

Tourism at bound distance. Minute cityscapes in Covid-19 Times

(21.500 caratteri- spazi inclusi)

Rossana Bonadei, Università degli Studi di Bergamo

rossana.bonadei@unibg.it

Abstract (255 parole)

The present paper explores in a subjective and collective perspective the experience of the “lockdown” in Milan-Lombardy in Covid-19 Times, and reflects on its impact on perceptions and practices in our everyday life of modern and global ‘touring subjects’- we people accustomed to radical mobility but now made to experience an unprecedented shock of mind and body. The word *lockdown* refers primarily to “the confining of prisoners to their cells”: all of us are prisoners now, locked indoors, watching the streets below from windows and balconies, the only mobility allowed being brief walks around the nearby city quarters, within the bound distance of 250 metres. And yet, by virtue of a paradox perfectly fit to the surrealistic context of the pandemic, we are perennially on the move, wandering across virtual spaces, in the realms of memory and desire, managing a host of images related to movement. On the web we Travel, Navigate, Tour, Visit, Explore, Run, Walk, Bike, Climb, Sail, Drive, Fly, almost non-stop, to exorcise a loss to be thus compensated. Alongside the new ways of restricted mobility, a paradigm of ‘total’ visuality emerges, a new urge to mobilize one’s eyes. In a memorable study on the “ways of seeing”, John Berger remarked that our gaze is never neutral but always ‘affected’ by circumstances, physical, spatial, emotional. We can come to see the same things differently: spaces and places perceived with strangers’ eyes, pointing out things once unnoticed, turning to unfamiliar corners, glancing at details: one’s gaze somehow resembling that of a tourist.

Key words: Walk, Gaze, Urban space

1. A Grand Virtual Tour (and petit virtual tours)- as in the year we will nowhere go.

Milan-Lombardy, March 10th 2020. We are all under “lockdown” and the experience precedes the language, as a sudden body jolt and a consequent mind shock that we attach to a sound hovering/to a low, distant hum in the everyday environment of discourse, obsessively echoed in the media as well as in our individual lives. The dictionary entry for *lockdown*, from North American English, refers primarily to “the confining of prisoners to their cells”. Nowadays however, the use of the word in Covid-19 time has gained a new sense, as testified by the many documents and surveys that accompany this extraordinary history, rumours and dispatches variously declining the extraordinary ‘state of art’ in terms of “blockage” (of circulation of people, goods, transport means), “confinement” (into one’s home or restricted places), a reclusionary semantics dramatically challenging a community markedly shaped by the ‘sacred’ right of individual freedom and less conscious of the responsibility of a collective health nonetheless guaranteed by the Italian Constitution.

In fact, all of us are the prisoners now, we, the subjects of radical mobility and of globalization and yet locked in our houses by decree, for many months, immobilized within familiar walls, watching the streets from windows and balconies, the only mobility allowed being in private courtyards and gardens, or in brief walks around the building or the city quarter, within the prescribed distance of 250 metres. And eventually also prisoners of our fears (that we may get ill and possibly die).

On the other hand virtual mobility has never been so regular and massive: enshrined in the realm of memory and imagination, magnified by the media- TV, radio and newspapers- intensified by the use of the IT connections, through smartphones, iPad, PC. For a paradox perfectly fit to the surrealistic context of the pandemic, we are nonetheless always on the move, daily if not hourly wandering across virtual spaces, while a host of words and images related to movement shapes our days, reminding of a loss that we endeavour to compensate: in the Web we Travel, Navigate,

Tour, Visit, Explore, Run, Walk, Bike, Climb, Sail, Drive, Fly....as if no restriction could inhibit the mobile habits inherited from our ancestors. We are the heirs of “homo viator” and “homo figurans” (Turri, 1998); we never stop expanding across space, physically and imaginatively. Nor can fade the more modern marks of our being “touring subjects” (Clifford, 1997), embracing on a global scale a new “nomadic turn” (Braidotti, 1994): in the last three centuries, to grossly summarise, a whole culture and a strong economy have reinforced our multifarious mobilities. Anthropologically speaking, we, subjects of the 21st century, are the result of a species selection whose minds (Leed, 1991) and gazes (Urry, 2011) have undergone a sharp refinement in the acts of exploring, travelling, touring, and in the development of tourist practices observed in different cultural and historical contexts.

