

**“Re-imagining Civita di Bagnoregio, the dying city:
a visual experiment in reversing the de-realizing effects of
images”**

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Paper presented at the RC21 International Conference on “The Ideal City: between myth and reality. Representations, policies, contradictions and challenges for tomorrow's urban life” Urbino (Italy) 27-29 August 2015

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cycle of death and destruction

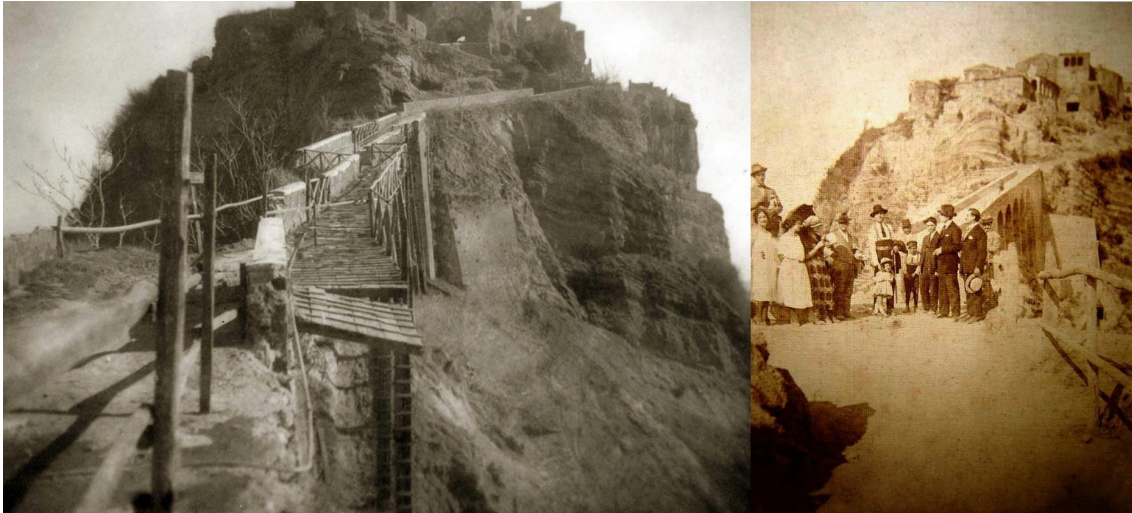
Civita di Bagnoregio is a small town located in central Italy and characterized by a complex environmental history. The town is located on the top of an unstable tuff hill. The peculiar geological conformation, and the dangerous action of two small rivers (Rio Chiaro and Rio Torbido) that erode the hill's clay slopes, transform Civita into a particularly fragile ecosystem. Devastating earthquakes, collapses, and landslides are definitely part of the archetypical core of the town's history and structure. Watchtowers, city walls, churches, monasteries, huge portions of the residential area and more than two third of the original size of whole town have crumbled in the surrounding valleys.

These hostile natural conditions have gradually lead the settled/local community to abandon the town. A phenomenon that underwent a huge acceleration after the Second World War, when a large modernization process in the whole country deeply changed the economic and productive infrastructure of the area. As in other Italian small towns, and maybe paradigmatically, Civita experienced the abandon of the countryside, the disintegration of the rural world, the depopulation of the town and the dispersion of its community.



A progressive environmental and social decay seemed to irreversibly affect this fragile territory. Nevertheless and retrospectively it is possible to outline how this fragility is what actually preserved Civita from other violent devastations that modernity was inflicting all through Italy. The isolated and confined little town in fact survived the condominium, buildings, garages and paved roads that have been destroying large portions of the Italian landscapes. As a result, nowadays, Civita appears as a well preserved and coherent medieval center, that miraculously stands on the top of a precarious hill as an object of growing wonder and curiosity. Based on these particular

characteristics, in the last few years this historic small town has been originating an increasing interest: an unimaginable growing number of tourists are drawn to Civita, attracted by its unique environment made of terrific sceneries, intact historic morphologies, mystic atmosphere and never-ending cycle of death and destruction.



global tourism

The tourism is an important phenomenon that is deeply affecting the way places are transformed, lived, imagined and conceived: a multiplicity of social, cultural, economic, as well as urban processes are connected to the material and immaterial circulations that characterize the global present. Such a phenomenon is continuously producing significant territorial effects along with often underestimated transformations of the imaginative hierarchies that cross the globe (Borghi, Celata, 2009; Urry, Larsen, 2011). This is also the case of Civita di Bagnoregio and its sudden transformation into a mass tourist venue. Some numbers can immediately depict this radical change: six years ago Civita was visited by 42.000 tourists; in 2014 there was a stunning rise of the number of visitors up to 450.000; in particularly crowded periods the small town host up to 13.000 people per day; during the Easter weekend of 2015 Civita had more tourists than the Coliseum. In a town where the resident population amounts to only 7 people, these numbers are pretty shocking. They configure a double identity for a town that is depopulated and hyper-populated at the same time: an hospice during winter, and a tourist village during summer.

