

The *Sudwestern Saga*: Live Media and Modular Narratives Between *Commedia dell'Arte* and Digital Hypertexts

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Introduction: the problem with 'live media'

The practice of 'live media' has become increasingly important in the last decade. After experimenting with the various aesthetic and conceptual aspects of interactive devices, computer and web technologies, artists realised that the use of digital media in a 'theatrical situation'¹ could attract a larger public and generate interesting new cultural genres.

Live media include all kinds of 'mediatized' traditional forms of performance (theatre, concerts, live shows where digital technologies play a fundamental role) and all kinds of 'performatized' media practices (film, web streaming, TV in a performative situation). Live media, thus, generated new cultural forms (VJ-ing, multimedia performances, etc.), but also transformed or hybridised traditional forms.

The complexity of the 'mediatizing process' and the high level of 'hybridism' in the generated languages, contents and contexts have inspired a debate on **how to define and describe** those new forms of theatre.

In order to elaborate a specific vocabulary and theoretical tools for live media within new media studies, it is necessary to distinguish between '**technology**', '**medium**', '**cultural function**' and '**social field**', four concepts that introduce four different 'points of view' on live media and on all cultural forms in general.

My case study will focus on a group of live media performances called '**The Sudwestern Saga**', by the Portuguese artist Edgar Pêra, that does not fit completely within traditional performance genres nor in new media genres (like VJ-ing and electronic audio-visual performances). The performance (defined by the artist as 'cine-concert') makes use of several media and languages (cinema, theatre, digital video, music), but it is the '**theatrical hypermedium**' that **determines the general narrative structure and the function of new media inside it**.

For this reason, I chose as a useful term of comparison an 'old theatre genre', the *commedia dell'arte*, a genre which shares with Pêra's work the 'modularity' of storytelling and a certain kind of 'popular aesthetics'. From this comparison it emerges that '**mediatized theatre**' **functions as ideal feeding ground for new forms of 'modular' narratives**.

It is beyond the scope of this article to account for the complex debate on new media, liveness and narrativity. Nevertheless, I will try to underline the importance of theatre as *hypermedium*, as a 'place' where 'intermediality' (the 'on stage' relationship between different media) takes place and influences our ways of telling stories and creating cultural identity.

¹ I distinguish 'theatrical performance' from 'performance' in general. Theatre is a cultural form based on four main elements: text, performer, audience, theatre space. Performance is 'every action which produces meaning' in all kinds of cultural forms (reading a book or playing a game are performative actions). In this article I use the word performance and theatre as synonymous with 'theatrical performance'.

1 The Sudwestern Saga: movies, myths, music and mix

1.1 The Sudwestern Saga: the myth

The Sudwestern Saga is a series of performances directed by the Portuguese 'cine-artist' Edgar Pêra. By means of live music and video, the artist develops stories inspired by the culture of *fado* and by the Western film genre. Pêra combines these two 'popular epics', believing that *fado* (traditional Portuguese music) shares with the **Western stories** a certain atmosphere, a certain attitude towards life. "Cowboys, just like *fado* people, are solitary and always getting into fights". He sees "the southwest of Europe as a resistance point, a bit like Asterix, as a corner in Europe where there are small instances where the popular culture survives. It is that confrontation with today that interested me. All these popular historical references; to take them and to put them face to face with contemporaneous acting, or at least, with a kind of burlesque acting and a kind of mute *fado*. To turn the *fado*'s 'sobs' into laughs. *Fado* are emotions in its primitive stage. Not only sadness but also another type of emotions..."²

The Saga represents a 'parallel universe', a place where authenticity and primitive feelings survive. The 'Sudwestern' is Portugal, the last frontier where cowboys came in the XIX century and lived the same kind of life as *fado* singers, joining the scum of society, telling stories of misfortune ('bad *fado*' means 'bad fate', 'bad karma'). Resistance (against modernisation without culture?), travel as a philosophy of life and nostalgia for a lost authenticity³ are the leitmotifs of their adventures.

1.2 The Western-fado filmzzz

The 'story' of the Sudwestern Saga was first developed in a video work called *Guitarra com gente lá dentro* (2003), realized for the exhibition *Movimentos perpetuos*. On this occasion "Portuguese artists were invited to create original pieces inspired in the work and life of Carlos Paredes", a famous *fado* musician. The 'film' starts in the theatre where Paredes, "legendary Portuguese guitar hero, rehearses for a concert with Madreus"⁴. The legends of *fado* and the spirit of the music immediately call up associations with another myth, that of the West, 'embodied' in the media through which it was shaped and spread all over the world: cinema and comics (the artist proclaims to be a "lover of Musik & Freedom (and Komix!!)").

