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The Rhetoric of Rome and the Reappropriation of the Ancient Monuments

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Abstract

Every culture has to deal with decay and death. Buildings and sites lose their original function and significance to be used in a different way by later generations. This becomes explicit in the case of, for instance, the Pantheon and the Colosseum. The way these Roman monuments are interpreted leans heavily on the ideas of the interpreter. Everyone reconstructs Rome according his own selective memory and creates a very personal image that may not necessarily take heed of any historical evidence. Even construction in the late nineteenth-century Rome follows its own distorted path as does Mussolini who transformed the Urbs according to his own ideological and political twist. All these volatile appropriations of the past should remind us that it is our task to preserve Rome as a cultural memory that reflects our whole civilization in an enlightened modern way.

Keywords

Conservation,
Rome,
Reappropiation
of ancient monuments

The tragedy of the Twin Towers (Fig. 1) has led to reflection on the tremendous ideological significance of Manhattan as a symbol of a certain Western way of life, even more than of the power of the United States. In this respect the driving force behind the life of New York presents more than one analogy with ancient Rome, which it resembles, *mutatis mutandis*, especially for its pronounced cosmopolitanism and for its self-presentation as a metaphor of a peculiar way of life: for many, the best possible on earth. However, neither the monuments of ancient Rome nor those of contemporary New York have remained immune to the unexpected blows of history and the vulnerability of objects. The ancient world was no less aware than the modern one of the instability of fate. In the rhetorical formulations of the past and present, the concept of the eternity of a culture, a civilisation, or of the monuments that represent it par excellence is always a formula of an apotropaic kind, a Leitmotiv that people apply more or less consciously to themselves to deflect, but not to underestimate, the latent dangers at the very moment when the highest level of political and economic power seemed

In substance, this text is a sequel to my article "Cantieri della conoscenza. Roma: archeologia nel centro storico e modifica del paesaggio urbano" published in Workshop di archeologia classica: paesaggi, costruzioni, reperti 1 (2004) pp. 165ff.

On the value of archaeology as a political element in the service of the post-unification national identity, see the publication of the study days "Antiquités, archéologie et construction nationale au XIXe siècle", which were held in Rome on 29-30 April 1999 and in Ravello on 7-8 April 2000 (in Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'École Française de Rome, Italie et Méditerranée 113, 2001, pp. 475-815), which I was unfortunately not able to take into account in that article. *I would particularly like to thank Antonio and Simonetta Modestini for providing me with the photographic documentation.*

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Fig. 2: The arm of the Statue of Liberty emerging from the water, from the film *Artificial Intelligence*, Steven Spielberg, 2001.

to have been attained. From this arises the need to carefully preserve those monuments raised as a symbol of proud human capacities, whether as a document of the economic, artistic and cultural level reached, or as a memento of a glorious history for future generations. That symbol, those symbols, become at the same time functional for the society in which they are found but, charged with values that go beyond their effective artistic quality, they are subject to the perils of social transformations, envy, hatred, wars, revolutions, and, of course, human folly. Transatlantic science fiction cinema has always lived with the nightmare of the destruction of the American myth, that is, the expression of the atavistic fear of losing all that has been won in one fell swoop. An essential component of US catastrophe cinema is the image of New York half-destroyed, in ruins, but still recognisable in spite of the invasions of Martians or the freak wave caused by a colossal meteorite, lethal virus, the melting of the ice-caps due to global warming, or, at a more banal level, a runaway nuclear war. These films usually show the Empire State Building and the Twin Towers tottering but still standing — and here reality has far outstripped the most far-fetched fantasy, showing dramatically the fragility of human endeavour — the Statue of Liberty in pieces or emerging with one arm from the waters of an abandoned and dark Manhattan (Fig. 2), its skyscrapers partly destroyed and transformed into cascade walls (Fig. 3), or ice-bound in a spectral and uninhabited world, visited only by extraterrestrial beings in search of information about the intelligence of the extinct human race, as in the apocalyptic vision of Steven Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence*. Here, with involuntary irony — the eleventh of September was to come only a few months later — the peaks of the Twin Towers, almost intact, still dominate the frozen and deserted panorama, a symbol of mortal *hybris*. The lively, pulsating megalopolis which seems to challenge eternity always has as its counterpart the ruined city, abandoned by the

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Fig. 3: Manhattan invaded by water, from the film *Artificial Intelligence*, Steven Spielberg, 2001.

human beings who lived there, a haven for criminal gangs and outcasts, but still standing, for the future memory of human glory and its ephemeral nature. Pride goes hand in hand with the burden of transience.

Rome knew this discrepancy well. Paradoxically, it acquired its enduring epithet "golden" in its worst moment of crisis, after having lost its leading political role and having suffered the disgrace of the invasions. A few years after the sack by Alaric, Rutilius Namazianus descried from afar the ruins of Populonia during his journey from Rome — the "most beautiful queen of the world that is entirely yours" — to Gaul:

> It is no longer possible to recognise
> The monuments of the past,
> Devouring time has consumed vast terraces.
> Only traces remain between the ruins of collapsed walls,
> Roofs lie buried in immense remains.
> We are not indignant at the dissolution of mortal bodies:
> See, cities can die too.

