

“THE WORLD’S MOST HAUNTED ISLAND”

Ghost narratives and practices around Poveglia, an abandoned island in the Venetian Lagoon

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ABSTRACT: Located in the Venetian Lagoon, the uninhabited island of Poveglia has recently gained global renown as “the world’s most haunted island”. This article reconstructs how this ghost island narrative originated and began to circulate, and analyses the social, cultural and geographical preconditions that fostered it. It also considers how such a narrative rebounded on the island, attracting believers in the paranormal and tourists interested in ghosts. The research presented here is based on qualitative methods, such as the critical reading of various texts (social media content, newspaper articles, blogs, videos, pieces of music and television programmes) and semi-structured interviews with the involved actors. Behind an apparently trivial island narrative, the in-betweenness of ghosts (intended as cultural objects able to activate an emotional sphere that goes beyond the rational understanding of places) allows for a reconceptualisation of the discontinuities of time and space, the disconnection between vernacular and academic cultures and the classical dichotomies assigned to insular spaces. The case of Poveglia demonstrates how ghosts can shape not only the way island narratives are told, but also the way that islands are approached and practiced.

KEYWORDS: Ghosts, haunted islands, island narratives, Poveglia, Venetian Lagoon

Introduction

This essay focuses on Poveglia, a small abandoned island located in the Venetian Lagoon (Figure 1) currently owned by the Italian State Property Office. Here, we consider global narratives and representations of the island but also practices taking place locally. Over the last few years, due to several events, that had notable resonance within the international press, the island has become well-known both locally and globally. The first event was the featuring of Poveglia in a 2009 episode of the US television programme *Ghost Adventures*.¹ During this episode, the island was described as “the world’s most

¹ The episode is currently online at: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2hbmix>

haunted island”. The second event was the attempted acquisition of the island in 2014 by local businessman Luigi Brugnaro (who went on to become Mayor of Venice from 2015 until the present). This attempt was opposed by the Venetian association Poveglia per Tutti (‘Poveglia for Everyone’), whose activists and supporters believe that the island should be preserved as a public space. The two events led to different practices taking place on the island. On one hand, the island began receiving visits from people interested in or attracted by mystery and gothics or by the paranormal. These visitors included international “ghost tourists” (a phenomenon analysed by McEvoy, 2007 and Holloway, 2010). On the other hand, Poveglia per Tutti organised various demonstrations and social activities. Its members also began the to restore certain parts of the island, clearing overgrown vegetation. In this way, Poveglia became the linchpin of two parallel narratives and representations that were spreading globally. These narratives became increasingly meta-geographical and were linked to certain island imagery that transcended the Venetian island itself.

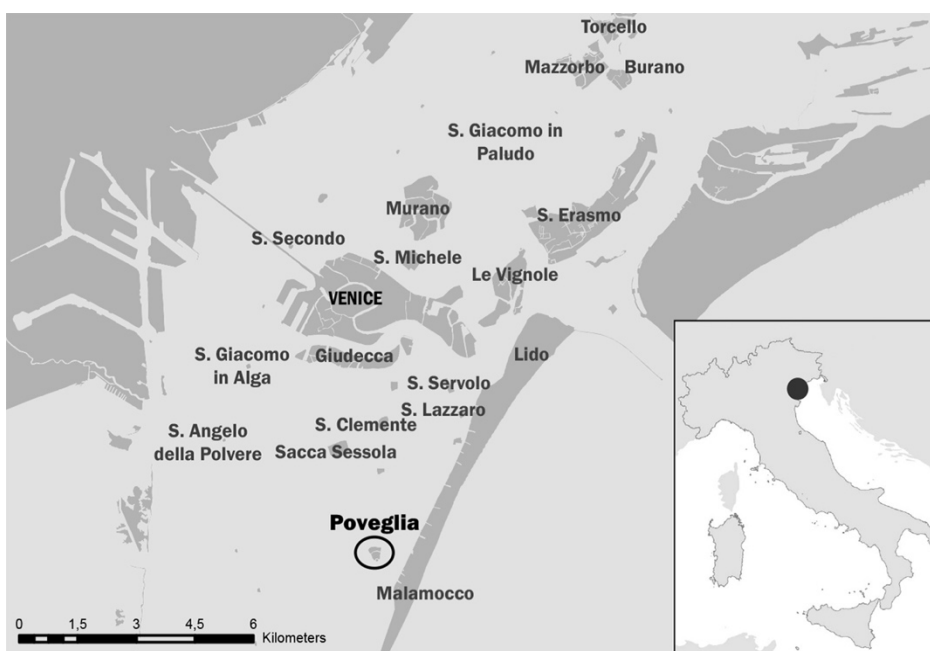


Figure 1 - The Island of Poveglia in the Venetian Lagoon archipelago (GIS elaboration by Pamela Lillo; cartographic base: Carta Tecnica Regionale, Regione del Veneto – L.R. n. 28/76)

