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4.2 Tirana's landscape through the lens of time, space and movement

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FRAMING the landscape

*Writing about Tirana's landscape is an attempt to propose a "new way of interpreting reality subject to change, invoking a different 'way of seeing' and therefore considering the landscapes that expressed our history"*¹

"Landscape is what you see after you stopped observing it". (Clement, 2011)

My mental journey starts along the Tirana-Durres corridor, on the top floor one of the industrial buildings that define the Albanian manufactured landscape² along the rarefied urban perimeter of the city - product of the fast economic growth of Tirana after the Nineties - reconverted in a Secondary school of architecture.

Sitting at the tables of the canteen looking up at very tall widows that erase completely the horizontal plane surrounding the school and mask the landscape composed by an alternation of informal houses, agricultural fields and commercial buildings, the eye is

directed towards the only visible element, the Dajti mountain chain, framed by the regularly spaced aluminum window frames. As I contemplate this accidental painting set before my eyes I reflect upon what is hidden behind the window and I wonder if the portion of landscape the window frame is erasing is the authentic Albanian landscape made of people, their culture and the history of their country. Landscape is not just gaze and contemplation, but it implies the importance of transformations and of the people who transform it by living the space (Marini, 2008 p.309) (Fig. 1).

Landscape through TIME

To many western citizens Albania is still an exotic and mysterious country, some people are not even sure of its precise location and they picture it as a black spot (a hidden corner) of Europe: many people know it's there but they could not say by which countries it is bordered by, if overlooks the sea, if it has a predominantly highland or rural character. But its capital Tirana is indeed on the maps, even on the on-flight magazines that show the airline's destinations

¹ Translation from Italian text (Turri, 2008p. 16).

² The typological characterization of the landscape that results from the consequences of the industrial revolution on our environment; from "Manufactured Landscapes", a documentary film about the work of photographer Ed Burtynsky (Canada, 2006 -directed by Jennifer Baichwal).



Fig.1 Source: Author - Caption: the view from the canteen of POLIS University



Fig.2 — Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tirana_before_1914.jpg - Caption: Old postcard of the capital of Albania, Tirana, before the year 1914



Fig. 3 — Source: author — Caption: the Tirana-Durres corridor, southern limit of the “triangle”. We notice a concentration of the development along and beyond the limit of the freeway. In the background one of the most recent examples of turbo architecture stands out against the hills

around the world. In 2005 the new Tirana International Airport Nënë Tereza was built and since then the airplane became the favorite mean of transportation for all the Albanians who emigrated to Europe after the fall of the Communist regime, and are now returning to visit their relatives; but also for the newer generations of Albanian international travelers and for the growing number of tourists that venture in this almost undiscovered place of the globe. Around the world there are not many famous literary or artistic representations that portray the identify and the peculiarities of the Albanian territory, nor are there repetitive and standardized landscape-images³ diffused around the medias that anticipate the visual experience a foreigner will witness as he/she sets foot in Albania. (Fig. 2)

The first impact on the visitors entering the city from the airport is of an uncertain landscape, not strictly rural nor strictly urban and definitely not natural. What they see is a long sequence of agricultural fields with sparse houses, then, as they get closer to the undefined limits of the city, they encounter a dense stripe of industries - predominantly food production - filtered by palm trees and advertisement signs and interrupted by the latest products of the so called turbo architecture⁴. But the speed of the car doesn't allow for a careful evaluation of the details that characterize the Landscape and we might fall in a superficial reading of the ungraspable landscape (Bianconi, 2008 p. 38). Since this portion of landscape is the first impact with the city for most visitors it could be part of a broader strategy aimed at defining a new

3 In his book "Il Paesaggio" Michael Jakob argues that in the contemporary society everything exists and is recognized through images. The world around us is represented through two kinds of landscape-images: the images that we find on magazines, billboards and television that publicize touristic attractions through which we discover and memorize landscapes; and the endless landscape-images that we produce through photographs and video recordings when we travel. Jakob, Michael, *Il paesaggio, Il Mulino*, Bologna 2009 (Jakob, 2009).

