

PROJECT PROPOSAL ROSSELLA NISIO

i. introduction

It's probably safe to state that a number of people spend part of their teenage years thinking their family is the most dysfunctional out there. I, for one, was under this impression. Now that age released me from the spell of exceptionality, even of the negative kind, I know that every family has dysfunctional sides to it to account for. Indeed, it would seem that being dysfunctional is in the natural order of family affairs. This is why I was not too shocked not long ago when, after looking for

details on web archives and forums related to an album of photographs from Africa from the late 1930s that has been in my family's possession for decades, I learned that my maternal grandfather was a Black Shirt (a member of the MVSN, the voluntary fascist militia) who fought in the second Italo-Ethiopian war. It's quite matter-offact: from a historical perspective, my grandfather was a villain—and of the worst kind.

I never met my grandfather, as he was dead almost one decade before I was born. Pictures of him and by him were, together with random documents and words from other members of the family, the only traces that he actually ever existed. The album was a very peculiar trace of him, as the pictures in it were from a world that no one else in our family had ever been part of. Some of the photos the album contained terrified me; nevertheless, they



portrait from the ethiopian campaign, 1936

became part of my childhood's visual imagination, as much as reproductions of Pellizza's *The Fourth Estate* or the pink elephants in *Dumbo*. For years the album in question was stashed in various bookshelves, first in my grandmother's sitting room, then in my own, in turns rubbing elbows with *The Woman's Encyclopedia* (from grandmother) and books on the collections of the Musée d'Orsay and the Louvre (from my parents). It was therefore a common sight, and yet at the same time it was a lost relic. Nobody spoke about it, nobody seemed to know exactly what was in it, and why.

ii. what i want to make

As I *inherited* the infamous album, I feel a certain responsibility to understand it. This is a crucial reason why the final project I have in mind for this year wants to explore it as a space where, for good or bad, the aspirations of a singular person came alive. I want to explore the album's ties with what surrounded it, which means, among other things, dealing with what its construction meant and the connections it established with its environment.

In practical terms, I want to present a new reading of the album through visual and verbal storytelling. The album has always been a veritable totem, keeping watch and influencing its surroundings in sure even though imperceptible ways. Over time it became thus something more than a mere object, it turned into a symbol: of the need of its creator to revolt against the status quo promoted by a society perceived as broken, and of the grave consequences this act of revolt produced both at a private and at a public level.



the album's front cover, 2018.

At the end of the journey, I will have a publication in the shape of the thesis, which documents the process of physical and conceptual dissection of the album, and a multimedia work comprising still and moving images both taken from and connected to it. In this manner, the thesis will serve at the same time as a foundation and expansion of the practice-based work.

iii. how i want to make it

In the past months, I spent time researching the context that made the album possible: the nationalist and imperialist impulses present within the socio-political climate of the time, its contemporary customs and visual culture, popular forms of expression such as cinema and literature that related to it, even if only indirectly.



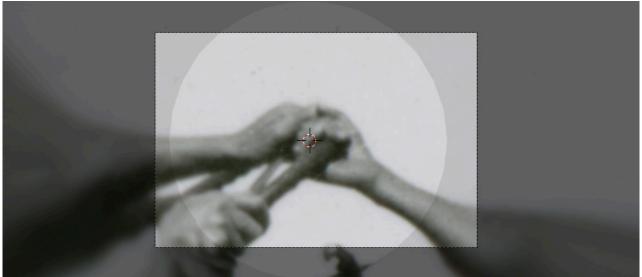
I then set out to understand the character of the creator of the album—that is, my "unknown" grandfather—by collecting interviews with his closest living relatives and by examining what remains of his former possessions that are today scattered at various locations. I also looked at photographs that are not part of the album and read diaries and writings from the war that are not his.

I finally started to build a replica of my grandfather's study and to spend time in it, even if only virtually. I intend to create atmospheric footage derived from stills of this space, partly remembered and partly imagined, and to put it in relation with the original album photographs. For the footage I am writing a monologue piece that reads as a minimalistic stage play. The text, in combination with the images, will look at the legacy of the war from an intimate perspective, without however forgetting about its profound implications. This hybrid moving image work will be the summa of the theory and practice based research of the last months.

iv. who can help me

The surviving members of my family—first of all my mother, but also my uncle and his daughter—contributed to retrieve documentation and collect references that helped me to contextualize the project and give it a backbone I could build upon.

