E te, beltade ignota – A short play on Fiction and Realism

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Prelude: Real or Fictional

Associating architecture, reality and fiction presents more than one snag. Neither reality can be reduced to fiction (and vice versa); nor architecture can be described as either "real" or "fictional". On the one hand, it might appear that architecture is always "real" in the sense that anything that is material is real. On the other, architecture can be understood as rarely real and more obviously fictional. In this case, architecture is defined as a discipline narrowly confined to the metaphorical embodiment of cultural values. Notwithstanding this dualistic separation of fiction from reality in architecture, the thesis of this short essay will concern the possibility of finding some connections between these two definitions.

In order to deepen this complex relation, then, this text will consider two artworks that are – apparently – characterized by two very different levels of fiction and realism. The first one is Victorien Sardou's/Giacomo Puccini's "Tosca", a play in which fantasy takes place in the real world. While the second one is Giovanni Battista Piranesi's "Campo Marzio dell'Antica Roma" where the real and fictional inventions are mutually entangled.

First Act: Tosca

Let us begin with the Tosca. This piece is commonly interpreted as an example of the Italian "Verismo": an artistic tendency defined as realist and represented by authors such as, among many others, the writers Giovanni Verga, Luigi Capuana and the musician Giacomo Puccini. Broadly speaking, these authors' work can be interpreted and read as the attempt of representing the things of the world as they are in "nature", focusing on their contemporaries and their problems. Giovanni Verga, in his novel "I Malavoglia", uses a language that reproduces some features of the Sicilian dialect and renounces to any external narrator. [1] Luigi Capuana, in his novel "Giacinta", depicts a story made of a relentless and endless series of tragic events: the main character, Giacinta, is first raped, then she marries a man who she does not love, she has a child with her secret lover; the daughter dies, the lover leaves. Finally, Giacinta commits suicide. For the aim of this essay, what is important to have in minde is Capuana's attempt of developing characters in a "naturalistic" way. So much so that, even though many critics believe that Capuana's attempt is not totally successful, this novel has often been considered as Verismo's manifesto: an illusion written in the most realistic way possible. [2]

Puccini's/Sardou's "Tosca"' is, as Capuana's and Verga's work, a realistic piece. It is so, first and foremost, because it is set in Rome in the day of Marengo battle. Still, to consider something as realist only because of the historical features of the play would be reductive, to say

1 Giovanni Verga, I Malavoglia, (Milano: Fratelli Treves, Editori, 1881).

2 Giacinta is Luigi Capuana's first novel, published in 1879. On the its being a "verist" play, see: Carlo Alberto Madrignani, Capuana e il naturalismo, (Bari: Laterza, 1970).

the least. In fact, in this piece love and politics are mixed in a plot of deceptions that leads to tragic and inevitable events and, as brilliantly and synthetically pinpointed by Alexander Kluge, "If he [Scarpia] hadn't died in this adventure, he would have disgraced himself with impotence".[3] As these words by Kluge highlight pretty well, Tosca is not realistic only because of the real events in which it is set, but also in the development of the main characters. In fact, the level of realism of the drama has to be taken so seriously that we could even read the psychological traits of the people involved in the drama's adventures. Yet, we must also admit that in any form or realism, such as "Verismo", the representation of reality has some unrealistic aspects. In fact, if realism means the representation of things of the world as they are, this same representation has some fictional aspects: it takes reality out of time and space. For instance, even in Tosca we can easily read the unrealistic representation of the real. One clear example among many is a dialogue between Scarpia and Tosca about the imprisonment of another character of the play, Mario: "Your lover is bound hand and foot, and a steel ring is clamped to his head. For every one of his denials, we make some of his blood spurt unmercifully!" [4]

Interlude: the imaginary beyond realism

Evidently, words like those by Scarpia are reminders to the romantic taste of the time as well as to some of the most relevant public discussions of the time; such as the ways of punishment. Indeed, even without mentioning Cesare Beccaria's "dei Delitti e delle Pene", or Giovanni Battista Piranesi's "prisons", it is pretty obvious that, in these words, there might be reminders to interdisciplinary imaginaries. [5] Still, allow us to remain focused on the most obviously realist aspect of the play: the set in Rome. Curiously enough, as proven by Lyle F. Perusse, both Sardou and Puccini, were inspired by the work of Giovanni Battista Piranesi. [6] As a matter of fact, we know that Sardou was abreast of the antiques trade and admirer of Piranesi's prints and, moreover, that he might have possessed a copy of Piranesi's Campo Marzio. In fact, quoting Puccini, the French dramatist was inspired by an "immense topographical map of Rome." [7] This Piranesian influence is particularly interesting because it gives us the chance to seek for connections between the "real" and the "fictional", in the attempt of breaking the usual dualistic separation of these two domains. In fact, Piranesi's depiction of Rome in the Campo Marzio, can be defined in many ways (and it has been), but "realist".

