

From Interrupted Experience to the Critical Gaze

Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* is a work that deeply unsettles me. I am not only struck by the colours, sombre and yet transparent, by cold tonalities that might nonetheless harbour a sense of hope. I am not perturbed, in short, by that ambiguous layering of perceptions which gives rise to conflicting feelings, only then to be freed, miraculously, by a brushstroke, a chromatic allusion. It is that figure, the Monk, alone and desolate amongst so much world, defenceless in that vast open landscape, fragile between sky and sea, which causes in me such a feeling of anguish. If, as a viewer, I identify with him, doing no more than that which Romantic painting calls upon the viewer to do, I feel as if lost. Insignificant and alone.

Monk by the Sea is a painting that Flavio de Marco also greatly likes, although it is not his favourite among Friedrich's paintings. *Monk by the Sea* is held by the Nationalgalerie in Berlin. And de Marco lives in Berlin. The last time I saw Friedrich's masterpiece was when I visited the German capital to see works by de Marco that were to be exhibited at the Collezione Maramotti in Reggio Emilia. We talked about Friedrich, among other things, but not about that painting. We talked about Melville, which is to say, about a parallel radical experience of landscape: "No one will again be able to describe landscape as Melville did in *Moby Dick*, not because the Ocean no longer exists, but because no one can experience the sea in that way anymore," de Marco told me at one point. So it is, for me, with Friedrich's *Monk*. Perhaps no one else will again be able to paint in such a way the desolation, the astonishment, the profound disquiet that might overcome a monk, or any human being, caught in a boundless laceration between sky and sea (although a monk should be able to draw on faith, besides reason, in order to master that bewilderment, which is why – I think – the subject of the work is a religious person: Friedrich wants to tell us that the overpowering force of that landscape succeeds in prevailing even over the power of faith), not because the grandeur of that ill-defined horizon between sky and sea no longer exists, but because, perhaps, we are no longer capable of experiencing, of living that magnificence.

This is what de Marco and I talked about, in Berlin.

We talked about the experience of landscape, even fantasising a little about cleansing it of today's dross, holding it up to the light to view it in all its dazzling luminosity, as an act of the gaze modelled on the morphology and discovery of that surrounding us. We talked about the experience and the painting of landscape, gliding about for conversational pleasure and entranced by images recalled, across seasons of art both diverse and exalting. Starting with the "golden age" of perspective, for example, when the naturalistic component gradually gives way to a subjectivity directed at culturally defining landscape; with Leon Battista Alberti and his *De Pictura*, "the artist who most perturbed me" – de Marco told me – "because he sustains the paradox of something fictitious, perspective, passing it off as real;" and, alongside him in this exquisite fiction, Piero della Francesca, less and less concerned with representing the existing, determined as he is to discover in colour and optics, and with a mathematising approach, the secret for controlling space,

with man the creator and embodiment of such control, “to the point of connecting in unitary synthesis figure and landscape,” as Federico Zeri has succinctly asserted. This is when landscape, without losing its original naturalness, becomes an elaborate conceptual process, a being-in-the-world that vivifies man’s gaze. Then onto Dutch painting in the sixteen hundreds, when – or so I think – landscape frees itself of human control – there is no Humanism in the golden age of Dutch art but a profound secularism, the anthropic dimension not being concerned with finding its reflection in nature – and becomes its own subject. It becomes an “autonomous agent of meaning,” as Amedeo Trezza has written. And again on to the nineteenth century, the Romantic era, when, as was the case with Friedrich, then Turner and along a trajectory that connects both to Lorraine and to Monet who “drowns in his gaze on landscape” - the *Water Lilies*, according to de Marco – this experience appears at its height, even annihilating, through excess of feeling, the distance between itself and its visual field, almost as though in thrall to the raptures of the sublime; or else no, we too shaken, as were the Nordic painters, by a hostile and crushing perception of nature, as overpowering as nature itself.

The risk with such forays into the past is to find oneself left with little more than a weakened and, dangerously, nostalgic theory, lamenting the loss of a fulfilling experience that is erased by the desolate comparison with today’s paucity. De Marco’s notion of landscape painting is strengthened by his control of nostalgic slippages, achieved by avoiding the use of a homogeneous language and technique: an abstraction that sharpens narrative details, insistent references to pop that erase any sense of depth, the gaze that alights on a detail in order to place it centre stage, and ultimately the negation of both the notion and practice of style *tout court*, could all nevertheless also reveal ghost-like possibilities: references to something that we already know cannot be there. Landscape and its experience as just that then; a ghost. This idea is also evoked in the installation of *Vedute*, an exhibition at the Collezione Maramotti, which emphasises the centrality of white, of a void in which the paintings act as frames.

This is a crucial issue today, especially for an artist who like de Marco ambitiously claims to have staked himself high in an exploration of landscape, wishing to be recognised, even if only in the future, as someone who has critically contributed to the debate. Because, as Luigi Ghirri has shown us, with a wealth of possibilities and perhaps unsurpassable acuity of vision, a wide ranging landscape does not exist today, only one that is derived. There is no untrammelled vision, only a fragmentary one, filtered through frames that at times denounce the paradoxical view, ridicule or reduce it, almost suffocate it, and at other times reveal it as a precious epiphany, as Karl Friedrich Schinkel had already revealed, in colour and paint, with his glimpses of landscapes caught in a section of a window, or in the opening of a cave. There is therefore no experience of genuine landscape (to speak of an authentic one is obviously a risk), only visits to a simulacrum.

