Marseilles' Sanitary Station: morphologies of displacement between memory and desire

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<Abstract> The former "Sanitary Station" of Marseille was built in 1948 by the architect Fernand Pouillon, its history closely linked to the history of the Phocaean city. The main entry and departure point for travelers and immigrants arriving by the sea, it was abandoned for forty years and was almost destroyed in 2009. In 2013, it was transformed into the museum Regards de Provence, but still keeps the memory of its past: the "steam room" (part of this quarantine internment system) is a permanent installation and is part of a section called "Memories of the Sanitary Station."

Migrants from all over the world arriving in Marseille were "displaced" here to go through disinfection, screening, and a vaccination process in a bid to fight the city's ever-present threat of epidemics. This was therefore a multilingual context, but also a place in which bodies were forced to undergo a transformation. Somehow, these people, like a text under the eyes of a translator, were carefully examined before being allowed access to a new space, a new context. The building itself is a palimpsest, made of different phases of transformation: from Sanitary station to a place occupied by squatters to a museum. What makes the Sanitary Station an emblematic city space is the fact that the different "layers" of its transformations are all present—none has been cancelled. An urban structure that is at the same time—as Derrida puts it—translatable and untranslatable: "Un texte ne vit que s'il survit, et il ne sur-vit que s'il est à la fois traductible et intraduisible."

> "La città non dice il suo passato, lo contiene come le linee d'una mano, scritto negli spigoli delle vie, nelle griglie delle finestre, negli scorrimano delle scale, nelle antenne dei parafulmini, nelle aste delle bandiere, ogni segmento rigato a sua volta di graffi, seghettature, intagli, svirgole." (Calvino, 1979, 18)[1]

In *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo and Kublai Khan talk about the impossibility of defining what a city is and what it is not. Cities are the product of multiple and unpredictable interactions rather than the result of a rational plan. Urban space is read and interpreted by Italo Calvino as a place constantly crossed by fluctuations and rhythms. In one of the sections called "Cities and memory," Marco Polo describes the city of Zaira that, he tells the Emperor, consists of

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[1] "The city [...] does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls" (Calvino 1997, 9).

"relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past" (Calvino 1994, 9). The urban landscape is made of time and space, and, like texts, cities are made of signs that we can read and interpret. In this article I would like to read the past of an emblematic building, the Sanitary Station, "like the lines of a hand" of Marseille, trying to decipher its patterns, its transformations, its symbolic function inside the city.

The former "Sanitary Station" of Marseille (figure 1) was built in 1948 by the architect Fernand Pouillon, and the history of this place is closely linked to that of the Phocaean city. Main entry and departure point for travellers and immigrants arriving by the sea, it was abandoned for forty years and was almost destroyed in 2009. In 2013 it was completely transformed into the museum Regards de Provence, but it still keeps the memory of its past: the "salle des étuves" (the steam room, part of the quarantine internment system) (figure 1) is a permanent installation and is part of a section called "Memories of the Sanitary Station." If the concept of memory recalls something that is buried in the past, what makes this building an exemplary space is the fact that all the different phases of its transformations are still there—they have not been canceled.[2]

The city of Marseille is not new to epidemics. The Mediterranean sea has always been a source of life and prosperity, but also of death: through the centuries, the population of Marseille has been devastated by plague and pestilence, and in the sixteenth century the first sanitation board was established, whose members inspected all incoming ships, cargoes, crew, and passengers. The worst plague outbreak in the history of Marseille occurred in 1720, when the merchant ship Grand Saint-Antoine brought pestilence-carrying rats and fleas into the Vieux Port. It was the "Great Plague of Marseille," the epidemics that Antonin Artaud evokes in his *Le Théâtre et son double* (1964) to develop an analogy between theater and pestilence; the plague is a transforming force that purges the world of its violence and ugliness.[3] Although this epidemic was considered the last outbreak of plague in France, at the beginning of the twentieth century small epidemics and sporadic cases were recorded in Marseille and Paris.

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[2] The book that retraces the several transformations from the Sanitary Station to the Museum Regards de Provence has the emblematic title of *Métamorphoses* (Muntaner and Durousseau 2013).