As noted above, inside the Covid-19 landscape we compensate for blockage and isolation by engaging in massive virtual mobility, which numberless initiatives of public institutions- such as museums and art academies or private agencies- are reinforcing, filling the loss of cultural demand with dematerialized experiences. The enduring “brands” of the Belpaese and of the Grand Tour have turned into best sellers: a weekly TV series on “La penisola dei Tesori” (“Treasures of Italy”), regularly reminds us of heritage sites and historical “borghi” (hamlets) possibly left unvisited by many, and now made vivid by memorable narrations and pieces of literature (Montaigne, Milton, Goethe). The Italian Ministry of Culture and Tourism has launched a web campaign around the slogan “Art you ready?” to parallel the idea of free museum visits on Sundays, the most recent chapter of the initiative being a Virtual Grand Tour fashioned in partnership with Google(www.beniculturali.it/virtualtour): what comes out is an online tour around some iconic territories of the former Grand Tour (the historical practice developed along the 18th and 19th century that had made of Italy the first extended tourist destination in the world and made of the Europeans the first extended tourist community). Namely, the tour moves from Rome and its astounding heritage towards Northern Italy, to Florence and its internationally known Museums, and towards Southern Italy, to Naples and its surroundings, culminating in the unique ruins of Pompei and Herculaneum. Archaeological parks, gardens, Villas and Grand public Theatres are part of this ‘Italian adventure’, to mark the cultural continuities of outside and inside experiences. Goethe and his famous narrations of the Peninsula’s beauties echo in the background, but the project are meant primarily for public participation, the minute narrations and the screenshots of the virtually involved new ‘grand travellers’.

From Grand Tour to *pétit* tours, outside and inside again, the tradition of cultural travels is the useful archive for present experiences: everything is actually already there, engraved in the cultural memory and ready to be revived in virtual forms. For *pétit* tours, art cities seem to be the favourite ground, walking or biking, in the wake of those past travellers- especially Americans- who in the nineteenth century were remapping the Italian Heritage discovering ‘minor’ art towns and tracing itineraries off the beaten tracks (Brilli, 1997). Milan itself, my own city, now a deserted city under lockdown, has become the ground for interesting virtual experiences: you can ‘walk’ across “la Milano segreta, raccontata su You-Tube in 90 secondi o quasi” (“A Secret Milan in about 90 seconds”), inspired to a recently published book devoted to a thousand things you should see in Milan at least once in your lifetime (Margheriti, 2020); and you can ‘bike’ online in bike tours enhanced by the Council agency Bike the City, a-chasing symbols, stories and legends of the older town, from the ages of the Visconti to the Milan of the Hapsburgs and the Italian Risorgimento.

Walking and biking- albeit within limited distances- are actually the two only activities permitted under lockdown: vital precious resources for citizens suddenly immobilized but also opportunities for a surprising rediscovery of familiar places and small everyday itineraries,

through fresh and estranged eyes which are compelled by restrictions hardly imagined in the time of “the old normal”. As John Berger remarked in a memorable study on the “ways of seeing”, “we only see what we look at” (Berger, 1972), and our gaze is never neutral but always ‘affected’: affected or guided or compelled by circumstances, physical, spatial, meteorological, emotional. Our sight is always dynamic, we can see differently the same thing- spaces and places can be perceived differently. I am sure this is happening to many of us in Covid-19 time. I believe many of us are discovering a ‘strange’ Milan through stranger eyes, and find themselves trodding on familiar ground in a strange mood, looking around differently, pointing at things once unnoticed, turning to unfamiliar corners, searching for unusual perspectives, glancing at details: taking on a gaze which resembles the gaze of a tourist. Across the media, much commentary reflects on the impact of the paradigm of total visibility: the virus compels us to lurk from the windows, to watch from the balconies, to indulge on the screens- we become all eyes, more or less unconscious voyeurs but also induced to observe around more keenly, maybe more deeply, reviving our inner eye, recalling the world with our imagination. New narrations spring from this rediscovered energy of observation- a nice, ironic TV jingle speaks of narrations from the balconies, addressed to our often unknown neighbours- Balcony Stories MTV.