One narrative is strictly contemporary and relates to the international role played by some small islands that have been claimed as public spaces or protected areas by grassroots movements against neo-liberal politics. Two notable examples are Sa Dragonera, an outer island of Mallorca (Spain), between the late 1970s and 1980s, and, more recently, the Ulva Islands in the Hebridean Archipelago of Scotland². These islands have become metaphors

² Sa Dragonera is an uninhabited outer island that was the subject of interest from property developers in the 1970s. A wide popular opposition blocked the project and led to the conversion of the island to a protected area. For a framing of the story of Sa Dragonera in the context of the

for freedom and civic self-determination with regard to land-use choices and territorial visions. To paraphrase Lefebvre (1968), this could be called the “right to the island narrative,” though it may have a more local or nissological origin (Depraetere, 1991; McCall, 1994)³. Even if we leave aside the “right to the island narrative” and related practices at this point, it has been important to recall it, in order to frame the topic of our article in the context of complexity. Indeed, not only is Poveglia a contested island but the narratives around it are diverse and contested as well. The focus of our article, however, is another narrative – the one that the members of Poveglia per Tutti tend to disclaim or programmatically ignore⁴. Such narrative is a patchwork of historically well-established Western literary and iconographic island clichés, such as the “mysterious island” (Stevenson, 1883); the “isle of the dead” portrayed by Arnold Böcklin between 1880 and 1886 in his various paintings; or, again, the “island of demon” (Johnson, 1994). In addition, there is the “island of ghosts” and the “abandoned island,” which have been reworked and blended into global popular culture. Not surprisingly, a gothic sensibility underlies these clichés. This article will refer to this idea as, succinctly, the “haunted island narrative”.

It has been said that ‘the richness of literary and cultural islanding can be so obtrusive and pervasive that it could actually threaten and dismiss the physicality of islands as “real lived-in places”’ (Baldacchino, 2008: 44). Nevertheless, island metaphors always lock onto some aspect of island physicality and effect people’s feelings, emotions, desires and fears, which have an impact on real islands. Moreover, as Hay has asserted:

there is one important manner in which metaphorical senses of islandness are the appropriate substance of island studies. This is when metaphoric transcriptions of islands rebound upon real islands and influence life there. (2006: 30).

In this particular case, it has to be considered that “cultural islanding” pushed travellers to visit Poveglia (or inspired them to plan or simply dream to go there) when they otherwise would not have known about its existence. This is true whether these people belonged to social movements demonstrating against privatisation or—as is the focus of this work—they were looking for mystery and gothic atmosphere on an abandoned island.

According to Vanolo (2018), phantasms/ghosts are cultural objects that can activate an emotional sphere that goes beyond the cognitive and rational understanding of places. Vanolo writes, “thinking in terms of ghosts and spectral presences allows for emphasis on specific geographic sensibilities, that is to say ways to look at and analyse space” (2018: 369 – authors’ translation). Furthermore, the ghost, which itself “levitates” between distinct realms and meanings, might be studied as a cultural concept, as well as an object, “that we will unpack in a deliberately intersubjective and interdisciplinary manner, tracing its travel... in time and space through various media and theoretical paradigms” (Pilar-Blanco and Peeren, 2010: xi). In order to explore such geographic sensibilities, we have used

environmentalist and social movements of Mallorca, see Rayò (2004). The recent experience of Ulva in the Hebridean archipelago showed how local people managed to block the sale thanks to a worldwide appeal to help the local community to buy the island. The government stopped its owner selling it for as much as £5m and the community was able to launch the buyout bid. More information at the Ulva community website (nd).

³ Even if these islands are not populated, the claim can be considered an expression of islands “in their own terms” (Baldacchino, 2008: 37) since it came from the archipelagic contest.

⁴ As they declared in quotations in a newspaper article (Davies, 2014) and in some interviews with us.

qualitative methods adapted from humanistic geography. We began with a textual analysis consisting of critical readings of social media content (from YouTube and Facebook), newspapers’ articles, blogs, videos, pieces of music and television programmes. In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews with some of the involved actors: members of associations devoted to paranormal investigations, ghost and gothic tourists, music ensembles and local historians. It should be recalled that each of the media used or availed by these actors brings a specific set of connotations and intellectual requirements. Nonetheless, beyond the media that is used, studied or interpreted, more relevant for our analysis are the way which stories are told, interpreted and adapted to the local context (Grixti, 2014; Pilar Blanco, Peeren 2010). The media, as Silverstone highlighted, should be studied because they are central to our everyday lives and merit study “as contributors to our variable capacity to make sense of the world, to make and share its meanings” (1999: 2). On the other hand, Media Studies also presents an insightful opportunity to understand the increasing popularity of media induced tourism (Reijnders, 2011).