Re-interpreting the language of the Western film genre, the early Western in particular, Pêra tells the story of a group of cowboys who came to Portugal as 'poor immigrants' and struggled to survive on the streets of Lisbon. The Portuguese capital is transformed into a Western movie set, with its small streets and its saloons. Portugal is represented as a land of immigrants (as America was in the Western), where the rules are made by guns and the emotions are primitive.

In the movie, the 'true hero' and other characters play short episodes, linked with each other in an associative and intuitive way, assembled like 'interchangeable modules' (some titles: Europa Southwest, Saloon Fadista, Unemployed & Hopeless, Delicate Lives, Stage-coach Robbery, Lynch au Espichel, Female *Fado*). The episodes describe scenes and happenings from the *fado*-Western life, with cowboys attacking trains (in this case the Lisbon tramway!), robbing

² Interview with Edgar Pêra in the World Wide Video Festival 2004 catalogue on CD-rom.

³ For the concept of 'nostalgia' in Western films, see Nanna Verhoeff, *After the Beginning: Western Before 1915* (forthcoming, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, fall 2005).

⁴ Quotes from the video *Guitarra come Gente lá dentro*.

undefended women to make a living in difficult times, fighting in the saloon. The episodes are scenes of love and jealousy, fights and rivalries. The *Western-fado filmzzz* is an assemblage of 'loose gags' and always ends with the death of one or all characters. The movie is released in several 're-mixes', with different 'sequences of episodes', depending on the context within which it is presented as a movie.

1.3 The Sudwestern performancezzz

Each Sudwestern Saga performance develops a **particular version of the story**, using episodes from different remixes and creating a new sequence that does not correspond to that of a particular movie-remix. The musicians and the actors play always the same role (in the films and in the performances), but not all of them are necessarily present on stage. There are editions with only two performers, like the one at the Video Village festival in Milan, and versions where the complete troupe participates, like that at the World Wide Video Festival in Amsterdam.

The musicians are the group DEAD COMBO: Antonio Antunes (Tó Trips), Carla Bolito (Zevera, The Woman From Nevada), Miguel Borges (Mik the Kid), Johnny Gomez (The True Hero). The 'guest cine-stars' are: Marina Albuquerque (A Vúva da Atalaia), Lavínia Moreira (Kacilda), António Alcântara (Kid Beans), João Dias (Pasolinero Del Diablo) Teresa Meireles (Wretched Girl).

While the actors and the musicians are 'playing' (the story is not 'spoken', the episodes are acted by means of pantomime and songs), Edgar Pêra mixes images from different sources: real time images of the performers and public; images shot one or two days before in the city where the show is presented; episodes from the *fado*-Western movie; archive images (tapes related to the *fado*-Western theme, images from other cities where the group travelled⁵).

This kind of improvisation could be compared to that of a jazz band. "There is a map of sequences for the actors and the VJ. A road with one direction and multiple ways of getting there"⁶. Most of the times the music leads, but other times a particular episode/action starts on the screen and passes to the stage, or vice-versa, from the stage to the screen. As in a jazz band, the instruments play together, alternating the leads and the solos without following rigid rules.

The 'mute cinema of *fado*' comes to life again every time it is played live and is influenced by the context where the performance is staged⁷.

Like the Carnival, the Saga crosses the borders between real life and theatre. The myth lives also 'off-stage', when the actors wear their 'masks' (a hat, a jacket, a guitar) and 'perform' on the streets of the places they visit. "The Sudwestern Saga is shot in almost every place I go – says Pêra – also when it is not performed in a theatre. I only need a hat. The AmeriKan Kowboy is All Over The World"⁸.

The tension between 'kaos and kontrol', coincidence and fate generates the endless and cyclical movement of life. This cyclical movement through time and space is 'represented' and 'empowered' by art. "Everybody dies on stage. They stab themselves whilst singing. The end is always a celebration of Acting and surviving Death through 'Art-Actions'"⁹.

⁵ Lisbon, Amsterdam, Beijing and Milan.

⁶ Interview with Edgar Pêra, 1 April 2005.

⁷ <http://www.art-u.it/Perform.htm>

⁸ Interview with Edgar Pêra, 1 April 2005.

⁹ Interview with Edgar Pêra, 1 April 2005.

