumatic double door. The shuttle reiniciates the march and your white reflexion is left there, on the door glass pane, for a milisecond, embattled and resigned to be, once more, late. You move your phone in all directions on the hope you will find a hot spot and navigate your way towards her. Probably you would have made it on a reasonable time if you just have kept walking in the direction the illhumoured driver just had indicated. Indeed, after a few steps the sign with the name Saint Paul written on it begins to grow so much that your hand can touch it. You would have taken a photo of the sign and send it to her to prove that you made it on time but there is no such a thing left now. Never mind going on Instagram. You are definitely late. There she is.

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<sup>16</sup> Yes, straight on.

<sup>17</sup> After? after that is it, go on, go.



## XIX

### Regarding the Pain of Others

The angry man begins to tell us a story about something terrible that happened in Colombia back in 1985. He says he remembers it well because it was so poignant. “The poor thirteen years old girl was trapped in the mud after volcano Nevado del Ruiz erupted destroying the village and trapping her in the rubble inside her house. I was only in my thirties but the image of her dark eyes in her last breath of life has never left me. Every moment of her three days agony was transmitted on TV. She was talking all the time with the reporters and she communicated through the television cameras with her mother, who was abroad at the time.” He stops to wipe his forehead and sighs. His wife who is now stroking his forearm continues: “They couldn’t help her without killing her. They didn’t have the surgical means to amputate her two legs in order to free her from the grip of the house.” “Cheap excuses!” the man cuts across. “A water pump from the national company could have saved her but it was too far away and the petition got lost in the red tape. It was horrible and all those people around her watching and all of us watching at home!” “But at the same time...” the woman says “...journalist and paramedics were her only comfort as they never left her side and kept talking to her.” Every second of those conversations was taped and filmed. The sole thought jammes your heart in a fist. “But I continued watching!” Says the man “Then Frank Fournier took the last photograph of her alive and a memorial wall was built on the site where she died. She was so calm all the time and the people around her so busy trying desperately to do

something.” Now intervenes the elegant woman who has been checking the case on her phone. “The fact that they didn’t succeed generated a great sense of emptiness, a void.” She says. “What destroys people is impotence.” She muses.

“I remember back in 2008...” the readheaded man with the sad face joins the conversation. “I was travelling in China when an earthquake hit the Sichuan region and many schools collapsed due to the poor materials used in their construction and killing over seven thousand people, including children, teachers and other staff. I was at the time in a safe area but I clearly recall how the number and names of the victims were wiped out by the Chinese government. If it wasn’t for a few civil rights activists, including lawyers, artists and a few brave ordinary citizens, they would have been forever forgotten.” “Which earthquake was that?” says the man with the briefcase and thinning hair. “There was also one in New Orleans and another one in Haiti” says the plumpiest of the twins, reading from her phone. “Those were tsunamis!” the other girl corrects. “Mnn.. it is the same, is it not?” Says the plumpiest, looking at you like seeking your approval. You avoid her question because you don’t have an answer unless you check it online. Instead you look at the readhead with the sad face and prompt:

“And what happened then?”

“A list of victims was eventually produced and published on social media and exhibited in art galleries accompanied by a video voiceover listing their names and who they were: student, daughter, sister, friend. Ai Weiwei, an artist, made it a personal cause. He said: Do you have any idea of how many things you can say in Chinese using only 140 characters? “. Of

course he was referring to his Twitter account which was eventually shut down by the Chinese authorities. Those dead made a lot of noise and gave a few headaches to the party.”

“In 1989, when Hurrican Hugo struck, people moved and helped each other.“ says the elegant woman, still reading from her phone “They all got out of the safety of the mundane. They motioned their bodies to do something as if in the movement resided the antidote to disheartentment. “ She looks at us and continues. “It reads here that the mobilization happens after every natural catastrophe. Like if in the act of rebuilding what was destroyed or repairing a wrongdoing or injustice the pain could be smothered.” “Until of course policy makers intervene bringing experts and preventing people to do what their stress hormones set them to do: the deed that would allow the community to heal. ” concludes the angry man. The full navette goes quiet, like in silent reflection.



**XX**

### **Relics**

He found a bone in the fields. He knew immediately that the bone was human because of his job, and also because of common sense. The place didn't conceal the fact that was plagued with them. The reason being, perhaps, that there were too many, they were too small or it was too expensive to collect and classify them. Or maybe he was mistaken and the bone was in the precise spot where it was meant to be, as a time machine. The fact that it was there, in the

middle of nowhere instead of inside a neat glass case, and without any marking or explanation, almost like dropped casually, made its finding even more poignant. It is conceivable that the body to which the bone belonged was murdered right there. Perhaps piles of bones and flesh all mixed up were thrown there to fertilize the field. Later he found out that the case was still under investigation and the site had to be preserved as it was for the forensics. He put the bone back where it belonged. But he told you that he saw people keeping them: their little trophies, souvenirs, relics. He felt disgusted but at the same time he could have done the same if it wasn't because he was afraid of someone watching him, specially the dead. There is something magically morbid in the act of possession, he told you.

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You remember thinking then of the uncorrupted body of Saint Catherine Laboure whom you saw, as a child, when your nana, your mother's mother, brought you to the shrine in a chapel in number 140, Rue du Bac in your first trip to Paris. She told you that the pious nun had her eyes as blue as if she was alive. But you couldn't see that as her eyelids were closed. You were amazed though at your nana's knowledge of the facts about the Saint. She must have had some important connections among them. Then she bought a special medallion for you, a little case containing a shred of the Saint's tunic. "Keep this always close to your heart boy. This piece of cloth has touched the skin of the Saint and it will protect you from bad spirits." Next she attached a string to the little trinket and passed it over your head like a necklace. "There. Now smile child." She ordered while pushing you towards the shop on the way to the exit. You weren't too sure about it but she wouldn't take it any other way. The art of imposition turned to be hereditary. It followed the matrilineal streak of the family. From

nana's nana to your mother and from her to your daughter and you presume future granddaughter(s). Needless to say that your mother was at the cusp of the crest.

Around you, on to you and to you the ominous display: A hair lock from the saint, a drop of her holy blood, a tooth chipping, all being sold in miniature cases as if the possession of the relic would infuse the buyer with the power of sanctity. Never mind Victorian death paraphernalia, you think now rolling your eyes: Mourning rings made of or containing portions of the deceased. On the way out from the shrine your child eyes were yet to meet the most terrifying of the sights: the ex-votos gallery of body parts. In your childish-wild imagination you thought them to be real and when nana told you that those were offerings from ordinary people to thank the Saint for curing a sick arm or a leg you remember getting totally mixed up with the hierarchy of incorruption. Only years after you found out that those limbs were in fact made with wax and not from the uncorrupted body parts of no-saints. Remarkably it never occurred to you asking what was the point of praying to the Saint to cure a leg and then sever it and give it away in an act of thanksgiving. You shake now your head in amused disbelief.

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He put back the bone where it was, nevertheless he took something with him. In his second stop: S-21 internment camp. There he took photographs of the wall displaying mug shots of the once prisoners. He focused on a particular one, a girl, because she reminded him of somebody he knew and because he wanted to flatten the neck of her dress which was rolled up. This must have been the punctum <sup>(31)</sup> Barthes' had in mind, you thought. She didn't have a number pinned to her chest like most of the other prisoners. Maybe she wasn't worth even that inside her captors mind. He watched those faces, so many of them. Real people. Who



were they? Were they related or known to each other? What were they thinking while that shoot was taken? Why so many? They seemed to be talking to the watchers: “Hail, those who are about to die salute you.” If the photographs were proof of “that has been”<sup>(31)</sup>; then the mug shoots became Death itself, staring back, making the truth of what has been, permanent. Those faces were still haunting him in the dark, he told you. Like the faces you are now looking on your phone will haunt the world until the next catastrophe strikes and inevitably replaces them, not in the memory of those who loved them but in the global forgetful mind.



## XXI

### Paris

No longer after boarding two flight attendants advance along the two aisles with the morning newspapers at first and later with the trolleys containing shapes, substances and materials all wrapped in transparent film and labelled as food of some sort. While I am browsing the international news section a voice asks me if I would like the continental breakfast. “Sure. Thank you.” I say to the smiling face. “Would it be croissants and coffee sir?” “Yes. Thank you.” Next she places a small tray on the folding table. The tray accommodating, in a sort of horror vacui<sup>18</sup> logical sequence the following: a set of plastic cutlery, napkins, salt and pepper and cleaning wipes, all contained in their respective sealed plastic bags. In a different container: a plastic pouch enclosing two small, pale, sad looking and as I am about to find out chewy croissants (a sight considered anathema in Paris), a couple of butter squares, strawberry

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<sup>18</sup> Latin. Fear of void or empty space.

jam and bitter orange marmalade presented in colorful plastic containers, sealed cups of water and artificial orange juice and an empty grey plastic mug, in which another flight attendant will pour a boiling americano from a flask also made of plastic. I might have to take a picture for Instagram and review the buffet.

It is impossible to glance through any newspaper, no matter what the day, the month or the year, without finding on every line the most frightful traces of human perversity...every newspaper, from the first line to the last, is nothing but a tissue of horrors. Wars, crimes, thefts, lecheries, tortures, the evil deeds of princes, of nations, of private individuals; an orgy of universal atrocity. And it is with this loathsome appetizer that civilized man daily washes down his morning repast. <sup>(32)</sup>

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You devour a fresh butter croissant, pre-dipping every bite in café-noir with the devotion of a parishioner. You have been looking forward this little pleasure for a while now. You scroll down and then right to stare at the happy faces staring at the camera (or maybe staring at you) from the screen of your iPad-Mini. Then you look back to your plate, then the croissant, the café-noir, and then back to the minipad. You take a picture of your breakfast making sure the fresh edition of Le Monde is on the frame. “Guess where I am?” Then you apply a filter and then another and three more until you are happy. Post to Snapshat, Instagram and Facebook. You do this mechanically. Oh, maybe not this time you retreat.

Set in automotion your index finger retraces the indentation carved at the back of your iPad, an Apple Inc. courtesy. This simple gesture gives you automatic pleasure. “It is when I sleep that I see clearly.” Your University motto. You draw a smile in your face. Touching these

words brings you straight to the days of wine and roses in a perfect madeleine funnel, a Proustian manoeuvre. Back then you two would miss late lectures and what nos to attend to art openings. Not because you were particularly interested in art. The shows proved to be quite disapointing most of the time, to say the least, if not obnoxious, but because wine and finger food ran free and you were so screwed you had grown some aesthetic appreciation.

Those nights were never ending except for the moment daylight would break and enter into your blood injected pupiles, with the contacts invariably left on, inflicting an excruciating pain. You two had a secret code for this sort of carry on: code 1927 <sup>(33)</sup>. Calling “one nine two seven” aloud would never get you into any predicament. A number is always the safest of the options as it is rendered completely meaningfull to any listener, yet it always lacks a meaning per se. Nevertheless it has an aura of thoughtfulness. Whatever the context is played against, it always works. A word on the other hand can get you into a lot of trouble. Two sudden blips and your are pulled out of the nirvana of self-absorption. Your attention shifts immediately towards the culprit: your phone. Whatsapp: two new messages overlaying the face reflected on the black mirror. Four rapid strokes it is all it takes to unlock the screen and the digital time is displayed in full over a marine landscape : Is “10:25:45 [46,47,48,49...60] AM”.

If you don't hurry you will miss the next complimentary navette<sup>19</sup> to the Picasso in Marais. You don't want to make her wait. In other times you did but not now. You will check your messages later. When you rush inside the navette you note the eyes of the other passengers on you, specially women. You are quite ambivalent about it. Sometimes it makes

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<sup>19</sup> Shuttle bus.

you feel good to attest that in spite of your excesses you still got mojo, but some other times, like the day of to-day you would have preferred to go unnoticed. But then, and to your disappointment, you think that maybe it doesn't have anything to do with your aspect as they resume their businesses immediately after you cross the threshold. The fact that they all looked at you had rather more to do with the way the vehicle was designed and the orientation of the seats. The fact that today you have decided to wear full white gear against the full gray Parisian backdrop surely doesn't help ignoring your presence, but also surely no-one is interested in you today but yourself alone.

You just did it for her, in remembrance of things past <sup>(34)</sup> when you both went your separate ways in the morning, fully clothed in white, only to reunite at night for the ritual of counting the stains life had left in each other's apparel. Well not quite life, as in a metaphysical construct, but more the life you were leading at the time. You were both working in different branches at Le Blanc <sup>20</sup> a franchise in which everything was white including the food, all creamy, while trying to become artists, as you would expect from two perfect enfants de la bourgeoisie<sup>21</sup>. For you it was a matter of becoming a master chef, but for her it was more on the side of the farandole, as she was a flamenco dancer and an actress.

The navette has three rows of two seaters near both the entrance and exit doors, all occupied, a row of five seats at the back, also full, and in the middle, next to the storage racks, two lines of seats facing each other. Of the facing rows, each another place is taken by someone. The shuttle is clearly intended for short trips from A to B, as it seems fashioned to make you feel uncomfortable and subsequently encouraging the wish to get out of it as soon as

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<sup>20</sup> The White.

<sup>21</sup> Children of the Bourgeoisie.

possible. Anyway, you are inside now, and the driver, who apparently has been warming up the engine for a while, turns her head towards the side mirrors and switches on the indicator light, changes to first gear and turns the steering wheel. You feel your knees bending to find your balance. With this state of affairs all you have left to do is making the crucial decision of where to sit, or rather besides who in the facing rows. Standing is not an option you would like to contemplate at this early hour. You go for the empty seat between a middle aged woman and a teenage boy. You amuse on the observation of how you continue to see middle aged people as a category separated from you.

On the opposite row, right in front of you, two attractive young women. Attractive in the way youth is attractive, per se, not because their features have anything specially striking. Both are brunettes with blond highlights at the ends of their mane. It is trendy. It was also fashion back in the 1970's. One of them wears hints of pink and orange in some of her locks, probably done for the special occasion of a concert festival. Both are wearing dark jeans ripped at the knees and gold and green bomber jackets, like the ones that were in style in the 1980's. The black paint of their nails is wearing out. Both girls wear high rise heavy duty sandals, for lack of a better description. They look like twins, even in the fact that one is plumper than the other, although it is clear, by the empty seat left between them and their lack of mutual engagement that they bear no relation whatsoever to each other, beyond their appearance and the fact that both seem engaged in the same activity: scrutinizing the depths of their smartphones.

The minute you take your seat the two girls raise their heads and meet your gaze with a smile. You smile them back. First to the less attractive according to your (highly prejudiced)

standards, then to the other. This is always the right order to proceed. A courtesy in the first case and a passage to grant her interest in the other. Sitting besides the plumpest one there is a man in his sixties reading what looks like the morning paper and next to him a woman of similar age with curly short hair, staring at and massaging the protruding veins of her hands. They might be a couple as they interchange sharp short sentences now and then. “Mais oui, mais oui<sup>22</sup>” she would say as a response to some comment made by him. He would then turn the paper’s pages and indicate something to her. “Mais oui, mais oui” she would repeat with resignation. To your right the middle aged woman, elegant, the way French can be elegant, that is to say, without apparent effort or excess trickery. She dedicates you a shy welcoming smile but immediately she buries herself inside the book she is reading. Her hair hasn’t been dyed and looks like salt and pepper and if she wears any make up this is totally imperceptible to you. You like it like this. You think of your mother and her heavy make up and histrionic hair do and how much you hated it.

