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The Expanded Enquiry
Reflections on an Interdisciplinary Approach Between Anthropology and Multimedia

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Foreword

We will begin this brief, four-handed reflection with the possibility that a specific and innovative interdisciplinary approach can open up in the sphere of research on the environment in general and the Venice Lagoon in particular. The complex reality of the lagoon, one of the most studied inland waters in the world and now also affected by globalisation, requires new perspectives capable of studying an environment that is rapidly changing from many points of view: from the landscape to the transformation of traditional crafts (many of which, no longer necessary, are being lost), from the phenomenon of over-tourism to ecosystems in crisis and the age-old issue of high tides, to list just the best known phenomena. In order to understand how to analyse these sudden socio-cultural and ecological evolutions and their consequences on people's daily lives, we will attempt to intertwine the methodology of anthropological research with the opportunities offered by filmmaking. Anthropology, which lends its voice to people by collecting their testimonies, intertwined with new film and multimedia techniques (Figs. 1–3), can build a new approach to investigation. Starting from the already well-established tradition of visual anthropology, we will also try to reflect upon ways of exploring the deepest and most emotional dimensions of the human soul. These are intimate aspects and, therefore, difficult to collect and convey. It is in the process of unveiling them that the sensitivity of artistic expression can help us.

Before venturing into interdisciplinary encounters, it is necessary to clearly explain what we are referring to when we talk about anthropology, filmmaking and multimedia, and art. If the basic concept of anthropology – that is a recent discipline mainly concerned with investigating the facets and peculiarities of and differences between the various human cultures – is now more or less clear to everyone, it may be harder to define a concept that is accepted by most people and sometimes taken for granted in the case of art and its products. In reality, our definition of 'art' often takes on a polysemic character, depending on who is looking at or practicing it. The best-known genres of art are painting, sculpture, drawing, dance, theatre, music and literature, as well as film, photography and mass media production. Oral narrative forms, festivals and celebrations can also be regarded as forms of artistic expression. These are now joined by the many objects, activities and products of our cultural heritage[1] that are beginning to take on patrimonial value thanks to their rediscovery by the curious and by enthusiasts (but sometimes also by those whose aims are more oriented towards business than appreciation).

Without dwelling too much on aspects that deserve more than this brief discussion, we will limit ourselves to providing a short description of what art means for anthropological scholars. We will use the definition of Alexander Alland who, based on the premise of a playful activity that is widespread throughout the world, explains that, unlike freely conducted play, art is limited by rules and the observation of pre-established forms, without whose guidance we would be unable to assess its value and mastery. In practice, Alland defines art as 'playing with form, which produces some aesthetically successful transformation-representation'.[2] Today, this 'playing' avails itself of new means such as filmmaking or multimedia tools. The latter are exemplified by interactive website-based documentaries,[3] which enable us to share a plurality of material, from audio-visual to textual, organised together thanks

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1   Vianello Rita: The MOSE Machine. An anthropological approach to the building of a flood safeguard project in the Venetian Lagoon. In: SHIMA -The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures, Vol. 15. 2023. p. 168–194.

2   Alland Alexander: The Artistic Animal: An Inquiry into the Biological Roots of Art. New York 1977. p. 39.

3   Calogero Lucilla: Documentario interattivo. Design e spazio del reale espanso. Milan 2020.

to the graphic interface of the platform and also, often, by users themselves with the help of the possibilities of interaction offered by the network.

Fig. 1: Screenshot from the metagoon.net page, where users can display their selected video and generate the interviews transcriptions booklet, 2024.
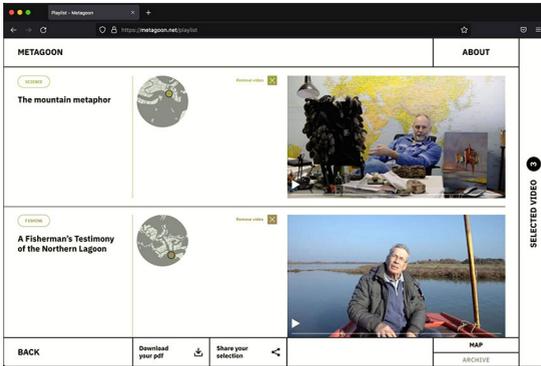
Courtesy of Matteo Stocco

Fig. 2: 3D rendering of the immersive interactive installation, Interreg ITA-HR project 'Arca Adriatica', exhibited at the National Museum of Maritime Archaeology in Caorle (Venice).

