

Andrea Cortellessa | Saturation, vertigo, foundering

«Monet is only one eye, yet what an eye!»

Cézanne

«It will be a big green sea, a saturation in green». That is what Abel Herrero told me the first time he described the painting he was working on for Salone delle Pietre. In fact *Green motion* – the title of the piece – follows the artist's compositional principle he has experimented at least since 2008 with *Black motion*, followed in recent years by series like *Yellow motion* and *Magenta motion*. Let's leave aside – at least for the time being – the different proportions, and also the different colours of these works. Let's look instead at what they have in common. Every time, the element “put in motion” by Herrero's painting is the same in every work of the series. It so appears that the “seascape” is one of the most traditionally accredited pictorial genres; and as such it would be unlikely – or so it would seem – to hold any surprise for us. According to tradition in fact – from Guardi to Friedrich, from Turner to Courbet, to de Chirico – painting the sea was considered by painters a show of strength, the exercise of virtuosity par excellence. How to render in the *medium* of painting – by definition synchronic and immediate, unmovable and fixed – what is by definition the *perpetuum mobile*, the sea, which constantly changes its blending of light and colours?

In what would turn out to be his last work of fiction, *Palomar*, Italo Calvino, the most “visual” writer of twentieth-century Italy, started precisely from this sort of phenomenological exercise as the key to «mastering the world's complexity by reducing it to its simplest mechanism». In order to reach this result, mister Palomar decides to «see a wave». *Seeing* its shape as it is, the «limited and precise object» that the wave is, in its essence, without the ongoing changes brought to it by wind, currents, temperature. «Perceiving all its simultaneous components without overlooking any of them». So he «sees it», the wave, attempting to erase any relationships – his own, as well as those of the object he has decided to focus on – so that the exercise of observation would be the purest and most unperturbed; trying to limit and circumscribe his field of perception possibly in the most precise way; striving to abstract the object to be seen from time and space. All is in vain, every time the picture breaks apart and reassembles before his eyes. And then «Mr Palomar goes off along the beach, tense and nervous as when he came, and even more unsure about everything».

What makes Palomar's experiment impossible is rather simply his being alive. Every time, by its unpredictability, mobility, *uncertainty*, life itself destabilizes and deconstructs the models, the “forms”, the ideologies through which we try to come to terms with it. At the closing of the book, Mr Palomar decides that «from now on he will act as if he were dead, to see how the world gets along without him»; thus he thinks he will finally succeed in «describing time», namely the variable that has made his primal project unattainable. At the beginning even this exercise seems to him impossible, because «every instant, when described, expands so that its end can no longer be seen». Then he changes his project: «he decides that he will set himself to describing every instant of his life, and until he has described them he will no longer think of being dead. At that moment he dies». This can only be the real, actual death (and not an abstractly anticipated one, as a thought experiment), coinciding with the moment when time freezes, and movement, precisely life, stops.

The monochromatic choice which obsessively permeates Abel Herrero's research thus acquires a threatening, or rather mournful, meaning. In this sense, the series of portraits with the title *Removed* on display in 2017 in his home country, at the José Martí National Library in Havana, is emblematic. The fifteen characters portrayed in large canvasses – from Pavel Florenskij to Vsevolod Mejer'hold – were all considered opponents of the regime and were all victims of Soviet Stalinism (the initial images are often time the mugshots taken when they were arrested and jailed by the regime, like the ineffable one of Osip Mandel'stam: the first step towards the inevitable catastrophe). And all the portraits have in fact been painted in only one colour: carbon black. These are truly *removed*, subtracted, delocalised, faces: as is also and always true for the objects in *Delocazioni*, made precisely with carbon soot, of a master Herrero has made reference to, Claudio Parmiggiani. These are imprints left in the memory by someone who is no longer here; but despite that, or rather because of it, these faces continue to stare at us from beyond the sea of time, from the void they have fallen into.

We then now come to understand that the title given to the “seascapes”, *motion*, is actually ironic. «These are – as Herrero has told me – landscapes of denial, of limit», as they have been made through «a process of subtraction, frugality, diminishing of the matter». Actually, the key word, here, is the first one he mentioned, *saturation*. This technical term usually means the levels of intensity of a given shade of colour in

photography. When such intensity is increased, the image acquires brightness and brilliance; if decreased, the colour loses intensity and gradually shifts toward shades of gray. If, however, this process is pushed to its maximum peak, the colour permeates the entire spectrum, filling the entire image, to the point of *saturating it*, precisely. Herrero's "seascapes" extend therefore to the unsurmountable limit toward which Calvino's Palomar moved dangerously, as we have seen: by acting on one of the image components – namely, colour *saturation* – and pushing it to the point of paroxysm, they paralyse movement, freezing it, and literally *mortifying* it.

