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# Europe: *décadence et élan*. Images of the eternal return of *Abendland*.

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## Abstract.

In one occasion, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck asserted that if Europe applied for membership in the European Union, its application would be dismissed. Such are the deficiencies that it maintains and further demands. Recognizing in this idea a certain influence of Toynbee, the conditional proposed by Beck expresses the contradictory loop of optimism and pessimism, negativity and positivity; a permanent crisis in which this space is subsumed. Even if the image of the West as a mythical space of plenitude has been recurrent in diverse thoughts and philosophies throughout history, it was Hegel who tried to articulate the path that the spirit follows; the curve of shadow that draws the course of the sun from East to West, as longing for the wandering in European land of that who lives coming to an end. Decadence appears as wandering, as a detachment, a cultural process that runs in the form of its own eviction, its impropriety: Europe is the *Abendland*, where everything ends only to start again.

This paper aims at exploring the spatiotemporal construction of Europe through its cyclical, (non-linear and non-symmetrical) self-conscience within a perpetual state of crisis; always in counterposition with the Other (or its Others), as the *Abendland*, following Marramao and Merleau-Ponty, only exists because of the projection of its gaze towards the East. Following a series of images, from the decadent Venetian paintings of the Tiepolos to the artificial suns of Laurent Grasso and other contemporary artists, we seek to unveil the intertwined forces of *décadence* and *élan* –which could be translated as “impulse”, “momentum” or “vigorous spirit” – that configure the becoming of Europe. These images, reflecting the moment of crisis, are especially relevant for the spatialization of a Europe immersed in negativity, as they reverse the rhythms of a linear conception of progress. Instead, they show a repeating cycle that keeps the unfinished European project in permanent becoming.

Key words: West, decline, archipelago, European Union, geo-politics.

## Introduction.

“Europe is a *process*, always *in fieri*, something that is becoming truth indefinitely, while facing a double risk: either to consolidate, still, as a center of irradiation or, conversely, to alienate itself, being attracted to a more powerful orbit. It is itself only when it is expelled out of itself. Hence the constant need for *reflection*. Logically, its fate may be expressed by an *infinite judgment* (‘Europe is not-Asia’), so it suits the ambiguity of the term *Occidens* (‘the one who/ what dies’ – ‘the one who/ what gives death’).” (Duque 2003, 439)

With these words, the Spanish philosopher Félix Duque states the first of his seven theses on the fate of Europe.<sup>1</sup> As a becoming reality -always under construction, never completed-, its processual nature corresponds to a counterposition of extremes. This permanent movement of consolidation / estrangement may serve as a starting point for our text departing from the negative, as it reflects the enduring inadequacy between the *concept-Europe* and the *thing-Europe*, that is, its geographical space. This duality is particularly relevant when the Old Continent is facing one of the most terrible challenges of its history: the redefinition of the European identity through the permeability of its borders (who has the right to Europe?) and its relation to the unknown others. The situation seems to reinforce the assertion of the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, who claimed that Europe would be rejected by the EU if it applied for membership in it (2003). This idea of a contradictory Europe has been explored by many authors and thinkers from several perspectives.

However, to set a modern starting point around which the text can be articulated, it was Hegel who tried to describe the path that the spirit follows; the curve of shadow that draws the course of the sun from East to West. Decadence appears as wandering, as a detachment, a cultural process that runs in the form of its own eviction, its impropriety: Europe is the *Abendland*,<sup>2</sup> where everything ends only to start again. The image is suggestive enough to start unveiling new reflections around a space immersed in a perpetual cycle of rising and falling, and which cannot exist outside this succession. Emerging from this turmoil, the paper aims at exploring the spatiotemporal construction of Europe through its cyclical, (non-linear and non-symmetrical) self-conscience within a perpetual state of crisis; always in counterposition with the Other (or its Others), as the *Abendland*. We seek to unveil the intertwined forces of *décadence* and *élan* that configure the becoming of Europe. These images, reflecting the moment of crisis, are especially relevant for the spatialization of a Europe immersed in negativity, as they reverse the rhythms of a linear conception of progress. Instead, they show a repeating cycle that keeps the European project permanently moving. Thus, we can see that in some important moments of the European space-time, there are fundamental keys that emerge as *other-spaces*- using Foucauldian terminology- that should be re-explored from modern, coexistent, differentiable perspectives. Only if inserted in a heterotopic world, our initial assumptions become susceptible of multiple, complex,

contemporary statements, in order to think of Europe as the place of encounters and alternatives, as a *com-munitas*,<sup>3</sup> which involves a laborious dedication to the Other and the others and our disposition to the nature of (donating) things. Manuel Cruz defined those who share a common identity-dissimilarity as a sort of *diachronic human communities*, whose subjects are united through history (2011, 9).

