

SPECTRES OF MÜNTZER AT SUNRISE

Wu Ming



WU MING undoing the mythmaking + mistakes of Genoa 2001



[This essay was written in the Summer of 2008, to be used as a preface to this collection of Thomas Müntzer's sermons. It is a bitter piece of self-criticism on our "mytho-poetic" politics during the 2000-01 period (roughly from the "Battle of Seattle" to the mayhem in Genoa). It's been circulating widely in Italian and Spanish, but not in English, due to problems that delayed the publication of the book. Many people asked us for it. We decided to post it in four chunks on this blog. This won't harm the book, indeed, our long-time experience with anticipating stuff on the Internet tells us quite the opposite.]

«A few months before the summit we started to write epic texts such as *From the Multitudes of Europe...* (and many more), you know, it was like an edict and it went: "We are the peasants of the Jacquerie... We are the thirty-four thousand men that answered the call of Hans the Piper... We are the serfs, miners, fugitives, and deserters that joined Pugachev's Cossacks to overthrow the autocracy of Russia..." Then we pulled media stunts in order to create expectations for Genoa. An example: on a quiet springtime night, we put placards around the necks of the most visible statues in Bologna (guys like Garibaldi and other nineteenth-century national heroes), with messages encouraging all citizens to go to Genoa [...] We wanted to persuade as many people as possible to go to Genoa, and we ended up convincing as many people as possible to fall into a full-scale police ambush. Demonstrators were assaulted, beaten to a bloody pulp, arrested, even tortured. We didn't expect such mayhem. Nobody did. I regret we were so naïve and caught off-guard, although I think that was a crucial moment for the latest generation of activists. In a way, it was important to be there. That experience has created bonds between a transnational multitude of human beings [...] We'll see the consequences of that "being there" for a long time to come, on a grass roots, extended, long-tailed level.»
- Wu Ming interviewed by Robert P. Baird, *Chicago Review* #52:2/3/4, October 2006

0. A present from the monkeys

It happened one chilly night of March 2001.
It happened in Nurio, state of Michoacán, Mexico, where all the indigenous tribes of the country were gathered to demand an Indian Rights Act. It was the third meeting of the National Indian Congress, largely a creation of the Zapatistas, those media-savvy poetic warriors who had seemingly appeared out of nowhere - out of the depths of time - seven years before. U2 were wrong, sometimes something changes on New Year's Day. Sometimes an army of balaclava-wearing Maya peasants occupy a city and get their message across to millions of people. It occurred in San Cristobal de las Casas, state of Chiapas, Mexico, on the first of January 1994.

NOTES

1. This shouldn't surprise us: Thomas Müntzer was a collateral - but no less important - ancestor of today's Baptists, and many of us have gotten familiar to Baptist rhetoric through the activism of the Black church, the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. and the influence of that rhetoric on African American culture. Think of the highly imaginative talks of another radical orator, Malcolm X, who in his adult life chose another religion but had grown up in the Baptist church. Malcolm spoke out in parables (e.g. the "house negro" refusing to escape from the plantation, George Washington bartering a slave for a barrel of molasses etc.) and made use of both direct and oblique biblical references, stuff that his audience could easily recognize. Even his condemnation of the treacherous clergy reminds us of words that Müntzer uttered four centuries earlier and wrote in such texts as the *Prague Manifesto*.

2. «I was in Paris about two months ago [...] Let me give you a warning, if you're goin' over there, here's an example: "chapeau" means "hat"... "Oeuf" means "egg"... It's like those French have a different word for everything!», Steve Martin, *A Wild and Crazy Guy*, 1978.

3. However, bourgeois postmodernism is in the eye of the beholder, particularly if the beholder misses the context. While the nature of the novel was well comprehended in Europe, most Americans didn't get it. In the US - a country whose academic milieu and literary scenes are heavily intoxicated with metadiscourses of all kinds - Q was completely misunderstood, some critics described the experience of reading it as the opposite of what European readers had felt. Reviewing the book for the *Washington Post*, David Liss called it "more of an anti-novel than a novel". According to him, "Q gives the reader the distinct impression of purposefully exposing the clichéd conventions of the historical novel and also throwing them in the reader's face". In the end, it all amounted to "postmodern nose-thumbing".

upside down. In 2003 the Italian movement was already in a deep crisis. Not even mass mobilisation against the war on Irak could infuse new energy into its body. At last, it regressed to a marginal presence, a presence occupying the semantic space of traditional far-leftist discourse. The usual boring role played by boring rules. A bunch of “professional revolutionaries” took over what was left, made all kinds of mistakes and proved to be immensely inadequate. Fossilized sub-Leninist tactics and strategies re-surfaced. A lot of time and energy was dissipated in intra-group identity wars. Meetings became pathetic cock fights. The majority of sensitive, “unregimented” activists (especially women) got bored and quit. We were among those who quit.