In this article, we will begin with a geo-historical framing of the island in order to trace how the micro-history of Poveglia has merged with the history of Venice. This will reveal the socio-spatial evolution of the island in which shifts between settlement, abandonment and re-use follow a non-linear pattern. Certain absences and presences both contribute to place Poveglia at the centre of debate, which attracts attention in human geography and other disciplines, about explorations fuelled by *ruinenlust* (eg DeSilvey and Edensor, 2013) and fascination with decay (Lavery, Dixon and Hassall, 2014) alongside a post-Romantic imagination of the entire space: a space with ruins and a place with stories. This article will investigate what occurs when an island’s process of metaphorisation and fictionalisation are primarily driven by television and the Internet (that is to say post-vernacular and non-official knowledge) rather than by literature, scholars and visual arts (official knowledge). With this focus, we embrace geographic place-writing tradition through a wider approach that includes social and popular revivals of interest in places. The absence/presence of narratives and the material and immaterial traces of history or histories have also become crucial in mobilising the experiences of this island, which enables people to reinforce or reformulate narratives.

I. The geo-historical context of Poveglia

The Venetian Lagoon, the largest wetland in the Adriatic area, is characterised by an aquascape of flawless horizontality in which some flatlands emerge just a few centimetres above the water. These are the so-called *barene*, platforms colonised by halophyte vegetation and regularly covered by the highest tides. Apart from this, the lagoon is home to dozens of small, partially man-made, islands and to the 123 *insule*⁵ forming the historic city centre. The entirety of this ecosystem has been (and remains) subject to incessant transformation due to the combined influence of the sea, rivers, and human intervention (Caniato, 2005; Dursteler, 2013). The Venetian archipelago reflects the tension between the benefits of island spatiality, which encourages human settlement (Grydehøj, 2015a), and the constraints that it places on urban growth, which has necessitated, throughout history, the expansion of existing islands and the creation of new ones through land manufacturing (Grydehøj, 2015b). With only a few exceptions, the outer Venetian islands

⁵ An *insula* is a Venetian urban unit, usually arranged around a *campo* (square), delimited by water spaces, may they be canals or open lagoon.

share a common history. These exceptions are primarily due to size (as in the case of Murano, Burano, Giudecca and Sant’Erasmo) or to a peculiar location (such as the long coastal seaside strips of Pellestrina and Lido).

In the Middle Ages, most of these islands were used as hermitages and around 1500 AD were often used as places of exile. Eventually, during the periods of French and the Habsburg domination, many were used as military warehouses or transformed into defensive fortifications. Though it also demonstrates several peculiar features, the island of Poveglia is no exception. Located in the southern portion of the lagoon, between Giudecca and Lido, in a particularly dense area of small islands (including San Clemente, Sacca Sessola, San Servolo and San Lazzaro degli Armeni), Poveglia faces the settlement of Malamocco (on Lido Island), which hosted the ancient ducal seat until 811 AD when it was moved to the Rialto area (Dorigo, 1983; Caniato, 2005).

Poveglia is composed of a main portion (7.5 hectares overall) divided into two parts by a narrow canal. In addition, a bulwark was built in front of the island in the 16th Century. Today, the island is abandoned and hosts eleven crumbling or ruined buildings, including the San Vitale bell tower that also served as a lighthouse. According to Busato and Sfameni (2018), Poveglia, formerly known as Popilia, was inhabited from late antiquity. In addition, hundreds of people lived on the island during the 13th-14th centuries, until the War of Chioggia, which broke out in 1379 between the two maritime republics of Genoa and Venice, which resulted in an evacuation of the island so that it might be used as a military outpost. This was the first abandonment of the island. From that moment, Poveglia ceased to be a permanently inhabited place. In 1527, the Doge offered the island to the Camaldolese monks. In 1661, it was offered to the descendants of the original inhabitants so that they might reconstruct their village there (Busato and Sfameni, 2018). Nevertheless, Poveglia remained abandoned during the following centuries. In 1793 it became a restricted area and from 1805 to 1814, it became a confinement station (*Lazzaretto*) for plague victims so that infection might be prevented from spreading throughout the city (Busato and Sfameni, 2018).

During the 20th Century, the island was used, again, as a Stazione Sanitaria Marittima (Maritime Sanitary Station). In 1922, the existing buildings were converted into a sanatorium for long-term care elderly patients. After 1968, when the hospital was closed, the island was briefly used as a vegetable garden and entrusted to a watchperson for several years. After this, it was left alone entirely. This was the second abandonment, which left the island without people. The deserted Poveglia began to be used as a sort of peri-urban, informal park reachable only by boat. In particular, it was used by young people from nearby Giudecca Island. According to various interviewees, the island was considered a free space suitable for picnics, barbecues, sunbathing or even camping.

