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Photographic Driftings as a Method to Intercept the Atmosphere of the Sprawlscape

Walking Exploration of the Ring Road Around the City of Cagliari

Martina LOI¹

Abstract. Urban strolls allow to intercept the atmospheres of a space, mediating between the moving body and the context. With a situationist approach, I carried out an exploration of the sprawlscape along the SS554, the urban motorway connecting Cagliari (Italy) and its surrounding centers. The contexts I met, a particular fusion of rural and urban, are considered marginal and degraded compared to the city, thus the choice of exploring on foot, driven by the difficulty that these spaces pose to walking and the possibilities it allows to explore spaces atmospherically. The stroll was integrated by a photoreport called « flat-shades » : photography is a useful medium to explore and interpret the atmosphere of a space, and it allows the (re)presentation and sharing of this personal perceived atmosphere.

Keywords. Urban Motorway, Walking, Visual Methodologies, Photography, Fieldwork, Atmospheres

Introduction: Walking as a Way of Knowing

When thinking about walking, it's easy to figure different activities, all extremely familiar and functional to the performance of daily practices. But we rarely pay attention to the act of walking itself; it is such a naturalized gesture that it is not obvious to be aware of it. But when one pays attention to those automated gestures and regains awareness, walking shows itself as a practice of extreme complexity and requiring great coordination between body movement, sensory perception, kinesthetic, etc., resulting in a “socio-technical assemblage of embodied, material and technological relations” (Middleton, 2010).

The continuous relation and interaction between the moving body and the space it passes through makes walking trace and define a place through the track left by the moving body and the memory of its own movement. In route, the city is continuously “acquired” in a glance and its surroundings are synthesized in and through the body. In this sense, the urban stroll is the simplest and most direct tool to learn, know and tune in to the environment around us and at the same time question the rigidity of political and social boundaries (Macauley, 2000).

While walking, a “continuous stream of ‘information’ parading past and through us [...] loosens, unties and releases the mnemonic knots in the body, triggering an active engagement with the places through which we walk” (ibid.).

In the same way, atmospheric perception is direct and ambulatory, kinesthetic and affectively involving, synesthetic or at least polymodal, but above all it is to make something present with the help of the body (Griffero, 2017).

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With these premises I carried out a work of atmospheric and walking exploration of the peri-urban context of a high-traffic road and the neighborhoods directly connected to: particular spaces, significant and/or to be (re)defined, thanks to the ability of walking to configure itself as a transformative practice, in which the moving body and spaces are constantly combined revealing the diverse dimensions of urbanity.

Case Study: Walking Exploration of an Urban Motorway

The work is situated in the history of walking as “symbolic, political and aesthetic practice” (Wiley, 2010), as stated by Situationists (Debord, 1956) and philosophers such as Michel De Certeau (1984). The now classic practice of drifting has been adopted by SI as a method “which could sustain a sensitivity to the city’s unconscious while also achieving a heightened political intentionality” (Wiley, 2010). With a less artist-activist approach, De Certeau considers the daily resistance practice of walking as an unstoppable urban force capable of redefining the urban fabric thanks to human action, converting the property value of urban space into use value.

Working on spaces designed for vehicular traffic poses several questions regarding the presence of pedestrians and the ability of these contexts to facilitate or hinder the use on foot. Unlike in a car, there are spaces where the pedestrian is even seen suspiciously, as a stranger or out of place, spaces where “the high-way of the speeding car is contrary to the low-way (and slow way) of the sauntering walker” (Macauley, 2000). Precisely for this reason I carried out an operation of overcoming the limits placed on walking, in the attempt to redefine and re-interpret these marginal contexts.

Roads are devices made to manage traffic in the urban area, but they also recompose spatial balances and with these the social, political and economic ones, configuring new forms of power(s) (Easterling, 2014). Infrastructure could be seen as dense spatiality, socio-technical systems and political devices (Tonkiss, 2013; Amin and Thrift, 2017), and they show both a political and a poetic aspect (Larkin, 2013), configuring themselves as proper places (Amin, 2014) and not only in relational terms (marginal, peripheral, suburban).

Following the example of the Stalker collective, which explored the “current territories” in their *transurbances*² and the exploration that Iain Sinclair carried out around the London Orbital (2003) in which “walking around the M25 turns into an existentialist pilgrimage, and the circularity of the route becomes a metaphor of its meaninglessness” (Ballantyne, 2006), I carried out a similar experiment, trying to experience and bring to light the atmospheres (in the interpretation of Griffero (2017) for which they are affective and embodied feelings aroused by external situations) of the multiform and apparently banal spaces born and grown up around the SS554, the road that runs tangentially to the metropolitan city of Cagliari for about 15 km and gathers the 450.000 inhabitants of the 17 municipalities that constitute it.

The construction of the road meant that a new portion of space was connected to the city, resulting in investments and an urbanization of the area. The peri-urban agricultural fabric has progressively been saturated, in a manner that is typical of the Mediterranean suburbanization (Leontidou, 1993): left to the informal initiative of small groups; with a great hybridization and the lack of a unitary regime of territorial management. The result is a fabric apparently unresolved, partly abusive/informal/spontaneous, and in any case urbanized according to Soja’s post-metropolis (2000): a

2. See at: <http://www.osservatorionomade.net/tarkowsky/manifesto/manifesting.htm>

city no longer understandable with classical urban growth models, with a progressive erosion of the border between urban and rural, and an urban form with a high density of flows, which raises new questions about spatial justice.