In the meanwhile, a self-professed vanguard of the ex-tute bianche had embarked on new projects that we regarded as grotesque, projects whose description is clearly beyond the scope of this text. The collaboration between us and that network had lasted little more than a year. So passes a glory of this world.

Since then, we have devoted our time and effort to tightening the bolts of our literary project, writing new novels and essay and expanding our presence in culture and the cultural industry.

We didn't give up the struggle, far from it, but never again will we play Frankenstein with technified myths.

And we keep going, and Don Durito's army of animals keep going, and no defeat is definitive, and hearts are still beating.

<http://www.wumingfoundation.com/english/wumingblog/>

And there we were, seven years later, in the darkness on the edge of Nurio, and the Zapatistas were there, Subcomandante Marcos was there, for the indigenous meeting took place during the famous and internationally covered March of Dignity.

The March: throngs of people travelling on battered coaches, covering thousands of miles, from the backwoods of Chiapas to a spectacularly crowded Zócalo, the biggest square in Mexico City. Twenty days of travel, twenty days of poetry delivered by Marcos in seven allegorical speeches called the ‘Seven Keys’.

Nurio was a stop on that journey, and we the Wu Ming collective were there as well, at least some of us. Marcos and the Zapatistas were accompanied by people from all parts of the world, a multifarious procession of journalists, activists, intellectuals, artists and parasites. We'd come all the way from Italy as members of a bizarre delegation whom the locals called “los monos blancos”, the white monkeys. That was a pun, as “mono” is also Spanish slang for “overalls”. Back at home, we were usually called “le tute bianche”, the white overalls. In a strange semantic twist, a work garment had temporarily become a symbol of civil disobedience, and many people used to wear it at demonstrations. We kept the overalls on for the whole march, and they ceased being white long before we arrived in Mexico City. There was never any occasion for taking a bath, we were quite filthy.

Sometimes the intent in calling us “monkeys” was derogatory and xenophobic, especially in the reactionary press, but we adopted the name ourselves and later wrote an allegorical little story, The Fable of the White Monkey, which started like this:

«After many years Don Durito, the black beetle, decided to leave the forest. He called on all animals near and far, even those from beyond the sea, so they could accompany him to the city. Many beasts came down from the mountains, others came through the sea. The strangest one was a white monkey from a very far land. Her colour was in stark contrast with the colours of the earth, and she looked very odd. The other animals were amazed looking at her. Every day the white monkey plodded along on a hard ground, under a sunshine that her skin had never experienced. She was awkward and clumsy, but did anything she could to be helpful and prove that she wasn't out of place. Many times she arrived late at the scheduled stops, but she never failed to show up.»

We looked like beggars, and yet - as sometimes happens with beggars - there must have been something noble (or at least interesting) in our ways, since the commanders of the Zapatista Army appointed us as their bodyguards. No kidding, at a certain point during the march, we the Italian monos

blancos became the commanders' security service, and what a sight we made!

It was mostly performance art, and more appearance than substance. Who knows what Marcos and the others had in mind when they chose us. Maybe they just wanted to pull a prank.

Luckily, we didn't put on airs.
(Well, at least not all the time.)

And even had we put them on, the steady flow of insults from the reactionary media - and even president Vicente Fox himself - would have reminded us that we were dirty, raggedy, awkward, odd-looking monkeys.

« - You're not familiar with this river. - Don Durito told the strange animal - But you've got big and strong hands. You'll build the bridge to the other bank. The white monkey, thrilled by such responsibility, started to work with a will. She worked day and night, in the sun and the rain. In the meanwhile, the slanderous fox was spreading lies about her among the other beasts, and the parrots kept saying: - She isn't one of us. She doesn't belong here, she's got another colour. Don't trust her, the bridge she's building will collapse and you will drown! The bear, the coyote, the black monkey and all the earth-coloured animals watched the monkey working and discussed among themselves: - She comes from far away, but she's our friend. She's working so we can cross the river. - But this isn't her river. We don't know who she really is, we can't trust her. Then old Don Felix, the eagle that could see everything, said that Don Durito had assigned the task to the foreigner precisely because she was different and came from afar. For that reason, her work would have a greater meaning for all.»

At last we reached Mexico City and basked in the reflected light of the Zapatistas. A correspondent from the left-wing daily paper La Jornada wrote:

«On Saturday, March 11th, during the walk from Xomichilco to the Zócalo, the Italian monos blancos who escorted the Zapatista caravan caught a glimpse of a placard, one of the many the crowd used to communicate with the general command of the Zapatista army. That placard said: "THE WHITE MONKEYS HAVE BALLS". It was meant as a compensation for all the insults and smears which, in the previous days, had turned these Europeans into targets of a xenophobic campaign.»