There are two more passengers in your row. Two men. To your left there is a man with thinning hair and of similar age than yours with a briefcase resting on his lap and his hands folded over it. To your right there is another man: a redhead in his mid thirties with a X2 Leica digital strapped to his neck and in between his knees, resting on the floor, a backpack similar to yours. His appearance is that of a tourist but the grave expression of his face seems to deny he is any way close to any touring enjoyment. You are not surprised taking into account the recent events. While you are absorbed studying your journey’s incidental companions, your phone blips again. You decide it is a good time to check your Whatsapp updates. The first message, that is to say the last, as they appear in reverse chronological order,

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<sup>22</sup> Of course, of course.

is hers telling you to meet her at the terrace of *La Bodega Cafe* by métro Saint-Paul. The other two are from your wife at home and from a friend in Germany. You do not bother to reply or even to look at the content of those. Later. “Ok. On my way now. See you soon. A bientôt.” You adventure in French, although you are a bit rusty...Umm. “See you in a bit” you write again to assure her you are definitely on your way.

The journey takes longer than expected due to traffic restrictions. You don’t want to let her down by being late. Why couldn’t you have left earlier? Maybe you should get off and get the underground instead? You are not unfamiliar with the city, but it has been ages since you lived here. The Wifi is too weak to check Google maps. You could ask the driver or another passenger. Maybe it is best if you don’t think about it. Thinking about time is a bad thing. It slows down when you are in a rush and it speeds up when you are having a good time. It is like looking at chicken roasting in the oven or waiting for the pizza dough to rise. There is also the much annoying realization that time definitely rushes after 37. For some may be even earlier. For you was 37.

You remember reading in some Facebook post that time slows down by the sea and goes faster at the mountain (or was that in a DeLillo book?) You wonder why. But these days you rarely go pass the headlines. A bad habit. You can end up liking or having a heated discussion about something that has happened a century ago or in a completely different way than what is suggested by the heading. You recall a particular Facebook post about Danes slaughtering dolphins as a rite of passage. The sensationalist title was accompanied by a picture of a shore with the water tinted with blood and populated with fishing boats and villagers bathing in the red solution . Oh! the Internet went on fire! The facts were ‘slightly’ different

though but only a few bothered to actually read the article or double check the information. It turned to be yes a slaughter but of common whales instead, and was done in order to feed the community in the Feroe islands during the long winter and by no means as a sort of obscure ritual. In addition the supposed 'breaking news' were actually eight years old! A bloody sight nevertheless but you just wonder if those that screamed the most gave any thought to the way animals are treated in their own countries' farms while devouring a steak presented on a polished dish.

Unlike your brain the traffic remains still. Well, judging that there is not much you can do about it you decide to continue looking at the pictures which had entertained your breakfast earlier. Incidentally you can only go through the ones you have already seen. Damned Wifi! Then you turn to look at the elegant woman sitting besides you, who seemingly has taken notice of your troubles and is now handing her phone to you : "Do you want to try with my phone?" she says politely in French. Your French has gone rusty, nevertheless you manage to babble an embarrassed "Merci. C'est bien."<sup>23</sup> while dismissing her offer with a synchronized gesture of your head and right hand. Considering that you are in full white attire today the fleeting thought that your gesture was similar to that of a Papal benediction crosses your already cluttered mind. She seems a little disappointed by your refusal but maybe it is just an impression because after a brief pause she hands her phone back to you again. "Oh no, no, no, merci." You insist in not taking her offer. But she knows better. At your refusal she types an address in the browser window and the website comes down fully powered. "Voilà"<sup>24</sup> she says.

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<sup>23</sup> Thank you. Is fine.

<sup>24</sup> There you are.



The elegant woman shows you the website with the pictures. “Terrible!” she says. This you can understand. You nod in agreement. “They are all here.” She continues in better English than your French has ever been. “Any relation of yours?” you ask. “No, luckily, but it is still incredibly sad.” She scrolls first down and then from right to left, just as you did before in your hotel room, to show you the happy faces of those caught under the fire a couple of weeks ago. You have heard of the hashtag [#rechercheParis](#) in Twitter and that many of your friends checked in as being safe in Facebook. Now the names and photographs of the people that went missing during the terrorist attacks has become the list of the victims. A list of pictures with smiling faces and their stories, written by their relatives and friends.

[...] Marion Jouanneau's boyfriend announcing her death on Twitter: 'I saw her die next to me but I didn't want to believe it. I never imagined living without her.' She died in the Bataclan attack; Helene Muyal-Leiris, 35, from France lost her life at the Bataclan concert. Her husband Antoine Leiris posted an incredibly moving message on Facebook telling the terrorists: 'I will not grant you the gift of my hatred'. He said: 'I saw her this morning. At last, after nights and days of waiting. She was as beautiful as when she left on Friday evening, as beautiful as when I fell head over heels in love with her more than 12 years ago. 'Romain Dunay died at the Bataclan. He was a well-loved musician. One friend said on Twitter: 'You are immortal'; Sven Alejandro Silva Perugini. Sven's mother announced on Facebook that her son had lost his life in the attacks on the Bataclan. She said: 'We carry you always in our hearts beloved son, dear brother, today, tomorrow and always.' Kheireddine Sahbi, 29, Algeria; Caroline Prenat, 24, from Lyon, France. She died in the Bataclan; Marie Mosser, French marketing manager died at the Bataclan; Mathieu Hoche, 38, a technician at France24 news channel, also killed at the concert. A friend, Antoine Rousseay, tweeted about how passionately Hoche loved rock 'n' roll; Nohemi Gonzalez, 23, a senior at California State University, Long Beach. The university said Gonzalez, from El Monte, California, was attending State College of Design in Paris during a semester abroad program. Gonzalez was in the Petit Cambodge restaurant with

another Long Beach State student when she was fatally shot, Cal State officials said in a news conference Saturday. A spokesman described Gonzalez as buoyant and extremely energetic. The university was notified of her death by French school officials and confirmed the death with her parents. Gonzales lived in the Los Angeles suburb of El Monte [...] <sup>(35)</sup>

The passenger in his sixties reading the newspaper and who seems to have taken notice of your conversation hands the paper to you while flipping and slapping the pages with rage: “Regard!<sup>25</sup> it is everywhere: here, and here, and here too. Everybody has a say!” He seems over excited or angry. His wife squeezes his arm gently, probably to indicate that he should calm down. “He is upset because journalists have been bothering us since that night.” the wife apologizes for his agitation. “And this is not all. Our neighbours are more than happy to talk about what happened and they weren’t even there!” The angry man adds. You nod in cautious agreement. “There is hunger for stories, portraits of the event. A non-stop feed of impressions sprouting everywhere: TV, papers, social media. It is in everybody’s heads, mouths, bodies, streets, staircases, corridors, shops, waiting rooms, cafes and workplaces, on the radio and on profile pages. Something has touched everybody to a different degree, even for a short period of time. Through horror the good citizens wake up from the stupefying inertia of the everyday, some angry some dulcified. The paradox of death becoming the bringer of life. A broken society brought alive through deadly motion: sadness, anger, astonishment, solidarity, marches, bouquets of flowers, utterances, gestures.” Then it strikes.

You remember stories of another time, another place. Khmer Rouge rule (1975-79). Millions of people were held, tortured, starved to death and killed. Their remains, most of them, prevailing in the site they were found, near Phnom Penh. Your mother’s boyfriend told

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<sup>25</sup> Look!

you a story about his visit to the memorial. He told you that he had neared death once and as a consequence he had developed a need to be among the deceased. Incidentally he worked as a funeral director in a big franchise. Yet, the case might have also been that he went there because he had watched the Hollywood film *The Killing Fields* and he wanted to see with his own eyes, he told you. He saw.



**XXII**

**KLOUT**

Arguments are extremely vulgar for everyone in good society holds exactly the same opinion. Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation. Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.<sup>(36)</sup>

One morning, you woke up with a sort of inspiration, probably due to something you had dreamed off or perhaps as a result of mental debris from the previous night dinner party. That 'mood of the day' prompted you to post on Facebook a quote by Oscar Wilde. Maybe it was intended as a blink to last night fellow partygoers. You don't remember the exact words but it had something to do with having arguments and them being vulgar because everybody was anyway of the same opinion. It was about political correctness, yes, you remember now. Something light hearted anyway.

While most of your friends responded with a ‘like’, either genuinely or because they didn’t care, some woman got it totally wrong. She made the connexion with a social issue in the spotlight at the moment: the marriage equality referendum, and she interpreted your quote as being cynical. Subsequently other comments appeared following the misleading thread and conflict was unleashed à la Twitter<sup>26</sup>. You hate Twitter. Twitter hates everybody. “Um... this is not meant for this.” You thought. That was the time when people posted about their meals or said: “Hello world, I am going to have a shower” in the morning. “Hello, I am too having a shower every morning. It comes with privilege.” “Today only idiots do that.” “To me social media is a little bit like going to the pub. You go there and different sorts of conversations might happen. The only difference or differences, in plural, is that social media conversations are de-contextualized, probably little spontaneous and most importantly: the tone of the ‘talk’ is missing. With this panorama people, most likely, get lost in translation. It is easy to get misinterpreted because the expression of your face, your body language or whatever is going on around you is not there. The conversation is also mute, soundless and most of the time asynchronous. It might look like talk but you cannot talk, talk really.”

So, if it is not meant for this, what is social media meant for? It is meant for anything you want, really. It is a sort of palimpsest in which people use and reuse someone else’s thoughts, opinions, passions and even looks. Actually we are the palimpsests ourselves. Carving layers upon layers of other’s lives. The social media platforms creators probably didn’t expect this outcome but there you go. Unexpected, alive. organically forming itself, rhizomatic: “This is a picture of myself at my daughter’s wedding”, “This is a picture of one of my works”, “This is a video of a show”, “ this is a picture of my mother’s eighty-eighth

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<sup>26</sup> In Twitter’s fashion.

birthday, although she always claimed to be thirty five ha-ha..”, Do you really think this is funny? Please spare me. “This is an album of pictures of my last residency in Milan.”, “This is a picture with a link to an article talking about my work”, “This is a picture of my father’s grave. He wanted to be cremated. My mother needed a place to put flowers.”, No, really? “This is a picture of me after brain surgery. Didn’t I tell you about it? ”, “This is a picture of my funeral.” “Only kidding.” Ah.

You have made yourself online, quite so, but offline, too. It is a lot of work. Once you met an artist, who was criticized because she was always present in her work. She would use traces of her everyday life, including her encounters with others, and stage it as art installations in art galleries: a train ticket, a photograph, her underwear, the unwashed sheets after a night of rough sex, an used condom, her communion book, a piece of cake from her thirtieth birthday. It was a chocolate cake by the way. When she was challenged by an art critic who said that she had exploited being herself. She simply replied: “ but I AM myself.” <sup>(37)</sup> YOU ARE yourself and you are not. You are exploiting being yourself yet when you talk in your own persona you are less yourself than when you put on a mask. When you are on stage you give yourself more than anywhere else. So who are you? You don’t know. You just go along with it, online you have found a place of narrative authority, which is giving you the possibility of reinventing and claiming your voice and your image. Like in your work. You first rehearse it all in private or in petit comité<sup>27</sup> and then you give the full performance to the world. And mind you, a performance comes always with a promise. This operation gives you license to speak out what is personally relevant, or even what is politically personal, in a public arena. This is an excruciating process but it is also enabling.

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<sup>27</sup> Small committee.

You exploit yourself in order to promote your work. You don't see anything wrong with it. Someone you know started playing the role of social activist online but it was all-fake. It was a way to gain clout. Once he had the desired number of followers he started promoting his own work. Now and then he would post something just to keep the face but it was all about getting published. Do you think this is unethical? You have lied to no-one on this matter. Your aim has always been clear: You are your work. You need to keep a balance between promotion and disclosure of personal information. Too much of either would upset the equilibrium. Too much of yourself and you can be accused of being narcissistic. Too much work and you might end up without followers. They are like the public that come to your shows in the theatre. They want to know a little bit of your life, and then they come and see the spectacle and vice-versa. This is the quid pro quo<sup>28</sup>. Online is the same. You give a portion of yourself, or some version of it, and you take comfort, admiration, and ticket sales from them. It is a means of survival.

All this wasn't your idea, it was your agent's. She knows all the tricks of the trade. She studied journalism in a prestigious college abroad and then she went to work for a well-known newspaper until it was absorbed by a giant agency, which subsequently let go many people, including her. She re-invented herself as a communications or PR expert of sorts and ended up managing a few artists like yourself. Once she told you that while she was working for some online magazine she was supposed to talk about herself in order to make her articles more interesting. "It is not at all unusual. Take any article, for example in the Sunday paper or in its supplement magazines. Chances are that any article featured, especially editorial ones, starts with a reference to a personal experience of the signing writer before moving onto the subject

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<sup>28</sup> The expected return for something given.

matter of the article. It is a marketing trick.” She told you. You see the same happening in Twitter where journalists intercalate current affairs’ tweets with their children’s breakfast, especially when working from home. Let alone pictures of beaches, laptops and margaritas, all of them expressions of their ‘flexi-time.’ “So why shouldn’t I? Probably the public is more genuinely interested in my life than in that of any of those journalists. After all I am a real famous person, ha-ha.”

Once your daughter told you about an artist of whom she had curated a show. She told you that the artist, a sculptor incidentally, had set on a quest to fix herself. Your daughter suggested that you could follow her to learn how to manage a successful social media professional/personal profile. Apparently she was using Facebook and Instagram as tools to reflect the struggle with her (self-confessed) elusive identity, but her carefully edited posts betrayed a highly skilled PR strategy. During the time predating the exhibition, a few months before to be precise, she started posting her ‘work in progress’, creating great expectation among her numerous followers. By the time the long anticipated exhibition was going to happen, the web was hot. Every single new bit and piece of ‘The Work’ was received with a roar of ‘likes’ and compliments from her fans. Invariably she awarded them with another best image of herself, if that were possible, or another musing about an apparently random moment from her past, most likely made up.

On the day of the long awaited exhibition opening the guests were filling the gallery. The artist was yet to arrive but her opera<sup>29</sup> was doing the talk, everybody was admiring it. Your daughter, as the exhibition’s curator, had already secured a few bids by the time she

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<sup>29</sup> Work.

made her triumphal entrance. She was dressed up elegantly, with high heels and a golden dress. By a way of contrast she brought with her a bag from Lidl with a six-pack of cheap beer emerging from it, which she kindly offered to some of the guests while saying: “ This is all I can afford after paying for them flyers.” Explosion of laughter. There was prosecco at the catering table and everybody knew. The exhibition, as planned, was a success . The artist didn’t disappoint, and for the ones that had never met her before, she was as charming (bordering seductiveness) face-to-face as she was online. Her speech-presentation combined expert words with a shy body language. Exquisite *mise en scène* <sup>30</sup>. The audience, including your daughter, was mesmerized.

At a certain point in the evening someone noticed that one of the smallest pieces of the exhibition had disappeared. It had been stolen! The alarm was raised and your daughter went to the office to call the police but she was stopped by the artist: “That won’t be necessary. It has been taken care of.” She said mysteriously. “I am so-so sorry, I am devastated” your daughter apologized. “ It is not your fault. Don’t blame yourself.” The artist reassured her while patting her shoulder. By then everybody had gathered around the artist to comfort her. She was really beautiful when she was sad or looking helpless. What an occasion for a photograph! So pictures were taken and posted online. Immediately her cache went through the roof. In fact, that night she sold out the full exhibition and new commissions were made. Your daughter was over the moon because she had felt very bad about the theft. It was a security issue she would have to deal seriously with.

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<sup>30</sup> Staging.



When the vernissage<sup>31</sup> was over and everybody had left your daughter caught the artist red handed producing the little figurine from the inside of the toilet cistern. Apparently she didn't even blink. She just asked for a towel to dry the incubus, for the piece was a wood carving of a little demon, before putting it inside her handbag. "This was a good night, don't you agree?" she said looking at your daughter maliciously and straight to the eyes. "I suppose..." she only managed to mutter. Your daughter told you that on another occasion the same sculptor created the fake profile of an 'envious artist', a specie of villain alter-ego, that criticized her work on Twitter and Facebook. These were only a couple of examples of the way she ensured a lively debate around her work and persona online (and offline too). Her clout and her purse benefited undoubtedly. You asked your daughter: "Is she for real?" "You bet."