What do we refer to, then, when we speak of his painting? More importantly, what options are open today to an artist wishing to approach landscape?

The degree zero from which one might start in de Marco's case is tinged with what, without exaggeration, can be defined as tragic tones. The first work in which he begins his exploration is a black monochrome from 1999. This is a painting that, for those who know the artist's work, is very familiar, its theme having been presented regularly in the following years. The image is that of a computer screen, unlit by any bluish light and which appears darkened, black. An eloquent sign of that compressed perspective to which the use of computers, as presumed "window onto the world", accustoms us, erasing depth of vision and, I would add, the potential luminosity emanating from it. This is how the artist describes it: "The black monochrome I produced for several years was the most I was able to express of the image, it signified my inability to find a position in front of landscape, it meant suspending judgement on images themselves." Censure, therefore, the removal and relinquishing of expression caused by an inability to piece together a vision untainted by polluting filters. Without however depriving such a vision of authenticity. Herein lies the only means of escape from explorations flavoured with an uncertain and nostalgic aftertaste. The black monochrome suggests that in the first instance it is our landscape that has changed so that, speculatively, our gaze, rather than extending across the depth of the horizon, is restricted to the close up flatness of a screen that has by now become, moreover, our natural environment. "I was convinced that one had to start again from here, from this black screen," de Marco explains. From a zero degree.

Yet, however painfully wrought, this image was in reality a shortcut. Loss was masked by that dark patina of colour applied to canvas that, if anything, highlighted rather than removed such loss. Later, this funereal drape was torn asunder and the computer's empty windows began to be populated, displaying views and partial views, in which information and details, confused elements, now build up. The gaze no longer registers a black negation, tragic yet condensed, and begins instead to fragment, summarily capturing images and their by-products, no longer able to distinguish between the view and that which obstructs it, a fragment and its disturbance.

This is how de Marco describes, in his own way, a notion of painting that never becomes style: "I am not interested in creating beautiful images, nor in engaging in a formal discourse, painting for me is not an aesthetic question. I am more interested in using it as a critical tool where, if anything, the subject suggests the style." His is painting that makes indiscriminate use of pastels, lacquers, sprays, acrylics and marker pens; that contorts and worries the line in order to find in it more than expression, the mood, the beat of the six cities in which he has lived; or that instead flattens the brushstroke, almost as though to allow this loss to better slip over it. Lecce, or rather Salento: where he was born, and where sea-blue and dark, earthy red spread, then are halted on a photograph and a rip, an aggressive gesture; and where memory is not entrusted to images or photographs, but to publicity leaflets. Milan: the city of his encounters with art, with Brera and fragments of august art works: Bellini and Segantini — strange bands of colour and dark grey. Bologna: filled with open windows, like anxious but perhaps unusable antennae in a

city that is surprisingly green, and through which one glimpses fragments of Morandi and Domenichino. London: a skeleton shaped by the abstract labyrinth of its *Tube* lines, of other lines that cleave urban space like Futurist lightning bolts yet are nothing more than satellite navigation traces on a map; and, also layered, further lines of escape: bus routes and the routes of ferries on the Thames. Berlin: claustrophobic in its narrow view from the underground, a familiar landscape for those who, like the artist, frequent the city; a tiled corridor wall, interrupted by another black screen and embellished by the obsessive refrain of an upholstered seat, a virtuoso line that for de Marco recalls Matisse. Finally Rome: mobile ruin, auctioned off on the front of a tourist bus, an enchantment elusive in the urban chaos. By now lost.

Set aside each of these large canvases are three postcards, more city fragments picked up by a disenchanted *flâneur* who registers that which he sees spasmodically, in real and delayed time; who, in order to capture images, fishes in the repertory of “that which is already represented”, returning it then to the most popular and also most sentimental format. High and low mingle, blurring a presumed hierarchy of sources. Here is a fragment of Constable’s clouds; Saint Paul’s in London seen from inside Tate Modern, its dome masked by the reflections of the windows; Piazza Duomo in Milan, but only seen from above, where the rooftops of by now unrecognisable buildings meet the sky; a napkin stamped with ancient Rome; graffiti that violate the stone of Lecce’s Baroque centre; vulgar flyers; shutters and sections of roads glimpsed in a flash from the window of a bus.

Nothing is as it should be. Everything is disturbed. Rome is a little filthy, London on the move but fake. Berlin is arid and ungenerous. Milan is aphasic. Bologna pointlessly exhibitionist. Lecce is a large postcard. But to pass judgement is mistaken. That is not the artist’s intention. Morality and aesthetics are out of place. Rather we should ask ourselves where de Marco’s perception and notion of landscape originate from. Is it the society of mass consumption, the cities within reach of low cost flights, the tourist’s hurried eye, large-scale urbanisation, that pollute our gaze, or has something else occurred?

