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Though the Agony is Eternal:

Voices from Below, from Anywhere. Exhibit of Dungeon Graffiti in Palazzo Chiaramonte-Steri, Palermo

Abstract: Exhibitions and museums about the Inquisition are usually focused on trial procedures, which involved torture. This form of violence is typically exhibited through recreated torture devices and repeats a narrative that leaves out the bodies and subjectivities of the prosecuted. In this paper, I argue that, by displaying prisoners' graffiti and providing context, the Steri Palace in Palermo, Sicily, produces a form of collective knowledge about early modern confinement rooted in the captives' experience and self-representation, instead of reproducing the power relation that inquisitorial sources tend to present. I also argue that the Steri exhibition responds to the 'morality' issue prevalent in dark tourism studies.

Keywords: graffiti, prison history, dark tourism, Inquisition, torture, Palermo

Introduction

"Though the agony is eternal, neither consciousness nor soul had abandoned me."[1] These are the final verses of a "soundless scream"[2] scratched by an anonymous prisoner on the walls of his cell in the prison built in the court of Palazzo Chiaramon-

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1 The prisoner – who signs as the abandoned – writes in Sicilian. Here the original ottava rima, entirely readable on the wall: "I am aware, and I feel everything. / Can't I resist the excessive pain? / And in front of the troubles that I continue to suffer every day, / my mortal pain is still alive. / Oh, what fate suspends my hardships / so that the pain is stronger: / though the agony is eternal, neither consciousness nor soul had abandoned me".

2 Giuseppe Pitrè/Leonardo Sciascia, Urla senza suono. Graffiti e disegni dei prigionieri dell'Inquisizione, Palermo 1999.

te-Steri, Palermo. From 1603 to 1782, while the Kingdom of Sicily was under the domain of the Spanish crown, the palace housed the prisons of the Spanish Inquisition. The relatively recent restoration of the building (2000–2005) has revealed hundreds of graffiti made by prisoners, and in 2011, Palazzo Steri was finally made accessible to the broader public, together with the writings and sketches that speak of the harshness of early modern confinement.

In this paper, I provide an overview of the historical functioning of Inquisition prisons and, in particular, of the procedures involved during trial and interrogation. In light of this praxis, the power relationship between the Holy Office and its prisoners are thus explored by considering how an overreliance on the dominant narrative leads to certain kinds of exhibitions, including the ones curated by the franchise *Inquisizione s.r.l.* in Italy, that will be explored in this paper. In this article, I contradict these dominant approaches by inverting the perspective and providing a view of captive life *from below*, as emerges from rather neglected historical sources, such as prison graffiti. Palazzo Steri, with its extraordinary abundance of well-preserved graffiti, has thus been selected as a case study for this article in contrast with other prison and torture museums. Methodologically, I draw on social history and the social history of writings (as a specific paleographical approach), as outlined by Armando Petrucci. I then refer to dark tourism studies and decolonial curatorship to provide a broader comprehension of the case study and verify the attitudes of visitors towards violence-related sites.

Scholarship on the early modern period, especially since the 1970s, has begun to question the objectivity of the "view from above",[3] a perspective which influenced how outcomes resulting from proceedings and chronicles were characterized: in Italy such perspective followed in particular from Carlo Ginzburg, whose work on Menocchio, an Italian miller prosecuted by the Roman Inquisition, paved the way to a new approach to written historical sources.[4] All information about the Spanish Inquisition and its functionality came in fact from documents that were produced and used by the Spanish Holy Office itself. The inquisitorial proceedings often ignored and denied the subjectivities of its victims (and when they did not, it is not on purpose as Ginzburg pointed out), and eventually handbooks provided inquisi-

3 Donna Haraway, Situated Knowledges: the Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective, in: Feminist Studies 14/3 (1988), 575–599, 589. Such approach originated from the subaltern studies introduced by Antonio Gramsci and developed by the *Subaltern studies collective* formed at the University of New Delhi by Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey, Shahid Amin, David Arnold, David Hardiman, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and, later, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Bernard Cohn.

4 Carlo Ginzburg, Il formaggio e i vermi. Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500 [The cheese and the worms. The cosmos of a sixteenth-century miller], 2nd ed., Milan 2019.

tors with strict guidelines for interrogations.[5] In this way, violence remained a prerogative and objective monopoly of the institution, which also controlled the way this violence was depicted. The consequences of this monopoly and its representation are still noticeable in how exhibitions display and narrate the power of the Inquisition and the functioning of its courts. While a paradigm shift in the approach to institutional sources has occurred in the scholarship, curators have too often failed to represent and acknowledge this turn.

Along with a critical attitude to Inquisition, in this paper I approach penal museums on the basis of Tony Bennett's Foucauldian approach, assuming for museums the role of disciplining institutions in relation to the modes of governmentality that define modern Western society.[6] In the 1980s, Bennett observed an increasing trend of old prisons reopened for visitors,[7] associated to "an important symbolic symbiosis between the development of imprisonment as the major modern form of punishment and the simultaneous tendency of museums and related institutions to include past forms of penalty within their repertoire of representational concerns"[8]. In *The Birth of the Museum*, he wrote that "if the museum supplanted the scene of punishment in taking on the function of displaying power to the populace, the rhetorical economy of the power that was displayed was significantly altered […] the museum – addressing the people as a public, as citizens – aimed to inveigle the general populace into complicity with power by placing them on this side of power which it represented to it as its own".[9] Bennett's analysis of museums as institutions where the exhibition space works as self-disciplining dispositive remained substantially is the starting point of this paper. I argue that the only step that must be considered is the shift that occurred from state power as the main actor in disciplining through soft or hard approaches to global neoliberal governance. With reference to the economic nature of disciplining interests, in this paper, I refer to dark tourism as a useful approach to the Steri palace and, more generally, to Inquisition or torture museums. The commodification of such sites offers the chance for further analysis on the relation between curatorial choices, past reception, dominant narrative, and counter-hegemonic discourse.

5 To this regard, see in particular Stefano Dall'Aglio, Voices under Trial. Inquisition, Abjuration, and Preachers' Orality in Sixteenth-Century Italy, in: Renaissance Studies 31/1 (2017), 25–42; John Arnold, The Historian as Inquisitor. The Ethics of Interrogating Subaltern Voices, in: Rethinking History 2/3 (1998), 379–386. More in general, my interpretation of archive records follows from the methodology drawn in the third chapter of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Towards a History of the Vanishing Present, Cambridge/London 1999.

6 Tony Bennet, The Birth of the Museum, London and New York 1995, 95.

7 Tony Bennett, Convict Chic, in: Australian Left Review 106 (1988), 40–41.

8 Bennet, Birth, 153.

9 Ibid., 95.

Palazzo Steri was commissioned by Manfredi Chiaramonte and completed in 1307. The palace was intended primarily as a private residence and it was called *Hosterium magnum* – later shortened to *Steri* –, that is "large fortified building". Given the meaning of the name, the palace is often called simply Steri, but it is not uncommon to refer to it as Palazzo Steri, Palazzo Chiaramonte, or Palazzo Chiaramonte-Steri.