[3] The streets of a plague-ridden city are blocked by mounds of unidentifiable corpses; at this point, Artaud writes, "[l]e théâtre comme la peste est une crise qui se dénoue par la mort ou par la guérison. Et la peste est un mal supérieur parce qu'elle est une crise complète après laquelle il ne reste rien que la mort ou qu'une extrême purification. De même le théâtre est un mal parce qu'il est l'équilibre suprême, qui ne s'acquiert pas sans destruction" (Artaud 1964, 25).
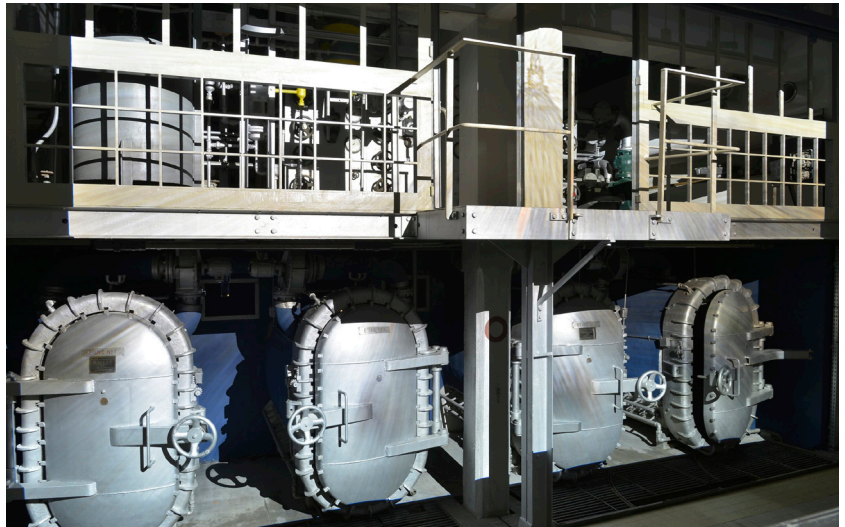
After World War II, there were fifteen million refugees, or "displaced people," in Europe. Marseille organized the reception of thousands of immigrants by creating a strategy of sanitary prophylaxis against plague, cholera, yellow fever, typhus fever, and smallpox. In 1948, the French architects André Champollion, Fernand Pouillon, and René Egger were charged with the project of designing the Sanitary Station of Marseille. The main aim of their project was to create a place of disease prevention and control but, at the same time, to defy rigid spatial segregations and the exposure of individuals to a controlling centralized observation. For this reason they created a structure with several one-way corridors through which individuals could move in order to be washed and disinfected and undergo a medical examination (figure

3.
Area for ablutions
and disinfection

3). Everything was done to avoid any sense of humiliation to the passengers: wide, luminous spaces and above all a horizontal linearity that invested windows, objects, and at the same time the building's structure created a place that evoked the atmosphere of a ship. These similarities between a ship and a place receiving potentially ill people suggests the Renaissance allegory of the "ship of fools" that, as Foucault explains, symbolizes an intermediate moment between the medieval exclusion of lepers outside the gates of the city and the exclusion of the mad within the social body (Foucault 1988). Every boat that arrived in Marseille found its uncanny "double" located on the threshold of the city, in a place that lies between the sea and the urban space, a liminal area that must be crossed if the individual wants to be considered healthy and, above all, inoffensive to the rest of the population.

The threshold is an in-between state that separates two spaces of different nature. As Walter Benjamin observed in his reflections on architecture:

The threshold is a zone. And in fact a zone of passage (*Übergang*). Transformation, passage, flux—all are contained in the word threshold. [. . .] We have become quite poor as far as threshold experiences go. Falling asleep is perhaps the only such experience that has remained to us. (quoted in Sieburth, 19)