Lorenzo Bassanelli, a frequent collaborator in other previous works I made, has been providing invaluable technical help and creative insight.





early experiment: magnification tests inside blender (top); original photo vs enlarged detail (bottom).

Feedback from Marloes, Steve and other PZI tutors—Simon, Ine, David, Barend and Javi—proved so far essential to refine the scope of my research and to approach it from a more personal perspective from what I intended at first, which I think greatly benefited the work itself by sharpening its focus. In addition to them, PZI colleagues and graduates from the previous years suggested additional material to my attention.

v. why i want to make it

A primary aim of this project is to make use of the album's defined theatrical character, as this very character I can see as an entry point with strong emotive qualities that effectively put it in relation to a broader social context. This character is serving as the connective tissue between private and public retelling of dramatic historical events that I see as having links with the present.



rome, 26.9.18, before a government announcement. the scene brings back to mind other times, other balconies.

Memory is a central theme I'm exploring, but so is the role of the human desire to transcend one's limits. I feel the idea behind this project has a connection with the present moment, not so much within the obvious discussion about resurgence of extreme right-wing tendencies in Europe—which certainly is a pertinent one to be noted—but mostly within a discourse on historical memory, of its marked fictional elements, and on the need of individuals to challenge their limitations in spite of consequences. I am not looking to give an answer to the many questions that the present moment is posing with ever increasing urgency, but to better frame them through a process of visual and verbal reshaping through subtle metaphorical means.

vi. relation with previous practice

Previously, I developed work that questioned understanding of historical micro- and macro-events connecting them with our visual culture, imposing on these events a forced perspective, that of spatial imagination. This forced perspective was especially evident, even though in varying degrees, in the body of work produced in the course of the last academic year, and it was interwoven with preoccupations concerning the notion of ambiguity in morality of the single as opposed to external impositions from societies, states, and so on. In several pieces, factual information from diverse sources, with special attention to mass media, was abstracted from its original context in order to expand its scope. This movement towards abstraction and the process of deconstruction-reconstruction was for instance at the core of Universal Time and Repérages, both making use of archival and found imagery to reflect on the destructive effects that faceless power in its various forms has on the individual. Both these works isolated secondary elements present in source imagery and made them the dominant of the reconstruction.



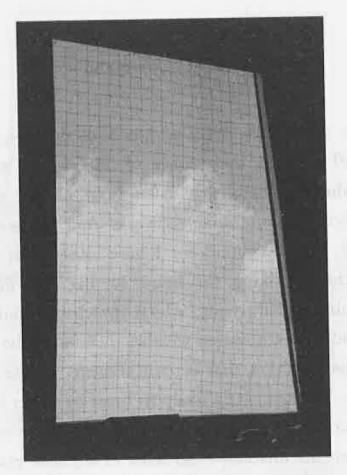
It's my intention for the graduation work to stem from these previously explored themes; I also want to make use of some of the experiences gathered in my recent practice, both in the researching and making stages. Even though this means I expect the new work to entertain a dialogue with what came before it, I however don't plan for it to be the repetition of it.

What I would like to do is to move forward on the path of blending the boundary between photographic and computer generated, still and moving image, text and sound, in view of the construction of a semi-fictional space and story deriving directly from the examination of the album.

vii. relation with larger context

The frame of reference for this project evolved significantly in the course of the months and incorporated works that are very diverse, ranging from film to literature.

summer had now shrunk once and for all to a single, blind, insensate spot. Indeed, all that could be seen of the world from my bed was the colourless patch of sky framed in the window.



Several times during the day I felt a desire to assure myself of a reality I feared had vanished forever by looking out of that

Essential to the conceptualization of the work were writers as W.G. Sebald, who explored in books such as *The Rings of Saturn* the connections between private and public memory, Carlo Emilio Gadda, who compiled with *Eros e Priapo* a satirical psychoanalysis of fascism, and Ennio Flaiano, who retold in the novel *Tempo di Uccidere* the experience of the colonial war through the lens of surrealism.

viii. references

Reading list, sources, references to use both in the research and in the making stages of the work (these are subject to change).

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c. Other miscellaneous references

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