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## City centres and peripheries in Pier Paolo Pasolini and Paolo Volponi

Mario Sechi

In an old number of a company publication from the early fifties, *Esso-Rivista*, which published writers and technicians, scientists and artists, playing its part in a renewed industrial culture addressing the significant problems of post-war reconstruction, I came across an interesting article by the painter Renzo Vespignani entitled *Periferia industriale* (Nov.-Dec. 1951) in which the theme of the new metropolitan peripheries was dealt with in a seductive and positive way. Vespignani's thesis is that large non-industrial cities, Rome in the first place, originate their modern vitality by setting in motion the creative force of machines on the margins of the territory, rather than suffocating them within factories. Cranes and concrete mixers, amongst the warehouses and tram depositories, the gasometers and freight depots, loom before the eyes of the painter as powerful agents of innovation, ready to dig and work the landscape, thus transforming the life and imagination of its inhabitants. We are still a long way from the alarm provoked by the building speculation which would accompany all the phases of the economic boom, and I would like first to allude to Calvino's excellent book *La speculazione edilizia* (1958) on the destruction of the Ligurian coast caused by the spread of the new mass bourgeoisie's holiday homes. At the beginning of the post-war revival, in the optimistic and industrious climate created by the Olivetti Community

Movement, amongst those involved directly in industry, urban planners and sociologists, the idea reflowered of a potentially harmonic relationship between technology, production and progress. Enormous scope for the progress of the entire system was attributed to the new frontiers of research and planning (think of the peaceful use of nuclear energy, invoked and pursued as an alternative to the nightmare of atomic weapons). A value was even assigned to the impetuous growth of the construction belts surrounding the old city centres.

The name of Vespignani (the painter) will now be flanked by the far more famous name of Pier Paolo Pasolini (poet, writer and then director) in order to delve deeper into the contribution made by artists, of word and image, in deciphering the new sceneries of modern Italy. In his fifties Roman novels (from *Ragazzi di vita*, 1955, to *Una vita violata*, 1959), Pasolini, it is well known, depicted the painful open conflict between the bourgeois heart of the city and the sub-proletarian shanty towns of the suburbs. The latter was a world cast aside, teeming with explosive tensions, which development proved incapable of keeping under control. In this half novel, half reportage, the outskirts of the city emerge at once devastated and devoid of form, a grouping together of shanty towns, new blocks of council flats, old warehouses and workshops, shabby half-worked lots and strips of cultivation. One is dealing with an open frontier, mirror image of the profound angst attendant on uncontrolled change, which assumes anarchic and violent traits. And it is precisely the *pischelli*, orphaned adolescents by definition,

without a future, who populate Pasolini's Roman period (including his cinema from Accattone to *Mamma Roma*). They are the most authentic interpreters of the arduous transition that the Italian cities were undergoing in physiognomy and identity during the decades of the economic miracle. An ulterior problem regarding Rome was that, inevitably and objectively, it reflected the overall, controversial identity of the nation itself, the innumerable rifts, between north and south, bourgeoisie and common people, culture and massification, in short the anthropological reality of the entire peninsula. The *ragazzi di vita* (an untranslatable, compact Italian phrase, which means both rent-boys and life embracing youth) are not then an expression of marginal or residual reality deriving from some picturesque nineteenth century 'fourth estate'. They were a new, pathological excrescence of modernity. In their destiny of exasperation (today we would term it deviance) and death, the ghetto of life turns in on itself suffocatingly, without development. As far as Pasolini is concerned, I wish to focus on a single text, nothing to do with the novels or scripts, but rather with an extremely incisive poem, *Il pianto della scavatrice*, collected in *Le ceneri di Gramsci*, which won the Viareggio literary prize in 1957. To the best of my knowledge, the poem is the only one whose theme is the reality of a building site, one of the thousand upon thousand that were altering the face of our cities, disfiguring and making new, for better or worse, façades and streets, roads or residences, real and mental, of the common people. The scene of the building site appears before the eyes of the poet on his way home, following his normal