But the notion of threshold has also fascinated Gérard Genette who, in the opening pages of *Seuils*, explains that "plus que d'une limite ou d'une frontière étanche, il s'agit ici d'un seuil ou—mot de Borges à propos d'une préface—d'un 'vestibule' qui offre à tout un chacun la possibilité d'entrer, ou de rebrousser chemin" (Genette 1987, 8).[4] Philosophers like Wittgenstein and Benjamin have created several parallels between the forms of the city and the diverse forms of language, and semiotic studies invite us to read the city through its signifying forms. In his "Sémiologie et urbanisme," Roland Barthes sees the city as a discourse, and this discourse, he writes, is truly a language: "Et nous retrouvons la vieille intuition de Victor Hugo: la ville est une écriture; celui qui se déplace dans la ville, c'est-à-dire l'usager de la ville (ce que nous sommes tous), est une sorte de lecteur qui, selon ses obligations et ses déplacements, prélève des fragments de l'énoncé pour les actualiser en secret" (Barthes 1985, 268).[5] Architectural spaces can be read as chapters of a complex text—the city—made of streets, traffic, buildings, and so on that interact in a complex game of intertextuality. From this standpoint, the Sanitary Station is a multilingual context, a sort of Babel, but also a place in which the bodies of the immigrants had to undergo a transformation. Somehow these people, like a text in the eyes of a translator, were carefully examined before being allowed into a new space, a new context.

A translation implies a movement, the concept of carrying something across. The English word derives from the Latin *translatio*, which itself comes from *trans* "across" and *lātiō* "carrying"; the Italian language adds a cultural element to this image of movement with the use of the noun *tradotta*, which is a special train used for the transportation of military troops or deportees. By extension, in Italian it is possible to say that "l'assassino è stato tradotto in carcere" ("the murderer was taken, 'translated' to prison"). In his book *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes asks the question "Does the text have a human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body?" (Barthes 1986, 16). We could ask ourselves whether the human body has

[4] "More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold or—a word Borges used apropos of a preface—a 'vestibule' that offers the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back" (Genette 1997, 1–2).
[5] "And here we rediscover Victor Hugo's old intuition: the city is writing. He who moves about the city, e.g., the user of the city (what we all are), is a kind of reader who, following his obligations and his movements, appropriates fragments of the utterance in order to actualize them in secret" (Barthes 1986, 199).

a textual status, that of a "readable" object of translation, whose position can be changed and relocated in a new context. The "transformation" of the refugees that arrived in Marseille took place in a building organized as a series of passageways that somehow evoke Benjamin's arcades, although with some remarkable differences. Sherry Simon writes that

> Benjamin uses the arcades as a cultural historian to represent an ambiguous urban space, neither inside nor outside, a passageway which is also a space of consumption, a new materialization of urban space. In the essay on translation, he uses the arcade to formulate a contrast between interpretive translation (which uses as its unit the "sentence" or the "proposition") and literal translation (which proceeds word by word). The first, he says, produces a translation akin to a wall, the second a text which functions more like an arcade: 'For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade.' The glass roof allows light to flow through matter, just as the literally translated text is a transparent surface which allows the light of the original to fall onto the new version, creating an interplay of surfaces. (Simon 2000, 75)

I find this passage extremely interesting because it gives me the opportunity to explore the relationship between the process of translation and the spaces of translation. Both in the Parisian arcade and in the Sanitary Station of Marseille, the presence of a glass construction is essential, but while in the arcade the glass roof has the aim of accentuating the transition zone between the outdoor world of the street and the interior space,[6] in the Sanitary Station the lateral glass walls contribute to the brightness of the space but at the same time the concrete structure creates a screen to guarantee the privacy of those passing by. Benjamin sees the arcades as the entry point of the Parisian labyrinth, a place where the *flâneur* could dwell; the Sanitary Station is a one-way passage in which there is no time for dwelling: the "translation" of those who are already "dis-placed" people should be done quickly in order to obtain a transformed, clean version of their bodies. Like Genette, I would like to insist on the term "vestibule," because, in addition to the concept of "threshold," this word also conveys the idea of clothing if we accept the etymology from the Latin *vestibulum*, from *vestis* "garment" and *-bulum*, probably from the sense of "a place to dress."[7] When the immigrants arrived in the Sanitary Station, they were first of all asked to undress so that their clothes could be

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[6] Benjamin was attracted by the ambiguity of glass, by the transformative power of this building material through its architectural application: "It is not a coincidence that glass is so hard and smooth a material to which nothing can be fastened. It is also cold and sober. Things that are made of glass have no 'aura.' Glass is the enemy par excellence of secrecy. It is also the enemy of property" (quoted in Heynen 1999, 155).

