

Hydro-idiocy

Bringing the aquatic ‘unthought’ into the dried landscape of Palermo

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Surfing, fishing and swimming the urban

With the title ‘Why go to the beach when you can wakeboard on the street?’, a YouTube video shot in 2009 and then shared online by a local newspaper in August 2019¹ shows a wakeboarder surfing the streets rather than the waves of the city of Palermo (Italy), taking advantage of the flooding of the bathing area of Mondello, which was previously a swamp and today one of the most popular city’s seaside villages. In September 2018, after a storm, the ZEN, an economically deprived quarter on the northern outskirts of Palermo and close to Mondello, flooded, with the local newspapers seduced by another farcical act: a boy decided to take his rod and pretended to fish from the garage’s roof in the courtyard of his neighbourhood.² At the end of May 2017, an image immortalising two children in bathing suits immersed in the fountain of the Garraffello Square, in the ancient neighbourhood of Vucciria, in the city centre, started to be virally shared on social media, this time followed by the readers’ comments not only over the alleged idiocy of the act but also on the lack of civic education of these children.³ The fountain, which was previously abandoned and without water, had been recently restored and gated to preserve it from a long-standing degradation.

The three vignettes, gathered from local newspapers and social networks, are certainly hilarious – truly idiotic we might say (as those people were often intended to be idiots in newspapers and social media’s comments) – but actually elicit many ruminations on the relations between the *limited* and *inadequate* infrastructure of water containment, the *unusual* appropriation of public space and, especially, the continuous *unsettling* and *disruption* of normative behaviour. As a result, though in a very playful way, these exquisite ‘subversive’ figures seriously speak to the many urban infrastructures’ malfunctions, failures and uneven access that are experienced every day in the city of Palermo and, more significantly, stage new acts of creation that will help us to rethink anew the apparent disconnection between water and land in the city.

‘Water and people cannot be contained’⁴

In Palermo, water infrastructures are indeed old and poorly maintained. They cannot apparently block, contain or interrupt the intrusion of the water in the urban system. Mafia control over water,

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1 <https://www.balarm.it/news/perche-andare-a-mare-quando-puoi-fare-wakeboard-per-strada-succede-a-palermo-21398>

2 <https://www.palermotoday.it/video/maltempo-allagamenti-pesca-zen-costume-partanna.html>

3 <https://palermo.meridionews.it/articolo/55419/piazza-garraffello-i-bimbi-nuotano-nella-fontana-i-palermisani-si-dividono-sulla-foto-della-discordia/>

4 According to Sicilian folk wisdom *acqua e populu non si ponu tèniri* (‘water and people cannot be contained’). This insight shows a curious correspondence between ‘aquatic’ and ‘human’ overflows.

but more generally a public policy driven by clientelism and careless about environmental sustainability and people's needs, contributed to create the imagery of an inefficient city. In the last decade, as an effect of climate change, torrential rains have started to inundate and congest the city. During these occurrences, wells and sinkholes explode, making objects, vehicles and people float and flow along the streets that once were fluvial beds. There *was* in fact an internal hydrography of the city, silently fermenting on the bed of ancient rivers and springs, which has been indiscriminately erased through the centuries to accommodate the concrete structure of the urban. As a result, in the ordinary

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life, citizens would be typically dis-entangled from *aquatic experiences* because of the water's concealment within the urban sphere. Yet, as these three extra-ordinary examples tell us, something is changing in the way that water events of the city ask to be lived, sensed and enacted by local

dwellers when the *absurd* becomes *ordinary* and urban normativity loses its take on human agency.

Yet, what is the *trigger* of these non-ordinary behaviours? Considering that Palermo has often complained of a shortage of water and the threat of drought – in Sicily, for instance, there are still many religious processions and ceremonies invoking the rain – both ordinary people and the municipal government appear utterly unprepared to face and tame the water as it infiltrates within the dried city. And so, how to respond to water's intrusive *excess* if not through an *excess of mood*, both aquatic and idiotic?