route, after a long walk through the popular and bourgeois quarters (Trastevere, Gianicolo, Villa Pamphili). As always, what directs the steps of the flaneur is the driving need for a dynamic awareness of spaces and of the masses which inhabit them (one is reminded of Umberto Saba and his carnal relationship with early twentieth century Trieste). Memories and visions overlap, resuscitating past voyages by car or bus from the suburbs, where he had his first extremely modest homes (the Hebrew ghetto, Ponte Mammolo, and Rebibbia), to the city centre, or taking in the wider perimeter of the city instead (Monteverde, Primavalle). The disorder, the strident contrast of the city's myriad faces, and the populations by which they are formed, are englobed in the mental image of an act of creative destruction, a stirring-up of the strata of tufa, mud and earth, from which there punctually emerges a new form of living and inhabitation. One should bear in mind the concept proposed by Leopardi, nature's assiduous effort to reproduce itself ad infinitum, indifferent to the pains of her children. Yet this concept must be transferred to human, not natural, activity, which in the modern age is a dream of reason and beauty, albeit also of the subtraction of life and imposition of models, standards and univocal norms of behaviour and taste. Thus, heard as the roar of an animal, the lament of the excavator bucket, surrounded by stone cutters, becomes a pathetic, angst-filled invocation to shared pain, standing as it does at the centre of a space destined to become a courtyard, a white and aseptic enclosure for the communal life of the bourgeoisie: "*Piange ciò che ha / fine e ricomincia. Ciò*

*che era / area erbosa, aperto spiazzo, / e si fa / cortile, bianco come cera, / chiuso in un decoro ch'è spento dolore. / Piange ciò che muta, anche / per farsi migliore. La luce / del futuro non cessa un solo istante / di ferirci: è qui, che brucia / in ogni nostro atto quotidiano, / angoscia anche nella fiducia / che ci dà vita".*

The poet's unerring awareness regards the mutation of human destiny that every new brick, every new building, block or condominium will bring with it. Hence the machine that pulverizes the ground and builds, the energy that drives it, acting against the background of social and cultural history in uncertain and painful evolution, assume the value of an enigmatic allegory. The experimental realism of Pasolini's poem, as the drawings and paintings of Vespignani (where in the latter nature indeed opens itself to the paraphernalia of industry and building with surprising generosity), sets off a chain of vastly significant questions; we will have to wait a long time for adequate answers from sociologists, architects, city planners, and environmental operators. What will be the long-term effect of this mutation of scenery, places, modes, and relationships with living space, that invests 'Italy of the Miracle' from head to toe? What will be the result of this new disturbing and disorientating transplantation of communities and individuals, uprooted and cast beyond the horizon of their cultures? The main character of *Una vita violenta*, Tommaso, like the mother prostitute and her adolescent son in *Mamma Roma*, once entered into the logic of adaptation to bourgeois respectability and order, and once doused their hopes for happiness in the petit-bourgeois dream of a flat in a condominium (the white

building of the INA flats), seem completely deprived of their turbid but authentic humanity. They become physically and mentally 'dislocated', derealized, in a word. The negative prophecy that the author projects onto his characters, perennially contaminated by a neurotic anxiety for normality, is a prophecy which may in part have a rational counterpoise in Enlightenment faith, but is nevertheless there, figuring as an incumbent prelude to a succession of verifications and definitions to follow. In any case, if poetry and the novel, cinema and painting, venture a problematic reading of the changes in the city, where these accelerate and intensify, this happens because the setting designated imposes such an effort. Every existential and social experience occurs within a given space. There is a rigid nexus of interdependency between mind and body, such that even the adventures of the consciousness have a material correlative, a *res extensa* that anchors them irrevocably. The French *nouveau roman*, Pop Art, the sixties Italian cinema of Antonioni and Ferreri, the prose and poetry of the Neo avant-garde, all have in common this suffocating, 'close-up' sense of spatiality, intended as disorder, an accumulation of materials and objects, the extreme artificialization of the gestures of living. The closed-in environment of the apartment is a landscape without openings to the sky and hence physically and millimetrically measured. Obviously not all the literature produced in subsequent decades surrenders, so to speak, to such a fatal narrowing of focus. An intellectual of vivacious and robust technical and humanistic culture such as Paolo Volponi proved himself