II. The Poveglia puzzle: from abandonment to the ‘myth’

The contemporary popular discourse of the “haunted island” can be conceptualised as an assemblage of different puzzle pieces based partially on the materiality of the abandoned island (and the suggestions that this might raise) and partially on a collective global relaunch by various actors, which created a distorted yet successful image. The abandonment of the island left it without a planned purpose for around 50 years. This was despite several proposed re-use projects. For example, in 1985 a tourist resort was planned by the Italian Touring Club in partnership with Club Méditerranée. In 1998 there were also

plans for a youth hostel designed by the CTS-Centro Turistico Studentesco. Poveglia, like other minor islands in the Venice Lagoon (such as San Giorgio in Alta, Sant’Angelo della Polvere, San Secondo and San Giacomo in Paludo), shared the destiny of many traditional landscapes:

They fall in the dereliction, abandoned to the flux of things, not thinking about their latent potentialities. They lie suspended waiting for... (Marini, forthcoming 2020)

These have been defined as “interrupted landscapes”, expressing “the lack of care and sense of living—in Heideggerian terms—of the never realised strategic and cultural planning and of the transformation of the territories, which has ecological, economic, ethic, aesthetic and geographic impacts” (ibid). The only public intervention within this time frame occurred in 2003. This intervention consisted of some reclamation and shore consolidation works that were accompanied by the restoration of a few artefacts⁶: the octagon, a bridge and a *cavana* (traditional boat shelter), which, left without a purpose, rapidly underwent a new phase of obsolescence. In general, such works were not enough to significantly curb the overgrowth of vegetation on the island. Within the open space, trees and higher plants from pioneer species ultimately created densely wooded areas that were hard to penetrate. These spaces were, however, colonised by small wild animals and the fruit trees, such as peaches, were able to run wild.⁷

The materiality of the abandoned island, and the dynamics of a partial re-wilderness, resulted in a “Third Landscape”, which could be interpreted as a fragment of the “Planetary Garden” left by man to natural landscape evolution (Clement, 2003). More specifically, this article refers to the second category of the concept of a “Third Landscape”: the residual one derived from the abandonment of previous anthropic activity (ibid). This process conferred an aura of imperviousness, darkness and mystery on the island, especially when compared to the highly domesticated and urban Venetian landscape. For its part, the progressive decay of the unmaintained buildings reduced some structures to relics that were gradually invaded by vegetation. Visually, this recalls the classical iconography of the landscape with ruins inscribed by European painters in the 17th and 18th centuries. This is the second piece of the puzzle. More specifically, the buildings of Poveglia remain suspended between the status of proper “ruins” and that of simple “rubble” (Augé, 2003). While ruins offer historical truths and layers of sedimented and symbolic memories with a cultural importance (often exalted by the aesthetic of the picturesque and the sublime), rubble is helpless and inert, forgetful of its ancient use and generates an interruption of meaning (Augé, 2003; Marini, 2020). In addition, it must be kept in mind that ruins and rubble are nowadays both likely to trigger forms of tourism within abandoned places and what has been termed *urbex* (urban exploration of abandoned places)⁸, which often includes ghost and dark tourism. Components of voyeurism and fetishism for abandoned places with a ‘dark’ history, such as places of detention, mental health treatment or plague, may also be involved in these practices. In this way, the island of Poveglia perfectly epitomises the gothic “fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space” (Baldick in McEvoy, 2007: 5).

⁶ According to the Poveglia per Tutti Association (2018) these public works cost 22 million euros.

⁷ According to one interviewee, the peaches from Poveglia were at one time renowned within the lagoon for their special flavour.

⁸ See for example Sernagiotto (2019).

Apart from abandonment, re-wilderness and decay, we find another piece of the puzzle. The vernacular historical narrative, so widespread in Venice and often condensed in anecdotes or over-simplified for the purposes of tourists, left out Poveglia. Even if academic historiography has dealt with the island (for example Dorigo, 1983), discussion and photography-based books about Poveglia have only spiked in recent years, in response to the revival of interest in the island (Zoccolotto, 2015; Elia and Mancini, 2017; Busato and Sfameni, 2018). As Hay has asserted:

In order that cultural place meanings can accrue.... there must also be a capacity to layer up stories, so that a potent vernacular culture (or cultures) can exist and persist, welding past to present and ensuring a seamless passage of time. (2006: 32-33).

Some Venetians, as has already been said, never stopped visiting the island for recreation and telling stories about it (for example, the aforementioned story of the succulent peaches). However, at the scale of the entire city, Poveglia suffered from a certain marginalisation from vernacular culture. Forgetting a place may be even more effective for its destiny than abandoning it. The island’s little-known history and absent or latent memorial pattern may have left space for the imagination and the creation of constructed memories and exogenous narratives.