But let's go back to that cold night in Nurio. What happened in that bivouac on Mexico's central plateau? What happened that was so special? Well, nothing special. Just a tiny gesture. While some campers were lighting

to reduce their complexity and test their aerodynamic properties in the wind tunnel of politics.

What happened in Genoa was not a "military" defeat: it was a cultural catastrophe. The tragedy was not being defeated in the street. The tragedy was being defeated in the street and as a cultural wave. After Genoa, the movement stopped being able to communicate in effective ways, and the media sucked all our blood.

20 July 2001. That Friday afternoon, in that long street called Via Tolemaide, nobody wore white overalls. A few days before, we all decided to extend the practice of "padded civil disobedience" as widely as possible. Even such an open symbol as the overalls would stand in the way of that purpose. Ever more often, Tute bianche were being described as an organisation, a separate - albeit large - group, and the "Bibendum" tactic ran the risk of being associated exclusively with those activists. That's why we all decided not to wear the overall in Genoa. Thus, it was only as a reference to a shared practice that the marchers pouring out of the Carlini Stadium described themselves as "the desobedients".

Then the carabinieri murdered Carlo Giuliani, and all demonstrations disbanded because of overwhelming police brutality. Thousands of people had to fight their way back to the stadium, like the Warriors gang returning to Coney Island.

That night, we felt as pigeon-shooting targets. Everyone was scared, and yet we had to respond and take the streets again. At that point, our only hope was that as many people as possible come to Genoa to show their solidarity. The day after, 300,000 people turned up to save our sorry arses. They were not hardcore militants: hardcore militants were already in town. Those were ordinary people of progressive feelings, outraged by the carnage they'd seen on TV. We will always be grateful to that multitude, always, as long as we live. That Saturday afternoon, we committed to never betray those people. Salvation laid in being open-minded, honest and comprehensible. Salvation laid in keeping away from sectarianism.

It was then that we instinctively started to work on a new mythologeme, one that would imply the criticism of the previous ones: Genoa as Frankenhäuser.

A guy eavesdropping our conversation asked: - Who the fuck is this Frank Enhausen you keep talking about?

Less than two months after Genoa came 9/11. The situation in the country and the world got much tougher, and the metaphor of the "siege" turned

strategy “technification of myths”.

Technified myth is always addressed to those Kerenyi called “the sleeping ones”, i.e. people whose critical attitude is dormant, because the powerful images conveyed by the technifiers have overwhelmed their consciousness and invaded their subconscious. For example, we may “fall asleep” during the incredibly beautiful first half-hour of Leni Riefenstahl’s Olympia (1938).

On the contrary, a “genuine” approach to myths requires staying awake and willing to listen. We have to ask questions and listen to what myths have to say, we have to study myths, go looking for them in their territories, with humbleness and respect, without trying to capture them and forcibly bring them to our world and our present. It is a pilgrimage, not a safari.

Technified myth is always “false consciousness”, even when we think we’re using it to a good purpose. In an essay entitled Literature and Myth, Jesi asked himself: ‘Is it possible to induce the people to behave in a certain way - thanks to the power exerted by suitable evocations of myths - and then induce them to criticize the mythical motives of their behaviour?’. He answered himself: ‘It seems practically impossible’.

In the heyday of the global movement (from Autumn 1999 to Summer 2001), we tried to operate in the space between the adverb (“practically”) and the adjective (“impossible”). We tried to use the adverb to break open the adjective. We deemed Jesi’s answer too pessimistic. We thought that “opening the laboratory” and showing the people how we processed “mythologemes” - i.e. the basic conceptual units, the metaphoric “kernels” of mythological narratives - was enough to provide the people with the tools of criticism. “Correct distance” from a myth was our chimera: not too close lest we might fall into a stupor, not so far that we no longer feel its power. It was a difficult balance to keep, and in fact we didn’t keep it.

Because the problem is also: who is the artificer of mythopoesis, the evocator, the obstetrician? It should be up to a whole movement or community or social class to handle myths and keep them on the move. No particular group can appoint itself to that office. At the end of the day, we ended up being “officials” assigned to manipulate metaphors and evoke myths. Our role became a quasi-specialised one. An agit-prop cell. A combo of spin doctors. Sure, From the Multitudes of Europe... could make your nerves sing, it made you feel like going to Genoa right away, but that was not enough. We never looked for ways to “criticize the mythical motives of our behaviour”. “Practically” never cracked “impossible”.

At present, there is no alternative but continuing the work: we have to continue the exploration, prick up our ears and approach myths in a way that’s not instrumental. We have to understand the nature of myths without wishing

the bonfire, one of us approached el Subcomandante and gave him a copy of our novel Q, which we’d written under the name “Luther Blissett”. It was a copy of the Spanish edition. On the title page was a dedication:

For “El Sub”
as the struggle keeps us warm in a cold night,
from a mono blanco (now of all the colours of the earth)
who happens to be the author.

