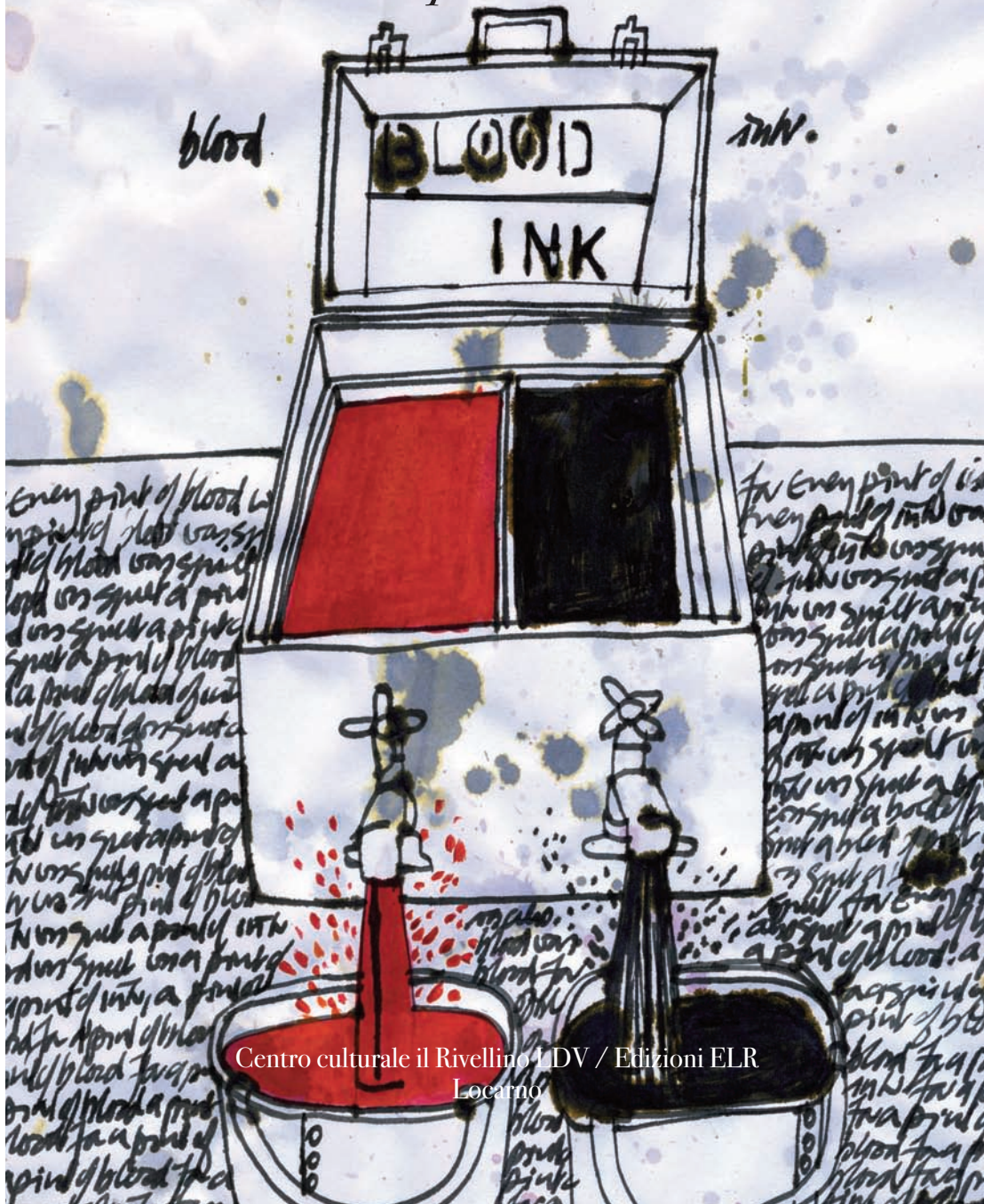


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Andata e ritorno, con valigia
Roundtrip with Suitcase