Another highly visual writer, Franz Kafka, was not fond of cinema, as far as we know, according to some accounts. The reason of his dislike (which cinema has not reciprocated, fortunately for us) was once explained by his friend Gustav Janouch: «Perhaps I am too "optical" by nature: I am an Eye-man, but the cinema disturbs one's vision. The speed of the movements and the rapid change of images force men to look continually from one to another. Sight does not master the pictures, it is the pictures which master one's sight. They flood one's consciousness». Kafka's admission is paradoxical and revealing at the same time, precisely because the *flooding of one's consciousness* he describes is the effect his writings produce in his readers – both those who love him and those who hate him. The feeling of choking, of moral and existential suffocation that Kafka's stories embody, more than describe, is actually due to effects of *tonal saturation* – to the point of generating swooning or vomiting in readers: an effect well described by some of his famous readers, like Georges Bataille and Jean-Paul Sartre. Franco Fortini, who has turned to Kafka with inquisitive Talmudic obsession all his life, did once apply the word which is Sartre's by definition, to describe such *saturation*: «hence the feeling of *nausea* coming from the endless pages of the *Castle or the Burrow*».

«They are walls», says Herrero of his paintings, while using in his turn an exquisitely existentialist, and, more to the point, truly Sartrean image. And it is no coincidence that the artist has specifically spoken of «nausea», besides «saturation»: «the landscape as the mirror of this nausea, a restive and reluctant scenario». At the acme of existentialism (and Art Informel), Jean Fautrier's *Otages* and specifically Antoni Tàpies's *Walls* were real "walls" of painting, the same as Sartre's works inspired by the traumas of the European civil wars from the 1930s and 1940s; *Scritto sul muro* is the title of a 1958 book by Gastone Novelli, the artist marked by the torture he had suffered in the Roman jail of Regina Coeli by the Fascist regime. And, similarly to existentialism, in Herrero's case as well, the wall of the metaphor underlies a very concrete reference to the sea-bound prison that an island can turn into.

Obviously, the monochromatic choice does not necessarily have the same meaning for every painter. A famous counterexample of that is provided by the anecdote told by Vasilij Kandinskij in his short, wonderful autobiography, *Looks on the Past*. In 1895 in Moscow he visited the Impressionists' exhibition which was a great discovery for him, and in particular, one of Claude Monet's *Haystacks*, had the strongest impact. A discovery which at first had been received with annoyance: «The catalogue said that it was a haystack, but I could not recognise it. My inability to recognise the subject upset me. I also thought that the painter had no right to paint in such a confuse way. I had the vague feeling that the painting lacked the object». However, as an afterthought, Kandinskij perceived an equal and opposite feeling: «The painting not only captured the viewer but embedded itself indelibly in the memory and kept on floating unexpectedly and constantly before my eyes in its minutest details». That yellow *without object* explodes in his mind: «Without realising it the object as indispensable element of the painting was discredited in my eyes». The colour, escaping from the boundaries of the object, then becomes the protagonist of a surge of euphoric *liberation*: the same that Kandinskij would unleash in his paintings till the end.

It just so happens that a "seascape" by Monet, *Impression, soleil levant*, had triggered in 1872 – as we all know – the Big Bang of the Impressionist revolution (starting from the name of the movement given, as we know, by a detractor, precisely from the title of this painting). The rapidity, the immediacy, the work by subtraction bring Monet towards a tonal simplification that at the time caused an outrage, but in the future would become the highroad of modern painting. Afterward Monet's work went in the direction of a deeper analyticity (in particular the sea surfaces become the focus of dizzy experimentation with shimmering effects and variegations); there is however no doubt that his initial painting expression striving to reach a synthesis did make all the difference for future painters. If I think at the 20th-century painter (meant as someone who has continued to use and ply the paint brush till the end, like Abel Herrero is doing today) that I love the most, Mark Rothko, I see the direct heir of that Monet – of the yellow without object of the haystack which had struck his compatriot Kandinskij so much. Except that the *saturation* which was so exhilarating for Kandinskij, in Rothko is linked to the opposite feeling. We know how much he admired Monet (in the conversations with

Alfred Jensen, which were recently made public, for example, he says that he preferred Monet to Cézanne for the «human depth» he felt they shared), but the parallel with the French painter, which was made quite early on, annoyed him. However, there is a reason if Rothko's artworks in London's Tate Modern are displayed alongside Monet's late works, the visionary, already tendentially abstract, *Water Lilies*.

