

The central point of everything is not man, but rather the survival of the system. An interview with Davide Grassi

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Dziga Vertov (the theoretician of kino-glazo) was certain that film could be used for political goals, that it can be changed into a means for a “communist decodification of the world”.

It’s hard to tell whether with the title of his last project – DemoKino – Davide Grassi wished to pay tribute to one of the fathers of film or to make fun of his unrealized ambitions.

The project is a narrative divided into 8 film clips based on a screenplay by Antonio Caronia. It unwinds live, with a streaming technique, allowing viewers to edit the film interactively. The main character is one Kolja, a Slovene youth with an average education and an average interest in current events, facing a series of varied dilemmas through the day, a sort of contemporary Hamlet. For example, two Mormons ring his doorbell, and he begins to ponder sects, Raelites and cloning. Or: he’s surfing the net and suddenly begins to question copyright. In this manner, while engaging in every day activity, on the toilet or on the phone, Kolja starts thinking about abortion, euthanasia, genetically modified organisms, therapeutic cloning,

homosexual marriage, water privatization. He discusses all the pros and contras and then tries to decide: which is where the user steps in, voting in his name; the majority vote then leads onto the next room, the next question. And the next dilemma. From one vote to the next, we come to the final clip of the film, followed by, without interaction by clicking, a final short clip. The now-familiar face of Kolja is substituted by a smiling clown: “What about if I tell you that everything was defined in advance?”. A silly melody and a sarcastic smile thereby destroy any illusions brought about by the “virtual parliament” of DemoKino. Concepts like (inter)active collaboration, direct democracy, a virtual agora and freedom of choice, collapse alongside the clown’s red nose, just as Italian democracy did alongside pianists’ musical performances. As with Kafka, the clarity of law is disfigured in the muddle of a process that remains invisible to the end. But the question of the virtuality of contemporary democracy is only one of the questions put forth by DemoKino: it also discusses the effectiveness of the much praised interactivity of the web and the transformation of politics into biopolitics, or rather, the recent tendency to try to make the private public, and transform life itself into a political question. This complexity is common to all works of Grassi, an Italian artist who moved to Ljubljana in 1995, where he founded the non-profit organization Aksioma, producing works which use new media to investigate social, political, ethical and aesthetic questions. Because life is politics, theatre is terrorism and problems produce profit...

DQ. How did DemoKino come about? Does it bear traces of a particular event in our everyday politics, or is the project a result of a more general contemplation?

DG. I would say that the work is the result of a general contemplation, although there is a very specific event that triggered it. In the late ‘nineties, I read the book *Collective Intelligence* by Pierre Lévy, which among other things, indicates a socially more beneficial use of computer-supported communication, supplying individuals

with the tools to establish intelligent collectives and initiate democracy in realtime. If we reread the book today, we would surely find it evident that Lévy's idealistic vision has failed to materialize.

I then accidentally found an article in the online version of the Financial Times discussing the phenomenon of the so-called “pianists”, the Italian senators that were filmed voting for their absent colleagues via the electronic voting system.

If they were voting by a show of hands, such a pianist would have to raise both arms, which, if nothing else, would be a very “brave” act if only because of the obviousness of such a gesture. But this analog and backward voting system would definitely not allow characters like senator Lucio Malan from Forza Italia to perform a skilful triple vote, unless of course he managed to borrow Stelarc's famous third arm in time. The electronic voting system, however, does enable such things – clear evidence of how new technology actually makes work easier.

So: this news got me thinking about a whole array of questions. Confronting this fact, which is symptomatic of the unreliability of the representative or parliamentary democracy, with the realization of the failure of Lévy's idea, I felt a great sense of impotence and at the same time the urge to delve further into these themes.

DQ. DemoKino makes fun of the supposedly democratic nature of interactivity, as well as contemporary democracy tout court. In both cases, freedom of choice seems inherently linked with the mechanism of choosing, while in reality it is this very mechanism which prevents democracy. Do you see a way out of this blind alley?

DG. To answer this question, we would have to carefully consider the significance of democracy, as well as the meaning of interactivity. The concept of democracy, historically and philosophically charged with meaning, seems emptier today than ever before, a caricature of its former self, far from the idea described by

“sovereignty of the people.”

If anything, the dictates of the economy and the market are the ones followed today. It would make more sense to coin neologisms such as “econocracy” or “marketocracy”. The term “democracy” acquires an even more grotesque meaning when it is uttered in a missionary manner or, even worse, when it is identified as a ‘good’ to be exported with a marketing operation, for which the package design is basically more important than the content. Capitalism is looking for new markets for Democracy, too.

