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Field-notes from Clusone: The Pandemic and the Landscape

Marco dell'Oca

The countryside just outside urban centers in Northern Italy is scattered with small chapels. Usually they are decorated with rough frescoes, crosses, or statues of religious figures. Occasionally, peeking inside them, one can see grates full of bones on the sides of the altar, or a dancing skeleton decorating a wall. These particular chapels are called either “ossari” (“ossuaries”) or “lazzaretti.” They were usually built at the end of plagues, atop the improvised buildings that hosted the ill and moribund, outside of the gates of villages, and now hold the bones of people that died there. The question I am outlining through these field notes came to me while traveling across the Italian Alps in the summer of 2020. Before COVID, I had never thought of interrogating these chapels as meaningful reminders of experience: they were “just” elements in the landscape — but now they seem to activate points of connection between the pandemic in Italy and its territory. How did the particular relation between life, illness, and death marking the COVID pandemic inscribe itself in the landscape?

Clusone is a small town in Northeastern Italy of around seven thousand people. It is located on the Orobic Alps, just 30 minutes north of Bergamo, a large city in Northern Italy. Despite being so close to an important urban center, Clusone is not a place one just passes by: it is removed from major distribution and traffic routes, and tourists are often amazed by the fact that an area of such natural beauty is not more frequently visited. Clusone lies on a plateau at the foot of high Alps, right in the middle of fast-climbing Val Seriana, connected to a single South West-North East road: it is a liminal space, not quite as isolated as villages located “più su” (“higher up”), deeper into the Alps, yet not really contiguous to the more urbanized lowland areas around Bergamo, which are seamlessly connected to the regional hub of Milan and from there to the rest of Europe. The area is historically conservative, but it usually elects as mayors independent local candidates, disconnected from national party politics. The local paper covers events such as the birthdays of very senior residents, or the occasional funny story of a city visitor that blindly followed his GPS and ended up driving into a ditch. Its territory is welcoming yet somehow removed: its very name is rooted in Latin *clausus*, “closed off area.” The village itself though does not give off a sense of isolation; rather, it seems full of strong relations internal to the place, a tight-knit community of people whose families have inhabited the same territory together for generations: people wave at each other and chat on the stairs that connect different levels of the town; local small businesses are active and full of customers. In late July 2020, as I arrived and got out of the car, a small group of teenagers looked at me with the curious gaze of someone suddenly aware of the presence of a stranger. They were sitting in a semi-circle on the ground of a grassy parking lot, but the distance between them was exaggerated, artificial: it spoke of a new proxemics they were learning to navigate and I was learning to read, informed by the new injunction to “mantenere la distanza di 2 metri” (“keep 6 feet away from others”). I looked back, and one of them smiled: I felt that I did fit, but I was surely not a local.

That summer marked the first loosening of the tight restrictions the Italian government put in order to control the spread of COVID-19. Hanging from many of the houses along the road from Bergamo to Clusone were bed covers, towels, or pieces of white cloth with handwritten messages: “Ce la faremo,” or “Andrà tutto bene” (“We are going to make it,” “Everything is going to be fine”). Occasionally, the gate of a hospital or retirement home displayed a more elaborate banner, professionally printed with images of healthcare workers, saying things such as “Siamo orgogliosi di voi,” “Siete i nostri eroi” (“We are proud of you,” “You are our heroes”). Everyone visiting Italy over the past 2 years has learned this refrain written on different surfaces (walls, sheets, streets pavements, windows, placards), morphing the landscape of Italian cities into a palimpsest of narratives about the pandemic. This is the area from which some of the first images of the reality of COVID-19 originated: dozens of military trucks tasked with transporting the coffins of those who lost their lives to other nearby provinces and regions, relieving the overburdened hospitals and cemeteries. Just in March 2020, more people lost their life in Clusone than they do, on average, in a year: people there do not talk with ease about those days; to describe them, they use qualifiers such as “devastating,” “incredible,” “terrifying.” They remember the sound of ambulance sirens, and the constant tone of “agonia,” the death knell of church bells. It is impossible not to feel the link between those images and words, and these banners: they are at once a reminder, and an encouragement.

I did not just happen to pass through Clusone. I stopped there for a specific reason: it is home to one of the oldest surviving “Triumph of Death” frescoes in Italy, which dates back to 1485. In those years, in addition to the ever-recurring bubonic plague that claimed more than three quarters of the population of the Italian peninsula, there was war between Venice and Milan: turbulent times in local history. The fresco is at the center of the older part of town, at the very top of the plateau, in front of the main church. A representation of Death is at the very middle: a skeletal figure wearing a crown and a robe, standing atop a sarcophagus filled with popes and emperors — the emblems of ultimate power in late medieval society. Surrounding it, other skeletal figures shoot arrows at the multitudes gathered around. Noblemen and high-ranking religious figures kneel and offer riches, but Death refuses all, and waves in a chart above her head: “I have arrived to take whomever I want, and no man is so powerful to escape me.” Below, a *danse macabre*: all the living alike hold hands with smiling skeletons and dance together.

The fresco is atop a long staircase that leads to a square. As I climbed the last steps, I found myself in the middle of a scene I did not expect to see: lined up just below the figures from the *danse macabre*, seeking shade from the summer sun, all keeping distance and wearing face masks, the locals were attending a funeral. A few seconds after I entered the square, still trying to figure out what was happening, a man in a face mask approached me and unceremoniously urged me to a marked spot below the fresco, facing the church, well-distanced from the next one. Funeral services were forbidden in the Spring, when the rate of spread was much higher: coffins were cremated, and ashes informally delivered to the families. “That was not enough for our last goodbyes,” a man said to me at the end of the service, “so we have decided to have one mass a day dedicated to each person that died. They are like funerals for us, even if there is no coffin, no incense.” I shared with him my sense that there was a correspondence between the fresco and the celebration I have just witnessed. I can tell that he has thought of that before: “Yes! But at the

end of the day that is what is supposed to be, isn't it?... Think about it: I think that the people that made this fresco, really made it for us. What I mean is, I think they wanted people in the future to feel close to the dead, remember them, and to know that their ancestors suffered in this very place, and still survived and thrived." For the people in Clusone, he seemed to suggest, there is no greater "andrà tutto bene" than the Triumph of Death.

The man was keen on my interest, and directed me towards a less-known landmark — the tiny church "dei Morti Nuovi" ("of the New Dead"). It was built in the late 18th Century, to remember the dead of the 1630 plague, replacing an older chapel sitting atop their original burial ground: the path of the road had recently changed and people back then wanted to keep the opportunity to pay tribute to the dead every time they passed by it. More skeletal figures decorate it: one wears a papal tiara, while another holds a hourglass. As I walked around it, I noticed a recent addition. A garden patch, with brand new benches and a shiny marble plaque. It dedicates the space to the dead of the COVID pandemic: they are not buried here, but the new dead have already left a mark on the territory for future generations.