What is also surprising is the international characterization of this tourist inflow. A growing amount of Asian tourists, mainly from China, Corea and Japan, are choosing Civita as an obliged stop for their Italian holidays. They invade the narrow streets of a town that is now inscribed in the map of the global tourist destinations together with Rome, Florence, and Venice.

This huge tourist presence has recently transformed the local economy. If up until the '80s the town relied just on one bar, this new phase of the history of Civita is characterized by the proliferation of commercial activities and accommodations: 2 bars, 6 restaurants, 11 bed and breakfasts, and 7 souvenir shops have been opened, mainly by the initiative of some local residents. In fact, due to the rise of tourism, the same local population who left the town years ago is now coming back to Civita: a place where to launch entrepreneurial activities or to work in the new tourism-related economy, and

also, for some, a place where to live again. The new tourist facilities are housed in ancient buildings recently restored, and as a result a brand new real-estate market has flourished, along with an incoming process of gentrification. The houses prices are increasing and the 40% of vacation homes are currently owned by wealthy foreigners, mainly from US (but also from France, UK, Germany, Turkey, Brazil, Poland).

In the last years, the local municipality recognized in the rising tourism economy a cash cow. Consequently they tried to develop a sort of “tourism reflexivity” (Urry, Larsen, 2011): a set of procedures and strategies that “produce, invent, market, and circulate” the tourist image of Civita di Bagnoregio. A fierce policy of city branding/marketing has been pursued: number of folkloristic events and commercial initiatives have been patronized and intensively promoted on local and national media, as well as on the Internet. Furthermore, since 2013, the access to Civita has been charged: just before climbing up the hill, the tourists have to pay an entry ticket, that despite its small amount (1,50€), seems to suggest the transformation of the entire town in an open-air museum. Finally, on the top of a hill that faces Civita, a web-cam¹ has been recently installed, making world-wide available in real time the panoramic image of the town, in a sort of voyeuristic surveillance of the decaying cliff.

According to Borghi and Celata (2009), the tourist attractiveness of a place depends not only/not so much on its physical characters, on its resources, or on its accessibility, but above all on the signs, representations, and narrations that translate them: through representations, in fact, cities and territories are not simply depicted, nor described, but also produced, changed, invented.



¹ <http://looks-civita-di-bagnoregio.com/webcam-live-civita-di-bagnoregio/>

This consideration is of great help to illuminate the current situation of Civita. Indeed, notwithstanding its physical isolation, and its small scale facilities, Civita is experiencing an impressive transformation into a tourist attraction just when its iconic image “epidemically” (cfr. Zizek, 2004) enters the global mediascape. Advertised as the “dying city”, the image of Civita is spreading indeed all around the globe at a truly amazing rate: the panoramic view of the precarious cliff dominated by a handful of buildings, is increasingly disseminated by documentaries, news reports, films, fictions, advertisements, as well Internet resources and social networks.

In a time of global circulations, the rise of tourism is sanctioning the passage of Civita from the pre-modernity directly into the post-modernity: from a time of local culture and rural economy, to a period where global economies are dominated by a mix of visibility and spectacle.

media and hyper-visibility

Images have played a central role in the emergence of Civita as a global tourist destination. During the last six decades, a variety of different visual sources, practices, languages, and technologies, have been visually portraying Civita: more or less intentionally, a stratified process of images production/multiplication has been disseminating the fame of Civita at a global scale. As a result this little town, relatively unknown till recently, started attracting an increasing numbers of visitors coming from all over the world.

This process can be dated back to the ‘50, with the development of the first video and TV technologies. At that time Civita started being visually depicted particularly because of its dramatic history. These representations were significantly based on a visual narration of death: the core story of this town.

In 1953, the Italian newsreel “La Settimana Incom” produced the first video report on Civita called “A town which disappears” (“Un paese che scompare”). The goal of this visual report was to document the difficult situation of a town struggling for its survival. The town is represented with its hopeless inhabitants: poor farmers living a decaying environment. The camera focuses on a landscape of ruins, vestiges and decrepit houses. The “city in agony”, as described by a voice over, is depicted in black and white images. In this dramatic visual record, Civita di Bagnoregio appears as a rural, isolated world, constantly facing threats and dangers. No future is imaginable.

