Другостта: медии и виртуална среда
Otherness: Media and Virtual Environments

Becoming a Non-Other.
Emigrant Narratives as an Integration Strategy

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Abstract: Constructing a reality out of language has been a recurrent experience of humanity since the first creative usage of language. When a narrative practice is used as a self-reflection and self-construction in a non-fiction manner, the result is blending real-world events, situations, and places with a subjective worldview, and consequentially redefining one's perception of these events, situations, and places (see for example Ricoeur 2009, Barton 2010, Linde 1993). It is interesting how telling a story of the self is used to reduce the subjective perception of otherness in conditions of recent immigration, a practice very well observed in Italian emigrant letters at the beginning of the XX s. (Franzina 1994). A contemporary case of such a practice are the emigrants' online diaries in the form of blogs, Instagram stories, Facebook pages. Here we propose an example of how multimodal online narratives are used as a rite of passage from a condition of a subjective perception of otherness to a situation of becoming a less- other or even a non-other. For this ongoing research three Italian bloggers, living in the United States, are followed for 10 years in their experience of writing and videoblogging through blog platforms, Instagram, and Facebook.

Keywords: emigration, multimodality, digital narratives, blogs, egodocuments, identity.

Introduction

Why do we tell the story of ourselves? Share thoughts, photos, and videos in social media? Lately, it seems like everyone is behaving as an author of an autobiography and we constantly see people talking, writing about themselves, about passions, discoveries, trying to have the public's attention. Here we propose a point of view on self-narratives (also called egodocuments) as a social practice with deeper motivation than a mere need for attention. We analyze a particular use of such narratives in an online environment, where creating non-fiction stories of the self is used to soften the sensation of otherness in the context of recent emigration through the inclusion of the new environment in the inner narrative

of who a person is. We will also look at how such social practice evolves in time and changes through online platforms.

How do we narrate ourselves?

Constructing a reality out of language has been a recurrent experience of humanity since the first creative use of language. And telling a personal story doesn't mean only referring facts to others, but also a paradigm of thinking about the world and thinking about yourself in the world. In fact, Walter Fisher, who in the 1980's performed influential narrative studies, termed narration as a human communication a "paradigm", not a theory, putting a wider scope in the concept [1] (Fisher 1984). If we accept his belief that people are natural storytellers and tend to think and communicate not through arguments and facts but through stories, then, in order to comprehend human interaction, we need to understand how stories work.

Here we are particularly interested in the social practice of creating non-fiction self-representations. And by "practice" we mean not only the act of writing (or the creation of multimodal digital narratives), but also what the French term *Pratique de l'ecrit* includes – both the act of writing and the act of reading. As the French anthropologist and theorist of writing Daniel Fabre puts it: "Writings [*écrits*] belong to a place, a social space they emanate from but which they also help to constitute and define" (see Barton 2010). [2] This kind of bidirectional connection is a central concept we base our argument on. On the one hand, stories rely on real events from the narrator's life, but on the other, they build this environment. Based on this premise, digital storytelling can be seen as a practice, situated on the border between personal and public domain, which could function as a controlled and safe space for rethinking the inner perception of identity and working on it, consciously or not.

Here we work on contemporary digital storytelling that is mostly multimodal. But before emerging into digital Instagram and Facebook stories, this kind of social interaction existed in older forms: first there were paper letters and diaries, then personal webpages and blogs. Many of the functions and the dynamics in the older genres, as defined by their scholars, therefore, are valid for the present-day digital stories.

A good synthesis of a diary's functions comes from a main theorist of personal writing, Philippe Lejeune. He defines them in his essay of 2001 "How do diaries end" (Lejeune 2009) as follows 1) to express oneself, divided in two – to release and destroy, and to communicate; 2) to reflect, divided in analyzing oneself and deliberate; 3) to freeze time and build a memory storage.; 4) to take

pleasure in creating. [3] He talks about paper diaries, where writing is considerably more private as an action than the act of sharing a story online. Nevertheless, there are interesting parallels. We find substantial analogies in functions 1, 3 and 4, while a significant difference is present in function 2. About function 1), we could say that digital stories are a form of self-expression. They release creative energy and communicate at the same time. The act of destroying the narrative, in order to release the emotional baggage it carries, is very well observed in one of the analyzed bloggers who deleted two of her blogs and stopped updating her Instagram account with a dramatic utterance. Function 2) is present as well. Although virtual content is far less stable through time than it may seem, bloggers, youtubers, and all users in general, are attracted by their memories, as testified by different Facebook, Google photos and other services that offer users to revisit old content. The pleasure of creating is even bigger when shared with a public, so function 3) is undoubtedly there.