Marcos read those lines and looked stunned: - *You’re the author? And you’re a mono blanco?*

- *Yes, I am. I wrote it together with three other guys, and they’re monos blancos too.*

He thanked our comrade, took the book and walked away.

«When the bridge was half-built, Don Durito gathered all the animals on the bank of the river.

After that, he told the white monkey to go to the window, so everyone could see her. Then he addressed the animals and said: - She is building a good bridge, but she can’t finish it alone. Nobody could do it without help.

The white monkey got puzzled and asked: - Then why did you put me to work alone?

Don Durito closed the window and allowed the white monkey to look in the glass. She stared at the reflected image and hardly recognized herself. Her coat wasn’t white anymore. Now it was of all the colours of the earth.

1. Marcos, Müntzer and Q (1994-99)

«[...] I fought [...] alongside men who really thought they would put an end to injustice and wickedness on earth. There were thousands of us, we were an army. Our hope was shattered on the plain at Frankenhausen, on the fifteenth of May 1525. Then I abandoned a man to his fate, to the weapons of the lansquenets. I carried with me his bag full of letters, names and hopes. And the suspicion of having been betrayed, sold to the forces of the princes like a herd at a market.’ It’s still hard to utter the name. ‘That man was Thomas Müntzer.’

I can’t see him, but I sense his astonishment, perhaps the incredulity of someone who thinks he’s talking to a ghost.

His voice is practically a whisper. ‘You really fought with Thomas Müntzer?’»

- Luther Blissett, Q

To this day, we don’t know if Marcos ever had a chance to read the book. He’s been supernaturally busy in the following years, and the situation in Chiapas (indeed, the whole Mexico) seems to have worsened considerably. However, to give him a copy had a precise meaning. To us, that present sym-

bolised the completion of a cycle, from the 16th century Peasants' War (the subject of the novel) to the Zapatista Levantamiento [Uprising].

The Peasants' war was the biggest popular revolt of its time, it broke out at the heart of the Holy Roman Empire and was savagely repressed in 1525, one year before the Spanish Conquistadores started their bloody invasion of Southern Mexico and destroyed the Maya civilisation.

The Zapatista Levantamiento was the most inspiring peasant rebellion of our time, it took place in Southern Mexico on the initiative of Maya activists and had an influence on struggles all across today's unholy empire.

Call it a chiasmus if you like.

The Peasants' War was a prefiguring event, in the same way its main agitator Thomas Müntzer was a prefiguring character. It was literally a pre-figuration because the social order that Müntzer and the revolutionary peasants envisioned was far ahead of their time, indeed, it's still ahead of our time, and yet it wasn't just a collective hallucination followed by bursts of mass violence. That's the conservative interpretation started by Martin Luther and refined by Norman Cohn, who described Müntzer as a forerunner of modern-day totalitarianism and Nazi madness. Bullshit. The peasants were far from being crazy: they had social programs (albeit rough) and concrete goals to achieve. Their needs were real and their practice was rooted in the social reality of their time. Their partial achievements were tangible: towns were conquered, revolutionary councils were established and the power structure was shaken from the foundations up to the princes' rotting teeth. In a feudal territory fragmented into countless city-states, the Peasants' War was a boundless, national, pan-Germanic rebellion long before Germany came to exist as a nation. The peasants' mistakes - both ideological and strategical - were immanent to that socio-historical context, but their politics had started to transcend it. They were defeated and massacred, but their legacy is still with us, buried in the ground beneath our feet, and it may resurface every time the social order is challenged from the bottom up. As to the peasant leaders' rhetoric, it still resounds throughout the centuries [1]. In many ways and voices, Müntzer still speaks to us.

He certainly spoke to four countercultural activists at the end of 1995, two years after the news of the Levantamiento had crossed the Atlantic, inspiring a new phenomenon called the Luther Blissett Project.

«In the early/mid Nineties the “Luther Blissett” collective identity was created and adopted by an informal network of people (artists, hackers, and activists) interested in using the power of myths, and moving beyond agit-prop “coun-

mind works, our brain is “wired” to think through narratives, metaphors and allegories.

At a certain point, a metaphor may suffer sclerosis and become less and less useful, until it gets void of all meaning, a disgusting cliché, an obstacle to the growth of inspiring stories. When this happens, people have to veer off, looking for other words and images.

Revolutionary and progressive movements have always found their own metaphors and narrated their myths. Most of the times these myths survived their being useful and became alienating. Rigor mortis set in, language became wooden, metaphors ended up enslaving the people instead of setting them free. The following generation often reacted by negating the past and developing iconoclastic attitudes. The vanguard of each generation of radicals described the myths they inherited as nothing more than false stories. Some demanded that the radical discourse be “de-mythologised”, be it in the name of Reason, “political correctness”, nihilism or even plain stupidity (as in the ‘myths-are-intrinsically-fascist’ argument).