A similar tone persists also in the work of Bonaventura Tecchi. The well-known writer invented the slogan “Civita, the dying city” (“Civita, la città che muore”) to recall attention towards his tormented hometown. It was a synthetic and alarming description of the frightening conditions affecting the town. Tecchi used this motto in a early video documentary (“Tuscia minore”) he created in the 1951 for the Istituto Luce. The same motto appeared in capital letters printed upon all the road signs leading to Civita. In the following years, Tecchi' s slogan has resonated in many other video reports on national (RAI) and international TV channels (among others, BBC, CNN, TF1, NHK), as well as in a number of newspapers printed all over the world. From this perspective a wide range of media have been functioning as powerful amplifier of an emerging territorial myth. Civita ended up transforming it self into the “the dying city”. A slogan/image that has been originally conceived to recall the attention of the public authorities was then increasingly used to promote the town in tourist ways. Since then “the dying city” has been, in fact, used as a marketing strategy that has progressively colonized the imaginary on Civita. The spectacle of death, as offered in these early visual documents,

has become a source of massive tourist inflows. Nowadays people come to see “the dying city”. They expect to find a life-less ghost town made of ruins. And sometimes they surprisingly discover, with some disappointment, that people live there.



But the “dying city” is not the univocal representation of the town that ended up creating curiosity and catalyzing the interest of tourists. Since the ‘60 another powerful depiction of Civita has been created and diffused by a variety of different media. In this visual representation Civita emerges as an untouched, historically coherent and original medieval town: a place beautifully frozen in a mythical past. Many films and TV series portrayed this image.

Among others, the Italian movies “I due colonnelli” (Steno, 1962), “Non ci resta che piangere” (Troisi and Benigni, 1984), “L’uomo delle stelle” (Tornatore, 1995), “Il racconto dei racconti” (2015), but also the Brazilian soap opera “Terra Nostra” (2003) and the Italian miniseries “Pinocchio” (2009), were filmed in Civita. In these cases, the town was chosen as a perfect pre-modern scenography for stories set in the past. The charming medieval scenery was a perfect location for this purpose: the perfect ancient setting. All these visual representations contributed to diffuse and emphasize a tourist imaginary aimed at portraying Civita as a perfectly preserved historical urban center. In these images the past becomes a stationary iconic figure, and the present is banished. There is no space for contemporary living practices. No space for transformations or other forms of identifications/significations. The celebration of Civita’s medieval and pre-modern dimensions is purely formal. A celebration that transformed Civita in a silent and frozen background that expelled its life.

Within this powerful and frozen representation of the town, even some social practices have been frozen and falsified to stress the sense of historical authenticity. Its’ the case

of an important local tradition, the “tonna”: a donkey race that traditionally takes place twice a year, June and September. These dates are connected with specific religious events that characterize the history of this town. In occasion of the “The Amazing race” (2013), a famous US reality show (broadcasted on BBC with about 10 million viewers per season) a faked version of the “tonna” was staged out of the context/time in which it usually takes place. Everything has been falsified to please TV audiences. The image of the town has been, once again, built on the spectacularization of the past. An element of the history of Civita has been selected, unearthed, simplified, and offered to a global audience, with the result to nourish the appetite of mass tourism.

This reality show is just the last meaningful example on how the image of Civita had been globally built. A myth that has been produced and disseminated world-wide reaching unimaginable audiences. The Brazilian soap opera, the US reality Show, the Belgian Thriller “Holy Money” (2009) and the US film production *Vij* are just a few pieces of a multi-located visual making process. This process shapes new audiences and consequently it creates new tourist inflows. This global construction of the image of Civita can somehow explain why the attractiveness of the town is arousing at such a disorienting and astonishing pace. Local inhabitants observe that every video production broadcasted somewhere is followed by new waves of visitors. It is what is happening with the increased number of East-Asian tourists that presumably are drawn to the town because they’ve been attracted by the image of Civita that has been portrayed by a famous Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki. His “Laputa” or “Castle in the Sky” (天空の城ラピュタ) depicts, in fact, an hill town magically suspended in the sky and inspired by the particular morphological conformation of Civita. Civita is also described in a manga “Ichigo Mashimaro” (苺ましまろ) created by Barasui and initially published on the monthly *Dengeki Daioh*.

