

THE LAST SUPPER IN PIAZZA DELLA SCALA

Francesco Casetti, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano

The photograph¹ shows a group of tourists in Piazza della Scala, in Milan. They are not, as we may imagine, admiring Piermarini's theater in front of them, nor are they looking at Palazzo Marino behind them, or at the Galleria to their left, all very famous buildings. They are, instead, gazing at a reproduction of *The Last Supper* – held aloft by a man with stretched arms, looking like a human easel – as their tour guide is giving them all the explanations (Fig.1).



The irony of this image springs immediately to mind. We are looking at a group of hasty tourists that have no time to walk just one mile down the road to see the original painting on the wall of the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie. Or perhaps, these tourists are merely unfortunate. Indeed their guide did not manage to buy the tickets to for the church, as the daily number of visitors is limited. Or maybe they are simply more interested in Gucci and Prada, and therefore not willing to walk away from the fashion district adjacent to Piazza della Scala. In this case, however, the irony is an unworthy guide: what we are looking at has a profound significance. This sit-

uation has its own logic the camera captures well. First of all these tourists have not “missed” *The Last Supper*; on the contrary, they have “found” it.

Let me explain. These tourists have traveled to Milan to tour the city. They want to live a direct experience of the city, explore it personally by getting impressed by the things they encounter. They want to arouse their mind and curiosity in order to go beyond their normal life and enter into a new dimension. In other words, they are in that piazza to “live” something that carries them outside of the course of their daily lives, to feel “alive”. Now, no doubt that these eastern tourists are living an experience: a “true” experience, both real and striking; something is surprising and capturing them. You might object that they are not experiencing the “real” *Last Supper*. True, they are not looking at the original work, which still remains a mile away. But still, they are not looking at a mere copy. The tourists are standing in front of a special object, which, although not exactly the one they were supposed to see, still maintains some of its important traits and what is more, it highlights these traits better than the original. They are looking at a work that is one of the emblems of Milan (they are in the heart of the city), a work by Da Vinci (just behind them there is the monument dedicated to the artist), an artwork (they are listening to the tour guide’s explanations). Well, if they are not experiencing the real *The Last Supper*, they are experiencing *The Last Supper-ness*. In this sense, even if they are losing something, they have gained something else.

This happens because *The Last Supper* has made a little trip; the tourists were walking towards this artwork, the artwork was making its way towards them. And here it is, in Piazza della Scala, in a context completely different from where you could have seen, but nonetheless able to offer emotions to spectators. This trip, with its particular destination, allowed us not to regret much about the original artwork, and give the reproduction a special value. Here, in Piazza della Scala, *The Last Supper* maintains part of its force, just as it acquires new traits: a certain exemplarity, as we have said, related to the fact that it is in contact with Milan, with Da Vinci and with art but also the fact to be easily accessible and visible by everybody and this emphasizes its characteristic of being a gift. In essence, it is still a little itself and a little more than itself. In any case, it’s worth seeing.

Or indeed, the fact to be in front of the work of Da Vinci in Piazza della Scala allows the viewer to live an experience, which, if on one way is only “almost” identical to the one promised (and “almost” can be intended as “not at all”), then in another is an “experience”, and what is more, a more explicit and accessible “experience”. After all, these tourists live *The Last Supper*, and they live it within their reach. The effect is double. On one hand we know that work can be admired also in other situations without it loses much of its identity. On the other hand, other peculiarities are given inevitably to this viewing, which makes the general aesthetic experience different from what it would be were it anchored to one, and only one, modality. We may continue to admire *The Last Supper* as we perhaps should (the original is after all only a mile away...); however, from the moment that we may do so in another place, on different terrain, no gaze, neither here nor there, will be the same. The transmigration to Piazza della Scala of Da Vinci’s masterpiece is not without consequence.

By *relocation* I mean to designate the process through which an experience, whatever it may be, “transmigrates” from one place to another. We are dealing with a displacement aimed at conquering a whole new sphere – physical, existential or technological – in which we may relive, “almost” in the same manner what we could have lived elsewhere, and where we may find new possibilities and new dimensions. This relocation, then, implies, in equal measure, both permanence and transformation: an event or a situation is *re-proposed* and different functions emerge. We get what other occasions can provide to us, or could have provided to us, but we get it, more directly, for example, or at a lesser cost, in a multi-use format, in a more explicit arrangement or

even in a more disturbing form, capable of highlighting the problematic aspects of an experience that otherwise might have been overlooked. This is what might have happened if *The Last Supper* in Piazza della Scala had been set up by a contemporary artist, instead of being the expedient of a tour operator who is obliged to do the best he can. In conclusion, *relocation* is a displacement, which, in the attempt to preserve the old by giving it an additional opportunity, inaugurates new scenarios, new rituals, new practices, and new adventures of the body and spirit, to the point of changing the overall framework of our experience. Sometimes highlighting the pleasure of a discovery, sometimes inducing nostalgia for the original supposing that there is, or was, an original.