[7] Ovid, in his *Fasti*, links the term vestibulum to the Roman goddess of hearth and home Vesta. In any case, if the vestibule is now the place where outer clothing is put on or removed in leaving or entering a house, for the Romans it was the area in which they used to depose their clothes.

washed and disinfected; they then had to go through the communal showers that, thanks to a system of mobile partition walls, became individual showers. The city that has made "Savon de Marseille" its emblem distributed bars of soap and towels to the immigrants who, eventually, got back their clean clothes and could go upstairs for a medical examination.

The Sanitary Station only remained active for a couple of years, until the World Health Organization coordinated a global vaccination program that made entities such as the station redundant. Before entering a country, people were supposed to show their vaccination cards; this was the beginning of preventive medicine. After having served as offices for the administrative clerks of the Direction du Contrôle Sanitaire aux Frontières, the Sanitary Station of Marseille was closed in 1971.

A new chapter in this building's life then began—that of refuge of squatters. The edifice that was used as an institution for disease prevention and control became a place of meetings and creativity for squatters and graffiti artists. The white aseptic walls of the Sanitary Station were filled with colorful poems, tags, and murals. Round images replaced the square tiles covering the walls, showers, and steam rooms. An ephemeral form of art violated the visual and architectural order and setting, breaking the rules of the space–time relationship. The body, the skin of the sanitary station was "scratched,"[8] in the same way as the skin of the migrants was scratched to be immunized against smallpox. The squatters imposed a transformation on this building by "inoculating" the germs of a revolutionary art. In 2009, in order to protest against the permanent closing of the place, the squatters burned a car inside the building (figure 4), which was
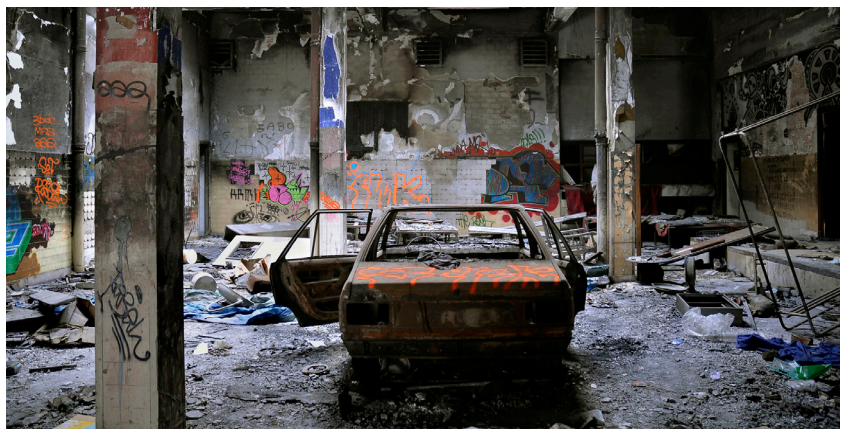
4.
Burned car
in Sanitary Station

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[8] The term "graffiti" derives from the Italian word *graffio*, a "scratch" or "scribble".

nearly destroyed—fire as a sort of extreme catharsis that paved the way to the next transformation. The burned car is a trace, its cinders a rem(a)inder of something that is at the same time present and absent. In *Feu la cendre*, Derrida describes how one particular phrase, "il y a là cendre" ("cinders there are"), continually returned to him and insists on the importance of the trace:

> Si vous ne vous rappelez plus, c'est que l'incinération suit son cours et la consumation va de soi, la cendre même. Trace destinée, comme toute, à disparaître d'elle-même pour égarer la voie autant que pour rallumer une mémoire. La cendre est juste : parce que sans trace, justement elle trace plus qu'une autre, et comme l'autre trace. (Derrida 1984, 30)[9]

What remains from the destruction returns to the surface, to the skin; when the smoke dissipates, the incinerated place resurfaces. The evocation of haunting memories that reemerge from a fire is at the center of the artistic production of Claudio Parmiggiani, who in his work *Delocazione* (De-location) builds installations and sets them on fire, revealing the traces of the disappeared objects. This is what Didi-Huberman calls "une matière de l'absence"—things disappear, but the memory of their presence still remains.[10]