The palace was repurposed several times over the centuries and its plan modified accordingly. From 1468 to 1517, the Steri lodged the viceroys while the Norman Palace – the royal residence – was being renovated and until the end of the sixteenth century it was the site of the civil justice tribunal. When these offices were moved to the Norman Palace, the Spanish Inquisition relocated its tribunal and its prisons here, and Palazzo Steri continued to be the seat of the Inquisition until 1782, when it was abolished by the viceroy of Sicily, Domenico Caracciolo.

The establishment of the Spanish Inquisition in Sicily was greeted with discontent by local institutions, whose laws allowed only indigenous judges.[10] The history of this jurisdictional conflict also affected the quest for a definitive seat: since the definitive installation of the Spanish Inquisition in Sicily in 1500,[11] the Office had moved its headquarters to a number of different mansions and palaces, but the Steri was the only long-lasting location. The inquisitors invested in the construction of new buildings that contained cells for prisoners, though the plan of the structure remains uncertain given that Caracciolo ordered most of the Inquisition's archival documents to be burnt and the interiors modified. After the abolition of the Holy Office, the palace was renovated and partially razed. The remaining buildings were turned into storage spaces for the public prosecutor. Its walls were plastered and filled with furniture and shelves: any evidence of their past was lost until 1906,

10 See Francesco Giunta, Dossier sull'Inquisizione in Sicilia. L'organigramma del Sant'Uffizio a metà Cinquecento, Palermo 1991; Francesco Renda, L'Inquisizione in Sicilia. I fatti, le persone, Palermo 1997; Lina Scalisi, Il controllo del sacro. Poteri e istituzioni concorrenti nella Palermo del Cinque e Seicento, Rome 2004; Valeria La Motta, Ministri e ufficiali dell'inquisizione spagnola durante il tumulto di Palermo del 1516, in: Giuseppe Ambrosino/Loris De Nardi (ed.), Imperial. Il ruolo della rappresentanza politica informale nella costruzione e nello sviluppo delle entità statuali (XV-XXI secolo), Verona/Bolzano 2017, 139–157; Romano Canosa/Isabella Colonnello, L'ultima eresia. Quietisti e Inquisizione in Sicilia tra Seicento e Settecento, Palermo 1986, 21.

11 The general inquisitor Tomás de Torquemada appointed Antonio de la Peña as inquisitor of Sicily already in 1487. The following thirteen years were characterized by the co-presence of the medieval and the Spanish Inquisition, until the abolition of the former apparatus structured by Rinaldo Montoro and Giovanni Sgalambro. Valeria La Motta, Haereticos. L'Inquisizione spagnola in Sicilia, Palermo 2019; Valeria La Motta, Inquisizione in Sicilia, in: Dizionario di eretici, dissidenti e inquisitori nel mondo mediterraneo, https://www.ereticopedia.org/inquisizione-sicilia (2 January 2023).

when, for the first time during the restoration of the building, the ethnographer Giuseppe Pitrè had the chance to see, recognize, and transcribe many graffiti. During a restoration work, in fact, some labourers, "spontaneously peeling off the lime", caught sight of several unknown frescoes. To shed light on the sketches, Pitrè was called in. He spent six months manually removing the superficial layers of plaster in three rooms, revealing hundreds of "graphic contents", which he called "dungeon palimpsests" because of their layering. His discovery was published posthumously in 1940.[12] Recently, the prisons have been studied by Maria Sofia Messana, Giovanna Fiume, Valeria La Motta, and the author.[13]

As the headquarters of the Holy Office, the Steri not only housed the dungeons but also the Inquisition's court and its offices. Trials and detentions were held in the same place to avoid information leaking out: the Spanish Inquisition enhanced the mystical value of *secretum* by imposing the utmost anonymity on informers. In the same vein, witnesses and the headquarters were chosen with regard to their remote location, with the special aim of preserving the identity of accusers and *familiares*, the lay collaborators of the. The role of the latter was crucial when it came to filing a case: the judicial activity of the Holy Office began with a guilty plea or a witness report that was collected by the *familiares*. Once the notification (*notitia criminis*) reached the Inquisition, it was possible to begin gathering information by interrogating possible acquaintances and charging the defendants. Once incarcerated, the defendants' assets were seized by the notary, and they were kept in the dark about the charges and the accusers. They were interrogated at least three times before the charges were divulged to them and after that, the inquisitor was eventually authorized to proceed with the interrogation under torture, if he considered it appropriate. In this case, the prisoners were led into the dungeon where, in the presence of the inquisitor, an emissary of the bishop, a notary, and the lay executioner, they were subjected twice to the *strappado*, a form of torture in which the victim's hands were tied behind the back and suspended by a rope attached to the wrists, typically resulting in dislocated shoulders. Torture, as a procedural mechanism of *inquisitio* (and not as a punitive measure),[14] could be administered also to witnesses. Each suspect might undergo several sessions of torture, for the purpose of obtaining a confession, to determine the intentions of the self-confessed[15] and collect the names of any accomplices. Torture could not be applied to elderly people, pregnant women, chil-

12 Giuseppe Pitrè, Del Sant'Uffizio a Palermo e di un carcere di esso, Rome 1940.

13 Maria Sofia Messana, Inquisitori, negromanti e streghe nella Sicilia moderna (1500–1782), Palermo 2007; Giovanna Fiume, Del Santo Uffizio in Sicilia e delle sue carceri, Rome 2021.

14 Ron Hassner, The Cost of Torture. Evidence from the Spanish Inquisition, in: Security studies 29/3 (2020), 457–492.

15 Eliseo Masini, Sacro arsenale, ouero Prattica dell'Officio della S. Inquisitione, Genoa 1621, 128.

dren, and people with disabilities, but in any other circumstances the suspect had to suffer, and no differences were made with regard to the gender or the social status of the prisoners.[16] According to the handbooks, each torture session lasted half an hour, and long pauses were planned in between, except cases in which "due to the atrocity of the crime and the seriousness of the evidence" the judges reserved the right to "continue the torture" and to "repeat it on the day after the first torture".[17] Generally speaking, the procedure illustrated and performed by the Inquisition appears as a form of "bureaucratized torture"[18] regulated by a strict doctrine, at odds with the practice of European criminal justice.[19]

The torments almost invariably led to a confession, which the suspects still had to ratify within 24 hours from the conclusion of the torture. In cases where the suspect refused – a frequent occurrence, given the ease with which pain induced the prisoner to confess – the Inquisition had the right to repeat the procedure from the beginning to push for a second confession. On the walls of a cell on the first floor, a prisoner wrote "On 30th of August 1645 I was tortured. On 9 of September, I was tortured again", and the warning recurs: "Watch it! Here they use the rope", confirming what was described as the regular practice in the inquisitors' handbooks. Nevertheless, this procedure could only be applied when there was "reasonable" evidence of guilt,[20] even if this rationale itself relied on denunciation and confession under torture.

During this time, the prisoner was supposed to be completely isolated: the Spanish Inquisition tried to arrange the confinement in such a way as to avoid any contact between incarcerated people.[21] However, the prisons' overcrowding made actual isolation quite unlikely. Prisoners shared the same cells – and the same walls. It is on these walls that we can get a first glimpse of how prisoners interacted with each other in regard to the *secretum*, the imposed silence.[22] Each room had an inner and outer door and a private toilet.[23] The toilet was enclosed by walls so that it was not

16 Nicholas Eymerich, Directorium inquisitorum cum commentariis Fancisci Pegnae, Rome 1585, 519; Bernardo Gui, Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis, Paris 1886, 98.

