

## Name as a Multiple Reference: Luther Blissett vs. the World of Media

Giacomo Giuntoli

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### Abstract

During the last few years there has been much speculation about a new definition for proper nouns. The problem was really difficult to solve. Usually a personal name identifies a specific unique and identifiable individual person, but when multiple-use names used by all the members of a group were created by underground artists in the Eighties, everything changed quickly. One of these multiple-use names is Luther Blissett, who was originally a football player. However, soon after his retirement a group of Italian writers stole his name to use it as a name that could be related to the writers themselves and also to the fans that wanted to be a part of it, becoming “Luther Blissett”. The practice of multiple-use names is only the first step in an onomastics revolution that became widespread thanks to social networks and metaverses. Nowadays proper nouns can be considered as a “medium” constantly changing into something really different from what the old definitions of a proper noun stated.

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We all know that the first proper name which appears in a book is undoubtedly that of its author. The name of the author is generally placed near the book’s title, on the front cover. A proper name, in our specific case, is that of an author and it immediately reminds us that the author is a person of flesh and bones and therefore an individual. That individual may also use a pseudonym, therefore not only differentiating the man from the author, but in some cases also for the sake of anonymity. Since 1994, the year the Luther Blissett Group was founded, a new possibility has been introduced concerning co-individuals and multiple-use names.

Luther Blissett, in fact, was a multiple-use name for five years from 1994 to 1999. In the last year of Luther Blissett’s life, the Group published a best-seller entitled *Q*. But let us go on in the correct order. What exactly is a multiple-use name? Multiple-use names are *signatures* that the *avant-garde* proposed for serial use during the Seventies and the Eighties. The most common are *invented proper names*, which *anybody* could use, as *contests* or *identities*. The idea is to create a *corpus* of artistic works using this invented identity.

The multiple-use name Luther Blissett frequently appeared in the news in the Nineties, as it was the signatory of thousands of scornful, artistic and media performances, which were expressly created to enlarge Luther Blissett’s myth. These performances were only partially controlled by the members of the Group, and so they were possibly not in accordance with the original project. In fact, the fundamental proposal for the project was based on the idea that *anybody* could be Luther Blissett, becoming an authorized follower of his conspiratorial and trans-media adventures. However this could clearly lead to problems with the concept of the name as a unique reference: anyone could be Luther Blissett, a person whose picture is disclosed. This picture is a mere *collage*, designed by five Italian artists, who are destroying the classical figure of an author, deciding to share this fictional identity with anybody interested. However, it should be mentioned that Luther Blissett was not the first multiple-use name. The Italian group Luther Blissett, which created this multiple-use name, was the one which first brought the extreme consequences as we shall see later of using multiple-use names.

Karen Eliot, the first multiple-use name which appeared in the artistic world of the American avant-garde at the end of the Seventies, was different from that of Luther Blissett. The reason is that before becoming a multiple name, it had been the name of a famous Anglo-Jamaican football player, who played in the Italian premier league for A.C. Milan and also won some caps for the English national team. In this case, we have a name which loses its unique reference: in fact *anyone* could be Luther Blissett, but we are also faced with a name which from a unique reference turns into a multiple reference. This innovation in the universe of names is worth further investigation. Here, I will discuss some observations which I hope will add another piece to the complex puzzle of the name, as used in this present time.

If the football player Luther Blissett was a man of flesh and bones, then the multiple-use name Luther Blissett is just an invention. But his actions are completely real and true and could be included in the sphere of reality. We may talk, in this case, of *fictional creation*, as in Luther Blissett's storyline, and this storyline is used by the same writers that handle the football player's name; Luther Blissett will be the leading actor of several events devised by the Group to spread its myth. So, what would seem a fictitious creation reaches a higher level of complexity which is the level of fictional *creation*, where real and imaginary fiction alternate in an inseparable manner. If once we were able to include the author's artistic work together with the world's representations, the *fictional creation*, we now have an entity which includes in itself both of these dimensions.