2. I’ve travelled the world....

March 15th. The first time I put my nose out of the house I was above all afraid of doing something forbidden- we were in fact allowed to go out alone and only for some shopping considered essential: just food and newspapers. If I should find some key words to convey the experience, I would say bright, oxygen, silence, green, in this sequence: bright was the air, as unpolluted as ever after a month of total ban on cars and transport means- you could feel the oxygen in your lungs as if we were in the mountains- you could eventually breath and meanwhile perceive the incredible silence of a City that had suddenly stopped its run. And the green around was as well incredible: spring was there and the green was sprouting everywhere, never seen such a blooming in the city, nature was really speaking and enlarging in the space left empty by the humans- it was almost noon but nobody was at view. I wondered if I would be able to archive this spectacle in documents (photos or videos, tales), to give testimony of the wonder, the dismay, and the awe. No personal or collective memory could recall that strange brightness, that silence, the awesome emptiness of the streets, apart from some short mental reels o of distopic films, and for literary echoes- “ Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep (...) And all that mighty heart is lying still” (Wordsworth, 1802)(1).

In that poetic mood I crossed the once crowded circular road that embraces Milan (the Bastioni) which connects my quarter to the pulsing heart of the city (the so called Quadrilatero)- The path to the closest newsagent passed through an area quite known to classic music fans, at the crossroads of Via Bellini and Via Donizetti stands the Conservatorio Verdi (The civic Concert Hall), where also tourists gather and queue for tickets- dropping from taxis and buses disorderly parked along the Bastioni. Milan is indeed a tourist city, certainly after the Expo, but few Milanese are aware that even before Expo Milan enjoyed the highest number of foreign visitors after Rome, an attractive art and fashion City that was investing energy and money on Museums and Exhibitions. And there was, just in front of the Conservatorio Verdi, one interesting example of the recent tourist turn of Milan: the museum-house of Vico Magistretti, a famous architect and designer, who from the windows of that small first door flat could look down over the triangle designed by the Conservatorio and the Chiesa della Passione. Museum-houses- of painters, poets, men of fame- are fashionable heritage in our days, certified by ICCOM and

included in many tourist itineraries. During the Milan Design Fair, thousands of visitors put themselves on the traces of museum-houses somehow connected with Design. Magistretti's house is among them, and that district of Milan for a week or so becomes a crowded tourist destination. Not now. Streets are in a void, I am practically alone, in an unreal silence. And I am all eyes, but somehow outside of myself, I mean that usual self that in a swift walk goes to buy newspapers, casting a hasty glance at the surroundings, only careful to avoid cars and bikes.

Now, in that unreal silence, at a very slow pace, right below Magistretti's window panes and stood gazing at the distinctive architectural convergence of forms that so much impressed and inspired his design: and, as in a game of sliding doors, I found myself in the guise of the tourist I usually am when I visit cities around the world. I have travelled the world, chasing street views and distinctive built styles, taking photographs, shooting small videos, storing images. Of course that very place was familiar to me- just across the road, a few metres from home- but that view at that moment, with those thoughts in mind, had produced a shift, in terms of gaze, in terms of mind perception, and in terms of self-perception. Magistretti came to my mind again, reminding me of my traveller's life brought back and projected unto the present situation: I've travelled the world but this year I know I will travel nowhere. I remembered that was indeed the title of the "Magistretti Voyages Projects", an exhibition whose recollection was setting off strange short-circuits in my mind. Why just that exhibition among the many? I remember quite well that it was especially an enquiry on the gaze in urban environment, a report of visual adventures with a camera at hand: "a sidewalk candid photos show" (2). And as a tourist, quite instinctively, with my I-phone at hand, I started taking some photos of the surroundings: of Magistretti's sober house (**photo 1**) and, again my back on those walls, of the remarkable sites in front, the Conservatorio Verdi and the Chiesa della Passione (**photo 2,3**). Images with a strong historical density, made denser under the emotional stress of the actual moment. Returning home, a few steps back, I realized that on my way I was looking at places differently, the eyes pointing at a couple of remarkable sites always been there, but hardly noticed before: an elegant neo-classic house embraced by a green mass (**photo 4**) and Casa Campanini, a massive Liberty building with two giant stony nymphs at the main entrance, festooned with garlands of leaves (**photo 5,6**). I could then fancy a proper tourist itinerary within a few steps, with in mind an Art nouveau vein that was actually visible scattered here and there: balconies, statues, friezes, decorations, iron grates had become so evident as to guide me by and by through connections and correspondences. The whole quarter resounded Art nouveau in its different international variations.

