

FROM THE ARCHIVES OF INVISIBILITY

Marco Poloni's *Displacement Island* and the
Visuality of the Border Regime

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A boy in swimming trunks, his chin resting on the rounded edge of an inflatable dinghy. A dog standing on its hind legs, poking its nose over the edge of a garbage bin. The curves in the photo of an archer spanning his bow in front of a red wall. The undulating lines on the white background of a sonar screen. An eel coiled on the green deck of a fishing boat. The colours of Italy, and more besides: an abandoned life jacket in the sand, orange and blue; an orange-clad astronaut in deep blue water.

In Marco Poloni's *Displacement Island* colours, body positions and lines forge links between images of diverse provenance and content. Metaphor and the trope of similarity form the predominant compositional principle. Poloni links his photographs both spatially and rhetorically. He sketches thematic fields and brings them together: island, landscape, ocean, sea voyage, space travel, fishing, dogs, birds, beach, flotsam, jetsam, holiday, death. The transitions and transfers between the individual images and the thematic fields create similarities or presumed similarities. The head of a tuna pulled from the water by fishermen; the tip of a space shuttle in flight: such juxtapositions generate a metaphorical surplus.

In the eye of the beholder, the similarities trigger and channel an act of pattern recognition and paraphrase. Yet, as Donald Davidson tells us, there is no limit to the meanings produced by metaphor. [1] The associations that Poloni offers do not give him any control over the development of meaning. At the same time, the links between the images are not purely coincidental, nor are they solely the product of the

inherent dynamics of observation. The layout of *Displacement Island* is based on a matrix of relationships. Some indication of this orderly structure can be found in the alignment of pictures on the wall of the exhibition space, or in leafing through the book. A complex arithmetic of spaces and visual formats explains how the system behind this "constellation" (to use a term that Poloni borrowed from Mallarmé, who used it to describe the spatial distribution of lines of a poem) actually functions. A constellation, in this sense, obeys a strategy of de-densification. Meaning and knowledge are no longer concentrated, in all their complexity, within a single, allegorical image, but unfolded: the condensed visual information is spatially dispersed.

This dispersion is not without a certain random aspect. The subjective factor is clearly evident, long before one realizes that some of the 69 images are actually taken from the private photo album of Poloni's family. The autobiographical element is just one indicator among others, embedded in a visual process of deduction triggered by a variety of imagery and origins, from agency photo to film still and back again to auteur photography.

Poloni exploits the fact that we are willing to trust similarities because they seem so familiar. They allow us to make a connection. They bring together what is divided. When a film is being shot, there is a *script supervisor* whose job is to ensure *continuity*. The aim is to stabilise the illusion of unbroken narrative. Similarity is a key prerequisite for the diegetic flow of cinematic images. Between any two shots, there are isomorphic elements that link them together. These elements enable the spectator to leap, or perhaps glide, from one image to another. They create an ensemble of related images.

Displacement Island is a place where fantasies and projects dovetail like the similar elements of two photographs. Yet the standard of *continuity* is repeatedly interrupted and undermined. Empty spaces appear. When it comes to the configuration of images, there is a recurrence of the breaks that characterise

the supposed parallels or isomorphs that have shaped the social reality of Lampedusa since the late 1990s. Lampedusa, the largest of the three Pelagian islands, belongs to Italy – EU territory midway between Malta and Tunisia in the southern Mediterranean and scene of a dual movement: in the summer months, tourists flock here by plane from Italy's big towns or by ferry from the Sicilian town of Porto Empedocle. Refugees from North Africa, hoping to make their way to Europe, arrive in small fishing boats or coastguard vessels. Unlike the comfortable journey enjoyed by the tourists, their crossing is dangerous and is generally undertaken outside the main tourist season.

The Mediterranean, as a hub of mobility, has often blurred the boundaries between different typologies of moving around: existential, hedonistic, military and economic factors have all played a part, to varying degrees, since the days of classical antiquity. Tourists and migrants exchange roles or experience themselves as *Doppelgänger* of the other. Poloni, as though to prove the point, shows Odysseus as archer (a still from Godard's *Le mépris*), archetypal adventurer, and wandering warrior swept along by divine winds. Archive pictures of astronauts, photos of insects (from Gordon Douglas' 1954 classic horror movie *Them!*) activate tropes of colonisation and invasion. In this context, scenes of holidaymakers by the seaside lose their innocence. At the latest, by the time we see the flotsam and jetsam in the sand, we realise the absence it indicates might even be death.