17 Masini, Arsenale, 1621, 143.

18 Hassner, Cost, (2020), 462.

19 Henry Kamen, The Spanish Inquisition. A historical review, 4 edn., New Haven/London 2014, 240.

20 Masini, Arsenale, 1621, 131. According to Argisto Giuffedi, reality was far from this (see n.7).

21 Tomas de Torquemada, Compilación de las instrucciones del Oficio de la Santa Inquisición, Madrid 1667, 10.

22 Paolo Prodi, Una storia della giustizia. Dal pluralismo dei fori al moderno dualismo tra coscienza e diritto, Bologna 2000; Adriano Prosperi, Tribunali della coscienza. Inquisitori, confessori, missionari, Torino 1996; Enrique Gacto, Consideraciones sobre el secreto del proceso inquisitorial, in: Anuario de historia del derecho español 2 (1997), 1633–1656.

23 Giuseppe Rotolo/Domenico Policarpo, Carceri dell'Inquisizione. Storia di una scoperta, in: Aldo Gerbino (ed.), Organismi. Il sistema museale dell'Università di Palermo, Palermo 2012, 32–38, 35.

visible from the outside. Some records report that the warder was required to inspect each cell almost every day, but these inspections were carried out by removing the prisoners from their cells into the corridor while the jailers took a cursory glance inside from the entrance.[24] This practice probably led prisoners to consider the toilet a safe zone, protected from the Inquisition's gaze. It is here that we can find their most spontaneous expressions. In cell no 2, first floor, three graffiti are still visible in the latrine. The largest one had been written with the smoke of a candle and said *nega,* elliptically urging whoever reads it to deny (any guilt, presumably). It is perhaps not by chance that this exhortation was made in the most hidden recess of the room, since the rule of *secreto* was intended to prevent any information leaking out, not only about the witnesses and the charges against the accused but also about how the Holy Office operated. Just below this exhortation, another prisoner put down instructions on how to find the holes that connected one room to the others. Evidence of the constant attempts to communicate are found not only on the walls. Pier Josè Mannella, who has conducted several studies on witchery in Sicily, recently pieced together the circumstances of a trial in which two defendants tried to communicate from one cell to another in order to arrange a common version of events, and found evidence of several women who became pregnant during their detention.[25]

As Michel Foucault rightly pointed out, "in the order of criminal justice, knowledge was the absolute privilege of the prosecution"[26]. In this case, inquisitorial power was not to be considered the power to prosecute criminals, but the earthly inheritance of the divine right to punish the *primi parentes*, Adam and Eve, which has its roots in Genesis 3:14-24. This interpretation was given for the first time by Luis De Páramo, inquisitor in Sicily from 1586 to 1608, who wrote a treatise on the origins of the Holy Office, according to which the history of the institution had to be read from a triumphant and providential perspective. Luis De Páramo identified God as the first inquisitor as soon as the creator interrogated Adam in Eden.[27]

24 AHN, Inq. Leg. 1745–4, exp. 22, ff. 235r–236r..

25 Pier Josè Mannella, Dalla carta al muro. Graffiti e rituali nelle segrete dello Steri, in: Etnografie del contemporaneo 4/4 (2021), 155–199, 175.

26 Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison [Surveiller et punir. La naissance de la prison], 2nd ed., New York 1995, 35.

27 Luis de Paramo, De origine et progressu Offici Sanctae Inquisitionis, Madrid 1598.

Between secreto and spittaculu: violence from negation to public celebration

The graffiti found in Palermo have been referred to as *soundless screams*[28] and *captive voices*.[29] Such interpretations point out a bias in the historians' gaze that produces a discourse on incarcerated people based on the ideal requirements of the victim. The bias, thus, leads to transposing a highly emotional feature – that is the inaudibility of grief – into the field of research, with all the consequences that the debate around subalternity has largely described.[30] I argue, instead, that the graffiti were a performative act of writing through which incarcerated people could find a (more or less) spontaneous and intentional form of expression. This expression was set against the backdrop of an imposed silence, itself a form of violence that not only afflicted bodies but also minds through isolation, discipline, and surveillance. It would be imprudent, in my opinion, to describe all these writings as acts of resistance in the sense of a deliberate act of objection leading to dissent: the Steri prisons are far from the coeval British dungeons.[31] In Palermo, most graffiti are devotional or religion related (prayers, pleas, biblical and liturgical quotes, sentences from the Church Fathers), and some scholars read them as prisoners' attempt to make the presence of a controlling and warning eye finally material, tangible, and visible.[32] Another interpretation casts them as attempts to please the Inquisition and prove prisoners' orthodoxy, but paleographers might object that religious graffiti were the most common type of writings simply because they reproduced the official – and most familiar – epigraphy.[33] However, the quest for internal means of communication to create a commu-

28 Pitrè/Sciascia, Urla, 1999; Giovanna Fiume, Soundless Screams: Graffiti and Drawings in the Prisons of the Holy Office in Palermo, in: Journal of Early Modern History 21/3 (2017), 188–215.

29 Giovanna Fiume/Mercedes García-Arenal (eds.), Parole prigioniere. I graffiti delle carceri del Santo Uffizio di Palermo, Palermo 2018.

30 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Can the Subaltern Speak?, in: Cary Nelson/Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, London 1988, 271–313.

31 See Ruth Ahnert, The Rise of Prison Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Cambridge 2013; William Sherman/William Sheila (eds.), Prison Writings in Early Modern England, in: Huntington Library Quarterly 72/2 (2009); Alison Ruppel Shell, The Writing on the Wall? John Ingram's Verse and the Dissemination of Catholic Prison Writing, in: British Catholic History 33/1 (2016), 58–70; Lisa Di Crescenzo/Sally Fisher, Exile and Imprisonment in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, in: Paregon 34/2, 1–23; Rivkah Zim, The Consolations of Writing: Literary Strategies of Resistance from Boethius to Primo Levi, Princeton 2014.

32 Gianclaudio Civale, Animo carcerato: Inquisizione, detenzione e graffiti a Palermo nel secolo XVII, in: Mediterranea. Ricerche storiche 14/40 (2017), 249–294, 266.