Nowadays, the “dying city” is internationally known not only for its natural, deadly plagues, or for its medieval urban form, but, more broadly, for its picturesque, well ordered beauty. In this vein, the most indicative examples are maybe the advertising campaigns that are using Civita as a setting: a colorful ancient town, suspended in time, plenty of perfect flowers, well restored buildings and warming stone streets (as in the promotional video for a well known Italian jam, or in advertising campaign for an Italian fashion brand). The celebration of the picturesque is indeed a core component of the image industry and the consumer society that constitute the tourist realm. In a world where numbers of tourist destinations compete among each other to attract visitors, the picturesque emerges not only as a visual construction that informs representations with a certain kind of pictorial beauty: the picturesque is the visual construction aimed at marketing, at selling beauty.

Such consideration came to our mind while attending the public presentation of the promotional video about Civita that the Lazio Region has presented at the Expo 2015, the Universal Exposition currently held in Milan. Recorded by a drone, emphasized by an epic soundtrack and without a narrating voice-over, this video displays the town’s historic buildings, the piazza, and the surrounding landscape, in a fluctuating image sequence where the viewer is alternatively brought to approach the hill from the sky, to overlook the roofs and the gardens, and then to sink into the streets, to float around walls and flowers, and then again to fly away towards the sky and the valley. Notably, the human presences detected are mainly tourists, recorded while strolling along stone alleys, taking pictures, resting in the piazza, or simply staring at the town. In this captivating video no landslides, no falling roads, no destructions, appear: just «beauty»,

as the Regional President Nicola Zingaretti called it, the beauty of a clean and ordered medieval town, «frozen in time», where the sight of the drone (or maybe that of a tourist?) hastily moves on exclusively in the search of some charming corners to be captured. In this institutional representation, the ongoing process of the “death” of Civita is visually concealed by the portrait of an attractive, picturesque and consumerist venue.

The visual construction of Civita as a global competitive tourist venue is exemplified also by another Regional promotional video made for the Expo 2015. The video has been built to promote the most beautiful places of the Lazio Region. Significantly the video starts with the image of Castel S. Angelo, one of the Rome' most known monuments, immediately followed by the picturesque image of the hill of Civita, as a way to suggest that the small town already belong to the map of the places that have not to be missed.

museification

As outlined, the stratification of these global images have played a major role in transforming Civita into a mass tourism destination. They celebrated the picturesque, the tradition, and the past but also the death that has become in itself a spectacular object offered to the voyeur gaze of the tourists.

In doing so, these images ended up freezing the very same identity of Civita. The picturesque and the tradition have been strategically advertised as tool of territorial marketing. The fetishism of the past has been able to attract unbelievable numbers of tourists transforming Civita into a life-less object to contemplate and venerate in the distance: an object rooted in a mystified and mythical past. As a result Civita di Bagnoregio has been de-realised through the multiplication of fake images that have been strategically used to attract people. What Civita is facing today is a museification of its landscape: a trivialization of what once was a complex socio-cultural system. Everything is flattened into an inert image. A postcard. The simulacrum of what doesn't exist anymore. Nowadays in fact the living and stratified social and economical environment of Civita have been progressively substituted by a multiplication of fetish-images that are astutely used in an interconnected global market. Life has been expelled in favor of a reification of the town. In this expositive staging, the act of seeing substitutes the act of living. The risk is to reduce Civita to a fossil that can be exposed on a showcase. A theme park built through diffused aesthetization processes that are not just produced by selected groups of intellectuals or artists. Rather they concern large portions of population. The cultural tourism is transformed into a cultural consumption that leads to a festivalization of the town: a spectacular venue turned into a modern cathedral of consumption.

Beyond the actual “Museo delle Frane” (“museum of landslides”) created inside the town, it's Civita in itself that risk to be transformed into a museum. According to Agamben the Museum is not just a physical place (building) with collections and exhibitions, but “the separate dimension to which what was once — but is no longer — felt as true and decisive has moved. In this sense, the Museum can coincide with an entire city (such as Evora and Venice, which were declared World Heritage Sites), a region (when it is declared a park or natural preserve), and even a group of individuals (in so far as they represent a form of life that has disappeared)” (Agamben 2007: 84). Civita can be interpreted as paradigmatic example of this museification process. A process that implies a separation, an estrangement. The Museum is, in fact, is where it is

possible to see what has been subtracted to life. It is the exhibition of an impossibility of using, of experiencing, and as such it occupies exactly the space and function once reserved for the Temple as the place of sacrifice. “To the faithful in the Temple - the pilgrims who would travel across the earth from temple to temple, from sanctuary to sanctuary - correspond today the tourists who restlessly travel in a world that has been abstracted into a Museum” (Agamben 2007: 84). In this Museum, experience has been expropriated and is no longer accessible. The only thing you can do is to see relics, objects, postcards: a reified world that denounces an impossibility of use. That’s why Agamben emphasizes a profound difference between the Temple and the Museum. “While the faithful and the pilgrims ultimately participated in a sacrifice that reestablished the right relationships between the divine and the human by moving the victim into the sacred sphere, the tourists celebrate on themselves a sacrificial act that consists in the anguishing experience of the destruction of all possible use” (Agamben 2007: 84). In a museified world, each place unabashedly offers itself to the gaze as a monument. Each place is voraciously consumed by tourists/voyeurs. Each place become object of a new religion.