What was guiding my gaze was certainly a Stendhal syndrome: I was not casually picking up details surfing across spaces, as these new sensations were immediately prolonged in a historical dimension, every sign or piece of stone was there in its full density. Moreover, I was experiencing the 'aside' look that Benjamin associates with the dynamism of making sense of images: when images live in a kind of "Standstill" (what was acknowledged, in the collective memory, is abruptly suspended in a no-time lapse and thrust back onto the beholder augmented by the subjective momentary perception) (Benjamin, 2002)- an increment which flares them up beyond their well-known function and beyond their received sense.

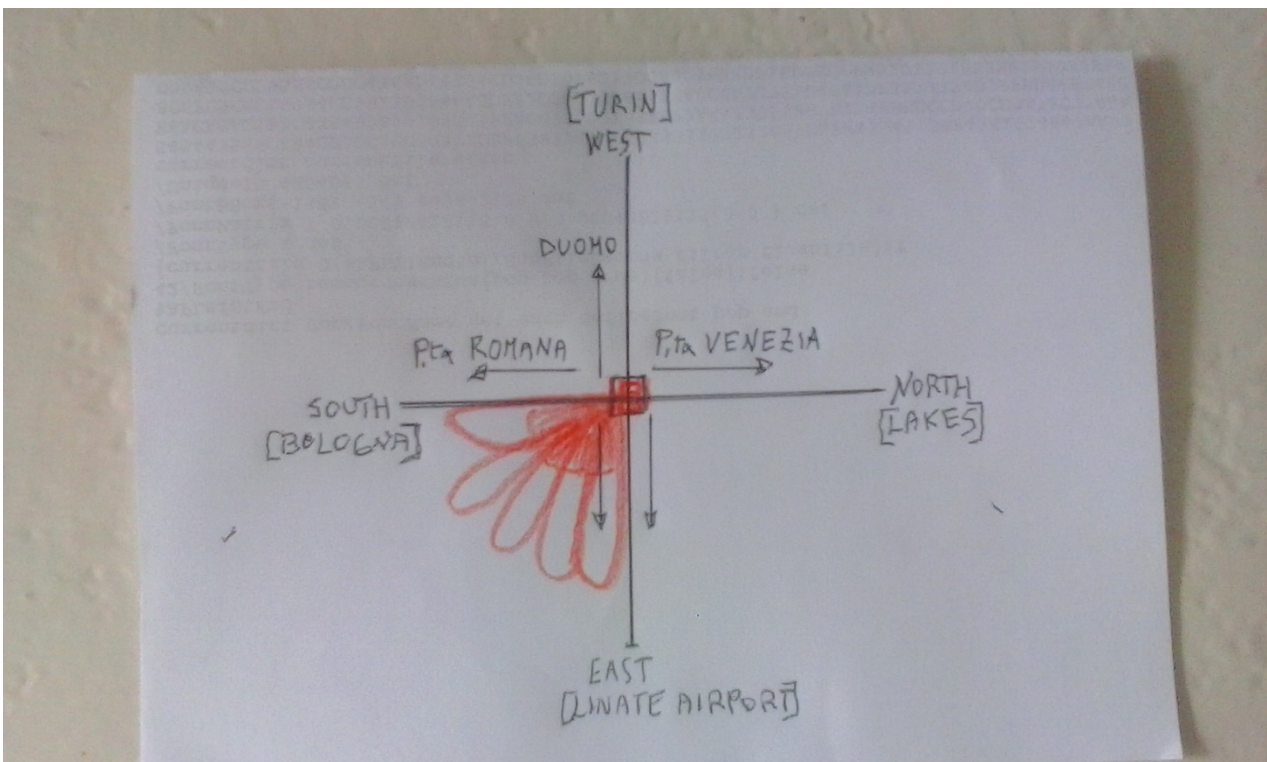
3. "Walking Liberty", but within 250 metres from one's own house