2 Names are the (broken) mirror of things

Every time a new cultural form is created, it takes some time to define it and give it a place in the history of culture. This history is made up of ‘traditions’ and ‘genres’ based on a particular technology, cultural function or social context. In the last two centuries new technologies played an important role in the birth of new ‘media’ like cinema, television, the Internet, etc. But the ‘technological’ aspect is not always the only or the most important element in shaping the identity of a cultural form. Some cultural forms and functions, such as narratives, music, virtual spaces, etc., are ‘cross-medial’. ‘Genres’ like the comedy, the ‘detective fiction’, the romance, even if born within a particular medium (in literature, theatre, film), are ‘transmedial’.

In order to **describe the relationship between medium and narrative**, it is necessary to define the **different elements which play a role in this relationship**: the technology, the medium’s identity, the cultural function and the social field.

‘**Technology**’ indicates a group of techniques and devices having in common certain functions or features (digital technology, for instance, includes all devices that can read, write, or store information that is represented in numerical form).

‘**Medium**’ as ‘means’ for transmitting cultural content is based on a technology, but its identity is influenced by the *dispositif*¹⁰, or ‘apparatus’, that is the mode of address, the positioning of the spectator/reader (for instance the ‘screening situation’ in cinema), the cultural function and the social field(s) within which it operates.

In Pierre Bourdieu’s model of analysis of social phenomena, the ‘**field**’ is a structured social space with its own laws of functioning and its own relations of force. It has its internal dynamics, but it is also related to other social fields. Inside the field of cultural production agents compete for symbolic power, and the conflict between the orthodoxy and the challenge of new modes of cultural practice manifests itself as ‘position-takings’, which may refer to both internal (e.g. stylistic) and external (e.g. political) positioning. At the social level, the systems of production and distribution, the critical discourses and the artistic products relate to each other following dynamics which are internal to the field. These dynamics, though, can be influenced or modified by other fields like the field of economy, of power, etc.¹¹

‘**Cultural functions**’ are narratives, information, game, education, entertainment, etc.

The identity of a cultural form, thus, and the way we name it, results from the positioning and the relationships between the four elements mentioned above.

Film, for instance, is a cultural form named by a technology, but the ‘genres’ within it can be defined by the cultural function (‘comedy’ refers to a certain kind of narrative, thus to a cultural function), by the *dispositif* (‘experimental cinema’ presents ways of addressing the audience different from those of classic cinema), by the social field (‘independent film’ refers to film produced by ‘independent’ production companies). All those ‘vantage points’ together constitute the identity of film as a medium.

The Sudwestern Saga is described as ‘cine-concert’. ‘Cine’ indicates the predominant role of the film medium in the choice of the visual language and of the ‘screening *dispositif*’, ‘concert’ indicates the presence of musicians on stage, thus the theatre as medium. The title ‘Sudwestern Saga’, though, refers not to a medium, but to the popular narratives of the Western and to the fact that these narratives are organised as a ‘Saga’, that is an ‘open story’, developing in ‘real time’ and dealing with the myths and legends of a certain community.

¹⁰ For the concept of *dispositif* see Frank Kessler, *Notes on ‘dispositif’*, work in progress, version presented at the Utrecht Media Research Seminar in August 2004, University of Utrecht, The Netherlands.

¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

The reference to open and popular narratives in the name of Pêra's work triggered the comparison with an older form of popular performance, the *commedia dell'arte*.

2.1 Naming cultural forms by the medium, the cultural function and the social field

The *commedia dell'arte* is a theatre genre born in Italy in the mid-16th century. It was called by different names, each of them pointing to different aspects of this genre which could describe it and distinguish it from other forms of theatre and 'entertainment'.

In the first decades the *commedia dell'arte* was "known as 'improvised comedy' (*commedia improvvisa*), 'comedy by subject' (*a soggetto*) or 'off the cuff' (*a braccia*) from the technique of the comedians who improvised their sallies on the basis of a scenario or *canovaccio*..."¹² These terms emphasize acting and performance rather than the literary text. The narrative structure (cultural function and *dispositif*) and the performing techniques were the most important features in this new genre. Nevertheless, the term 'commedia', I would argue, indicates the influence of the classic comedy, and thus the profane and literary character (rooted in Renaissance culture) of the new genre as opposed to the two main forms of theatre in the Middle Ages: the *sacre rappresentazioni* (religious theatre) and court entertainment (the *buffoni*, stand-up performers).