“Insofar as it represents the cult and central altar of the capitalist religion, tourism is the primary industry in the world, involving more than six hundred and fifty million people each year. Nothing is so astonishing as the fact that millions of ordinary people are able to carry out on their own flesh what is perhaps the most desperate experience that one can have: the irrevocable loss of all use (Agamben 2007: 85). From this perspective Civita deadly displays itself: it’s an altar that bans any other possible use than the act of seeing. More specifically Civita is a Museum where past, tradition and death are fiercely and falsely exhibited. It is globally advertised through images that endlessly multiply these characteristics. People come and watch, despite the authenticity of what is displayed.

The celebration of the past, in fact, freezes and counterfeits the little town. It’s the paradox of a tourism that ends up destroying its object of desire. We are talking about a

falsification that paradigmatically permeates the re-construction of fake “historic” building. A falsification that also strategically stages some social/ritual practices (see the fake remake of the “tonna” described in the previous paragraph), impose simulated versions of the past, and offer synthetic histories that produce an officially sanctioned form of cultural memory.

As a result Civita appears as a collection of simulacra: copies of the originals that never existed. Copies built to please the hunger of the tourists. Everything seems to be performed to look authentic. Everything is immersed in an indistinct dimension floating between the real and the fake. Everything is decontextualized, reconstructed, performed, simulated, reduplicated and continually renewed and recycled to appeal the tourist gaze. Everything is de-realized through the mass multiplication of images that freeze the territory of Civita into a lifeless and counterfeit postcard.

De-realization: loss of reality

The role of images in the tourist spectacularization of Civita is very controversial as we tried to outline. Images convey fake and frozen representations of this territory. They contribute to a process of de-realization that needs to be fully understood and theoretically framed. This paragraph and the following one are aimed at framing a debate on these issues.

Many theorists and philosophers (Adorno, Anders, Debord, Baudrillard) have argued that the de-realization of the world we live has been caused by the multiplication of mass-media images. According to this theoretical framework, the technical reproduction and the capillary diffusion of images end up threatening the very same concept of reality. Cinema, photography, visual advertising, digital networks and television provide a representation/falsification of the world that is transformed into a reality-show. As a result, the reality beyond the images tends to disappear. As Gurisatti (2012) says: the more we see, the less we see. The more our lives are invaded by a florilegium of images, the more we become voyeurs and the less we directly experience the world. From this perspective, the visual pornography of the world leads to a dangerous disappearance of reality.

Adorno is one of the philosophers who succeeds in powerfully outlining this theoretical position. He paradigmatically demonizes the role of cinema that would be responsible in producing inurement, in atrophying fantasy, in inhibiting imagination, in counterfeiting reality. According to Adorno (1972), filmic images create the illusion of closeness to reality. It’s the “illusion of reality in the lost of reality, the illusion of the presence in the lost of presence” (Gurisatti 2012: 104) that blurs the boundaries between reality and falsification. Adorno’s pessimism is particularly evident when he critiques the sneaky and subtle capabilities of images in colonizing people’s mind. This colonization acts under the level of consciousness of the users who confuse the illusionary reality conveyed by images and the reality itself. The philosopher outlines that the most deceitful danger is when images appears transparent, readable and complete. This fake adherence to reality makes people unable to recognize the manipulative and conditioning power of images themselves. It makes people losing contact with reality in irreparable ways.

Adorno is not alone in depicting the de-realization produced by images as an alienating illusion. Anders (2003) emphasizes how images transform the world into a *ghost* that creates seduction and apathy through the loss of sensibility, comprehension and experience. In this framework the “distinction between image and reality is abolished”

(Anders 2003: 134): reality works as a fiction and fiction as reality. The result is a complete disorientation because images lose their connection with the world. And the world disappears beyond its image.

Moving along the path traced by Adorno and Anders, Guy Debord (1977) pushes these reflections forward. Our world has become a *society of spectacle* that is the reign of a separation: images are part of an independent sphere detached from reality and acquire a supremacy by subjecting human beings to themselves. The spectacle in itself produces impoverishment, enslavement and the negation of real life. It is an “allucinatory social phenomenon” (Debord 1977) in which people are transformed into consumers/spectators: the more they contemplate images, the less they live. According to this perspective images are nothing but the foundations of our society. Everything exists and is accessible only because it is conveyed and mediated by images. The spectacle is not a collection of images rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images. These images are not superimposed to a substantial reality: they are real themselves. Reality is nurtured by spectacle, and the spectacle is real.

