

The two towns of Venice

An exotic aquarium fish

“Venice is fish-shaped“, it is said. As a fish it swims in the lagoon, it goes below sea level and it re-emerges to breathe, it looks with curiosity and greed at the tourists – who advance with their masks and cameras – ready to withdraw like a hermit crab into its shell. The metaphor of the fish well suits Venice, not only for its geographical structure but especially because the fish, as a domestic animal, shares a similar fate being trapped in a wonderful case, embellished with coral and sea treasures, without the possibility of moving to the open sea – unlike the *Serenissima* which sailed around the oceans a long ago.

And Venice appears just like an exotic adventure to many of the tourists who arrive for a short stop, just the time to cross the main road and find a triumph of three-light windows, *gondolas*, luxury and *souvenirs*. The aquarium being an incomplete representation of the sea – often suiting the tourists’ taste rather than the needs of the fish living in it – in the same way Venice is more a representation for tourists than a town that expands according to the needs of its inhabitants. Almost confined in a crystal ball, those who live in Venice risk being prisoners of a mirage, actors of the self-representation that the town gives of itself rather than citizens.

What connection is there between those who pass through the town, or who stay for a short time, and those who live and work permanently in Venice? Every day in the centre of the town around 60,000 inhabitants, 10,000 students, 15,000 users of holiday homes, 12,000 tourists and some ten thousand commuters share the same space. How to distinguish between the two towns of Venice: the Venice of the tourists and the Venice of and its inhabitants? Two different worlds: exotic and commercial the first, provincial and cosmopolitan the second. The “two towns” actually are separated by spatial and time barriers, which are defined yet fluctuating: the border between the two areas consists of passageways and places of exchange assuming the dual value of inclusion/exclusion spaces.

Like many other tourists, I first entered Venice by that long entrance called *ponte della Libertà*: it’s a pier on the water, separating Venice’s centre from *Terraferma*, a bridge towards the unknown, a passage to the past. Whether in a car or a train sluggishly jolting in the direction of *Santa Lucia* station, the bridge is the place of the toll, more metaphorical than real (the charge for buses, the parking fee in *Piazzale Roma*). Entering a town of art for the first time, in a jewel of the past well-preserved up to today, is like entering a museum: while leaving your haversack at the entrance (the car or the bus in the parking area), there are those who ask themselves if the cost of admission is proportional to the wealth and the rareness of the exhibited treasures, those who don’t share the idea of collecting the art works in a museum to pedagogically induce visitors to an aesthetic experience, those who prepare for an exotic experience, under the romantic illusion that he/she will discover a detail that the common watcher will never see, and those who are only curious or who fear a disappointment owing to the similarity between Venice and Disneyland (it’s a common place).

In my first tour – I was just a child – I asked myself how could it happen that the car was suspended over the water and if that water was as deep as the sea or only as a summer flood and I watched without understanding those wooden piles immersed in the water. All those questions, together with the slowing of the means on which I moved, made me feel suspended in the indeterminacy between separation and estrangement. In anguish I turned my attention from the sea to the land we were leaving behind our shoulders, as if to measure the distance separating me from terra firma, that more familiar, surer and stable place. The suspension, the feeling of emptiness, the wondering, the time slowing and the shortening of the space are still the more vivid experiences of every return to Venice, a necessary break to live a reality that is different and separated, but not just like an art

work that is locked in a museum stands out from an art work that is integrated in its context of origin.

Bodily and aesthetic experience

Moving in Venice is firstly a bodily experience: anyone going there for the first time remembers the tiredness after a long walk or the physical contact with unknown people in the most crowded places, or even the cool breeze on their face, the light causing them to squint, the noise of voices and footsteps, the smell of water and of the canals, the many bright colours. The abundance and the novelty of sensory stimuli intensify disorientation, that the unusual space disposition arouses: it's no use having recourse to a GPS navigation system or to the common map, only walking and moving makes understand what Venice really is. The town has neither a square nor a circular layout, the centre of it is not in the centre, the main street is not straight. North and South, East and West have no significance: there are no different railway stations to indicate the main directions (like in Paris or in London), just one station to find the way out.