One room in particular in the museum, however, has no place for anyone but Rothko. It is the one replicating the exact layout he had designed for the Four Seasons restaurant, thinking that in this way he could comply with the commission from the Seagram Company in 1958, to decorate their New York headquarters on Park Avenue, designed by Mies Van der Rohe and Philip Johnson. When the project floundered (Rothko admitted to the journalist John Fischer that his precise aim was to «ruin the appetite of every son of a bitch that ever eats in that room»), the whole group of more than thirty canvasses made for the location (although the space provided by Seagram could fit no more than seven) was broken apart; besides London, they are now found in the National Gallery, Washington, and the Kawamura Museum of Sakura, Japan. The works in the Tate are a gift by Rothko, who donated them to the London museum on condition that they were to be displayed exactly as he required.

During his many journeys to Italy, Rothko had especially enjoyed the Laureantian Library designed by Michelangelo in Florence. He liked the fact that it gave visitors «the feeling of being caught in a room with the doors and windows walled-in shut». And that is exactly the same feeling one feels in the room of the *Seagram Murals* at the Tate. The space is plunged in semidarkness – to the point that, as it happened in his studio, as written by Riccardo Venturi, «the painted background colours – like icons surrounded by gold – become the true sources of light». This kind of *immersion* was tried out for the first time by Rothko for his solo exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery, in New York, in 1955: «The impression of being submerged», continues Venturi (the italics is mine), «is accompanied by a feeling of choking, shortness of breath, lack of air, *saturation* of the space which evokes well the tragic dimension conveyed by the artworks». This is not a projection of ours, but the artist's express intention. That year Rothko said the same in a letter to critic Katharine Kuh (the italics is mine): «by *saturation* the room with the feeling of the work, the walls are dissolved and the intensity of each individual work becomes more visible to my eyes».

Thus, *saturation* is then for Rothko the specific technical device of the pursued tragic dimension. In the conference at the Pratt Institute of New York in 1958 he dictated seven rules, seven «ingredients» to be included in the «recipe of an artwork». The first of these rules says: «There must be a clear preoccupation with death – intimation of mortality to the knowledge of death» (while the last instead says: «Hope. 10% to make the tragic concept more endurable»). There are very few artists in all the disciplines and from all ages who were able to achieve their goals with Rothko's precision and ruthlessness. The sentiment of death emanating from his canvasses was berated by his detractors, obviously, but even by those who were closer to him (like Barnett Newman). When he saw the exhibition at the Sidney Janis, Clyfford Still, who had been a friend of Rothko, but was no longer so, wrote to the gallerist about the «splendour of death» conveyed by the paintings. In a twist of fate, the morning of the day when Rothko's paintings reached London at last, after long-distance extenuating negotiations, his lifeless body was found in a large pool of blood, the same colour as one of his canvasses, on the floor of his house in New York. It was February 25th, 1970.

Rothko's paradox lies in the formula adopted by Still, who, as is often the case in art history, just wanted to offend him, and instead managed to make his description all the more incisive. For it is true that Rothko's *saturation* is asphyxiating, it is an «aggression» (as Still wrote in the letter to Janis); but this feeling of being under siege coexists inextricably with its – likewise undeniable – *splendour*. Rothko's paradox is that the claustrophobic effect he so obsessively planned would trigger in viewers a symmetrical and opposite feeling of bursting open. What Rothko *bursts open* every time is a chasm where one is plunged into, but with eyes wide open. This is the same paradox we find in the poem that Abel Herrero has quoted in the title of the exhibition *Green motion, M'è verde il naufragare in questo mare/Green Motion*. And foundering is green in such a sea. The title paraphrases the closing and most famous line of the absolutely most celebrated poem of our literature, *L'Infinito* – The Infinity, written by Giacomo Leopardi in 1818-19. The original line reads instead: «and foundering is sweet in such a sea». Truly, there is no trace of *sweetness* in Herrero's infinity. Rather, something can certainly be found in him of the same exhilarating grandiosity, that mortal splendour which – as we have seen – is for Rothko the *stigma* of tragedy in art.