"The term '*commedia dell'arte*' can be traced to the eighteenth century... In the medieval and Renaissance period, an 'arte' was an economic and political corporation organized by one of various crafts of profession"¹³. This term denotes that the actors were organized into professional companies to perform not merely on religious and political festival occasions, but all year round for their principal livelihood. The genre is thus named by the social field within which it operates. The bourgeois culture and context were indeed very important in shaping the identity of the *commedia dell'arte*. In the 16th century theatre became a secular form of entertainment again, for a bourgeois public, dealing with bourgeois issues, with its own professional status and place (the building called 'theatre') and its own 'commercial' production system.

Modern forms of '**mediatized performance**' have undergone a similar process of shaping identity through the debate on names and definitions. It was easier to find an appropriate definition when new media were totally integrated in older forms and aesthetics. It became much more problematic when the new cultural forms involved new or hybrid production contexts, contents, displaying and viewing patterns.

Multimedia performances described as 'VJ-ing', for instance, are directly inspired by DJ sets for the techniques used, the aesthetic qualities and the context of presentation. 'Video settings' in theatre plays and in rock-pop concerts do not have a 'separate identity' and name, since they do not change radically the technology, the *dispositif* or the social field of the 'hosting forms', but just 'add' cinematographic or 'mediatic' features to those old media.

When the aspect of technological experimentation is predominant, both on a technical and on a theoretical level, the performance is included in the field of new media arts and labelled as '**live media**'. Live media forms, like electronic music concerts with video, multimedia or interactive performance in the tradition of performance art, etc., can be presented in traditional contexts (theatre, concerts, clubs), but they also developed their own circuit in media arts and electronic music festivals, that is, in the field of new media arts¹⁴.

¹² Giacomo Oreglia, *The Commedia dell'Arte* (London: Methuen & Co LTD, 1968), 1.

¹³ Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5.

¹⁴ Some examples are the Sonar festival in Spain, the Toonfestival and the Sonic Acts festivals in The Netherlands, new media art festivals like Ars Electronica, Transmediale, Deaf festival, etc.

Some media art makers and critics call some of these forms ‘**live cinema**’. This definition refers not to the traditional ‘cinema effect’ (realistic moving images telling a linear story, shown in a ‘passive’ viewing situation) described by Metz¹⁵, but to a different ‘cinematic *dispositif*’ of screening and spectatorship patterns (suggested by the word ‘live’). The term ‘cinema’ is used here in a very broad sense, as a synonym of ‘moving image’, referring to experimental forms of screening, visual language and contents¹⁶. This definition stresses the similarities with film practices, especially the presence of big screen projections, but neglects the contribution of video and TV to the elaboration of various *dispositifs*, visual languages and narrative structures.

Both ‘live media’ and ‘live cinema’ are broad definitions which do account for the ‘theatrical *dispositif*’ and the presence of ‘media’ within it (the term media refers mostly to electronic and digital media) but do not indicate the cultural function and the context of presentation.

Actually, these terms are used in the **field of new media art** (the complete name should be ‘live media arts’) and indicate works dealing with the aesthetic aspects of digital media¹⁷.

Edgar Pêra’s work can be included in the broad category of live media. The particular structure of the Saga, though, where different media (cinema, theatre, digital media) produce a particular kind of narrative, can be better explained through the confrontation with the *commedia dell’arte* rather than with other forms of live media.

3 Modular narratives

‘Narrative’ and ‘story’ are very complex concepts. Different definitions have been given, and the issue of what is narrative and what is not is too broad to be discussed here. I will agree on a narrow definition of narrative as a particular textual structure that is functional to my case study. According to Wanda Rulewicz:

A text is a semantically coherent whole which may be presented as a surface structure either in natural language (as was the case with the traditional notion), or in any of the sign systems used by mankind... Narrative grammars are only part of text grammars, narrative structures not being the necessary condition for the existence of a text... Nevertheless, these grammars furnish an instrument to analyse the great part of our literary and theatrical heritage which is based on the principle of narration, including ‘characters’ and their actions.¹⁸

A text, thus, is not necessarily narrative. According to Mieke Bal, a cultural object is narrative if it contains an actor and a narrator, is organised in three levels, the text, the story and the fabula, and if the ‘content’ is a “series of connected events caused or experienced by actors”¹⁹.

¹⁵ C. Metz, “Le film de fiction et son spectateur”, *Communications* 23, 1975.

¹⁶ According to the Dutch curator Hans Beekman, “live Cinema” stands for the simultaneous creation of sound and image in real time by sonic and visual artists who collaborate to elaborate concepts on equal terms (<http://www.live-cinema.org>).

