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Some Questions about the Notion of "Reading"

A – Looking at the schedule in the entrance corridor of the Faculty of Philosophy, via Fieravecchia in Siena, where ILAUD had its Residential Course, I was surprised by the number of times the word "reading" appeared. Surprised, because as far as I knew the ILAUD thought, a term imported from the very fashioned field of linguistics ad semiotics was not appropriate to describe the discovery, the approach to a place, insofar as a place is a reality much more complicated than can understood by reading only. When I put the question at the first faculty meeting of the Residential Course, one answered me that the term "reading" had been chosen because everybody knows what reading is, so everybody would share with architects the space knowledge. It was a means to prevent architects to be enclosed in a world of specialists, kept apart from the common people. So "reading" would belong to the philosophy of participation. I agree with the goal, not with the means.

B – To explain myself better I would like to begin with an example, by asking the meaning of a word to show how a single word can carry hidden meanings which make the use of that word not without unwished consequences. The word I shall question, very often used by architects, is "theory", and I borrow my analysis from Martin Heidegger. "Theory" comes from the Grek θεωρεῖν, we can find two roots in it: a first one θέα, and a second one ὁρᾶω. We find θέα in "theatre", it means the visible aspect of things which appear. The second component means "I see". So to make theory is to see the aspect under which things appear. But Heidegger propounds another origin for "theory": then θέα with a different accent, means the goddess (it is the θέα we find in theology), and ὁρᾶ, means "respect", "regard". So, to make theory is to respect, to have regard for the goddess, and precisely for that goddess named by Parmenides "Ἀλήθεια", translated in "veritas" by the Latin. When we make theory we enter a field dominated by the sense of sight, with a posture of regard towards the truth. Are we actually aware of that when we want to become a theoretician?

C – I will not try to make an heideggerian ethimology of the term "reading", but just ask myself about the act of reading. What are we doing when we read? Offered to the sight we have a sheet of paper with little signs set on it. With the help of a mental code we try to decipher, to decode that set of signs in front of us. The physical means is actually the sight, but the most important thing is the mental code. Without the knowledge of the code the reading is reduced to a kind of looking at abstract



drawings. Without the code we can't communicate with the meaning dwelling in the set of signs.

But how do we read, from a sensitive point of view? We are silent and we are alone, even lonesome. While reading, we don't want to be disturbed neither by people, nor things. Reading encloses us in an egocentric world. Indeed we fly in the imaginary, but we travel alone. It is only after our reading that we can tell other people what we have discovered through the written sheet of paper. And to talk with oneself it is not necessary to pronounce the words we are reading.

Sometimes poetical texts convey us to read aloud, but usually we don't speak when we read. Now, these two characteristics of reading happened only with the modern times, during the Renaissance, after the

invention of printing by Gutenberg. Before that, in ancient or medieval times, reading was a public act and done aloud. Because of the rarity of handmade books, a private reading would not have allowed social communication. So, readers did not read for themselves, but for an audience. In this ancient reading the sensitive world involved by the act of reading was much richer than ours today. The reader had to pronounce in a clear voice, so in addition to the sight he had to use his breath, so as to feel the meaning with his chest, and the audience had to hear. In our modern reading we have lost that sense of community and that complex sensibility. Reading, we are a silent, lonely sighter!

D – Now, let's go to the relationship we have with space. How are we connected with a place? Certainly through sight, and even at the beginning of the relationship, when the place is still far away from us, only by sight. When we draw nearer to the place where we want to go, not only the view is affected, but also noises and smells.

And more closer, it is the whole body that is concerned. We touch, we graze, we rub the skin of things, of walls. It is a "skin to skin", like the well known cheek to cheek. Our feet are very important, they connect us with the ground, by them our body is a kind of resonance box, which resounds the world. Walking, we create a rhythm, accorded, tuned with the rhythm of the place. And our back too plays its part, because it is able to perceive backwards when sight perceives only frontwards. I can testify that I have seen two very serious faculty members from Zürich lying on the pavement of the Campo, feeling the warmth of the stones on a summer evening. Sight is a bad medium to feel warmth or coldness!