Reflection and analysis of function 2), on the other hand, are present, but not in the same way as in paper diaries. Lejeune says that: "Diaries offer a space and time protected from the pressure of life. You can take refuge in its calm to "develop" [in photographical sense] the image of what you have just lived through and to meditate upon it" (Lejeune 2009). [4] In our digital stories, space is far from protected and safe. Rather than a place to ponder the one's condition, it represents a space to experience different ideas of the Self, an "identity incubator" where different personalities can be processed. Hence, when previously we have talked about personal webpages and blogs, we have added a fifth function: creating a virtual image of the self (Vargolomova 2020). [5] This virtual figure is not created in a linear and consistent way, as a protagonist is built in an autobiography. Instead, by adding fragments of experience on top of each other, blogs create a representation that can't be a faithful image, yet as an alternative self, aspired and purposefully designed, it can affect the author's perception of identity. As a result, they create an alter-ego that they can control. We must specify that the representation created is not randomly selected, because the community is easily able to perceive and react to representations that are too detached from reality. To be accepted, it should be consistent, sincere, and possible. As Linde (1993) [6] points out, the coherence of a narrative is held up not only by the level of the story itself with its linguistic structures, but also by the level of what makes a story adequate, credible, and consistent in a specific social situation. To use Killoran's metaphor (2003) [7], personal webpages are not us, they are "the gnome in the front yard", chosen to represent us.

All the considerations above are related to the theory of identity as a narrative and a changeable construct. This theory derives forces from the Riceour's concept of identity as establishing continuity with the previous instances of the self and from Bauman's self, seen as a fluid process. We therefore assume that people form their identities by integrating real-life experiences into a global inner history of themselves. This history is not static and develops in time, requiring constant incorporation of new facts and experiences. Thus, a sense of continuity and purpose in life is established (more on narrative identity in Linde, 1993 [8]; McAdams, 2001. [9]

What is new then in today's world? We already knew that identity is not an immediate substance, but a construct mediated by various narratives. As early as 1992 Anthony Giddens was interested in the changing nature of identity when society passes from traditional relationships to the so-called "late-modern societies". He believed that modern people must always make decisions about who they are by constantly observing themselves. As a result, the self is a reflective project and the responsibility for it is all in the subject's hands, because in the modern world we lack the support and the institutionalized stability of the predefined roles and identifications of traditional society (Giddens 1991) [10]. We knew also that the mediation of narratives emphasizes the fact that self-knowledge is a self-interpretation, and this mediation often is provided by formal storytelling (see Ricoeur 2009). [11] The novelty is that in digital stories everything seems much more captivating and real for the public, but also for the author, because it is interactive, and above all, multimodal. And as a result, the virtual self has more influence on its creator.

The multimodal storytelling

For the people that saw the first film in the history, Lumiere's *Arrivee d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, the train that appeared on the screen was real. So real that they were overwhelmed and ran out of the room. This audience didn't know the mechanisms of cinematographic representation, so it took some time for the public to accept that something so real is not the reality itself. The new medium and the new mode of representation was something too authentic to be fiction. Likewise, it takes time to comprehend the methods of representation in digital storytelling. In Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, one needs to immerse in the medium to understand his representational nature. Just like personal webpages and blogs before, it is a new way to present yourself, and it i s also a way to work on once's identity. But the fact that digital stories are multimodal changes the situation. It is much more difficult for the public to see the narrative's mediation. In

that sense, it makes it seem more immediate, relatable, "truer". As a result, the border between real-world events, situations, and places and their representations blurs and redefines one's perception of those events, situations, and places (see for example Tiggeman 2019). [12]

What is multimodality?

If we think our language is made only of words, we are wrong. When we talk to someone face to face, half of the information comes from what we see on the face of the interlocutor and in their gestures. Linguistics calls this multimodality.

Multimodality represents the co-functioning of several "modes" or "modalities" at the same time: words, gestures, facial expression; or text, picture, video, sound, music etc. In combination these modes convey joint messages that represent most of the human interactions. As in the definition of Kress and Bezemer: "Mode is a socially and culturally shaped resource for making meaning. Image, writing, layout, speech, moving images are examples of different mode" (Bezemer & Kress 2008). [13]

Nowadays language is rarely just words. The important theorist of multimodality, Bateman, has even come to call monomodal expressions a mere "abstraction" (Bateman 2014). [14] Of course, this is not exactly true, being the classical book without illustration a very good example of monomodality. But, apart from similar cases, almost all our daily communication exchanges are made up of different forms of multimodal language.