4 A term used in the Balkans referring to excessive and over the top architecture, music.

identity for Tirana. Hence the importance of "the triangle": the strategic infrastructural network formed by the Tirana-Durres freeway, the motorway link road connecting the latter with the Airport and the road giving direct access to the northern part of the territory⁵. (Fig. 3)

Landscape and MOVEMENT through SPACE

Back in the nineties, after the collapse of the Socialist system, many Albanians were escaping the poverty and the anarchy left behind by the communist regime in search for a better life and their only point of escape was the sea: they had to reach the harbor city of Durres or Vlore and, after crossing with makeshift means the Adriatic sea, they were able to find a new home in Italy or, through the boot-shaped country, they had access to the rest of Europe⁶. Many of the Albanian emigrants were able to build a stable life overseas and as their financial condition improved they begun to return to their home country. Most of them were still traveling on boats. As they traveled across the sea during the night, leaving behind Italy and getting closer to the Eastern Adriatic coastline they could not see the land as it was dark and there were almost no urbanized settlements along the coast and no restless lights tracing the edges of

5 The corridor Tirana Rinas defines the first side of the triangle to the west, the remaining two sides are defined by the Kamza corridor to the east - the area developed along the Kamza road that connects Tirana to Fushe Cruje and to the North, characterized by a mix of commercial and residential activities - and the Tirana Durres freeway to the south - characterized by a concentration of large industrial structures along the two sides of the freeway.

6 The documentary *The Human Cargo* (original title: *La Nave Dolce*) directed by Daniele Vicari 2013, gives a good sense of what these journeys must have been like. On August 8th 1991 an Albanian ship, carrying twenty-thousand people, arrives in the port of Bari. The ship is called Vlora. To those who see it approaching, it looks like a teeming ant hill, an ill-defined mass of bodies clinging to one another.

the waterfront. At dusk, when they finally approached the land, they had a comprehensive and frameless⁷ view over the territory from a privileged point of view, which allowed them to perceive the landscape in its totality; the view was the same one that the ancient Greeks, the first geographers, must have seen as they were sailing along the coasts and reporting what they saw in the *periploi*⁸. What the Albanian emigrants returning to their country saw before their eyes was mostly wild and uncontaminated natural landscape – vegetation and rock formation – and few contained, visible traces of men: the urbanized settlements of Durres and Vlore. Their journey was not over though, as most of them were headed to the capital Tirana and they had to switch to the rail or the road transpiration system and therefore their perception of the landscape changed again, moving from a slow sequence of progressively closer panoramic views of the coast (guaranteed by the slow movement of the boat), to a landscape viewed through a fast changing image sequence framed by the window of a moving car or train and affected by the speed of the chosen mean of transportation. (Fig. 4)

⁷ The view from the deck of the boat has no visual constraints and it doesn't impose a selection of a portion of the territory, while the view from a window of a car, a bus, a building or an airplane acts like a selective filter that directs the view of the subject towards a specific view and erases whatever is not included within the frame itself.

⁸ The *periploi* were descriptions of the coastline operated by the ancient Greek navigators (Phoenicians) – Scilace of Carianda and Hecataeus of Miletus, end of Sixth Century. B.C. - which listed the ports and coastal landmarks during maritime travels; these manuscript documents also recorded notes – like in modern maritime logs - that recorded not only physical information about the coastline, but also cultural and ethnographic characteristics, giving an overall view of the territory.

Fig. 4 – Source: Luca Turi <http://www.apuliafilmcommission.it/wp-content/uploads/La-nave-dolce.jpg> - Caption: The Human Cargo, the ship 'Vlora' arriving in the port of Bari, the 8th of August 1991







Fig. 5 – Source: author - Caption: Laknas area railway line – Tirana-Vora segment.

The consecutive perception of space through movement

The landscape perceived by the Albanians returning to Tirana through the window frame of a train coach was a landscape perceived from a moving point of view and most of all from an oblique perspective, which offered composite images – the restless speed of the machines makes the foreground images disappear and the background appears surprisingly extended and panoramic (Jakob, 2009 pp. 111-112). The agricultural fields seemed repetitive, shapes along the territory were endlessly renewed, reference points became changeable, landscape could not be identified in a set of stable images but rather in an endless flux of impressions that could not be fixed. Trains substantially alter the relationship of the passenger with nature: man becomes a spectator and nature a distant and fascinating exteriority⁹. Moreover a part from the rural areas, what the passengers saw was mostly the hidden side of

places, the back side of cities, train stations and all the portions of the territory that are violently cut by the linear rails of train networks (Schwarzer, 2004 p. 59). (Fig. 5).

Before entering Tirana the railway line that connects Durrës to Tirana through Vora – which is partially suspended today – runs along the Tirana river valley and the Laknas settlement. Here from the train the passenger can witness a gradual decrease of housing densities – two to three story family houses separated by large green areas – and the unfolding of large agricultural parcels.