Before we continue, it must be pointed out that the conjecture about decline is not addressed here with the intention of repeating something that both detractors and defenders vehemently deal with, evidencing that the problem is not the issue but the drawling ditty that evacuates energy in forms and not in contents. In fact, we pretend to extract some fruitful ideas –rather than certainties- that could serve as a starting point for a cartography of the limits of Europe. This is the reason why the perspective of the negative pervades our interpretive methodological approach, as the logic of action is not juxtaposition - contrasting the Being and its expressions-, but deceptively regarding the edges of a particular reality -its limits- which configure its reverse at the same time. Following a series of artistic interventions and images related in some way to these limits –and always using text as a main support-, we seek to unveil the intertwined forces of *décadence* and *élan* –which could be translated as “impulse”, “momentum” or “vigorous spirit”<sup>4</sup> – that configure the becoming of Europe.<sup>5</sup> These images, reflecting the moment of crisis, are especially relevant for the spatialization of a Europe immersed in negativity, as they reverse the rhythms of a linear conception of progress. Instead, they show a repeating cycle that keeps the unfinished European project in permanent becoming.

## The path of the Sun.

To bring forward once again the image of the setting sun means to remember the lineage of thought that goes back to the Ancient Greece with the “traumatic discovery” of the Other –and therefore, of the plural, or the “many”- in Asia (Carrera 2015, 131). Since that moment, not only Western philosophy emerged, as Carrera points out, but also the newborn Europe would continue to expand its horizons, positioning itself towards other territories through an unequal, asymmetric perspective,<sup>6</sup> but constructing an image of itself that would be forever tied to the radically different. The Italian philosopher Giacomo Marramao, following Merleau-Ponty (1964), says:

“What is, then, the European difference? Not just on the boundary between ourselves and others, which is tracked in any collective logic of identity: from the tribe to state, from the clan to the nation. (...) It is located rather in the fact that, while all other civilizations are characterized self-centrally, identifying as ‘the center of the universe’ (...) Europe, however, is constituted by ‘a polarity internal between West and East’. The antithesis between East and West is therefore a mythical-symbolic exclusive property of the West, a typical Western dualism unverifiable in other cultures.” (Marramao 2006, 63)

And it is precisely because of this indelible difference that the sensation of progress starts to emerge. In many ways, the West has been regarded as the last land on Earth –*finis terrae*-, beyond which the darkness of the unknown, but also the hope of a better and more perfect life resides. Turning around the point where Atlas embraces the world,<sup>7</sup> the cycle –*anakuklosis*, which in Greek means “revolution” (Herman 1997, 15)- continues day after day. In this regard, the path of the sun allows at the same time a spatial and temporal differentiation. If the East is the extreme which represents light, life, vitality, strength and illumination, the West is that of death and decline, but also that of plenitude and completeness, unveiling the promise of a new rise and a new cycle. Therefore, the symbolic meaning of both extremes led to a spatialization of the concept that societies had of themselves. In fact, many cultures have had their particular “Wests”, not only understood as the place where the sun hides and where the day finishes, leading to a new day, but as the mythical threshold to an-other unknown world. Babylonians, Greeks, Egyptians and Romans, among others, recognized the West as a symbolic construction related to these concepts of (in)finitude and fullness. (Jackson 2007, 78) However, Christian tradition –and more specifically, the Augustinians-, driven by the eschatological narrative of salvation, regarded the space from East to West as coincident with the direction of history, from Babylon to Rome. (Jackson 2007, 80) In consequence, the spatiotemporal cycle was interrupted and deployed as a sequential, finite line –from Alpha to Omega. (Herman 1997, 18)

