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## «MIGRATION» AS INDETERMINACY AND POSSIBILITY IN «PORTFOLIO TORINO 2002»

### MIGRATION AND THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

In June 2000, Vincenzo Castella received a grant to execute *Portfolio Torino*<sup>1</sup>, a photographic project portraying the visible and visual transformation of the urban fabric in and around contemporary Torino in preparation for the 2006 Winter Olympics.

Castella decided to photograph the city, of which he had no personal recollection or available narrative<sup>2</sup>, as a series of seemingly topographic views.

The artist scrutinized the city from above by selecting a point of view that could duplicate the perspective of the utilitarian, impersonal observatory which is familiar to the denizens of the tops of buildings and to tourists visiting the city's monuments.

From his perch, Castella contemplated a changing Torino, a city in waiting, a city dreaming of its 21st century. The rhythmic succession of Baroque architectural designs can easily be recognized from this height, as can the violent intrusions of modern buildings, the open spaces threatened by superfluous traffic signs, the antennas, the vehicles, those irritating modular constructions, and, further away, other shapes and colours that overlap before breaking down, melting and almost evaporating on the horizon.

From the top of the most conspicuous structure, the artist witnessed a slow migration of forms, a sequence of open spaces, and a flood of colours, as if they were magnetized on frosted glass and transposed into a frame. It was an image in the making, a horizon of (im)possible daily life, a chaotically vibrant coming-and-going; in other words, the irksome chromaticisms we insist on calling a city.

*Portfolio Torino 2002* seems to present the complex phenomenon of «migration» of elements. It is not just a translation of figures and forms from the material world into images, but a reiteration of a more complex «migration» that takes place rapidly in space. It is the invisible nomadic process going on in the contemporary city, which causes three-dimensional shapes, forms and voids to look alike regardless «of culture and geographic latitude»<sup>3</sup>. And thus we discover that many other (not only European) cities and their forms, colours, traffic signs and events inevitably and fatefully inhabit cultures and geographic latitudes everywhere.

But how are we to understand this migration, this simultaneous apparition that is perceived and then represented by the Neapolitan artist in his «nomadic» images of cities? What theoretical supports can we invoke to begin to define and then understand a phenomenon which ensures that a subject developed in the culture of one area will simultaneously be found in another, even though no conventional transmission involving planning and intention has occurred?

The theory of art may be of assistance as a reference point.

### THE PROBLEM OF «MIGRATION» IN VIKTOR SKLOVSKY

In the USSR of 1924, which was seething with harsh political debate and ideological conflict, we find none other than Leo Trotsky himself drafting an attack on the school of Russian formalism founded by Viktor Sklovsky and Roman Jakobson, who had both been accused by the Marxists of developing a superficial, philosophically erroneous aesthetic theory that was reactionary and (above all) anti-Marxist<sup>4</sup>. The arrows of Trotsky-on-the-warpath are particularly aimed at a brief essay written by Sklovsky entitled, *La mossa del cavallo [Knight's Move]* (Berlin, 1923) in which the theorist of formalism discusses the phenomenon of theme migration and demonstrates the ineffectiveness of Marxist sociological analysis by theorizing the independence of art.

Sklovsky analyses the migration of themes frequently encountered in poetic texts, novels, short stories and narratives - including oral traditions - of different cultural groups (Persia, India, Egypt) in various epochs. According to the formalist theorist, the theme of a poetic text (or the subject of a work of art) knows no boundaries, is quickly spread, crops up in different languages, and can even be expressed simultaneously by poets belonging to different races, and even in widely separated historical periods. Sklovsky confirms: «Themes have no fixed abode!»<sup>5</sup>

The migration of themes was a real menace to the Marxist interpretation of art. For this reason, Trotsky first attempts to undermine this powerful argument, first by minimizing its importance, and then by countering it with the concept of «spontaneous creation» and explaining the phenomenon as an upsurge of popular creativity that is widespread in different cultures.

Yet this explanation overlooks the central point of Sklovsky's analysis: what «migrates» is not *only* the theme but also its narrative *development*. The migration of a story, in fact, is not partial but total in nature and involves the complete sequence of events and very structure of the story.

The concept of the «so-called migratory themes» represents the first fundamental step toward the development of formalist theory, which examines *how* an *work* of art is constructed rather than understanding why a work is done, as the Marxists purport.

*I photograph a city which perceives itself as photographed.*

Using the framework of a series of polished surfaces, *Portfolio Torino 2002* reproduces the constant, ongoing migration occurring in the contemporary world. The artist invites us to examine another way of looking at things by leading us to discover in Torino a type of architecture or suburban intersection that reminds us of Milan. Or is it Amsterdam? Or Naples? The answer is all of them, because the ramp of this beltway also belongs to an image of Genoa, even though it ultimately recalls Madrid. Thus, Castella's photographs pay homage to and include all the great cities in Italy and Europe, as they are all referenced in a single frame.

