

# AGAINST THE TRIUMPH OF APPEARANCE: SCATTERED NOTES ON MADALENA MIRANDA'S IN SEARCH OF THE LISBON LAZARETTO AND OTHER ISOLATIONS

 **CATERINA CUCINOTTA**

Universidade Nova de Lisboa,  
Contemporary History Institute  
cucinotta.caterina@icloud.com

## ABSTRACT

Madalena Miranda's journey to the lazaretto in Lisbon is a metaphor for a journey into the interior of everyone who has experienced the covid-19 pandemic. Just as the last pandemic marked our lives forever, other pandemics can be found during other times and in other societies. In this short text, we cross the video with other stories created by the connection between moving images and the direct sensations they create. We explore Rousseau's ethics, the savage in Robinson Crusoe and Senator La Ciura, and Boccaccio's concept of community. All the stories take us back to a moral and ethical problem that is linked to the concept of "appearance".

Keywords: Journey; Pandemic; Appearance; Solitude within solitude.

Madalena Miranda's audiovisual essay *In Search of the Lisbon Lazaretto* presents itself with images that seek to document the route the director took to reach what was once a lazaretto in the area of Porto Brandão. The images of the first few seconds follow one another unsteadily with moving shots of sky and vegetation accompanied by an out-of-tune violin echoing in an off-screen sound of wind in the foliage. It was 2020 and the whole world was forced to lock itself indoors because of the covid-19 pandemic. Miranda recalls the presence of a lazaretto in the south of Lisbon, echoed in her memory by creating a connection between Catherine Malabou's descriptions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his experience at the lazaretto in Genoa with her new and unexpected experience of seclusion in Portugal.

The key to understand the pandemic that Madalena Miranda suggests to us, and which is inspired by Catherine Malabou's writing, seems to suggest to the spectator that we should go and learn more about the path taken by Rousseau when he decides to move away from a community pandemic to gather in an individual pandemic.

The lazaretto in Genoa, Messina in Sicily, from where the *Felucca* had passed, and the "in movement" approach to the other lazaretto in Lisbon, project the spectator to seek connections with other pandemics, other isolations, in other times, with other characters.

Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* was written after the plague of 1348, between 1349 and 1353, telling the story that, for ten days, ten young men and girls in isolation told each other to pass the time.

Daniel Defoe's own novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), cited by both Malabou and Rousseau himself, tells of the exploits of a man shipwrecked on a desert island, where he remained for 28 years.

Another story, echoing between Sicily and Genoa, which took place more than a hundred years later, in 1887, gives us another new form to forced isolation, transforming Robinson Crusoe's character into Senator Rosario La Ciura, the protagonist of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's short story *The Mermaid*.

Senator La Ciura also recounts the episode as a past event, telling a young friend in his old age. He tells him that to escape the heat of Etna and its lava that was devouring him, he moved for three weeks, in August 1887, to a small house by the sea, near Augusta, but far from the town: a sort of lazaretto where he decided to cure his physical and psychological ills.

My isolation was absolute, interrupted only by the visits of the farmer who brought me my few provisions every three or four days. He only stopped by for five minutes because, seeing me so exalted and unhinged, he must have thought I was on the verge of dangerous madness. And to tell the truth, the sun, the solitude, the nights spent under the twirling stars, the silence, the scanty nourishment, the study of remote subjects, wove around me like an enchantment that prepared me for the prodigy. (Lampedusa, 2007, p. 117)

In this forced isolation he met a siren to whom he would return as an old man, throwing himself into the waters off Genoa from a ship that was taking him to Portugal.

The siren's call, it is said, is a lament that captures those who have heard it once, and in a gesture of denial of one's own self, one goes into the water, almost unconsciously, to find it again.

Rousseau, Robinson Crusoe and the young senator La Ciura all go towards a type of isolation materialised in another solitude, more intimate than the intimate, in the construction of an individual installation that closes an external journey to open an internal one. The question of the ten young Florentines who, faced with forced isolation due to the plague, instead consciously decided to stay together in a cottage is different. Rousseau took the opposite direction, choosing the lazaretto instead of the Felucca. We are men and women before we are citizens, and the journey to the lazaretto, *In Search of the Lisbon Lazaretto*, is the lazaretto itself.

Indeed, the experience that Rousseau pursues by going into solitude within solitude is not isolated from the rest of his aesthetic and political claims which, in turn, are reflected in this audiovisual essay, in which the author chooses to go against the current in order to see, to touch, to ascertain with her own eyes that other people have already experienced, what she was experiencing in 2020.