Also the vision from a moving car or bus breaks the frontal logic – framed and still – allowing for a broader view – panoramic and dynamic (Jakob, 2009 p. 119) – but since it is freed from the constriction of the rails it confers to the driver the illusion of control over the visual space. The driver and the passengers are not able to frame or explain what they see through the car windshield or the car windows, they need to experience it in first person (SMITH, 1966 p.19). To them the landscape becomes a landscape-film, an endless sequence of street poles and guardrails, gas stations and parking lots, new elements that scan the restless sequence of images. Moreover drivers can perceive at once the landscape they are approaching and the landscape

⁹ When we walk or travel on a horse or old carriages we can see and pass through nature, we are part of the landscape and through our movement we determine the perceived visual impressions of the surrounding landscape (we stand in front of nature as we stand in front of a representation of nature like a painting), while if we are traveling on a train it is the machine/technological mean which imposes its point of view and we are only passive observers. (Cfr. Jakob, 2009p. 112). See also (Bianconi, 2008 pp. 36-37).



Fig. 6 – Source: <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/los-angeles-the-architecture-of-four-ecologies/> -
Caption: Los Angeles through the rear view mirror in the 1970s

they left behind¹⁰, while passengers can abandon themselves to the landscape-film that the roadside movie theatre is offering. (Fig. 6)

This landscape dominated by the products of technological innovation - that were initially designed to make all men free and equal - is what we would experience traveling on the freeway from Durres to Tirana; but what if, leaving the Tirana Durres freeway behind, we decide to venture with our car the informal settlements of the semi-urban peripheral areas inside the “the tri-

angle”? Entering the area through Kamza road and penetrating in one of the secondary routes on the left we would be challenged right away by the inadequate road network - no reference points, dead end roads (cul-de-sac), dirt roads, natural and artificial obstacles - and we could easily lose the sense of direction and get lost. If we decide to leave the car behind and we continue our journey on foot we can start venturing in the accidental landscape of one of Tirana’s informal development areas characterized by disorder, the lack of reference points and the absence of a clear morphology in the building and street layout. As we walk through small roads delimited by high walls we can still find some spots where we can stop and gaze at what

122

123

¹⁰ On the city seen through the rear view mirror Cfr. “Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles” (USA – Documentary, Julian Cooper (director), Malcolm Brown (producer) (1972).



Fig. 7 – Source: author - **Caption:** a street in Kamza informal settlement

appears as hybridization between rural and urban landscape¹¹. The brick or concrete walls that surround the illegal houses recall the special enclosure of the Medieval *Hortus conclusus* - which in turn originates from the introverted Roman *Domus* courtyard that influenced the Medieval cloister typology – as they are enclosed spaces reserved for private domestic life, places for contemplation, and just like the medieval *Hortus conclusus* they are gardens without landscape¹². The opaque walls isolate the families that seem to hide behind them and from the public life along the streets. Beyond these enclosures we can begin to imagine a complete universe (Pandakovic, 2013p.66), where people have surrounded themselves with domesticated nature - or civilized natural landscape (Bianconi, 2008 p. 41) - vegetables, fruits, herbs and commodities that are protected from indiscreet eyes or envious neighbors. In the Latin culture of the first century AD the gardens were built to reproduce and educate nature¹³, and they were fenced or enclosed within courtyards to protect them and the urban population from the tamed wild nature of the woods; similarly the walls of these informal settlements seem to voluntarily erase the neglected landscape that surrounds the informal houses, but they also seem to isolate the families from the community. (Fig. 7)

11 At a speed lower than 10 Km per hour we can begin to observe the details of the landscape, immerse ourselves into it and become part of it. Cfr. Bianconi, 2008 p. 37.

12 The Medieval enclosed garden typology descends from the court of the *Domus* and it is characterized by the fact that it's enclosed within buildings and its size corresponds to the portion of sky above. *Hortus* (fenced space, vegetable garden) *conclusus* (enclosed) is a garden without landscape, in the sense that there are no exterior views, no horizons and profiles of mountains and sea. In these gardens space is defined by the volumes surrounding it which determine the proportions of the garden, the access of light and, as a consequence, the variation of the shadows (scanning the rhythm of time for the monks) (Pandakovic, 2013 pp. 64-67).

13 In the past in the conception of *rus in urbem* was referred to an illusion of countryside created by a building or garden within a city. The phrase, which is Latin means literally 'country in the city', was coined originally by the Spanish-born Latin epigrammatist Martial (ad c.40 to c.104) of the Latin culture. According to this conception the Italian city, with parks and gardens included within its limits, welcomed the natural, but civilized, landscape - that represents other territories - within the urban settlement; while the countryside with its scattered villas, marked the landscape with anthropic elements which defined the urban/human dimension (Bianconi, 2008 pp. 41-43).



