

A STAR BETWEEN *HUBRIS* AND FICTION

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On 4th June, 2014, at the National Gallery of Modern Art, the exhibition Stella [Star] features 44 paintings, plus a corpus of more than 30 drawings and a literary work by Flavio de Marco. This exhibition is the result of the artist's investigation during the past two years. But what exactly is "Stella"?

Stella was born as a book about an artificial island built in the Aegean, which is far more advanced in terms of planning and technology, than Palm Islands, those islands that have been under construction for some years in the UAE. The island's peculiarity, as Flavio de Marco said –with passion and foresight embracing the fictional dimension – is to propose a repertoire of sophisticated representations of real landscapes among the most attractive ones in the world, alongside a selection of landscapes that belong to the categories of spirit and art (some of them were "modeled" on works by Dhal, Rousseau, Modersohn, Klimt and others). They all are miraculously enclosed in just one "Super-place". Stella is indeed a "Super-place", an excellent example of engineering landscape, an evolved product of a precise planning, on the verge of pedantry, which defined its extension, nature, functions, activities, leaving nothing to chance. It is a "Super-place" also because it has "super-accessorizes" that make it unique: airports, heliports, an intricate but highly efficient road network that connects the central hubs nodes of the island, as well as hotels, shopping centers, leisure centers, places for erotic consumption, restaurants and food distribution centers that materialize in a few minutes getting to the end user without any pecuniary nor human mediation. Here's why, Stella is a "Super-place" populated by end users (to put it with an effective metaphor), divided between tourists and residents, for whom everything was designed and programmed.

While Metropolis, Fritz Lang's famous film, appeared layered, visually distributed in an "archetypical" vertical way – such was its power of visual impact – scrutinized and re-proposed to the viewer by a long sequence shot, and if Dante's trilogy, that at the time I'm writing, it seems to me to be the progenitor of Metropolis and of other Super-places created by the imagination of writers, filmmakers and visual artists, has also a vertical distribution with groups and concentric circles that overlap each other and drawn profoundnesses (Hell) or heights (Purgatory), Stella, on the other hand, thrives on pure horizontality.

Stella's structure, and nature are flat. It presents mountain peaks too, here empirical data is not in question. It is a structural flatness – and de Marco's deliberately "flat" painting wants to be an expression of it – which relates to the lack of depth, that has often been investigated by the artist, connected to the world of communication which the island belongs to. Stella is the amazing surrogate of a world flattened on the horizontality of communication, which has abandoned the depth of perspective, that device surpassed by the panoptic structure that Stella embodies, which was made accessible by an evolved operating system. And its flatness, as "softened" by the typical five points of a star, is innervated by an extreme vision, which we do not define crazy just because it belongs to an imagination that goes far beyond any possible reality and that undermines rules that normally govern it, however this project presents itself as an incredibly regulated reality. Stella is a mix of contradictions. In it the impossible is looming as possible and each historically-known order is subverted and replaced by another one. For example, the more Stella is tightly controlled (the form of government is an absolute monarchy), the more it is confirmed as fake. This is the paradox on which the island is based and that combines in a single creature fiction and rule. It duplicates the reality on two levels seemingly irreconcilable: the level of fiction which, while belonging to the sphere of aesthetics as freedom to create new areas of perception, alludes to the arbitrary (that on the other hand belongs to the sphere of ethics), and the level of rule and control, which

should primarily suppress will and fiction. But above all, on Stella it is possible “for the first time in human history, to change landscapes through the use of a software that allows you to treat them as backdrops [...] The heart of the island is represented by this computing technology capable to realize multilevel landscapes and cityscapes known as LSN (Landscape Screen Nature). LSN software is a complex system of micro-projections on three-dimensional white surface elements, wherein the projected image constitute the ‘skin’ of the solid, and simulates the scenario through olfactory dispersions and sound recordings”.

This crucial passage, written by de Marco, reveals two elements that cannot be passed over. First, Stella is definitely a huge archive of landscapes which can be chosen according to user’s discretion, condition that goes far beyond the “normal human propensity to take possession of the environment”¹: on the island it is actually possible to replace a certain landscape with a new one as it were any other merchandise. For being paradoxically holistic – every landscape, but also every offer and every consumption – Stella is a kind of huge “landscape supermarket”. Disquieting evolution of the tourism industry which, in exchange for money, allows us to temporarily own landscapes and environments that are, otherwise, denied to us: something very similar to Calvino’s “negative mirrors” (Invisible Cities), places that we did not own and that we will never own, but that now, in Stella, turn accessible and interchangeable. The second element concerns the fact that on the Island of Stella landscape not only has nothing to do with an original opening but, being a mere scenic backdrop, it takes art history back at least five centuries, when some fundamental pictorial experimentation sought to reduce the distance between figure and background, giving the landscape a central role in the construction of the artwork and not considering it as a mere backdrop.

As I was reading Stella, often came to my mind landscapes saturated by events, figures, actions, locations and mixed up details that Bosch had created for his paintings. I could recognize that same crazy obsession to detail, the same excesses, the same dazzling figurations. I do not want to make disrespectful comparisons, I’m not talking about painting, but of “worlds” expressed exclusively, and in a sublime way, through painting (Bosch) and worlds expressed through painting and writing, where written words intervenes where the visionary painting stops. Hastily speaking, these worlds share a similar madness.