And what about Leopardi? The traditional interpretation of *The Infinity* is reassuring, similarly to the sort of prophylactic treatment the classics are subjected to in order to continue celebrating them without too

much discomfiture. Its inclusion, by the poet, in the section of his *Canti* called «Idylls» has always fostered a stereotypical landscapist interpretation of the poem: and the «solitary hill» of the initial line, rightly identified by the poet's fellow citizens within the topography of the «uncivilized hamlet» (as Leopardi called Recanati, his both loved and hated birthplace, with tender sarcasm), has become a must-see in the theme park that Recanati has now become. However, to counter the simplistic “idyllic” idea which has numbed *The Infinity* in its trivial school reading (when «Idylls», for the young count-philosopher, only referred to the etymology of the word: “small image” which, as it may be read in the pages of *Zibaldone*, is produced by the shrinking of the field of vision given by the «hedgerow» in the second line, which «so much» of the view «excludes» from «sight», in the next line; precisely this visual obstacle evokes, in negative, the «immensity», in the second-to-last line, of the whole image that springs to mind – «I fake myself in my thoughts», seventh line), the high, airy choices of lexicon, far detached from any vileness or bucolic humbleness should suffice: «endless spaces», «inhuman silences», «the deepest quiet», «infinite silence».

All of that would not yet be enough to include this canonical example of our literary tradition within the mournful constellation, and Abel Herrero's genealogy of *saturation*. Herrero writes instead that, as with Leopardi, the «wall» of his painting wants to trigger the «Illimite» – and precisely this represents «the rejection of the temporal rational. Hence nausea and saturation. These are not views of contemplation, but of conflict». If these remarks have also been inspired by the poem *The Infinity*, I must avow that very few of my learned compatriots seem to have read this Italian masterpiece, which fame has somewhat blunted, with the insight shown by this artist coming from the other side of the Atlantic.

I am comforted in this interpretation by the words of the scholar I consider the best expert of Leopardi today, Gilberto Lonardi, who recently has re-interpreted the last line of the poem as expressing the «conflict of a modern Sublime». High and terrible, «sublime», precisely in the 18th-19th-century meaning of the term, is the premonition of another view from on high of the sea surface, of another lonely character, and similarly to the poetic I of *The Infinity*, prey of «fear-terror» for the «new siege of the immense»: that from the *Last Song of Sappho* which Leopardi composed four years later, and where he imagines the last words of the poet from Lesbos before she kills herself leaping from the cliff of Leucadia, as the myth is told in Ovid's *Heroides*. The «infinite beauty» of nature does not soothe her love sorrows, because its «superb kingdoms» do not smile at her, but rather «scorn» her. Another suicidal trace is found by the same discerning reader in the subtle echoes that in *The Infinity* reverberate from Leopardi's interpretation of Goethe's Werther: a novel that at the time triggered a real surge of imitation suicides in impressionable readers all over Europe. And other infra-mince signals coming from the “idyll” of 1819 would be found again in *Chorus of the Dead* whose tragic-comic traits were to be echoed in his 1824 Moral Essay, the *Dialogue between Frederick Ruysch and his mummies*.

Whether the I of *The Infinity* actually killed himself or not does not matter, as his other evident *avatar* – Sappho – would later do; the feeling expressed in the last line is, in my opinion, self-evident. It speaks of a disintegration perceived by the subject as *sweet*, yes, but only because it entails the melting away of the entire pain that he has always linked to the material existence. After all Leopardi would say in *Zibaldone*: «It seems that only what does not exist, the negation of being, nothingness, can be limitless, and that infinity is substantially the same as nothingness». *The Infinity* should essentially be read – and the abstraction that it shows in comparison with the more explicit and melodramatic scene depicted in the *Last song of Sappho*, further stresses its disheartening modernity – as an «*Itinerarium mentis in nihilum*» (so said another thoughtful reader of Leopardi, Guido Guglielmi), whose «dissimulated theme» is precisely «death». The leap of the last line in the undifferentiated surface of the «eternal» (dimension dialectically related to the «dead seasons» evoked in line 12, namely the subjectively processed past; but of course the use of such metaphor by Leopardi cannot be innocent), is like a leap into the void, as it should be quite clear by now.

