(In)visible cities: subjects, visions

Giorgio de Marchis
Università degli Studi Roma Tre
giorgio.demarchis@uniroma3.it

Maria Paola Guarducci
Università degli Studi Roma Tre
mariapaola.guarducci@uniroma3.it

Giorgio de Marchis is Head of the Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures and Cultures at Roma Tre University where he teaches Portuguese and Brazilian literature. He coordinates the teaching programs “José Saramago” and “Agostinho Neto”. His fields of research include the first and second Portuguese Modernisms and nineteenth-century literature. He has also worked on contemporary Portuguese and Lusophone narrative and, from 2001 to 2013, he coordinated the contemporary Iberian Narrative Series for La Nuova Frontiera publishers (Rome). He has translated many Portuguese, Angolan, Brazilian and Mozambican authors.

Maria Paola Guarducci teaches English Literature in the Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures and Cultures at Roma Tre University. Her research areas include African literatures in English (South African in particular), relationships between the British literary canon and the Empire, Black British literature. She has published articles on J. Austen, W. M. Thackeray, J. Conrad, S. Beckett, S. Selvon, G. Lamming e M. Ali. She is the author of Dopo l’interregno. Il romanzo sudafricano e la transizione (2008) and has recently edited the Italian translation of Joseph Conrad’s The Planter of Malata (2017).
I like maps, because they lie. 
Because they give no access to the vicious truth. 
Because great-heartedly, good-naturedly
they spread before me a world
not of this world.

As Nelson Brissac Peixoto states in his *Paisagens urbanas* (2003), cities are “the” contemporary landscapes. If this be the case, we can hope to catch their deepest nature only through foreign eyes and ears, as the emperor Kublai Khan does in Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* while listening to Marco Polo’s tales about what he saw in the course of his explorations. All our efforts to describe the urban space from a suitable and familiar point of view run the risk of ending up in a simplified list, if not in a chaotic accumulation of details, maybe precise and circumstantial, but totally irrelevant. “Newly arrived and totally ignorant of the Levantine languages, Marco Polo could express himself only with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder and of horror, animal barkings or hootings, or with objects he took from his knapsacks – ostrich plumes, pea-shooters, quartzes – which he arranged in front of him like chessmen” (Italo Calvino 1974, 21). Perhaps, the only way to “tell” the contemporary metropolis as a site of passages and crossings, avoiding a simplified description, is to do so from Marco Polo’s perspective; that is, translating into words or images what the newcomer sees: s/he who does not master the map ignores the local languages and nonetheless wants to communicate the wonder and the horror as if experienced in that precise moment, because – deprived of intelligible words – the stranger is compelled to recreate the incomprehensible, which is to say the indescribable.

Acquiring, therefore, a characterized and de-centred point of view is the issue here. In order to listen to a city tale capable of unveiling the least familiar aspects of the space we inhabit and we pretend to know it, we must lend an ear to the first impressions of those who come last, following the example of John Berger, who in his fascinating report on the 1975 rural emigration in Europe wrote:

The city is larger than he imagined, with more people. He is conscious of the will which is required to pass through it. Nearly everyone speaks the same language as he does, uses the same words; yet there are already unfamiliar things: kinds of fish such as he has never before seen on sale in the market: extravagant tableware in a shop window: cakes and sweetmeats in strange forms. Increasingly what he encounters will be unfamiliar. He sees many others like himself, who have come this far and then stopped. (John Berger 1975, 40)