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Roundtrip with Suitcase

Travel as an absolute metaphor in Peter Greenaway's Tulse Luper Suitcases, Locarno 2010

ROUNDTRIP 1

The Italian poet Alfonso Gatto (1909-1976) once said that at the moment of departure on a trip he, or better a part of himself, could envision his departure and, upon returning, could see himself return. This is a poetic and stirring vision and I choose it here not for the pleasure of selecting it, but rather as a means of understanding the intimate truth it contains. Several simple questions applied to this image can provide insight: Who travels when we travel? Which part of us remains at home while awaiting our return? How do we remain coherent, as we are our departing, travelling and returning selves? What do we leave at home and what do we bring with us, in our suitcases? I repeat this is not an analytical exercise regarding the rather mundane event of travel. The separation and rejoining of a subject represent a very real experience: it is what we feel when we return home from a long trip, when a certain surprise takes hold of us with the realization that everything has remained as we left it. Or else something has changed, something separates us from our environment that previously represented us so well - was actually an emanation/extension of ourselves - like an outfit, an integral part of ourselves and we are aware that we will need to reacquaint ourselves with this place and reoccupy the space, reactivating old habits, etc.

These are themes and problems, connected to departure, travel and return that are persistently present in literature, philosophy and religious stereography, albeit with different modalities, configurations and intentions. In philosophy, it is the theme of the Heraclitean permanence and change (do not enter the same river twice) or the subject of unity in the variety of experiences and self-alienation, the question can easily be reduced and expressed in terms of departure and return. From here it is a short step to arrive at an absolute metaphor, that of the journey itself.

According to the German philosopher Blumenberg, absolute metaphors are those that are not based on other metaphors and are not reducible to the properties or terminologies of logic and thereby express an original conception of the world. They act then, as a kind of principal active ingredient that is the primary tool of the hermeneutic act, regulating speech and guiding our judgments about things.

If we apply this concept or paradigm of thought to the subject under discussion here, we can assert that what provides us the opportunity to leave, to wander

through the world and to return home, are metaphors. The Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, who lived at the turn of the eighteenth century, has described metaphors as miniature myths. We live and travel in metaphors, we fill our bags not only with personal objects but also with our personal metaphors. During the trip some are lost, others wear or change and still others will be replaced according to what we have seen and the encounters we have had. It is the absolute metaphors in our baggage that will allow us to return and resettle in the same places; these same metaphors that we brought with us and that were a part of our home.

ONE-WAY TRIP

There are also one-way trips. Countless travelers leave forever, never to return, to die or, as immigrants, to settle abroad.

The first half of the twentieth century saw absolute and tragically emblematic examples of these one-way trips. Members of special units of a totalitarian regime beat violently at the door and ordered the inhabitants to leave. With ten minutes notice people had to gather, in a single suitcase, their personal effects. These departures are etched in our collective memory. Pictures that depict crowds of ordinary citizens brought to collection points, a symbol of the possibility of absolute, unlimited power. We also know that the suitcases are a cruel fiction, that what they contain will be of no use, that those departing will be separated from them. It is a way of taming them into submission allowing them to believe in the suitcase, believe in the trip. We later see their bare bodies in the camps of planned and organized annihilation on an industrial scale.

Nudity itself is a metaphor of life stripped of everything except for that last fatal, fundamental differentiator of oneself from one's self-image. "The nudity of the human body.." writes Agamben, "...is pure visibility and presence, its image; that is, the trembling that makes this body knowable, though it remains, in itself, ungraspable"¹. This elusiveness is not, however, absolute, there is something very dark and very far out of reach, yet actively present, operational and visible, hence the unique fascination that images exercise over the human mind. Precisely because the image is not the object, but rather the object's knowability (its nudity), it neither expresses nor signifies the object. Nevertheless, inasmuch as it is nothing more than the delivery of the object over to knowledge, nothing other than the stripping off of the clothes that cover it, nudity is not separate from the object: it is the object itself"².