In two of the photos, we see a cluster of brightly coloured little boats; a wooden cemetery of

wrecked hopes drying in the sun. Anyone who has escaped death or has been intercepted by the border patrol boats (as so often happens) on the high seas is detained in the containers and concrete buildings of the local CPT (“Centro di permanenza temporanea”). The very name – “Centre for Temporary Permanence” – clearly and cynically describes the situation of the migrants held there. After a few weeks, or sometimes just a few days, the Italian authorities transferred the migrants to a so-called third country such as Libya or later Tunisia, according to their origin. During the Libyan civil war, they were sorted to different Italian regions. A report by journalist Fabrizio Gatti, who documented his week at the CPT on Lampedusa in the guise of an illegal immigrant of arabic origin in September 2005, brought the inhumane circumstances to the attention of a wider public. [2] Poloni has also photographed this camp right beside the airport. His inquisitive but unintrusive gaze is directed at the illuminated complex from outside, by night. The inmates cannot be seen. Interest is focused on the apparatus [*dispositif*] of internment, or rather, on its nocturnal appearance.

The observation, control and channelling of immigration in the southern Mediterranean region is officially in the hands of the authorities. However, the population here, as elsewhere, is involved in implementing the border regime. For instance, the fishermen whose photos Poloni also includes in his work, are accustomed to the sight of the refugees in their boats. But they keep themselves out of trouble by turning a blind eye. Whereas the islanders welcomed the first migrants who came ashore on Lampedusa in the 1990s with sympathy, their neighbourly love waned as the influx of refugees steadily continued, eventually reaching the point of life-threatening indifference to these people in their boats. Their change of attitude is mostly due to the discriminatory security law passed by Berlusconi's government in August 2009, which criminalizes illegal entry and stay, and severely punishes those who bring aid to migrants. A certain degree of xenophobia, fuelled by the media and politicians in Italy, may also play a role. Whether the refugees appear on the radar of the community or stay

under the radar, they have to make the crucial decision for or against visibility in the interests of migration. If they are spotted by fishermen, the coastguard might be alerted – or not, as the case may be. Either way, there are potential advantages and disadvantages. Those who go unnoticed by the border police might drown. On the other hand, many migrants meet their deaths the moment they see the coastguards because, in their excitement and their frantic attempts to draw attention to themselves, they end up capsizing their overfilled boats and dinghies.

On land, too, having control over their own visibility or invisibility is crucial to their survival. Clandestinity calls for camouflage: merging with the crowd, being inconspicuous, not attracting attention – all these are part and parcel of the life of the illegal migrant “sans papiers.” Whereas tourists tend to stand out like a sore thumb, while, at the same time, contributing to the extraordinary spectacle of landscape and otherness, the media-constructed visibility of migration forms a counterpart to the migrants’ need to remain invisible.

Poloni respects this regime of (in)visibility, which takes various forms, not only on Lampedusa, but also in many other places along the boundaries of the EU. [3] His visualisation of the situation defies the conventions of social documentary as well as the logic of the images and texts in the news media. The result is a counter-narrative, or sub-narrative, to these dominant narratives. The gaze that takes it in is a roaming, associative, archiving, autobiographical, affective gaze. It is directed towards chance finds and incidental observations, and at times simply lingers on the beauty of the glittering sea or on the poignancy of a discarded cigarette packet labelled in Arabic. The mobility of the gaze that generates and guides the photographic cartography of *Displacement Island* recalls the mobility of the Situationist *dérive* – “a technique of displacement without any aim.” [4] The supposedly aimless drift of photographic selection and documentation seems to be contradicted by the supposedly targeted movements of migration and tourism. On the other hand, the acts of travelling and documenting, moving and

visualising, complement one another. The morphology of mobility that emerges here is, at the same time, a cartography of emotion, underpinned by similarities and associations, by the remembered and the familiar.

