

A journey through devastated memory

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In his novel *Invisible cities* Italo Calvino invented the tales with which Marco Polo had described to Kublai Khan, the emperor of the Tartars, the cities he had visited on his mission as ambassador. Through those stories the traveller had to tell Khan what the cities and landscapes he had conquered but had never visited in person, were like. Marco Polo returned from his travels laden with images and strove to translate all his eye had lighted on into words. This, apparently, was no easy task. And nor, Calvino writes, was it easy in the case of Zaira, the city of the high bastions. "I could tell you", Marco Polo says, "how make up the streets rising like stairways, and the degree of the arcades' curves, and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but I already know that it would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past".¹ There is the city Marco Polo is unable to recount: that space which shows, at each step, the traces of a vanished past which, nevertheless, defines the city in its most intimate essence. "As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like sponge and expands. A description of Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira's past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but it contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, of the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, on the poles of the flag, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls."²

Like a flash, Marco Polo's almost utopian effort provides two lucid insights that may serve to enter the complex, subtle imaginary of Maria Bleda and José María Rosa, two young artists who for ten years have distilled a body of photographs of a power and rigour which are most unusual for their generation. First, the difficulty of access to the reality of the city and the landscape from the visibility of the present: because what we see is always a mutilation of what there was and the question of the visible necessarily refers to the apparently inevitable forgetting of what has disappeared. Second, the phantasmal reality of each trace: what has gone must always leave in the space it occupied wounds and scars, the barely legible writing of a life that occupies the imaginary of the places and transforms what the present shows through a strange density of time that has already been erased, in the layers of a store of visual memory which, despite everything, refuses to disappear completely.

In their work over a decade, Bleda y Rosa have pursued some of those haunted spaces. Spaces that are not what they once were, but which, in their emptiness and abandonment, almost always desolate, conserve the strange memory of what happened there. And of what passed through there. In their photographs a present that preserves the fleeting trace of something that has vanished is preserved. But in the face of the painful loss of what was, there remains –and the image retains it– a trace whose very precariousness speaks eloquently of the devastating power of the memory and yet, also of the powerful writing of time, which continues to leave its mark where human beings have inhabited spaces of hope or conflict. There is a kind of phantasmal archaeology in Bleda y Rosa's work: in the Greek and Mediaeval sense of the world. Because what is phantasmal is in this reality, exclusively visible in nature, which guides our perception of things; it is not there but, due to the strange nature of

the visible, conditions what we see. When history fades and loses its monumental character, when its traces have been erased, it leaves behind the signs of an absence which, because they are stripped of life, look like a spectral hieroglyph. Like the wreckage of a ship that drifts, reoccupying the spaces and making them the enigmatic and many-shaped body tattooed by a shadow line that gives a new meaning to what it was and a new dimension to what remains: ruin.

Walter Benjamin was right when he attributed to the angel of history the strange power of seeing, when we looked back, a catastrophe that ceaselessly piled ruin upon ruin.³ That is what Bleda y Rosa's photographs are in search of: the work of time on spaces, the –almost, but not yet completely- invisible presence of that past has become a trace, the phantasmal ruin which, with its weight and density, turns every space into a writing waiting to be read. That is what happens with some of their hallmark series such as *Campos de fútbol* (Football Pitches), *Campos de batalla* (Battlefields) or *Ciudades* (Cities). Series that distill images of something that was, but has not disappeared altogether. Precarious fragments of a time, now a ruin, which reject the tendency of amnesia of all spaces. Because everything that bears the marks of humanity is subject to the devastating power of forgetting. And yet, along the way that inevitably leads to the disappearance of all human traces, the very departure or fading of the past leaves behind a spectral, hieroglyphic presence that is never completely erased. Indeed, it makes its almost slow and imperceptible erasure into its reason for being. And by tracking those traces in an impossible archaeology of the present, Bleda y Rosa's photographs heighten, without nostalgia, the extreme precariousness of what once was but later became almost nothing. That “almost” nothing, which is still waiting to be seen, although only as a remote insinuation, makes up Bleda y Rosa's gaze: an intensely moral one. Hence their interest in the places rather than the image: or in the image that springs from the place as traces of its history disappear.

Roland Barthes showed how photography is fighting an essential battle against death: so that the photograph does not become death.⁴ In their peculiar position in the face of that battle which no photographer can overlook, Bleda y Rosa fix in images the resistance of some signs to that powerful form of death which is forgetting, the disappearance of memory in the legible space of the ruins.