Nevertheless, the modern understanding of the West as a community –in the sense of sharing a common (poisoned) gift-, and not as a mythical horizon, dates back to the eighteenth and nineteenth century, when the conscience of a European civilization arose mostly among French and German thinkers – like Novalis or Schlegel, but also Rousseau or Turgot<sup>8</sup> before them- who were particularly influenced by the ideals of the French Revolution and Romanticism (Ginzo 2005, 31). Despite their contributions on the issue, Hegel was the one who, having filtered the classic and Judeo-Christian tradition through a Germanic perspective and aiming at giving a response to the debate of a singular or multiple civilizations (Jackson 2007, 88) recovers the term *Abendland* (in opposition to *Morgenland*)<sup>9</sup> as the territory where world history reaches its end, its final plenitude; that is, Europe. The notion of progress as a motor of civilization was therefore linked to history and geography from a Western-centric tradition, as well as its dark reverse, decline. Both, which can be equally terrible when radically understood, are nonetheless unavoidable in order to grasp the origins of the idea of Europe. This is why the image of the sun has been so recurring in Western thought, since it functions as an absolute point of reference to define its space in time, always in relation to Other(s). The sun never

shines at the same time in the same way in Europe than in the rest of the world, and vice versa; a fact that is clearly pointed out during the dialogue between Peter Sloterdijk and Alain Finkielkraut: “geopolitics of the sun have become simple and plain geopolitics.” (2008, 149)

To contemplate the sun requires a specific gesture; semi-closed eyes, unavoidable frown, pain and effort at the same time. The blinding light of noon makes it impossible to look directly at it, whereas visibility progressively increases as the sun goes down, or during the first hours of the morning. That is the moment when things, as well as the star, can be seen calmly, without being annoyed by excessive brightness. At dusk, the shadows unveil the forms, their limits and contours, while the eyes of the viewer are not altered by phosphenes or other optical illusions. Sunset is the moment of reflection and pause, but also of understanding a present that has just escaped –like the owl of Minerva, flying “only with the onset of dusk.” (Hegel 1991, 23)- This Hegelian thought finds its reply in his contemporary Caspar David Friedrich’s series of paintings of couples contemplating the sunset or the moonrise (the famous *Moonwatchers*).<sup>10</sup> Friedrich started painting these similar scenes between 1816 and 1820, and he returned to the same motif during the decade of 1830, when his health was progressively deteriorating.<sup>11</sup> Either couples of men, women, or both, stand quietly against bright –though melancholic- landscapes, looking directly to the light source. But behind the stillness of the scene and the apparent calm of these moments of contemplation, a profound rupture is represented: that between nature and human conscience or even that between the joy of the sensual realm and the spiritual/intellectual introjection of a human being expelled from the world. Besides, no attempt of conciliation exists in the paintings of Friedrich, since all fissures remain open. The serenity and the peaceful moment of contemplation experienced by the depicted couples, a sensation of *Unruhe* –again, a Hegelian feeling, meaning “restlessness”<sup>12</sup>- invades the scene, as an invisible agitation that hits the observer - behind but also with the pair- against the fading sky. This *Unruhe* manifests as a moving, internal force which precedes an action that will never take place in the picture. How many possible worlds are hidden behind this feeling of disquiet, restlessness, even anxiety? And what if this force remains latent and does not succeed to become action? In this regard, Friedrich’s work emanates from a negative, destructive aesthetic experience, sharing a common root with the Burckian sublime (Burke 1757). Both predicted somehow the feeling of disenchantment<sup>13</sup> that would inspire the beginning of the avant-garde movements –at least according to some critics (Poggioli 1968)-, but also the contemporary idea of Europe, which clearly contains, still nowadays, an important dose of restlessness and disquiet –specially against the Other or the unknown, like the sun than can be hardly looked at and impossible to grasp.

Friedrich itself, as well as Turner, was interested in that gloomy, steamy light that announced the fall of the sun, which could almost be regarded in a prophetic manner. With the advent of electricity, and thus of artificial light, the image of the sun lost its symbolic strength; it was desecrated in a way, as it was no longer the absolute source of light that ruled the rhythms of the world. The highly rationalized modes of production led to the disappearance of the division between day and night –one of the most urgent symptoms of globalization-. Involute interiors, such as the factory, the bourgeois home, or the commercial passage configure the European space of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; spaces where isolation from the outside provide a specific atmosphere of protection and enclosure –from *communitas* to *immunitas*-.<sup>14</sup> But despite being substituted by the myriad of electric lamps that illuminate the metropolis, the sun is already there, although it turns black<sup>15</sup> in the paintings of Odilon Redon and Marc Chagall –both before and after the World Wars-. It no longer illuminates, but it rather confirms the association of the forces of decay (*fin-de-siècle*, in the case of Redon) with the image of a “cosmological catastrophe” (Larson 2004, 132).