No-one can erase mythological thought from human communication, because it's embedded in the circuitry of our brains. Cognitive scientists and linguists such as George Lakoff are proving that beyond doubt. We think through metaphors and narratives.

Every iconoclasm eventually generates a new iconophilia, against which new iconoclasts will rage. The cycle will be endless if we don't understand the way these narratives work. The trouble with myths is not their intrinsic falsehood, truth... or truthiness. The trouble with myths is that they sclerotise easily if we take them for granted. The flow of tales must be kept fresh and lively, we have to tell stories by ever changing means, angles and points of view, give our tales constant exercise so they don't harden and darken and clog our brains.

This, of course, is an extremely hard task, for several reasons.

First of all, it's too easy to underestimate the dangers of working with myths. One always runs the risk of playing Dr. Frankenstein or, even worse, Henry Ford. We can't create a myth at will, as though on an assembly line, or evoke it artificially in some closed laboratory. To be more exact: we could, but it would have unpleasant consequences.

Expanding some observations by Karoly Kerényi, the Italian mythologist Furio Jesi drew a sharp distinction between a “genuine” approach to myths and a forced evocation of myths for a specific (usually political) purpose. Think of Mussolini describing the 1937 invasion of Abyssinia as “the reappearance of the Empire on the fateful hills of Rome”. Kerényi and Jesi called the latter

made.

We had chosen one battleground and a supposed field-day.

We were all heading to Frankenhäuser.

3. Frankenstein in Frankenhäuser (2001-09)

'How long have you been on the run?'

[...] 'I told you, ever since priests and prophets claimed a hold of my life. I fought with Müntzer and the peasants against the princes. Anabaptist in the madness that was Münster. Purveyor of divine justice with Jan Batenburg. Companion of Eloi Pruystinck among the free spirits of Antwerp. A different faith each time, always the same enemies, one defeat.'

- Luther Blissett, Q

Thomas Müntzer spoke to us, but we couldn't understand his words. It wasn't a blessing, but a warning.

It is impossible to disclaim the responsibility the Wu Ming collective had, at least in Italy. We were among the most zealous in urging people to go to Genoa, and helped to pull the movement into the ambush. After the blood-bath, it took quite a while - and a lot of reflection on our part - to understand our own (specific) errors in the context of the (general) errors made by the movement.

We had underestimated the enemy, and overestimated ourselves. Clearly, something had gone wrong with the practice of "mythopoesis" or "myth-making from the bottom up", which was - and still is - at the core of our philosophy.

By "myth" we never meant a false story, i.e. the most banal and superficial use of the term. We always used the word for a narrative with a great symbolic value, a narrative whose meaning is understood and shared in the community (e.g. a social movement) whose members tell it one another. We've always been interested in stories that create bonds between human beings. Communities keep sharing such stories and, as they share them, they (hopefully) keep them alive and inspiring, ongoing narration makes them evolve, because what happens in the present changes the way we recollect the past. As a result, those tales are modified according to the context and acquire new symbolic/metaphorical meanings. Myths provide us with examples to follow or reject, give us a sense of continuity or discontinuity with the past, and allow us to imagine a future. We couldn't live without them, it's the way our

ter-information". In Bologna, my circle of friends shared an obsession with the eternal return of such archetypal figures as folk heroes and tricksters. We spent our days exploring pop culture, studying the language of the Mexican Zapatistas, collecting stories of media hoaxes and communication guerrilla warfare since the 1920's (Berlin Dada stuff, futuristic soirées etc.), obsessively re-watching one particular movie, Slap Shot by George Roy Hill, starring Paul Newman as hockey player Reggie Dunlop. We liked Reggie Dunlop very much, he was the perfect trickster, the Anansi of African legends, the Coyote of Native American legends, Ulysses manipulating the cyclop's mind.

What if we could build our own "Reggie Dunlop", a "trickster with a thousand faces", a golem made of the clay of three rivers - the agit-prop tradition, folk mythology, and pop culture? What if we started a completely new role play game, using all the media platforms available at the time to spread the legend of a new folk hero, a hero fueled-up by collective intelligence?»

- Henry Jenkins III, 'How Slap Shot Inspired a Cultural Revolution: An Interview with the Wu Ming Foundation', Confessions of an Aca/Fan weblog, October 2006

The communication strategies of the Zapatistas were a big influence on the LBP. References to el Sub and the EZLN can already be found in the early texts produced by Luther Blissett. What intrigued us most was the way the Zapatistas avoided to frame their struggle in any of the hopelessly worn-out twentieth-century modes of thought, and refused old dichotomies such as Reformist vs. Revolutionary, Vanguard vs. Masses, Violence vs. Non-violence etc. The Zapatistas evidently belonged to the Left, but they seemed to refuse any linear, traditional left-to-right scale thought, and in a way that had nothing to do with how some European fascists argue that they are "neither left nor right". The Zapatista language moved away from stereotypical "third-worldism": they put creative reappropriation and use of old myths, folk tales, legends and prophecies into a vision that encompassed a new transnationalism (Huey P. Newton might have called it "Intercommunalism"). The "community" the Zapatistas talked about was an open one, it went beyond the boundaries of the ethnic groups they spoke for. 'We are all indians of the world', they stated. They came from the most miserable corner of the known world, and yet they soon got in touch with rebels all around the globe.

