

Research program:
“Rethinking Asylum. Perceptions of Spaces and Subjectivities between the two Mediterranean Shores”

Annex C

Department of Letters and Philosophy

Tutor: PROF. Federica Sossi

Research program:

This project traces a genealogy of asylum in the modern era, on the basis of the relation between space and subjectivity, and its discursive and visual representation, with the aim of questioning the present time.

In 1785, Kant founded universal hospitality (Hospitalität) or the right to visit (Besuchsrecht), forerunner of the contemporary right to asylum, on the idea of the inevitable interconnection between subjects. The inevitability of this interconnection was due to the projection of a spherical image of the Earth, that puts humans in the condition of finding themselves, sooner or later, one beside the other. Nevertheless, in the space of a few lines, and just as Kant was conceptualizing it, universal hospitality was also marked by the ambiguity of one restriction, through the distinction between the notions of Gastrecht (right to be a permanent visitor/right to hospitality) and Besuchsrecht.

Over the centuries, the different interpretations of the relation between spatiality and subjectivity - and, case by case, the subjects' related perceptions of their own existence in space, and of their own feelings and projections onto it - gave rise to different theories on the possibility for a human being to seek protection in a place other than that of origin.

Many different formalizations of the concept of asylum have been developed during the period of the formation of national states and throughout the nineteenth century. Yet, it was only in the second half of the twentieth century that a radical rethinking of the historical realizations of this institution has occurred. Indeed, perhaps due to its originally inbuilt ambiguity, asylum had not been able to avoid the extermination of millions of human beings. The new epochal challenge, as it is expounded in Arendt's theses, is then posed by the "superfluity" of the stateless person.

In this respect, the contemporary era is faced with an equally momentous challenge. New migrations, increasingly composed of refugees seeking asylum, impose an urgent necessity of rethinking the human cohabitation, starting from the relation between human beings, spatiality and territories.

The Mediterranean space will be analysed as the concrete and symbolic laboratory of the undergoing transformation in the relation between spatiality and subjects, and of the redefinition of the related theories of asylum. The mediatic representation of this space and of those fleeing people who cross it, produces a discourse of truth that reconfigures the perception of their dislocation. Through the visual overrepresentation of refugees, the perception of them that is produced is made to depend on the very aesthetics of their appearing. If they are alive, they are survivors of a shipwreck, for whom a mere humanitarian horizon can be disclosed. If they are dead, they are exposed as images of a form of collective mourning without any responsibilities, while placing the inhabitants of the Northern shore in the position of spectators who are not directly involved and still unable to develop a critical thinking with respect to the official discourse.

Research structure

The primary purpose of this project is to contribute to the development of innovative perspectives on a highly topical issue that has great political and ethical relevance. By

rethinking the relation between subjects and territories as one of the main lines of investigation within Western theories, its current reconfiguration will be evaluated, along with the production of the discourses and representations that stem from it. The implementation of specific ideas on the relation between space and subject, within contemporary policies governing the Mediterranean space and the migrations that cross it, will be critically analyzed in order to question the possibility to conceive new forms of human coexistence in the current era of geopolitical upheavals and global conflicts. The present research focuses on a right which is at the very basis of the way in which the representation of the European identity has been ambiguously constructed in relation to other areas of the world, at least since the second half of the twentieth century. Within this perspective, rethinking asylum allows to capture the historic challenge of its present-day redefinition.

- The first part of the research (5 months) is dedicated to a theoretical inquiry on the relation between subjects and spatiality, as well as on those asylum theories that refer to the ethical, moral, political and social bases of western societies;
- The second part (2 months) consists in an analyses of the official rhetoric and documents that are currently redefining asylum, as they reconfigure the relation between space and subject in defensive and excluding terms;
- The third part (1 month) will be devoted to a fieldwork in Sicily and in Lampedusa, in order to question, on the one hand their new representation as military outposts, and on the other the government of refugees as shipwrecked or as body-in-suspension.
- The fourth part (1 month) will entail the collection of interviews to asylum seekers, with the aim of investigating their perception of the relation between subject and space with respect to their displacement.
- The last part (3 months) will be devoted to returning both the results related to the collected data, and their analysis.

The expected outcome of the project are:

- An experimental workshop-seminary dedicated to rethinking asylum, which is to be hosted by the University of Bergamo.
- Two academic articles, published in peer-reviewed international journals, addressing the genealogy of asylum and how the recent representations of the relationship between space and subjects are reconfiguring the European and Mediterranean policies governing refugees.
- The initial stages of the production of a monograph, and the editing of a volume collecting contributions by scholars from the two sides of the Mediterranean.
- The publication of the interviews on the website storiemigranti.org, where a special section will be devoted to the project.