Visual analogies are an often underestimated and widely criticised instrument in constructing an order of things and signs. For Michel Foucault, the regulative principle by which knowledge and things were related to one another in the sixteenth century was determined by the category of similarity. [5] Four main types of this episteme are distinguished by the theoreticians of the Renaissance: harmonious co-existence (*convenientia*), emulation without interaction (*aemulatio*), the invisible resemblance of situations (*analogia*) and the dynamic power of assimilation across distances (*sympathia*). According to Foucault, this world of identities was gradually replaced in the course of the seventeenth century by the “classic” episteme of representation, in which the relationship between the signifier and the signified became increasingly tenuous. An era of shifts and difference began.

This negation of sameness and similarity brought about the classification and division of phenomena. The increasing differentiation of words and things constituted a technology of power. For Jacques Rancière, the “distribution of the sensible” [*partage du sensible*] is a form of dominion. Resources of expression and portrayal were deliberately removed or limited. The ability to participate fully in aesthetic possibilities was, according to him, a utopian notion of Romanticism and Modernism, whose programmes involved the dissolution of opposites and the redistribution of the sensual. [6]

Barbara Maria Stafford suggests other grounds for the rehabilitation of analogy in place of the negative dialectics of difference. [7] The (implied) reference to Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* of fundamental non-identity (such as art, which is permanently in revolt against itself) may be somewhat misleading. Stafford is speaking not so much about antinomic situations as about the negative consequences of a way of thinking that rates difference above sameness.

She recalls that the project of similarity actually continued even under the classic episteme in which difference held sway. She also recalls the Romantic concept of the allegory as opposed to the analogy: “Analogy, as the creative and tentative weaving together of individual phenomena, was thus supplanted by the elevation of atomistic difference: the obsession with unbridgeable disparity and the hieratic insistence on insurmountable distance between the material and the spiritual realms.” [8] If we consider *Displacement Island* against the backdrop of this call for visual analogy, it becomes evident how little the relations between the photographs can be described as a mere function of similarity and how much, on the other hand, the metaphor is replaced and substituted by the metonymic trope, which is based more on displacement and shifting than on similarity and correlation. The cigarette pack and the life-jacket on the beach, the net and the red buoy, followed by the image of the astronaut tumbling out of a duct, is something that Poloni himself regards as a “metonymic representation of the invisible migrant.” [9] Between the registers of metaphor and metonymy, there is a tension that owes much to the cinematic language of discontinuities in the tradition of Eisenstein and Godard.

In Marco Poloni’s seemingly aimless visual wanderings, the allegorical and the analogical appear to dovetail. The affinities constantly reach their limits; the chain that binds them falls apart. While the individual images may interact in terms of their contiguity and correspondence, the correlations between them remain loose and unclear. It is through the open-

ings and gaps left by what appears similar that the observer’s imagination is allowed to enter and pull the missing links together. The poetry of unfurling the condensed image and spreading it out brings forth moments of the combinatory and the narrative. At times, Poloni’s configurations are reminiscent of a game of patience or dominos. That is when his photographs appear to be modules of a report, traces of evidence, the thread of an argument. This new associative form, whose structure is explored by Jean-Christophe Royoux – in reference to Mallarmé’s poetic constellations – as the end of traditional cinematic narrative on the threshold to the post-cinematic narrative of configurative exposition. [10] Such visual practices bear a certain familiarity with the countless films and television series featuring police forensics, in which detectives mull over photographs on pinboards and exhibits from the scene of the crime to determine how these elements might be consolidated into hard evidence. In this respect, every police station is like a film workshop. The principle of the storyboard is culturally dominant partly because it is limited to methods of cartographic and diagrammatic representation of data: *mind maps*, *mood boards* and other visual strategies aimed at stimulating and channelling the imaginative process are culturally closely related to storyboarding. They contribute towards linking thoughts, feelings, memories and inklings more closely to visual materials. They help to order and classify dream fragments and daily remnants, fitting them into a system that makes them available for unknown purposes. In *Displacement Island*, however, the accumulative strategy of *mood boards*, in which images are layered until the desired creative process kicks in, is broken by the gaps and lacunae of the whiteboard (or the page) between the individual images, and channelled in another direction that “activates the diegetic links through metaphors” (Poloni). [11]

Poloni’s aims in this respect remain largely unknown because, even though there is a certain point of view inscribed into his investigations on the borderline between photography and film, the intentionality of this viewpoint remains curiously hidden. The viewer’s gaze wanders from image to image in search of connections that

are somehow guessed, but cannot be presumed. These connections owe much to the logic of suspicion. The landscapes, still lifes, scenes and events in the pictures of *Displacement Island* appear to be coded, almost hieroglyphic, as though just waiting to be deciphered. Individually, they can be seen as pure exercises in form. But taken together, they trigger a way of seeing that draws conclusions – a way of seeing that is also a cinematographic projection.