33 On historical graffiti see Armando Petrucci, Public Lettering. Script, Power and Culture, Chicago/London 1993; Francisco Gimeno Blay/María Luz Mandingorra Llavata (eds.), Los muros tiene la palabra. Materiales para una historia de los graffiti, Valencia 1997; Véronique Plesch, Body of Evidence. Devotional Graffiti in a Piedmontese Chapel, in: Martin Heusser et al. (eds.), On Verbal/Visual Representation, Leiden 2005, 179–191.

nity of shared knowledge represented a conscious provocation to the Holy Office. Even when the dimension and position of the graffiti suggest a personal use of the sign, it is in fact possible to explain the act of writing as an act of self-remembrance, of self-determination through the production, and, in particular, the re-appropriation of space. By marking the walls, "the graphic act allows the prisoner to embezzle and reclaim its place within the prison".[34]

However, the imperative silence imposed on prisoners also contrasted sharply with the spectacular nature of the punishment, which was the only public moment of the inquisitorial suit. Trials were meant not only to redeem the sinner but also to put them on public display. The public *auto de fe*, literally the "acts of faith", were held about once a year[35] and displayed in public places with a pedagogical purpose of exhibiting and reaffirming the power of the Holy Office. This kind of *auto de fe* was quite aptly defined as "spettacoli",[36] performances to be "celebrated"[37]. The public acts of faith were accompanied by music and choirs and sometimes culminated in bullfights and equestrian games because "the discomfort, displeasure and uneasiness that the punishments could create in the spectators had to be quickly dissolved"[38]. Moreover, the magnificence of these moments tended to *justify* the punishment, to make the punishment *just* for the community.[39]

The polarity between the secret/silence/anonymity of the trial and the exhibited punishment – not a prerogative of the Holy Office but inherent to all European medieval and early modern legal systems – seems to have been carried over into modern exhibitions about the Inquisition. The sensationalist and entertaining approach to torture refers there to the recollection of pain by displaying alleged torture tools in dark and hidden locations. The Holy Office's quest to produce consensus through the spectacularization of public penances, and to instil fear and subjection through an aura of mystery through the sole evocation of its power, are indeed characteristics that most torture museums or early modern prison museums tend to

34 Joël Candau/Philippe Hameau, Cicatrices murales, in: Le monde alpin et rhodanien. Revue régionale d'ethnologie 1/2 (2004), 7–11, 9–10.

35 Antonino Franchina, Breve rapporto del tribunale della Ss. Inquisizione di Sicilia, Palermo 1744, 45. A comprehensive list of the acts of faith held in Palermo is available in Messana, Inquisitori, 2007.

36 It was a shared definition that also occurs on the walls ("On 21 July 1646, / they held "lu spittacolo" / in St. Dominic square, with / thirty-three people, / male and female").

37 Francesco Baronio, Ristretto de' processi nel pubblico spettacolo della fede divulgati ed espediti a 9 settembre 1640 dalla Santa Inquisizione di Sicilia nella piazza della madrechiesa di Palermo, Palermo 1640; Antonino Mongitore, Breve ristretto di un atto generale di fede celebrato in Palermo il giorno 6 di aprile del presente anno 1724, Palermo 1724.

38 Consuelo Maqueda Abreu, El auto da fé como manifestación del poder inquisitorial, in: José Antonio Escudero López (ed.), Perfiles jurídicos de la Inquisición española, Madrid 1986, 407–414, 414.

39 Mongitore, Ristretto, 1724, 83: "They all venerated the divine, inscrutable judgments of God: and in their loss they acclaimed the triumph of the Holy Faith over the ungodly by shouting with the loudest voices: long live the Holy Faith" (my translation).

reproduce. The exhibition of torture devices leans towards (and relies on) one specific narrative that follows the power relation set by the Inquisition; hence, their pedagogical intent is only partly achieved. Building on this, I argue that the musealization of the *soundless screams* of Palermo can lead to a different understanding of the historical circumstances that dismantle the rhetoric of inquisitorial power and allow for the visitors to empathize with the victims. The question is how.

The Steri prison: a case study exhibition

The Steri palace was repurposed several times and the building's original plans no longer exist. Nowadays, the access to the building is through a sixteenth-century gate that overlooks Piazza Marina and leads to an inner quadrangle. A grim building emerges on the north-eastern side of the historical complex, separated from the main body of the palace.[40] The entrance overlooks a long corridor and from there the visitor has direct access to eight cells on the ground floor. The first floor is accessed through the seventeenth-century staircase. Each cell measures 4.65 by 6.85m, with a height of 6.50 m at the centre of the ceiling. The prison's floor plan has been corrupted over the years: original doors have been removed and enlarged and internal walls were demolished. Doors were also opened to connect the adjacent rooms; therefore, on the ground floor, it is hard for visitors to get a sense of what the historical space was like. Visitors can go from one room to another without passing through the corridor, which contains an exhibit of historical maps of Sicily. These maps are meant to allow visitors to compare the official topography of the island over the centuries with two maps drawn by a prisoner in two different cells.

The current appearance of the building is the result of a long dispute. In the 1960s, the city council signed a restoration project that involved tearing down the *filippine* – the cells named after King Philip III of Spain – which were considered a later addition without historical value. Strenuous opposition on the part of public opinion that, at odds with the council, claimed the values of the fabric, succeeded in preventing the demolition of the seventeenth-century building. But it could not stop the destruction of other cells discovered in 1904 by the jurist and historian Vito La Mantia[41] and examined by writer Leonardo Sciascia and photographer Fer-

40 Architectural signs and graffiti on the outer walls prove that the building was indeed connected to the Steri's main body. The works done in the 1970s demolished the southern part of the *filippine* block to restore the old volumes layout.

41 Vito La Mantia, L'Inquisizione in Sicilia. Serie dei rilasciati al braccio secolare 1487–1732. Documenti sull'abolizione dell'Inquisizione, Palermo 1904.

dinando Scianna.[42] Scholars, writers, journalists, and artists, together with the citizens of Palermo, tried to stop the city council, but in vain. This is not a negligible detail – it proves that ancient prisons and prisoners' graffiti were not considered valuable historical sources or objects worthy of display. The later restorations, carried out in the 1970s, did nothing to secure this heritage but adapted the *piano nobile,* the principal floor of the palace, to the needs of the rectorate office of the University of Palermo. The project did not end well since, ultimately, the site was abandoned and then occupied by a junkyard dealer who turned the seventeenth-century building and the surrounding area into a landfill.

In the meantime, the regional administration and the university were planning definitive site refurbishing but works began only in 2000 after the death of the squatter. Five years later, traces of reddish colour were discovered on the ground floor and fourteen cells were identified, eight on the ground floor, six on the first floor. The supervisors of the project[43] modified it with the aim of preserving, restoring, and exposing the cells. This was the first time that the idea of a prison museum was expressed. The site was opened to the public in 2011 through guided visits. Since then, no alterations have been introduced to the site or to the exhibition, and the historical prisons have been included in the museum centre of the University of Palermo.

The cells underwent some modification during the most recent restorations. Wall washer lights enlightening upwards have been installed on the floor along the walls in all rooms, which are otherwise too dark for the graffiti to be appreciated despite the (non-original) windows. The walls are, in fact, covered by layers of writings and sketches, in most cases painted, sometimes carved. There are some differences between the two floors: the rooms on the first floor are slightly larger (5.10 by 6.85 m) and in more recent times two windows were inserted one above the other. On the first floor, one of the cells was restored according to the original plan so that it is easier to estimate the actual size and shape of the cells. This is also the only cell that contains some other additions: a wooden chair and a panel with an Italian quote from Leonardo Sciascia's book *Death of the Inquisitor.*[44] Except for the artificial lighting on the floor, the other rooms are empty. There are no torture devices in

42 Pitrè/Sciascia, Urla, 1999.

43 The excavations and the restorations were supervised by Emanuele Canzonieri (archaeologist), Antonino Catalano (engineer), Santi Bonomo, and Domenico Policarpo (architects), appointed by the regional administration, the city council, and the University of Palermo.