“At their core the genesis of these paintings is guided by the touristic aspect of urban experience, as defined by the two moments that precede and follow real experience: projection and memory,” he states. Is the experience of landscape, then, affected by a socio-cultural element? In part, undoubtedly. Humanism’s conception of landscape, as an environment in which to govern space from the starting point of human centrality, no longer exists; although, as previously mentioned, at the time there were already strong conceptual readings of such constructions of landscape, with Piero but also with Giorgione and Bellini. Anthropocentric influences were already in evidence, not only because Italian landscape was inhabited and forged by man’s knowing hand, but precisely because they were necessary for the articulation of that “unitary synthesis between figure and background” (to quote Zeri again), a perspective that marginalises landscape as a natural environment in favour of its cultural representation. Landscape was less and less “natural”, the boundaries between nature and artifice became ever less

perceivable, until landscape became an ever more complex and perhaps ungovernable environment where layered and parallel realities, spurious genres and secondary sources accumulate; and where the language and the gaze that interpret it became equally corrupt. De Marco is right, therefore, to call into question the “touristic element of urban experience,” because such an adjective captures the sociological and cultural metamorphosis that we embody, in that we are always and everywhere tourists, consumers of something, whether of nature – be it domesticated or by chance still wild – or of a computer. Something that is “real” or “virtual”.

I think though that we need some clarification here; it is this “something” that causes me some problems. I am not convinced, as de Marco asserts, that “the gaze onto landscape is somehow the experience of landscape, if we assume this to be the most heightened awareness of the gaze itself” and that therefore it succeeds in “filling the distance between itself and the horizon.” To put it differently, this would mean that the gaze onto landscape has the capacity to annul the distance between the subject – he who sees – and the object, the thing seen, in as much as it is the “archetype” – de Marco clarifies – of seeing. Hard to disagree with him. Think of Arnold Böcklin’s *Island of the Dead*, another painting held by the Nationalgalerie in Berlin. There it is our gaze, tinged with pity and therefore emotionally complicit, that accompanies the boat carrying the body to the island. It bridges the distance between subject and horizon but, at the same time, registers that distance. It seems to me, in fact, that the gaze activates the landscape from the standpoint of a strong subjectivity, towards something that however remains distant, the endpoint of its action. And I think that it is precisely this distinction, this break with something in-which-one-has-always-been – first articulated through landscape, as an environment (to use a more contemporary expression) shared by an interlocking sense of being and *being there* – that creates not only the distance, but a “relationship at risk”, in which the subject now consumes the object. This is none other than the “touristic” attitude of our time. An attitude which not only causes what Baudrillard describes when using as emblematic of our times the Japanese tourist, who visits a place in order to photograph it rather than to see it, so as to later relive the representation rather than have lived the experience; but that also, through fundamental necessity, fragments, hybridizes and corrupts the very possibility of experience. I think that the disappearance of that shared environment is at the origin of a notion of experience that plays itself out between two opposing polarities; one active, the subject, and the other passive and objectified, the background, the horizon, the visual field, no longer the landscape as much as the place of being. It’s not a question of no longer being able to live something – Melville’s sea, Friedrich’s dismayed monk – nor is this inability, in turn, merely a matter of sentiment, because the lived and the emotional rest on something that, ontologically, precedes them, and that incorporates them into its aperture: the world. Or, in art, landscape.

That said, why do I think that de Marco’s paintings succeed in his set objective, that of turning them into a lens for reflecting on one of the most fundamental

questions of our time? I think first and foremost that de Marco unhinges some of today's artistic tenets, not just a certain suspicion that painting is an inadequate medium with which to represent the complexity and turbulence of our world; a simplistically partisan notion, as though a single period had the optimum visual language, a more effective form of artistic expression than that of any other. Rather, it dismantles painting's confinement to a two dimensional and passive space. With his paintings de Marco invites us to have the same, active, mental and – with the strong sensorial impact that his paintings exert today – I would say almost physical, disposition that we experience with some environmental installations. I think that de Marco succeeds in achieving with painting that which some artists achieve by working in space, adopting it as an integral and irreducible component of their work. He mobilizes a critical gaze, which is also the gaze, I would almost say miracle, of art – not only of those who make it, but also of those who participate in it. He solicits a mediating of the senses that facilitates an engagement between the space of the work and the eye that interprets it. What we see of Bologna, Lecce, Rome, Berlin, London, Milan, their partial and at times anguished views, are images that we reconstruct conceptually and visually and that don't just make us reflect on the state of things in these cities, on the "touristic aspect of urban experience;" this would be a terrain that lies half way between art and sociology, remarkable but not arousing. The encounter with those large paintings, the level of attention demanded by the postcards accompanying them, open up a profound questioning of ourselves, of that which we see, of what it means to see and of seeing's fraught grammatical make-up, that doesn't draw back – as the artist has not – from the discomfort caused by the short perspective of the computer screen and the view, real and reworked, of a city.

Those images create a critical space. Something that, in the absence of beautiful images, even if by choice, today represents art's best bet. Better still: the meaning of art, the reason for making and living it. That all this should take place today in painting seems to me something special.