From idiocy to hydro-idiocy

Although 'idiocy' is often used as a term of denigration, the speculative character of the idiot has differently solicited the interest of many thinkers, philosophers, poets and writers, from Deleuze and Guattari (1994) to Žižek (1995), from Dostojevskij – with his famous novel *The Idiot* (1869) – to Artaud (1995), all enticed by the idiot's exorbitant capacity to exceed and transgress a normative boundary or rule by way of a genuine, unthinking and naïve behaviour. In philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari explain that 'the old idiot wanted, by himself, to account for what was or was not comprehensible, what was or was not rational, what was lost or saved; but the new idiot wants the lost, the incomprehensible, and the absurd to be restored to him' (1994: 63). The old idiocy is 'the naturalization of thought as a capacity of a thinking subject', while the new idiocy claims to 'the denaturalization of thought and the irruption of the unthought into life' (Shaw, 2016: 3).

By adopting and transferring aquatic behaviours over the surface of the urban, the three idiotic examples may also seem incomprehensible and meaningless, which is exactly why they breach the ordinary, bringing the aquatic unthought into the urbanescence of life. By doing so, they powerfully evoke the wet epiphanies of the urban, the striking appearances of floods and liquidities in the city that reveal the coalescence and co-presence of aquatic and terrestrial *matrices* and *moods*. Well, this might be seen just as a mere speculative proposition, but I am more than convinced that such acts of idiocy occurred in Palermo may help us to re-consider the overlooked relationship between landscape and waterscape. As Vannini and Taggart (2014: 98) noted, we usually dwell on waterscapes for how they differ from landscape but 'what would happen if we instead viewed the land from the perspective of water? What would happen if we wanted to see similarities and overlaps between land and water, rather than distinctions and boundaries?' Perhaps, the overlap between water and land, as much as between water and the urban, might actually emerge if we began to take more seriously and speculatively the idiotic behaviour sketched above – that is, an ironic, fleeting and disorienting

act that subverts the concreted order of things.

In this sense, the overflow ceases to be seen only as a material phenomenon that disrupts the dried imagery of the contemporary city, and can be conceptualised as a bizarre public mood that manifests through eclectic but nonetheless critical agencies that are consistent with the extraneous advent of water in the urban context. We might refer to this behaviour as 'hydro-idiocy', which alludes to amateur, creative, meaningless, humorous and stupid acts of subversion of the ordinary way to experience the city as a dried environment. As Goriunova (2012: 3) puts it, 'idiocy is about gathering and crafting "rubbish" that does not give answers or that has direct access to truth, but that enquires and stages encounters with the real through its force of insignificant, false and preposterous doings'. What happens, in short, when the aquatic overflow suddenly turns into a social-psychotic overflow, an excess of thought and action? But more importantly, which insights and encounters with the real can an idiotic or an excessive mood offer to a fuller understanding of the city from the perspective of water?

Rethinking the urban through hydro-idiocies

The ridiculing and mocking of the urban overflow by urban dwellers fruitfully highlights the urban complicity with water. After all, even if the indomitable force of water tends to be held away from or contained in the land, it can nonetheless reappear in unexpected places (e.g., in the city, sneaking into its buildings and streets through jets, leakages, overflow and flooding), but especially in unexpected ways (through many liquid metaphors and behaviours). This is particularly true for the threefold exploratory scenario sketched above. Through the acts of surfing, fishing and swimming the urban landscape of Palermo, the above experiences instil in the urban psyche the shock of a liquid experience. In the first vignette, for instance, we encounter the 'absurd' act of surfing a street. Obviously, surf is both a fluid and temporary phenomenon, and as such would not necessarily be considered as a place from a sedentary, terrestrial perspective' (Anderson, 2014: 75). Yet, in Palermo, the hearth of the Mediterranean Sea, the metaphorical and anthropological relationship with water originates rightly from the visceral and material bond that people experience with a particular aquatic manifestation: the sea.