44 Leonardo Sciascia, Death of the Inquisitor and Other Stories [Morte dell'inquisitore], Manchester 1990. The books tell the story of Diego La Matina, an Augustinian friar arrested and prosecuted by the Holy Office for four times in thirteen years with different charges – from banditry to heresy. For a historical reconstruction of his life see Maria Sofia Messana, La vicenda carceraria di fra' Diego La Matina, in: Incontri mediterranei 3 (2002), 176–193.

the cells, no prints dwelling on the brutality of the trials or indulging in gory recollections of the violence inflicted on the prisoners' bodies, and no explanatory panels. Inquisition museums – systematically presented as "torture museums" – usually linger on the Holy Office's repressive and violent features, providing extensive information about trial procedures and sometimes about interrogations under torture. This is a constant feature not only in Italy. The same attention to torture tools is present in the Inquisition museums of Lima, Toluca, Cordoba, or Carcassonne. In this scenario, Palazzo Steri stands out. The exhibition relies on the musealization of artefacts that would have otherwise been neglected. In the past, history museums tended to select objects for display based on criteria that have been extensively questioned, leading to a paradigm shift in the curatorial approach.[45] Even if archaeology and history museums tend to be slower than other kinds of museums in introducing new museological criteria, the musealization of these graffiti follows from and articulates this shift.

The graffiti of Palazzo Steri are quite unique among prison graffiti. In other former Holy Office prisons the writings are fewer and less well preserved. The quality and quantity are not the only distinctive features of the writings in the Steri's prison. They appear *in situ* as a rare example of a still-existing inquisitorial prison built for this purpose. The surrounding architectural framework is, in fact, not without importance. As Deyan Sudjic points out: "Architecture matters because […], more than any other cultural form, it is a means of setting the historical record straight."[46] In this case, the authenticity of the building contributes towards convincing visitors of the institution's authenticity, a condition that "engenders a degree of empathy between the visitor and the past victim (or product)".[47] The sited-ness of these graffiti is a major draw for visitors, since the prison and its pedagogy are perceived as authentic.

Disneyland dungeons and dark tourism

Unlike Palazzo Steri, most exhibits about the Holy Office dwell on torture devices exhibited within recreated settings; prisoners are only represented as the victims of

45 See Andrea Witcomb/Kylie Message (eds.), Museum Theory, New York 2020; Jean-Paul Martinon (ed.), The Curatorial. A Philosophy of Curating, London 2013; Paul O'Neil/Lucy Steeds/Mick Wilson (eds.), How Institutions Think. Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse, Cambridge MA 2017.

46 Deyan Sudjic, Engineering Conflict, in: The New York Times Magazine (21 May 2006), https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/21/magazine/engineering-conflict.html (8 April 2022).

47 Philip Stone, A Dark Tourism Spectrum: Towards a Typology of Death and Macabre Related Tourist Sites, Attractions and Exhibitions, in: Tourism: An Interdisciplinary International Journal 52/2 (2006), 145–160, 152.

the displayed object – the violence itself. The artefacts chosen to represent it are, in most cases, forgeries. Such expositions do not aim to provide an accurate historical reconstruction but an entertaining and morbid narrative of violence. Within this frame, a fair representation of prisoners would call off the desired effect. Furthermore, the location of these museums, recreated with the sole purpose of hosting the exhibit, produces a different awareness of the *milieu*, perceived as artificial and manipulated. In Italy, this is well represented by a franchise known as *Inquisizione s.r.l.,* which owns five permanent museums and has put on several temporary exhibitions. The five galleries – the "Horror Disneyland", as one journalist put it[48] – are housed in the basements of medieval buildings that never actually served as dungeons. The organization's website *www.torturemuseum.it* claims that it "doesn't need to emphasise its message through bloody representation and horror scenes: instruments speak for themselves", in a venue where "thanks to recent innovations, it is possible to fully understand the phenomenon of torture, but also to experience in an 'experiential' way the devastating effects it caused on the victims".[49] The declared purpose of these exhibitions is "practising our memory, documenting the aberrations of intolerance and zealotry which men achieved in their clear headed delirium to intentionally provoke harm and death [sic]"[50]. This is the stated pedagogical aim, but how is it accomplished? This question refers us back to the field of study on dark tourism – tourism to locations of disasters and death, to destinations where violence is the main attraction[51] for remembrance, education, or entertainment.[52]

Studies on dark tourism have addressed the questionable "morality" of displaying violence and death. The media have accused dark tourism of trivialising death and exploiting tragedy through the commodification of grief and pain, or for economic or political purposes.[53] To some extent, I agree, but I think it is simplistic to label dark tourism experiences as mere voyeurism or driven by *Schadenfreude*. While "contemporary tourists are increasingly travelling to destinations associated

48 La Disneyland degli orrori, in: Il Mattino (2 March 1986), http://www.torturemuseum.it/rassegna-stampa/disneyland-degli-orrori/ (8 April 2022). The article has been published on the museums' website within the section dedicated to the press review.

49 The exhibit, http://www.torturemuseum.it/en/the-exhibit/ (8 April 2022).

50 A journey through human cruelty, http://www.torturemuseum.it/en/the-exhibit/ (8 April 2022).

51 Erika Robb, Violence and Recreation. Vacationing in the Realm of Dark Tourism, in: Anthropology and Humanism, 34/1 (2009), 51–60, 51.

52 Malcolm Foley/J. John Lennon, Editorial: Heart of Darkness, in: International Journal of Heritage Studies 2/4 (1996), 195–197. Philip Stone, Dark Tourism and Significant Other Death: Towards a Model of Mortality Mediation, in: Annals of Tourism Research 39/3 (2012), 1565–1587, 1569.

53 Philip Stone/Richard Sharpley, Deviance, Dark Tourism and 'Dark Leisure': Towards a (Re)Configuration of Morality and the Taboo in Secular Society, in: Sam Elkington/Sean Gammon (eds.), Contemporary Perspectives in Leisure: Meanings, Motives and Lifelong Learning, Abington 2013, 54–64.

with death and suffering"[54], the question of whether this trend is recent or historically documented is still open to debate.[55] Tourism scholars Malcolm Foley and J. John Lennon have referenced sociologist Chris Rojek's studies on leisure to define dark tourism as "an intimation of post-modernity"[56]. Tony Seaton, in turn, argued that dark tourism has a long tradition, emerging an historical continuity between early practices of thanatopsis, the contemplation of death – expressed in pilgrimages to sites housing relics or places of martyrdom, or crowds attending public executions in early modern times.[57] According to Seaton, contemporary dark tourism is the "travel dimension of thanatopsis", hence thanatourism.[58] Both theories, in fact, address the pedagogic potential of dark sites, summarized by Philip Stone: "despite the notion of entertainment and commodification of (dark) history for mass consumption, […] it does not preclude the presentation of counter-hegemonic stories, tales of injustice or dark deeds committed in recent or distant memory".[59] Therefore, the question is not whether these exhibitions have a pedagogic intent but which tools are used to reach their aims.[60]

The *Museums of Torture and Death Penalty* operated by *Inquisizione s.r.l.* convey their message by physically moving visitors around confined spaces densely packed with instruments that were designed and used to inflict pain. The dimly lit venues do not give any idea of what real dungeons, courthouses, or "torture chambers" looked like, and, in most cases, they do not display original torture tools, spoiling the consequent positioning of the visitors. These exhibitions are supposed to incite feelings that condemn violence,[61] as indicated on the museum's website. Instead, they sensationalize it by using fakes. The dozens torture tools displayed in most of these torture exhibits are historical forgeries, designed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for private collectors and passed off as authentic. The deliberate display of fab-

54 Ibid., 6.

55 Richard Sharpley/Philip Stone (eds.), The Darker Side of Travel. The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism, Bristol/Buffalo/Toronto 2009, 22.