Relocation is undoubtedly related to all those symbolic processes that imply a move, a transfer, a restructuring or broadening of field. It has something in common with the adaptation, the remake, the sequel, the citation, the *calque*, the rewriting of a text or a medium but it highlights rather the creation of a new space in which a new experience can spring up, rather than the creation of a new object to be compared with an old one; a space that is, in any case, an important element of experience².

Similarly, relocation plays a part in that great movement which has characterized our epoch: the loss of the “original”. Indeed: the *unicum* no longer exists: everything, experience included, can be rebuilt, replicated wherever and whenever desired, until we can not distinguish the original from the copy. Relocation’s logic meets the logic of reproduction and of simulacra, with the exception of one point. If it is true that the loss of the original seems often to imply a loss of value, then relocation demonstrates that a new proposal of the original may also imply a revival. In fact, relocation offers all the conditions for a full experience and when relocation is suffused with nostalgia – or even simply with the memory of what we have lived, this nostalgia not only tends to enrich the new experience, but it also shines a new light on and somehow contributes to the recreation of the original experience. As far as this aspect, I would say (I will explain it more in depth further on) relocation is, on the one hand, associated with a process of “desacralization” – the end of every aura results from the end of every original –, and on the other hand draws attention to a contrary movement of “reconsecration” – the aura can return and shine again, either because the space still exists for the experience, or because the experience for which the space exists is really worth the trouble, preliminarily or retroactively.

Finally, relocation may be placed among the processes of globalization: it is a movement capable of going over the barrier, breaking down boundaries and broadening the field of action. We find again the flow logic that marks the contemporary world³. In this sense, relocation contributes to redesign the geography of our world: it acts on a map on which any coordinate point may be placed in reciprocal contact with any other, and on which novel and more specific territories reappear.

It is from this starting point that we can examine cinema and other media. Relocation comes into play in at least two fronts. First, media have always been an essential instrument for the relocation of experiences. Media allow us to live, or relive situations that otherwise would not enter within our present horizon. The portrait of someone I love restitutes my love to me, not my lover. Secondly, the same mediatic experience is always relocated. Nowadays we are not used any longer to read a book, listen to the radio, watch a film or a television program in a traditional context that is: with a paper volume or in front of a HI-FI device, or in a movie theatre, or in front a TV in our living room. These are experiences that we can now perform in nontraditional places with nontraditional means. Let us take, for instance, the experience of watching a film: thanks to the television, the computer, the iPod and the cellular phone, film has been transferred from the movie theater into our homes, and beyond: onto buses and airplanes, into train stations, into waiting rooms, into plazas, parks and streets, etc. In these new technological and special environ-

ments, movie watching – and the same applies to other mediatic experiences – has found a way to reestablish several of the traits that had initially distinguished it: when I watch a movie in my living room, in fact, I dim the lights, sit in a comfortable chair, and I focus on what the little screen offers me, as if I were in a movie theater. In any case, tiny and yet undeniably decisive changes have taken place: my living room is a private – not a public – space; my television screen is luminescent, not reflective; I have not purchased a ticket, rather I have bought a television set, a DVD and a DVD-player (Figs. 2-3-4-5).



Now it's worth noting that the relocation of a mediatic experience puts into play something different from our previous example, while revealing its deeper logic. A film screening, as soon as it is transplanted, for instance, into my living room, does not have behind it an object or environment that can be called “original”, at the same level as does Da Vinci's painting in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie. In the course of time, the film screening has taken place in countless locales and occasions, all equally “authentic”. But nevertheless, we all know quite well that a “real” film screening takes place in a public theater with a film projected onto a screen. Therefore, even though there does not exist a single unique occurrence to be used as a comparison, there nonetheless exists a model. And it is this model that I try to recreate in my living room when I dim the lights and I concentrate on the little screen. So, whence is born this model, which has been

already applied in a variety of cases, from the nickelodeon to the film club, and that takes place in my home, at the end of a long chain of, if not relocations, then at least allocations? Certainly it may be found in a widespread habit: that of “going to the movies”. However – and here lies the paradoxical and yet revelatory aspect – it may also be found in an *a posteriori* recognition: it is in the moment that I relocate the filmic experience to my house, that I project back to an “ideal” situation and, because of its “canonicity”, I conceive of it as “authentic”. Relocation “constructs” its own original, to which it refers to. This is, after all, also what happens in the relocation of an aesthetic experience, even if only tacitly. Let’s think of the museum⁴: do I not discover the “aura” of a work in the very moment that it dissolves, since this work becomes an object on display – without, however, completely dissolving, as it continues to project itself into the new situation? The relocation of media brings this process of “authentication” out into the open, just as it takes it to the limit.