The Regards de Provence foundation, in need of a permanent structure for its exhibitions in the city of Marseille, decided to rehabilitate this building and create a museum that collected artworks created in and about Provence. But before its permanent recuperation and conversion, before the ancient Sanitary Station was transformed into a Museum, a French photographer and installation artist was asked to fix an image in which the traces of the past could interact with the poetic metamorphoses that this place has experienced. Georges Rousse is an artist attracted by neglected and forgotten sites, by their solitude and emptiness; he takes his inspiration from the "wounds" suffered by an edifice to create an ephemeral "mise-en-scène" that he then immortalizes with photographs.[11] One of the main characteristics of a photograph is its link with the referent, a sort

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[9] "If you no longer recall it, it is because the incineration follows its course and the consummation proceeds from itself, the cinder itself. Trace destined, like everything, to disappear from itself, as much in order to lose the way as to rekindle a memory. The cinder is exact: because without a trace it precisely traces more than an other, and as the other trace(s)" (Derrida 1991, 57).

[10] In his book *Génie du non-lieu*, Georges Didi-Huberman explores the works of Parmiggiani. The Italian artist shows that fire does not cause the complete disappearance of an object, but, rather, it delocates it. The question of memory and survival therefore becomes essential: "Il serait donc abusive d'identifier l'œuvre de Parmiggiani à une simple nostalgie du passé (Delocazione est d'ailleurs plus proche d'Hiroshima que d'une reconstitution pompéienne). Cette œuvre vise plutôt un travail de la mémoire—une prise en considération de la survivance—qui a fait dire à l'artiste que 'les veritables Antiques, c'est nous'" (Didi-Huberman 2001, 43).

[11] His artistic intervention is multifaceted: "I call upon various methods of art: I am the designer of the project, the painter on-site, the architect by my interpretation of a given space and by the construction I organise there within, and finally the photographer who coordinates all these actions" (http://www.georgesrousse.com/english/news/rousse-speech.html).

of "reality effect" that makes the past reality of the object indubitable. In *La Chambre claire*, Barthes argues that the photographic referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation: whereas in painting the presence of the model is optional and in language the referents can be chimerical, in a photograph we cannot deny that the thing "has been there."[12] This significant aspect of referentiality seems to compensate for an inexplicable lack of images in relation to the activity of these spaces. In fact, neither the book *Metamorphoses* published by the Musée Regards de Provence (Muntaner and Durousseau 2013) nor the 45-minute documentary that, in the same Museum, explores the history of the plague in Marseille, immigration, and the building contain a single picture concerning the people who passed through the Sanitary Station, and there are only a few pictures of the areas and rooms from when it was active. Somehow, the artistic view of Georges Rousse is asked to capture, in single images, the significant past of these spaces, and he does so by insisting on the double liminality of the Sanitary Station: the instant captured by the photos of the French artist is not only that of a place that has represented for years the liminal area between the port and the city, but also that of a phase of an urban space that has gone through several transformations.[13] The technique used by Rousse is that of anamorphosis; whereas *trompe l'œil* gives the illusion that a flat surface is three dimensional, his anamorphic images create the illusion that a three-dimensional area is flat (figures 5 and 6). Although it looks as if the geometric form has been digitally created, the illusion generated by these photographs is optical, and represents the outcome of several weeks of work so that the colorful geometric is only visible from a specific point of view. The anamorphic figure invites those who are watching it to move, to change their point of view, in order to bring into perfect focus the object of interpretation. Nevertheless, the installations created by Georges Rousse, once they are immortalized by the camera, do not ask the viewer to move, to change their perspective: his artwork is intended only for the lens, and not for an observer in the actual space. Rousse creates a "before" and "after" effect—first, the "deconstructed" red circle and then the perfectly round red circle reassembled by the camera. In doing so, he wanders in the rooms of the Sanitary Station with the eye of the photographer who is trying to find the right standpoint.[14]

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[12] Its essence is recorded in the formula "ça a été," "that has been."