Two fundamental points can be denoted for the understanding of this audiovisual essay and for a reflection that can be derived from it: firstly, Rousseau and his gesture of locking himself up in a second and deeper pandemic; and, secondly, the place of passage that the lazaretto in Genoa represented for him.

The problem, as is always the case with Rousseau, is of a political order, like one who is always in pursuit of practical-pragmatic convergence: in that case, abandoning ship and descending into the depths of his ego in a small room in the lazaretto in Genoa; in this case even aptly seeking direct contact with the architectural construction of the lazaretto in Lisbon.

In his 1758's text "Letter on the Spectacles", Rousseau takes what he calls the triumph of appearance and the objectivity of social hypocrisy in stride by translating its meaning materially into the object "mask". "So far I have seen many masks; when will I see the faces of men?" (Rousseau, 1995, p. 13).<sup>1</sup>

The philosopher from Geneva also made trial and error in the spasmodic construction of "absolute metaphors" that would in turn leave room for the "subjectivity of the dream of a society founded on absolute transparency" (Panella, 1995, p. 13): the case that occurred a few years earlier, in 1743, does not remain outside this construction.

If the question of the introduction of theatres into the life of Geneva at that time, in the text of 1758, became for him a problem of moral-political education, with the gesture of the voluntary departure from the ship *Felucca* it was a question of moving towards the lazaretto to choose

<sup>1</sup> In the original: "Jusqu'ici j'ai vu beaucoup de masques; quand verrai-je des visages d'hommes?"

true solitude and a type of introspection that the “theatre” of the ship could not have made blossom.

The installation of the individual in quarantine stands up against the triumph of appearance in society and goes against a material organisation of the exterior to evoke the interior in all its truth.

The event of the lazaretto in which Rousseau was a protagonist (1743) only was known in 1782, when *The Confessions* was published, posthumously: there Jean-Jacques Rousseau had decided to recount episodes from his life that could be remembered as important for posterity.

Even in a pandemic situation, Rousseau aims to free himself from the appearances to which society might have led him, had he remained on board and in the community, knowing perfectly well the mechanism, whereby the desire to perform contrasts and coexists with the ability to produce perfect “concealment”. On the contrary, the group of 10 young Florentine men, faced with the proposal of a compulsory ten-day isolation, had decided not to free themselves from the appearances of society and to immerse themselves completely in the appearance of their mask in the community.

Among other things, the comparison with the fictitious character of Robinson Crusoe came from Rousseau himself, who used it many times for his theorisations on the natural man and from which his “Emile,” a philosophical text of 1762 dealing with man’s relationship with society, was born.

In abandoning the *Felucca*, therefore, Rousseau abandons his self-representation, that mask in society that he wears when he masquerades as a citizen. There, in the lazaretto, he wants to focus instead on his “individual performance” and lists all the actions he had to perform in order to complete his quarantine in quarantine.

“Solitude cannot be the origin of society. This may be true, but I think it is necessary to know how to find society within oneself in order to understand what politics means”. These are Malabou’s phrases, that Miranda shows us in front of the moving image of the door of the old lazaretto in Lisboa with the inscription “Propriedade Privada. Proibido Entrar.” (Private property. No entry.)

The search for the lazaretto in Lisboa is also the search for this performance that becomes useful because it is individual, it is the search for an opportunity in the pandemic, the unique ability to withdraw into oneself to fully understand the world around us and its happenings.

We imagine the lazaretto of Lisboa through the aerial views that overlap the initial journey with the camera pointed towards the sky.

I don’t like that we need to tie our hearts to the scene at all times, as if it were uncomfortable inside us. (Rousseau, 1995, p. 40)

## REFERENCES

Di Lampedusa, G. T., (2007). La sirena. *I racconti*. Universale economica Feltrinelli.

Malabou, C. (2021). To quarantine from quarantine: Rousseau, Robinson Crusoe, and “I”. *Critical Inquiry*, 47(S2), S13-S16.

<https://doi.org/10.1086/711426>

Panella, G. (1995). Presentazione. *Lettera sugli spettacoli*. Aesthetica edizioni.

Rousseau, J. J. (1973). *Emílio ou da educação*. Difusão Européia do Livro.

Rousseau, J. J. (1995). *Lettera sugli spettacoli*. Aesthetica edizioni.

Creative Commons Attribution License | This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.