The Luther Blissett project has a difficult situation with the writer Giuseppe Genna, who literally takes into account what was said by the five Luther Blissett founders, using the name of Luther Blissett as his own signature for an essay which was published by Mondadori, long before the original would reach bookshops. A fascinating problem of attribution then arose. If anyone could be Luther Blissett, and for example Giuseppe Genna decides to use the name without being entirely subject to the rules of the original project, what happens when a book is signed with the name of the project? The Luther Blissett Project put an end to its history at the beginning of 2000, after having published the novel entitled *Q* with the name of Luther Blissett. This novel was a bestseller, not only in Italy but also abroad. It is interesting to note that the main character of *Q* changes his name during the novel more than ten times. Analyzing the novel will allow comprehension of Gert-from-the-Well, and the ever-changing names of the main character in *Q*, being a sort of *alter ego* of the writer Luther Blissett. This obviously leads to an intricate situation: a group of writers who are real people concealed behind the figure of a fictional author. This creation of a fictitious character trying to turn into the legend Luther Blissett's figure. In fact the novel has its turning point when the antagonist of the main character *Q*, thanks to "media hype" of the name, falls into a trap.

The two antagonists, *Q* and the multi-named hero, who confront each other throughout the novel, seem to be the main characters of a "psychic" war. In fact, Thomas Munster at the end of the first chapter and during his capture pronounces the prophetic sentence of insubordination towards the pre-constituted authority: *Omnia sunt communia*. This sentence is a reminder of the famous *querelle on No Copyright* of which the five Blissetts were the undisputed leaders. It is interesting that at the end of the novel, while Gert-from-the-Well hides in Turkey, Giovanni Pietro Carafa, with whom *Q* maintains a dense correspondence, as *Q* is a spy paid by Carafa himself, wrote in 1559 the *Index Librorum Proibitorum* (a list of forbidden books), the last vexation of a system, that of the Holy Church of Rome, which did not allow the free circulation of ideas. And from this perspective, we need to read a novel which, if not adequately interpreted, risks becoming an adventure bestseller.

We will never know the Christian name of the main character. We should be satisfied with analyzing the partial truth, which is contained under each of these false names, or even better, names partially true, keeping in mind the following parts of the novel *Q*:

“The names are the names of the dead. Mine and those who have walked winding paths.” (Blissett 2003, p. 2)

It is almost as if the names that remain always connected to the person using them, whether false or true, seem to predict the impossibility of human experience. In fact, according to the book, the unique possibility which remains with *Q*'s main character is to have a name only for a short time. Therefore, heading off possible enemies and detractors of his work. In the end, the only way to survive seems to be to give themselves a different name for every season of their life. Here we meet a hero who is *faber fortunae suae*. But let us go on step by step, seeing the onomastic changes of this character. Here is the first name, which we know the hero as, who escaped from Frankenhause and entered at Eltersdorf:

“Eltersdorf. I've got a room, a plate of soup and a new name: Gustav Metzger. I'm still alive, I don't know how. I won't be setting off again for a while.” (Blissett 2003, 12)

“By now I automatically turn around when people call me Gustav, I've become accustomed to a name no less strange to me than any other.” (Blissett 2003, 13)

These whirling changes of name are not as one right away may be tempted to think exclusively addressed to giving invisibility to a man who commits insurrectional acts against the pre-constituted power of the catholic Roman church. This is just the surface of Luther Blissett's allegory. In fact the sentence “a name that is not anymore mine belongs to anybody else” moves together with Luther Blissett in co-individual expectations and with his fight against copyright.

In Blissett's *Q* the proper name of a person, originally a single reference term, is not the same as we know it. Something has changed: if I want to change my identity, taking the name of Gustav Metzger, a name which our hero made his own, I can. Hence, a name not within copyright, which can be linked to the key sentence of the book *Omnia sunt communia*, can therefore belong to all. The immediate consequence is that even the name is subjected to the same rule. The first name chosen by the main character is Gustav Metzger. Gustav Metzger and Luther Blissett are people who really existed. The football player Luther Blissett was well known by the five components of the Italian group. And moreover Gustav Metzger is well known in the artistic world as one of the leading figures of auto-destructive art. A concrete example of this art must be remembered. Metzger in the year 1961, during a performance at London's South Bank, threw some acid onto three nylon canvasses. These canvasses corroded entirely within fifteen seconds. And this is the reason why Gustav Metzger is the first name appointed by The Luther Blissett group for their main character. In fact the last change of name will be subject to identity auto-destruction as it had been in Luther Blissett's time. Already from the first proper name the concept of *nomen omen* and above all the classic definition of proper name must be newly considered. If we would like to consider the proper name Metzger as a *nomen omen* (and not as in the case of Metzger which means butcher in English) then we should say that it pre-announces what the main character “will not be” rather than what “it will be”.

“Names of the dead. I first read them in the Scriptures, and they flashed out of the pages of books, merging indissolubly with the joy in the eyes of the sisters, assuming the luminous expressions of their children, the sharp, rough profiles of peasants and miners liberated in the Spirit of God.