## XXIII

### **Hysteria or the Curse of Cassandra**

Last year, close to this time, I got an artwork commission I really looked forward to it. Being on the other side of the trade, most of the time, I craved to unravel my own creativity. Besides, caring for my mother had drained me so much that this work presented itself as a way of respite. I had to paint a mural of thirty-nine by twenty feet for a financial services firm. The

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<sup>31</sup> Private view.

work was meant to cover the back of the reception area and represent the spirit of the company. So far so good. I had a few meetings with the managing board and once the final design was approved and the scaffolding set in place I started working. I painted through the day, starting early in the morning and working my way through quite late in the evening as the sun sets quite late in this latitude. It must have been around the second or third day into the job that I noticed a gentleman looking interested at what I was doing.

He wouldn't say anything at the beginning but as the days went by he became chatty. I recognized him as one of the members of the board, actually he occupied a quite high up position in the ranking of the company. He seemed genuinely interested on my work so I didn't mind talking to him while I was working. "I would like to discuss a painting I want for my office." He said one day. "Oh, of course, that would be great, I can do it when I finish this one..." "Would you come with me for a second so I can show you where I want it?" "Sure, give me a second..." So I left the brushes and cleaned my hands as best as I could and followed him to the top floor of the building. He showed me the way into his office, a bright room with a view to the canal and to the blue mountains in the distance. The room had a wooden wall on one side and a white wall behind the desk. "I would like something for behind the desk." "What a lovely office you have! Sure. Which kind of painting do you have in mind? Should the style be similar to the one I am now working on or...?" I said enthusiastic for getting another commission. "I am thinking of something completely different but with similar colours." He replied. "I see...any particular style in mind? Have you seen something that you like that can give me an idea of what you are looking for?" I went on. "I think we should hang out after work and talk about it." He gave me as an answer. Awkward silence.

His proposal took me completely off guard. I didn't particularly fancy doing anything after work, never mind more work, not with him in particular but with anyone. I was completely exhausted, besides many days I would check up on my mother after work. I wanted to get more jobs on these lines but at the same time the question set up the alarms. "Em...I would love to but...em... I am afraid I am engaged later on. Maybe you could look into some styles you might like and send me an email instead..? that would give me an idea..." It occurred to me to say. "Sure, sure. Give me your card. Maybe we can connect on LinkedIn..." he said. "Oh. Of course! Em.. I don't have a card but I can write down my email address..." I replied embarrassed of not having a business card. "That's fine, see you tomorrow." He simply said. "See you tomorrow." I greeted him. Then I went back down to the reception area to continue working on the mural and I recall thinking that maybe there was no need for the alarms to go off after all. I was pretty sure he was genuine. Why wouldn't he? I noticed that in his office he had a picture of himself with a much younger looking woman and two small children. I assumed they were his family. Wow, my twisted mind, thinking beyond what was there. Poor man I thought. He had also many other pictures of himself shaking hands with some people I knew, for example the President of the country, and others whom I didn't know, for example a man wearing a white coat and looking like a doctor.

That night when I arrived home and checked my social media and my mail I saw his invitation to connect in LinkedIn which I accepted. There was also an email from him saying how much he admired my work and that he was looking forward having one of my murals in his office. Wow, am I really that good? I thought. Nevertheless I was flattered. Next day he came by again and said that he would have also a couple more jobs I could do for him. Really?

I thought. I couldn't believe it! Could it be possible that I have found a patron like in the Renaissance? But something was off. Anyway he continued to come by everyday and suggesting now and then that we definitely should hang out to discuss prospective jobs and that we were so similar yari-yari. I always had an excuse ready to refuse his invitations but his insistence was tipping the point of starting to annoy me. But I couldn't say or do anything beyond finding excuses, after all I wanted those jobs.

When the mural was completed the company held a party in the reception area to which of course I was invited and presented as 'the artist.' By the end of the evening the same gentleman approached me and said that now that the job was done I didn't have any excuse to refuse him and next he grabbed my ass. "EX-CUSE-ME !?" I said aloud. Then I looked at him so furious that I could have slapped him on the face right there. I couldn't believe it! Mother of God! I was approaching retirement age and this satyr thought that he could still grab my ass like that! I wasn't sure if what annoyed me the most was the abuse or the realisation that my ass wasn't a grabbable piece of art but a falling mass of bouncy flesh. "HAVE YOU JUST GRABBED MY ASS???" I shouted while a cold sweat traversed my spine. "I don't know what are you talking about..." he said calmly "DON'T YOU DARE...!" I said, the voice trembling, while pointing down to his nose with my index finger and from the weak (wobbling) vantage point given by my high heels. Then I surprised myself with a thought: "There is no good dwarf", my grandfather's (a quite tall man) rule of thumb. In his experience short men were all mean in character in order to compensate for their lack of height and for this reason the lack of respect from their peers. Well granpa, this one-off time I had to agree with your remark. In return for my curse, the short man gave gifted me with a poker face. Then he turned around his heels and walked away nonchalantly. When I left the

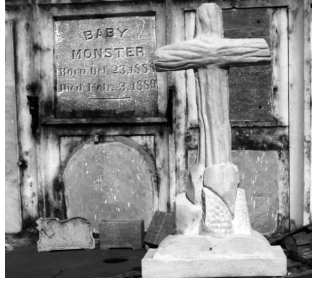
party I saw him talking to some men from the company. They didn't say anything to me but by the way they looked in my direction I knew they were talking about me, and that what they were saying wasn't any good.

The morning after I got a message through LinkedIn saying that what I had accused him of doing the night before was despicable and that he didn't want to have any further contact with me. Obviously I could forget about any further commission or good reference on his part. I felt helpless. Arrived to that point I could be content that he didn't threaten to discredit my work. Of what happened that night I couldn't prove anything, did I want to? What for? I knew all boiled down to his word against my word and I also knew that I was going to be the loser. He had already pointed out that I was confused, if not drunk, and emotional. He added that he didn't want to be linked to me any more and that I should remove myself from his contacts in LinkedIn. You can remove yourself if you want I was tempted to reply, but I said nothing and just removed the contact from my network.

A few weeks later when I had almost forgotten about the incident a friend brought to my attention that there was a smear campaign against me in Twitter. "What..?" I said. "What have I done?" I was nobody, how could I be the center of a Twitter smear campaign? It didn't occur to me to link the previous incident with the smear campaign but there you go. Basically he was discrediting me because I had falsely accused him of harassment to my advantage. Which advantage? I thought. He was talking about me joining a long list of "supposed work harassment epidemic", that I was an example of "victimhood proliferation" and that I was making "victimhood a coveted status to attain privileges." It turned that he had copied the argument from a reactionary columnist called George Will, anticipating that I would go public

about the incident. But I said nothing, not to anyone, nor did I post anything online, nor did I reply to his accusations on Twitter. Because I knew there was no way out for me. Perhaps the only possible solution, I thought, was to stay put and wait until the turmoiled waters returned to shore or until a bigger issue took over. Very unfair but very real nevertheless. It was humiliating to say the least. This was a very banal experience one might think, but what if it have been something bigger? a bigger aggression, a bigger lie. There are many and subtle ways of violating someone's integrity, the right of a person, a body, to self expression and self determination.

What is worse, calling wolf several times and being believed, again and again even after deception has been proved, or to tell the truth and being dismissed as crazy because it sounds improbable or unreal? Hysteria means uterus in Greek and also an extreme emotional state, once blamed on a wandering womb (note how the definition automatically excludes men). Today the word hysteria stands for 'irrationality', 'incoherence', perhaps a 'muddled mind' and 'deception.' How many times I have heard that I confuse feeling with knowing? That I should be objective opposed to subjective? That I should stick to the proof of facts instead of interpreting them? But I believe there should be a way to label or name patterns of underminement. Would it be possible to bypass the credibility that any time a small fish rises his or her voice? In the Greek Myth, Cassandra was cursed with meeting disbelief any time she made a prophecy. She was cursed by Apollo, the God, when she refused to have sex with him. Therefore there seems to be an ancestral link between a person's body right to self-determination (mainly a woman, or a child) and credibility. I have always found the riddle quite suspicious.



## XXIV

### Guests

I kiss goodbye to Sally Katana. She has arrived to her final destination. I have only reached the first milestone. Not only literally but in many ways. I am now on my way to my first transfer flight. I notice the weather beginning to change outside. It is getting very dark for the time of the day. The wind is picking momentum. I hope it will be only a passing storm. I take a seat near the boarding gate, facing a monumental glass pane with a view to the exterior. Still forty minutes to go. I watch the planes moving in different directions on the runway. Then I sit back and close my eyes to feel inside the outside wind. I might doze my 'waste-time.' I feel cuddled by the symphony of whistling sounds to the point I wish I could board one of the gusts and fly away only with my body and the aid of the currents.

Free my body from this shroud. Do not put me in a coffin. Do not bring me to a graveyard. Do not disturb me with your sobs and funeral devotions. Do take off my clothes and return me to my mother's womb in the heart of the Earth. Do celebrate with wine and laughter and then return home and you will find what death could not take from you.<sup>(38)</sup>

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The Northern wind hasn't stop blowing for a month now. During the day the sky is solid blue, only interrupted by the odd elongated cloud, which usually travels at the speed of a soul

being chased by the devil, disappearing as fast as it has emerged. The streets look clean and more beautiful than ever, but this is at the cost of having all the dust on Earth installed inside the houses, filling every single nook and marrow. No corner is spared, including nostrils and ears, scalp, nails and eyes. The worst are the eyes. It goes without saying that the din is unbearable, like the dust, the noise penetrates the brains of the villagers to the very last fold. Their daily chores are ushered by an ominous crescendo of banging shutters chaperoned by an equally ominous sforzando, achieved by the rolling wheelie bins colliding against walls at their best and baby prams at their worst.

From the balcony of your hotel room you notice the army of neighbors heading to the graveyard with their cleaning equipment. You take some pictures for your Instagram. You are musing on the observation that the village seems to have loads of widows, as most of the figures you see from your vantage point are women, and you say so on your feed. The wind will only complicate their task today. You decide to skip breakfast. Instead you grab a small rucksack and head down with the intention of following the women. You also tell this on Instagram. And what comes next too. Once you set foot on the street you pause for a moment to reflect on the fact of whether you too belong to the very stream of people who pace through history in the same direction. Probably. You join the womens' retinue.

You have not even taken two steps away from the hotel front door when a boy of about eleven offers you a bouquet of chrysanthemums. "Hey Mister. Only three euro for the All Saints" he says with a grin. You stop but remain unreactive for a couple of seconds, which seems to make the kiddo impatient because he is now shouting: "ONLY three euro! Sakes !" You dig in your pocket and pay for the flowers. After all you need an alibi. You take a selfie



with the boy holding the bouquet while flashing to the camera what to you is the sign of victory but it turns to be a gesture meaning that you are a cuckold, according to your social media followers. Ah well.

It does not take long for you to reach the cemetery gate with the cortege. As expected the wind is already causing mayhem. Inside the graveyard there is a dance of flying leaves and stems, tissue paper, plastic bags and silky scarves; falling flower pots and whatnot. Nothing seems to aim for stillness. Some children cry because the dust has got into their eyes and mothers and grandmothers are trying to console them by saying that the dead will laugh at their tears, which does nothing but to increase their bawling.

An old man catches your eye now because he is sitting next to a monument with a sandstone dog instead the customary cross or angels. “A friend of yours?” you adventure to ask. He looks in your direction using his left hand as a shade while narrowing his eyes as to prevent getting too much of the sunlight, or for the same token, dust. “Yes and no. See I am just sitting here to catch my breath and yes I knew them.” He says while petting the stone’s mongrel. The man speaks with a light lisp. “My tomb is further down.” he continues while pointing towards a hill lost in the distance and filled up to the top with graves. “You see, this bucket is too heavy.” The man goes on, alluding to the bucket at his feet. “I can help you if you like...” You say. “Oh, you are very kind, very kind indeed.” He pauses for a second or two and then charges: “You are not from here, are you?” You just nod. You were expecting the question.

“What brings you here?” You have also anticipated this question. “I am just passing. I am heading to town for a wedding.” “Ah, that’s good... Friends of yours or it is your own? Mind this village is full of pretty girls! Even if you can’t see them.” He jokes. “Just old friends...” You say a little defensively. “Ah friends, friends are a good thing. Pretty girls are good too!” He laughs showing two gaps and a gold tooth. “I suppose they are, yes.” You say. “Friends or pretty girls?” He insists. “... Both?” You adventure to say. You start suspecting you have just met the village’s pervert but it turns to be the matchmaker.

You grab the bucket and follow the man to his tomb. “The grave I was sitting by belongs to a once pretty girl. “ He says all of the sudden. Then he continues: “See, she refused to get married. She lived alone with a dog in a small bungalow slightly tucked away from the village. See, the girl was a little bit on the wild side. I mean wild as in wilderness. Such a waste of beauty. She insisted that the dog was her only love and that was that. But see, the village wouldn’t let her have her way.” “What happened?” You ask a little alarmed. “Oh, it’s not what you think. See, we just kept introducing young fellows to her, every time she came down to the shops or to the pub with her girlfriends, all of them happily married at the time and by my doings, as it happens. All but her...see, I even organized a ball and invited young men from the neighbouring towns. It was a question of principle for me!”

He pauses and stops the march to catch his breath once more. Then he points to a grave with the picture of a handsome young man. “See, he was very close, that fellow over there. She eventually agreed to marry him.” “And what happened?” You ask intrigued. “He married someone else, eventually.” “What happened to the girl?” you go on “She disappeared but see, it was all a misunderstanding leading to misfortune.” He sais. “Back then. See, I am

talking about sixty years ago. We didn't have all these machines, see. How do you call it? intelligent phones. See, we had only a phone box in the village square, another one in the pub and the third at the post office. Right, the well off had their own private phones and washing machines but see, those I count not. As I was saying, all was a big misunderstanding. Or a simple twist of fate if you prefer." He grins.

"The week before the wedding the fido flew, as if sensing the girl's betrayal. See, she went mad. She looked every place she thought he might be hiding to not avail. She couldn't bear it and decided to go further out to look for him. She told nobody. She didn't think about it or maybe she thought she wouldn't be long. God knows. See, she grabbed a small rucksack, the size of yours, and a torch light and off she went deep down to the valley. The wedding day approached and the girl was nowhere to be seen. The groom and his family and few villagers, myself included, all went to the house but found it empty. No girl or dog. See, what we found were the traces of her rushed departure, so we just assumed that the girl must have had changed her mind about the wedding. "

"You didn't think that maybe something bad had happened to her? An accident, or worse a kidnapping or murder? " You ask. "No. See, as I said she had a reputation in relation to marriage. The groom was pretty angry. Apparently she had previously hinted to some girlfriends that she was having second thoughts. The lad's family called the wedding off and he left the village. The weeks went by without any news about the girl or the dog. The young man eventually settled down in town. He would later marry and have three children. One day, see, when everybody had forgotten about the girl and the dog, a group of hillwalkers found them by the stream, or what was left of them. Their bodies were embracing. The coroner

concluded that the girl must have fallen and hit her head with a rock. See, she must have been still alive when the dog found her. It seems he nursed her as best as he could with his dog's mind until she died. He then snuggled close to the girl until death found him too. A real shame. See, a true love story. That's why he is the only dog allowed in the graveyard and the only one with a monument." He says this with great solemnity. "What was the dog's name?" you ask. Expecting the question the old man looks at you maliciously: "She called the poor mongrel Othello."

