

Dean Martin Had a Hard-on

By Wu Ming 1

Confusion is the only thing left which makes any sense.
Lester Bangs.

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“So then, here we need a brainstorm to write a story to stick into Flavio’s catalogue, and the idea’s that of a slightly lysergic conversation while looking at one of his paintings...” This was the first line of my speech. All I remembered when the nurses managed to wake me up with cardiac massages, electric shocks and a shot of adrenaline - “Where am I?” I murmured.

Then the ceiling began to shift as it did in the last scene of *Carlito’s Way*. An IV needle was pushed into the fold of my left arm shoving God-knows-what into my body.

A hand held my right hand. Wheels were running along under me. Excited voices:

“We’ve got to talk to him! It’s a question of life or death!” And other voices that answered, “You can’t now, come back tomorrow!”

I couldn’t feel my legs. I thought, “This time our brainstorm’s gone a bit too far. It had to happen sooner or later. We asked too much of ourselves.”

They took me into a room. Someone said, “He’s a writer, one of the Nameless Group, those who wrote *Uh!*, *Tomahawk* and *666*.”

“I liked *Uh*; *666* seemed a bit over the top though...” someone answered.

“Did you read *Mater semper certa est pater numquam* by Valeriano Apostoli? It’s the new episode in the *Limerick* series” someone else asked.

“This really isn’t the right time. Call doctor Twain, tomorrow he’ll have to operate on his brain.”

“Shit, it even rhymes! How do you always manage to be so brill...”

The sound of a smack disturbed something; it was as though a necromancer’s hand had fumbled among the neurones, digging out beams of memories.

Two months earlier, Flavio De Marquez, a lanky painter from Apulia, had asked us to write some text for the catalogue for his show.

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And he asked me one night - actually it was nearly dawn - while I was taking him to the local car pound. Puzzled, I said the straightforward truth: “But we don’t understand shit about art, it even makes us sick.”

“That’s just it.”

”Sorry, what?”

There was no answer. The pound was now in view.

We had spent most of the night sitting at a table outside a local eatery and watching the

pick-up trucks pass by, with Flavio who - a bit drunk - was taking the piss and making over-the-top remarks like, "Look, another loser on the way to the car pound! Ha! Ha! Ha! Don't you know they're washing the road, *you turd*? That's 80 Euros at least! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Lorenzo De Tommasis was with us, the *maudit* and pigheaded critic from Salerno, the author of heavy tomes, among them *Incurability: An Asymptote of Hypochondria* and *Being Toward Death: New Perspectives for the Twentieth Century*. And, talking about the last one, someone had pointed out to him that the 20th century had already finished some time ago, but he only said, "Well, so what?", leaving the questioner in a quivering state of uncertainty.

In the middle of his indescribable Neanderthal whinnies, his empty glass lifted skywards, De Tommasis happily shouted to the hookers who were coming inside to warm up (fuel for a long night ahead): "Hail to you, magnificent worker!" only then to come out with a bag-full of sub-Majakovskian remarks that the hookers (even though Russian) couldn't understand.

I'd met them both an hour earlier outside the cinema, and they had dragged me into this cheap bohemian scene which had soon begun to wear me down. I'd certainly have left if De Tommasis, seeing yet another pickup truck go by, hadn't turned round to De Marquez and pointed out that they were washing the street where *he* and lived probably *his* car had already been carted off. For a while De Marquez wavered like the worm at the bottom of a bottle of Mescal, then he swore in dialect, and finally asked me to give him a lift to the pound.

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The adrenaline and the mysterious substance met up like the king and Garibaldi at Teano, and they shook hands. The night passed without disturbing memories. In the morning, a short while before they anaesthetised me, I remembered everything: the cons far more than the pros.

In the following days De Marquez went back to the attack both on me and on Willo. Just what did he mean by 'some text'? A review? A critical essay? It was agreed that the most sensible thing to do would be go to his studio and see his paintings. I'd read somewhere that De Marquez was interested in the evolution of the concepts of 'landscape' and of 'still-life' in the age of the computer and the net. We asked him for some press-reviews and critical essays about his work, besides a CD recording of his interview with a local radio.

Listening to the CD, me and Willo swapped raised eyebrows.

Question: Many people think that having more than one string to your bow is a tactical mistake, that eclecticism doesn't pay, that you end up being master of nothing...

Answer: Everyone has to do what he thinks best, it doesn't matter what you do, what we see each time is a unique result. I once saw some vegetables cultivated by Nelson Mandela, spindly, atrophied greens, and I've always thought that twenty-five years of prison don't necessarily give you green fingers... But then I saw, here in Bologna, a show of embroidery by John Wayne Gacy, the famous serial killer. The show seemed okay to me, and that made me think that prison is a better education for sewing than for gardening. It could be a

problem of space, apart from having a jaundiced eye about so-called 'nature'... No one has to pose themselves the question of how many things to do; everyone should just try, and I hope they do try. I don't because I prefer to paint and keep a dialectic relationship between painting and writing.

And speaking of De Marquez's writing, the interviewer talked enthusiastically about a story he had begun but never finished called *The Last Day of Edoardo G.*, inspired by the suicide of a scion of a great industrial family. Willo promised to get it and read it. The interview finished with an interesting and rather enigmatic statement:

I believe that one of painting's problems has been resolved or, rather, it doesn't interest me. I'm not interested in problems that are limited to a painting, I'm not interested in a painting that is limited to the surface, a painting concerned with 'making painting' or the quality of the pictorial layout. I think this is masturbation, but with the aggravating circumstance of an eternal, exhausting retention of sperm.