How does cinematic or mediatic relocation work? What is favoring it? And to what consequences does it lead to? At this juncture, I will limit to evoke some pressing questions, without launching into a detailed interpretation. These questions cast doubts on various ideas such as the specificity of media, the centrality of the technological apparatus, including also our notions of vision, of spectator and of discourse.

First, cinema’s and media’s relocation is related to several ongoing processes, in addition to the general ones we have already mentioned. The most evident is undoubtedly the technological changes connected to convergence⁵. The adoption of the digital signal by all media allows them to converge in unified “platforms”: media exit from their traditional environments, and they overlap. What is more, they disappear as single media from the moment that there no longer is a specific technology that defines their identity (just as there no longer is a specific corpus of texts which relies on them: for example, the cinema is no longer identified with the traditional apparatus, nor does it imply the employment of “celluloid”). If anything remains, is the type of experience that media have delineated. A certain way of watching (cinema or television), of listening (radio), of reading (newspaper). It is this experience, liberated from former constraints, that can “transmigrate” more easily into new technological or physical environments and face a new destiny.

The progressive privatization of sight has also invigorated cinematic relocation. The spectator has largely ceased to take part in a public audience: he/she now follows a personal route, constructed *ad hoc*. The spectator’s contact with others is no longer concrete; rather, it has become virtual. Undoubtedly, mobile technologies have encouraged this privatization: the spectator now carries the devices that supply the content to be utilized; and the utilization of this content occurs whenever and wherever it can. He simply switches on his iPod or cell phone in order to construct around himself a sort of safe bubble where he can live his experience. Modalities of vision, once tied to specific context, are now portable and thus transferable.

Finally, relocation is also guided by a pressing need to requalify public spaces, especially urban spaces. The proliferation of screens of various sorts within our cities now serves a variety of functions, as props, as gathering points, as information devices, etc... Whatever the nature of these screens, they all favor the emergence of new visual experiences, many of which are reminiscent of the collective viewing of a cinematic spectacle, or, in other cases, the viewing of a television program. These screens, be diffuse, fixed or ephemeral, create environments in which old forms are relocated.

Convergence, privatization, public spaces: these three motors of cinematic and mediatic relocation remind us that not only is the physical displacement in play, but also the status of a subject (no longer the “addressee” of a message, rather the actor and agent in an experience), and the role of technology (no longer tied to a single medium, but rather provided with an extreme “flexibility”).

The dynamics of relocation is our second area of exploration. How can an experience – we shall once again use the cinematic experience as our example – insert itself into other environments, while retaining, at least in part, its own characteristics? There seem to be essentially two sides to this question. On the one hand, there is a *transfer* thanks to any medium, a film is literally delivered to a new destination in order to be utilized in a new context. In this case it is the object being watched, more than its environment, that assures us that we are still in the perimeter of the cinematic experience. This is what happens when a train passenger watches a DVD on a laptop: it is the film, not the environment, that allows him/her to be a spectator as well as a traveler. On the other hand, there is the process of *staging*. A locale is rearranged with some of the characteristics of a movie theater. Here, it is not the object being watched that admits us into the perimeter of the cinematic experience, rather it is the environment. It does not matter if the locale has walls, auditorium seating, etc.: the presence of a screen on which to concentrate attention is enough to attract some spectators and to offer them images prone to spectacle and a storyline. These are the environmental elements that allow for the reemergence of a cinematic experience. This is what occurs when I dim the lights in my living room, I sit down in a comfortable chair and I concentrate on my television screen. The important thing is the disposition of my soul and of the things around me, even if the “film” I’m watching is a cult tv series or a soccer match involving my favorite team.

This last observation allows us to explore more profoundly two aspects. When the object of vision assumes the task of restoring a cinematic experience the environment falls progressively into line, though not always completely. Even a no-man’s-land can become a movie theater, even for a night only, thanks to the projection of a film onto a provisional screen. In this case the object ends up by “redefining” the context: or, to use the words of de Certeau, it transforms a place that is without identity, or that has an identity capable of being put in parentheses, into a precise space with its own structure, its own strong points and its paths⁶. At the same time, if it is the environment that restores the cinematic experience, the object being watched falls into line. In a movie theater, whatever is projected onto the screen ends up by taking on the characteristics of a film – or at least of what we may call a “filmic material”, as anything displayed in a museum becomes a work of art. In this case, the context “redefines” the object. When the object is a text, it takes on characteristics that render it suitable for the situation, perhaps *après-coup*. This is the example I used before, even a soccer match, when projected on a screen in front of an attentive public, can become, to a certain extent, a film. However, the rules of many sporting events have recently been changed, so that they may be better adapted to be spectacles for the screen. The “semanticization” of a space by a text, and the “resemanticization” of a text by a space, are processes that relocation not only knows well, but that it also highlights.