The above-mentioned elements—re-wilderness, decay and oblivion/marginalisation from local vernacular culture—constituted the substrate (or the first pieces) on which various actors arranged the different pieces of the “cursed Poveglia” puzzle. This puzzle has been made easier to compose thanks to the diffusion of the mentioned cultural clichés, which tend to conceive insularity as a metaphor for death and mystery. This was strengthened by the background of Venice, a city that boasts its narrative of decadence. For example, between the 1920s-1960s, the island hosted a few patients most likely affected by senile dementia⁹ and was, therefore, portrayed as a “madhouse island” that not only imprisons the insane but also “drives the sane crazy”¹⁰. A story about a doctor who lost his mind and committed suicide by jumping from the bell tower of the island began to circulate. Similarly, Poveglia was, at one time, used as a quarantine station. This resulted in the web’s frequent association of the island with images of plague victims’ mass graves (images which actually depicted archaeological excavations from another island within the lagoon, the quarantine island of Lazzaretto Vecchio). As Busato and Sfameni have identified, during 2007 “websites enriched the imaginative story, adding that the island was forbidden to the public and that any video material recorded there would have been seized” (2018: 92).

III. Reinventing a ‘haunted Poveglia’

a. The role of web and television programmes

When did Poveglia become one of the “most haunted places in the world”? It is not possible to determine a precise starting point because the representations, visions and

⁹ This is different from the islands of San Clemente and San Servolo that served for a long time as female and male Venetian asylums for the mentally ill.

¹⁰ A motif recently taken up by the novel *Shutter Island* (Dennis Lehane, 2003) and its film adaptation by Martin Scorsese (2010).

practices about and in a space are always transforming according to the relevant geographical, historical, social, economic and cultural factors. We can better understand the haunted Poveglia narrative as a process(es) developed through multiple continuous dialogues between expert knowledge sources (produced and diffused within the community of paranormal believers) and their popular reception, between tacit and explicit references, between imagination and reality, between suggestions and ‘fake news’ and between official history and vernacular stories. In this sense, the nature of media, and the specific orientations of single authors, play a central role in re-representations and fictionalisations. Narrative can be transmitted and received in various ways through and by the media, depending on the cultural trajectories of both senders and recipients. What is certain, in this case, is that the media facilitated access to a large and diffuse audience by resignifying reality within terms of the gothic. Places are variously revised and reinvented, and the question of how place is made is a critical and central component in human geography (Lowenthal, 1961; Buttimer, 1976; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977; Cresswell, 2004). The role of ghosts in the re-invention of contemporary Poveglia can be better understood if we consider them as “a presence ‘halfway’ between the visible and the invisible, the real and the unreal, the past and the present, the conscious and the unconscious” (Vanolo, 2018: 370 – authors’ translation).

Poveglia has not always been widely known as an island filled with the ghosts of plague victims and mentally ill patients. In their work, the local historians Busato and Sfameni indicated a potential starting point for this narrative. In the first months of the 2005, some blogs dedicated to paranormal activities and “ghost hunting” started to be interested in the island. They were the authors of “the legend of the island’s mental institution”, where doctors were sadistic torturers and there was also the presence of mass graves for the plague’s deaths (Busato and Sfameni, 2018: 92). A chain effect began around this time in which there was a multiplying of blogs, videos on YouTube, Facebook pages and other online sources that were devoted to the mysterious and supposedly infested Poveglia. It was within this uncontrolled (and uncontrollable) process that legends, inaccuracy and deceit (such as the mentioned mass grave images taken of another island) merged into an increasingly self-alimenting narrative.

Although newspapers and books (for example Biaggiotti and Bronchi, 2017) contributed to this process, the popularity of the ghosts of Poveglia was primarily due to television and the web¹¹. The Fox Family Channel’s television programme *The Scariest Places on Earth*, for instance, dedicated two episodes to Poveglia (entitled ‘Island of No Return: The Venice Dare’)¹² that were broadcast on August 19th and 24th 2001.¹³ It is also possible to identify a watershed moment in the diffusion of the narrative of haunted Poveglia in the form of an episode of the popular US television programme *Ghost Adventures*, presented by Zac Bagans, in 2009. The programme presented scenes of “possession” filmed at night with an infrared camera, demonstrating why Poveglia might be considered “the world’s most haunted island”. This designation implicitly referred to the existence of other haunted islands and, therefore, reinforced a cliché of a particular type of islandness.

¹¹ A similar process, even if rooted in a literary tradition, has been described by Emma McEvoy (2007) for Berry Pomeroy Castel in Devon, England.

¹² Presently available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHXb9aualg> (part 1) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kOSPA1-8Rk> (part 2).

¹³ Some years earlier than the date indicated by Busato and Sfameni (2018).