The Zapatistas' strategy of communication was based on the refusal of traditional, camera-craving leaders. In the early days of the Levantamiento, Marcos stated: 'I don't exist, I'm just the frame of the window', then explained that "Marcos" was just an alias and he was just a "sub-commander", a spokesperson for the Indios. He asserted that everybody could be Marcos, and that was the meaning of balaclavas: the revolution has no face because

it has all faces. “If you want to see the face under the balaclava, grab a mirror and look at yourself”, Marcos said.

That’s where Luther Blissett came out of. Commentators have always speculated a lot on the alleged “situationist origins” of the project (a dead end street if there ever was one), whereas the truth was under everyone’s eyes. The example set by the Zapatistas helped the LBP refine its purpose: to snatch the use of myths out of the hands of reactionaries.

The Luther Blissett Project was roughly a Five Year Plan and lasted from 1994 to 1999. Hundreds of people, all over Italy and in some other countries, adopted the name and gave contributions in terms of media hoaxes, radio programmes, fanzines, videos, street theatre, performance art, radical politics and theoretical writings. At least fifty agitators remained active in Bologna from beginning to end. In 1995 some of them started to play with the idea of writing a historical novel. That novel was to become Q.

As filled as we were with fresh Zapatista suggestions, we almost immediately thought of recounting a peasant insurrection, nay, the mother of all modern insurrections, peasant or not.

We already knew about Müntzer: in his teenage years, one of us had briefly belonged to a marxist group where reading Friedrich Engels’ *The Peasants’ War in Germany* was little short of mandatory. And it may sound strange for a catholic country, but Italy has an interesting tradition of studies on Müntzer and the radical wings of the Reformation. Müntzer’s sermons were first published in Italian in 1970. During the Seventies, a highly politicised decade, the figure of Müntzer was intensely studied and discussed. In such a crucial year as 1989, scholars from different parts of Europe (including the soon-to-collapse East Germany) came to Ferrara - about twenty miles from Bologna - and took part to a conference called “Thomas Müntzer and the Revolution of the Common Man”.

But why tell that story once again? Why a historical novel on such an anachronistic subject? What meaning could Thomas Müntzer and the Peasants’ War have in the “Roaring 1990s”? “Communism” had been defeated, “democracy” had won, belief in Free Trade was undisputed to the extent that the French called it *la pensée unique* [2], “the only one thought [allowed]”. Market-centric “Neoliberal” ideology was triumphant. Did we really want to write a novel on some long-forgotten proto-communist bums?

Yes, we did. In times of counter-revolutionary hybris, at the peak of “the greediest decade in history” (as Joseph Stiglitz called it), we thought such a book was more necessary than ever.

Dead will be marching. And the text calls on those fallen ones, it makes a list of those troops covered with the dust of centuries and dispersed by the wind of history, with the epic punctiliousness of Homer’s “Catalogue of Ships”.»
- Historian Franco Cardini, *L’Espresso* weekly magazine, 22 June 2001

We also wrote or co-wrote a plenty of other texts (including, you bet, *The Fable of the White Monkey*), as well as scripts for street performances and media stunts.

Looking back, we think that Müntzer’s ghost, Q and - as a consequence - the novel’s authors found themselves at the centre of the mobilisation because a general metaphor was taking shape in that midst: ever more often, empire was described as a castle besieged by a manifold army of peasants. That metaphor recurs in several texts and speeches. Sometimes it’s explicit, very often it’s only implied, but it’s there. Its emergence was influenced by several factors.

1. The summits were invariably held at fenced-in, heavily militarised areas (sometimes called “red zones”), which conjured up images of a regime under siege by protesters. Demonstrations took the form of “blockades”: the more the power wanted to keep the people out and away, the more the people forced the powerful to meet in ridiculously over-fortified garrisons. Metaphorically speaking, they closed themselves into castles.
2. The movement had a firmly held (and loudly stated) ecological stance, and the struggle against Genetically Modified Organisms was diffuse, especially in Europe. In France, José Bové’s Confederation Paysanne [Peasant Confederation] was very active in destroying GMO crops and trashing McDonald’s restaurants.
3. The popularity of the Zapatistas - a rural, peasant movement - was reaching ever new heights among activists in Europe and North America.
4. The movement’s World Forum repeatedly took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil, a country where a radical peasant movement - the *Movimento Sem Terra* - was active and widespread.