It is hardly worth underlining the fact that, in this light, the dynamics that support the relocation show their characteristics of social practices. They are concrete gestures, often institutionally regulated, which imply the fact that somebody “does”, “makes someone else do” and “makes someone else be”. The first case is a question of practices aimed at “localizing” mediatic communication; in our case, cinema. However much we state that the *media* do not communicate the sense of a place, in reality they are tightly connected with the environment in which they are they project around themselves. In many cases, media can “suspend” this environment, “virtualize” it, or even “narcotize” it. When I navigate the web, on the one hand I move in a world that has become pure web – the world wide web – and I move from a position which could be situated anywhere. On the other hand, the concrete situation in which I find myself still threatens me with an ambush, ready to intervene in what I am doing.

These localizing practices of the cinematic and mediatic experience highlight additional ques-

tions. For example, when cinematic relocation takes place in spaces that favor individual utilization – as in the case when watching a film on a DVD-player – what happens to the feeling of being part of an audience? Does this dimension of the experience become completely virtual? And therefore am I exclusively a member of a virtual community? In processes of relocation, both the sense of belonging and the presence of a “public sphere” to which we may make reference is often put into a critical position. When relocation evidences highly localized solutions, such as the exchange of film through digital peer-to-peer programs, a modality of social relations emerges, which is quite different from those of the past. Peer-to-peer is both a simple exchange between two people, and the construction of a particular “tribe” – it is both the place in which they make offerings, and a space of poaching. In this context can ideas and behaviors emerge? How these ideas and behaviors circulate and strengthen? If it is true that relocation reminds us that media, including cinema, do not operate in a platonic realm of ideal forms, but in the world, in concrete environments, in precise circumstances, then it is also true that the type and quality of the spaces involved attach a real importance to the mediatic experience in the world.

Being attentive to the social practices that enable relocation allow us to pose one last crucial question. There is no doubt that most active processes are “channelled” by the economic-communication system, and that they depend upon it in order to function. I am thinking, for example, of the most advanced outdoor advertising: the intervention of screens (and, more generally, visual installations) in urban space undoubtedly serves to revitalize spaces often without identity but they function as a more effective form of advertising communication. Viral and guerrilla marketing operate in the same way. In these cases, notwithstanding the presence of changes that seem to break with the traditional order, neither the commodity nature of the utilized object, nor the status of consumer of the subject user, nor even the nature of the space of consumption of the city, are put into question. On the contrary, the experience itself becomes a product. Nevertheless, relocation can constitute an element of complication, of disturbance or of system blockage. The experience can be a “critical point” that explodes habitual processes, creating situations of disorientation, or at least of astonishment. As opposed to those situations in which the desired effect is wonder⁷, disorientation and astonishment lead us to rethink the conditions of our existence, to reactivate them, to literally uncover the “fetishes” on which our desire becomes channeled and blocked⁸. It is permissible, then, to ask what form of subversion relocation can introduce, especially in the case of cinema. To what degree can relocation, especially of cinema, be compared to other practices of subversion, which are conducted today both in “spontaneous” urban culture and in artistic practices? In other words, can cinematic relocation simultaneously assume a “critical valence” and broad aesthetic qualities that reinforce this “critical valence”?

It is in response to these questions, and to those which I referred to before, that we can better focus on the phenomenon of relocation. Our starting point could be the mapping of the new places for the filmic experience. And at the same time we may identify the forms of gaze and spatiality which are about to be born. It’s a big work that probably will contain surprises but we have to go ahead, if we believe that the comprehension of the present is an authentic obligation.

(Translation by Daniel Leisawitz)

- 1 I thank Angelo Mereu for the photograph (2008) he allowed me to use.
- 2 On this issue, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Fiducia e paura nella città (Trust and Fear in the Cities. Seeking Shelter in Pandora's Box or: Fear, Security, and the City. Living with Strangers*, Polity, Cambridge 2005), Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2005, p. 22.
- 3 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 1996.
- 4 On the museum as site of a relocation, see André Malraux, *Le Musée imaginaire*, in Id., *Les Voix du silence*, Gallimard, Paris 1952.
- 5 For a discussion of convergence, see Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University, New York 2006.
- 6 Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien*, Union générale d'éditions, Paris 1980.
- 7 On wonder in contemporary media, see in particular the study by Henry Jenkins, *Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture*, New York University, New York 2007.
- 8 For more on these topics, see the suggestive book by David Joselit, *Feedback. Television against Democracy*, MIT, Cambridge MA 2007, which demonstrates the continuity between the television system and aesthetic operations that put into question this system. Aesthetic operations which are not necessarily entrusted to artists. See especially his analysis of an electronics store as if it were a Nam June Paik installation. Finally television appears as a group of symbolic and social practices, without being limited either by its programs or by his broadcasters' policy.