Apart from its generally sensationalist tone, we also found the narration of the *Ghost Adventures* episode (a special version with extended content)¹⁴ misleading. At minute 13:30 of the programme, Bagans and his crew are interviewing local people in Malamocco, the Lido settlement in front of Poveglia. The interviewees are presented as scared and reluctant to discuss Poveglia to the point that they refuse even to speak. “They don’t talk about it,” says Bagans in order to stress the narrative of fear. The scenario emphasises the haunted island narrative rather than capturing real feelings. For example, when Bagans speaks to an elderly woman seated in front of her house’s door, she replies in Venetian, “So vecia mi, no so gnente”. This sentence literally translated means, “I am old; I don’t know nothing.” It is spoken with a tone that expresses an unwillingness to be disturbed by a stranger carrying a camera and speaking an incomprehensible language. It is not spoken in a tone that indicates fear. As stressed before, for many Venetians, Poveglia represents one of the last lagoon islands not yet occupied by hotels or privatised. It is more of a peri-urban, informal park that everyone may visit than a supernaturally infested island.

Moreover, two events, directly linked to ghost narratives, deserve to be mentioned, since they are representative of the complex interactions between several levels of understanding rooted in the dichotomies of mind/body, appearance/reality, the fictional/the historical and the local/the global. The first event was an improvised expedition that took place during the summer of 2016. A small group of young people from Colorado (USA) decided to spend the night on the island looking for ghosts. Something apparently went wrong and someone sailing near the island heard screams coming from its thickets and called for help. A firemen’s boat reached the island and recovered the small group, whose members were clearly upset. The case was then reported on by local newspapers and reports of the incident percolated through the city. The second event was an official visit, this time an authorised survey, undertaken by the Italian-based European Paranormal Activity Society. In January 2017 a group of 15 members stayed on the island for 12 hours (from 4pm to 4am), equipped with recording instruments in order to investigate any paranormal activity (Figure 2).

In an interview with the authors, Max Maresca, the president, affirmed that they did not see “psychic or negative entities” but that they felt something. He said, “there are no ghosts on the island, but we heard, with our instruments, a girl’s scream” (interview, 9th April 2018). Despite their different approaches, both the informal group from Colorado and the EPAS expedition shared the conception of Poveglia as a mystery island. This idea stemmed from the island’s troubled history, abandonment and embracing of it as “one of the most haunted places in the world”. This label has been reinforced by articles, blogs and posts on social media that systematically attribute adjectives to Poveglia, such as “haunted,” “hellish,” and “mysterious.”

The above-mentioned groups are a sample of two different kinds of actors involved not only in the global spreading (and constant reinterpretation) of the haunted island narrative but also directly engaged in its translation in locally situated practices. Though they differ from one another, both mentioned experiences confirm something that pertains to haunted landscapes. Ghosts may come from the past, but they must be felt in the present (Heholt and Downing, 2016). On one hand, there are people who have been inspired by ghost narratives and who then spontaneously reach (or try to reach¹⁵) the

¹⁴ <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6b5hgy> [last accessed 10th October 2019]

¹⁵ We interviewed other people who could not find a boat to reach the island and settled for seeing its skyline from the nearby Malamocco shore of Lido Island.

island of which they have heard or read. On the other hand, there are semi-professional and well-organised people who systematically visit supposedly haunted places in Italy in order to record, through specific instruments and fixed protocols, the presence and entities of what they perceive to be paranormal activity¹⁶.



Figure 2 - The European Paranormal Activity Society (E.P.A.S.) team surveying Poveglia in January 2017 (photo: courtesy of Max Maresca, E.P.A.S.).

¹⁶ Another exploration was undertaken by Gruppo Investigativo Attività Paranormali (GIAP) based in Rome (see GIAP, 2018). Also, Susy Biaggiotti and Alessandro Bronchi, two people passionate about unexplained phenomena, went several times to Poveglia and wrote a book about their experience. They state that, after two years of research, they have “resized almost the totality of the legends and rumors about the island. Unexpected evidence from the past emerged. From some analysed pictures emerged anthropomorphic figures... while from the audio emerged voices saying complete sentences” (Biaggiotti and Bronchi, 2018: 85-86 - authors’ translation).

In conclusion, paranormal believers, ghost tourists or people who are simply curious—Italian and foreigners alike—have visited the island despite its limited accessibility¹⁷ and have performed and interacted with its materiality. Such interactions are both localised and globalised. They involve a network of nonhuman entities and human actors influencing each other, and they have made the “spectral” (past and present) continually re-emerge during experiences of this place.

b. Playing the mysterious Poveglia: the haunted island in the international music scene

The role played by television shows and by the Internet in the invention and diffusion of Poveglia as a globally famous haunted island intersects with the international music scene. There are several international music bands, from genres such as metal, electronic, psychedelic ambient and post-rock, whose recent work features or refers to Poveglia in some way. Within the music scene, the watershed moment represented by Zac Bagan’s 2009 television programme is clearly inscribed. All musical representations of Poveglia’s ghostliness were created posterior to that date.