"He is winding you up! Do not trust a word!" A chorus of women shout. "She is a ghost!" a young girl claims. "I know what really happened..." A woman sentences, but before she can speak out one of the girls cuts across: "She killed herself and now she has returned from the afterlife to take revenge." "Who is winding me up now?" You say. "It is true!" the girl protests. "She didn't have an accident. She took her own life because the groom killed the dog!" another girl argues. "Shut up! You don't know anything!" a woman that seems her mother sanctions. "Look!" the girl insists while showing you her phone. She types something quickly on it and a Twitter account appears. "She is been posting since the 14 of February. The date of her wedding. This is her first tweet: '\_ How could you, whom I loved, killed my lover? How could you downgrade my act of love to accidental death? I must seek retribution\_' And the day after she posted: 'What is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying.'<sup>(40)</sup>" "I have heard that before..." You say. But the girl goes on: "And then she started posting pictures of dogs with their mouths on fire. Look, look!" she says while scrolling down on her smart device. "We reckon the ghost is bringing up the fact that the dog was poisoned..." An older woman starts talking in a deep calm voice. "The bodies weren't embracing when they found them. They were twisted in pain. I was there. I

had gone for a walk with my parents. I was a child at the time but my only memory of it was the ugliness of their contortement.” “Didn’t she fall?” you ask intrigued. “No, she licked the poison falling from the dog’s mouth. Rotgut.” “Oh jezz. How come then it was declared accidental?” You inquire. “You see, in places like this one we rarely look at things straight to the eye...” She says mysteriously.

“I see...who is posting this then?” you keep on asking. “The ghost!” The younger ones yell. “We don’t know...” A middle aged woman intervenes. It could be anyone. I reckon it is someone from the village because he or she knows what is going on in here. For example one day the “ghost” twitted that the village would bleed during the Summer Festival and somehow it happened, right girls?” “Yeah!” The girls chant at the unison. “How?” you ask intrigued. “The wind had sent a blanket of dirt that covered everything, as it is being doing since I have memory and before, but this time the dust came from the South, from the Sahara desert, from a place where the colour of the sand is red. It just needed to rain a little to cover everything with a cloak of ‘blood.’ “So the ghost was right” You say, following the crazy banter. “Yes, but anyone with a minimal knowledge of the area could have guessed what was about to happen that day.” A man with a grave voice reckons.

“Leave the ghosts in peace or they won’t leave you...” An old woman in black intervenes. “Now back to work! All of you, gossipers!” She orders. At the same time a middle aged woman with small intense black eyes and a sturdy complexion taps you on the chest and indicates you to follow her with a gesture of the head. “Leave the tourist alone!” She shouts to the others. Then she starts explaining, while cleaning a tombstone: “The care of a gravestone is not a light matter. First of all it should be cleaned from bottom to top, like this, with a soft

bristle brush. Never use a wire brush because you might scratch or tarnish the stone. Also you should abstain using abrasive detergents such as ammonium carbonate, choride or trisodium phosphate, best known as calgon, because they contribute to accelerate the production of salts below the surface of the stone and this is not a good thing.” She is the owner of the only drugstore in the village and talks with the authority of someone who knows her business. You thank her for rescuing you from the crowd and the free advice and decide to resume your business. Is time to post online everything you just have learnt. But before she lets you go she fires: “You are not from here, are you?” “No, I am not, I am just a wanderer.” You confess for lack of a better answer. “For whom are your flowers? For the living or for the dead?” She pushes it. The question completely gets you off guard as you have totally forgotten about the chrysanthemums. “A boy sold it to me down in the village.” She now frowns in disapproval. “Ah, poor you. I know the rascal. He steals from the living and from the dead.”

“You mean he took the flowers from a grave?” “Probably. You better find it and give the flowers back to whom they belong, otherwise your hidden guests won’t let you sleep from the time being.” she sais mysteriously. You smile. You think she is winding you up too but you cannot be sure. “I better keep going” you excuse yourself. “Mind the guests!” is her final warning. You shake your head in disbelief and wave her farewell. You know she is referring to the ghosts. In this part of the country they call them “guests.” You have read it somewhere, perhaps in the Lonely Planet or in Wikipedia. You don’t remember. Being a guest yourself, at least for the time you have been wandering, you too feel like a ghost. Always visiting someone else’s life for short periods of time. You appear into people’s lives as suddenly as you disappear from them and all that is left are pure fleeting manifestations or traces of your presence. Namely some dirty towels and sheets and some stupid posts on Facebook or Instagram, and

your moronic Snapshats vanishing even before you post them. Definitely you deserve to be a cuckold. You better resume walking.

You notice how floral arrangements are the most popular. The women have carried buckets with fresh flowers to substitute the withered ones. Some tombs have plastic flowers though, but as one lady puts it in a conversation you happen to unvoluntarily overhear: "...plastic doesn't look as good, fresh flowers say more about the living." Some graves have potted flowers such as Chrysanthemus, wildflores or geranium or small trees or a shrubs. You see women busy trimming and grooming these miniature gardens. Some of them look overgrown though. Maybe there are no relatives left alive to do the job, or at least female relatives. Other tombs wear crosses, stepping stones, solar lights, bird feeders, plastic foam cross bases with assorted evergreens and berries, pinwheels, military emblems, all sorts of memorabilia and tributes, including decorative flags, sea shells, marble chips, mosaics, figurines, a miniature Ferrari, and what not. Some of them have also photos of the departed, usually at a younger age, but not always. It hits you how some graves remind you of the mantelpieces of the houses you have visited and inhabited along your life. Mantelpieces are projections of the living dwellers as much decorations in a grave are projections of the dead, or at least how relatives have projected themselves on the dead. Mantelpieces in which every little object is an address: "Hey this is me. How do you like it?"

You heard that the dead can organize their own funerals now. Well, not when they are actually dead but they can prepare them before hand. Funeral services representatives even visit nursing homes to offer trendy funerals to the 'service users.' They also sell after life interactive memorials in which the dead can send pre-programmed letters to their loved ones. Maybe a

postcard for their birthdays or a letter telling them to forget about the inheritance. A whole wealth of possibilities. They also deliver brochures to hospices and give Power Point presentations to care staff and relatives. This is part of your mother's boyfriend, now husband to be, job.

The old tombstones seem to have more pictures of the dead than the newest ones. It strikes you as something odd taking on board how much everybody loves picture taking today. You dare to ask one of the ladies scrubbing a stone. "Oh! Some people do. But I don't like it. Some even laser engrave the picture of the dead on the stone." You go on asking why she doesn't like it. "I just don't. No reason. I just know that when I buried my man two years ago, I just wanted everything to pass quickly. If you ask me I wouldn't even have had a church funeral. Cremation and in with the ashes to the sea. But his family wouldn't let me." She falls silent all of the sudden, maybe in reflexion or maybe realizing that perhaps she has talked too much. She takes a deep breath and concludes: "And this is all I have to say mister." Then she turns around and resumes grave scrubbing clearly ignoring you. You resign yourself and continue wandering around determined to solve the paradox at a later stage.

Self-absorbed in these thoughts you notice how two teenage girls take pictures of each other pretending to be corpses laying on their graves. They wear crowns of fresh flowers over their mermaid hair and heavy orange make up over their faces. You see how their facial features start cracking under the weight of too many layers of product and the constant gesticulation produced by short explosions of laughter. Then comes the selfies turn. Pouting lips and so on. More laughter. But the banter is soon to come to an end. A woman with the look of thunder in her eyes approaches one of the girls and without uttering a word



discharges a blow onto her head. The impetus is such that the floral arrangement ends up travelling several meters until is momentarily stopped by a stone cross before being stolen by the wind. “To the house! Both of you! And give me the damned thing!” The girls run away crying and laughing at the same time. “You are not to go near the phone until I say so ! Do you hear me?” She is screaming her lungs out. But the girls cannot hear her anymore. You remember when your mother hit you during her rage episodes. She would first use the palm of her hand and hurt herself more than she would hurt you, so she would then use her slippers instead. Meanwhile you couldn’t stop laughing. As time went by and you proved to be a challenge she would upgrade to other objects such as handbags, umbrellas, belts and stilettos, the latest only after you threw a stuffed lion straight to her head. You were both good pieces. All came to a still the day you raised your hand in a gesture clearly indicating that you would break her face if she continued this carry on.

As you continue strolling the paths and avenues of the graveyard you arrive to a special section. The graves are small and decorated with teddy bears and colorful toys and trinkets. On your left there seem to be some special gathering. It looks as if it was the birthay of a deceased infant. The family has brought a cake. The cake has the shape of a football with four candels, three of them are pinned in the black pentagons and the fourth in the white one at the centre. They are trying to light them but the wind won’t let them. A woman, which seems to be the mother seems very distressed by this fact. A man, probably the father, grabs her by the shoulders and rubs her back. She turns around and hugs him. The little memorial is filled with toys, pinwheels and angels. It is also spotless. You feel like an intruder and decide to move on.

After walking for a while you come to a halt as the track bifurcates. On your left, in a dark tucked away spot, a different gathering, this time is a group of six or seven teenagers wearing long dark cloacks and pale faces with dark eyeshadows, which give them a sombre aspect. They hold white lillies in their hands, one each. One of the youngsters deposits his flower over a grave and the others follow with the same gesture. You ponder what it is: a car crash or a suicide? You decide to take the other avenue. The path you chose brings you to what it seems to be the older part of the cemetery. The graves have obvious signs of wear and tear and the faded dates are from the eighteen hundreds, maybe older. Something catches your eye. You cannot believe it. In front of you a square shaped stone wears the following inscription: “Baby monster. Born Oct. 23, 1888; died Feb. 3, 1889.” You know what to do. You crouch and leave the bouquet for the baby monster. You know the hidden guests won’t bother you tonight.



**XXV**

## **Feelings & Conundrums**

My mother has always complained about the fact that I am an appalling recycler: “If you do the same with your life that you do with the bins you are doomed.” She is right. I do not know how to separate rubbish properly. I put everything in the same bag. The problem is that I do the same with everything else in my life. I literally cannot separate work from emotions,

memories, food or fashion. I mix everything. Of course I do the same on Facebook. Once, after my husband left, he said that he felt alienated from the relationship; I posted a selfie holding an inflatable alien, much bigger than myself, with the caption: "Nothing human can be alien to me." The message was intended to reach him, of course. He took that picture during a week-end-away. They were better times. Thirty five people liked the picture but none of them was him.

A few days later I took another selfie, I was all done up, heavy eyes make-up, red lips, chin upwards, defiant. The caption was: "A strong woman accepts the war she went through and is ennobled by her scars." I don't remember whose quote was that but it seemed to sum up quite well what I was going through at the time. For that post I got two hundred and eight likes and nineteen comments. All of them totally unrelated with the true story behind the picture. If I was to post it again I would probably get even more likes and new comments and nobody would know that that was from years ago and that I was trying to put a brave face to my troubles. Those posts were expressions of my emotional state and a way of venting my disappointment. I remember my mother saying that emotions were overrated but for me emotions are all we got. Everybody needs to release, we just do it in different ways. I have an emotional relation with everything and others have a rational relation to it. So what? Some people can properly separate plastic from cans and paper but I can't. What does it mean? That we do react differently to life? Is one way better than the other? I don't think so.

I have killed three times in my life, I mean intentionally. I do not take into account the myriad of animals that I have killed unintentionally or in legitimate defense, for example either because I have crushed them while walking or because they have bitten me. I do not

count either those that I have eaten, no because I needed to in order to survive, but because I just liked the taste of cooked meat and because I had earned the right to consume it. But I do remember clearly three occasions when I felt that I had to kill no matter what. And I would be one saving spiders from being flooded by the water of my morning shower, and opening doors and windows to let the blue bottles go away, or even catching alive the mice living at home and looking for a more suitable accommodation, for example a plot of land next to a restaurant. I am not a psycho, am I? Nevertheless I had to kill.

I killed three beings from three different species. One was for compassion and the other two for fear. Two were mistakes, the other education. Two were mammals and one was a bird. The first was a chicken and I was 11, the second was my child to be and I was 17 and the third was a puppy dog and I was 26. The first killing was a test for my grandad's crazy education system project. To cut a long story short, in his view, every child should train to kill an animal before being allowed to consume its meat. So one day when nobody else from the family was watching he instructed my brother and I how to terminate a chicken. Because I was the older sibling I had to do the honours. My grandfather gave me a hunter's baby knife and indicated with a rapid left-to-right gesture with his extended thumb aiming at his own throat, to proceed with the poor bird. I was terrified but I did it. I must have exhausted all my adrenaline because I couldn't move for a while afterwards until grandad slapped me on the face. I remember my little brother first laughing at my horror and then vomiting when we had to pluck the fowl.

With the pup was a stupid accident. I was late for work and I got into the car all stressed out and reversed quickly without looking behind. Our dog, a mixed breed Alsatian,

had just had pups. Four little black beauties. They must have been around two months old at the time. I crushed the little thing's skull. When I realized what I had done, a sort of primeval instinct kicked in, I grabbed the nearest rock with enough weight and stoned the poor animal to death. I am still having nightmares about it but not because what I did, although I admit it was a brutal act, but because the pup was looking at me while I was smashing his head, and not only that but its mother, my Alsatian, which witnessed everything, kept looking at me and moving restlessly left to right and right to left while howling. Later I thought that maybe I should have called the vet instead of taking such a gruesome initiative. Maybe I should have done it but I didn't.

The third happened many years before. I must have been seventeen, nearly eighteen. I had a boyfriend who was a lovely, proper nice person, and a painter with the name of an archangel. He had a friend, who everybody nicknamed *the lunatic*, who was the total opposite: wild, mercurial, devilish, pot smoker, very much into heavy metal, a biker and utterly irresistible. I felt for him in a crazy way. The three of us used to go for short trips after class and during summer vacations to the mountains or to the beach. I travelled on the back seat of a moped driven by my angel, and the lunatic in his Yamaha Enduro 300 cc, which he had tuned to look like a Harley Davison, with doubtful success. It had belonged to his father and when he passed away the lunatic inherited it. He was twenty three at the time, already an adult, unlike us.

One day we were at the beach and my boyfriend had to leave early because he was supposed to help his dad to move some furniture. "Lets go!" he said to me to what I answered: "You go, I will stay a little bit longer..." "Ok. I will call you later all right?" "Sure." It is not

difficult to imagine what followed. As soon my boyfriend had left, the lunatic rolled a joint and gave it to me. Basically we spend the rest of the afternoon till the sun was well down smoking, drinking, laughing and when it was dark we kissed. I didn't feel any guilt for it. In my head it was meant to happen, it was fate. We were made for each other. I liked wild.

In the days that followed and during the rest of the summer, we continued to go out in little excursions, the three of us. I continued meeting the lunatic during twilights, always in secret. I couldn't find the right time to tell the truth to my angel as I didn't want to hurt him, I loved him so much. One night we went to a party, the three of us. We became separated, each of us gathering with different people as you do in parties. When it was almost over I couldn't find the archangel, who apparently had passed out in a corner of the garden after one too many drinks, but I bumped into the devil. He looked at me straight into the eyes while grabbing my shirt and pulling my body towards him. Then he dragged me into a dark empty room, at the back of the house, and he kissed me on the neck. The kiss was such that it felt as if I had been bitten by Dracula. I was powerless under his influence. He was about to make me one of his. He would take my life and then give me the blood that will make me immortal. "Yes!". "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!" "Oh shit!" I knew the minute it happened that I was pregnant. "For God's sake, my life is over, my mother is going to kill me, my father is going to kill my corpse, my grandparents are going to kill my ghost and I want to die."