¹⁷ In the press release of the Netmage festival, 4th edition (Bologna, 21-24 January, 2004), ‘live media’ are described as “performance practices that use, and integrate, audio-visual devices (digital, electronic, cinematographic, technological, pre technological etc.) to construct an active relationship with the audience... the wide range of instruments and solutions that are used by artists, musicians, technicians and crews from vastly differing starting points: going beyond, though obviously not excluding, the forms of mixing sound and image that are covered by the term VJ-ing... We are aiming for innovation and originality, for forms that reflect the pleasure of risk-taking, a taste for experimentation, originality.”

¹⁸ Wanda Rulewicz, “A Grammar of Narrativity: Algirdas Julien Greimas”, *The Glasgow Review*, Issue 3, Summer 1995, <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/SESL/STELLA/COMET/glasgrev/issue3/rudz.htm>

¹⁹ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 8.

3.1 *The narrative structure of the commedia dell'arte*

Obviously, the performances known as *commedia dell'arte* were narrative texts. The narrative structure of this genre is of a particular kind.

The *commedia dell'arte* was played by organized professional companies that performed improvised drama based on written plots (*scenari*o, *libretto*, *canovaccio*):

The scenario or *canovaccio* (canvas) is a schematic description of the performance; it gives a list of the characters and of the 'props' required, the division into acts and, by the use of brief and stylized instructions, the entries and exits of the characters.

The plots... are developed by the use of the most varied devices: disguises, identifications, misunderstandings, kidnappings, shipwrecks, spells and magic. The central theme is always the loves of the young people, the jealousy and rivalries of the old ones and the intrigues of the *zanni*...²⁰

The plot described in the *canovaccio* was always a variant of the 'universal and eternal' story of a hindered love between two young lovers. The central theme was the love between the young people, opposed by the jealousy and rivalries of the elders, but helped by the intrigues of the *zanni* (servants) and destined to a happy end. Often a generational conflict shaped the plot, with the lover's father (Pantalone or Dottore) providing the blocking agent either for financial motives or because the father has erotic designs of his own.

The *canovaccio* complicated this 'common basic plot' with additional romance plots, sometimes in contrast with the main one, misunderstandings, spells, disguises, plots within plot, etc.

There were thus **three structural levels**: that of an overall structure (the dominant romantic plot), a sub-structural level (the variant of the story described in the *canovaccio*), and the level of particular verbal, musical, or gestural enactments (actors improvised songs, gags, jokes, drawn from repertoires called *zibaldoni*).

For developing the plot in its most basic form **four main characters** were necessary. The characters were 'types' playing conflicts of elementary, 'universal' forces: the servant against his master, the son against the father, the old against the young. Those conflicts triggered the minimum 'action' necessary for generating a story. The four main 'masks' were the old man (Pantalone, il Dottore), the cunning servant (Brighella, Pulcinella, Arlecchino) and the two lovers (the Cavaliere, Isabella, etc.). Those basic characters could 'multiply' and be presented in many variants in the same play (two or more servants, two or more couples of lovers involved in interlacing affairs, etc.), but none of them had an 'historical' or psychological evolution, they were masks without memory and without catharsis²¹.

The fixity of the 'overall structure' (the basic plot of a hindered love, which we could call '**meta-narrative**' or '**matrix narrative**') and the characters contrasts with the variety of the *canovacci*, and with the uniqueness of each performance. The same *canovaccio* was indeed interpreted differently each time it was played (it functioned as a 'second level matrix', a matrix for the single performance), since the actors improvised the dialogues using jokes, gags (*lazzi*) and gestural enactments taken from the *zibaldoni*. The *zibaldoni* were written repertoires, a kind of '**character's data base**' containing all possible words and acts that could belong to a certain character.

The general structure (the three levels together) can be described as '**modular structure**' (and 'modular narrative'), formed by a matrix narrative filled by modules describing situations and

²⁰ Giacomo Oreglia, *ib.*, p. 18.

²¹ Norbert Jonard, *La commedia dell'arte* (Lyon: L'Hermès, 1982), 72-73.

characters, which could be endlessly recombined²². The modularity operates at two levels: the matrix of the overall structure (the romantic plot) was filled by modules-situations (disguises, misunderstandings, kidnappings, etc.) and modules-characters (Pantalone, the Doctor, etc.) forming the *canovaccio*, the second level matrix was filled by the modules-dialogues (jokes, and gags retrieved by the actors from the data base – *zibaldone*).

As we will see, this structure has many similarities with contemporary new media performances and with the so-called ‘aesthetics of the data base’.

The simple plot of the *canovaccio* is each time enriched by ‘interchangeable modules’ (gags, scenes, characters, ‘inserts’ like music, poetry). The gags were not necessarily functional to the development of the storyline. While in a ‘classical’ story each element contributes to the development of the plot, in this kind of narrative the ‘digressions’ are as important as the main story.