Second Act: Campo Marzio

As well known, the Campo Marzio (1762) is a depiction of a strange ancient Rome that seems to announce future forms for architecture. This is an archaeological project in which history, invention and topography blur into each other. Indeed, Piranesi consciously reuses the historical fragments of the "fragmenta Urbis" in order to compose a project of invention combining original plans of ancient buildings with invented ones and his own imaginary. This is a city of monuments in which people can wonder the greatness of Rome and its architecture in a kind of urban scenography. Archaeological reconstructions, topographical maps, iconographic plans and perspectives contribute in reconstructing an imaginary Augustine Rome in its grandeur. This is a vision of Rome that is finally free from the medieval constructions: an ingenious planning in which the real and fiction become one. Emblematic cases of this overlapping of fiction and reality are those buildings left by Piranesi in their real state, such as the Pantheon or the Circus Maximus: architectures that exist in Piranesi's time as ruins, that were used in the hypothetical ancient Rome depicted by the plan and that are surrounded by the imaginary Rome designed by the Venetian architect. In this project we see then the constant mutual folding of the real on fiction, and vice versa.

Still, if this work is such a fictional project, how

3 Alexander Kluge, "Die Macht der Gefühle", quoted in Gertrud Koch and Jeremy Gaines, "Alexander Kluge's Phantom of the Opera", in New German Critique, No.49, Special Issue on Alexander Kluge (Winter, 1990), p.84.

4 "Legato mani e piè il vostro amante ha un cerchio uncinato alle tempia, che ad ogni niego ne sprizza sangue senza mercè!", in Burton D. Fischer (edited by), "Puccini's Tosca", Miami: Opera Journeys Publishing, p.75.

5 in "Dei delitti e delle Pene" (1764), Cesare Beccaria, accordingly to the culture of Enlightenment, famously defined torture as a useless practice. GIven the huge impact of this book, we can see Sardou's and Puccini's play as a comment to Beccaria's theories.

6 Lyle F. Perusse, "Tosca and Piranesi", The Musical Times, Vol. 122, No. 1665 (Nov., 1981), pp. 743-745.

7 Giacomo Puccini, quoted in Lyle F. Perusse, cit., p.743.

could it have inspired the writing of "Tosca"? How could such a fiction have been an inspiration for a realist play? An anecdote might help to solve this apparent contradiction.

Third Act: Real and Fictional

Apparently, while confronting himself with Puccini, Sardou thought about representing the last scene of Tosca's third act (Tosca's suicide) with the Tiber and Castel Sant'Angelo on the one side of the scene and St Peter on the other. [8] Of course, Puccini's reaction was not favourable (to say the least). Indeed, the musician, who – as we have seen – was a realist, could not accept such a vision of Rome; a vision that did not conform to the real landscape of the city. On his part, Sardou toyed with such an idea in order to create the visual illusion of Tosca's plunge into the Tiber. In other words, Sardou's intention was to create an illusion by altering elements of the Roman landscape in order to intensify the drama: a well-made play. Sardou knew all too well that reality, to be such, needs fiction.

This aspect is particularly interesting because of two reasons. It makes us solve the little mystery behind the influence of Piranesi's work on Sardou's and Puccini's and, more importantly, it allows the problematization of this specific case.

In fact, this anecdote implicitly shows us how every form of reality is a matter of fiction as well. In other words, any social object, as such, is a matter of our subjective understanding. Consequently, when an author, such as Sardou, Puccini or Verga, writes a "realist" novel, the real that he is describing is not the reality as such, it is, instead, something likely to be real: a verisimilitude.

Consequently, if we briefly expand this reasoning to architecture, we must admit that the boundary between the two aspects mentioned at the beginning of this essay are more blurred than how it is usually understood. In fact, we might say that architecture, being part of the material world, has to take account of material and social realities. Yet, architecture must be fictional as well, in order to be something more than, and beyond, a service. In other words, architecture has to produce cultural "effects", exactly as an opera, a movie or a piece of art. Therefore, as shown by the examples of Tosca and Piranesi's Campo Marzio, the demarcation line between reality and fiction might be considered as blurry, vague and constantly moving: an ensemble of differences (what, referring to Jean-François Lyotard's vocabulary, might be called as "differend"). [9] Yet, fiction must not be judged negatively, because, as often pointed out, there is no reality without a certain degree of fiction.

Finally, we can re-read the relationship between "Tosca" and Piranesi's "Campo Marzio" presented here as a play on itself. In-fact, pursuing different levels of fiction, Piranesi, Sardou and Puccini show how the limit of fiction is something inherently ungraspable. In other words, quoting another character from Tosca (Cavaradossi): such a limit is a "beltade ignota", an unknown beauty.[10]

8 see: Lyle F. Perusse, cit.

9 Quoting Lyotard, the "differend" can be defined as "a case of conflict, between at (least two) parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments." Jean-François Lyotard, The Differend, Phrases in Dispute, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) p.65.

10 Burton D. Fischer (edited by), "Puccini's Tosca", Miami: Opera Journeys Publishing, p.49.

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