One recent example is a song entitled ‘Ghosts of Poveglia’ by the Austrian psychobilly band The Monstrosities.¹⁸ The song’s lyricist, Konstantin Dvorchuk, has stated:

I discovered the island of Poveglia and I began researching the history, myths, rumours about Poveglia. YouTube was full of ghost hunters’ stories about the island. I personally love ghost stories and how they are grounded in culture. (interview, 3th August 2018).

The Internet was the main source of inspiration, therefore, for a song whose lyrics state:

*Not far away from the lagoon from the lagoon of Venetia
There is an island that is called that is called Poveglia
That’s our home where we haunt where we wander around
So many stories about this about this filthy little place called Poveglia*

*...We are the Ghosts...We are the Ghosts
...We are the Ghosts of Poveglia.
...Forever lost on this death blackened coast
...Forever lost on Poveglia
...We are the Ghosts...We are the Ghosts
...We are the Ghosts of Poveglia.
...Forever lost in castle of dusty bones
...Forever lost on Poveglia.*

¹⁷ It has to be kept in mind that the island of Poveglia is not served by public transport. Furthermore, since 6th February 2018, a State Property Office decree forbids access to the island, invoking security reasons. The decree and the objections to it formulated by the Poveglia per Tutti Association are available on the association’s website (2018).

¹⁸ A live performance from 2017 is currently online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxo-ov9vuHE> [last accessed 10th October 2019]

As of 10th October 2019, the website Bandcamp, a popular US-based music streaming company, had 35 registered songs that mentioned Poveglia in the title. Among them, the French music group Tölva, whose Bandcamp page describes their oeuvre as “instrumental post-rock merges ghost ambiance with furious explosions” (authors’ translation)¹⁹, includes a piece called ‘Poveglia’ in its 2016 album *Wide Shot*. Also relevant are the songs ‘Mists of Poveglia’ by Misanthropic Dark Ambient Circle (2011), ‘Poveglia Island Asylum’ by Forever Philly (2013), ‘La ciudad sin nombre-Poveglia’ by Ragnarock (2016), ‘Lazzaretto Poveglia’ by Tyrannophobia (2017), ‘Poveglians’ by Prothos (2017) and ‘Party at Poveglia’ by Rose Liquor (2018). In addition, 21 other songs listed on Bandcamp are simply called ‘Poveglia’ (18), ‘Poveglia Island’ (2) or ‘Isola di Poveglia’ (1). It is also relevant that Poveglia also appears in album titles. Six albums listed on Bandcamp refer to the island, such as *Sonnambulist Poveglia* by A Future Without Press (2010), *Poveglia* by SKELETONKIDS (2012), *Poveglia EP* by Angoscia (2013), *Poveglia* by Demolished by Neglect (2015), *Poveglian Daydream* by Critter Piss (2016) (the latter two showing pictures of the island on their covers) and *The Poveglia Connection* by BURG (2017).

Perhaps more meaningful than naming an album, or a single song, after the small Venetian island is naming the group itself after it. On Bandcamp, there is an English band called Mists of Poveglia and a Texan band called Plagues of Poveglia. Similarly, an Argentinian experimental rock trio, founded in 2013, is named Poveglia as well. According to their Bandcamp page, they

chose this name for the gloomy situations that took place there, the theme of the black plague, the asylum and all the related mystique. We liked the story and we thought that it perfectly suited the atmosphere of our band...We became aware of it [the island] through a webpage listing the scariest places in the world. Our fans know what it’s all about because we take care to disseminate its [the island’s] story through our concerts and social networks.
(interview, 5th August 2018 – authors’ translation).

These examples represent more evidence of the appeal exerted by the narratives of Poveglia and how these narratives are reinforced and relaunched, circulating worldwide and prompting willing people to visit the island even when they are totally exogenous from the Venetian Lagoon. According to The Monstrosities, “a lot of people at our concerts ask us about the island and how you can travel there” (interview, 3rd August 2018).

The second album by Poveglia is titled *Yersinia Pestis* (the Latin name of the coccobacillus responsible for the plague). On the cover is an original drawing by the Argentinian artist Marea Negra. It depicts a gondola crossing troubled grey waters with black figures on board that are wearing the traditional Venetian plague doctor masks that whose long nose was believed to protect the wearer from contracting the disease. The name of the island (where ‘nobody comes back from’, according to the Twitter handle of Poveglia group ‘@depoveglianosevuelve’) is thereby associated with a classic Venetian Gothic iconography of plague and darkness (Figure 3).

¹⁹ <https://tolvaband.bandcamp.com/> - accessed 10th October 2019.



Figure 3 - The cover of the album *Yersinia Pestis* by the Argentinian band Poveglia (original drawing by Marea Negra; courtesy of Poveglia).

Another US metal band, established in 2011, is called Sirens of Poveglia and explains such an eponymous choice, and the sources of this choice, in the biography section of its Facebook page:

The information on Poveglia is taken from Ghost Adventures & Wikipedia. An abandoned island that legends say was formed by the ashes of hundreds of thousands of people infected by the bubonic plague. Locals and tourists are forbidden from visiting. Fishermen avoid the area for fears of being cursed. Poveglia is known as one of the darkest spots on earth. Its located between Venice and Lido in the Venetian Lagoon, northern Italy.