If Europe had been subsumed in one of the deepest crisis of its history, broken, contemplating the black sun of despair for decades, brighter suns appear in other parts of the world; for instance, in the East, where the sun rises, particularly in the People’s Republic of China. The very name of China has also strong geopolitical connotations, as it means “the Central Kingdom”; the center of a universe that, besides, contemplates the rising sun before any other land in the world. The instauration of the communist regime opened up a whole new rhetoric of progress and development; even the Chairman Mao was called the Great Helmsman, the one who directed the destiny of the nation towards the future. As a consequence, the image of the sun as a symbol of strength and progress is very present in contemporary Chinese culture<sup>16</sup>; and even one of the projects considered for the leader’s mausoleum had the shape of a huge red, setting sun –as if the cycle had been closed-. Paradoxically, today it is almost impossible to contemplate the sun in Beijing, due to the thick cloud of pollution that covers the Chinese capital.

Meanwhile, in the other extreme of the world –of course, if we take as a reference the Eurocentric projection- the United States of America emerged as the powerful extension of the old *Abendland*, as a more advance version of the Europe that could have been and never was. In this regard, the Romanian-American illustrator Saul Steinberg offered a sharp, critical view on the issue from an urban perspective –his drawings were frequently published in the weekly magazine *The New Yorker*-. From the 1960s on, Steinberg started a series of drawings reflecting the world view of Manhattanites, towards the East or the West, always with the sun as a reference. Steinberg’s earths are extremely compressed, as if the eye could see the Eastern and Western coasts of the USA at the same time. Everything in between is deformed, hidden or shown in an arbitrary way: Northern Europe and Africa are almost invisible, while Russia (or Siberia), China, Japan or India appear as a thin strip in the horizon announcing the arrival to the American Pacific coast –in the drawing of the early 70s-. In the end, emulating the old empires where the sun never set,

Steinberg bitterly advances David Harvey's definition of globalization as a "time-space compression" (Harvey 1992). These drawings have been copied and reproduced countless times, and curiously, *The Economist's* front cover of March 21<sup>st</sup> 2009 showed an interpretation of Steinberg's visions –equally caustic- from a Chinese perspective, depicting Europe as an insignificant island where expensive, luxury items (represented by Hermès and Prada) can be bought.

And yet, Europe continues thinking about its position in the world and its relation to the Other and the others. The cycle is in permanent movement, and these contradictions cannot be avoided. Meanwhile, European artists still keep on gazing at the sun; either with terror, like Laurent Grasso and his *Soleil Double* rising above the ruins of the warlike Europe and reflecting, once again, the terrible signs in the sky, or with pessimism, like Damien Hirst and his *Black Sun* made of death flies stuck on the canvas with resin.<sup>17</sup> Other works, such as *My Sunshine* by the Macedonian artist Nikola Uzunovski or the impressive installations of Olafur Eliasson at the Tate Modern and Utrecht (*The Weather Project* and *Double Sunset*) seem to reflect the invalidity of this narrative of the path of the sun that we have been following. In fact, the sun can be already produced, "faked" through human work and reproduced elsewhere. Broken forever the Hegelian path, there are no absolute references anymore to rethink ourselves with respect to the Other.

### (G)lücke and possible worlds.

Concerning the negative and heterodoxies, the Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han has pointed to a certain philosophical legacy as co-responsible of the futility of seeking a place for utopias: joy (understood as good fortune or luck) and lagoon (coming from the Latin word *lacuna*, which means "pool", "gap" or "cavity") share the same origin in German. If *Glück* comes from *Lücke*, this will be the couple of concepts that will be explored through the following paragraphs, as a second dichotomy that underlies in the very essence of Europe. If we have focused in the rocky and coastal horizons of Germany to contemplate otherness from a geopolitical position, its southern counterpart, Italy, and specifically the lagoons of Venice, may serve as an accurate landscape to continue our journey.