When it was a fact that I had become pregnant, and to my surprise, I was summoned to a meeting with the lunatic's mother who told me that he would marry me. "What? I don't think so." For some strange machination of the human mind, the minute I realized that I was expecting, I started hating the once overwhelmingly attractive lunatic, whom I blamed for the

situation, so the idea of marrying him wasn't one to put on my immediate or long term plans, besides my mother shouldn't never find out. So I refused the offer and started thinking of having an abortion instead. To me that was the only way out. At the time there wasn't much information and a simpler solution like the morning after pill wasn't available, and if it was I didn't know it existed. We didn't have Internet and we were all very much Catholics, to a point, meaning that we were Catholics to hide vital information about sexuality but not enough to avoid the adoption of more sinful and drastic solutions when deemed necessary to save the face before the sacrosanct community.

I informed the lunatic that I was going to have an abortion and that he would have to pay for it as he was the adult and the only one working at the time. Fair play to me. Under no circumstance this was to be disclosed to anyone, specially his mother or mine. If his mother asked questions we were to tell her that it had occurred naturally, that I had lost the child. The next step was to find out how and where to have the abortion. I had no idea. None of us had. It was illegal in the country of course, and still is. Then I remembered that a few months before I heard some gossip about a girl from school that had travelled to Amsterdam for an abortion. That was a tricky one. I knew who the girl was but not how to approach her with the question. What about if it wasn't true? Anyway I was desperate. The weeks were passing quickly and 'the problem' was growing. So I swallowed my reticences and one day at the beginning of fall, in the afternoon, I knocked on her door. She was very nice to me. When I told her my situation she immediately helped me to organize everything: calling the clinic from a phone booth, buying the plane tickets in a travel agency and booking a room in a guests house. She would also cover up for me during my absence. She phoned my home pretending she was her mother and invited me to spend a few days in their family beach

house. Obviously I had already prepared the terrain and had obtained my mother's permission beforehand. When the call arrived it was all decided.

I had never flown before in my life and I had never travelled alone or being in a foreign country, never mind staying at an hotel alone. I was very shy and thinking of every single milestone I had to go through in that journey was a burden. The flight was fine, better than I expected. I met a girl at the airport that was doing exactly the same journey as me. When we arrived to Amsterdam we shared a taxi to our accommodation. At the hostel we met other girls from a diversity of countries and with the same predicament. Most of them were travelling alone, others with friends or boyfriends. In my first morning in the guesthouse I went down early to have breakfast. I was in my pajamas, with a crazy hair and without even having washed my face, to the surprise of everybody else, who were all fully clothed and polished for the outside world. What are they lookin' at ? What's wrong with them twats? I thought. How was I to know about hotel etiquette?

All the girls were assigned different clinics that were scattered throughout the city. Luckily the girl I had met before was in the same one. The morning of the operation we didn't have breakfast and we took the tram from the back door, to save some money. Everybody was doing it and we were learning fast. Our appointment was at 8:10 AM. We had both been given the same slot. Later we learned that the patients were distributed in time blocks. Say a bunch of girls per hour. Our bunch, six of us, were all unable to speak. We all sat facing the reception desk inside a blue waiting room and we were all filling the forms that were given to us by a nurse the minute we arrived. It was a consent form and we had to sign at the bottom, where there was the sign of a cross indicating the right place to stamp our names. Ironical, I



thought. Then we were called by the surname, one by one, and we had to enter, in turns, into different rooms in which a succession of tests were performed.

For example room number one was a general check up and a quick chat to make sure we understood the procedure and to ensure we were positive in our decision. The second room was for the urine and the third for the bloods. Number four was where the operation took place. I went before my friend. I was terrified but at the same time I just wanted it to be over. My swollen breasts hurt so much and I had already had some episodes of feeling so sick that I thought I was going to die. I just wanted it out of me. The sooner the better. I was wearing one of those horrible gowns tied up at the back that you have to grab and close with your hands if you don't want to show your backside. Two nurses and a female doctor invited me to accommodate in one of those terrifying chairs in which you have to put up high and spread your legs. They gave me local anesthesia. In less than ten minutes I felt something going in and something slipping out. It was an almost pleasant sensation if it wasn't for the gravity of the circumstances. When it was over one of the nurses removed a blue plastic bucket from underneath my chair and brought it to an adjacent room. That was my child I thought.

Now anytime I think about it I cry. That day I celebrated. I remember other girls feeling sick or dizzy, uneasy or sad, specially the ones with boyfriends, but not me. My new friend and I went out that night, to celebrate. We were free again and we drank our freedom away. The day after we left early to catch our plane, terribly hungover. After landing, we went our separate ways. I have never heard back from her. She had never heard back from me. That was the way things were done before. I wonder what had happened if I had told my mother.

Would she had killed me? Probably not. In retrospective, I cannot hide behind that fear anymore. I made a choice. It seemed the right choice at the time. Now I am not so sure. It would have made a difference having someone to talk to, even if it were an abstract entity like the Internet? I will never know. What I did was writing everything up in a diary but I was afraid that my mother could find it and read it ( it wouldn't be the first time she looked into my things ) so I ended up destroying it.

Today girls vent their sorrows on the Internet. The journey is similar but I wonder if the experience is the same. I never had the opportunity to tell this story before. My mother still doesn't know and I cannot tell her because It would kill her. What exactly would kill her I am not sure: my long silence, the fact that I was so stupid that I got pregnant, the fact that I had an abortion or the fact that she didn't have a clue. Last summer I saw an abortion diary on Twitter: @TwoWomenTravel. A girl and a friend companion documented their journey to a foreign country to have an abortion. They took pictures at the airport on their departure and they specifically twitted a reference to the country's Prime Minister holding him responsible for the situation. Their Twitter account profile pic was a moebious ribbon reading, underneath, the text: "Repeal the eight", and as a byline the utterance: "Two Women, one procedure, 48 hours away from home."

The girls tweeted pictures with captions all along the forty eight hours journey, which generated over forty four thousand tweets and re-tweets. Although the identity of the two girls remained anonymous, they manifested their motives for sharing their experience: " We make this journey in stem solidarity with all our Irish sisters who have gone before us." The story went viral and they got a lot of support from other women and likeminded people, including

the host of a popular national TV talk show, and an acknowledgement from the health minister who thanked them for “Telling the story of the reality which many face”. However, the Prime Minister didn’t comment on the matter. The girls also got some criticism from anti-abortion Catholic lobbies which accused them of “Trivializing the procedure.” <sup>(41)</sup>

But that wasn’t the first time the issue hit social media. After the death by sepsis of a young pregnant woman to which a life saving abortion was denied, many took on to social media starting the trend [#repealthe8th](#) and opening a discussion on the eight amendment of the Irish Constitution in which abortion is criminalized by equating the life of the mother to the life of the foetus. Many women resorted to live tweeting their menstrual cycles to bring attention to the control the state was exerting over women’s bodies through laws like the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment. The pics posted by @TwoWomenTravel were quite aseptic in appearance, compared to the previous colorful menstrual shots, but not less dramatic: a plane of the national aviation company they used to travel abroad (a clear reference to Ireland), a corner of the taxi’s window in which they were travelling to the clinic, a handwritten note directed to the president and a different one to other women, a fragment of the chair in the waiting room where they were sitting before the operation, and finally, and this was quite reminiscent of the menstrual images: the picture of the white sheet, presumably of the hotel room in which the women were staying, stained with diluted blood, the residue of the intervention, and a testimonial of a fait accompli.

Womens’ testimonials abound nowadays. Their stories are hunted, recorded, collected and curated in online outlets such as [theabortiondiary.com](#), which started back in November 2013 with the following entry by her author Dr Melissa Madera:

Someone recently told me that every trip is a necessary part of the journey. I would have never guessed that my abortion experience 16 years ago would have birthed The Abortion Diary Podcast.

I woke up in a small room with 2 or 3 other women. I was sitting in a chair with a thick maxi pad between my thighs, and I was throwing up in a plastic, kidney-shaped basin. I was seventeen years old. It was the summer after my high school graduation. I just had an abortion.

While I was in high school I lived in a rented house in Yonkers, NY with my strict, Dominican parents and two younger siblings. My parents never talked to me about sex except to tell me not to have it. I didn't learn about sex at school either. I had attended an all girls Catholic high school in Hartsdale, NY. A mousy woman with frizzy brown hair taught my "health" class. She was visibly shaking in front of our class of thirty girls when she tried to talk about sex. The bottom line was that I didn't have the tools to keep myself from getting pregnant.

Other entries, mostly anonymous, followed and the list continues growing:

Abortion Diary Entry 149: Kassi U., 32 (Barre, Vermont 2004) Kassi shares her abortion experience, and her journey of enlightenment after abortion, which she chronicles in her new book *MAY CAUSE LOVE*. (Published on February [...])

Abortion Diary Entry 153: Anonymous, 43 (Manchester, England 2013) Anonymous shares her story of needing to travel to England from Northern Ireland for an abortion. Abortion is illegal in Northern Ireland. For more information about the abortion [...]

Abortion Diary Entry 155: Anonymous, 31 (Tuscaloosa, AL 2013)

Anonymous shares her experience seeking an abortion in Alabama, and talks about the post-abortion rituals she created for herself afterward. (Published on April 20, 2017 | Listener: [...])

The secret is now out in the open. Women are still criminalized or victimised but at least they can talk about it. There is room for debate. If only the problem could be solved with the right dose of common sense, which advises that a solution to a dichotomy (if is that the case) must lie somewhere in between opposite views. In the the middle point of virtue. To me, and having gone through the experience, a clean solution is not that simple. I wonder. To me, the polarized debate only succeeds to scratch the surface of the matter by posing it as a political issue when in reality, in my opinion, is a moral one (or philosophical if you wish), similar to the right to terminate one's own life.



**XXVI**

**Circe**

Six month ago my wife and I hit a deep shit point. The things between us weren't going too smoothly for the last couple of years but mainly our troubles had to do with the business of which we were also partners in crime. When I met her I had already achieved some modest success as a chef. The restaurant was doing just fine but perhaps I just needed a little push to make it to the next level, as you do. She appeared in the right place at the right time and she made it possible. Or at least she made me see the possibility of it. Besides being a socialite aka

PR consultant she was so beautiful and charming that I knew I was lost the very minute she laid her eyes on me. She was also eighteen years younger than I. "Hello Chef" She said offering me a canape from her own dish. We were at a gourmet showcase of local produce and she was promoting one of the businesses. That day I was just visiting. "Hi" I said. "Sit and rest. I will feed you" she said and shovelled a miniature birds' nest into my mouth. This sort of turmoil has cursed my otherwise pleasant life only twice. And despite being an agnostic I cannot thank God enough for that.

At work I liked to innovate and that proved to be one of the keys of my success. For instance following the smoking ban in the state I created a pure Havano cigar ice cream. The idea had come to me many years before after I had stored, by mistake, a peeled onion inside the vanilla ice cream container. It was one of those days. When I went to prepare a dessert I realized that the ice cream had absorbed the flavour of the onion. I was furious with myself but the episode somehow stayed in the back of my head. When the ban came into fruition I made the connexion with that episode and I started experimenting. I had great interest in finding a solution as I was a heavy smoker myself. One day I blew my last remaining Havano into a bowl of ice cream. The experiment was a success. I only needed to wrap the infused ice cream with a dark chocolate gimp, add some crushed species and black sugar to make it look like ash and put it on a decorative ashtray. Of course I couldn't smoke a cigar every time a customer asked for the dessert so I came up with a system, which consisted of a siphon pump sucking the smoke from a cigar and releasing it over the ice cream.

She said she had fallen in love with me the day I gave her a demonstration of how to make the tobacco ice cream. That was our first date and I wanted to impress her. She was impressed.

We made love like crazy after that. The following morning she said that I was wasted as a chef and that she would give a new impulse to my career so that was how she took on the task of promoting my work. Of course I was flattered by her interest and gave her carte blanche. She turned out to be an accomplished promoter. She got me a couple of interviews in the local radio and even the front cover of the Sunday supplement in a national paper. She said that the next move was to get me a regular section on a morning TV show intended for housewives and then to have my own show. I was already dreaming the dream of Fame. The modest media coverage I got brought more costumers to the restaurant but that was that. At the time celebrity chefs were mushrooming at nauseam. The competition was just too high and my appearance on a TV show, never mind hosting one, never materialized. Nevertheless we got married.

As the time went by and with the rise of social media she talked me into becoming a virtual chef. The plan was building a very strong profile in a few social media platforms first, then write a book and finally host the bloody TV show. She was obsessed with my appearance on TV. So while I was cooking kangaroo steaks and experimenting with molecular cuisine she was cooking my (our) way to fame. Everything was going well and I worked a lot. We opened a second restaurant and I got a Michelin star (never in a million years I would have thought I would get one). But the greater breakthrough came via Youtube. As my TV appearance never seemed to materialize she suggested we should create our own show and Youtube was the solution. She organized everything. Very modestly at the beginning, and later adding layers of sophistication as we learned along. I started broadcasting my own recipes and tricks while my wife, every now and then would make appearances to explain with exhaustive detail how she did the laundry for the restaurant, for example. At the time we were virtually alone doing it

and as years went by we grew a following. We were not the Kardashians as she often liked to say, because we were not afraid of being mundane and that was our main selling point. But if Youtube was the real instigator of my popularity, it was also the cause of my downfall.

Money started pouring steadily and we decided that it was time to have children. At the beginning I wasn't too convinced as I wasn't sure I could be a good father, taking on board my own lousy childhood, and also because I was very busy. But little by little I allowed myself to be seduced by the idea. "Me, a dad!" The day she told me she was pregnant I was elated. Like with the Michelin star, it never occurred to me that I could have a child, ever. I was truly happy. I knew it would complicate my already complicated life, nevertheless it was pure joy. That day we recorded a video sharing the good news with the world. We got over three hundred thousand views! Oh yes, we were not the Kardashians but we were sitting on a gold mine nevertheless.

After that achievement, she started plotting an idea. She didn't have enough with making of me a great chef, I had to become a great man too. So she proposed to expand on the 'domestic life' section of our show and start filming inside the house. Basically she wanted to broadcast our entire everyday life. While I was initially reluctant, she managed to convince me. She was right. The number of followers just skyrocketed. Especially when she started reporting about our parental joys and troubles while ironing baby towels. We presented our daughter to the world for her christening, then it was the teething, and right until her first steps and toddler life. My wife also started taking a picture of the child every single day and she posted it into Instagram: day one, day two, day three and so on. At the beginning I didn't



mind, of course, but after a while I started to feel a bit wary about sharing our daughter publicly. However, and as I was about to find out, I didn't have a say on the matter.

The first months of parenthood were very stressful. The baby wouldn't sleep so we couldn't either. The broadcasts, although with less frequency, continued. We talked to our viewers about every minute mundane detail of our lives. The more banal, the greater the interest. For instance we shared our trouble sleeping at night, the constant cries, the baby's tummy cramps or the baby expelling her winds, we would talk about the price of diapers or about my wife having to painfully pump the milk out of her breasts and then storing the surplus in small containers in the fridge, to be used at a later stage to feed the baby when going to the park for a stroll. After those posts we started either getting diapers sent for free to our post box or creepy messages asking us to sell the breast milk accompanied with comments such as if I would use my wife's breast milk to create a new dessert. To that she responded laughing as she had a hard skin, but those remarks would annoy me and I would reply to them in a rage. Then we would fight over it or over any other thing. We were becoming increasingly restless. I would snap on any occasion. Sometimes in the restaurant. But we endured it and eventually we managed to survive.

The years went by and with our best, good and bad moments we were doing just fine. The channel was going well too. Although more and more people were joining the hordes of Youtubers, we were pioneers and we had our own loyal following. I was busy so was she. She would mind our child most of the time and also the front and backstage of the channel up to a high degree of efficiency. I only had to show my face when everything was ready for the recording to start and I was off when the performance was over, without giving it a second

thought. She would do all the rest: Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, everything. Not only her accounts but also mine too. She managed my life without me being present. Sometimes I even surprised myself. Always positively, I must admit. That man there, the one that looks like me, it is such an interesting character. While my everyday was actually quite repetitive it looked great from the outside, even if it sounds like an oxymoron: it was extraordinary in its mundanity. The most important thing: I believed it.