[13] In an interview about his installations at the future Musée Regards de Provence, Georges Rousse said that "[l]e port c'était la station sanitaire qui accueillait les immigrants mais c'est aussi le point de départ vers l'ailleurs. [. . .] Je voulais rendre compte de ce nouvel espace qui a perdu toute fonctionnalité et qui va disparaitre, cet entre-deux" (Muntaner and Durousseau 2013, 109)

[14] "Je déambule dans les lieux avec l'œil du photographe pour repérer le bon point de vue jusqu'à l'image finale qui a besoin de l'appareil photographique comme outil de reproduction" (Muntaner and Durousseau 2013, 111).

In these ephemeral installations that are immortalized only by the lens of a camera, the gaze of the artist leaves its place to another "gaze": that of the Museum *Regards* de Provence, a museum that has slowly become a sort of palimpsest, made of its different phases of transformation. The permanent installation shows the old steam room and a documentary that retraces the history of this building, while the temporary exhibitions are housed in galleries on the ground and first floors. The several windows along both the front and the back walls of this long, horizontal building invite the observer to gaze outside, towards the port and the city. In the course of all its transformations, the Sanitary Station has been "living on"; its trans-lation, its trans-positions have not destroyed it. Like a text, this building has survived only because, to paraphrase Derrida, it was at once translatable and untranslatable.[15] This building outlives itself, is at the outskirts of its own living.

Like Georges Rousse, Walter Benjamin was attracted by the decayed or abandoned spaces of the city; likewise, he was fascinated by "thresholds" and borders. He first visited Marseille in 1926, and then several times in 1928 and 1931. His last visit to the Phocaean city took place in 1940, shortly before his death. Marseille was for him like a book to be interpreted:

> In the early morning I drove through Marseilles to the station, and as I passed familiar places on my way, and then new, unfamiliar ones or others that I remembered only vaguely, the city became a book in my hands, into which I hurriedly glanced a few last times before it passed from my sight for who knows how long into a warehouse crate. (Benjamin 1999b, 447)

Whereas Paris represents for Benjamin the ideal place to discover the traces of social meaning and the collective dreams of modernity, he finds Marseille hard to decipher, to the point where he once commented that no city so stubbornly resisted his efforts to depict it as did Marseille (Eiland 2014, 310). Benjamin sees each street as a vertiginous experience; for him the city-dweller should be "on the threshold of the metropolis as of the middle class" (Benjamin 2006, 40). Nevertheless, in his writings on hashish, and in particular in the text "Hashish in Marseilles," he does not stay on the borders. Rather, he lets himself sink inside the "ventre of Marseilles":

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[15] "Un texte ne vit que s'il sur-vit, et il ne sur-vit que s'il est à la fois traductible et intraduisible. [...] Totalement traductible, il disparaît comme texte, comme écriture, comme corps de langue. Totalement intraduisible, même à l'intérieur de ce qu'on croit être une langue, il meurt aussitôt. La traduction triomphante n'est donc ni la vie ni la mort du texte, seulement ou déjà sa survie. On en dira de même de ce que j'appelle écriture, marque, trace, etc. Ça ne vit ni ne meurt, ça survit. Et ça ne 'commence' que par la survie (testament, itérabilité, restance, crypte, détachement déstructurant par rapport à la rection ou direction 'vivante' d'un 'auteur' qui ne se noierait pas dans les parages de son texte)" (Derrida 1986, 147–149).

> I lay upon the bed, read and smoked. All the while opposite to me this glimpse of the ventre of Marseilles. (Now the images begin to take hold of me). The street that I'd so often seen is like an incision cut by a knife. (Benjamin 1978, 138)

When, under the effect of hashish, Benjamin describes the streets of Marseille, he enters a surrealist dream world, made of strange sounds, images, and scents. His perception of what he sees in the streets—where he strolls to find a restaurant for dinner—is distorted, the dimensions of time and space are abolished.[16] Unexpectedly, the words of a conversation in a little port bar sound to him like dialect:

> The people of Marseilles suddenly did not speak good enough French to me. They were stuck at the level of dialect. The phenomenon of alienation that may be involved in this, which Kraus has formulated in the fine dictum "The more closely you look at a word the more distantly it looks back" appears to extend to the optical. (Benjamin 1978, 144)

Michel de Certeau writes that the city is a text, and that walking in a city has its own rhetoric: "Il y a une rhétorique de la marche. L'art de 'tourner' des phrases a pour équivalent un art de tourner des parcours. Comme le langage ordinaire, cet art implique et combine des styles et des usages" (De Certeau 2005, 15).[17] Nevertheless, the legibility of a city changes; it is the perspective of the viewer that defines the object of observation. When Benjamin quotes Kraus's aphorism ("The closer one looks at a word, the further away it looks back"), he too evokes the importance of perspective. How should we read a city, its translation zones, its palimpsests?

