Border space in motion

Artistic positions and relational appropriations of space

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The border area this article focuses on is located in Friuli, a region in the very northeast of Italy, bordering on Austria in the north and Slovenia in the northeast. Friuli was one of the venues of major European conflicts in the 20th century. The Valli del Natisone, the valleys of the river Natisone bordering Slovenia, were particularly affected by these conflicts: in the First World War the fronts ran on the mountains, there the battles were fought. In autumn 1943, the area became part of the German Occupational Zone of the Adriatic Littoral, where Italian and Slovenian partisans and German occupiers faced each other. After the Second World War, the region played a central role as part of one of the front states in the Cold War, where ideological and geostrategic conflicts took place and military bases were established. Thus, this border area was strongly influenced by emigration, which is still anchored in the collective memory today. These conflicts have not only left traces of a material nature in the region and its landscape. They can also be related to in the narrations and everyday and artistic actions of different actors in the valleys, which I refer to in an exemplary manner in this article.

The focus is not on the experience of migration as a field of action, but rather in dealing with its consequences, such as depopulation, and their meanings for people and their living environment. The landscape in the valleys not only tells the story of conflicts, but also of the absence of people. Hence in the valleys of the Natisone it can be vividly understood «how global transformation processes [such as migration] are reflected in a local field of action» (Scholz-Irrlitz 2008, 8) and renegotiated in dynamic movements. While at the beginning of the 1950s about 18,000 people still lived in the villages, their number has fallen to about 6,000 today. Many vacant houses in the border area have filled up in recent years. Apart from remigrants and new immigrants from the surrounding regions, actors from the culture and art scene discovered the valleys for their projects. They bring new movements into the area and deal with conflicts and consequences such as migratory movements. In these processes, various approaches and positions can be identified, which develop different dynamics and can sometimes be traced back to the generational storages of the actors. The majority of them aim to preserve and pass on local culinary or agricultural traditions. Often, these actors remain in traditional narratives and open up little to new influences and developments. Coming from the villages and from
outside, others chance to question, scrutinise and possibly even transgress existing perspectives and cultural borders and their validity through their works.

One of these projects is the international cultural and art festival *Stazione Topolò*. It bears the name of the small village of Topolò, which belongs to the municipality of Grimacco, and has been held since 1994 each summer. Some of the performing artists stay in the village throughout the entire period, exploring the territory and related stories throughout their residence. This contribution deals with this form of mobility of artists, cultural workers and people interested in creative processes, which brings not only different actors but also the visitors of the festival to the remote villages. Furthermore, I focus on specific movements on site and on the (every-day) practices that have found their way into the villages and valleys with the festival and its participants.

My ethnographic work is based on informal conversations and interviews with residents and cultural workers from the valleys and the surrounding area, as well as on participant observation and field notes before and during the festival. For this contribution, I orient myself to the narratives of interlocutors, in particular one of the co-founders and curators of the festival *Stazione Topolò*. By means of this material, I approach the border demarcations and transgressions and thus the cultural and transnational movements and encounters taking place. How are the villages and the landscape perceived by the cultural workers and artists, and how do they use and interact with these spaces? And what kind of transgressions do these artistic approaches enable?

Space and landscape are subject to a constant process. Tim Ingold recommends taking a »dwelling perspective« when dealing with landscapes, hence paying increased attention to the local practices of actors and their impacts and effects on the spaces. He understands landscape as a permanent store of past material, but also of cultural developments that have left their marks. He emphasizes the relational context evoked by dealing with the landscape, which is characterised by the experiences of people and inhabitants and thus culturally shaped. Besides the built environment, the visible, also the invisible, the imagined shapes our utilisation and experience of space. It is an important part to read the material and cultural traces: »The landscape tells - or rather is - a story« (Ingold 1993, 152). And border landscapes contain history in a condensed form.

The initiators of the festival have made the examination of the landscape through direct access to it and its history a starting point. By physically experiencing and walking through a landscape in the form of a walk or a hike, it is possible to develop an understanding of the landscape and the stories that are inscribed in it, and to establish a relation to it. »Through walking, in short, landscapes are woven into life, and lives are woven into the landscape, in a process that is continuous and never-ending.« (Tilley, cited in Ingold 2004, 333). This close connection and interaction between man and landscape, cultural practices and forms is one of the starting points of the festival and everyday life on site.

Movement and mobility are already in the name of the festival: the *Stazione* primarily refers to the station, which is missing in the village. A station is a place where routes and paths cross, a place of arrival and departure, a place of transit. The name thus refers to the difficult peripheral location of the village. By creating references to urban space, the curators position the festival in an imaginary centre, overcome the peripheral location and place Topolò in the
focus of the action. With reference to urban locations and institutions, they transfer these to the countryside. However, city and country are not thought of as opposites. On the contrary, the *Stazione* overcomes these opposites and thus creates continuity and relation between these spaces.

Right from the start, the festival’s programme was strongly oriented towards the appropriation of the landscape. The starting point for the festival was a reference to the village, its history and its eventful past. Donatella Rutar, one of the curators, says it is the perspective that is important in these discussions, with which one looks at the spaces and the stories inscribed in them: the focus is not on the border, which was once heavily armed and impenetrable, but on the idea of being in a centre in which new perspectives for the future (on site) are developed. The *Stazione Topolò* should not merely be understood as an exhibition venue, but rather as a process that picks up on material traces (for example through the extension and conversion of former residential and business premises), as well as on traces of an ideal, cultural and relational nature. These are being regrouped, reformed and newly articulated (see Braun 2006, 24). Thus, established narratives can be broken up and filled with new content.

One can observe that in this case, art is not exclusively seen or implemented as the engine for renewing the rural image or the infrastructure. It is not just about upgrading the area and attracting visitors. The organisers are concerned about a content-related and artistic confrontation with and exploration of past and present living environments and everyday lives in peripheral zones, and take a close look at landscapes that can be described as forgotten from various perspectives. Through the relational practices of appropriation and use of space presented in the article, such projects can contribute to highlighting complex dynamics and continuities of conflicts by building on old debates and addressing new challenges and opportunities for negotiations that our contemporary society should face.

**References**


Extended Abstract of:


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