According to Baudrillard, images don't belong to the dimension of appearance rather to the dimension of simulation. They do not produce alienation anymore. They are not something to fight since they have already and pervasively transformed our world. Human beings have definitely become virtual. Our lives are ultimately part of a “socio-, foto-, and video-synthesis. Media are our chlorophyllian function” (Baudrillard cit. in Gurisatti 2012). These media codes are everywhere, inside each cell or mechanism. Their diffusion is fractal and virally epidemic. Reality has been radically substituted by a massive process of simulation where we face a loss of meaning. Nothing is true nor false. “True? False? Undecidable. This undecidability is part of every process of simulation” (Baudrillard cit. in Gurisatti 2012). What is left is a pornographic hyper-reality hungrily consumed by voyeurs. The world is transformed into a reality show where people are despoiled of their capability of imagining. The hyper-visibility, in fact, leaves no space to imagination. It just creates addictions.

De-realization: politically experimenting with reality

All the previous authors manifest a radical pessimism when they reflect on the de-realization process produced by images and media. According to them the de-realization is nothing but erosion and annihilation of reality. It is a distinctive aspect of an era characterized by the technical reproducibility of appearances (Gurisatti 2012). But the analysis of this phenomenon is not univocal. Other philosophers and visual theorist (Nietzsche, Benjamin, Vattimo, Schopenhauer and Foucault) tend to go beyond the apocalyptic, hallucinatory and terrifying aspects of the de-realization produced by images. They try to understand how to manage this process in a positive way, how to take advantage of its mechanisms through the definition of strategies that would be able to transform de-realization in a opportunity. According to these reflections, the de-realizing power of images is not only a loss but also a chance that needs to be pursued.

According to Nietzsche everything is a carnival, a game, and a dance of appearances that produce a diffused de-realization. Nevertheless all this nihilism has to be dealt with the maximum of optimism. The carnival has to be acted, the game has to be played, the dance has to be danced (Gurisatti 2012). In order to sustain these considerations, Nietzsche introduces a reflection on the mask. He says: “the world is composed only by masks” (Nietzsche cit. in Gurisatti 2012). The mask is not only something we use to hide, to camouflage, to falsify and counterfeit reality. The mask can be interpreted as a

practice of freedom, a radical creative process that is capable of offering transmutations, alternatives and new imaginative configurations. In this framework, the mask is not a real appearance that hides a real essence. “It is rather a new constellation of de-realizing and de-realized appearances [...]. It is the reign of appearances without essence” (Gurisatti 2012: 33) in which the masks never meets the face. This mask, which stands beyond essence and appearance, is a source of aesthetic/ethical optimism. It is jocund, happy and dancing like a Dionysus. It can be governed and managed by “the perfect nihilist” who is able to face the aesthetic abyss of de-realization.

Together with Nietzsche, Benjamin (1968) recognises in the nihilist de-realization not only a catastrophe but also the possibility of a salvation. He welcomes every possible communicative act that is able to reject the fetishism of reality, every possible image that is able to go beyond the worship of pure, unique, immutable and inalterable reality. In this respect images and photographs make the world transformable, changeable and communicable. The image that re-produces reality offers new combinations, new perspectives and new meanings. Its de-realization effects free the world. Benjamin is more than conscious that images are often used by the market to create a fetishist worship of goods: their commercial use produce reified and hyper-realized world. But images can also be politically used in de-reifying and de-realizing reality. They can be used to unmask the world and awake anesthetised masses. In order to reach this political objective, images have to be de-constructive e constructive at the same time. They cannot be a mimetic representation of reality. Rather they have to be radically revolutionary in experimenting with reality. According to Benjamin, the only way to transform shock in chance is the political capability of using the images as a tool to let people think, discuss, imagine.

Following on Benjamin’s reflections Vattimo strengthen the role of nihilism as an occasion of “a new possible human experience” (Vattimo 1985: 34): an occasion of emancipation. He rejects the twentieth century nostalgic resistance to de-realization. This attitude is seen as useless and regressive. On the contrary, what needs to be done is to remove all the limits that inhibit the full disclosure of de-realization. Vattimo celebrates the erosion of an essential, durable, certain and stable reality. This erosion is the only way to perform a drastic dissolution of the violent and dogmatic idea of truth. Images works in this direction: crushing, multiplying, contaminating and melting. The result is the construction of a world open to an unprecedented variety of possible interpretations. From this perspective the loss of reality is nothing but the multiplication of interpretative agencies. That’s what Vattimo calls de-realization. A process that requires an ethical sensibility to create spaces where different interpretation can potentially build a fecund dialogue.