Except for the fact that this transposition of architectural designs and urban modules reproduces not only the nomadic movements of forms, but also a dense intermingling of points of view and gazes.

What I basically recognize in these images is the materialization of a complex visual process which has me looking at these photographs as if my gaze were reflected back at me, and I found myself confronting a portion of the visible world which is looking at me. As I look at this image, I recognize that I am caught up in a criss-crossing network of other gazes, of visual trajectories that intersect and return my initial gaze in multiplied form. It is this «invisibility» made accessible that catches the eye.

*Il visibile e l'invisibile*<sup>6</sup> [*The visible and the invisible*] comes to my aid by explaining that the «I» who gazes at an image perceives a being simultaneously from behind and beyond the gaze itself; that is, the ego perceives its involvement in a process of scrutinizing the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the visual is in fact a reversible phenomenon; what I look at, looks at me. It communicates and considers itself within me.

*Portfolio Torino 2002* thus exemplifies diverse migrations, namely of the forms and modules of the contemporary city as photographic editions; of multiple perspectives of the nomadic; and of the functioning of visual perception itself.

What is crucial in these images is that the invisible is made tangible, and that the void which swallows up the images is presented as connective tissue...a transparent membrane that both joins and contains everything in the world. It is this invisibility made accessible that constitutes the true subject of visual perception and the heart of Merleau-Ponty's theory of vision. The philosopher explains that seeing means accessing an all-encompassing invisibility, of connecting with the *chair du monde*, a pulsating latency that connects the ego with everything else in the world and not only with the mind.<sup>7</sup>

#### THE RESPONSIBILITY OF VISION

In the mid 1920s, Sklovsky was not the only theorist to stop and reflect on the phenomenon of «involuntary migration» of the narrative story line, which we can also understand as a form of (mental) energy which can spread unbeknownst to the author himself and move through time and space.

We do not know whether the Russian theorist was aware of the scientific theories taking shape in Europe at same the time as the controversy involving story lines. These theories were based on an analysis of the «nomadic character» of sub-atomic particles of matter. In 1925, for example, the idea that the invisible in the world of the infinitely small moves and «behaves» according to strange laws inspired young Werner Karl Heisenberg to come up with a mathematical formula explaining the *bizarre migrations* typical of the microscopic universe. The results he obtained initially disconcerted the German physicist and future Nobel prize winner to such an extent he even thought of destroying them. In 1927, Heisenberg developed the *uncertainty principle* based on his formula. It was to be one of the fundamental tenets of quantum theory, which recalls the migratory theory of art and of phenomenological perception.

As in art, observation is fundamental to quantum physics. In quantum physics, however, reality does not exist until it has been observed, and as soon as it is observed, it has changed. Observing reality implies the very condition for its transformation. It is no accident that quantum physics has also been called the «physics of possibility».

Fred Alan Wolf emphasises, «...[in quantum physics] observation is the decisive factor because it transforms every object in the world simply by paying attention to it.» And he concludes, «In the quantum world we live in, every time we observe reality and all it contains, we create profound mutations and alterations that ricochet across the entire universe.»<sup>8</sup>

It is worthwhile to reconsider the phenomenon of visual migration and its philosophical implications in order to find an ethical side to looking at and being in the world.

1. *Portfolio Torino 2002*, (2000-02), 10 chromogenic prints, 550x700 mm, 2/2, in the Collection of the Historic Archive of the City of Torino.

2. Louis Marin, *Mémoire sans souvenirs* in Paola Tognon (edited by) *Vincenzo Castella Photo Works*, Silvana Editoriale, Milan, 2003, p.30.

3. Artist's statement, 2000.

4. Leo Trotsky, *La scuola formale di poesia e il marxismo* [*The formalist school of poetry and Marxism*] in Leo Trotsky's *Literature and revolution*, Einaudi, Torino, 1973.

5. Sklovsky cited in Victor Erlich's, *Russian Formalism*, Bompiani, Milan, 1966, p.108.

6. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Il visibile e l'invisibile*, Bompiani, Milano, 1969.

7. For the French philosopher, vision is not explained as a purely cognitive phenomenon, and consequently its philosophic implications may prove useful for resolving problems raised by the latest research in neuroscience and aesthetics.

8. Fred Alan Wolf, *Matter into Feeling*, Moment Point Press, Needham, Ma, 2002, p.148.