The preposterous act of surfing the urban actually transposes an aquatic event into a terrestrial ground, by eliciting a collision between two familiar spaces and temporalities. In fact, in the dazzled merging of the two spaces, the motorboat comes to be replaced by a car, the surfer still keeps on his shoes, and a guy in the background nonetheless tries to bike the flooded path. Besides idiocy and humour, the epiphany of living the urban as a marine performance disrupts the solid imagery of the terrestrial city by performing the unique and dirty hybridity of the water-land system. To reveal how material, imaginative, and discursive practices are held together with water (Anand 2017), such hydro-idiocy looks to benefit, in particular, of the continuous breakdown of infrastructures. In the area of Mondello, every torrential rain causes a flooding because, as many city dwellers and organisations complain, the collector created in 1891 to manage the natural outflow of rainwater into the sea is, let's say, a bit outdated to address the aquatic challenges of the XXI century.

The immersive experience of both hydro-city and hydro-idiocy comes back in the episode of the fisherman-citizen in September 2018. Even if farcical and pointless, this act returns to question the traditional boundaries between the urban and the liquid sphere, by presenting an urban landscape soaked in water that 'logically' requires an aquatic mood. Even here, it nonetheless reveals the malfunction and shortcomings of water containment. The experience of overflow does not spare anyone, from the wealthy citizen to the disadvantaged. In the final case, we find innocent children swimming and splashing in the waters of a historic fountain. A deplorable gesture, certainly. As it can be seen from local journals' articles and from comments on Twitter and Facebook, the 'model citizen' condemned the exchange of identity of the fountain made by kids with a swimming pool as an act of *usurpation*

of a public good. Yet this playful gesture sadly reminds us of the scarcity of recreational facilities in the historic centre that cannot accommodate and satisfy the children's aquatic desires.

Such events are thus also interesting because they question the meaning of the public space by perturbing its imagery with private experiences of *unusual* appropriations, rather than usurpation, of ordinary places. Digging deeper, an idiotic gesture sheds light on the original meaning of the Greek word 'idiot', which actually alludes to the personal, private and outsider experience of the cityness. In this sense, hydro-idiocy should be also theorised as the intrusion of a private experience, aquatic and idiotic, into a public setting. Finally, from a more phenomenological perspective, the three idiotic examples suggest that the relationship with water is not felt as immediate and pure but always mediated through hybrid devices. We find both urban things such as cars, street signals, fountains and buildings along with surfboards, masks, swimming suits and fishing rods. Therefore, the estrangement might be due by the commingling of sea and urban elements and by the coalescence of familiar objects and habits in an unstable setting. However, when the water *steals* the urban scene, who and what are really out of place? The surfer or the driver? The fisherman or the biker? The swimmer or the civic dweller? Through humour and un/usual correlations, we actually discover the urban and water as more entangled than we think, 'giving rise to a nebulous and fluid environment' (Lahiri-Dut, 2014: 507).

Some very last ruminations on the material and moral overflow of Palermo

The hydro-idiotic perspective tells us that the urban adaptation to the water ontology is not only possible 'once a "switch" is made' (Vannini and Taggart, 2014: 97) in the urban normative behaviour, but is perhaps also needed in the new context of climate change that is decentering the human from his land-centric experience. The urban idiot then becomes also a warning, the redolent figure of an imminent change. Irrupting through and against the urban solidity during the overflow, the recalcitrant 'hydro-idiocy' opens up a singular and outlandish hybrid space where the entrenched dichotomy between the liquid and the solid, the aqueous and the terrestrial, the human and the non-human, the facetious and the serious, can be alternately addressed. From a geographical perspective, this hybridity shows, as Lahiri-Dut puts it, 'environments that can morph from one into another, and can fuse into each other' (2014: 512). But it is the force of an extra-ordinary behaviour, the idiocy and paradoxical combination envisioned by its citizens, that helps to visualise, for better or for worse, the aquatic urbanity that moulds and affects the city both materially and psychologically.

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