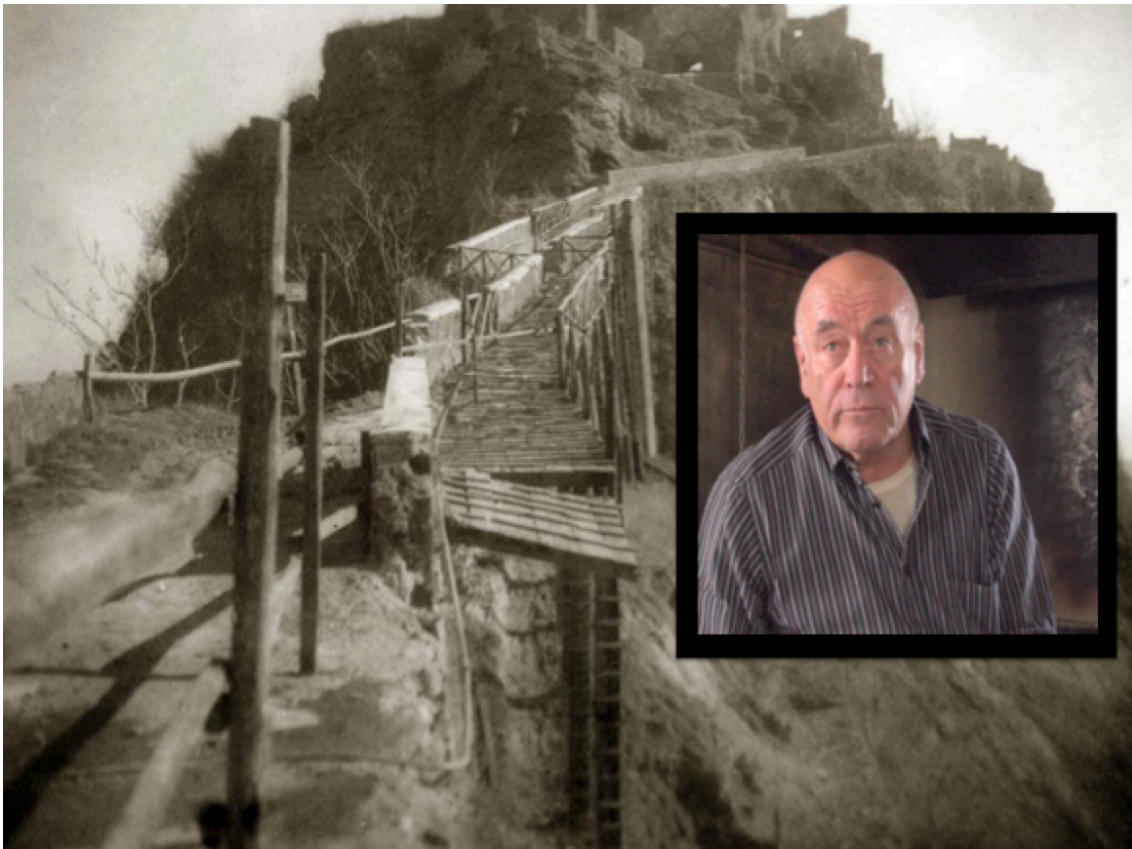
Living images

According to this latest conceptual framework, our research process is aimed at using images by positively working through their nihilist and de-realizing effects. Following Nietzsche, Benjamin and Vattimo’s reflections on the political and interpretative potentialities of images our goal is to create a set of “living images” of Civita that are potentially able to unfroze this territory. We are talking about an action research process (currently in progress) that will end up creating a multi-layered visual ethnography of Civita in order to offer alternative images, to transgress stereotypical representation of the town, to catalyze fecund conflicts, to mobilize a new dynamism and political

imagination. A contemporary urban imaging tactic that will produce a more complex portray of the history of the town as well as other ideas of its possible futures.

Based on previous research projects developed in other territorial contexts (Sandercock, Attili 2012, Sandercock, Attili 2012a; Sandercock, Attili 2012b; Sandercock, Attili 2013), the fulcrum of this research approach is the construction of a digital ethnography: an in-depth qualitative analysis of the territory that is portrayed and shaped by the use of digital languages. Post-modern ethnography feeds on the potentialities of new forms of technologies (ICT). The current technological organization level in fact cannot be thought of as an accidental or revocable phenomenon. It represents an influential paradigm that cannot be disregarded: “a new system of restraints and limits, but even of unpredictable and unprecedented possibilities, through which it is possible to undertake new paths of thought, action and behavior” (Gargani 1999: 16).

