

Voyaging in Piranesi's Space:

A contemporary re-reading of the beginnings of modernity

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Abstract

The graphic work of Giovanni Battista Piranesi has attracted the attention of different scholars in different times of crisis and disciplinary redefinition in architecture. Experimenting on paper, Piranesi explored the limits of the classical language of architecture, taking it to its extremes with the production of paroxysmic and impossible spaces. Piranesi's images represent, and in representing they construct, a new notion of space – open, infinite, changing, smooth, dynamic –, which still engages the efforts of contemporary architectural and spatial practices.

This paper re-reads the space of Piranesi's *Carceri*, his views of Rome and Roman antiquities in terms of movement and voyage, through an analysis of their 'inhabitants'. Piranesi's views and inventions are densely and variedly inhabited by different characters, whose presence, attributes, behaviours and movements are fundamental spatial and temporal indicators. The analysis of these figures allows to expose the complexities of different spatial conceptions in Piranesi's challenges to the architectural discipline and to the organization of the space of the city.

Piranesi's Rome, its architectures and its surroundings – a multiple city made of past and present – never exist as a resolved, flat, static plane, but always *become*: dynamic, layered, fragmented, they work on a surface that is an ambiguous space of tension, never possibly resolved by a dividing 'Nollian' line. It is for its treatment – or making – of space that Piranesi's work remains

significantly placed in architecture, dangerously and provocatively suspended between the classical language and its rupture, between an enclosed urban space and the proliferation of the formless – not only on an outside defined and excluded by walls, but also within and inside and underneath the actual and visible structured order of the city. Today it is possible to reengage the modernity of Piranesi's work, for its reading and reactivation of urban space in a critical dimension. Over two and a half centuries ago Piranesi's theoretical work was already exploring the spatial and temporal complexity of the 'difficult complications, alternations, and superpositions' (Deleuze and Guattari) of the different forces at work in the space of the city.

'The smoothing voyage' explores the notion of movement in Piranesi's *Carceri*, in which space becomes non-measurable but experienced, not governed by composition but susceptible to many re-compositions. 'Incorporation' argues that Piranesi operates through an *incorporation into* architecture's classical language, that is, through a destabilizing work on architectural space carried on from within the rules and the 'already formed' products of the classical language. 'Invisibility' analyzes the role of the feminine presence in Piranesi's Roman views and antiquities, as temporary irruption from a practical reality of pre-industrial production, exterior to architecture. 'Static time' reads the passive role of architecture when it limits itself to freezing and suspending time, inserting it in the permanent presence of a constructed official history. 'Materiality' opposes to this the dynamic time of the 'architecture of the ruin' as architecture of becoming, an architecture that operates beyond form, working on the properties, potentials and failures of its materials.