If, as Spengler said -and if we could for once reaffirm his words-, every empire has its end, Venice -the expansion and contraction of its influx- has had to be reorganized, or better said, rethought. Such is the "idea of Venice" that a few years ago its philosopher-mayor Massimo Cacciari outlined. However, Lord Byron had already sung its decline in his *Ode on Venice* in 1815, and so did in 1802 William Wordsworth in his poem *On the extinction of the Venetian Republic* and Ruskin in the first chapter of *The Stones of Venice* (1851). Perhaps –transforming the Marxian assertion- it is since then that the fatigue haunting Europe has become chronic. It now seems a long time since the words on the tomb of Sir Christopher Wren in St. Paul were carved: (...) *Lector si monumentum requiris, circumspice!* ("lector, if you seek the monument – look around you.") Actually, Arnold Toynbee (1960) reinvented this epitaph, substituting the original word "reader" with *Europae*, to argue that Europeans cared little about the process of degeneration in which they were immersed, if the West, the whole world was "becoming Europe", from the United Kingdom to the former East.

Observing the map of Venice by Giacompo di Barbari circa 1480, we would realize how the artist draws Venice looking towards the mountains, to Germany, stretching the space that runs from the mouth of the Grand Canal to the Arsenal. Barbari and his team spent more than four years in order to measure the entire city for a representation that would be more accurate than later maps. Tafuri -who devoted a course to this plan in Buenos Aires, 1981- finds a very revealing element in one of those subsequent plans: when Benedetto Bordone drew the city in 1528, he placed Venice in the center of an ellipse which formed the edge of the lagoon, with its axes crossing at St. Mark's Basin in order to depict the city as the center of the world. Tafuri immediately related the date of the map with the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1526), who, in turn, used the image of a city located in the middle a lagoon, Mexico-Tenochtitlan. From the imagination of those who come from the New World, the encounter with the real place of utopia takes place: Venice. *Glückliche*, or fortunate coincidences take place in the *Lücke*, which give Europe and the World its capital in its form of governance. It is in Venice where it was located. The Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas expressed it very clearly in his story of the pool, moving the capital to the New World in New York through a group of Soviet students of architecture swimming in their particular artificial lagoon (a floating, bottomless pool) opposite to the direction that such element, which had become a boat, should take.

Heterodoxy would unveil the repositioning of what things await to become. Such an image could appear with the figures of Giambattista Tiepolo, and one of his sons, Giandomenico. Calasso (2009) said that the father painted *décadence* before it even had a name. The son inherited his father's ability to trace what could not be seen, and both Tiepolos painted images on which to place the negative that alleviates the excess of surrounding positivity. Piranesi, the mad architect, used to wander through Giambattista's Venetian atelier and hence the resemblance between hidden and oppressive vital needs expressed in the latter's *Capricci* and the former's *Grotteschi*.

Giandomenico, for his part, returns to Venice from Madrid and resides in the summer villa at Zianigo, previously purchased by his father as a sign of social status, and scarcely used. However, the son would do the same as Goya did

with his *Quinta*, or Vasari with his house in Arezzo: to shape his own reality. Misinterpreting the lives of these heterodoxes, in particular Goya, the English critic Philip Gilbert Hamerton publishes in 1879 an article that starts as follows:“(...) When an artist decorates his home (...) expresses its deepest and more sincere Self (...) [frescoes] are not hurried compositions intended to pass fleetingly and out of sight of the painter until he forgets about them.” This excerpt, drawn from the work of Rafael Argullol (1994, 37), call the contemporary reader’s attention to precisely indicate that the visible is the sick mind that finds delights in such atrocities, in lack of beauty or in a precarious sense of time: a Baroque that perishes against an emerging classicism, returning to Greco-Roman antiquity to heal those immutable principles upon which to set an idealization and model of beauty.

Only the Germans equate the opposite of light -dusk, darkness- to the depth of Being, not only Heidegger. Sloterdijk recalls that it was Hegel who, like the sky represented in the ceilings of Würzburg (painted by Tiepolo for the archbishop Von Greiffenklau), tried to show the spirit a path that follows the curve of shadow that draws the course of the sun from east to west. The spirit (in this case, how Nietzsche understood it: prudence, astuteness, patience, simulation, the mastery of oneself and all that is mimicry) adverts to enter the western sunset -as Duque saw also in Heidegger (Duque 2003, 61)- as longing for the wandering of that who lives in European land coming to an end. In psycho-pathological terms, decay is wandering, a detachment, a cultural process that runs in the form of its own eviction. A gap (*Lücke*), a void, *nihil*: hence the importance of taking into account Nietzsche, but withdrawing his heroism. But as soon as one reaches that *finis terrae*, what defines the European identity is its reclusive character that “sees only shadows and abysses in the future” of this civilization (Vargas Llosa 2004), as Steiner wrote in *The Idea of Europe*. Vargas Llosa (2004) disagrees with him at this point, of course, looking with a (neoliberal) ocean in between, and because Europe is “in the world of today, the only great internationalist and democratic project that is under way and that, with all the deficiencies that may be pointed out, goes forward.”