6th April. Newspaper scraps, TV news, web views, cinema, cartoons, poetry, modern criticism- the everyday life runs with the noises and the images of current news, but we live in a mediatic/ oneiric landscape. Technology sustains our dreams and fears and hopes, envisaging surreal

'worlds' and landscapes that far from being virtual are now dramatically real. We find ourselves protagonists of narrations once dystopic and now attached to everyday actual life, left unable to set imagination apart from reality- consigned to the "*Unheimliche*" (the uncanny): a disturbing presence or situation (very much like the dangerous Covid virus), attached to mixed sentiments (fear, uncertainty, danger, anguish) that leaves us impotent in front of the radical change of life we are consigned to (Freud, 1917). We anxiously wait for signs of resurgence.

After four weeks of lockdown, by a new decree we are allowed to walk, still unaccompanied, still within 250 metres of our homes, and once again conquer pieces of the city again, step by step, as hundreds of City Council posters promise at every corner (**photo 7**).

What I have in mind are casual itineraries day by day imagined, from my house going North, South, East and West, to cover as many semicircles countable on the space contingently designed by the decree: a sketch map for an invented new space that I would strictly respect taking it as a kind of formal and visual experiment planned over 20 days (imposing constraints to the moving and the gaze, as Oulipo writers did with the language, where constraints are used as a means of triggering ideas and inspiration, obliging the mind to play with unusual grammars).



And so will I, inventing my own 'constitutional', I will embark on a number of self-disciplined walks- cardinal points, number of metres and limited time being my severe compass- I am sure I will encounter nearby sites and buildings that I had met in my regular mobility, but hardly ever noticed them in their form, colour, size, style, and with no attention to details, correspondences, continuities of style, historical or cultural relevances. I was of course alone, but a host of mumbling citations gave pace to my walking thoughts- Benjamin, Barthes, De Certeau, Berger, the philosophers of the "everyday practices", were with me.

I then started to explore small districts, turning to corners never crossed before, looking at things with stranger eyes, ready to unpredictable encounters but nonetheless longing to be surprised and entertained, as a tourist, or better as the tourist I am when I visit new cities, indulging in

walks with no clear destination, fancying on the forms and the colours, the correspondences and the densities. I experienced the liberty of minute cityscapes (not more than one hour or so), I took photographs and formed my own visual archive of an 'other Milan' as interesting as the 'famous Milan', I could detect densities of architectural and design styles that impress this or that quarter at the four cardinal points: in the suspended time determined by the Covid, I experienced a voyage in time, finding the many cities within the city and the secret memory of its communities.

Among these minute cityscapes, one is still vivid in my mind- as it was so markedly unlike-Milan. "April is the cruellest month" (Eliot, 1923), reads a most famous poem written in a London suffocated by pollution and inhabited by 'hollow men', but exposed to the almost painful signs of spring-life blooming against the shallow life of its citizens. Also in that empty and dead Milan nature was speaking, spring was blooming, and the green literally exploded in my eyes just as I turned round the Eastbound corner, opposite the more famous West area that I had explored in my previous peregrinations. My East End- my favourite quarter for food shopping- welcomed me with a small patch of grass pointed with numberless daisies (**photo 8**), an incongruent view in the stone jungle of a densely built area. In the surreal silence of the drowsy city, somehow seduced by the green vein lurking here and there, springing from the pavement's holes or hanging from street sills (**photo 9, 10**), I found myself in front of a small village of tiny houses, cosy two-storey houses adorned with tiny gardens full of those flowers typical of countryside orchards.

I had a vague memory of that place as I entered a narrow lane that crossed along the small village (**photo 11**). A strange Milan was there- pale blots of azure, green, yellow and pink elegantly jotted in a landscape of grey, cream and brown blocks- as if a pastel colour line memory of certain Hapsburg popular dwellings had broken into the massive 19th century conglomerates that were there dominant (**photo 12, 13**).