With artworks, video games, automatic bank tellers and other ‘finalized’ products defined as interactive, the reciprocal operation, the release of a process of interaction, is merely virtual. The bottom line is, in the programming phase of these products, a number of possibilities are considered, but no matter how many, they are still limited, studied ahead and programmed accordingly. The interaction with these devices creates in the user a strong sense of sovereignty, of self-determination. But on closer inspection, this feeling turns out to be merely virtual. Herein, perhaps, lies the reason, the factor of interactivity is so well aligned with Virtual Realities. In both cases, we deal and worry about more with appearances than with effectiveness.

But there is a form of interaction, a mutual exchange of inputs, provocation and information, taking place between subjects in more or less wide communities, both in physical reality and cyberspace. I find the interaction between individuals or groups of individuals much more interesting, much less predictable and more creative, especially if we understand interaction as a “cohesion force”. Certainly, even such interaction is subject to limitations put forth by the system in which interaction is taking place. This is why some communities and collectives are trying to free themselves from such ‘tyranny’ by setting their own ‘rules of the game’, often and deliberately opposite and incompatible with the rules of the ‘imposed system’.

A possible exit from this blind alley might be that suggested by Hakim Bey in TAZ, yet we remain in the sphere of utopia and idealism.

DQ. DemoKino connects the personal choices of the main character with a virtual parliament. And if the final negation of the votes mortifies the voters, it also returns the freedom of choice to our hero. Do you believe that there is a conflict between personal freedom and collective will?

DG. I must say that I disagree with your claim for at least two reasons.

The first is that at the end of DemoKino, the voting is not really done in vain. Rather the question “What about if I tell you that everything was defined in advance?”, put forth by the clown while whistling a melancholy sing-song tune inoculates the cybervoter with the doubt that everything might have been set in advance. It’s not an affirmation – it’s an element of doubt.

Indeed, the same thing happens when we vote. After we throw the ballot into the box, we have a feeling that we have used our right to vote, which was acquired at great cost through centuries of very important social struggles. But what, really, is the feedback, the proof that our vote was really counted? All in all, it wouldn’t be the first time we hear about gerrymandering.

My second reason for not agreeing with your claim is that freedom of choice is in no way returned to ‘our hero’.

He, as a matter of fact, is presented to the viewer and voter as a protagonist of eight prerecorded short films, which therefore are in no way modifiable.

The decision of the cybernetic voting body affects the chronological order of the themes addressed by the lead character, but not his actions. So, even if the hero were to free himself of the will of the voters, what freedom would he gain?

The conflict between personal and collective freedom definitely exists and is an undeniable fact. The only way to avoid this conflict would lie in the form of a ‘totalitarian will’. Impossible.

DQ. If Problemarket researched the development of politics in an economic sense, DemoKino is a reflection on the politicisation of life. Do you believe the terms to be connected? What is life like in the era of biopolitics?

DG. Both phenomena are undoubtedly interconnected, in my opinion.

The economy has managed to trap politics, and politics has a direct influence on everyday life. We could say that the economy, as filtered through politics, dictates the rules of everyday life.

The predominance of the economy over politics has reduced democracy to a formal ceremony, in which the leading role is played by the interests of the corporations. The greatest attention is paid to the maintenance of the machine of capitalism, to prevent it from breaking down. The central point of everything is not man, but rather the survival of the system. So, in the era of biopolitics, life is, if not a marginal matter, at least of secondary importance.

DQ. DemoKino continues your collaboration with Antonio Caronia, with whom you have been working since Problemarket. Where does such harmony come from and why did you choose an activist and media theorist to write the screenplay?

DG. The “tuning” between Antonio and I is something that grew over time, through dialogue and the exchange of opinions on various themes, mainly on social issues.

We’ve known each other since the middle of the ‘nineties, from a time when we were both interested in questions regarding the human body in a digital era and new technologies. I read his work *Il Cyborg, saggio sull’uomo artificiale* and later *Archeologie del virtuale*. Both books amazed me, not only with their content, but also

with their clarity and synthesis. When I began to work on DemoKino, I chose Caronia as screen writer, because I knew I could expect a precise, clear and analytical work. I knew Antonio was acquainted with the themes I wished to deal with, precisely because he is personally committed as activist.

It was at that time, during the first European social forum in Florence, that SocialPress was being founded, a daily with independent funding and production, co-founded with Antonio.

The publication deals with issues that are subject to political debate, through the testimonies of social networks, communities and individuals taking part in “the movement of all movements”. Antonio forwarded copies of the daily to me, finally convincing me that he would be the perfect screenwriter for DemoKino. I contacted him and we met in Milan. The project was already well-defined in form, but some radical decisions had to be made in content. We drew up a list of possible subjects and then proceeded to decide on the final eight.

This form of collaboration turned out as an intellectually very fruitful experience for both sides. I think it's very stimulating to create a “space of interference”, a zone of inter-action of dialogue and action between individuals, specialized and active in various fields.