New media have the disruptive and intrinsic capability of contextually using different expressive languages. They seem complex scores of multi-sensory idioms that can be creatively re-assembled to express and communicate specific contents. Potentially, new media have as many epistemologies and languages as you can find in the world itself (Levy 1997). They represent an extremely versatile and dynamic container inside which it is possible to build complex “images”: forests of signs and communicative metaphors which are co-involved and inter-penetrated. The creative bricolage of media and diversified messages produce something more than the simple summation of these elements: it is a digital poetics that is germinative of new meanings.



Digital languages strengthen the expressive possibilities of ethnographies, connecting a qualitative study of the city to the potentialities of deeply communicative languages. Digital ethnographies are able to communicate narratives through aesthetic involvements which are crucial in urban interactions. They can give expression to inspiring stories which are potentially able to trigger further planning processes, showing possibilities and sense worlds.

From this point of view, digital ethnographies are creative and very delicate inventions that reveal meaning without committing the mistake of defining it. They circumscribe, without closing or labeling, leaving imaginative spaces open. "Like a space which contains and opens at the same time, like a spoken word and like a sense intention that is never concluded" (Melucci 2000: 112), digital ethnographies point at opacity, semantic fluidity, ambiguities that could give rise to different possible interpretations. All these characteristics are extremely important in awakening new imageries and in allowing people to creatively think about their own space, moving beyond maps, blueprints and schematics; moving beyond limited forms of interaction; taking advantage of the transformative, de-realizing potential of images themselves.

New technologies transform ethnographic analysis into a different communicative tool that offers a surplus of meanings and interpretations. It doesn't exhaust itself. It is not univocally determined. It never finds a precise answer. Each view finds another richness. It can be impregnated with what is not verifiable or inferable according to logic and scientific languages. This is an imprecise and arbitrary dimension that is not easy to grasp once and for all: the more you try to determine its essence, the more this essence withdraws, offering space for new interpretations.

Digital ethnographies embody the transition from rhetoric to poetics: it is a leap which allows the move from referential and argumentative languages to germinative and constructive ones. The potential result is the transfiguration of the world into a plot of "living metaphors" which plays a role in breaking acquired codes and in generating new grammars and meanings. It is not the outcome of aprioristic schemes. Rather it emerges poetically. The expressive and communicative characteristics of digital ethnographies create a space for the potential creation of fervent and pulsating metaphors: a creative filter which allows the cohabitation with what is inexpressible; a communicative act that is able to involve and connect people in a public discourse on the environments in which they live.

This is the main goal of our research approach: creating a dialogue on Civita by politically using destabilizing and transformative images. In other terms the images portraying the complex ethnographies of Civita will be used as a tool of community engagement and as a catalyst for public policy dialogues. "Beyond their life and their interests, far from their areas of competence, separated the one from the others, individuals have nothing to say. The difficulty lies in capturing them - both in the emotional and topological sense - in a group, and getting them involved in an adventure in which they take pleasure in imagining, exploring and building together sensitive environments" (Levy 1997: 131). The digital "images" constructed on the basis of ethnographic explorations can perform this task. They can be considered as communicative and relational devices: "devices which favour the development of the social bond through learning and the exchange of knowledge; communication devices designed to listen, integrate and represent diversity [...]; semiotically engineered tools which enable data constructs, know-how and the accumulated symbolic power to be tapped and exploited for the benefit of the majority" (Levy 1997: 133).

These devices invite changes, further narratives and particular perspectives to be introduced through dynamic forms of knowledge management in order to “explore certain paths and associative events considered pregnant with meaning not only in terms of their discourse, but also through sensitive methods. And all this can be done with the awareness that, seeing as reason does not determine all our actions, to create real communication spaces and induce action, words are not enough; it is rather necessary to transmit energy, allow feelings and emotions to palpitate, awaken sleeping aspirations, knowledge and energy by rediscovering the powerful role of the languages of art and poetry. Thus rediscovering the cognitive and communicative role of intense aesthetic pleasure not as an accessory or an additive, but as a founding element, the pivotal moment of every communication process” (Decandia, 2000: 216).

In this respect people’s involvement is based on the potentialities displayed by images and their capability of creating aesthetic pleasure. These images are tools that recall sense-making processes. They are intended to awake anesthetized perceptions, to let people think differently about the environment they live in, to foster radical creative process that is capable of offering transmutations, alternatives and new imaginative configurations. It’s an occasion for Civita to rethink about itself, going beyond its dangerous museification.

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