Courtesy of Rita Vianello

Fig. 3: Documentation image with the public of the immersive inter-active installation 'Arca Adriatica'. On this side of the installation, visitors can interact with a digital archive composed of archival im-ages and interviews. Caorle Museum.

Courtesy of Rita Vianello

A Chance Encounter

Bruno was a fisherman from the island of Burano, whom Matteo Stocco met in 2015.[4] Due to his advanced age, Bruno could unfortunately no longer practise his passion, and limited himself to preserving and keeping in order the tools of the trade that he had collected throughout his life. From an early age, he had dreamt of being able to go fishing every day with his father. Unfortunately, the precariousness of those times, the mid-1950s, and the meagre earnings offered by small-scale fishing, together with a large family, saw him forced to fall back on work in the glassworks on the nearby island of Murano.

He was a kind man and very willing to meet strangers (in Venetian parlance, foreigners), especially as this meant that he could spend a large part of his precious time, which was as precious as only the time of the elderly can be, sharing his stories and his vast knowledge of the world of fishing. Matteo then began

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4   Matteo met Bruno in December 2015, they started their first shoots together that month and completed them in January 2016.

to take his first steps as an artist in the shape of his lagoon explorations, collecting notes through interviews that would later become a fundamental part of the *Metagoon*[5] platform archive (Fig. 1).

Fig. 4: Still image from an interview filmed by Matteo Stocco with Bruno Polesel in January 2016, in front of the island of Torcello.

Courtesy of Matteo Stocco

Matteo was able to make contact with Bruno (Fig. 4) thanks to a series of chance acquaintances. The most important of these was a woman who was working as a gondolier and had long been convinced that someone had to interview Bruno before it was too late. And so it happened: Bruno decided to open the doors of his very secret warehouse on Murano (Fig. 5) in order to leave a testimony of a world that was disappearing, before he also disappeared, taking his precious testimony with him. Thanks to Bruno, it can be said that Matteo's

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5   *Metagoon* is a tool for observing and investigating the Venice Lagoon. The project, which started in 2015 and is still in the process of expansion and development, consists of a website, on which films and interviews investigating the varied and complex aspects of the Venice Lagoon and the communities that inhabit it are archived. Users can navigate freely through the archive and trace a personal path through the testimonies and audio-visual documents, in order to build their own perception of the lagoon environment. https://www.metagoon.net

artistic research met anthropology. This encounter made it possible to understand the importance of being able to record and recount certain voices, the voices of those who, like him, can tell the story of a life lived in close contact with a complex ecosystem and its interactions (even with non-humans). Such lives shape history, albeit in a minor, intimate way, and their stories should be listened to and told.

In Matteo's then young career, several other interviews had preceded the one with Bruno, in other contexts and for other projects. It was felt that he had mastered the way of working and dealing with content in his investigations. But the meeting with Bruno had a different weight. Matteo felt the responsibility that this man was entrusting to him and, at the same time, the value of his testimony.

From that moment on, a long series of interviews began, aimed at not only documenting but also at establishing a kind of relationship, a less superficial and more intimate, emotional bond with the people interviewed. About a hundred interviews were independently carried out over nine years, but a persistent doubt kept creeping in: The results were certainly satisfactory, but they were still the outcome of a method developed by a self-taught researcher who had no knowledge of proper scientific methodological bases. There was a need for a comparison with someone who, in their career, had already widely applied the anthropological research methodology of the interview and the video interview in the lagoon area. In our story, it was art, moved by a desire for enrichment and exploration, which sought the contribution of anthropology. And, once again, fate guided the encounter: During an interview at the *Hydrobiological Station D'Ancona* of the *University of Padua* in Chioggia in January 2023, Alberto Barausse[6] suggested that we contact Rita Vianello,[7] a cultural anthropologist who had been researching the socio-cultural, environmental and cultural dynamics of the Venice Lagoon for many years.