The awareness of this fact is not something new. Since ancient times, the contribution of non-verbal language in communication has been clear to scholars and ordinary people. We can consider the importance ancient rhetoric art gave to gestures, facial expressions, and voice dynamics a good example. Yet, for centuries written language dictated the attitude towards communication in an authoritative way. We use verbal language to analyse verbal language, and our analysis logically has the bias of written words. In linguistics, we have the clear presumption we should base our work on words, sentences, and verbal texts in general as a primal form of language. Only with the new technologies of the twentieth century, linguists have tentatively started acquiring broader understanding on language analysis and using the term "multimodality", in an attempt to conceptualize and theorize on the problem. In the twentieth century, for the first time, non-verbal modalities could be preserved, and we can apply an analysis to them. In recent years, multimodality has been explored by scholars interested in the pragmatic side of language and communication. Discourse analysis, for example, works on

many non-trivial questions about how the combined message is constructed and how this mode merging works.

We can say that today multimodality is considered by many the natural condition of language. We have even theories on human language origin and essence that confidently apply the concept and the term *multimodality* itself (see for ex. the review of Wacewicz 2017). [15]

The emigration narratives of the self

An emigrant's condition is an extremely interesting life situation that requires people to activate special social, but also linguistic strategies. This kind of transition has been recognized as a research terrain by different scholars in humanities and those interested in qualitative research often use personal narratives as first-hand source material.

Narratives have high importance to emigrants in different times. Talking about Irish emigration at the end of 18th century, Fitzpatrick states that: "The emigrants used words to maintain emotional, social and economic ties, in defiance of physical separation" (Fitzpatrick 1994). [16] Another traditional transatlantic emigration, the Italian one, has been studied through their narratives by Bevilacqua (2001) [17], Vedovelli (2011) [18] and Emilio Franzina (1994) [19], who proposes an interesting view on Italian rural postwar emigration through their rich written ego-documents. He empathizes that the emigrants coming from different countries to America have universal problems. For him their letters all have the same core function, the original function of the epistolary act: "to consolidate the relationships with family, disrupted from emigration" (Franzina 1994). [20] Their written practices are mainly used to overcome the trauma of transition and they aren't an isolated personal creative expression, but a real institution, having a clear and almost ritualistic forms: introduction formulas, followed by concrete information about work, money earned, news about relatives, etc. Of course, these postwar rural emigrants had a different kind of transition experience from today's expats. In traditional Italian society, emigration was a collective act. Until very recently it was not a single person or a family to migrate, but whole villages. Therefore, they had a big community to support them in the foreign country and often stayed enclosed in it. Writing about these new experiences, nevertheless, is still used as a social practice to mediate this difficult moment of transition. It remains a personal strategy to mitigate the traumatic transition or the isolation, in absence of traditional migrant communities.

It is well known that moments of passage activate not only letters, but also other kinds of self-narratives. Anna Iuso demonstrated how personal diaries on

paper emerge regularly in the life length, in periods characterized by important changes – puberty, matrimony, childbirth, pension. [21] Emigration is a good example of such a moment. Talking about the dynamics of the Dialogical self, Hermans says that: "Cultures and selves are seen as moving and mixing and increasingly sensitive to travel and translocality" (Hermans 2001). [22] Today, moments of transition activate modern diaries, called digital narratives. Online diaries, in fact, are considered an evolution of paper diaries, despite the obvious public nature of blogs and personal webpages, and all the other differences (on the continuity of the two genres, see for example. Serfaty (2004) [23], Lejeune (2009) [24], Van Dijk (2004) [25]). Often, they begin with the act of emigration and stop when the need to relieve the transition trauma is no longer that strong.

Therefore, we could say that as a discursive practice, telling stories about emigration experience online has historical roots and it is used with its stabilizing function, allowing the creator of the story to take control of the inner narration of the self and in that way guide the transition from one social situation to another. In this process efforts are often directed towards mitigating the subjective feeling of otherness.

The evolution of internet storytelling

The most recent reincarnations of personal self-narratives are the multi-modal digital stories in Instagram and Facebook. Here we will follow the stories of three Italian emigrants' writing practices from personal blogs to multimodal "stories" and we will see how these narratives are used as a rite of passage from a condition of subjective perception of otherness to a situation of becoming less other or even a non-other.