¹ G. Agamben, *Nudità*, nottetempo, Roma 2009, p. 119.

² *Ibid.*

I am aware that I stretch this idea: image and metaphor are not equivalent, and I have done so only because the latter, although involving images, is strictly related to language, speech and writing, not to the figurative dimension. Nevertheless, transposition is justified by the opportunity to free oneself from the direct contact that occurs in the viewing of images.

The metaphor is, in fact, a process of transforming images. Taken and transposed from one context to another they therefore cannot have a character of their own immediate visual image.

Importantly, however, there is yet another aspect, namely the conjectural dimension of metaphor, its nature of being a guess in essence, a mini-conjecture, which can "bend" an image and thus capture its magic. If we now think of the luggage of the deportees, in this power of metaphor we discover something awful and abysmal. In fact, that the prisoners piled naked to be destroyed, remains the metaphor of nudity as luggage or as the extreme hermeneutical tool to regulate discourse and guide opinion, is perhaps our only, however painful or cathartic, empathy, necessary in order to believe that we can give voice and words to a pain that wherever today life is reduced to almost nothing, in refugee camps or at sea, where thousands of prisoners and fugitives die, is commonly recognized as dumbfounding.

ROUNDRIP 2

Metaphors we live in, we have seen above, ensure the continuity of our lives, so to speak, the land on which to walk - were it not also to change.

Blumenberg has repeatedly described the metamorphosis of absolute metaphors, such as navigation or the readability of the world. Over thousands of years of evolution, metaphors may sometimes disappear and then suddenly reappear in twisted and contorted new forms only to disappear again. This is due particularly to the affirmations of scientific thought which, as noted by Bodei, gradually reduce the power of mere metaphors or heuristic function, called by Blumenberg, "dismantling the scaffolding behind the pictures, indifferent to whatever function they had in the formation of the models"³.

The inaction and the progressive weakening of metaphors also affect our lives and practices. From tourists traveling thanks to modern technology; the more frequent departures tend to lose the aura of detachment and separation; we no longer board our airplanes but rather our bodies are injected at the airport from one space to another and then into torpedoes of unprecedented power that

³ H. Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1981, p. 408.

propel us far away, separated from our luggage and related technological gear which are immersed in otherwise shaped spaces. The metaphor of the journey has effectively ceased to explain and guide our movements in contemporary space. Navigation is now a worn metaphor used to describe access to services on the World Wide Web (surf, in fact, in English, with a sports metaphor, to surf). In short, our travels have taken on the character of mere shifts from one part of the globe to another.

I do not mean, however, to align myself to the easy criticism of technological civilization but what interests me here is to highlight the formal aspects, so to speak, that the loosening of the power of guidance and coordination of their discourse of metaphor, which I treated above as with luggage with which we turn to the world.

This loosening or tightening has not prevented the philosopher who theorized to recall the metaphor of the journey in the title of an essay published posthumously: *Zu den Sachen und zurück*, which translates to "Toward Things and Back." Blumenberg undermines the phenomenology of Husserl, which summarized in the title can be considered the motto: "Zu den Sachen selbst" (Return to Things Themselves).

I do not intend here to discuss the fierce criticism of Hanseatic philosophy developed by Husserl, but only make some very general remarks to put more focus on the theme of travel (and of course the suitcases). Thus Blumenberg notes that "through phenomenology the goal was to arrive at things however and yet, it becomes difficult to remain close to things"⁴. With the instruments, or luggage, organized by the method of phenomenological reduction, which seeks to be scientific, the philosopher can make the trip up to the things themselves. But once he has arrived at the thing he has no place and means to stay there because the things themselves offer no foothold for transcendental contemplation.

The Voyage of the phenomenologist would therefore be as follows: departure / arrival and return with no pause at the destination. It is difficult to say with certainty whether the return trip is, for Blumenberg, a necessity or an inconsistency of the phenomenological method (Return, yes, but towards what?), if the return is the option recommended by him, towards an anthropological phenomenological return that he hopes is mandatory. In addition to being "technical", the issue is extremely complex, for the purposes of the problem discussed here we are only interested in its outlines, so to speak, its external features: travel to a destination, inability to see or even stop there and then the return trip.