56 Malcolm Foley/J. John Lennon, Dark Tourism. The Attraction of Death and Disaster, London 2000, 11. According to the authors, the development of the leisure industry – which commodifies also dark sites – originated in Western societies' reaction to the medicalization and marginalization of death. Chris Rojek, Ways of Escape. Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel, London 2013.

57 Antony Seaton, Guided by the Dark: From Thanatopsis to Thanatourism, in: International Journal of Heritage Studies 2/4 (1996), 234–244.

58 Ibid., 240.

59 Stone, Tourism, (2006), 150.

60 Elspeth Frew/Leanne White (eds.), Dark Tourism and Place Identity. Managing and Interpreting Dark Places, London 2013; Jessica Moody, Where is 'Dark Public History'? A Scholarly Turn to the Dark Side, and What it Means for Public Historians, in: The Public Historian 38/3 (2016), 109–114; Glenn Hooper/John Lennon (eds.), Dark Tourism. Practice and Interpretation, London/New York 2017.

61 More generally, "dark tourism tours are undertaken in the name of social justice or historical awareness […] in the hope of preventing future atrocities or ending current ones" (Robb, Violence, (2009), 51).

rications – interrogation chairs, "iron maidens", "pears of anguish", "Judas cradles" – provides the visitors with an emotional experience that perpetuates historical power semantics instead of overturning them. This can be easily explained by matching the dark experience with anthropologist David Riches's triangle of violence. According to Riches, the acts of violence are situated in a conceptual triangle formed by the victim, the perpetrator, and the witness, who position themselves differently according to their view of the legitimacy of violence. The stance of the witnesses/visitors is conditioned by their moral code and social standards, but also by their relationship with the other actors. The display of the tools used by the inquisitors is equivalent to displaying the power asymmetry, an array that conditions the positioning of witnesses, who do not have access to an unveiling explanation, to an anagnorisis. The artificiality of both setting and displayed objects is palpable enough to distance visitors from the victims' perspectives.

Although the scholarship on dark tourism has grown significantly in recent decades, with many studies on "penal tourism", very little attention has been devoted to medieval or early modern prisons.[62] Most publications deal with well-known penitentiaries in use until quite recently, such as Alcatraz or Robben Island (Nelson Mandela's prison in South Africa). Extensive literature has been produced on the moral implications, reception, processing, and elaboration of dynamics that result from visiting these sites. Conversely, the existing literature on the historical display of torture and dungeons reports that the feeling of revulsion induced by the sight of torture devices is often accompanied by visitors' acceptance of the circumstances in which violence was perpetrated: within the historical context in which Inquisition dungeons existed, torture "is deemed as (morally) *acceptable* because that is how society was perceived to operate and thus considered the norm". On the other hand, torture becomes "(morally) *unacceptable* when political dimensions are added".[63] Sites of events such as the Holocaust or the collapse of the Twin Towers are more likely to arouse feelings of condemnation towards violence, since the

62 See Emily Godbey, Disaster tourism and the melodrama of authenticity: revisiting the 1889 Johnstown flood, in: Pennsylvania History: a journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies 73/3 (2006), 273–315; Tiya Miles, Haunted South. Dark tourism and memories of slavery from the civil war era, University of North Carolina 2015; Rebecca Price/Mark Shores, Dark tourism, in: Reference and user services quarterly 57/2 (2017), 97–101; Amy Sodaro, Exhibiting atrocity. Memorial museums and the politics of past violence, New Brunswick 2017; Carolyn Strange, The "shock" of torture: a historiographical challenge, in: History Workshop Journal 61 (2006), 135–152; Eveline Dürr/Rivke Jaffe, Theorizing slum tourism: performing, negotiating and transforming inequality, in: European review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies 93 (2012), 113–123.

63 Philip Stone, 'It's a bloody guide': fun, fear and a lighter side of dark tourism at the Dungeon visitor attractions (UK), in: Sharpley/Stone (eds.), Side, 2009, 167–185, 182.

emotional experience here links the visitors' living experience and memory to contemporary values.[64]

Because torture was a regular judicial practice in Western societies during medieval and early modern times and the Inquisition was infamous, it is quite usual to encounter torture or prison museums recalling Holy Office aesthetics. Such exhibitions tend to render the corporeal reality of the prosecuted abstractly invisible. In some cases, the functioning of torture devices is explained with the aid of a mannequin, a passive and inert representation of the victims. These exhibitions prove and reinforce the sense of obedience to a discipline institution whose expressions, function, and jurisdiction were intentionally unclear to the public. By displaying mannequins, they distil victims' bodies and materiality into abstraction and replace them with a plastic representation of what victims were supposed to look like from the torturer's point of view. It is not surprising that the visitors/witnesses are likely to adopt, unconsciously, the latter's perspective. The victims are not ignored or neglected, but depicted according to a narrative that plays a role into the visitor's positioning. This outcome shares some features with the results of the Holy Office's activity with regard to the attention that the crowd dedicated to the victims during their acts of faith. As mentioned above, the authority of the Holy Office relied both on a strict control of society, made possible by the pervasiveness of informers' networks, and on its ability to flaunt its power through public penances – the open display of tortured bodies condemned to forced labour, exile, wearing the *sanbenito* – the dress symbol of their guilt –, or, ultimately, death by execution. Besides the general sense of reverence, the show also sparked interest in the defendant: the crowd thronged along the procession route and before the *auto de fe* eager to learn more about the penitents, their sins, and, in case of death sentences, their last moments. Short pamphlets and leaflets thrived, encouraged by religious authorities, who saw the circulation of these texts as a convenient means to spread discipline, terror, and pity.[65] These leaflets reported some more or less fictionalized details about the defendants, drawing the audience's attention to the victims' personal stories. The texts contained many information about people who were otherwise invisibilized, while reproduc-

64 See Gregory Ashworth/Rudi Hartmann (eds.), Horror and human tragedy revisited. The management of sites of atrocities for tourism, New York 2005; Josef Abrhám/Eva Heřmanová, Holocaust tourism as a part of the dark tourism, in: Czech journal of social sciences, business and economics 4/1 (2015), 16–34; Olivera Simic, A tour to a site of genocide: mothers, bones and borders, in: Journal of International Women's Studies 9/3 (2008), 320–330; Zala Volcic/Karmen Erjavec/Mallory Peak, Branding post-war Sarajevo, in: Journalism studies 15/6 (2014), 726–742; Philip Stone, Dark tourism as 'mortality capital': the case of Ground Zero and the significant other dead, in: Richard Sharpley/Philip Stone (eds.), Contemporary tourist experience. Concepts and consequences, Abingdon/New York 2012, 71–94.