This declaration makes evident what is true for many of these bands from the US, England, Belgium, France, Germany, Argentina, Poland, Czech Republic and Austria (NB none of them are Italian). As confirmed by the members interviewed, they have no direct knowledge nor specific relation to Poveglia or even the Venetian Lagoon²⁰. Instead, they are taking part in a certain subculture of mystery common within circles of metal, dark and post-rock musicians. These circles led them to embrace the globally circulating narrative of the Venetian haunted island and use it as a source of musical inspiration.

This surprisingly wide and international music repertoire shows, once more, how the Internet and television can contribute to the construction of a media-myth (or, to better say, to an umpteenth variation of a myth), which suits the prevalent mood in certain musical genres, nurturing artistic inspirations. If in the above analysed television shows and web pages, the link between the place and the narrative was indirect, here, in the musical context, the geographic materiality of the island is replaced by a fictional Poveglia.

Conclusion

The island of Poveglia epitomises the dichotomous characteristics that pertain to small islands (Depraetere, 1991; Baldacchino, 2008): past and future, lived and imagined, outside and inside, inhabited and abandoned, histories and stories, heritage and wilderness,

²⁰ Sometimes they have an approximate knowledge of the geographical location of the island, as in the quoted song that places it “not far away from the lagoon of Venetia” rather than in the lagoon.

vulnerability and resilience and global and local; once more a small island has proved to be an “outpost of globalisation” (Ratter 2018). Poveglia is both decaying and generating. The intermitting human presence on the island has resulted in an historical alternation of human settling, abandonment and recolonisation. In the recursive periods of abandonment, human absence (whether temporary or long term) has been replaced by non-human presences, such as pioneer vegetation, animals—birds and rabbits—and, possibly, spectral presences. The processes of abandonment, re-wilderness and decay, alongside the lack of a strong shared narration of the island, allowed the proliferation and the circulation of stories that succeeded in re-imagining Poveglia and ‘making space’ for ghosts.

As noted by Baldacchino, “islands suggest themselves as *tabulae rasae*” (2006: 5). In other words, they are a potential background for any conceivable narrative or conceptual framing of the world. This is even more evident in abandoned islands. Island metaphors and cultural images can overthrow objective reality (Baldacchino, 2006; Hay, 2006) to the point that an island “tends to become another globally transportable commodity” (Hay, 2006: 32; Gillis, 2004). The caricature of haunted Poveglia sketched by certain television programmes and websites seems to confirm this process. Indeed, the ghosts of Poveglia, like many other ghosts before them, have been “available to be processed, reproduced, packaged, marketed and distributed by the engines of cultural production” (Clery, 1995: 18). Nevertheless, the globally circulating ghost island narrative rebounds upon the island, raising curiosity about its geographic materiality and attracting outsiders. The ghosts of Poveglia, whether they are the evidence of paranormal activity or simply the fruit of media-driven imagination, ultimately activate new practices on the island and emotions inspired by specific sensibilities towards the place.

For the neuroscientist Peter Brugger, ghosts do not have a place in the ruined castles of childhood memories but in the brain itself (2001). If a brain has ghosts, places do too. This ubiquitous aspect of phenomenology may be called *genius loci*, an immaterial presence pertaining to a specific place (Bell, 1997). Places are, in a word, personified even when there is no one there. In particular, the geographic features of small abandoned islands (silent buildings, spaces that have run wild, a perceivable finitude and other inscrutable geographies) can be easily re-interpreted, re-imagined and re-visited in the light of some immaterial presence coming from another time (the past) and/or from another dimension (the paranormal).

In this article, we aimed to bring to light the complexity of an apparently trivial island narrative and, at the same time, contain the risk of sterilising hauntology through academic canonisation (Pilar Blanco and Peeren, 2013). The concept of ghosts led us to the possibility of bringing together theoretical academic discourse and popular narratives circulating among individuals and communities. When we began work on this topic, we were sceptical of the extent to which a place-centred geographical analysis was potentially pursuable through reflections on ghosts that went beyond the cultural lens of island metaphors. Now, we can confirm how the “in betweenness” of ghosts “can contribute to problematise, rethink and reposition the discontinuities of time and space, as well as the numerous dichotomies that tend to simplify the geographical gazes, such as the one, precisely, between visible and invisible, real and unreal, life and death, presence and absence” (Vanolo, 2018: 370 – authors’ translation). The case of Poveglia demonstrates how ghosts, intended and perceived by different actors as metaphors, presences, absences, liminal entities or even as easy sensationalist lures, can contribute to shape not only the way island narratives are told but also the way they are approached, lived and practiced.

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