The methodology is based on qualitative observation and analysis of blogs, Facebook and Instagram accounts. Starting from 10 bloggers in 2012, we followed the users in their online sharing experience for almost 10 years. The initial selection of blogs included the10 most active blogs in a community of Italian emigrants to the United States. Over the years, some of the bloggers kept blogging, others abandoned their blogs. At the end of the period, in the last few months, only three of the initial users are active, two of which continue to update their blogs and Facebook accounts, producing plenty of Facebook "Stories", while the third blogger uses only Instagram, posting mostly Instagram stories, with plenty of writings, videos, photos. During this period, telling stories of emigration has become more and more a multimodal effort and blogging is replaced with what is called "digital storytelling". The first two bloggers with their Facebook and Instagram accounts are: *Nonsisamai* (You never know), *Living in California, it's*

a Cultural Shock; while the names the third blogger uses vary, starting from the blog *Donna con fusoa* (Woman with time difference/A confused woman) nonexistent at the moment, through *Datemi un Martello* (Give me a hammer) e *Casa a New York* (Home in New York).

Sharing personal multimodal stories has arisen from a platform that has lost popularity recently, but 5 years ago was a prominent new communication channel for teenagers – Snapchat. The platform's unique selling point were the videos, user shared, that lasted for 24 hours and after that were lost for the public. These videos' service, combined with images and text, was replicated in Instagram and Facebook as their very popular "Stories" – easy to create, brief multimodal content that combines videos, sound, images, writing, emoticons. Instagram acquired the feature in August 2016 and Facebook in May 2017.

At the beginning, digital stories and multimodal storytelling seemed something new compared to blogging practices. It started as a teenage entertainment platform with mostly frivolous content, the most striking difference being the prevalence of the visuality. Blogs have textual and visual elements, but the verbal text largely prevails. The coherence in multimodal messages there is achieved through what Roland Barthes (1977) [26] calls *anchorage* or *illustration* where one of the modes has a subordinate position to the others. Mostly the verbal text is the main mode, while the image is there to support it. In blogs, the coherence between text and image is rather reduced, because generally the two modes function separately and the isolation of the subordinate mode does not compromise the readability of the blogpost.

As already stated, Instagram, as a communication channel is oriented towards visuality. We would therefore expect that the messages lack the verbal element or that they have this element only in a supporting position – as in Barthes' anchorage connection. If that holds true for a normal Instagram post, stories have lots of talking and writing. In this case multimodal complexity is elevated, but the overall message is indeed readable, more immediately expressive, and easier to perceive by the user, due also to the short processing time. Meanwhile, the messages observed reveal a high degree of coherence, meaning that different modalities function together, making a combined message which would have lost its meaning, if one of the modalities were removed. Facebook stories have similar properties.

Consequently, the three blogs that have remained active at present among the initial 10 are presented.

Non si sa mai

This is the currently active blog with the longest history. The user is present on all the three platforms with different types of posts. She started blogging in 2007 when she moved from Italy to Dallas in the United States. Since the beginning, unlike many others, she did not hide her identity, even though she uses pseudonyms when talking about friends and acquaintances. In the blog, she introduces herself stating that she wants to write about her new experiences, her impressions, her bewilderment, the cultural shock, but mostly she writes to "keep thinking Italian". Her life passion and profession is teaching art in schools on non-regular contracts, so she meets different American kids almost constantly. She talks about political and social topics, insisting on seeing the personal meaning of the events happening around her in the public and private sphere. On Facebook she announces blog updates, but she also shares short stories and images with text. Her Instagram stories are usually formed by series of images with text embedded in them.

Living in California, it's a Cultural Shock

The blog starts as *Living in San Francisco, it's a Cultural Shock,* and changes the name with the blogger's new living location. After 9 years she continues to update the blog and posts on the other two platforms, Facebook and Instagram, regularly. Instagram and Facebook updates are nearly identical, characterized by large use of pictures with writings on them. She is an art historian, and she works in a museum in Los Angeles. At the beginning of November 2021, she tried to analyze the reasons why she had started and she continues to write, saying that at the beginning she was writing to overcome cultural shock and get acquainted with the new environment, but now she is doing so in order not to forget the Italian language. In her own words: "Talking about cultural shock seemed a good way to exercise it". In this rather long blogpost, she mentions almost all of Lejeune's diary functions as her own reasons to write: writing as a way to preserve memories, to mediate a difficult transition period, to reflect and express.