capable, with great originality, of deepening the lesson of Pasolini. The movements Volponi made during his career trace an important circumference of differing territories and fuel his strenuous, all-embracing theorization of the processes of change and innovation: from his homeland Urbino to Rome, then at Ivrea and Turin, from an extremely civilized and pensive central Italian province to the cosmopolitan centres of power, from laboratories of research and technology, eventually to the seat of command of a major car industry. The allure of the factory, to which the main character of the first novel, *Memoriale* (1959), a worker, lies subject, during the nightshift particularly, when it appears "*lucente ... come un pezzo di stella caduta ... con i suoi vetri e metalli, con le grandi arcate azzurre e tutte le machine in fila*", this and his trusting dedication to his machines and their fragile force, needful of the hands and brains of man, are the origin of a dream of transformation and liberation through science: the daring Utopia that the author from the Marches region was to pursue ardently for decades, motivating and re-motivating his profession as a man of letters and industry. The impact of new development on the entire environmental and cultural scene of the country gave rise in him to a series of far reaching questions. What is the quality, or rather the content of the knowledge and beauty incorporated in the new production lines? And the quality of the consumption itself? In the evolution of the market, what spaces exist for the development of research and innovation? What zones of freedom open up for work planning, and for the minds and material and emotional needs of the citizen consumer? Volponi's

profound conviction is that an effect of civil and cultural progress can be achieved through a virtuous chain reaction, from design to fabrication to the use of ever new machines in a constant state of evolution. He also sees, indirectly, a spread of knowledge and ability, both technical and creative and intellectual, capable of liberating human potential on the individual and community level. In other words, pragmatic education to the values of science, for Volponi translates itself into an extraordinary impulse towards liberation from fear, subjection, inertia and the drive to death (we are in the post-nuclear age) which overshadows the contemporary world. In his career as a novelist, Volponi stretches the arc of Utopia to the utmost, linking the abstract rigour of the above considerations to the psychology of irregular characters, anarchic and rebellious provincials, such as, one should not forget, were many heroes of Renaissance science, born in the depths of the Italian countryside, from Telesio to Bruno to Campanella. Against the brooding superstructure of religious superstition and academic culture, these threads of thought explode like missiles of solitary hope. Going beyond the disconsolate urban sociology of Pasolini, the author-manager's intention is, by narrating the adventure of thought, to scrutinize the trajectory of change, not only to understand its force, but also to direct it towards a fully human outcome. From the eighties, the parabola of a new cycle of economic and productive life, which seemed to set off a process destructuring the renewed post-war industrial system, appeared quite disastrous to him, insofar as it dismantled the alliance between production and culture, between the

one and the other of the 'two cultures'. The consequence was a dangerous lowering of the cultural and civil life of the nation. Volponi's legacy, as man and author, is to be found in the pages of a ruthlessly prophetic essay-novel, *Le mosche del capitale*, which came out in 1989, just after his definitive rupture with Fiat. There is little point in following here the tortuous development of this analytic, confessional text, complete with j'accuse and a grotesque allegory of the new power of speculative holding companies, aimed at the somewhat uncivil grasslands of the markets of globalization. It would be interesting rather to see how the diagnosis of the new contradictions of development, originating this time not outside (in politics and society), but inside the head of the industrial system, goes in search of confirmation in the scenery of the city, bringing to light a species of wasting disease in urban growth, which seems to have reached a point of genuine implosion. The city is Turin, and its history, written in the stones of the full and empty spaces of its populated quarters and wasteland, is one of order sought and lost. To the decline of the factory, its loss of influence on the strategy of the entrepreneurial groups, to its contagious ugliness, which renders ugly the factory girls, ugly the products brought out without quality control and ugly the collective life of the working environment, to all this corresponds the decline and, ineluctably, the death of the modern city. Reduced to a shapeless pudding, it crams together in strata and blocks human conglomerations which once were social classes and ranks, but now are disgregated and atomized. Here is a cross section, a radial core boring, which