What *Displacement Island* will never be, like other works by Poloni, is a film resulting from the processing of an archive that could be summed up as “dragging.” Chris Rojek used this term in an attempt to describe the complex emotionality of touristic experience. It is a concept that defines the cultural activities of salvaging, viewing and reconfiguring images, symbols and associations from the archives of representation with the aim of creating new sights or re-evaluating old ones. What Rojek has in mind, first and foremost, is the tourism-related marketing of landscapes that have, for instance, become film locations: “Cinematic events are dragged on to the physical landscape and the physical landscape is reinterpreted in terms of cinematic events.” [12] All that is missing now is the iconic feature film about Lampedusa under the apparatuses of mobility of EU’s external borders. [13] Marco Poloni will not shoot that film. But in many respects *Displacement Island* makes it seem as though that film has already been shot. It feels like part of that genealogy: the tourists clambering up the cliffs recall the search (on another Sicilian island – the volcanic isle of Lisca Bianca) for the missing woman in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’avventura* (1960). This *locus classicus* of modernist cinematic history finds a direct reference in the black and white still from *L’avventura*: a man in swimming trunks lying on a boat, playing with a little dog. The inaction of the image, the referential logic of the still and the representation of mobility merge in a complex reflection on the spatial and temporal aspects of reference itself. The island of Lampedusa with its natural topography, its geopolitical role and its mass-media visibility becomes a photographic-cinematic object that *Displacement Island* localises and makes perceptible in specific ways,

without projecting any preconceived knowledge of the situation of its official and private protagonists.

Instead, Poloni’s storyboard suggests that this landscape of mobility might be conceived as a sight, like an imaginary film “dragged” over the territory. In that respect, *Displacement Island* is also a model simulation of how the people affected actually perceive the Mediterranean border regime as a virtual cinematic experience. Alternatively, it might be seen as a reconstruction of the visual unconscious of migration, tourism, coastal surveillance and fishing.

1 Donald Davidson, *What Metaphors Mean*, in Sheldon Sacks (ed.), *On Metaphor*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London 1978, pp. 29-45.

2 Fabrizio Gatti, *Io, clandestino a Lampedusa* in *L’Espresso*, 7 October 2005, <http://espresso.repubblica.it/dettaglio-archivio/1129502&m2s=a>

3 Cf. Tom Holert/Mark Terkessidis, *Fliehkraft. Gesellschaft in Bewegung – von Migranten und Touristen*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch Verlag, Köln 2006.

4 Guy Debord/Jacques Fillon, *Résumé 1954*, in *Potlatch* 14, 30 November 1954, p. 53.

5 Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, transl. Alan Sheridan, Random House, New York 1970.

6 Cf. Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique*, La Fabrique, Paris 2000, p. 70.

7 Barbara Maria Stafford, *Visual Analogy. Consciousness as the Art of Connecting*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999, p. 51.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

9 Marco Poloni, email, 25 February 2008.

10 Cf. Jean-Christophe Royoux, *Beyond the End of Narrative: Allegories, Constellations, Dispositifs* in Marie Fraser (ed.), *Explorations narratives/Replaying Narrative*, Le mois de la photo à Montréal, Montréal 2007, pp. 301-312, esp. pp. 310f.

11 Marco Poloni, email, 25 February 2008.

12 Chris Rojek, *Indexing, Dragging and the Social Construction of Tourist Sites*, in Chris Rojek/John Urry (eds.), *Touring Cultures. Transformations of Travel and Theory*, Routledge, London/New York 1997, pp. 52-74, esp. p. 54.

13 *Respiro* by Emanuele Crialesi (2002), a film shot on location on Lampedusa, telling the story of a manic-depressive young woman on the island, completely avoids involvement in the reality of migration and tourism.