I would like to close this paper with another quote from Calvino's *Invisible Cities*:

> In due modi si raggiunge Despina: per nave o per cammello. La città si presenta differente a chi viene da terra e a chi dal mare. [. . .] Ogni città riceve la sua forma dal deserto a cui si oppone; e così il cammelliere e il marinaio vedono Despina, città di confine tra due deserti. (Calvino 1994, 370)[18]

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[16] "Versailles, for one who has taken hashish, is not too large, nor eternity too long" (Benjamin 1978,138).

[17] "There is a rhetoric of walking. The art of 'turning' phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path. Like ordinary language, this art implies and combines styles and uses" (De Certeau 1984, 100).

[18] "Despina can be reached in two ways: by ship or by camel. The city displays one face to the traveler arriving overland and a different one to him who arrives by sea. [. . .] Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes; and so the camel driver and the sailor see Despina, a border city between two deserts" (Calvino 1997, 17).

Whereas the city of Zaira is part of a section devoted to memory, Despina is a city of desire that opens paths and opportunities for visitors. There are multiple ways of seeing the same city, depending on which face of the city they see. Those who arrive at Despina have to shift their perspective, as if they were in front of an anamorphic image. By building the Sanitary Station, Marseille has tried to give itself a "face" from which the immigrants could see it, but France's oldest city has not resisted the univocal direction imposed by this passage point: the Station operated for a few years, quickly transformed by artists who made this structure a place of exile, of displacement, a metaphorical place that contains a plurality of meanings and errant trajectories, and that lends itself to multiple interpretations.

The story of those anonymous people who arrived in Marseille and whose body/corpus underwent a transformation in order to be admitted to a new context intertwines with the story of another migrant who, some years before, in 1940, had been trying to escape France for the United States: Walter Benjamin. He went from Paris to Marseille, which at that time was full of refugees, especially those from countries occupied by the German army. The philosopher who used to be an extraordinary city dweller and who loved to get lost in the meanders of a city, found himself obliged to follow the route taken by many refugees. In Marseille he obtained a passport issued by the American Foreign Service, but when he discovered that the port was virtually closed he tried to cross the Spanish border by walking up into the mountains. He never managed to traverse the most important boundary of his life, however, and in Portbou he was refused entry into Spain. He was held in Portbou overnight and sent back to occupied France the next morning. The morphine Benjamin had brought with him from Marseille was strong enough to kill him. Hannah Arendt wrote about her dear friend and the Kafkian situation in which he found his death:

> A few weeks later the embargo on visas was lifted again. One day earlier Benjamin would have got through without any trouble; one day later the people in Marseille would have known that for the time being it was impossible to pass through Spain. Only on that particular day was the catastrophe possible. (Arendt 1990, 24)

Benjamin died in a liminal space, in a liminal time; a bitter twist of fate for the philosopher who has taught us the important difference between "boundary" and "threshold": "The threshold must be carefully distinguished from the boundary. A *Schwell* <threshold> is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action are in the word *schwellen*, swell, and etymology ought not to overlook these senses" (Benjamin 1999, 494).

Following Benjamin's fundamental distinction, we might suggest that the Sanitary Station was initially born as a "boundary area" because of its

function of containment and delimitation, and that it has eventually "swollen," with an extraordinary series of metamorphoses, into a threshold, a place caught up in a tension, an innovative space. The Regards de Provence museum is now a site of rewriting, a place that combines memory of its past and a gaze towards the future. It has not lost its "in-between position," though, caught as it is between the ancient Cathedral and the new buildings (Mucem, Villa Mediterranée) designed by internationally renowned architects. A potential space for hybridization.

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