If the aim is to be able to see new things, the artistic portrait of the city – in literature as well as in visual arts, music, multimedia – is therefore a fiction that acquires meaning and shape according to the point of view of s/he who arrives and recounts what s/he sees for the first time. The auroral gaze on the city informs the special features of the portrait it presents, outlining hidden traits and spectacular aspects at the same time; private, intimate and unique marks, but also collectively relevant characteristics, which are such because they were originally thought of that way, or because of the use people made of them, in time and possibly unconsciously. The city, which is born out of an act of “realistic” planning is, however, also the site of utopia and dystopia, it is an open and ever changing place, threatening and welcoming,
familiar and undecipherable. The urban space - unlike ghost cities, urban ruins from ancient times or the extreme contemporary “fake cities” – is, per se, a manifold and elusive arena because it is crossed and changed by time, because it is metamorphic and irregularly fragmented with its gentrifications and abandonments, re-qualifications and new forms of neglect, homologations and intense characterizations. However, because of its many contradictions and its versatility, the city is a privileged topos in all forms of art whose meanings, we believe, are enhanced if scrutinized through the critical lens of today. Often conceived in female terms as a territory to conquer, to explore, to seize, the city – one should not forget – is a space originally planned, plotted, mostly by men, “naturally” for the benefits of male subjects or, at best, for an abstract collective identity codified according to normative standards ruling out all so-called minorities (whether numerical, cultural, political or of any other kind). Rescuing such points of view is, today, an urgency one can no longer ignore; it means, as a matter of fact, enriching/enlarging the perspective, introducing within one’s horizon an otherness which complicates in a constructive and exciting way what we make of what we see: a living object which is seen in new ways and acquires deeper implications. Through the heterogeneity of the vision on the city, it is contemporaneity itself that, we think, is being rewritten.

As editors we have to arrange the articles in a linear “Table of contents”. Still, we are aware that this issue of de genere provides multiple and alternative paths throughout the proposed contributions on so many different metropoles. Each article, in turn, “converses” with different forms of expression such as cinema, novels, poetry, paintings, graphic novels, photography, etcetera. Since we are skeptical about maps claiming to organize space while in fact – as Wisława Szymborska’s lines say in the epigraph – they only defuse, neutralize and falsify it in order to give us a world which does not belong to this world, we believe that the reader should create her/his own itinerary, drawing her/his temporary geographical and conceptual map(s), according to her/his own desire and appeal. In the essays we selected, we often cross figures of flaneurs/flaneuses and we would like to think that the readers also could stroll, critically, across this issue of de genere, choosing each time which path to take. Istanbul, Montreal, London, New York, Cape Town, L’Aquila, Boston, Kiev, Lisbon, Amsterdam or ‘New Babylon’ are, after all, but the reflection of a vision merging in the urban space and interpreting it, redrawing it, facing its criticalities, imagining it and therefore consistently discovering it. Only from this point of view we can tentatively sketch a distribution of the articles along a geographical and historical line moving up and down among past, future, and present.

Artistic representations of urban spaces are prompted by a consistent dialectic between personal and collective memory, negotiating between the erasure of memories, historical traces and the hyper-realism of virtual plannings, finally producing an asynchronous archive of memories (Vallorani); forced to live together, indulging or clashing with the unavoidable legacy of the stratified gazes and picturesque visions surfacing from the past (Almas). While there are very ancient cities that cannot be seen through a virginal gaze, nothing forbids the drawing of imaginary metropoles, multiple topographies without geographical boundaries (Souto), heterotopies where the tensions provoked by global capitalism come to the fore (Cardoso) or else utopian afflatuses rooted in history but at the same time also traceable in contemporaneity (Terrenato). However, if the city is “the” contemporary landscape, it seems clear that the present is made of counter visions claiming their rights to full citizenship. This is
still the case with the perspective of women, migrants, people with sexual orientations differing from the so-called norm (Giorleo, Leff, Paoli, Michaeli). The contemporary urban space is undoubtedly characterized by complex identities and it is the site where languages and cultures meet and need to translate each other in order to interact (Sofo).

We decided to close the issue with a narrative piece on L’Aquila. This is a deliberate choice. The smallest city among those mentioned in this issue is indeed a clear-cut example of the dangers that any urban centre runs, whether it has suffered an earthquake or not. L’Aquila – which is not a metropolis – seems to tell us that all metropoles breath out of an incessant metamorphosis and a continuous (re)construction. If we fail to translate all the vital elements that cross them, we will most surely petrify an exciting work in progress and transform them into an immovable and funereal load of ruins.

Works Cited