⁴ H. Blumenberg, *Zu den Sachen und zurück*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2007, p. 153.

Taking license with respect to the serious discipline of philosophy, I propose graph the trip just sketched as a model or paradigm of our individual and collective journeys. We undertake tourist or business trips often, frantically; the whole of humanity seems caught up in the frenzy of travel. And yet our destinations are gradually vanishing, upon arrival we cannot see or cannot recognize what we see as different, it seems identical to the place we left or with only minimal variations. So we return, but towards what? The pace of travel (departure/arrival/return) has lost significance, the moments have dissolved or at least do not seem to punctuate and mean anything. Even the "big trip" that man has embarked on since the advent of techno-science offers no possibility of return, the reconfiguration of the world has been too broad, incisive and radical, too radical the opportunities and the threats, terror and freedom, that they have deployed. The metaphor of the journey has been absolutely, utterly exhausted. So it is probably not a coincidence that in the last few decades the term nomadism has been much in vogue.

THE OPEN SUICASES OF GREENAWAY / TULSE LUPER

The wear on the metaphor of the journey is also of course related to suitcases as metaphor. Greenaway, in the preparation of the suitcases laid out a sort of path, an organizing idea and yet he can hardly escape the ironic or parodic nature of the device.

Bags filled with all kinds of items, the number 92, which occurs obsessively, drawings depicting the suitcases and their contents, explosions, comments, captions, overlays, movies, split-screens: if only we call to mind the adventures of Odysseus, but also the travels of Don Quixote and Gulliver, we realize that here we are dealing with a parody of the voyage, a sardonic representation of travel in the era of compulsive dislocation.

Several of Greenaway's or ideally, Tulse Luper's, suitcases are open, as if their owner might be about to leave, yet everything suggests that he is just back after a long wander around the world. They contain all sorts of things.

It is known and has been widely analyzed and discussed the habit of travelers and tourists to collect all kinds of things. These are trophies of travel, no matter what they are, anything, even the most unthinkable, absurd and macabre, can be found in the suitcase of a few tourists. These objects can be broadly grouped under the title "The fetishisms of the traveler". They are things that represent other things or events: places, landscapes, lived. So through the apples, eggs, mushrooms and water contained in suitcases Greenaway evokes

other things and the travels to them, they are like findings that describe a foreseeable future.

But of course description, as Blumenberg notes, is not the thing itself but only the way to give back the memory of the vision of the thing.

For the realization of his multimedia project, Greenaway does not just fill the Tulse Luper Suitcases with probable and improbable things, to make them ready-made, but he designs and multiplies them, thus explaining the findings that illustrate a trip either real or hypothetical. This is not, however, a simple game of memory duplication. So how can we explain then this repeated duplication? What is the logic behind the procedures and referral mechanisms, duplication and multiplication of images?

The intentions of the artist, of any artist, can also be ignored where appropriate. The intentions, either declared or implied, are one, but not necessarily the most important, among the factors relevant to understanding the work. In the case under consideration here, of the exhibit design, I have decided not to consider it. I want to try instead to answer the question by returning to the thesis of the metaphor of the journey and, more specifically, to assess whether the process of duplication and multiplication described above may be considered a result of the exhaustion of the travel metaphor.

In the past, scholars, researchers and other travelers have collected and brought home items. Upon return, and sometimes, as Goethe in Italy, during the trip itself they wrote the memories of their travels in the form of a diary, letters or guide. To do this we imagine that they used notes, but also small items or souvenirs, to stimulate and evoke their memories.

Of an entirely different nature is the operation carried out by Greenaway, who slyly boasts relics of authentic voyages, these supposed trips, frivolous or improbable, but including drawings, paintings that reproduce and multiply - all in a multimedia screenplay which is absurd, cacophonous, engaging, sometimes hilarious.