Jacob, Matthias, Johannes, Elias, Gudrun, Otilie, Hansi.

“Names of the dead, now. I will never have names again, never again. I will not bind the truth to the corpse of a name. That way I’ll possess all names. I’m alive today in order to remember them, and I can listen to the rain beating on the roof while another autumn passes and Eltersdorf prepares itself for the snow, the icy cold that will come on the heels of this last hot breath.” (Blissett 2003, 35)

In these words stands the close experience of the onomastic subversion present in *Q*. The name, and what it contains, is compared even to a corpse. Reflection is important and relevant when looking at this point: in a world – that of the media – in which yesterday’s news is already obsolete, continuous onomastic change is nowadays probably the only possible existence for the proper name. So, if at its origin the proper name was a celestial body which illuminated the novel universe, according to Luther Blissett the proper name could be nothing else than a supernova imploding on its mad course.

“Squares, roads, bridges, palaces, markets. People, dialects and different religions. The road through memories is hazardous and bumpy: they’re always ready to betray you. The dwellings of the bankers in Augsburg, the gleaming streets of Strasbourg, the indestructible walls of Münster... it all comes back to my mind confused, disconnected. It wasn’t even me; it was other people, with different names and a different fire in their veins. The fire that burned right down to the bottom.” (Blissett 2003, 59)

And the same will be for the other names that the main character of *Q* will adopt himself during the intricate course of the novel. And in the novel our main character will always have different names during the historical period of the Counter-Reformation: in Mühlhausen he will be Lucas Niemanson (in German son of no-one), and in Augsburg for a short period he will be Thomas Puel, and then in Strasbourg as Lienhard Jost, an Anabaptist prophet that really existed and Melchior Hoffmann’s disciple; who afterwards, escaped from Strasbourg, became Gerrit Boekbinder (in English Bookbinder), nicknamed Gert-from-the-Well, and even now we have a name of a real historical figure. The nickname from the Well takes its origin from a brawl. Our hero, thrown into a well, succeeds in reaching the surface and defeating his aggressors by using the pail in the well and the chain to which the pail is attached as a contusive weapon.

Gert-from-the-Well becomes captain because during the siege of Münster he is one of the leaders of the armed revolt that the Anabaptists unleashed in this town. But even in this battle Gert-from-the-Well is defeated. During some exciting phases of the revolt, the rebels abducted the wives of both Councilor Wordemann and Burgomaster Judefeldt. To parlay for the rebels will be Gert himself with the name of Swedhartho the locksmith. But even in this event the revolt of Münster will be held back and Gert will be compelled to escape to Antwerp, where he will be taken in by Lodewijk de Schaliemaker. On his suggestion Gert changes his name: the new one is Lot, “the man who never looks back”, for Gert makes the vow of never coming back to Münster. Lot, together with Lodewijk with whom he will become a friend, commits fraud against the Fuggers by creating false letters of credit and translating them into money. It will be Lot himself who cashes the credit with the false name

of Hans Grueb, a name which probably originates from Hans Gruber, a character from a very popular action film of the Eighties entitled *Die Hard*.

Hans Grueb discovers that a betrayer has infiltrated in every organization which he has taken part in, with the aim of destroying his plans. His name is Q. Therefore a false name is not enough to defeat the enemies. It also takes a clever strategy in which the name will be the key.

This leads Gert-from-the-Well to the creation, in the third part of the novel *Q*, of a 1538 Luther Blissett. To fight against Q, a power symbol, the use of his own means is needed. Therefore Gert who becomes, in the meantime, Ludwig SchaliEDEKER, settles in Venice, where he prints copies of the subversive book, “Christ’s benefit”, which is the equivalent of the novel *Q* in a romantic pretence. This is to divulge the new subversive ideas and to contaminate whoever touches it. And so while Q monitors the diffusion of the book for his mysterious goals, through an investigation reported in his diary, he begins to follow the traces of a certain Ludwig SchaliEDEKER, struck by a name which evokes for him ancient memories. To these memories Q will be able to give a form after long meditations.

“Clearer memories: Eloisius de SchaliEDECKER. Wittenberg, more than twenty years ago, a man who came to challenge Luther and Melancthon. He was the talk of the whole university, because of his strange notions about sin and perfection. [...] Lodewijck de SchaliEDECKER, alias Eloisius Pruystinck, alias Eloi.

“Roofer by trade.