follows a 'street-map', from the old town to the new peripheries: first, upper class dwellings, in the lee of the old city, then squares of ordinary houses inhabited by the petit-bourgeoisie and working classes, destined to an inexorable declassing with their little shops and basements bursting with the semi-clandestine sub-proletariat; next, blocks of flats with a touch of pretension, well equipped with, and protected by "cancelli inferriate ... ringhiere colonne respingenti", with supermarkets annexed; then again, "un nuovissimo residence" adapted to the habitative pulverization of the innumerable metropolitan monads, individuals intermingled without distinction of status or respectability, a labour force in a fluid state, modern and flexible, in both its function and its social behaviour. But the resplendent modernity of the residence is already disfigured by the signs of a dreadful fire which has destroyed two floors, yielding up three corpses lying there without a name. Immediately afterwards, the working class tenements, these too organized into strata: first the Calabrians from the boom years, then the Sardinians and Sicilians who arrived too late and were rejected by major industry, then Venetians, Lombards and immigrants from the Marches, who inserted themselves a few at a time into the small-scale industries disseminated *intra moenia*: then, the indigenous again, closed in the rancour of the besieged, and finally the 'low houses' were, as if in a casbah, live a formless mass of people without a precise identity: seasonal workers, jacks of all trades, prostitutes, the emarginated, and professional criminals. In brief, one is faced by an urban organism perennially

incapable of healing the lacerations that the purely quantitative growth of space built-upon and the massification of new waves of immigration have produced. It is as if that painful but vital wound, inflicted to the ancient image of the city by Pasolini's excavator, has suppurred. The city, born to unite, to mingle the destinies and lives of people in accordance with the exigencies of work and civil cohabitation, now exhales, in the words of Volponi, a stench of death, mixed with earsplitting noise and rancorous solitude. It is entirely pointless that the restoration of prestigious buildings, entrusted to the patronage of the banks and holding companies, should preserve the monumental beauty of single structures in the city's old town, left into the bargain unused, as if in a show case. The end of an expansive and progressive cycle of industrial culture has deprived the growth of the cities of the indispensable alimentation of planning and ideas. The angst of the author can awake, at different times, images of disorder and degradation, voracious consumption and contamination of spaces, or, on the contrary, a fictive idea of order operating within the psychology and lifestyle of the new homologized masses. Pasolini, in the ambitious fresco of his unfinished, posthumous *Petrolio* (1992), attempts a series of sketches, a species of still life with figures, of the condition of the 'new peripheries': "*Le prime case erano posate su quella pianura senza forma: erano enormi, bianche, geometriche, le pareti battute dal sole ... erano accecanti, e la serie infinita e tutta uguale dei balconi le screziavano di piccole, secche, misere ombre identiche; le pareti in ombra erano nere e lisce: dei*

*giganteschi rettangoli. Le forme di questi grandi casamenti, disposti in gruppi asimmetrici ma regolari, intorno a cortili circondati da muri, erano forme gemelle. Ripetizioni di una stessa forma, ma che del resto si ripeteva anche, analoga, negli altri gruppi vicini. Come costellazioni, questi gruppi di abitazioni, si spingevano dal deserto desolato verso costellazioni più fitte. Ma il silenzio non era meno fondo che nel deserto. Negli enormi cortili di materiale povero, cemento spruzzato per parere marmo, mattoni che parevano finti, il vuoto era assoluto. In qualcuno soltanto due o tre donne stavano raccolte, profilandosi oscure contro le pareti metalliche, con in mano sacchetti di plastica bianca, semitrasparente. C'erano anche dei bambini, lontani, silenziosi, per lo più oltre i cortili, tra i muretti di cinta e i fossati secchi e colmi di rifiuti oltre i quali si stendeva il deserto".* Certainly, literary testimony accentuates the stridency of contrasts, prospects in a univocal way the tendency of an epoch, which is nevertheless one of painful passage. That which remains are the cries of alarm, the ethical drive to reflect and decide, for the future, and for that which lies within ourselves.