Because every gaze, rather than a way of possessing things, is a way of exposing oneself to them. So that they will speak of their fragility, tell their story, show their wounds, and their struggle not to disappear. And in that exposure to what things show us, we end up being the thing that what we see makes us. “In order to be what I am”, as Jean-Paul Sartre said, “it suffices merely that the Other look at me.”⁵ Those landscapes which Bleda y Rosa's camera halt at the almost final instant of their erasure remind us, not only of the spectral presence of what was, but also of our own erasure, the disappearance of that face which is ours, marked, like all things, by a precariousness which makes it spectral too.

And in the visible dimension of those photographs, moreover, there throbs an also enigmatic acoustic dimension. There is no-one because there is no-one to be seen, because they have all left but the remote echo of those who were there still remains. The echo of all that life. That is the case in *Campos de fútbol* (Football Pitches) now deserted, where the weeds and grass of oblivion grow unchecked and where the naked geometry of a goal, still standing, refers

to a noise whose faint echo, blending with the sound of the wind, heightens the loneliness of this space which is now a metaphor for the work time does for ruins. The same thing happens in *Campos de batalla* (Battlefields): landscapes, almost moonscapes now, the mere mention of which conjures up hardships and conflicts, measureless pain which nature barely manages to veil. Roncesvalles, Numancia, Navas de Tolosa, Calatañazor, Bailén, Sagunto, Villalar de los Comuneros... Little more than names which, like photo captions, allow us to reinterpret the devastating fury of oblivion. But all the savagery and the fury, the bloody trace of hate, are still there, in the amnesiac guise of a history, the history of the landscape, which has never been written. Everything reveals itself, in the frozen image of the photograph, like a visible vestige, apparently silent but terrifyingly eloquent. The same thing happens in their *Ciudades* (Cities) series: Ampurias, Castellar de Meca, Briteiros, Segóbriga. Almost illegible traces of old dreams, marginal writings, hieroglyphics whose code, vanishes long ago, speaks of that past which makes any presence dense.

Enigmas of visibility. Lived expression of a lived transience. All those things make up Bleda y Rosa's photographic places. As Calvino said, those "relations between dimensions of its space and the events of its past." There is no identity, as Maurice Blanchot guessed, that is not defined by disappearance: but in the face of the work of oblivion on places, Bleda y Rosa's photographs show the resistance, spectral now, of what does not manage to become emptiness. Georg W.F. Hegel liked to recall that philosophy takes flight at dusk, like the owl, when things have happened and allow thought to decipher them.⁶ Bleda y Rosa also arrive afterwards, always late, at the dusk of that time that erases, to pursue with their camera the writings of history on the place. Its enigmatic, fascinating writing which confronts us with the precariousness of our own transience.

Calvino with whom we began to think about Bleda y Rosa's photographic adventure, also referred to another city, Zora, which had the virtue of remaining in the memory down to the last detail, even the tiniest and most fleeting: a city that is not erased and does not vanish from the memory. That is why, he said, on sleepless nights anyone who knows Zora from memory can "imagine he is walking along the streets and he remembers the order by the copper clock follows the barber's striped awning, then the fountain with nine jets, the astronomer's glass tower, the water-melon vendor's kiosk, the statue of the hermit and the lion, the Turkish bath, the café at the corner, the alley that leads to the harbor."⁷ Zora is the unforgettable city: the impossible preservation of the unscathed past. Zora is also the city that will not let you sleep. But no city, no space, is made of this flesh. Above all because we are –and spaces also are in their way– animals made of forgetting, predators of passing time. For that reason, faced with the devastation of time on spaces, faced with the erasure with which history draws straight lines where once everything was alive and confused, the archaeology of the present that is a feature of Bleda y Rosa's photographs, is perhaps, above all, a moral attitude. A moral gaze. With no nostalgia and no reticence. A gaze that trawls among ruins to stock an impossible archive: the inexhaustible testimony formed by the small calligraphies of a writing of time which refuses to disappear and marks spaces –landscape, cities– with signs that remind us of the fragility of human ventures and dreams.

Since we do not in fact live in a world like the city of Zora, the “unforgettable” city, Bleda y Rosa strive to remind us that any of our spaces is, in a radical way, the city of Zaira. Those spaces, laden with a devastated memory, whose writing we should learn to look at.

1 Italo Calvino: *Le città invisibili*, Torino, 1972, p. 18.

2 Calvino, 1972, p. 18.

3 Cf. Walter Benjain: *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. In: *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften*, Frankfurt/M., 1977, p.262.

4 Sf. Roland Barthes: *La chambre Claire. Notes sur la photographie*, Paris 1989, p. 21.

5 Jean-Paul Sartre: *Being and Nothingness. An essay on phenomenological Ontology*, London, 1957.

6 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse*, Stuttgart, 1928, p 9 (*Sämtliche Werke*, Bd, 7).

7 Calvino 1972, pp. 23-24.