Although it was inspiring and effective, the metaphor was a misrepresentation. There was no real siege going on, as you can’t besiege a power that’s everywhere and whose main manifestation is a constant flow of electrons from stock exchange to stock exchange.

That misrepresentation would prove fatal in Genoa.

We were mistaking the power’s formal ceremonies for the power itself.

We were making the same mistake Müntzer and the German peasants had

we're coming!' on the chorus of Guantanamo as they march with both hands raised, perfectly aware that they're going to be clubbed, and none of them will fight back.

The narratives that the white overalls produce about themselves are self-sarcastic, e.g. The Fable of the White Monkey [...] The white overalls are consciously ludicrous, that's been their advantage so far. When they cease to be ludicrous, we'll have to find another tool.»

- Wu Ming 1, "An Open Letter to Limes Magazine" (unpublished), June 2001

It wasn't the only strange phenomenon we detected in those days, for the ghost of Thomas Müntzer (none other!) was re-appearing in unexpected places.

There was some sort of short-circuit between Q and the movement. Thanks to word of mouth and the Internet, the novel had become an international best-seller. We began to see Müntzer's sentence "Omnia sunt communia" [All things are to be shared] on banners and placards. We began to see quotations from Q used by activists as e-mail signatures. In forums dedicated to the movement, people would adopt such aliases as "Magister Thomas" or "Gert-from-the-Well". It was only the beginning of a strange, controversial, troublesome relationship between our literary efforts and the ongoing struggle. In the months leading to the Genoa showdown, the names "Wu Ming" and "Wu Ming Foundation" came to be associated more with "agit-prop" activities than our literary output. It was mainly our fault, as we plunged into the struggle so deeply that it became difficult to avoid confusion of roles. For example, even if it had no byline, everybody knew we were responsible for the epic appeal known as From The Multitudes of Europe..., which in the spring and early summer of 2001 was constantly forwarded, xeroxed, printed on leaflets and journals, broadcast on the radio, recited by actors, scribbled on walls and so on.

Quite obviously, Müntzer was one of the ancestors claimed by the "narrating we" of the edict: «We are the army of peasants and miners that followed Thomas Müntzer. [...] The Lansquenets exterminated us in Thuringia, Müntzer was torn to pieces by the headsman, and yet nobody could deny it: all that belonged to the earth, to the earth would return.»

«The text is a declaration of war. A political and historical war, but also a trans-historical and trans-political one. The powerful of the Earth gathered in Genoa for the G8 summit, as well as their educated and overpaid consultants and collaborators, shall not have to face the "people of Seattle", the students, the thugs of the social centres plus some poor sods and freaks strumming guitars or breaking windows. Or rather, all those people will be there, but together with them, behind them, inside them an immense Army of the

Very soon, we bumped into a work by German playwright Dieter Forte, a 1970 drama entitled Luther, Munzer, and the bookkeepers of the Reformation. It was an explicit allegory of the 1968 movement in West Germany. That text had a powerful effect on us. It kickstarted the writing process.

To tell the truth, the Peasants' War and Müntzer's preaching were just the beginning of the story we would tell. Q covers more than thirty years of European history, from 1517 (when Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg cathedral) to 1555 (the year of the Peace of Augsburg). Those tumultuous years provide historians and storytellers with a lot of pre-figuration and first attempts, as radicals of that age seem to have tried practically every revolutionary strategy and tactic. If we listen attentively to what the 16th century has to say, we'll encounter anarchists, proto-hippies, utopian socialists, hardcore leninists, mystical maoists, mad stalinists, the Red Brigades, the Angry Brigade, the Weathermen, Emmett Grogan, Friar Tuck, punk rock, Pol Pot and Comrade Gonzalo (of Peru's Shining Path guerrilla movement). A whole army of spectres and metaphors. Also, we'll find all kinds of culture jammers, body artists, pamphleteers and fanzine publishers. Our main character, the nameless hero, gets involved in each and every subversive project he bumps into, from the Peasants' War to the Anabaptist takeover of the city of Münster, from Jan Van Batenburg's terrorist sect the Zwaardgeesten to the Loyist community in Antwerp, from book smuggling in Switzerland and Northern Italy to a final escape from Europe towards the Ottoman Empire. The third part of the novel echoes such Luther Blissett practices as the dissemination of false news and the creation of a virtual character (Titian the Anabaptist) with the purpose of bewildering the powers-that-be.

Nevertheless, there's little doubt that Müntzer is one of the key figures in the novel. He's the character that most impresses himself on the memory of the readers.