We carried on like this for a while. I, working in the restaurants, now more at a supervising level, and also posing as a perfect dad for our Youtube channel and her, she was taking pictures, editing, posting, liking or answering comments, always busy curating family plots. If one day we had had a row, the public would take notice only because she would post something in the morning, during breakfast, and then nothing up to maybe 7PM. The rows between us had begun and soon they became more and more frequent. The pressure was starting to take its toll. It was just too much. Not only there was the fact that I had to juggle between a real job and a Truman Show but the fact that we were starting to get a sense of the real demand from the part of the public. Everybody wanted a piece of us.

But there was no discussion on one point: the channel had to stay. If we stopped posting we would lose the audience and a great source of income and also, perhaps, as I was starting to suspect, the purpose of our marriage. “So what?” I said one day but she wouldn’t give way. “You could close the restaurants. They are not doing that well after all. We could live only with the online business.” She was right. At that point I had lost the star and that was really bad publicity. Besides, some people, namely a couple of local journalists without anything better to do, had started taking notice of me and made of my family and I being on Youtube,

a moral issue. They said in a review article that I was neglecting my pots and pans to become an Internet stripper. The stripper bit was a low blow. They accused me of capitalizing on my family instead of working hard in the kitchen. It hurt because that wasn't my intention but they were right. Then the whole thing took to Twitter. It was carnage.

At the time I had started to regrow a long tamed ill temper. I had soured again. The restaurants resented it. My explosions of rage were recurrent and I ended up losing all the good staff. The rest is easy to imagine. When the food critics crucified me, the restaurants were already in shambles. The clientele first complained, but soon they stopped coming by and as a result I started accumulating debt. My wife kept pushing me to close the restaurants and concentrate on the online business, but I had believed my own delusion: I was a chef first and foremost and eventually I exploded. I had a sort of nervous breakdown or whatever. "I am done!" I said "This is the end of it! Basta!" I shouted while knocking down all the filming equipment cluttering the house. My wife was crying. I think I might have shoved her aside too. Then she brought out the subject of me being unfaithful with an ex-girlfriend on my last trip to Paris. Then an unending singsong started penetrating my brains: That she knew everything about it, that if I thought she was stupid, that who do you think you are, yari-yari. "What the f+ck are you talking about?" I screamed out of my lungs. Why was she coming up with that now? I couldn't breathe. I had to leave the house. On my way out I kept knocking down everything I encountered on my path. I had become a storm of biblical proportions. Ruthless, apocalyptic. I didn't see the little one crawling in my direction and I tripped up falling on her. "Got damn!"

I was feeling so bad with myself that I didn't dare to contact my wife or go near my home for weeks. The kid was fine but I was a monster. I rented a small apartment downtown and decided that I had to do something with my life. I wouldn't fall into the trap of self pity again or become an alcoholic depressed asshole. But guess what? I did. I drank myself to exhaustion and started having sex with any woman stupid enough to take me. History repeating itself. I needed to get a grip. I booked a visit with a therapist who gave me lithium. One day, out of the blue, I got a restraining order from a judge. I couldn't get near either my wife or my daughter, neither the house. My family life was wiped out. Everything changed in geometrical proportion. I couldn't enter or stay in a place where they were, including a public place. I couldn't phone, text, email, send letters or shout at them from thirty yards away, also I couldn't send a present to my daughter for her birthday, not even through an intermediary, and so on. " Oh man. What the f++ck?"

One day I was at the farmers' market buying some local produce for the restaurant when I spotted my daughter holding hands with my father-in-law, by the cheesemakers. I waved at them from where I was because I thought they had seen me. As a result the kid started pulling her grandpa on my direction. When my wife's father realized what was going on he tried to pull the child away but it was too late. The child had freed herself and was running towards me. I was paralyzed on the spot. I knew I had to go if I didn't want to make things worse but I knew too that I was going to stay. I wanted to give her a hug and a kiss, and tell her how much I loved her. When her grandfather reached us we were already embracing and I had tears in my eyes. He just stood there for a while like if he didn't know what to do. After a while he said: "You know I like you very much don't you? But you need to give me the child back...now." I looked at him sheepishly and I did what he said. "When are you coming home

daddy?” “Daddy is busy fixing his life sweetie. He will be back soon. Don’t tell mama you have seen him OK? It’s going to be a secret.” He said while indicating the child to shush. “If we keep the secret he will be back home soon enough...OK?” “Yeah!” she said making the sign of a cross with her two little index fingers covering her mouth, as to prevent the prohibited words escaping from it. At that point she was giggling in excitement at the prospect of having such a big secret. “Thank you so much” I said. “Do not thank me. Pull yourself together.”

Of course the event transcended. What best antidote to keeping a secret than telling someone to keep a secret. The poor thing was just too excited and eventually shared her excitement with her mother. In her mind she thought she too would be happy to know that I would be back soon. As a result I got a fine and an even more restrictive restraining order. My father-in-law got his fair share too. At that point I was desperate and having lost any control over my life I did a stupid thing. I turned into social media to try to get my kid back. I started using Facebook to post the pictures I had with my kid from when we were a happy family. Then my wife went crazy and started posting misleading information about me. To cut a long story short we ended up disputing over our child online instead of talking like civilized people. I couldn’t reason with her. She knew how to push all the buttons. Our followers polarized their support. Some became my team and started to abuse my wife online and viceversa. Our ‘real’ friends, although they were aware of what was going on, they tended to stay out of the way and not get involved. Some of them sent me good advise through private messages but I decided to ignore them. What a stupid man I was. I couldn’t realize that I was throwing dirt over my own shoulders and that the things, far from getting fixed, they could only get worse.

My initial idea was starting a campaign on Facebook over the issue of fathers that are prevented from seeing their kids. I was hoping to get some support from people in the same situation and maybe change the way things are done or at least rising some awareness about the fact that men are invariably portrayed as violent monsters. But it backfired. Instead of community and conversation I got hatred. It was an acrimonious spectacle. It went as crazy as the sempiternal sex wars can go. Then I realized that Facebook was good to talk about the stupid bacon I had for breakfast or to campaign about social issues but as far they were enough tucked away from everyday local struggles. For example the rights of the refugees in the Gaza strip, because people don't really need to engage with the communities they are pretending to defend. Solidarity at a distance. But when it hits home, it is a different matter. It becomes too visceral. Your real friends are the least to get involved in anything like that. They just remain silent like dead. When they bump into you in the street they also avoid the topic: "Looking well. How is the restaurant doing?" "Well but I happen to go through a personal crisis and..." "Oh sugar, I forgot I have to collect the dog from the groomers. I am off. Talk to you soon, mate. Take care." Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I had used Twitter instead. It looks to me more like a round table...although... Nay, it would have got out of hand too.



XXVII

## Sally Katana

I must have fallen sleep after the take off because I startle when I feel someone tapping on my right shoulder from the row behind. “Well, well well. Look who I have found!” I know the voice but I quite don’t. I turn around and to my shock and horror I see a very pale female face with a bluish-black short bob and a giant red dot in the middle of her forehead. She is Katana from the suicide squad. I had seen the movie only recently on Netflix. It crosses my mind that the apparition has come to carry out some sort of female revenge on me, but I also think that I might well still be dreaming one of those dreams in which you wake up but to find out you are still dreaming and wake up again, sweating, just the minute the villain is about to kill you, like in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. But the voice in my dream continues talking: “The invisible man himself. Where have you been? I haven’t seen you since the Comicon! Humm ... are you escaping?” She says shovelling me a packet of Haribos.

“Fancy an egg yolk?” she says imitating a child’s voice like in the TV commercial. “I will take a bear instead.” I reply continuing the banter still not knowing to whom I am talking, never mind accepting candy bears from her. Ten seconds go by and I haven’t managed to take my eyes off the red dot. “Hey dudette! I didn’t recognize you! Looking well!” I finally say. My row companions cannot be more excited. “Yeah. Lets see how it goes. I am afraid the character

might be already outdated, but I like her so much! You know? ” No, I don’t. “I beg your pardon?” I say instead. I remember her very well, indeed.

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A while ago the restaurant was commissioned to cater for the Comicon and she was there posing as Sally, a ragdoll made from various pieces stiched together and supposedly stuffed with dead leaves, a Tim Burton character. Our meeting was awkward to say the least. I was working on my station when I heard a strong blow coming from somewhere among the crowd of villains and superheroes in front of me. The ragdoll had dropped a leg. Everything had come to a halt, freezing for a second or two but resuming the hustle and bustle shortly afterwards. The superheroes and villains continuing their pageants like if nothing had happened.

In her excitement she must had forgotten to adjust the braces properly and her artificial leg had fallen with great commotion. I could see her from my vantage point, almost like if surrounded by a halo of light, framing her. I could see also a couple of people taking pictures or making videos of her with their smartphones. They were visitors wearing badges but not in costume. I felt sorry for her and I was under the impression that I had to rescue her from the vultures. So off I went with the intention of dispersing the raptors but she seemed to actually pose for the photos. After the novelty of the situation was over and the ‘paparazzi’ were gone I approached her and offered my help. “I am a big girl you know? I don’t need heros to save me, besides this is good publicity, but I thank you.” She said and then, nonchalantly, she picked up the limb, clicked it in and offered her hand to me so I could help her to stand up. Then she saluted the crowd with a theatrical reverance and winked at me. She was very young. Almost a



child but she had a very strong presence, which made her outfit incredibly deceptive. “Can I offer you a refreshment?” I said. “I am just over there” I signalled. “Oh, that would be nice. You have some stand there. Are you somebody?” she asked.

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“Where are you off to?” I ask her. “I am off to the cosplay in Melbs dude! You coming?” She asks “I would love to but I have to catch a transfer flight.” I reply bending the corners of my mouth downwards. “That’s too bad!” she says with a grin. “How are you doing anyway?” She asks. “I am grand, you? How is your vlog doing?” I say. “It is doing very well. Many things have changed since we met. I cosplay for a greater good.” She declares. “Oh... how is that?” I inquire. “I was contacted by an amputees charity. Apparently they came across my story through the vlog and the Gotham community on Facebook and they asked me if I would be interested in getting involved. “So, these things work after all?” I said cynically. “things...?” “Social media. For social causes.” “Oh yes, we are collecting redundant prosthetic legs from everywhere in the country and sending them to Cambodia. Now I don’t cosplay for me anymore, I cause-play for others.” She laughs. Her laughter is contagious and uplifting.

“So you are like a star-fish then.” I say as a compliment. “A star-fish?” “Yes, not only you can grow a leg after losing one but you can also grow a full body from a leg.” “Really? Can they do that? It is amazing!” She replies. I am about to compliment her again when one of the youngsters sitting on my row cuts across with: “Hey mate, cool outfit. Mind a pic?” “Sure thing, come over here” she says. In a split second she jumps into the aisle and strikes a cosplay pose, flanked by the two dudes. The three of them smile at the phone with which I am ready to capture the moment. “Where are you heading to by the way?” she asks from the center of

the frame: “Em...to my mothers’ funeral” I say, then I shoot and capture their puzzled faces.  
“Oh...” she says.



**XXVIII**

**Don Juan**

The plane is starting the run for the take-off. I forget about reading the book. Now I feel more like napping until the journey is over. The phone blips. It slipped my mind to put it on airplane mode. Someone told me once that all this swiching off of the electronics during take off and landing was a lot of rubbish: “Do you think that if it really had any effect companies would put the security of their flights to peoples’ discernment?” He said. He was in a big job in a big aviation company. Anyway, #nonapfortoday. I have been out of the loop for over a month and I am curious. As you would expect I am succumbing to the temptation of checking out the latest on the cyber circus. I get into a few friends profile and look at their pictures. Not much has been going on. It is all pretty much the same but for Donal Trump’s election. Would this qualify as a black swan? Terrorism on the West is on the rise.

I take a picture of the liminal runway and I upload it onto Facebook. My official coming back. I am disgusted with myself. I find my action utterly meaningless but I still carry on. It is

like smoking. Sometimes the cigarette tastes so bad but I keep sucking nevertheless. This simple act unleashes an avalanche of blips. They haven't forgotten me after all. It seems that I still have friends. Well done me. I am loving it. I live to entertain and to be entertained. When the jest recedes I decide to Whatsapp a couple of flings. "Darling. Sorry I haven't been in touch. On my way to Europe. I miss you." "Life is hard without you lassie. I miss you." I usually send the same text to all of them. But not always, sometimes noblesse oblige and I make an effort and customize the text. I find very interesting the way they react to them in either similar or different ways. But their replies are rarely surprising, even when I can tell they are making an effort. I don't mean bad. I feel really flattered but I am just not myself these days or maybe this is me. I am unable to give affection to anyone. It is if I had made a regression. I am back to the teenager I once was and I like everyone and nobody in particular. But of course I just have had a nervous breakdown of sorts. The captain announces through the cabin microphone the sequence for the take: noise "Ready for the take"; more noise "crew take your seats" even more noise. I set the phone into airplane mode, I lean back and close my eyes.

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I order the cabman to drop me by my friend's car. She is already waiting for me by the village's major landmark: the only gas station in eighty miles around. The only bar is right behind. Inside, the only chance for suburban sex, but not before midnight as this is the time when high heels drop and spirits and hopes start hovering. Above the bar, anytime, but not for free and not for anyone. Both are owned by the same dickhead. We agreed earlier on to meet up mid way as first she has to pick up her daughter from her grandparents' house in order to take her to the nursery later on. She is giving me a lift to the airport where I will catch the expensive uber complicated flight retrieved as my best option by a travel site. The total

journey: 2 cab rides, 1 to and 1 from my house; 1 ride on a friends' car with a screaming baby at the back, 1 domestic flight, 1 International stop over below the Ecuator, 1 International stop over between the Tropic of Cancer and the Arctic Polar Circle, 1 flight from 0 point Greenwich to my final destination: a place called Faraway, allegedly. For one of the whims of relativity I will arrive the same day of my departure, only 24 hours later. A pettiness to the universe, an hecatombe for my body.

“Hey, Hello.” I greet my friend, and then “Hell-o gusugusu...” to the baby strapped to the baby seat at the back of the car, who is looking at me with suspicion. “All good?” my friend asks, while patting my right shoulder as I enter the car, the baby starting to scream. “Yup.” I say raising my voice over the baby’s. “Have you reset your account yet?” She continues. “Yeah, a while ago. All up and running.” I shout with weariness. The cry keeps growing while I am showing my friend my profile picture on my iPhone’s Facebook app. It is a close-up of my face wearing sunglasses and a cook hat. She smiles at me and denies with her head while rolling her eyes. “You are one for change!” I have changed that picture only once since I set up my account back in 2007. “ She will stop crying and fall asleep the minute the car starts moving.” She apologizes for the baby’s tantrum.

Before Facebook took over I was on MySpace, and although well into my thirties I was still trying to figure out which way to go professionally. At the time I was messing in a band with few friends while working in a bar and finishing my degree in cookery, after two frustrated attempts of becoming first a lawyer and then a sociologist. But I could play drums and make pizza from scratch. Allegedly. As a band we were atrocious but this didn’t prevent us from getting a few gigs (and a few girls) locally and keep dreaming of being part of the stars

system some day. The truth is that our only asset was that we were good looking. Professedly. MySpace was a revelation. We could broadcast ourselves and contact venues, and best of all we could make friends with Pixies, which had just reunited, or Red Hot Chilly Peppers. Such was the size of our delusion. But we had high hopes. Back then I presented myself, on my profile picture, wearing enormous red headphones and a T-shirt featuring a robot stuffed with technological gadgets, including a computer, a bottle of wine and a coffin with a skeleton peeping from behind, from the *Paranoid Android* album by Radiohead. In the picture I was 'inadvertently caught' in the act of playing drums.