65 Adriano Prosperi, Delitto e perdono: la pena di morte nell'orizzonte mentale dell'Europa cristiana, Torino 2013, 361–363.

ing the dominant narrative that depicted the prisoners/sentenced as the Other,[66] indulging in a sort of *Schadenfreude*. This is also connected to the voyeuristic afflatus we find in some dark tourism sites today, and in promotional contents created to attract visitors. In this regard, the perspective "from below" was subsumed in the past by the Inquisition – through the instillation of morbid curiosity – and today by the market – which by commodifying pain and suffering extracts value from visitors' emotional reactions to injustice. As noted before, this is not a general feature of dark tourism sites, although it is quite common among torture museums.

Nevertheless, in the case of prison graffiti exhibitions, such a perspective can be problematized and overturned. When visitors enter a prison museum like the Steri, they do not bump into the tools of an institution that considers torture a legitimate procedure. Instead, they encounter the epigraphic landscapes left behind by dozens of prisoners. The walls of the cells are entirely covered by graffiti and the tour guides the visitors through them: names, dates, quotes, sketches, prayers. Visitors are, thus, given visible access to the everyday life of those who endured confinement, to their self-representation, and to their cosmogony so that the exhibition promotes an understanding of a context that does not proceed from the inquisitorial perspective. These sorts of written (or sketched) documents are to be considered "a product of society that has made it according to the bonds of forces that in it retained the power".[67] But let us take a closer look at these objects and their reception by sightseers.

Captive voices: how prisoners describe their situations and pain

I am returning here to the ideas expressed at the beginning of this paper and to the paradigm shift in historiography towards a critical approach to sources as a rather recent development. This shift embraced voices and bodies previously neglected, while providing a deeper understanding of historical circumstances. We see this also in the case of prison history, which, instead of relying on official documents produced by the legal authorities, is showing interest in so-called "prison literature". Graffiti are another source that has been neglected for too long, but nowadays historians are turning to these writings in their discourse about dungeons. In this section, I address a few graffiti, selected according to their topic and author, that provide an example of how to extract knowledge on Inquisition museums from differ-

66 I refer to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of othering as she uses it to analyse "the fabrication of representations of historical reality" (Gayatri Chackravorty Spivak, The Rani of Sirmur. An Essay in Reading the Archives, in: History and Theory 24/3 (1985), 247–272, 271).

67 Jacques Le Goff, Documento/Monumento, in: Enciclopedia Einaudi, vol. 5, Turin 1978, 38–43, 41 (my translation).

ent sources. I also try to show how the dominant narrative on Inquisition prisons displayed by other exhibitions (such as the ones already mentioned) focuses on topics often neglected by prisoners – but emphasized by the Holy Office.

In Steri's first-floor cells, there are dozens of graffiti left by the same prisoner, who never signs his name in full. A paleographic analysis of the *ductus* allowed me to determine his graphic domain[68] and, subsequently, trace his name with the help of a few hints. His writings can be found in two different rooms, indicating the practice of moving prisoners from one cell to another (supposedly forbidden by the inquisitorial statute).[69] What is most interesting is a distinctive approach to writing in the two different environments. The first cell is covered with anonymous Sicilian octaves, which are hard to ignore. The size is small, and the stanzas are written in an elegant cursive script with, usually, an upward slanting baseline, but the spatial density of these poems and their good state of conservation makes them one of the exhibition's most attractive spots. Each octave is signed with an adjective that the author changes from time to time, such as *lu turmentatu, lu meschinu, l'abbandunatu…*,[70] and he uses poetic means to narrate and describe his plight. On the internal angle of a baroque cartouche, the prisoner wrote:

> "Friends, do not ask how I'm faring,
> because I can see death in front of me.
> Don't you see that I'm falling at every step
> and that I can't stand on my feet?
> Don't you see I'm failing there where I go
> and that I'm slowly surrendering to fate?
> Should somebody ask you how I am
> (tell them) I'm faring like someone who is getting worse."
> The wretch

There is no hope in these words, though the prisoner describes his misery without referring to the physical violence he has endured. His grief is both emotional and corporeal, death is the only prospect before him, and, yet, he does not mention wounds, starvation, or the typical hardships that other Inquisition museums tend to emphasize according to the hegemonic narrative. The stanza opens in the vocative, the prisoner addresses his *friends.* Real or imaginary, this opening gives the visitors

68 Armando Petrucci, Potere, spazi urbani, scritture esposte: proposte ed esempi, in: Culture et idéologie dans la genèse de l'État moderne. Actes de la table ronde de Rome (15–17 octobre 1984), Rome 1985, 85–97, 89.

69 Torquemada, 1667, 28v.

70 That is "the tormented", "the wretch", "the abandoned".

an idea of the social context in which the prisoner found himself. The "wretch", as he calls himself, acquires a body and a voice. But how can it be heard?

When entering the cells, visitors are already aware of the presence of writings, since the museum's presentation focuses on that. Their gaze turns immediately to the walls, but even during the guided tour, the guide cannot provide an extensive explanation of each graffiti. They introduce a few graffiti per cell based on the artistic or literary value, on the presence of recognizable names or other relevant information, and then give the visitors some time to explore the walls on their own. Nonetheless, the interpretation of such graffiti relies on the visitors' degree of literacy, their spoken languages, and their ability to correctly read or spell handwritten texts. To partially solve this problem, the University of Palermo released a free app available for iOS and Android *Inquisition prisons*", in 2021.[71] When selecting "visitor mode" (*Percorso*), the app scans the QR codes positioned at the entrance of the cells. The code gives access to a list of a few graffiti in the room and each writing or sketch is accompanied by a short caption. The same list is accessible through the main menu. The app was designed to facilitate access to the site, but this purpose was only partially achieved, since it is available only in Italian, contains a limited number of graffiti – selected on biased criteria –, and relies on dated technology. In this respect, there is room for improvement. For instance, instead of QR codes leading to preset and non-interactive contents, the app might exploit marker-based recognition to deliver extended reality (XR) experiences (potentially superimposition-based AR). Alternatively it could refer to iBeacon, GPS, digital compass, or accelerometer technologies to provide context-sensitive contents through markerless AR. Contents could be developed to include the entire *corpus* of graffiti to make them available in different languages. Accessibility could be improved. References could be hyperlinked or embedded to be directly available for users.

It would be helpful if the app was able to provide an accurate reading of graffiti and their mutual relations. Writings and sketches developed on the walls according to a sort of rhizomatic progression that has something to tell about the writers. Not too far from the previous octave, the same prisoner wrote:

> "There is no man as unhappy as I
> who am dead but cannot end my life.
> Fate believes I'm immortal
> but could I die I would not suffer
> because with my death they will end
> the suffering and my endless tribulation.