The “living outrage” that Giambattista Tiepolo was according to the painter Raphael Mengs, was despised for the last time with the ignominious, secret burial organized by the king and his court when he died in Madrid. Obliterated and forgotten, it seems that Tiepolo already knew his destiny and decided to arrange an entire sequence of resurrecting spells scattered through some of his greatest works. When remembering the spells to revive the painter, two centuries later, through a whole series of anathemas embedded under the contents that he had to paint by contract, it seems worth recalling the incisive analysis of Régis Debray in his controversial article “Decline of the West?” (2013) Painter and civilization have immunized themselves through the regular assumption of a negative critique. That may be “the West’s great talent, its dynamism and its armour-plating” (Debray 2013, 36), an expression that would be one of the few concessions made by Debray, along with a final conclusion: although not convinced about what Europe represents, it still goes forward.

The beauty of Europe as a woman seduced Zeus, who became a magnificent white bull that attracted the young lady and flew to Crete with her on his back. In Würzburg, Tiepolo recreated the Four Continents within a fascinating and theatrical space, reaching on the side dedicated to Europe the most revealing figuration of a West that can look at itself: some figures in a clumsy attitude, vague and melancholic; an old, prostrate bull; a bunch of variegated elements drawn from the density of History; dilapidated architecture (from four continents, the European is the only represented); a woman -Europe- receiving gifts from Neptune.<sup>18</sup> Following the magnificent work of Roberto Calasso (2009), the Florentine writer needs, in order to understand this pictorial arrangement, the imposition to forget, erase something, a *décalage*, offset or disagreement. It is necessary since many centuries have been needed to gestate the Being of the West, setting itself in distrust of itself. It can be seen in the trompe-l’oeil of a European-like character falling off the support where he is sitting. He carries a folder, probably with drawings or plans, and his misstep drops him in the worst place, only momentarily supported by the folder itself and a woodpile prepared to provide fire and death to those who venture in the Americas, represented by a strong woman riding a huge crocodile. The New World defends itself from foreigners. Calasso pays less attention to the other two continents, but regarding the whole, he does not miss the chance to operatically recite the opportunity of understanding between men, women, animals, backgrounds, representations, beliefs: a true “cosmopolitanism”, he adds; however, without any “conciliatory attitude.”(Calasso 2009, 231)

From an Asian perspective, the sun sets in Europe, and its definition is its name, *Abendland*. The New World is to Giandomenico, in the years following his return, in 1791, pure scenery; a magic lantern, a fair booth to see from two outer perspectives: the one of the viewers, trying to see through a small window, and the other, denying the presence of our observation. None of the figures is aware of being observed. Father and son, as they used to, are portrayed in profile, but it is the figure of a *pulcinella* with disturbing eyes the one that monopolizes attention. A lost world that we, absent and petrified, fascinated by a new one that is not reachable, have let go. Comedy dominates, though not for much longer. *Pulcinelli* were all over the walls of Giandomenico’s chamber, but the pressure of the enlightened Francophiles effaced the love that children and people in general had for them. They were able to adapt themselves, as a wildcard, to any character in the *commedia dell’arte*. Sloterdijk, recovered the expression “*Translatio Imperii*” (1994), to recapitulate the essence of Europe, which matches with an imperialist *commedia dell’arte* irradiated for millennia.