The experience of visiting Venice often depends on the length of the time one disposes of, on average 2-3 days. That's why one usually follows the recommended itinerary, to maximize the vision of the art works in the shortest possible time. There are two main routes, one for getting in and one for coming back: one is via waterways and the other via land – the *Canal Grande* to *San Marco* and the *Strada Nuova-Rialto-Frezzerie*. None of these ways is either direct or straight, but walking them without detour will inevitably lead one to form a 'touristified' impression: Venice-postcard (aristocratic and out of time) or Venice-tourist-catcher (a mass of *souvenir* shops, restaurants, hotels and *pizzerias*). This is not a recent destiny, starting at the times of the eighteenth-century painter Canaletto – the writer Tiziano Scarpa says – when the maritime supremacy of the *Serenissima* ended and a new age began: the age of entertainment.

It was at that time that Venice began to deal in a new article, itself, and to self-represent in the *souvenir* paintings for the foreigner purchasers who came and visited it as an exotic, folklore town. As Tiziano Scarpa pessimistically comments, Venice – as the whole Italy – has become “a place that only sells trips, holidays, cultural pilgrimages without producing anything but its own image”¹.

Those coming to Venice often have an ambivalent experience: the corporeity could underline the distance from the mass tourist experience, but the shortage of time at hand (inversely proportional to the cost of staying in the historic centre) favours sticking to the fixed ways of displacement. Therefore the wayfarer's experience in Venice risks becoming an aesthetic experience of an autistic, self-referential and solipsistic kind; it stands out from a bodily experience in the same way as going for a ride in a *gondola* “to experience the emotion of going in a *gondola*” distinguishes itself from catching a *gondola* to get to the other side of the canal².

The boundary: inclusion/exclusion

Venetian residents live in a parallel dimension, separated in space and time from the tourist dimension, though closely interlinked. Suggesting the two “fixed” ways to tourists confines them to one side of the town setting the other free, so that inhabitants can move without meeting too much crowd, souvenir shops or hotel luminous signs. This physical separation, apparently relegating the tourists to a commercial area with its concentration of economic activities that offer reception, restoration and entertainment, turns into its contrary: it isolates the Venetians in a mirror ghetto. A ghetto generally originates in an attempt to isolate someone in some area of the town, as a normalising reaction to something exceptional³. The ghetto in which the Venetians are confined or in which they close themselves as a reaction to the tourists' invasion is not surrounded by high walls but by crowds crossing the two main ways: water and land. The normality of the ghetto consists in

the suspension of the commercial exceptionality of the *Canal Grande*, of the *Strada Nuova*, of *Rialto* and of the *Frezzerie*.

The specificity of Venice could then be described starting from the analysis of a boundary crossing the town, an analysis of those water and land ways representing both an appointed passage (therefore a forced point of intersection between tourists and inhabitants) and a 'state of exception' that ends up by turning into a normal dimension. Each boundary has two sides which are often in contradiction: that's why it is the space of the "misunderstanding", a neutral zone operating as both an inclusion and an exclusion mechanism⁴. The *Canal Grande* and the route *Strada Nuova-Ponte di Rialto-Frezzerie* are two fluid boundaries shaping the layout of the historic centre of Venice and dividing it into two different towns: one for the tourists and one for the inhabitants. A maybe anomalous boundary, being open but well defined: a place of passage more than a protective barrier, a corridor of encounter/confrontation, a zone of contradictions in which everyone loses and gains something though there are neither winners nor losers.

A boundary usually separates two groups: anyone who crosses the boundary is a stranger. But who is a stranger in Venice? The tourist is not a stranger, considering that what's foreign is not "the wanderer that comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather [...] the person who comes today and stays tomorrow"⁵. As the architect Piero Zanini says, if a boundary turns a foreigner into a stranger⁶, the tourists in Venice would not be considered as strangers, were it not for the borders that segregate them. But how do the suggested itineraries become mechanisms of segregation? Tourism being one of the pillars of the Venetian economy, the segregation of the tourists – if it occurs – can't aim at the expulsion of the tourist: the exclusion can take place only after the inclusion in the town.

As a boundary, the suggested tour (the fixed land and waterways) has a double function: it takes the guests to their destination (favouring their transfer) but isolates the tourists in a restricted area with the double purpose of limiting the occupation of the ground and of supporting commercial activities. The tourists complain of some changes made by the *Associazione Comunale per i Trasporti di Venezia* concerning the transfer along the *Canal Grande*: the increase of the price of the *vaporetti* and the institution of a new line reserved for Venetian residents. Beyond the economic, political and environmental grounds for these choices, it's interesting to see both a common element and an essential difference between them: they redraw the border represented by the *Canal Grande* and reallocate spaces. The latter measure allows the Venetians to re-appropriate the *Canal Grande* after the tourists have invaded it, thus strengthening the border and the idea of a necessary separation between the "two towns". The former measure is ambivalent: on the one hand it reduces the separation between residents and tourists, on the other it increases the passage via land. To save money the tourists can take out a monthly subscription to the public transport that allows the same purchase conditions and the same journeys as the residents. This could allow the tourists not to have the status of strangers or of travellers unable to find their way around to their destination. The increase in the price, apparently unfavourable for tourists, could induce them to leave the fixed waterway with the risk/advantage of finding some Venetians not involved in tourist business. On the other hand the tourists might decide to walk: through the fixed way via land they would be confined once again, thus contributing to the flowering of trade along the *Strada Nuova* and to the transformation of Venice into a new Disneyland.