E – But until now we have only considered what is full, hard, solid, what resists to our penetration, our coming in, what is an obstacle.

Briefly, walls, outlines, borders, but a place is also, maybe above all, the void, the emptiness which receives us, with the double meaning of "to receive", that is to allow our physical entering, and to welcome us. If, considering a place, we are focusing our attention on the fullness it is because the scheme of our relationship with the world is dominated by the sight. And sight is considered since Descartes as a game of little bullets hitting the target, or rebounding against walls, as if seeing were to play billiard. But let us try to get into another culture, and listen the story of the taoist butcher.

Once upon a time there was an Emperor of China who was tired to have to always buy new knives for the butcher of his court. So he made a competition to find a butcher



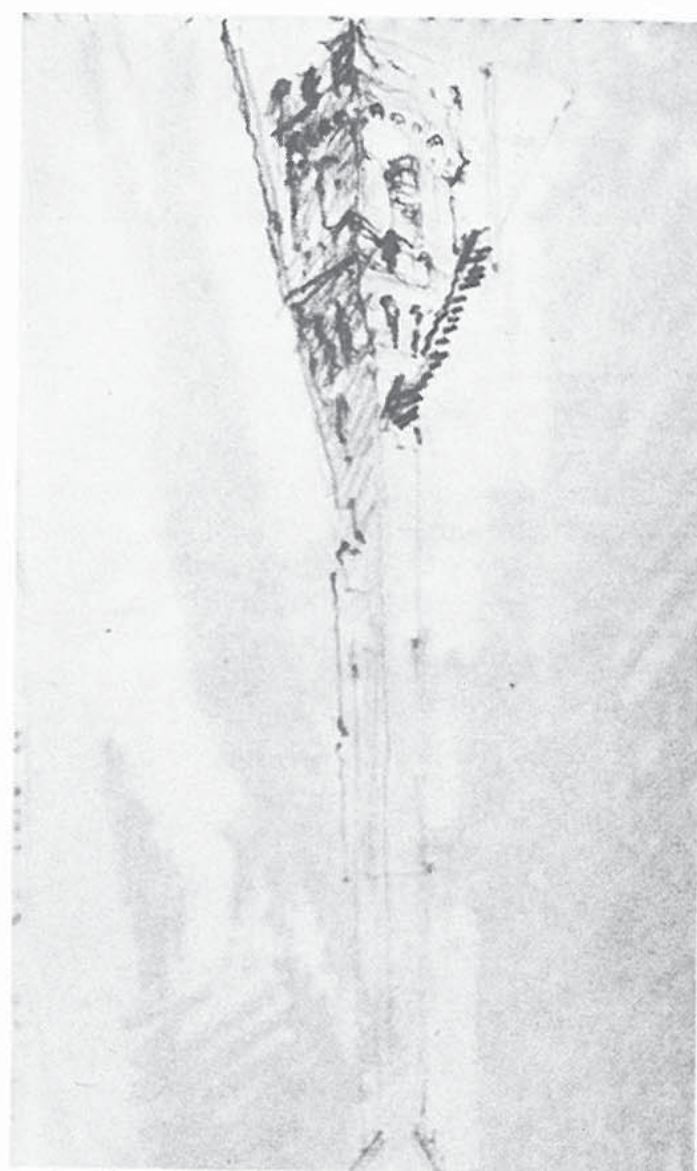
who would not wear out too quickly the imperial knives. Every competitor had to carve a beef. At the end of the operation, there was one butcher whose knife blade was undamaged. The emperor was very happy to find him, but very surprised. So he asked the butcher how he had carved the beef without damaging his knife. The answer was very simple: "Inside the beef I pass the blade between the hard, the full parts. As I am a taoist, I know that the beef which seems all compact and solid, is actually full of voids, like a labyrinth inside the earth. So I have only to follow the empty galleries, and my knife goes through the weak parts of the beef and not against the hard bones".