3.2 **Modular narrative in the Sudwestern Saga**

The Sudwestern Saga is built on a modular structure similar to that of the *commedia dell’arte*.

The meta-narrative is the ‘Western-*fado* saga’, where the heroes fight for love and survival and die tragically at the end.

The different versions (remixes) of the video and the total corpus of ‘episodes’ are the *canovaccio* (each remix edits a choice of the many episodes realised) and the *zibaldone* where the video artist select the clips he mixes during the performance and the actors find the stories on which they improvise.

The ‘play’ can be performed by two characters (at the Video Village festival, in Milan, there were only two artists performing a ‘duel between camera and guitar’), by more than two or by the complete troupe of ten elements.

3.3 **Modular narrative forms throughout history**

The cultural forms using modular narrative are numerous and various throughout history. Modular narratives probably **originated within oral cultures**. When stories were transmitted orally the storyteller needed a repertoire of phrases, images and episodes which could be easily inserted at any point in the main storyline, to avoid embarrassing silences, to keep the attention and interest of the public high and to adjust the length and tension of the storytelling to the particular circumstances, audiences and context.

Even though the term ‘modular’ indicates a ‘technical’ aspect, my understanding of a modular narrative form is also linked to a specific cultural function (collective and archetypical narratives) and social field (popular culture).

The story told in a modular structure is often a ‘**collective’ product**, showing **archetypical characters, situations and values**. The content is ‘ahistorical’ and the characters have no psychological depth or development. At the same time, the story is more embedded in and influenced by the ‘real life’ of the storyteller and the public (who can often participate in the development of the story). The difference between ‘**real life**’ and ‘**fiction**’ is less clear-cut than in ‘classic narrative’.

Finally, modular narratives are often ‘**transmedial**’ (they can evolve or be transmitted by different media in different ‘viewing and participation settings’).

²² In the on line English dictionary Dictionary.com (<http://dictionary.reference.com>) “modular” means: 1- Of, relating to, or based on a module or modulus. 2- Designed with standardized units or dimensions, as for easy assembly and repair or flexible arrangement and use: *modular furniture; modular homes*.

Examples of modular narratives include oral sagas and epics, fairytales, TV genres like series, sitcoms, reality TV, (video) games, 'theatre genres' like carnival, rituals, etc.

3.4 Performance and modular narrative

Modular narratives are 'open' forms which function better if the public is involved in the creation of the story or 'lives' in the fictional space. For this reason, modular narratives have a privileged relationship with 'performative' media in general and theatre in particular.

The practices of storytelling and theatre (in all its forms, including ritual) were the main means of transmitting stories in pre-literate times, when visual arts as well were meaningful only as part of a ritual or collective event. In performance both the 'maker' and the 'public' work to construct the story in 'real time' (here and now).

Non-performative cultural forms that are structured as 'series' are also often 'modular': in a broad sense, all literary, theatrical and cinematographic genres are modular narratives, because they present variants of the same kind of story. In a more 'restricted' sense, only forms like sitcoms and some TV shows are modular. These forms are not performative, but for the reasons mentioned above (parallelism with the 'real life' of the viewer) they involve the spectator directly in a different way than do 'classic narratives'.

TV for example, is more 'theatrical' than 'cinematic', because of the ontology of liveness, the 'continuous' use of space (while cinema has access to an alogical or discontinuous use of space), the 'programming flow' that follows the daily rhythm of the audience's life²³.

Modular narratives, just because they have a '**participative**' character and are able to build a sense of community, are often linked to performative or participative cultural forms, which seem to be more developed in oral and digital cultures. The term 'modular narrative', indeed, is common in new media studies, where it is sometimes used as synonymous with 'hypertextual narrative'.

4 New Media, modular narrative and performance

4.1 Digital media fostered the development of modular narratives

According to Lev Manovich, in the computer age narratives have been replaced by data bases as the 'dominating form' of human culture. A **data base** is defined in computer science as a "structured collection of data... organized for fast search and retrieval by a computer... Different types of data base - hierarchical, network, relational and object-oriented – use different models to organize data." CD-ROMs and web sites are collections of data ordered in lists, where narrative is just one method, among others, for accessing data. The fact that data are continuously added to a web site, which is thus 'open' and never 'complete', contributes to the **anti-narrative logic of the web**. "In new elements are being added over time, the result is a collection, not a story".²⁴ Manovich seems to set data base and narrative in opposition to each other.