A year later big productions like the X-Factor came to upset our order of things. There were hundreds if not thousands of kids out there that could actually sing. And if they couldn't they had some other qualities such as stage presence or charm that could count as the X factor. But for us... I was actually one of the youngests in the band. The others were well into their late thirties and starting to settle in their day jobs, moving in or marrying their girlfriends and having children. However, the worst wasn't that, the worst was that having lost the arrogance of youth, they realized that we were too bad and we weren't going to get anywhere. Subsequently the typical boyhood dream of becoming a rock star in an all-boys band disappeared into thin air. They were maturing while I remained the same, in a sort of arrested development. I am of the opinion that if we had held on to it for a little longer maybe we could have made it to SoundCloud. In fact I might try to put a band together now or just join my father's bucket list musical formation. His 'last chance' as he calls it.

When I first signed on Facebook I used the same profile picture I had on MySpace. I switched platforms because it seemed to be the new thing to do and everybody was there and

encouraging each another to sign on. It was exciting the things you could do although nobody was quite sure about what those things were. After the band dissolved and I had finished my degree and started working in a serious restaurant downtown, my Radiohead T-shirt didn't make much sense, so I switched it with the picture my dad took the day of my graduation. I remember him, afterwards, plugging the camera, a Fuji FinePix S9500, which he had just acquired, to my computer at home, and sending it to mom via email. "Like this son?" he would ask. At the time he knew how to use spreadsheets and a few computer programs from work but he was for the foremost an analogical man. I think that day my mother must have been performing somewhere and couldn't attend. When she received the photo she posted it onto her Facebook as if my graduation was a big deal for her. I thought it was strange but I was a big boy and nothing she could do surprised me anymore, so I gave the picture a like. She commented on it in an ambiguous way so you could think that she was there if you didn't know. Many years have gone by and I still have the same picture on my profile. Like Marco Piero White, I don't age.

By the time we make it to the airport the baby has calmed down and it is sound asleep with a red face. "Don't forget to check in!" My friend advises. "Keep in touch and don't be long mate." "I will. I will." No. I won't. "Cheers for the ride. Talk soon mate." I say to her while still inside the car. Then we kiss and hug in the awkwardness of the confined space. The steering wheel stuck in my lower ribs. "Right. I am off." I say undoing the embrace bluntly. Then I pull my gear from the back seat of the car, being careful not to awake the little tasmanian devil, I open the door and get out. Then I throw my backpack over my right shoulder and I close the door without slamming it, all in a single continuous pre-meditated movement. I can see from the corner of my eyes that my friend is becoming tearful. At the

sight I hasten my march and without turning my head I wave goodbye with my free hand. She has a crush on me, I needed to crash out last night and a quick ride.

There isn't much time. Not even for a fag. I go straight towards the control gates, which are reasonably busy for the time. While I am queuing I can hear the call to go to the boarding gate for my flight. Now I am nervous. The passengers in front of me doesn't seem to be in a hurry. I consider whether I should jump the queue, after all it is a case of life and death. I hold on for a minute or two but the line doesn't seem to move. I ponder disclosing to the agents my situation hoping to get a special treatment. Under other circumstances I wouldn't dare but before I finish the thought my reptilian brain has already taken control. I am already walking ahead the queue and, putting my best face, I make my case to the female agent, strategically chosen. A piece of cake. I picture the other passengers frowning at me but I refuse to give it a second thought and before anyone has a chance to say anything I am in.

I take my seat. I am still hungover from last night self pity party. I get a Whatsapp alert. It is from my friend "Safe travels. Don't be a stranger." I don't answer immediately. She is a good person. I am grateful I had someone to talk to last night. I am also grateful she has given me a lift as I am prevented from driving. I had a crazy year. I am longing to get wrapped by the muffled sound of the plane motors and the subdued atmosphere of a transatlantic flight. I take a book out of the rucksack and I start reading, while the rest of the passengers accommodate. The book is a paperback brick even if it is called *A Short History about nearly Everything*. I find it quite entertaining. The writer asks the whys, hows and whens of everything without burying the magic of science under obscure academic jargon <sup>(42)</sup>. John Locke said something about the abuse of words : "We should have a great many fewer

disputes in the world if words were taken for what they are, the signs of our ideas only and not for things themselves.”<sup>(43)</sup>

“Excuse us sir. Those are our seats. Would you mind...?” A high pitch voice grabs me by the hair and pulls me from my depths. I look towards the voice and smile. “Of course.” Then I stand up and stepping aside I allow them to occupy their allocated seats. One by the window, the other in the middle. By chance I am by the aisle today but If I could have chosen I would have taken the corridor anyway as it is closer to the exit and psychologically less oppressive. The two passengers are two young backpackers, with fair hair, tan complexion and sturdy bodies. They must be tourists returning home after their holidays. Foreigners by all accounts as I am not used to hearing this degree of politeness around here. A local would have said something like: “Ow ya goin’ mate?” while pointing to the seats with their chins.

My theory of the great cultural gap is invalidated the very moment I finish the thought for before a minute lapses they start talking. They also feel obliged to gift me with the first plane-selfie of the day. I am afraid reading has lost momentum. I leave the book aside and look at them instead. Something is going on: I am being entertained and I don’t need to make any effort. A familiar display of artistic direction is unfolding in front my eyes. This is mass-produced humanity in a present at arm’s length. While one of them holds the phone the other spreads a banner with the name of the city written in it. The pair are leaning their heads against the small oval window, very close together as to fit inside the frame. With great skill the guy upholding the phone manages, with his free hand, to give the two fingers to the camera while pressing the button and consequently releasing the digital shutter that would capture the act. Laughter. “Fuck you all.” #fuckuall; giggles #gonewiththewind; #byebyedickheads #missualready; more laughter, louder. Then they start drawing colorful



dicks all over the picture in Snapchat. I might have been wrong after all. They are definitely locals. They might have thought I was the tourist. They might have had a point too.



## XXIX

### Götterdämmerung <sup>(44)</sup>

You put the ring on. There his body lies. You snatch and swing a torch first above your head, then pointing it towards the blackness of the fourth wall. In a quick gesture you hurl it into the pyre of wood, which rapidly bursts into flames. Two ravens appear behind your rock, flapping their wings and then disappearing from sight. “Fly home, you ravens! Recount to your master what you have heard here by the Rhine! Pass by Brünnhilde’s rock: direct Loge, who still blazes there, to Valhalla; for the end of the Gods is nigh. Thus do I throw this torch at Valhalla’s vaulting towers.” Two men bring the noble horse to you. You grab it by the reins and both walk “Do you too know, my friend, where I am leading you? Radiant in the fire, there lies your lord, Siegfried, my blessed hero. Are you neighing for joy to follow your friend? Do the laughing flames lure you to him? Feel my bosom too, how it burns; a bright fire fastens on my heart to embrace him, enfolded in his arms, to be one with him in the intensity of love! Heiajoho! Grane! Greet your master! Siegfried! Siegfried! See! Your wife joyfully greets you!” Mounting the horse you jump into the flames that grow bigger and bigger and fill all the space to suddenly die out in a dark and dramatic cumulonimbus cloud. Immediately the waters of the Rhine enter triumphally, overflowing its banks and inundating everything and what was

fire is now water. <sup>(45)</sup>

The hearts in a fist. You can hear a pin drop. Then the applause breaking the silence. Then a sudden silence breaking the applause. You are becoming aware that everything before you is assuming the form of waves. The whole universe starts to ripple. You feel ghastly. The audience leaping out of you. The red curtain falls. Your head spins. Why is it all black? Blackness with tiny white dots flying in different directions. Are those atoms? Are you going to faint? No, no, Oh no, I must not faint. Silence.

\* \* \*

Flowers are brought to your dressing room. There he is with a bouquet. The father of your children. You haven't seen him since your late husband's funeral. He kisses you on the cheek. "Mom?" your daughter approaching from the corridor, shouting from the other side of the door. "Are you there?" She goes on. "Lock the door for a minute would you?" You say to him. He obeys. "Mom?" [outside] He now kisses you properly. "Magnificent performance dear!" "Mom!" "My swan song." "Ave Phoenix!" "Lets raise the glasses for old times seek" "Let's" "Mom!" [outside] "To the flames!" "To the old flames!" "Mom!" [outside] "Who's old?" "Mom!" [outside] "Jesus, daughter!" "Open up before she knocks down the door." "Dad?" "Daughter?" "What are you doing here?" "Shut up. Let's embrace!" "I wouldn't have missed it for all the gold in the world. Would I?" "Let's toast!" "For the show!" "For the artist!" "Here, here" "And they lived happily ever after."

\* \* \*

After the performance I had a stroke. On stage. I cannot imagine anything more dramatic than that. I woke up in hospital surrounded by my daughter, my manager and some

of my closest friends. No sight of my ex-husband though. I wondered if he would be outside. I imagined him drinking coffee in the cold, taking a break from being at my bedside, perhaps smoking a cigarette. Haven't he quit? Strange how much that idea would comfort me. Thinking of my ex-husband was something that came totally out of the blue. What had got on to me? But he never came to the hospital. He never came to the theatre either. I must have dreamt it. Dreams are like literature without characters, no-human texts, the minute someone tries to piece them together, to make sense of them, they vanish. Where they come from?

Many years ago, when I was young I had another stroke. My brain had to be operated to release the pressure. The doctors gave me the diagnosis. It fell like a blow. "There is no cure. Only palliative care." They said. My husband said we would look for a second opinion. They said go ahead. We did. It didn't make any difference. I was fine after the operation. The children came to see me at the hospital. We said nothing to them. As far they were concerned the operation had been successful. We took a picture that day. The months went by and I was feeling stronger and stronger. In fact I decided to go back to work because it seemed that all was part of a nightmare of which I had finally being awoken. My husband didn't like the idea but I wasn't one to stay at home. I knew that one day, when I least would expect it I would have another stroke and that would be the beginning of the end for me. I had to make the most of life and to me life was work.

The doctors told me the illness could strike again in five or ten years, it could be in twenty or it could be tomorrow but it was certain that after each stroke a part of me will die, inevitably. At the beginning I would go to bed thinking that perhaps that would be my last day, then I would wake up in the morning glad that I was still alive. Soon I forgot. In a way I

was like Faust bargaining with the devil. I knew one day he would come to collect his payment but I decided to forget about it. Could I cheat the devil? Can you cheat death?

That day arrived and I became a lesser myself. If I cease to be me, will I also be estranged from others? What can I do but writing up myself as somebody else? Perhaps I cannot even do that. After each stroke everything seems different. Does this illness, like madness, amounts to a death in life or a renaissance? Will I become a text in a medicine book? A distant memory in a Facebook wall? A chapter in a dissertation? I am about to cross the last threshold, I know. I can sense I am becoming the body nobody wants. The fool at the edge of the abyss. Irrecoverable for this life. The person, which is no more. The specimen, a bullet point in a list, a case in a report. Someone destroyed by the words. Alphonse Daudet once said that pain, the same as passion, drives out language.



**XXX**

**Troy**

Ten odd years ago I suffered all the time. I suffered from longing, jealousy and anger. I suffered from heartbreak; I suffered from anxiety, heartburn and constipation. I also suffered from excessive body fat, notably palpable in the exaggerated roundness around my neck, which gave me the looks of a creepy Humpty Dumpty egg. Not that Lewis Carroll's version of the nursery rhyme wasn't ghoulish itself. "The face is what one goes by" Alice said. I was

doomed then. It all branched from the same: arduous boredom. Just like the spiteful character of Dostoevsky's underground memory, I was "crushed by inertia". Like him my strongest conscious act consisted of practicing self-awareness through thumb dabbling.

Sometimes I afforded a slight break in my paralysis and I turned my head upright to take a deep look to the map-like stain left by a leak on the ceiling. Needless to say that I was heavily medicated. I was dead way before my time. One day, and out of the blue I leaped from my stupor and grabbed a graphite pencil from the drawer under the coffee table, I took a step and then another to the top of the table and there, standing with my head bent upright at forty five degrees, I outlined the stain. Then I sat back on the couch and glanced at it with admiration. That was my first and positive action of the month. It was April's fool. That day was. Maybe this is why. Nevertheless that happening set me into motion again.

In 1790, aristocrat Xavier the Maistre was placed under house arrest for forty-two days. His crime: duelling. Confronted with nothing to do but watch the walls of his own room, Maistre decided to take a tour in it. The result was a forty-two days memoir. In his endeavour, Maistre travelled the thirty-six paces perimeter of the room uncountable times and then adventured to the couch, the table or the bed and the rest of the furniture subsequently. After that there were the paintings, engravings, decorations and whatnot. He cheered the journey and commended it to those suffering from idleness, lack of riches and poor health. That was me. Like Maistre I was placed under house arrest for quarrelling. I had been living alone in a dull flat near Belleville for about a year since my girlfriend one day shouted so hard at me that the glass of my bi-focals broke into pieces. This is an exaggeration, of course, but you

get the picture. I use contacts since then, but only when I have company. Then she left the attic we were sharing in the Marais.

That day she took the dog with her, a poodle I considered my son. Then she came back on two more occasions but only to empty the bedroom's wardrobe and the kitchen cupboards. She also took some of my books and my best vinyl records. Strangely she forgot, or didn't consider of importance, the printed photographs of the three of us smiling from the mantelpiece. I sort of had expected that next she would rip them apart keeping only her image and that of the dog, as it would be customary, but she didn't. However the icing on the cake was when she took, for good, her living portrait out of the bathroom's mirror. That was final. Then she slammed the door with such a rage that the walls were left shaking. She never came back. It took me nineteen days and five hundred nights <sup>(46)</sup> to forget her. She was a temperamental dancer from Andalusia, who I have met in college and reacquainted while waitressing at Le Blanc. She turned to be my nemesis but this is another story.

As the attic in the Marais proved to be too big, too expensive and too empty I moved to a small flat. At the time of the separation I was trying to put together a project for which I had obtained a grant from the Foods Board. What I intended to do was designing a series of miniature dishes, forming a sort of tri-dimensional quilt, depicting a modern adaptation of Dante's Inferno. The work was to feature in an International competition. I was in the process of building up a model which I will be executing with real food in situ. The project was a sort of combination of cooking skill, architectural design and performance. The stipend wasn't great but the basic equipment and raw materials were paid for and with the help of my girlfriend's earnings, we could manage quite well. She was at the time touring with a very

successful spectacle: the dance version of Lorca's *Bodas de Sangre*<sup>32</sup> in which she was playing the leading role of the deceitful bride.

Once set in the small flat I realized that my work had all got muddled with the move. All the pieces I had cautiously put together for months and years all had ended up in a mess. The moment I opened the boxes I could see that most of the pieces had been damaged and the construction didn't look the least what it supposed to look like. The minute I came to the terrible realization I had to gasp for air. There lay my masterpiece, now a total strange land. A mass of unknown shapeless pieces. Not only my personal life was in tatters, my work didn't make sense anymore. The rest is easy to imagine. I didn't have the time to start again as the deadline was just around the corner and I couldn't bring myself to put the pieces together as I couldn't understand them anymore. I felt ill. Of course I didn't make the deadline and the funding stopped. To finish me off, the restaurant I had been working in just to make some extra cash, let me go and I was left with absolutely nothing going on. Then was when I fell into the stupor, which lasted for about a year. If I am alive today is thanks to a friend who checked on me every so often and brought me food and supplies and put some order in the flat even though I insulted her and told her to get lost any time she tried to help me out. I think she might have been in love with me, otherwise I don't understand, but this is yet another story.