It seems important to stop here and move towards the things themselves, I mean those placed in suitcases. Take, for example, the suitcase containing a hundred eggs: eggs = birth, life and fertility, I reason, but then I read that Tulse collected eggs and in fact I see eggs on the numbered drawing, so by association my mind runs to ornithology with its classifications, and his expeditions seem to lead to the discovery of new species. Then, or before, comes numerology: 92 eggs, 92 nuclear explosions, 92 chemical elements, 92 cases, and so on. I return to the suitcase: many eggs cannot be transported in a suitcase, but the vision is something primal and sublime. The tone and the sequence of associations are completely random, and all are contained in bags, which as mentioned are the theme of the project. The cases, like milestones,

are numbered, but this conceit is both ironic and tragic (92 explosions) and there is no ordered path to follow. All too obvious and easy is the analogy with the way we travel, the relentless offers of tourist destinations with the exposure of the traveler to a flow of images in rapid succession.

It is said that the destination is the reason to travel. The journey of the tourist is no more than a shadow of the great journeys of mythical and historical past. The scheme departure/arrival at destination/return marks the organization and travel plans, not the processing of moments and their unification into an experience that marks and changes within the depths of our being.

Erfahren, the German verb to bring, to experience contains *fahren*, to travel, and perfectly illustrates the pattern of experience as a process of sense-perception according to the rules of the intellect, as a movement outward and inward. The experience includes three moments: that of the sensitive subject, of the object perceived and of the reflective subject.

I do not want to say that today it is no longer possible to experience, because this alleged impossibility arises usually from transfiguring projections or idealizations of golden eras that, of course, never existed. We continue to travel, however, at a pace never known before, and we experiment, but in a stochastic way and on the basis of fragmentary images, or instead of agglutinated images. Of the territories in which we pass and places that we visit we hardly ever gain an overview, but rather thousands of partial visions that constantly refer to other views and places. In the spaces in which we move every day and as tourists order and chaos, war and peace, purity and contamination- coexist and blend without a center or a design, but rather with a myriad of designs and cohabiting centers, interacting, colliding. Exposed to a steady stream of images of all kinds and density, consciousness struggles and is often unable to get back to itself and build upon experiences, being overwhelmed by the constant "work" of selection and de-selection, connection and disconnection. Never coming back, if not occasionally and for brief moments, to yourself you do not travel properly but wander aimlessly.

The traditional duplication of multimedia by Greenaway and other artists generate images of images, multiplying the images, but somehow they re-elaborate them by marking and cutting. You can argue about how the effects of this frenzied multiplication of images and whether the continuous reproduction of simulacra, in the end cancels, or possibly has already canceled, the reality, but all in all it seems to me a matter of philosophical dispute reminiscent of other times.

Each marking, even the numbering, of an image has the effect of recontextualizing, and redirecting it to mean something new, and then to hold

that meaning for a moment. In a sort of continuous scanning of images variously marked or re-elaborated, past and present mingle without being confused. This occurs because, on the one hand, our present created of impending pre-announced disasters, of terror and freedom, and of a vortex of visions which is always swirling on the verge of breaking the evocative power of the images of a past, that in the case of the Tulse suitcases, are of travel, adventure and discovery. On the other hand, precisely because it is with this explosive, heartbreaking and contradictory force that the images may appear – or, if you prefer are "stripped" of their consolatory and mystifying aura.

These marked images remind me of the "survival" and "dialectical images" mentioned by Benjamin. According to the author of the *Passagen-Werk*, the image is that in which a past appears in a flash in constellation with the present. It is dialectical, and therefore authentic, to the extent that is marked by the historical context in which it stands; it is not dialectical, and is therefore ideological (tacky, regressive, archaic) if configured as a projection of a present which itself conceals or contributes to conceal.

Benjamin was convinced that from dialectical images, even in times of disaster, it is possible to obtain unexpected resources.