But further on Manovich affirms that data base and narrative are complementary to each other, which he explains through the concept of **algorithm**. In computer games, for instance, the 'tasks' set by the algorithms ('if you shoot, you win') "make[s] the player experience the game as narrative. (...) While computer games do not follow database logic, they appear to be ruled by

²³ Marina Turco, "Changing histories, changing practices. An instance of confrontation between video art and television", *E-View*, no. 2 (2004), <http://comcom.uvt.nl/e-view/04-2/inhoud.htm>, 7-10.

²⁴ Lev Manovich, "Database as a Symbolic Form", in <http://www.manovich.net/>

another logic – that of an algorithm. They demand that a player executes an algorithm in order to win.” Manovich compares algorithms with narrative: “in contrast to most games, most narratives do not require algorithm-like behaviour from their readers. However, narratives and games are similar in that the user, while proceeding through them, must uncover their underlying logic – its algorithm. (...) CD-ROMs, web site and other media objects which are organized as data bases correspond to the data structure; while narratives, including computer games, correspond to the algorithms.”

The concept of algorithm, though, cannot be precisely identified with the concept of narrative. ‘Algorithm’ only indicates the ‘mechanical’ operation, executed mostly by a computer, of retrieving data from a data base and assembling them in a sequence determined by predefined parameters. The concept of narrative is more complex, and Manovich admits this when he adopts Mieke Bal’s definition of narrative, which requires the presence of a text ‘representing’ connected events, and makes this connection (and the presence of a meaning) depend on the activity of a human author, reader, actor, etc.

In Manovich’s view, the importance of the data base in new media and the interaction with algorithmic operations would create a new kind of narrative. “The ‘user’ of the narrative is traversing a data base, following links between its records as established by the data-base creator. An **interactive narrative** (which could also be called ‘**hyper-narrative**’ in an analogy with hypertext) can then be understood as the sum of **multiple trajectories through a data base**. A traditional linear narrative is one, among many other possible trajectories; i.e. a particular choice made within a hypertext.”²⁵

I agree with Manovich that data bases are important elements of modern narratives, because new media allow the ‘**elements out of which the story is constructed**’ (stored in the data base) and the **interface to maintain their separate existence, even while they are working together, connected by a matrix-structure** (which determines which choices the author/reader can make).

If we want to describe this kind of narrative - a text formed by multiple data bases and by an interface that leads the choice through the data base, structuring the sum of these choices as a coherent sequence – independently from the medium used to produce and convey it, the terms interactive and hypertext are not the best options. In my opinion, ‘modular narrative’ better describes this process because it refers only to the organisation of the content (in a matrix-modules structure), while the term ‘interactive’ refers to a certain action, function and position of the reader/actor²⁶.

In fact, the problem of how this kind of narrative influences the concepts of spectator, actor, reader, author, is one of a different level. Modular narratives can ‘activate’ different kinds of authorship and spectatorship, and they are not the product of digital media only.

The opposition between ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ narrative proposed by Manovich thus is not precise enough. I prefer ‘modular narratives’ vs. ‘**classic narrative**’, where the story is not only linear, but represents a ‘complete’ and independent *weltanschauung* proposed by an ‘author’ (separated from the ‘reader’). In ‘classic narratives’, even if the author and the reader refer to meta-stories, models and ‘data bases’ to build up their stories, there is no ‘recognised’ matrix saying how the story should be organised and which kind of data base should be used.

The term ‘**hypertext**’ could be considered a synonym of ‘modular narrative’, but it seems to refer more specifically to computer interfaces, to narratives transmitted by a hypertext. As Jon Dovey argues:

²⁵ Manovich, ib.

²⁶ For an overview on interactive narratives see Chris Hales, “New Paradigms <New Movies: Interactive Film and New Narrative Interfaces”, in *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative*, Martin Rieser & Andrea Zapp editors (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 105-119.

Strictly speaking, ‘hypertext’ refers to works which are made up from discrete units of material, each of which offer the user a number of choices as to which unit is next encountered. That is to say: pieces of text which carry within them paths to other texts. The work itself is made up from discrete bodies of representational content, linked together in a web connection, which the user must navigate.²⁷

Even if we extend the concept of hypertext to non-digital media, it still differs from ‘modular narrative’. Hypertext indicates more a networking, rhizomatic structure, where a hypertext retrieves data and texts from potentially endless other data bases, while in a modular structure the choice of the data bases and the kinds of data (modules which are homologous with each other) are limited.