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6   Associate Professor of Marine Biology at the *Department of Biology* in Padua.

7   Researcher at the *Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures and Cultures* at the *University of Bergamo*.

Fig. 5: Still from an interview filmed by Matteo Stocco with Bruno Polesel in his Murano warehouse in November 2015.

Courtesy of Matteo Stocco

It is from this encounter that our lagoon reflection was born, the testimony of a series of conversations dedicated to confrontation, to examining reciprocal methodologies, to the search for connections, but, above all, to outlining and understanding the possibilities of further developing the work carried out so far. Hence, this text is meant to be not just a single testimony but, rather, a sort of conciliatory gesture, in which we hope that our paths, as well as the paths of other artists and anthropologists around the world, can beneficially intertwine again, recording new stories and bringing new emotions to light.

Interdisciplinary Dialogues. We, the Other and the Image

Matteo Stocco: Given your experience in the Venice Lagoon, have you ever found yourself adapting your approach to interviewing according to different contexts?

Rita Vianello: The starting point is always vague, we have a topic in mind and we begin by trying to obtain some initial information about it from the person we are interviewing – the person who, for us, is the expert on the subject. As a result of these initial answers, curiosity arises and new discoveries are made,

and all this leads to further questions, in more and more depth and more and more detail. It is the chain built with these different discoveries that allows you to develop the investigation. I think it is a bit like painting a kind of landscape on canvas, or a drawing, which is enriched with various elements. I have the idea of representing, for example, a navy, and I have to make it visible to others. I do this with words. Interviews don't always seem interesting to us initially because people, as we all do when we talk, can ramble on, they often tell us their impressions, their emotions and feelings. It is as if they are painting a mental, imaginary canvas for us. As an experience, this can sometimes become very intimate, almost touching. Then, of course, it depends on personal sensitivity, professional ethics, and it is always up to us to be discerning so that we don't disappoint those who offer us their trust and their time. My personal experience is that when we deal, for example, with environmental issues, it is precisely the information extrapolated between the lines of the interviews that often provides us with one of the main tools that helps us to read and interpret the environmental and landscape context in which the interviewees live and work.

MS: What value does image have for you in the interviews you conduct?

RV: Fundamental, its power is fundamental. Otherwise everything remains suspended in an abstract dimension. If we want to understand, for example, a trade – i.e. how it is carried out, what it is used for, where it developed and why, how it has changed over the years, and so on – it is important to show the workplaces. By talking about workplaces we can take pictures, but for us anthropologists, and for those who study trades in particular, there is a very difficult aspect to deal with. This terrible moment arises when our interlocutor describes the different working phases of their trade. Let us take a practical example in order to simplify this. When a fisherman explains how to tie what for him is a trivial knot in a fishing net, if he does it orally he usually fails (and, in my opinion, no one would succeed) because it is too difficult to describe the individual steps. As the anthropologist Giulio Angioni (1984), who worked extensively on learning trades in the last century, taught us, people generally tend to show how it is done with gestures because it is much easier. But gestures are also too fast for us and have been made mechanical by the habit of repeating them. This is where the role of the video image demonstrates all its value. Being able to film with a camera, to firstly understand and then disseminate, show tools and show them being used, is a great help. For example, in the world of