## Conclusion.

While searching for an end to these reflections, several images appear in the media, scattered across the subcontinent, reaffirming the diagnosis of Europe's decline in the present. Maybe *Abendland*, the documentary of the Austrian filmmaker Nikolaus Geyrhalter is the best way to represent the European *status quo*, its deep immersion into the forces of *décadence et élan* and –why not- its indifference towards its own situation. Five European cities are filmed at night revealing the advance of a democracy whose center of the world was here. Surveillance cameras and fences, brothels, borders, tell our success or, better said, the decay of success. We may find a thousand stories to depict our “land of sunset”; they may not leave a clearing to find the arrow, but a gap (*Lücke*) where the fall, guilt or feelings of decadence are evident. Meanwhile, the fear against the Other keeps affecting a society where xenophobic groups and parties proliferate, like the extremist Pegida (in English: Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West [*Abendland*]) in Germany, which appropriates for itself the notions of Europe and the West –understood as exclusive entities- for its own racist purposes. In this regard, the Schmittian logic of the enemy is being applied to its most terrible extreme, forgetting what Cacciari clarified some years ago: the *hostis* is always a *hospes*, that is, the stranger (the enemy, the other) is always a guest at the same time. “It is precisely by asserting my difference from the other that I am with him. The other is my inseparable *cum*.” (Cacciari 2009, 204)

Maybe Friedrich was pointing out something in his series of paintings. Probably Europe stopped looking at the sun many time ago –or maybe we “crucified” it, as Henri Lefebvre understands the overcoming of vitality and life by means of “morality and social duty” (Shields 2005, 8)-. It is easier, less damaging to look at the moon, when the limit between the visible and the unknown has already been surpassed. Arthur Schopenhauer had already noticed that: “(...) the moon remains purely an object for contemplation, not of the will (...) the moon gradually becomes our friend, unlike the sun, who, like an overzealous benefactress, we never want to look in the face.” (Quoted by Rewald 2001, 12) To close the parallelism of Europe regarding its own destiny and its own position in the world, maybe gazing calmly at the moon is a better depiction of the passive European society, which prefers to refuge itself under the harmless shafts of moonlight rather than facing the sun -the same sun that will continue rising and setting- and accepting its own contradictions and moving forces, recognizing its links with the rest of the world.

“It is not a coincidence that Europeans, when reformulating their historical project in the fifteenth century, begun to dream of desert islands.

As good Western, one demands an island simply to restart. Desert islands are the archetype of utopia. (...) One cannot be a good representative of Western civilization without sharing the requirement of a second start.” (Finkielkraut and Sloterdijk 2008, 153 ff.)

We could conclude, using the words of Sloterdijk, that this is the European *élan*. Europe should not miss its second chance to live up to the responsibility to be the focus of attention and source of courageous actions to avoid a last sunrise. Even if the European project cannot find its solution in the archipelago (Cacciari 1997; Carrera 2015, 130) – understood as a multiplicity of islands, united and separated by the sea at the same time-, it does offer another perspective on certain issues, such as those concerning the centrality or disintegration of the Union: the islands must stop being islands, in a way, in order to connect with the rest of the archipelago (or archipelagos, in plural), pointing to a new beginning, a Nietzschean “backlash” –which in German contains the vivid prefix referring to a counteraction, *gegen-schlag*- to the very essence of Europe.

## Notes.

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<sup>1</sup> The mythical origin of this negation is narrated by Roberto Calasso through the dream of the young Europa –later kidnapped by Zeus in the form of a bull-, in which two women were violently fighting for her. Finally, Europa was separated from Asia by the other woman, a stranger without name. (Calasso 1990, 12–13) A similar vision is described in Aeschylus' *Persians*: Queen Atossa, mother of Xerxes, dreams of his son in a chariot carried by two women. One is Asian, and stays calm, while the other is Doric and revolves violently until it breaks the harness (Cacciari 2009, 200 ff.). The decadence of Europe and its tragic spirit, reflected in both dreams in counterposition with Asia, is studied by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

<sup>2</sup> The different terms used in the text to refer to Europe (*Abendland*, the West, or Occident) are undoubtedly diverse and have distinct connotations. However, and being aware of that, we have used them to define the same geopolitical unit.

<sup>3</sup> About the concept of *communitas*, see Esposito, Roberto. 2003. *Communitas: Origen Y Destino de La Comunidad*. Madrid: Amorrortu.

<sup>4</sup> The most recognizable use of the term –although much discussed and even reinterpreted by some authors, such as Gilles Deleuze- is that of Bergson and his *élan vital*, related to the complex generation and self-organization of life. In this context, we consider *élan* as an intrinsic force of impulse.

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<sup>5</sup> We are aware of the difficulty of not falling into the same trap that Massimo Cacciari avoided, in contrast to Carl Schmitt; the “tendency with mythological reconstructions of the European political space” (Carrera 2015, 130). The references and images in our text are useful within an already established theoretical framework, that of the negative, that articulates an ongoing research on counterspaces.

