

Alessandro Bava

Voices (Towards Other Institutions) #10



Villa Jovis, Capri, © 2020 Google

La scuola di Capri

During these months of isolation I spent large portions of my day looking at the iconic silhouette of Capri which I can see from my studio in Naples, appearing as a sort of mirage during the long, difficult days of lockdown. The island of Capri is a calcareous stone rock off the coast of Italy, just in front of the Vesuvius, the volcano which dominates the surrounding region.

If in recent times it is known as a luxury destination for Russian and American oligarchs and the local elites, previous iterations of its long history offer precious and unlikely paradigms to think about contemporary institutions.

Even as a local it is hard to contextualise this island (which has always been popular with foreigners) in decolonised terms: as far back as we can see, this island has been a colony, much like the rest of the Italian south. In Imperial Rome, Capri was a summer residence of emperor Augustus who transformed it into a magnificent island-wide otium villa, in which he apparently exhibited findings of the archaeological traces of paleolithic presence. Emperor Tiberius built 12 villas where he spent his time around natural grottos where the orgiastic rituals which he was fond of took place, significantly contributing to define the 'spirit of

the place'. It can be speculated that these precedents, coupled with the generous climatic conditions, created an ambiance which centuries later continued to attract the international pleasure-seeking elites looking for a break from the social norms of their home countries; especially for queers, non-aligned and intellectual workers (Walter Benjamin found it ideal for night shift writing). They relocated to Capri contributing to the island's identity as a sort of laboratory of emergent *lebensformen*.

Given this pedigree it is perhaps not surprising to find other kinds of revolutionaries who were radically questioning the status quo of their homelands on the island: in the beginning of the 20th century Capri was the stage for an experimental cultural institution which would have tremendous impact on world events and which constitutes one of the paradigms useful to reflect on contemporary institutions.mentioned earlier.

The Social Democratic School of Propaganda and Agitation for Workers was a brief but significant educational experiment established by a group of Russian exiles in Capri in 1909. Between the months of August and December prominent intellectuals (most notably Maxim Gorkij, Alexander Bogdanov and Anatoly Lunacharsky), set out to work out an institutional model which not only questioned the bourgeois structure and practice of academia of their tsarist homeland, they also put into question the very knowledge they built the school around.

The main aim of the school was to teach young workers tools to 'propagate' the ideas of socialism in their homeland. A structured education not just on current affairs but geared towards a complete recasting of existing knowledge reformulated from the point of view of the working class.

The courses taught included: political economy, history and theory of the union movement, history of the International and of the German Social Democracy, history of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, Russian history, history of Russian literature, Church and State in Russia, the agrarian question,

finance and unions.

The political context which the school confronted was the aftermath of the failed revolution of 1905, which registered a deep crisis in the Russian Empire and made evident its incapacity to respond to the needs of the emergent working class who was beginning to determine itself as a political actor on the tail of the democratic revolutions in Europe and the US, thanks to the socialist ideology which had been spreading in Europe and was threatening the constituted powers.

In Russia the aftermath of the 1905 revolution left the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party divided in two factions that diverged on which direction to take to prepare a new revolution. The leaders of these two factions, Bogdanov and Lenin, were both forced to escape Russia and used the tools of cultural institutions (i.e. magazines and schools) to assemble consensus on their respective positions. The school of Capri emerged from this context as a political workshop meant to corroborate Bogdanov's faction, which at that point had been expelled from the party troika, attempting to refine its ideological and theoretical positions, in spite of Lenin's attempts to shut it down.

The main theoretical point which was contested to the group of intellectuals behind the Capri school was the intention to approach political theory in the guise of a religious paradigm, echoing the religion of reason of the French Revolution, with the idea that while religious knowledge interprets the world this new socialist religion would aim to transform it. The school of Capri was animated by an ethic and aesthetic proposition, "the hope in the victory of Good and Beauty", fulfilled by Socialism.

This approach was called the 'construction of God' and despite its antagonistic position within an already antagonistic and 'illegal' political body, it would ultimately be far reaching, not only in post-revolutionary Russia, but way beyond its intended initial scope. It arguably influenced how to this day we intend the public and democratic role of culture.

What I find most interesting about this exemplary cultural institution, outside of any improbable nostalgia, is how, as a laboratory for ideas, its politics were completely manifest.

Contemporary cultural institutions are hardly in the position to make their political agendas clear, and as such they are not manifest, kept instead in the shadows by their public or private mandates. This “softly” limits their scope as laboratories of political, ethical and aesthetic imagination. Some areas of cultural production (art and architecture, and their attending Biennales particularly) generally have been sanitised from any overt political position: in fact often the position of its individual actors are muddled in an illegible cacophony. Since the supposed end of history brought about by neoliberalism, we assisted the slow death of culture and its resurrection as entertainment. A process which now, in a time of crisis in which the creative capacity of interpretation and sense-making of culture are urgently necessary, perhaps we lack appropriate spaces for. In contemporary institutions politics are at best non manifest, at worst covertly protective of the status quo, or completely devoid of any political awareness. Cultural institutions should be about social ‘innovation’, political ‘imagination’, ethical ‘experimentation’ and aesthetic ‘communication’.

We can (and should) decolonise institutions, we can queer them, and we can diversify them, but until cultural institutions are able to manifest their political agendas beyond mildly and vaguely progressive statements clouded by identity politics, these institutions are bound to obsolescence. Meanwhile culture is taking place on the streets defiantly seeking to redefine our ideals, toppling false idols and beheading statues.

Alessandro Bava is an architect based in Naples, Italy. After graduating at the Architectural Association in London with Pier Vittorio Aureli and working for Vito Acconci in New York, he practiced as an artist with the collective åyr he co-founded in 2014, making installations and exhibitions in various institutions in Europe and the US, reflecting on the radical changes brought about by the ‘sharing economy’ to the domestic space. After

dissolving the collective in 2018 he returned to practicing and researching architecture with a focus on installations, exhibition design and curation, interiors and urban design, while publishing his research in international magazines such as e-flux and Mousse. He has been teaching at the Bartlett School of Architecture since 2019. Bava is also the founder of the ecology magazine ECOCORE.