We have to be the knife of the taoist butcher. We sneak in and out of the place's void which accepts us, which receives us. Emptiness allows our moving and accepts our rest, our *astanza*, as the Italian critic Cesare Brandi says. But void, emptiness, is not offered to sight, only to the whole body which spreads out its gestures.

F – I would like now to recall a discussion happened in the Bruco's garden on a morning of August. Giancarlo De Carlo was explaining that the spatial structure of Siena has to be interpreted by the same passion that enlivens the Palio itself. This passion belongs to the primordial world of medieval times which still inspires the Siennese places. Then Donlyn Lyndon mentioned that most of the buildings of Siena have been built after the medieval times since the eighteenth century. So he wondered how "modern" buildings could communicate an ante-modern passion. GDC, a little bit disturbed by the argument, said that DL was right. But I think that GDC was wrong to say that DL was right! In fact, it is only if we consider Siena as a visible city, only given to sight, that a house from the eighteenth century or from the Renaissance can communicate messages, feelings, moods only from its own time. As a visible thing a building is related to a certain typology, it belongs to homogeneous series, closed in its style. Even the morphology of our post-modern theoreticians (remember what Heidegger said about theory!), that mere visible scheme, does not liberate the building from the need of the single meaning decoding. But if we take care of the invisible city, of the taoist butcher's beef and not of the unskillful's one, then the city offers, presents its net of voids, of paths, with their specific way of allowing motion and rest. Then we don't care about buildings typology, or style. Each piece, gothic, renaissance or modern, is taken in the vertical spring of Siena which is actually gothic. Spring which settles the vertical relationship with space, that anagogic

relationship which reascends from the bottom, the earth, to the top, the sky, with the help of a divine light (in medieval times God was considered the Father of Light). When we are walking in Siena our body is always stretched up or, on the contrary, hurled down. And even when we walk on flat streets or piazzas (we can find some of them) our body is framed and aspired by the slits of narrow streets apertures, and the thin edges of crossing streets. So, the gothicness of Siena belongs much more to the invisible city than to the visible one. I am sure that even modern typology of new buildings would be consumed by the power of the invisible Siena, so long as they would be real architecture!

G – But now the question is: how to perceive the invisible city?
In a lecture for the students of the High Studies Institute of Films in Paris in 1945, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who unfortunately died in



1962, said that "the world aspect would be upset if we succeeded to see as *things* the interval, the gap between things – as for instance the space between trees in a boulevard – and reciprocally as background things themselves – the boulevard's trees". He said the same thing for the perception of sounds. And finally he explained that to perceive the world is not to *add* the informations given by our different five senses, but to go towards the world with our body as a unit, where senses are overlapping and contaminating each other. Sounds are seen, colours are touched, images are heard, etc. So our whole body, as one set of senses, is the tool not to perceive only solid seen things, but things and their surroundings which are not perceived by sight.

Our body is our private ambassador between us and the world. It is welcomed by the place and at the same time it welcomes the place.

I am a cavern and the place is a cavern. In the meeting of these two caverns being happens. Merleau-Ponty called this reciprocal movement of being, the "chiasme". We take and we are taken. We touch and we are touched. Our skin and the world's skin constitute the being's skin. In going into a place, which is out of us, we get into us.

Feeling the place we feel ourselves. The world, things, places, are partners, our necessary and friendly partners. To know the world and particularly the world as architectural space, is to know ourselves. That is why architecture is so important, because when it is bad or nothing, the link with it is still there, and instead of happiness we get sadness.

You know that in the Bible when somebody makes love with somebody else, it is said that he knows her or she knows him. So I propose that *loving* serve as a substitute for *reading*. So when somebody will ask you "What are you doing in the first period of ILAUD's Residential Course?", you will answer "Oh! we just do some loving!"