71 The app was designed by "GStudio adv" for the Museum Centre of the University of Palermo (SiMuA) in the context of the Erasmus+ program *GAP – Graffiti Art in Prison (2020–2023).*

So to make my remembrance eternal
you do not let me die among so many agonies."
The unhappy

Unlike the other poem (we do not know which one was written first), here death seems to be too far away, as he would rather die than continue to live in such misery. His suffering and tribulations have turned his existence into a state akin to death: his condition is even worse than death, since having been cast out, isolated, and removed from the public view, his body is allowed to linger on for the sole purpose of making him suffer. The Inquisition sought to redeem the souls of those it prosecuted, its main goal being to reconcile sinners with God, no matter how late and at what cost. Of course, the repentance did not exempt them from torture, execution, or death. For the inquisitors, these were the necessary means for salvation. The octave shows how this view was not shared by the prosecuted, who found no purifying value in their psychological and physical torment, only agony.

However, these and other further considerations require a knowledge about these graffiti that visitors usually do not possess. To trace back the identity of the writer, paleographical analysis and long archive research were needed. This allows to associate the stanzas in the first cell of the first floor with other writings in the other cell, which the prisoner calls "the most human room". As a consequence, his swings of emotion can be noticed.

The author appears to have had a very different attitude in cell 5. While he bewailed his condition in cell 1 using different pseudonyms, in cell 5 he paints pictures of saints, writes prayers, and signs with the letter *B.* or, in one case, with all his initials: *D.A.M.B.* According to Beatrice Fraenkel's studies on acts of writing, the choice of signing is the equivalent of a statement.[72] In our case, the prisoner is willing to testify to his existence and his presence. However, he must have changed his mind at least once more while being in prison. In fact, just above these verses, he added in Latin:

"This is a sombre land, covered by death's
haze. A land of misery and darkness,
inhabited by the shadow of death
and a sempiternal dread, without any order."

These lines appear to be a paraphrase from the book of Job (10:20-22), and were, perhaps, influenced by St. Ambrose's definition of hell as a "dark land, covered by the

72 Béatrice Fraenkel, Actes écrits, actes oraux: la performativité à l'épreuve de l'écriture, in: Études de communication 29 (2006), 69–93; Béatrice Fraenkel, Actes d'écriture: quand écrire c'est faire, in: Langage et société 121/122 (2007), 101–112.

ashes of death, land of misery and darkness"[73]: from the "most human" cell to a land of misery and death. What happened to change the prisoner's mind to this extent? These testimonies induce reflection on what it was like to be prosecuted beyond the narratives of the Inquisition, which tended to standardize its victims, their past, and their conduct. But to raise such questions – and eventually find some answers –, the exhibition in Palermo would need to adjust and improve its means of dissemination.

Without knowledge based on research, visitors can only partly appreciate the literacy and multilingualism of the prisoner, who could write stanzas in Sicilian and quote excerpts from the Bible in Latin. And this assuming that they recognize his graphic domain, a landscape that includes pictures of saints, Sicilian octaves, sonnets, and writings prose in Tuscan Italian, Latin quotes, and prayers, all of which attest to an elite education and textual knowledge. The prisoner was, in fact, a member of the *Accademia dei Riaccesi:* he was Doctor Angelo Matteo Bonfante de' Cassarini. His membership in this organization is a matter of no small importance: the examination of the *milieu* of academies shows that many of its members appeared in the Inquisition's trials.

This brief overview was meant to provide a sample of the potential implications of studying and, eventually, displaying graffiti. Potential, since these objects are not immediately readable in their layered overtones and require prior knowledge to be adequately available to the public. The Steri exhibition has moved in this direction, and even if there is still room for improvement, it provides a valid alternative to the entertainment industry of torture museums.

Conclusion

As pointed out by Michael Welch, "museums facilitate their narratives by putting on display objects intended to catch the attention of visitors".[74] Unlike other torture museums I have considered in this paper, at Steri the primary museum objects are graffiti contextualized in historical surroundings, and looking at them necessarily implies thinking about who wrote them and why.[75] In addition, at Steri, the museal mission of delivering knowledge is not pursued through entertainment and obtained via a multi-layered encounter with objects, devices, printings, images, and settings, but rather through these *soundless screams*. Being exhibited as voices of the

73 Ambrose of Milano, Precationes duae hactenus Ambrosio attributae, 2, 17, PL 17, 840C: "terra tenebrosa, et mortis caligine cooperta, terra miseriae et tenebrarum".

74 Michael Welch, Escape to Prison. Penal Tourism and the Pull of Punishment, Oakland 2015, 31.

75 Armando Petrucci, Storia della scrittura e storia della società, in: Attilio Bartoli Langeli (ed.), Scrittura, documentazione, memoria: dieci scritti e un inedito (1963–2009), Rome 2018, 111–125, 116.

voiceless, the graffiti tend to convey specific cultural meanings that did not emanate from the disciplining institution. In terms of cultural mission, this perspective moves the museum away from a claim to universality and political neutrality – which is in fact a pretended "view from nowhere" originating an allegedly impartial "view from above"[76] – manifesting its *situated-ness*.

The peculiarity of the prison museum is not only its sited-ness; in fact, it helps shape "the consciousness of the community it serves"[77] through the museum effect, which arises in the presence of text-bearing objects[78] that appear in a context. In addition to this, the musealization of penal institutions inverts the temporal vector from the present, in which the visit and the exhibition take place, and the distant past, which is exhibited. Thus, the point is not solely to display the past, but to provide a critique of the present and a direction for the future.[79] To freely quote from the proceedings of the Santiago Roundtable of 1972, this kind of shift is what ought to characterize *integral* museums, institutions able to link past and present together and take a role in development by casting a critical gaze on contemporary problems.[80] But to achieve such a goal, I think that museums should be addressed out of a chronological narrative of time, as the necessary succession of events leading to a teleological destination: questioning the perception of displayed objects, as in constant evolution, should be at the core of the curatorial task.[81] And this perception, this gaze, must be considered as an act of (involuntary?) participation governed by a cultural construction, whose result is "an assembly, conscious or unconscious, of history, of the time, the society that has produced it, but also of the later times when it has continued to live".[82] To some extent, the evolution of this gaze and the visual interaction between subject, object, and context in fact produces a form of knowledge about historical prisons and prisoners that updates every day and produces, consequently, new forms of knowledge about current prisons and prisoners. To this extent, "sites for penal tourism operate as mechanisms for social production with respect to order"[83], but exhibitions like the Steri's encourage us to take a deeper look

76 Haraway, Knowledges, (1988), 589.

77 Basic Principles of the Integral Museum, in: Museum International 66/1–4 (2014), 175–182, 175.

78 Marion Lamè, Primary sources of information, digitization processes and dispositive analysis, in: Proceedings of the third AIUCD annual conference on humanities and their methods in the digital ecosystem 9 (2014), 1–5, 1.

79 Yaiza María Hernández Velázquez, Imagining Curatorial Practice After 1972, in: Curating After the Global. Roadmaps for the Present, Cambridge 2019, 252–271, 264.

80 Principles, (2014), 175; Mario Teruggi, The Round Table of Santiago (Chile), in: Museum International 53/4 (2001), 15–18, 17.

81 Jean-Paul Martinon, Museums, Plasticity, Temporality, in: Museum, Management and Curatorship 21 (2006), 157–167.

82 Le Goff, Documento, 1978, 42 (my translation).

83 Welch, Escape, 2015, 33.

at these heterotopias, to question the risks of a neoliberal approach to dark tourism sites, and to criticize the authoritarian approach that belonged – and still belongs – to prison management.