<sup>6</sup> “Progress, Turgot insisted, was ‘inevitable,’ even if mixed in with periods of decline. Yet ‘progress has been very different among different peoples.’ Here Turgot seemed to be taking the fateful step that led toward European and eventually a more general Western superiority, in which the developmental schema is, as it were, spatialized. Some nations in the present remain stuck in their historical backwardness while others show the effects of their historical advancement.” (Hunt 2008, 63). This idea is also shared by Hegel. (2001)

<sup>7</sup> “And here, here is the man, the promised one you know of -/ Caesar Augustus, son of a god, destined to rule/ where Saturn ruled of old in Latium, and there/ bring back the age of gold; his empire shall expand/ past Garamants and Indians to a land beyond the zodiac/ and the sun's yearly path, where Atlas the sky-bearer pivots/ the wheeling heavens, embossed with fiery stars, on his shoulder.” (Virgil and Day Lewis (transl.) 1986, 184)

<sup>8</sup> Turgot (1727–1781) also talked about the progress towards the West, even before Hegel. He was the first to suggest that “the civilizing process had reached its height in modern Europe”, overcoming “the barbaric and savage part of its collective personality.” (Herman 1997, 25)

<sup>9</sup> The German term *Abendland* (literally meaning “the land of evening”) was first introduced as a synonym of Occident by the German theologian Caspar Hedio in 1529 (as the archaic plural *Abendlender*). Since then, it has been used –and discussed– by many writers and thinkers, especially those related to the German world (Martin Luther, Hegel, Oswald Spengler... and more recently Massimo Cacciari or the Austrian filmmaker Nikolaus Geyrhofer). The ideological connotations of the term are quite ambiguous, having been recently appropriated by the xenophobic German group Pegida.

<sup>10</sup> An exhibition about the series was organized under the same title, between September and November 2001 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York (Rewald 2001).

<sup>11</sup> As an anecdote, it is worth remembering that the work of Friedrich was highly appreciated by the highest spheres of Russian nobility and literature, being his most renowned patrons the Grand Duke Nikolai Pavlovich (who would become Tsar Nicholas I some years later) and the writer Vasily Zhukovsky (Rewald (ed.) 1990, 4).

<sup>12</sup> “Hegel employs this term *Unruhe* frequently throughout his corpus to characterize negation, even as early as the *Phenomenology*, where, in the concluding pages, he speaks of the self-alienating Self as ‘its own restless process [*Unruhe*] of superseding [*aufheben*] itself, or negativity [*Negativität*]’. The restless nature of negation thus inheres in the notion of *Aufhebung*. It agitates, it does not stay still. It persists like a current, but remains as invisible.” (Hass 2014, 122)

<sup>13</sup> Disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) as a symptom of modernity has been studied by many authors and thinkers. Although taken from Schiller –another German romantic–, Max Weber is the one who develops the concept in 1919, which refers to the progressive cultural rationalization and desecration of the mythical factor in Western modern society (1999. “Wissenschaft als Beruf,” in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*. Potsdam: Institut für Pädagogik der Universität Potsdam)

<sup>14</sup> Sloterdijk develops the search for immunity in a world where the human is expelled in his book *Spheres*. German version (2010): *Sphären 3: Plurale Sphärologie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth mentioning the ideal of blackness in art formulated in 1970 by Theodor Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory* (2002. London, New York: Continuum). It is an art pervaded by dark colors, as the only art capable of salvation against the horrors of humanity (*negative aesthetics*). The paintings of Redon seem to anticipate this ideal.

<sup>16</sup> Many popular songs and texts make use of it, like this traditional chant for children: “I love Beijing’s Tiananmen / The place where the Sun rises/ Our Great Leader Mao Zedong/ Guides us as we march forward!” (Translation by Wu, Hung. 2005. *Remaking Beijing. Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space*. London: Reaktion Books)

<sup>17</sup> Between October 2015 and January 2016, the Beyeler Foundation in Basel organized an exhibition called *Black Sun*, devoted to the influence of Kazimir Malevich upon contemporary artists. This line of research, though interesting, should be continued elsewhere.

<sup>18</sup> “What was Europe, if not an extension of Venice?” (Calasso 2009, 228)

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