craftsmanship in the lagoon, if I write about the *sesti* (a template used to build boats),[8] which is still used today in the local shipbuilding industry, I can describe this tool in ten pages and still be unable to make someone understand what it is. But I only need to insert an image, or even better a video, in which I show it being used, and that's that. This is very useful for helping people to understand: not only us or enthusiasts but also, and above all, ordinary people, young people. I am convinced that a well-constructed video product can help make something attractive and interesting that, on the written page, would probably seem deadly boring. It would do a lot to help disseminate the results of research. And if the product not only turns out to be a quality production, but also adds an artistic dimension, this would be best. Being able to savour the light and emotions connected to places, gestures and people, for example, would be very enriching. Bearing this in mind, I will allow myself to offer a small criticism of the numerous ethnographic museums that are scattered throughout our territory. Today, practically every mountain village in Italy has its own small museum (think of the new realm of mountain holidays for families that has developed in South Tyrol). Upon entering these museums we can observe various objects on display, but how can we tell what their intrinsic value is? Generally, the exhibits are old, used and shabby tools. We can say that they are ugly and, in these contexts, they are very rarely artistic objects. This, however, is not because of any incapacity or ignorance on the part of those who created them, but because of their purpose. These are tools that must, first and foremost, perform their assigned task well; they must be strong, durable and functional. Consequently, when a museum exhibits, for example, an old hoe, what is the value of this object and this exhibition? What process transforms a work object into an object of value (and, for some, almost an artistic piece)? Have we turned it into a heritage object worthy of display because it is now disused and a witness to nostalgic worlds that no longer exist? Is this alone enough to recognise something as part of our heritage? Or would it be more correct if we also understood and shared the enormous wealth of intangible knowledge behind that object? That old scythe or the hoe that we used as an example and that someone certainly made and used. But do we know how it was made, and how it was used? Were there, for example, specialised, perhaps itinerant, craftsmen?

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8   Vianello Rita: Ferrying modernity: evolutions and transformations of the gondolier trade between the 20th and 21st centuries. In: La Ricerca Folklorica. Vol. 74. 2019. p. 145–161.

If we now return to focus on the instruments of the local Venetian shipbuilding industry, we discover a much more complex reality. Consequently, it is also much more difficult to present. A shipwright, a person who builds traditional wooden boats, from the gondola down, does not have an excessively large set of tools, compared, for example, with a carpenter, but these are unique and very special. The value of a gondola or the old oar, or even the special tool used to build it, lies first and foremost in the intangible knowledge that originates upstream and is hidden from our eyes. It is this knowledge that needs to be revealed. It is this range of knowledge that enables a person to use these tools, which are always the same to our eyes but, in reality, always turn out to be different, because every artisan who has used them in the past, uses them now and will use them in future will have to adapt them to their needs and preferences and the little professional secrets that they have perfected over long years of work.

All this long – perhaps too long – discourse is trying to make people understand that the true value of an object must also be shown and that this also applies (but, let it be clear, not only) to its use and its creation, which also 'show' the immaterial knowledge hidden within it. And this brings us back to the role that the image can play in revealing the secret life of objects or crafts.

Do you, as a video maker, agree with this initial thought of mine? And if so, how do you think you could intervene?

MS: I think that the image is fundamental, certainly. From my point of view, the image is almost always a point of arrival, which often starts from a much broader project that not only consists of the action of recording and post-production. I think that the image represents the point of emergence of an integrated system of information that must be organised together according to a narrative logic. Whether it is a short story or someone's personal history or the explanation of a fishing technique, the audio-visual product that is to be published will always be the result of a series of considerations, needs, meetings and research objectives that are planned beforehand and aimed at placing that specific product in a constellation of other elements, with which it will have to come into contact. Let me try to explain myself in a more concrete way: The various interviews that I collected on my platform were created for the development of science fiction screenplays set in the lagoon. In fact, I started to contact a series of people who could provide me with fundamental information in or-

der to investigate themes linked to the Venice Lagoon that would later help me in the writing of some screenplays for short science fiction films. Reviewing the testimonies collected, however, I realised that their evocative power could not just be shared and sublimated into fictional texts. This consideration led me to develop a web interface that could connect them together, potentially generating a single great story thanks to the interaction between the user and the graphic elements that make up the navigable parts of the web platform.