The choice to explore on foot the contexts is dictated precisely by the difficulty that these spaces pose to walking and at the same time, the potential that this practice offers to immerse oneself in the atmosphere of a space, narrating thus the self (Wylie, 2005) and recognizing the space an ontological status of its own. Not only, according to the Situationists, the drift around and through the city represents a political statement against rational, ordered, capitalist urban space (Middleton, 2010). This is even truer in the case of a car-oriented context as the one on the edge of an urban motorway.

The SS554 area is made up of very different contexts, which have been explored at different times, according to a completely arbitrary choice criterion, starting from virtual explorations or based on what I have encountered on previous occasions. Together with the walking exploration, I equipped myself with a camera, with which I took a series of photographs, collected in a report that I called *tintepiatte* (literally “flatshades”).



Figure 1. An extract of the photographic report, Martina Loi, January 2020

The photographic report is an attempt to collect and narrate atmospheres: through the use of photography I would like to try to re-signify the infrastructure and de-construct the paradigm of marginality usually associated with new interpretations and meanings. Photography and visual methodologies allow to explore, interpret and represent landscapes, urban forms, architectures, in a way that requires a situated and embodied work that can't avoid the deep interaction with the context. Photography makes possible to carry out a geo-ethno-graphic work of exploration of little-known contexts, to relate oneself with seemingly banal micro-landscapes and spaces, to

provide innovative and creative readings of them and to contribute to their potential re-significant interpretation.

The explorations that have been made and the subsequent reflections have made it possible to highlight some aspects of these contexts that I would like to put in evidence.

The first aspect that can be highlighted is the process at the base of the genesis of this *undecided* urbanity: the urbanization occurred with a great fragmentation and had as a consequence the creation of a large number of residual spaces and the general impression of neglect and incompleteness. But one element of great interest is how, even in informality, there is no escaping from already existing urban models that are reproduced, as if the building ideology that characterizes our suburbs, has been (unconsciously) introjected and is repeated even in the absence of regulations; anyway there is no lack of independent and extremely localized modalities, leading to different situations, to practices of use of space proper to that context and to differential narrations, both in relation to the context and to the “central” city.

This led to a situation in which it is not possible to account of a unitary or homogeneous context, characterized by elements in relation and a coherent development. Although it is a relatively limited stretch, along the route we are faced with extremely different situations, with a great mixture and a high degree of variation. Within a few hundred meters it is possible to move from agricultural contexts to industrial areas to single-family villas districts. This variation is constant and almost always occurs without caesuras or traumas, as if hybridization was the vocation of these spaces.

They are quite well known for those who frequent the city of Cagliari, on the one hand for the commercial functions that are found there, on the other for the fame of marginality and degradation that is associated with them. Exploration has allowed me to try to deconstruct this paradigm, trying to act without prejudices and expectations and immersing myself in space, letting me get enveloped by the atmospheres and bringing back some of these clues in the photographs.

The spaces thus approached have shown a character and a vocation of their own. Yes, they are spaces left a bit to themselves, result of individual initiatives and without a unitary plan, but for this very reason they distinctly bear the mark of its inhabitants and show a particular mix between urban and rural, between city and countryside, which is perhaps the most fascinating atmospheric component and that can explain the rise of this part of the city. The passage from one area to another is constant and without traumas and it is exciting to immerse oneself in this building and urban freedom, collect fragments of shapes and colors, take some notes and continue to explore. The small residential neighborhoods are all similar to a generic mid-range single-family district, but here too there are many variations and every single inhabitant has tried to personalize his or her own small domestic space, disregarding the paradigm that depict this urbanity as characterless and strongly degraded.

Conclusions

The work carried out, of course, is not intended to be definitive and decisive, but is a circumstantial and instinctive collection of spatial elements, aimed at highlighting some atmospheric characteristics of that space, not always evident in everyday practices.

During the explorations, it was possible to experience the spaces in a new way compared to what can be done in daily practices. The approach I adopted is deliberately personal and instinctive: I avoided doing preliminary research and I let myself be inspired and enveloped by the context and the sensations that the spaces communicated to me (McCormack, 2018).

With the help of the photos I was able to frame some of these urban moments, highlighting their forms, construction methods and relationship with the context. In this way the exploration was not limited to my current experience, feelings and memories, but it was possible to share it and make it present even to those who have not made the exploration themselves, but can benefit from the fragments that I have collected and that try to account for all these ineffable sensations. The experience itself, when the exploration is accompanied with photos, is modified. The decision to take a photograph requires a cognitive act, thanks to which I decide to stop, choose the point of taking, set all the parameters and take the picture. It very slows down the exploration, but in the same way it dilates it and allows me to realize many more aspects: I dwell on the light, on the way it enhances the forms and in a certain sense this approach amplifies the whole experience.

In the same way, walking, with all that it requires and involves, radically changes the enjoyment of a space. Through the feet you can measure distances on the body; spaces are reached after a movement that is always relevant and changes every perception; every element encountered is somehow recorded and participates in the experience, cognitively or not.

The union of the two practices therefore contributes to making apparently banal and daily activities (as an urban stroll can be) definitely significant for those who perform them, allowing to acquire new and different awareness of spaces and urbanity (whether known or not), immersing oneself totally in their atmospheres and also producing visual products that somehow participate in highlighting some of these significant fragments.

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