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It took a long time for me to emerge from the sea of ether: my head was a diving bell from which unknown people came out to illuminate and photograph the bottom. From behind the door was a murmur of excited voices and a dictatorial order: "Go away! He's still not up to receiving visits!" After a pause (of how long?) I found the thread to my memories. Willo and me had arrived at two in the afternoon of a weekday. De Marquez' studio was in an alleyway in the San Donato district: an ex-fishmonger's closed off by a shutter and by the side of a shady bar where we decided to have an after-meal coffee. Two hairy-throated drag queens were playing rummy with two old granddads talking in an unintelligible Bolognese dialect. The transvestites talked in Portuguese with a thick Bahia accent. The game was a masterpiece of communication.

The barman, a hunk in a T-shirt with tattooed forearms like Popeye, looked us up and down and asked us if we were 'friends of the painter'.

We answered, well, yes.

"He said he's goin' to be here straight away. He had an interview, and they wanted to do it in a rotten place..."

"And why didn't they stay here?"

I elbowed Willo in the ribs, thanked the he-man, and ordered two coffees. We had been waiting in front of the shutter for nearly twenty minutes when De Marquez finally arrived, obviously happy with the way his interview had gone.

"We wanted a really run-down location, dark, something referring to the death of the concept of 'nature' and on the non-death of 'still-life', and so we planted ourselves in front of the video rental in Via del Lavoro. We seemed to create a bit of difficulty for the porno-video renters."

"And what channel was it?" I asked.

"Well, it wasn't a television station, it was the students' radio at Siena University."

"But you can't see the location on the radio..." Willo started to say, but I nodded to tell him to drop it, and in fact De Marquez had already bent down to pull up the shutter.

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Subject: the text for Flavio's catalogue

“Compadres, apart from any other questions, I want to update you on the visit by Willo and me to Flavio De Marquez’ studio. Basically you want to know if we can invent something, some piece of *gonzo* stuff using his art as an excuse. It will end up in his next catalogue, in English and Italian. All things considered, his paintings are skeletons of schemes of operative system graphic interfaces. In other words: they look like a Windows desktop or something similar, with the open windows deprived of content, writing, icons, until there remains only outlines and colours. I’d dare to say that there remains *the autumn of the landscape that we visit when we are in front of the computer*, the leafless branches of the forest of signs that we use daily. Now I’ve got a really nice idea: instead of meeting up in order to have a brainstorm about what to write, I’d write a story *about* a brainstorm, and about De Marquez asking us for a story, and above all about the impossibility of writing a story. So, the goal of the story is an impossible story, a completely inconclusive brainstorm. It might just as well start with me in an ambulance or in a hospital waiting-room about to be operated on the brain because, in some way, I’ve *somatized* the brainstorm. Outside are you, asking the doctors if you can speak to me, because I must’ve had a stroke when I was about to tell you something important, the clue, the ‘keystone’ of what we had been discussing. Obviously, this is an opening that knocks the wind out of you. So my suggestion is that the story might become recursive, folded back on itself and meta-textual, rather like the possible interpretations of De Marquez’ art, a kind of literary ‘hyper-cube’. So I’m proposing a narrative through flashbacks, with a protagonist who wakes up stricken with amnesia but who slowly reconstructs what has happened to him, with De Marquez’ idea etc. etc. and at one point in the story there would have appeared this email that I’m sending you in which I make the proposal I’m making. This is nothing new in literature, it’s like the scene in *Spaceballs: the Movie* by Mel Brooks in which the characters watch themselves in real-time on a videocassette of the film, and there are no doubt many other examples, and probably catalogue browsers - those post-modern wankers - would enjoy the quotations, the use of a *topos*, how reflexive and recursive it all is etc. etc. And what’s more, in the story I’d like to quote another story, one that in theory was written by De Marquez himself, of which there exists only the beginning, though everyone really likes it. As an appendix I’d print this famous beginning. The story (ours, not De Marquez’) would be called *Dean Martin Had a Hard-on*, which is the start of a fictional biography of the Rolling Stones that Lester Bangs wanted to write, but of which he only wrote this starting phrase. So, let me know what you think.

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Subject: Re: racconto per Flavio

>So, let me know what you think.

Go fuck yourself.

- Appendix -

The Last Day of Edoardo A.

By Flavio De Marquez

Cuddled up as though praying, in the position that they say is good for the neck and shoulders, he was actually reading the tiny inscriptions on the carpet. *In* the carpet. Arabic couplets, almost invisible, sewn into the many-coloured weave, emerged only if he looked at the carpet extremely close up, and his body curved round like a hand protecting a match-flame. It was a particular time in the afternoon, the sun outside was already weak, the large window open... He concentrated on the green threads and slowly there emerged... Like that time in a helicopter: he'd seen a swastika of bright green treetops stand out from the mass of the dark green forest near Berlin. A homage to Hitler by some forest guard. The couplets, instead, he had attributed (with a margin of error of some 70%) to the great mystic Ibn al Bashir, who had lived in Salamanca centuries ago. In Edoardo's translation:

“God is a stern judge
Explain your case well”

Or:

“When you leave home close the door
But when you return it's as well to open it”.

Alternative translations of the two verses. Edoardo didn't know which to prefer. They were the symbols of the Arabic alphabet, strung together following some logic, but... Well! Were they the phonetic approximation of some other language? Hungarian? Ladin? Afrikaans? But then could he really be sure there was something written? That it wasn't just a chance interweaving of threads of the same colour?

The sphincter being stimulated by the need to defecate, notes of flutes...

Postscript by WM1

I wrote and sent *Dean Martin Had a Hard-on* on 20 February 2003. Two weeks later I saw *Adaptation*, the movie written by Charlie & Donald Kaufman, and directed by Spike Jonze. Rupert Sheldrake, the British biologist, is certainly right: this is a clear case of 'morphic resonance'. If you want to know more check out www.sheldrake.org

Translated from the Italian by Michael Haggerty

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