That April's fool, as I was saying, set me again into motion. After outlining that stain on the ceiling and realizing that that was good and that it also felt good I began to look at the flat with renovated eyes. Until then everything in there reminded me of my petty self : my sadness,

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<sup>32</sup> Blood Wedding.

my dirt, my rage. Me, me, me. But now, like Maistre I could travel across that closed world. I could visit islands on the ceiling and I could sail with the sofa. That instant I got into the computer, which I had avoided for a while, because I was checking as crazy my ex-girlfriend's feeds on Myspace and on the then new outlet: Facebook; obsession that only contributed to increase my already inflated rage. But this time I started looking for odd jobs with immediate pay off. "Just what I need" I found a 'work away' ad and I signed for it. Then I called my friend and asked her for money. "I need you. This is the last time, I promise. I will give you back everything." Two days later I was off to the Antipodes.



**XXXI**

### **Telemachus**

I put together my first meaningful escapist act during my childhood. I must have been around seven or eight when my sister told me that I was a cross breed between a circus clown and a zebra and I was so ugly that that was the reason why my mother was going away so often, because she couldn't bear the sight of my face. Of course she told me that after I had completely ruined her collection of sea shells with which she intended to make a sculpture of



the sea. I had crushed them with a stone, one by one, to find the origin of the sound coming from their interior and because I was a moron, and that is all it was. She has always held some grudges against me. Especially since I left empty handed and had managed to become a master of the universe of nothingness by work and grace of the holy trinity of chance, marketing and a clever wife.

That day I was wearing a similar size backpack than the one I have now but with the image of Leiff Garrett imprinted on it . My mother told me “Go on, go ahead, but I think your bag is too small for the ride, and perhaps too girly.” That was my sister’s bag. I told my mother that I could buy whatever I happen to need on the way and when I ran out of money (I had some savings from my holy communion) I would work whenever the day met me. “I will work hard and make a lot of money.” I said with great conviction. She said that it was a good plan and that she wished me a safe and productive journey. That was her coup de grâce. Of course and classically, my escape lasted until the end of the day. I was back home by the time the sun set as I was terrified of darkness. That trip earned me the name ‘wanderer’ and became the historical material for family jokes. As you can imagine I craved for retribution.

“Well Goodbye then...” I said to my mother. “Goodbye.” She said. I was going to say something else but the phone rang inside the house. The phone was always ringing those days. I saw her flouncing away while kissing and fanning the air with her left hand in my direction. I rolled my eyes in disbelief, disappointed. “Don’t roll your eyes!” she shouted without looking back. She was always happy when the phone rang. It meant that she will be off for weeks if not months. It meant too that I would be every night in bed waiting to hear the comforting sound of her high heels approaching from the corridor, <sup>(47)</sup> first muffled by the distance, then

getting louder and louder until I would feel a kiss on my cheek and then I could finally manage to fall into sound sleep. “Don’t forget your passport.” a friend text comes up on Whatsapp taking me back to reality for a second. That day I made a frame with both my hands and shot the vanishing point where my mother stood. But I failed to retain her. Now I am inside the taxi. The taxi brings me out of Wasters Creek. A shithole. Even for the kangaroos.



**XXXII**

### **Faraway**

“As always, I have been living in the place in between paradise and hell.

A place called Faraway”

I, quoting My Self

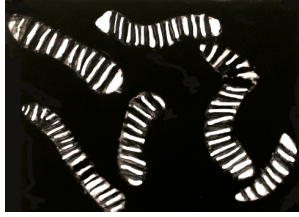
It is already eight in the morning on the sixteenth of June when I open the door of my bungalow. I need to pack . Where is my passport? I better hurry. I asked the cab to wait for me outside. My flight is leaving only in a few hours and I am in the middle of nowhere. It has been over a month since I gave up everything, including social media. I had made an exception with food, booze and cigarettes, otherwise I would have nothing left to give me some solace. I had also seriously reckon with leaving sex out of the picture because I had the suspicion that it had become a highly overrated commodity with nothing to do with a healthy enjoyment of the possibilities of the body. Anyhow I just wanted to become a fully sensuous

monk. On the one hand stoic and unreachable but on the other definitely grounded. But grounded to the ground from where life stems and not to the ridiculous order of things that seemed to have taken over the most 'intelligent' of the species. Unfortunately my act of heroism might have come across rather different than what I had in mind. Perhaps more like that of the ostrich hiding its head under the sand, which by the way is a myth. Ostriches only dig holes in the dirt to use them as nests and they put their heads in the hole only to turn the eggs around. As their heads are quite small compared to their bodies it looks like if they had literally buried their heads into the sand. Appearances are deceiving.

It has been six month since I gave up on my wife. Four month since I gave up the house and anything in there that would remind me of her. I wanted to erase everything and disappear. But of course I couldn't. For example I couldn't give up on my daughter, our daughter. I couldn't black out the memories that kept flashing back any time I was off guard. I couldn't wipe out the trails I left behind in others' memory files, including those of revenue, and online. Because I couldn't obliterate so many things I couldn't give up on my self either, which is what I wanted the most. Let go, vanish once and for all. But everything was still hanging there and staring back at me. "What is going to be your next move dude?" "Should you kill yourself?" I must avoid despair by all means.

I am now in the taxi that brings me out of a woop woop town in Wasters' Creek. A shithole. Even for the kangaroos. Ten years ago I did the same journey but in reverse. As I did before, I am carrying a medium-size backpack for the long trip. I am going to my mother's funeral. The news of her death have just reached me. A friend appeared in my hiding place with an urgent message from my sister. "Tell him to call me now. VERY URGENT." My

friend knew why but she didn't want to tell me. She pressed me to call and sit tight. I did. My sister was furious. "Where on earth have you been? I have tried to reach you for the last two days!" "Had you lost your phone? Why didn't you check your emails or Facebook? Jesus! Mom has passed away and now you are going to miss her funeral too!" Silence. "Do you hear me?" I have always been amazed by the euphemisms we use: 'passing away', like if she had left this life gliding her way towards death. "Do you mean she is dead?" "Jesus! Yes, as dead as a dead person can be!" "I am sorry..." I managed to mutter. "Are you coming to the funeral or what? It is tomorrow at 5PM. Luckily for you there was a waiting list for the service and this was the only slot left available. If you look for early flights you might make it with the time difference. And leave your bloody phone switched on ! OK? " "O-K."



### XXXIII

## EPILOGUE

I know it is common belief that a child cannot remember what happened to him or her before it reaches two years of age but I clearly remember being born. It was like drowning in a lake of sorts but in reverse. Instead of drowning in water I was drowning in dryness, light, cold and noise. I had to gasp for air as I didn't know how to breathe in the outside world. I had to cry out of fear and hoping for that horrible sensation to end. What I didn't know is that that was only the beginning. Then I heard a familiar voice and I felt the warmth of my mother's breast and her heartbeat. I was safe again. I had been in a long journey, a revolution of some sorts, in both senses: cosmological and mundane. I revolutionized from beginning to end meeting the exact point where I began but at the same time I changed along the way. I was transformed only to become the same, or just to understand that I was the same. That I needed to exist before looking at me from the outside.

Now having reached the point in which I have been gifted with the contemplation of my own Mary of Egypt, I realize that it is not at all as I expected it to be. I, like James Ramsay, I have also realized that "nothing is simply one thing." If the act of talking about oneself to others is an act of reassurance, then in which way have I reassured myself in the talking? In order to be able to do that I needed to take a stand, I needed to find my foundations, therefore

I wandered: to find my primary causes, my purpose. But I also wanted to enjoy life as it was, out of analysis and straight into pleasure and awe and if I have succeeded in affirming what exists, in affirming the state of things, as they are or in other words revel in the world outside instead of searching for a way out <sup>(48)</sup> I would have accomplished my purpose. For now.

## END NOTES

- (0) Based in David Foster Wallace 's disclaimer appearing in his novel *Infinite Jest* (1996)
- (1) Buechner, F. (1991) *Now and Then: a Memoir of Vocation*, San Francisco, CA: Harper One.
- (2) Bertolt Brecht, quota from *Motto*.
- (3) Reference to Balzac's tale *The Unknown Masterpiece* first published 1831 and later incorporated to the collection of short stories about French society in the volume *The Human Comedy*, which in turn is a reference and pun to Dante's *Divine Comedy* but incorporating the mundane, which he forgot. The tale tells the story of an ageing artist working for ten years in a painting, which he considers to be his masterpiece. When he shows the work to his colleagues they are astonished to see a chaotic composition that makes no sense only to the artist who painted it. The tale reflects on the sad figure of the artist, which is ahead of his time and it is misunderstood and isolated by his contemporaries. The chaotic painting was nothing else than an abstract work over a hundred and twenty years ahead of his time.
- (4) Notion of *unlearning* as in Hannah Arendt philosophy in Knott, M.L. (2014); London: Granta in which it is discussed how the philosopher went through the process of "unlearning" recognized philosophical and cultural trends and patterns in order to establish a theoretical praxis all her own.
- (5) Reference to Oliver Sacks book *An Anthropologist on Mars* (1995); London: Picador in which the psychiatrist studies several cases in which mental disorders can paradoxically awake latent talents or powers.
- (6) Reference to a street performance by artist Francis Alys, which took place in Mexico City in 1997
- (7) Reference to a 2015 interview to writer Karl ove Knausgaard in Louisiana Channel (Denmark) in which he manifested his opinion on the widespread use of digital technologies and how they changed his life.
- (8a) The wanderer refers to *Virginia Woolf* in her reflections on the art of writing. For Woolf the writer is set in a quest to explain the world as it is in its messiness and incoordination but still has to make itself comprehensible and the difficulty in doing so. Therefore there is an ongoing juggling between narrative conventions and the need to look deeply into us, which not always can be expressed through conventional language.
- (8b) Woolf, V. (1925) Modern Fiction, in *The Common Reader*, San Diego CA: Harcourt pp. 150
- (9) 'An imaginative man is apt to see, in his life, the story of his life; and is thereby led to conduct himself in such a manner as to make a good story of it rather than a good life' (Sir Henry Taylor, dramatist, 1836)
- (10) D.H. Lawrence: "Art-speech is the only truth. An artist is usually a damn liar, but his art, if it be art, will tell you the truth of his day." published in *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, James T. Boulton, E. Mansfield, and W. Roberts (1987), vol. 4, pp: 234.  
Oscar Wilde: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." In ed. Richard Ellmann (1968) *The Artist as a Critic: Critical writings of Oscar Wilde*, New York: Random House, pp: 389

- (11) These are *The Odyssey* first words pinpointing the main theme of Homer's epic poem. These words also set the main theme of this second part of the dissertation, the journey of a wanderer, symbolically every man and everywoman set for a life journey written on the autobiographical.
- (12) Based on a poem by Miquel Martí i Pol *Parlem de Tu* (Let's talk about you)
- (13) Reference to the ending of Molly Bloom soliloquy at the end of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.
- (14) Irish song by *The Gloaming*, released 2013.
- (15) Molly Bloom Soliloquy which concludes *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce
- (16) Pseudonym of Photographer Ascher Fellig (1899-1968). Worked mainly as a photojournalist in New York. It is well known for documenting crime scenes for the tabloids. He would photograph their subjects from 10 feet above (Weegee (1988) in Golberg (Ed) pp: 404.
- (17) From Tolstoy, L., (1886[2013]) *The Death of Ivan Ilych* translated by Louse and Aylmer Maude, Pennsylvania State University: pp: 58.
- (18) Examples taken from Nietzsche's *The Wanderer and its Shadow* first published 1880 as the third volume of the collection: *Human all too Human: a Book for Free Spirits* (1878)
- (19) Reference to "A space without use" in George's Percey *Species of Spaces*, 1997:26
- (20) In Holland is rare to see curtains on the windows while in Ireland, UK, Spain or Italy blinds are current features. They make sense in warm countries to protect the house from the sunlight but it is difficult to apply this explanation to Ireland or the UK where sunlight is scarcer. The motivation to hide behind curtains might be more social than practical. Note curtains appear partially or totally opened around Christmas time in Ireland possibly to show the interior Christmas decorations, for example the tree; while during Halloween decorations are kept outside the house.
- (21) *A Most Disgusting Song* (1997) performed by Sixto Diaz Rodriguez • Copyright © Universal Music Publishing Group
- (22) Ethnography published in 1986 by Nancy D. Munn. Gawa is a small island off the southeast coast of mainland Papua New Guinea. The work exposes how the community affirms its own internal viability through the achievement of Fame.
- (23) Quotas from interview with Danish artist Peter Land. [www.peterland.dk](http://www.peterland.dk); Available at: <http://channel.louisiana.dk/video/peter-land-self-portrait-homeless>
- (24) Quota from Jorge Luis Borges in "Other Inquisitions" (1952) in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and other Writings* (1969) edited by Donald A. Yates & James E. Irby, New Directions: New York
- (25) Reference to *The Matrix* (1999) in which Neo, the chosen, is given two options: a red or a blue pill. In one case he will be able to see the real world beyond the matrix and in the other he will remain unaware of the truth and in blissful contentment.
- (26) Babylonian Law code carved on stone and dated 1754 BC, from which stems the popular: "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" or *Lex Talionis*. The code is on display at the Louvre Museum.
- (27) Reference to an expression by Rumanian author Cioran in *La Tentation de Exister* (The



- Temptation to Exist) published first in 1956 by Gallimard, Paris.
- (28) Reference to Rimbaud : It is necessary to change the life. It is necessary to get the dead out of their graves. In Wallace, F. (1950) *Age of Surrealism*, Swallow Press: NY, pp:47
- (29) Reference to a Nostradamus prophecy (1555).
- (30) The Republic, Book IV
- (31) Punctum: that object or element in a photograph that jumps out at the viewer. The accident. Barthes, (1980), *La Chambre Claire*. Hill&Wang: NY
- (32) Charles Baudelaire Journal entry, Paris, 1860 in Auden, W.H., Baudelaire, C., Isherwood, C. (1949) *Intimate Journals*, Dover: NY
- (33) Reference to a group of avant-garde Spanish poets including Guillen, Alberti, Aleixandre and Garcia Lorca, which developed during and in spite Franco's dictatorship.
- (34) Reference to Marcel Proust's multivolume novel *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1913); translated as *In Search of Lost Time* and also *Remembrance of Things Past*.
- (35) List of victims of the Paris terrorist attacks claimed by the Islamic State in November 2015.  
<https://twitter.com/rechercheparisi?lang=en>
- (36) Quotas from Oscar Wilde tale *The Remarkable Rocket*, published in 1888 inside the collection *The Happy Prince and other Tales*. Available at Project Gutenberg:  
[http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/902?msg=welcome\\_stranger](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/902?msg=welcome_stranger)
- (37) Reference to British artist Tracey Emin.
- (38) Based in Kahlil Gibran's "The beauty of Death" in *Visions of the Prophet* (1994) London: Penguin.
- (39) This story is based in popular legends from Galicia (North-West of Spain) in which young women with dogs living in isolation were thought to be witches and their dogs the sign of death (Santa Compañía).
- (40) From Camus, A. (1975[1942]) *The Myth of Sisyphus*, London: Penguin
- (41) <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-37156673>
- (42) by Bill Bryson, 2003, London: Black Swan
- (43) Locke, John (1689, 2001) *Of the Abuse of Words*, London: Penguin Books
- (44) In Germanic mythology: the downfall of the gods; It is the equivalent of Ragnarok in Norse Mythology; also *The Twilight of the Idols* in Nietzsche (1889)
- (45) III Act of the final part of the opera *Götterdämmerung* by Wagner.
- (46) Reference to an album with the same name by Spanish singer songwriter Joaquín Sabina, released in 1999.
- (47) Reference to Pedro Almodovar film *Tacones Lejanos* (High Heels), released 1991.

(48) Quote from *My Struggle*, book 2 (2013) by Karl Ove Knausgaard.