What we wanted to do was write a fierce and passionate book, a book that were conscious of itself as a cultural artefact (nay, a cultural weapon), but at the same time didn't raise the usual shield of post-modern detachment and allegedly all-explaining irony. A novel announcing the return of radical/popular narrative fiction. The world needed adventure novels written by folks who were serious about their writing, folks willing to soil their hands without ducking responsibility - soil their hands without ducking accountability.

In March 1999, the publication of Q was our final contribution to the Luther Blissett Project, which ended at the end of the year. When the novel was published in the UK, British novelist Stewart Home described it as an example of

“proletarian postmodernism”, and the stress was laid on the adjective rather than the noun. Such temporary classifications always signal that a change is taking place. Later on, the literary tendency blossomed in the wake of Q was called “New Italian Epic” [3].

2. Müntzer Mojo Rising, or: the Castle under Siege (1999-2001)

«They say that they are new, they christen themselves by acronyms: G8, IMF, WB, WTO, NAFTA, FTAA... They cannot fool us, they are the same as those who have come before them: the écorcheurs that plundered our villages, the oligarchs that reconquered Florence, the court of Emperor Sigismund that beguiled Jan Hus, the diet of Tuebingen that obeyed Ulrich and refused to admit Poor Konrad, the princes that sent the lansquenets to Frankenhäusen, the impious that roasted Dozsa, the landlords that tormented the Diggers, the autocrats that defeated Pugachev, the government whom Byron cursed, the old world that stopped our assaults and destroyed all stairways to heaven.

Nowadays they have a new empire, they impose new servitudes on the whole globe, they still play the lords and masters of the land and the sea.

Once again, we the multitudes rise up against them.»

- From *The Multitudes Of Europe Rising Up Against The Empire*, Springtime 2001

The publication of Q was followed by an extended book tour all over Italy (and Ticino, the Italian-speaking canton of Switzerland). We met hundreds of readers in all kinds of venues (squats, libraries, bookshops, festivals etc.), answered their questions and discussed the reception of the book in the literary scene. During that tour we announced that, after the end of the LBP, we'd start a new project, more tight-knit, focused on storytelling and with no deadline ahead. Wu Ming was just around the corner.

We were still travelling when the Battle of Seattle broke out.

It was the thirtieth of November 1999. That evening we arrived at Lodi, a small town in Lombardy, and met readers at the municipal library. Instead of talking about the book, we raved about what had just happened at the WTO summit. We felt it was the beginning of something big.

And big it grew indeed. Very soon, the new movement erupted into a worldwide challenge to the global institutions regulating “free markets” from the top down: the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and other bloodsuckers.

2000 was a year of intense organization, protest and disruption of important summits. The most relevant demonstrations took place in Prague at the end of September, when thousands of demonstrators ridiculed an IMF/WB joint meeting. We were there as well.

At a certain point, the movement decided that the showdown - the litmus test of its strength - would be in the third week of July 2001 in Genoa, Northern Italy, where a G8 summit was scheduled. It would be the first G8 summit since the election of George W. Bush as president of the USA, and the first with right-wing clown Silvio Berlusconi as Italian premier and grinning host of the event.

In April 2001, people from all parts of North America gathered in Quebec City to protest against the FTAA treaty. The marches were colourful and radical, the protest was imaginative and multifarious. Many different strands of radicalism twisted together to form ropes, not only metaphorical but also literal ropes, with grappling hooks attached to pull down the “Wall of Shame” (the fence surrounding the summit area). Guess what, we were there, and we thought it was a useful experience, as well as a good omen for Genoa.

In the meantime, curious things were happening in Italy and elsewhere. At demonstrations you could see people resembling Bibendum, the Michelin Man: they all wore helmets, white boiler suits and, under the suits, any kind of bodily protection: shoulder pads, shin-guards, life-jackets, cushions, even sheets of packing foam. You'd see hundreds of those funny figures holding big plastic shields or mobile barricades made of tyres, marching towards the coppers in a phalanx-like formation. They had no offensive weapons, only inventive ways of preventing the truncheons from smashing their bones. It was called “padded civil disobedience”, or “civil disobedience all'italiana”. There was something distinctly “Blissett-like” in that puzzling practice, and we soon started cooperating with those people, mostly orphans of the orphans of the old Autonomia movement.

«The white overalls are not an uniform, and the images they conjure up should never be of a militaristic kind. That would be a big political mistake.

The white overalls do not fix an identity, nor they have to do with belonging to a group or a troop. The white overalls are a tool. One should never say: “I belong to the white overalls”, but: “I'm wearing white overalls”.

White overalls are awkward and clumsy, many times they have been compared to Michelin Men. They can't help laughing at each other, and when the police charges they can't run, they're easy targets, it's like hitting a cow in a corridor [...] The performances in white overalls are aimed at tickling the throats of jolly people [...] Their slogans are ironical in a warm way: the words “Peace & Love” are associated with pictures of riots, and they chant ‘We're coming! / Hey, bastards,