Now tell me, since you, unlike me, do not plan a script beforehand, how do you conduct an interview if things do not seem to go quite as you had hoped?

RV: This happens very often, especially when you talk to older people, to people who are often almost incredulous that you have an interest in their profession, their knowledge. In fact, you could almost say that they often interview me in turn, asking me why I do it, who I am, what my job is and things like that. In specific cases, a certain feeling of mistrust can emerge because many professions perceive themselves as outsiders. When you can offer people the opportunity to express their voice, the interview turns into an excellent tool of anthropological research. For example, it often happens that fishermen complain about the regulations laid down by politicians, by the world of science. It is as if they feel somewhat oppressed and managed from above, bypassed, so the interview becomes an outlet. And they digress. This is also to be understood as an enrichment, as it allows you to discover aspects that you otherwise would not know about. Even if this is not immediately perceivable as useful for the purposes of our research, it offers us in-depth knowledge of people's socio-cultural context. For the sake of clarity, let me offer a further example: When older people talk about their youth this helps us to conceptualise, because we can interpret the possible presence of a sense of nostalgia for something that has changed, or has not changed at all. Placing the person you are interviewing within the specific context of their life, environment and culture, helps you to really understand who they are and whether what they are telling us is their individual view or can be extended, compared, with the perceptions of others. Just think of the changes that are taking place within the lagoon ecosystem, changes that we observe, that technicians and scientists explain to us and, indeed, that professionals such as local fishermen notice. Obviously, you have to carry out many interviews with different people to understand whether these are personal visions and perceptions that are limited to a few or shared by many. They tell you about transformed places and landscapes

or fish with changed habits. If you do not know that particular place, landscape or fish, it all turns into something abstract. But if the image takes over and helps us, the tale becomes concrete and takes on those real contours that allow us to come closer to understanding it.

To sum up, when we have collected a series of interviews on similar subjects, we have created an archive of testimonies that we can compare with each other. This allows us to identify common lines that are useful for constructing a socio-cultural image of an area: a sort of socio-cultural landscape map that can be superimposed on the physical one. A map that allows us to explore more intimate and personal spheres such as the emotional ties that are created over time with places, people, non-humans and objects, as well as those linked to the sensoriality of smells, sounds and sight. I remember fishermen telling me that when motors were not widespread, there was not all the noise that there is today; the lagoon was silent and you could hear the lapping of the waves breaking on the banks of the canals, before they were all covered in stone. These are all images that are steeped in sensuality, emotions and memories of places that still exist but are no longer the same.

MS: When you start working on an article, after you have collected the interviews, how do you relate to the images?

RV: I usually use photos, either archival or taken by myself. But there is still a gap. Since it is a written text I can only use images, photographs or drawings, but all the footage and video material collected in the field, which many of us anthropologists use, will be missing. This is where multidisciplinary cooperation with your field might come into play. We could connect more content and thus avoid potential loss. Furthermore, while an article, especially an academic one, circulates only in certain contexts, the possibility of developing videos or clips, something visual and more immediate, would help me to not only disseminate the results, but also sensitise more people, especially young people, to the most pressing issues of our times, such as environmental issues. The image, or video, is more striking than the written word. I am not saying that these should replace the written part or the museum exhibition, only that a parallel collaboration should be experienced. Personally, I would like my research to be accompanied by video work whenever possible. It is one thing to tell about a fisherman but quite another to see a fisherman telling about himself, to see his boat, his house, the place where he lives and works. Even observing the way

he poses, gestures and moves can tell us a lot – about his being and his world. In this sense, the cross-media part also plays a key role in expressing my point of view.

MS: We came to talk about cross-media communication, about the potential that technology has today and, therefore, the multidisciplinarity with which we can publish research. Here, the web potentially becomes one of the main means through which your work could find a great platform, from the possibility of publishing texts, to the presence of images, audio visuals and audio recordings.