Mediatized theatre as ideal stage for contemporary modular narratives

Contemporary ‘mediatized performance’ with a narrative content often presents modular structures for two main reasons: digital media allow elements from a data base to be easily and quickly recombined ‘on the fly’ and secondly, in contemporary culture there is a need for participation, social meaning and identity.

With regard to the first reason the data base – interface relationship, typical of digital media, also allows the manipulation and recombination of elements of a data base very easily in a ‘live’ situation. In VJ-ing for example, video clips from a digital data base are combined ‘live’ by a Video Jockey by means of a VJ software. ‘Mixing softwares’ and devices are used in all kinds of performance with video or digital sound.

Edgar Pêra uses no VJ software in his performance, but by connecting analogue and digital video sources to the digital mixer and projector he reduces all video elements to a digital code: the film episodes are transformed into digital modules and reassembled during the performance by the interface mixer-artist. The acting and singing of the actors mirror or induce the video sequences. The second aspect is that of social identity and participation built through theatre. The structure of modular narratives can be successfully combined with a kind of content which re-uses and re-actualises collective values and forms. Think about TV and the film ‘icons’ used by VJs to involve the audience of young people that has grown up with such images and to build through them an ‘age community’.

Theatre as hypermedium allows the artist to combine different media, strengthening the ‘effects’ of each of them in the ‘intermedial’ interaction²⁸. In the case of live media, both the medium theatre - where the performers and the public ‘create’ the story while sharing the same space and time - and the digital media (sampled and real time video mixed by a digital mixer, mixing softwares, etc.) intensify the aspects of participation and interaction.

In fact, modular narrative in a non-theatrical situation can also be participative and popular, like some kinds of virtual communities and online role-playing games. Nevertheless, from an anthropologic and psychological vantage point the physical presence of two or more participants (author, spectator, actor, etc.) in the same space reinforces the feeling of participation and community. Theatre enhances the anthropologic aspect of modular narratives as collective and archetypical narratives (cultural function) and as popular culture (social field).

The Sudwestern Saga draws on the ‘colonisation myths’ of Western societies (the Western film genre) and combines them with the local tradition of *Fado*. This combination of elements from

²⁷ Jon Dovey, “Notes Toward a Hypertextual Theory of Narrative”, in *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative*, Martin Rieser & Andrea Zapp editors (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 135.

²⁸ For the concept of theatre as hypermedium see Chiel Kattenbelt, “Theatre as the Art of The Performer and the Stage of Intermediality”, in *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance* (forthcoming, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005).

different traditions ‘translated’ into popular culture is very strong in the *commedia dell’arte* and in most forms of popular live entertainment as well.

To summarize the results of the comparison between The Sudwestern Saga and the *commedia dell’arte*, we can say that the saga has in common with the old genre the use of the theatrical *dispositif* (theatre as hypermedium), the integration of different media (theatre as acting, music, stage design, etc.), the cultural function (modular, archetypal narratives), and, with all the differences due to the distant historical situation, the field of cultural production (popular and profane theatre).

Conclusion

The question of what kind of narrative emerges from a new media environment is not a simple one. As Manovich notes, even if “the modernist notion of medium specificity (‘every medium should develop its own unique language’) is obsolete, we do expect computer narratives to showcase new aesthetic possibilities.” We expect digital technologies to identify with a certain kind of hypertext, ‘data base’ or ‘video games narratives’.

Nevertheless, even admitting that there is a prevalence of a certain narrative structure in ‘digital culture’, my case study and the huge corpus of comparative media studies indicate that this structure does not account for all cultural forms created by digital media and that some of the characteristics of new media narratives were already present in older media.

Live media sometimes make use of the ‘digital’ data base – interface relationship, but the kind of narrative that results from this operation is determined by different factors: the theatrical hypermedium, the social field, the cultural function and the several aspects of the media involved in the performance.

In this perspective, the Sudwestern Saga can be defined as ‘live media’, but also as ‘participative’ narrative, ‘modular’ narrative, ‘popular theatre’, ‘cine-concert’, etc. Pêra’s work certainly belongs to the field of ‘live media art’, because it is produced and presented in the art context and because it fosters the experimental use of digital media within a performative situation.

Nevertheless, the assonance between the Saga and the *commedia dell’arte* underlines the importance of the theatrical tradition (as narratives and techniques) and of theatre as hypermedium in the definition of this mediatized cultural form. Theatre incorporates cinema and video and adapts these media to serve a narrative structure and participative patterns that are theatrical and televisual rather than cinematographic.

We can say thus that in the case of the Sudwestern Saga the convergence of theatre and digital media generated a cultural form which is at the same time modular, performative, and participative.