I always thought that in Bosch’s extreme vision it can be read a tragic idea of the world and, at the same time, a moral judgment on the world that is tragically caught between corruption and righteousness, between sin and possible redemption. I often tracked something similar to a moral judgment even in secular, young and contemporary Flavio de Marco. Thus, (even if I have been knowing Flavio and his work for years) here follows the question I can not escape: what did led him to imagine a world without morality, like Stella? What did produce a madness, an aberration like Stella?

In this same book, Federico Ferrari offers an interpretation of Flavio de Marco’s work by identifying in two artworks a beginning and an outcome of his artistic career (at least for now). Two works that are both significantly called Paesaggio – Spazio pubblico privato pittorico (Paesaggio), 1999 and Paesaggio (Isola di Stella), 2012– but very different from each other: a black screen and a sunset. Ferrari places in Leon Battista Alberti’s “window of vision” the possibility, unchanged over time, of “pictorial vision”. Then, the question he asks himself is: “What can we see today within this window?”. This reading helped me to retrace the attitude of hubris that Stella embodies, giving me, hopefully, the ability to open further questions.

In an effective way Ferrari recalls the steps that have led de Marco to question himself,

¹ Gerardo Mosquera, Paesaggio Nostrum, in G. Mosquera, (edited by), Perduti nel Paesaggio, exhibition catalog (MART, Rovereto), Edizioni MART, Rovereto, 2014, pp. 21–31

with growing insistence, passion and intellect, not only on what landscape is today, but on what “to see” means today, how you see, and what you see. Ferrari writes: “Our days are a restless wandering in a proliferation of windows that open onto each other [...] every place can be reached; landscape’s boundaries are broken until the window turns black and you can not see anything anymore”.² This was Paesaggio, the black screen from which de Marco’s investigation started many years ago, in comparison to which the lush greenery, the bright colors, the dazzling holism of the merchandise–landscape offered by Stella, seem to be painted by the hand of another painter. De Marco’s aim, is not to talk about landscape from a “cultural” point of view, but to deal with it from the perspective of painting. He tries to match the angle (the window) within which art can frame landscape today with the point of view of a society that is querying itself on its meaning. This, in my opinion, is his challenge and (in case) it is also art’s victory: the ability to articulate a strong and necessary point of view on something that, from a strictly pictorial perspective and from the perspective of civilization and human behavior, has a foundational value. Not surprisingly, in many languages the word “landscape” shares the same Latin root of pagus: the pole hoisted into the ground to mark territory and, as consequence, the first axis of the window within which the gaze configures a place.

According to de Marco, painting is meaningful if it is “an invention of a new way of seeing space”³, thus if it reconfigures Alberti’s concept of window. So, in my words, painting makes sense if it works as a critical device of what can be seen. Similarly, landscape has something to say too, despite the black computer screen or the All-of-Star, beyond the convergent extremes reached by the technical arrogance, if it is not faced as a pictorial genre, but as “mean for the construction of meaning”.⁴ The issue is delicate and in game there is not a more beautiful “or more successful picture than others (some would rejoice because, on de Marco’s canvas, colors and shapes have finally appeared!) but, as the artist asserts, in the running there is “a new way of seeing the space”. Stella is an excellent critical device of what is visible, for its extreme functional dimension. It is the most radical example of how we have transformed our natural inclination to take possession of the landscape into an arrogant domestication of it.

But the issue gets complicated since de Marco claims that “landscape is itself a critical device, because it disconcerts”. And what does landscape disconcert? Is the eye, the gaze, the perception of space, its reconfiguration as well as the overwhelming spectacle of nature, our being within landscape as being-in-the-world, like being inside an “original” opening that does not mean “natural” because, according to de Marco, “landscape begins where nature ends”?

Yet painting, the painting of Flavio de Marco has dealt and it is still dealing with that visual earthquake carried by landscape and, at the same time, with fragmentation, interference, flatness and excess of images, the technical hubris that today, and increasingly, governs our relationship with landscape. Hence Stella was born as a theoretical project, and then the painting suggested by Stella, meant as a painting project, arose.

However, while analyzing these issues, a “resistance” of the landscape and perhaps something even previous to landscape itself emerges. In front of this resistance it seems to me that de Marco’s painting takes on a two-pronged strategic value: on one side it is the artist’s answer to the technical hubris that Stella embodies and which reduces landscape to an interchangeable backdrop, not only on a computer screen, but in our usual daily and touristic consumption, of which the machine is just one variation. On the other side, painting appears to be (as in Romantic art) a defense strategy against the

² Federico Ferrari, in this book, pp. 109–112

³ Conference at the Maramotti Collection, Reggio Emilia, April 5, 2014

⁴ Mosquera, cit.

impossibility to stay firm in front of the spectacle of nature and the perception of the landscape. An unbearable vision arises from the horizon (which first caught young Flavio's attention)⁵ where, in the sublime regularity of a radiant day, everything is aligned or, in the sublime tumult of a stormy day, everything is confused and that line seems unreachable to us but, at the same time, is unavoidable for us.

An unbearable vision of and inside the landscape, where the eye tries to comprehend (cum-prehendere), to retain and then to rule the spectacle of nature, which is given instead as gaze's vertigo.

Vertigo and origin that remain, although debased and suffocated by computer screens or by frames of a car window – small windows through which landscapes are revealed today. And from them, perhaps, it comes the ultimate meaning of painting.

⁵ From private conversation with the artist