Fig. 8 – Source: Nikos Danilidis from AlbanPOLIMI-2012 on Flickr - Caption: Tirana seen from the airplane



Landscape form ABOVE (being 'outside' the landscape)

But what appears before the eyes of the increasing number of tourist that decide to visit Albania and the Albanians that fly back into Tirana as they are gazing outside the window of the airplane in preparation for landing? (Fig. 8). They can trace the form of the city in its entirety and read its morphology. Most importantly the traditional frontal view of the green scenery beheld vertically in front of them is transformed into a flat infrastructure that includes both natural and urban environments (Weldheim, 1999 p. 136) and they can clearly identify the relationship between the artificial (anthropized) and the natural landscape, not from a bodily experience of the landscape, but rather from a *detached and remote viewing position*. The perception through a sequence of ground-level views is substituted by a perceptual mode based on *collective subjectivity* and the subject becomes a spectator-consumer. *The idea of landscape has shifted from scenic and pictorial imagery to highly managed surface best viewed, arranged and coordinated from above* (Weldheim, 1999 pp. 121-124). (Fig. 9).

Since the mid-Nineteenth century aerial documentation - made possible by the introduction of air transport - has become a means by which we reveal the urban order at work through the fabric of the city¹⁴; but the early examples see the city as an object, whereas later photography taken from airplanes generated a form of mass spectatorship experienced by air travelers¹⁵.

Aerial observation can also become a useful tool to reveal the failure of the cities as well as the potential of new and broader view on the territory and its complexity¹⁶ as

¹⁴ The first aerial photographs were taken in 1858 from a Goddard balloon by Nadar, who later (1868) documented with aerial images Haussmann's renovations to Paris. (Weldheim, 1999 p.122)

¹⁵ This also influenced architecture as buildings began to be designed to be viewed primarily from the air. See the Columbus Lighthouse Competition in Santo Domingo (1929).

¹⁶ In his book "Aircraft", Le Corbusier writes about the utility of aerial representation in bringing to light the condition of twentieth-century urbanism; he argues that what made aerial image a recommended planning tool in that period was its lack of picturesque sentimentality. See also, Lavin, Sylvia (1966) *Sacrifice and the Garden: Watelet's Essai sur les jardins and the Space of the Picturesque*. In *Assemblage* 28, pp. 16-33.



Fig. 9 – Source: Internet - Caption: The city seen from the point of view of Spider Man, from the movie the Amazing Spider Man)



Fig. 10 – Source: www.alexmaclean.com/ – Caption: Philadelphia, I-95 Intersection



Fig. 12 – Source: POLIS University – Caption: View of POLIS University from the adjacent empty field



Fig. 11 – NASA <http://visibleearth.nasa.gov/> – Caption: earth seen from the moon

the landscape viewed from the air produces a particular kind of human subjectivity for the terrestrial spectator and this detachment enables him/her to see the negative consequences of human action. (Fig. 10)

Always in relation to the alteration of perception caused by the introduction of views of the landscape from above, it is important to mention the technological innovation that operated another shift of the view point and changed the meaning and status of landscape irrevocably: space travel and satellites. Thanks to this important machine, the central perspective that dominated western history from Brunelleschi to the Nineteenth Century has to now share its absolute position with a multiplication of points of view. Anthropocentric perspective has been thrown over by the inhuman and technical perspective imposed by the *panoptic* vision of the satellites. Google earth can offer us the totality of our territory from the point of view of space. The beauty of our planet is portrayed through aerial photography¹⁷ - this time taken at an even greater distance from earth - which employs, again, an elevated point of view. The earth's surface seen from above creates a new geo-graphy, a graphic impression of the world (Jakob, 2009 pp. 118-119). The person observing the satellite images from a computer screen feels alienated from the world as he/she is no longer the subjective viewer immersed in the landscape – he is no longer part of it- just like the astronaut looking at the earth from a capsule floating in space feels estranged physically and psychologically as he is materially detached from the planet (Turri, 2008pp 26-27).(Fig. 11).

My journey ends where it started as the world is a sphere and sooner or later what we leave behind we will find again in front of us, especially if the subject is moving¹⁸. (Fig. 12).

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126

127

¹⁷ See *Aerial photography* by French photographer-aviator-prophet Arthus Bertrand and American aerial photographer Alex MacLean.

¹⁸ Preface by Franco Farinelli in Turri, Op. cit., p.11.