At this point one may ask how feelings and suggestions of this kind could evoke in different authors such contrasting emotions (which then reverberate on those who read their texts, or look at their paintings). Then how come that processes of radical synthesis and saturation result in an unquenchable euphoria in a painter like Kandinskij, while similar assumptions would lead Rothko, in Harold Rosenberg's classical interpretation, to an implacable «approaching of the zero by the mind», in an increasingly cruel «marathon of elimination» which would only end tragically when the marathon runner reaches the finishing line? The answer by Riccardo Venturi convinces me (following Lacan). Both Kandinskij and Rothko share the Russian tradition of icons with the *avant la lettre* suprematist splendour that Pavel Florenskij found in them: «The icon lived in a supreme anonymity as it was the very same incarnation of God's eye», wrote Venturi, «of a divinity

looking at the world through its portrait and the shine of gold». This dimension fills Kandinskij, who lives his artistic expression as a feature of his exalted religiosity; while the artist (and his viewer) living «at the time of God's death» breeds distress and anguish (Leopardi's atheism was declared openly and deemed scandalous in his time; but Rothko as well defined himself, according to William Seitz, a «materialist», and believed that «his images are made only of things»; he used to call *things*, confidentially, his notorious rectangular strips): «such a gaze, no longer certain of the divine element, risks to *founder* at any moment» (the italics is mine).

Finally, the green. This chromatic choice as well, says Herrero, «amplifies this feeling of nausea». It is no coincidence that he underlines specifically that feeling with the title he has chosen not only for his work, but also for the exhibition in Todi (where, we repeat, in the reference to Leopardi, *green* replaces *sweet*). Several studies summarise the symbols that people have associated with colours but, in comparison with more unified interpretations that other colours can show, those associated with green seem to be based on the utmost ambivalence. On the one hand, green is the most common colour in nature, and therefore obviously linked to the value of life (topically, it symbolises hope). In antiquity, for example for the Egyptians, this value was evident; in Islam green is the colour of Paradise on Earth (and today still stands out in its flags and symbol). It holds great prestige in Dante's *Comedy*: at the height of *Purgatory*, in Canto XXX, Beatrice appears to the *viator* clad «under the green mantle» and «olive crowned». But precisely in Medieval Europe, the analysis of dyes showed that green was chemically unstable, and therefore it started to be associated with everything that is fickle and whimsical: youth, luck, fate. The Italian expression «essere al verde» (literally, being in the green, being broke), as explained by Manlio Brusatin, derives from the custom of carrying large church candles during liturgical processions (exactly like the one staged in Dante's *Purgatory*): when the candle is burned off, the colour of its supporting stand transpires. Green also became the colour of witches, poison, evil. In Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, 1958 (known in Italy as *La donna che visse due volte*), Judy (Kim Novak) wears a blaring and garish green dress when meeting the protagonist Scottie (James Stewart), after having played the role, and worn the clothes, of a much more sophisticated and sublime Madeleine, in order to mislead him. Afterwards, with a no less subtle retaliation, in the most morbid scene of the film, Scottie forces her to don again sophisticated clothes in order to resemble as much as possible the model of his lost love (that he believes lost): and when at last Judy metamorphoses again into Madeleine, the ritual takes place in a hotel room infused with a feverish light, coming from an outside neon sign: a green light, precisely. This *saturation*, as recalled by the costume designer of the movie, was defined «the colour of death» by Hitchcock. And in the famous interview with François Truffaut he explained it clearly: when Judy emerges from the bathroom, where she has changed according to the indications of her pygmalion Scottie, «she is lit by a green neon light outside, she has truly come back from the dead» (in 1978 Truffaut drew inspiration from that scene for his most morbidly mournful film: *The Green Room*, loosely inspired by Henry James). That mournful light actually anticipates the end of the film: Judy, definitively plunged again into the fatal role of Madeleine, follows the fate that she had previously pretended to be hers. And this time she truly leaps to her death from the bell tower of San Juan Batista mission.

Colour symbolisms abound in Hitchcock's films. As Riccardo Falcinelli, recently wrote, «Scottie's obsession is iconographic», «the phobia told by the plot», which «has something to do with the void», is shown «in green»: «a double colour reminding both of the natural world and decay. The colour of life and death». *Vertigo*: obsession of the double, the mirror, and simulation. The green obsession of death saturating life, counterfeiting it, wasting it into a void.

I am not sufficiently familiar with Abel Herrero's spiritual personality to say whether the *saturation* of *Green motion* foreshadows liberating developments, à la Kandinskij; or whether he should rather be aware of somber omens, à la Rothko (or à la Hitchcock). What I am convinced of is that foundering is inevitable in the motionless void of his sea, and that in seeing it this vertigo of his has been inexorably conveyed to us.