If the exclusion consists of casting someone out, far from the centre, perhaps in Venice the boundary doesn't exclude and marginalize the tourists but the Venetians, who move over more distant zones, far away from the station or *Piazzale Roma*. The houses in the centre of town rarely belong to the Venetians: they are often holiday homes and hotels, signs of a progressive marginalization of the residents, who move far away from the boundary, that is to the *Giudecca* Island or to the margin of the area called *Castello*. The resident then becomes a stranger, he/she is

an outcast, whose small privileges reveal a status of minority, an attempt to regain the lost ground or not to lose any further ground. The Venetians thus pay a price for selling themselves and their town: it's the giving up of their space, their creative acting, their independence in favour of tourist business and speculation. That's why Tiziano Scarpa compares the Canaletto's basin of *San Marco* to a photograph of the square swarming with tourists; in both pictures he sees an exotic image prepared for tourists: "the revenge of Europe on Venice"⁷. This revenge could be seen as a transformation of the space, an occupation, a redefinition of the boundaries according to the tourists' taste or maybe the requirements of international travel agencies.

No man's land

This double marginalization – the tourists forced to *San Marco*, the residents deprived of their space – leads to a "no man's land" that surrounds the boundary and moves it, making it fluid and always new. It's the land of those who live in Venice without residing, who move from one *sestiere* to another depending on the availability of rooms and flats to rent: students, seasonal workers, immigrants, public workers, professionals. It's the land of unclear, undefined borders where those who come to study and work in Venice for a short period of time arrive bewildered and discover the contradictions of everyday life. In Venice the majority of inhabitants go on foot or by boat and speak in dialect, the cultural planning is not different from that in an international city and it is possible to meet or to find friends at the bar like in a small town. Venice has a rather high accommodation capacity but people who work there have difficulties in finding a well illuminated room without water infiltrations. And as the crow flies displacement of five hundred meters might take several minutes, both for lack of a bridge or for the crowd on holidays; however a woman can walk alone at night with no fear and one can get lost or discover previously unseen *calli* even after a several years stay.

The inhabitants of this "no man's land" don't belong to either of the "two towns", nevertheless they make Venice alive and younger, they make love: all this in a cohabitation stimulating the bodies and breaking pre-established spatial attitudes. Here the aesthetic experience gets bodily shape and turns into an erotic experience of the town, which is not only an object of contemplation but also an object of real pleasure, a field of contemplation and especially of action. Only a bodily experience starting from the passive admiration of beauty and culminating in the production of something beautiful can guarantee creativity and innovation. Only the erotic experience of those who arrive in Venice as incomplete people, looking for something, meant to satisfy not a need of belonging but rather a will of change, can infuse life and love into the town and can force Venice beyond the self-representation. Living in a "no man's land" then is more a state of the soul than the occupation of a space with physical boundaries, it's the bodily experience of a fringe and anomic place and at the same time a point of contact, that is the starting point of the search for an alternative to the boundary in a dimension compressed into and spread throughout time.

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NOTES

¹ Tiziano Scarpa, "Venezia, già Disneyland 300 anni fa", *Il Corriere della Sera*, 12 marzo 2008, p. 49.

² Scarpa, p. 49.

³ One could analyse the mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion that characterize this ghetto starting from the reflections on the "space of exception": it is the space in which what is excluded is included through its

exclusion (“ciò che in esso è escluso, è, secondo il significato etimologico del termine eccezione, preso fuori, incluso attraverso la sua stessa esclusione”). Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer*, Torino: Einaudi 1995, p. 190.

⁴ Piero Zanini, *Significati del confine. I limiti naturali, storici, mentali*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori 2000, p. 92 ff.

⁵ Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, transl. by K. H. Wolf, London: The Free Press, 1950, p. 402.

⁶ Zanini, p. 62.

⁷ Scarpa, p. 49.