Donna con fuso-a

While the other two bloggers make a moderate and rather subordinate use of videos and visual stories, a typical Facebook and Instagram story of this user starts and revolves around a video registration. Her blogging experience began as a typical blogger writing about her emigrant experiences with few pictures. Just like the others, she also started writing soon after relocating from Italy to the United States. At the beginning she was very active and even a community gath-

ered around her blog, because she maintained a list of Italian emigrants' blogs. Some years later, she deleted her blog and started another one, *Datemi un martello* (Give me a hammer). This one had a different focus and was more visually oriented. It was dedicated to her passion for self-made home refurbishing. This blog is presently abandoned. She lacks a Facebook profile, while in her Instagram one long videos with detailed accounts of how she transformed old furniture in the house appeared very intensely. On November 12th 2021she declared she wants to leave social networks using a selfie of herself in a hospital bed. She implied her physical and mental state was caused by realizing relationships in social networks are illusory and not real with these words: "They call them social, but they are the most antisocial thing that has ever been created".

Becoming a non-other

One way or another, these bloggers have done intentional reworking of identity, aiming at mitigating the feeling of otherness, caused by their emigrating. They present similar writing patterns and platform changes, suggesting that this social practice is institutionalized, and it is not an isolated form of creativity. They write as if they explained the American environment to other Italians. In this way, they evidently express a desire to take the position of a person who is closer, physically, and psychologically, to the new country than the readers. By "explaining" the new environment, they manage to make it less foreign and more related to them. Accepting Herman's theory that the Self functions as an interplay of different "I positions", we could observe how bloggers actively reinforce the "voice" or the position of the self, connected to the new place. "I write about America, therefore I feel less as a stranger". As a result, the subjective feeling of not belonging there, the feeling of otherness, is replaced by a relatively (compared to the readers) more integrated position.

It is interesting how visible it is that some of these bloggers (Donna con fuso, for example) organize and reorganize their identity by actively taking control of the identity voices, the I positions. By strengthening the voice associated with Italy, she often is trying to confirm continuity with her roots. As well as writing in Italian, she uses the pronoun "we", having in mind we Italian, etc., she prefers very "Italian" topics such as: food, holidays, traditions. On the other hand, the need to rethink the new environment from different points of view also appears often. We can see how the linguistic narrative vision of the self is actively used as a way to take control of the perception of identity, activating three series of I positions: 1) me, as an Italian, part of the Italian culture; 2) me, as an emigrant, trying to adapt to the new home; 3) me, as part of a virtual social practice. One of the

reasons we know the authors comprehend the meaning of these social practice is they often reread older posts and writes about the meaning of writing.

One characteristic of this social practice makes it a preferred controlled space for self-reflection and identity construction, and it is the nature of the media. Blogs are a frontier space between public and private space, where expressing oneself means also presenting oneself. And since the borderline between the constructed authenticity and the authentic expression is a thin one, every suspicion of fallacy is taken very seriously. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the posts with the most comments by one of the bloggers is dedicated to a private message that questions the authenticity of the personal story. "If it were all true, lucky you, but maybe that's not the case", says the private message and while many of the comments support the blogger, others actively reason about the constructed nature of the personal image on the internet.

The strong presence of the community of other bloggers is another key to understanding the practice. The style sometimes strikingly resembles a letter to a friend. A reader is necessary, but unlike in private letters, through the comments here is present as closely as the author themselves. And as anticipated above, readers are present as a support environment that can help bloggers in the transition period in the absence of traditional emigrant communities.

We can claim the main function of narration is reposition the perception of the self also because blogs are interrupted or change focus when the feeling of otherness is less persistent. Usually this happens after 5-8 years and could be interpreted as a sign the narration's function is fulfilled. We know that in paper diaries the end is a particular condition (see Lejeune, *On diary*, 2009) [27] and it creates a lot of doubts. Every diary entry is a last one until a new entry is created. So, a diary does not have a real closure. For Lejeune ending as an act could be a) a voluntary and explicit stop (without destroying the diary); b) the destruction of a diary; c) a rereading (subsequent annotation, and interpretation of the written text); d) publication. While publication is not applicable in our case, the other ways of writing interruption are observed. We have cases of interrupted blog and Instagram accounts, and a deleted one by *Donna con fuso,* and posts that reassume the blogging experience when passing to another platform. Here we can add a new way of ending the blogging experience, we also have observed – changing the narration's topic. When emigration is no longer a relevant experience to a blogger, they might change the blog's name and start telling stories about something else. This way of ending a digital diary is also a sign the person's need to write about emigration is no longer present and therefore the relative sensation of otherness is not that intense.

When digital storytelling is transferred in multimodal platforms, we have new technological means and the reality they build online seems even more real and pertinent to the perception of itself.

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