The air was bright and scented, people stayed in their *locus amoenus* enjoying their tiny sunny gardens, lying on a chaise long, reading or eating, as if they were on vacation- I must admit that I envied them, and that staged privacy so unusual in big towns. It was like being in a movie, or better, as if they were in a movie or and me watching them from behind a screen- an unreal scene in an unreal city. At the very end of the street- outside that oasis- another block of small, coloured and stylish houses awaited me, once again an unexpected view (**photo 14**). I couldn't really tell the age of those original forms- it might be in between the two World Wars, or even before, refurbished houses of the end of 19th century. Once at home I would do some historical investigation for sure, but meanwhile I was enjoying that strangeness, and started tracing then a colour vein of yellow and pink that suddenly appeared spread out by and by, once reached the large streets Eastbound that encircled the small village. That was actually the right sign to detect around: the evidence of a continuity, of age and style, was more evident to me, an illumination (**photo 15, 16**). That area was at the back of the famous Milano Teresina (after the Austrian Empress) located along Corso Venezia- the 19th century of the Austrian domination over Milan that so indeleibly marked the architecture of some city areas. The Milan West End and East End: the East End being the mews, the popular and small bourgeois quarters in face of the luxurious residences of the Rich- servants, small shop keepers and artisans in support of the domestic and elegant life of the then dominant classes.

I went home back with an imaginary music in my ears- Mozart from Vienna, but also Verdi, the Milanese patriot whose Milan Conservatorio is devoted. One hour passed and the streets were still empty "And all that mighty heart is lying still". A TV or a Radio speaker, heard from inside a flat, was chattering about a coming 'awakening': in May the lockdown is going to stop. You know what? The time will surely come when we shall look back at the sleeping metropolis with some nostalgia....

Notes

(1) Cfr. William Wordsworth, "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, 1802". The sonnet belongs to the period of the poet's residence in London. The view and the life of the city becoming the overcrowded metropolis was at the basis of his famous long philosophical poem- The Prelude- grounded on the practice of walking. Through a methodic walking and the consequent visual posture, Wordsworth tried to capture the London of the Industrial Revolution focusing on the iconic "crowd". In the above cited sonnet London is viewed at dawn, an unreal, surprising city enjoyed from a bridge, empty and silent.

(2) Cfr. "Ho girato il mondo...". Magistretti Viaggi Progetti, (26/3/2015- 29/12/2015). Exhibition curated by Rosanna Pavoni. Brochure produced by Fondazione studio museo Vico Magistretti (www.vicomagistretti.it), 2015

References

- Barthes R. (1957), *Preface a Stendhal. Quelques promenades dans Rome, suivi de "Le Cenci"*, Guilde du Livre, Lausanne
- Benjamin W. (2002), Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), *The Arcades Project (1927- 1940)*, Belknap Press, New York
- Berger J. (1972), *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin, Harmondsworth
- Braidotti R. (1994), *Nomadic subjects*, Columbia U.P., New York
- Brilli A. (1997), *Il Viaggiatore immaginario*, Il Mulino, Bologna
- De Certeau M. (1984), *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California P., Berkeley
- Eliot T.S. (1923), "The Waste Land", in *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 1940
- Freud, S. (1917). The 'Uncanny'. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, ed. by J. Strachey, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London, 1955
- Leed E.J. (1991), *The Mind of the Traveller, From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism*, Basic Books, U.S.
- Magistretti V. (2015), "Ho viaggiato il mondo...", Magistretti Voyages Projects, a cura di Pavoni R., Milano, Fondazione Vico Magistretti
- Margheriti G. Luce (2020), *Cento cose da Vedere a Milano*, Newton Compton, Milano
- Turri E. (1998), *Il paesaggio come teatro*, Marsilio, Venezia
- Urry J. and Larsen J. (2011), *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, Sage, London
- Wordsworth W. (1802), "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, 1802), in *William Wordsworth. Poetical Works*, O.U.P., Oxford, 1904