“Suspected of the distribution of heretical books, of denying the substance of God, of denying sin, of insisting on the perfection of man and woman, of practicing incest and concubinage.

“Burnt at the stake as a heretic on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1544, along with many members of his sect, the so-called Loists.

“The German I am looking for is a dead man who fills an entire file in the archive of the Antwerp Inquisition.

“The dead man is now the titular owner of a luxury brothel in Venice.

“The German I am looking for travelled through these parts during the years of the Anabaptist revolt [...].

“I should have killed you then. Only that way could I have expressed my supreme respect for your deeds. Only that way would I have been able to help myself, fifteen years on, almost at the end, from wanting to see once again the fire in your eyes, feel the cold blade of your sword, Captain Gert-from-the-Well.” (Blissett 2003, 228, 246-247, 250)

It is clear at this point of the tale that Ludwig SchaliEDEKER had been a name purposely used by Gert who wants to lure Q into a trap. Therefore the hunter Q and Gert as the prey act in inverted roles, when our main character takes possession of the information circuit by a particular onomastic use, as L. Blissett did in reality, using a name which was already known but over-identifying it.

The “over-information” of a proper name is typical of the communication guerrilla. And the communication guerrilla was one method of the group of the five writers largely applied, as stated by Luca Muchetti in *Storytelling*:

“The communication guerrilla [...] takes place in the communicative process for subverting it, using several techniques of semiotic distortion: subverting affirmation,

multiple names, camouflage, plagiarism and collage operate on the basis of two fundamental principles: estrangement and over-identification.” (Muchetti 2007, 113)

But the analogies between Blissett and Schaliwedeker do not finish here. In fact, Blissett also controls the media with various performances including false information for the production of concrete events by entering in possession of the so called network of events.

“The invention of false information for the production of real events as a method for disclosing and criticizing the mechanism of hegemonic production of media and political images of reality. This method over-exceeds the forms of analysis and explication of information and alternative information as it does not attack the actual representation of determinate topics, rather the invention of false information has to be taken as a joke about the mechanisms by which politics and media socially produce events.” (Autonome Afrika Gruppe, Blissett, Brunzels 2001, 46)

The appearance of a prophet who divulges the teachings of Christ’s benefits now monopolizes the attention of Q. The name of this prophet is Tiziano Rinato (in Italian *rinato* means ‘born again’) or Tiziano the Anabaptist, and our main character personifies him. So Tiziano Rinato is a fake, but he has real followers.

“A German. A German, whose presence may perhaps explain the origin of the idea of the second baptism.

“(An Anabaptist?)

“A German who says his name is Titian. Who hands out copies of the Benefit of Christ Crucified and rebaptizes peasants.

“Titian the German.

“The Fondaco dei Tedeschi in Venice. The frescos painted by Giorgione and his pupil Titian on its external walls.

“Our Anabaptist is a German living in Venice. Like a needle in a haystack.” (Blissett 2003, 225)

Thanks to this intricate expedient, Gert manages to attract Q who falls into his trap. Therefore our main character wins his battle against the secret spy of Giovanni Pietro Carafa who despite everything will be elected pope. A small but important victory for our main character who by the end of the novel finds refuge in Istanbul, together with the Miquez brothers, two Sephardic Jews who accompanied him during the last part of this adventure. In the epilogue of the novel, Gert gets the name which seems to be a final one. So ends the romance Q. And I think now proving that Luther Blissett and our multi-named hero overlap. Further support is given by Wu Ming 1, an original member of the Luther Blissett project. Wu Ming 1 in fact defines multiple names as a medium which opens out the deep message of Luther Blissett’s experience.

“We have considered a definition in a broader sense of mass media. The medium was the Luther Blissett legend itself. We didn’t have a radio station, we didn’t have a TV channel, there wasn’t even an official website – [lutherblissett.net](http://lutherblissett.net) came along later – because the medium was a multiple name: a viral medium auto-reproducing itself which had, as a communicative method, the gossip, the birth of contemporary legends. We didn’t need to have a specific medium because we had an oblique one which could use and cross them all.” (Muchetti 2007, 206-207)

In the end, this whirling change of names is not only a provocation to pre-established laws, as the main character, thanks to names, is difficult to punish, but it is also a communicative strategy of a fighter that takes control of new media not totally becoming a winner, but neither a loser.

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Giacomo Giuntoli  
Università di Pisa  
Italy  
[giuntolir@tiscali.it](mailto:giuntolir@tiscali.it)