RV: I am convinced that the cross-media approach has great latent potential. What needs to be understood is how best to work across media and use this potential. But I think that this is more your area, so I will leave the final thoughts and conclusions to you…

Conclusions: The *Metagoon Manifesto*

I would like to focus my reflection on Rita's statement on the 'sector'. I think we should imagine an approach to research that is as participative as possible and capable of enhancing disciplinary, academic and professional differences in a dialogue-based perspective, where each and every one of us contributes to the orchestration of research by aiming to 'shape' it in a way that is the fruit of our common work. In fact, going beyond the cross-media approach, I think that there should be a multi-disciplinary thrust that is aimed at bringing together researchers willing to share their cultural and experiential backgrounds in order to deepen a research subject and publish its results through a complex multimedia product. Let me use Rita's example of the ethnographic museum: I really appreciated how she noted the need to exploit another tool, namely video, in order to be able to best narrate an artefact on display. This reflection says a lot to me about the need for several disciplines to come into contact, to contaminate each other, and there are actually already processes that reflect in this direction, towards the need to collaborate with other professionals and disciplines in order to achieve a common goal. And those who do the theoretical work have to take into account the suggestions of those who do the formal work: For example, suppose that we have to develop a platform similar to *Metagoon*. We will need to create a working group, let us say a constituent one with

the necessary skills to carry out the complex and profound mapping of a place. This means we will need an anthropologist, a person representing the world of science, a professional from the world of visual communication and data visualisation, an expert in the web-based development of complex interactive platforms and, finally, a professional in the field of documentary video and photography and perhaps, if available, an artist. Obviously, the working group could be expanded, but it is enough for the moment for us to know that other figures could (and perhaps should) be added. Now let me hypothesise a working scenario: I imagine that the anthropologist will talk to the video maker about how to set up an interview, while the video maker will talk to the anthropologist about how to approach a person to be interviewed and perhaps they will work together drafting questions. The marine ecosystem scientist will guide the designer in charge of graphics (and thus data visualisation) in line with settings that will not 'alter the scientific purity' of the shared data. At the same time, the entire team of researchers, being well aware of the communication needs inherent in the discipline of visual communication, will dialogue with the person who will develop the web interface (if there is a web platform). The latter figure would consequently assume the role of mediator and translator between the different disciplines. The ultimate goal, in my personal opinion, will be to collectively manage the construction of the end-user experience. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to bear in mind how this user will benefit from the information shared within the multimedia product and to constantly address the interaction modalities between different disciplines, especially in the design of research that aims to disseminate complex subjects to a general public.

It is therefore necessary to lay the foundations for usefully reflecting on how to build a working methodology, guidelines that interdisciplinary working groups can follow in order to share common horizons of thought, action and, not least, intent. Everything must always be the fruit of shared reflection and respect for the protocols necessary for the success of the project.

This is why I have been thinking for some time about working on a publication: the *Metagoon Manifesto*, a series of articles generated by the synergetic work of

an inter- and multidisciplinary team.[9] The objective is to consider several scenarios, both past and future, which allow us to reflect on the identification of a series of shared axioms in order to translate these into concrete actions.

To finish, I would like the experience gained in recent years with *Metagoon* to serve as a starting point for colleagues and for all those interested in experimenting with new research approaches. Through critical reflection on what has been done so far, I would like to identify a methodology that can be easily repeated. By giving space to anyone who wants to collaborate in the expansion of the platform's contents, in line with the available means and resources, *Metagoon's* experience can be useful and independently replicable in other contexts and places and by other researchers and filmmakers.[10]

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9   For example, a team composed of experts in the fields of participatory design, documentary video, web design, information design, anthropology, sociology and ecosystem science

10   Other important references consulted for this text include:
Angioni Giulio (ed.): Il lavoro e le sue rappresentazioni. In: La Ricerca folklorica, no. 9. 1984. https://www.jstor.org/stable/i264908.
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