It is evident that, during these terrible stages of transition, when the myths and fundamental rituals of pagan culture and its very written documents fell into deep oblivion, the principal monuments of antiquity functioned as a mnemonic device in an attempt to perform a reappropriation, albeit legendary, of their past. The few historical data that survived were reinterpreted from a different point of view and took on a very different meaning that was obviously functional to the new, entirely Christian society that had settled on the ruins of imperial Rome.

This loss of memory has also meant a simplification of the urban structure of the city. Their relation with the urban fabric severed, the surviving monuments seem to float in a

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Fig. 4: Fazio degli Uberti, *Dittamondo,* watercolour, 1447, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.

vacuum in a depopulated city reduced to its monumental buildings. It might be called a field of unorganised ruins, to paraphrase Marc Augé,[1] on which the Romans of the medieval era, and perhaps the pilgrims who came to Rome to visit the tombs of the saints, tried to impose a new order by interpreting the extant ancient data in terms of everyday reality. Such an interpretation entailed an identification with the past, albeit partially reinvented, to reconstruct the present seen as a precarious and unstable moment in anticipation of a better future.

It is floating in a symbolic space that the surviving buildings appear in the plan contained in the Paris codex of the *Dittamondo* of Fazio degli Uberti (1447)[2] (Fig. 4), or in the plans by Pietro del Massaio in a Paris codex (whose date

[1] Augé, *Rovine e macerie,* especially pp. 9ff.

[2] Frutaz, *Piante,* I, p. 129ff., III, pl. 153; Frugoni, "L'antichità", pp. 17ff.; Maddalo, *In figura Romae*, pp. 115ff., fig. 57, pl. XII.

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is the object of controversy) and in two Vatican codices (1469 and 1472) that accompany the translation of the Ptolemaic *Cosmographia*.[3] The Romans of the medieval period probably did not perceive this fragmentation, although obvious to a critical eye attentive to those elements that had escaped the destruction of the time, and schematically reconstructed a fantasy version of the ancient city, giving a different interpretation to those same monuments, with a fatal ignorance of the way in which the ancient city was organised and of its complex setup. According to the *Libro Imperiale*,[4] the Colosseum "was surrounded by a large piazza", had numerous entrances and "many chapels with infinite statues" dedicated to the gods, and the statues were of gold and crystal. The sacrifices to the gods were sumptuous: they killed an animal on the sacrificial altar and threw incense, pearls and crushed precious stones into the fire for three hours. In the *De Mirabilibus civitatis Romae* inserted into the collection of Nicolás Rosell, Cardinal of Aragon (1314-1362), the Colosseum becomes a temple dedicated to the Sun, perhaps through assonance with the bronze colossus that stood in front of it.[5] It was divided into a multitude of small rooms and covered with a gilt bronze roof that imitated the sky. Inside thunder was heard, flashes of lightning were seen, and the rain entered through narrow channels. It was the site of the statues of the Sun and the Moon in a chariot. The Sun had the earth at his feet, but his head reached the sky, and in one hand he held a globe to symbolise Rome's worldwide dominion. Pope Sylvester ordered the destruction of the temple so that pilgrims who came to the city could devoutly wonder at the churches and not the profane buildings. The head and the hand of the Sun — the *palla Sansonis* — were taken to the Lateran. The largest monuments to be preserved — the Colosseum, the Pantheon, and the Palazzi Capitolini — are confused in these accounts. The colossal statue of Constantine, now in the Palazzo dei Conservatori, is identified with the Colossus of Nero and therefore with the statue of the Sun (an identification which still finds some support today).[6] What remains is an atavistic memory of a glorious and now legendary past seen through medieval lenses.

But by their very nature, the monuments lend themselves to this cultural game, because the key to their interpretation changes over time. If we return to the cinema, which seems to express more than the other arts the anxiety of the present and the feeling of instability of contemporary society, even when it reconsiders its own past, we can recall the vision of ancient Rome expressed in the visionary fantasy of Federico Fellini in *Satiricon* (1969), where the Suburra becomes like

[3] On the Paris codex in the Bibliothèque Nationale ms. lat. 4802: De Rossi, *Piante,* pp. 90ff; Ehrle and Egger, *Piante*, p. 12, pl. VII/2; Maddalo, *In figura Romae*, pp. 123ff, fig. 58. On the codex Vat. lat. 5699: Ehrle and Egger, *Piante*, pp. 11ff; Maddalo, *In figura Romae,* pp. 124ff, fig. 59. On the codex Urb. lat. 277: Ehrle and Egger, *Piante*, p. 92, pl. VI/1; Frutaz, *Piante*, I, pp. 139ff, III, pl. 158; Maddalo, *In figura Romae,* pp. 124ff, pl. VIII.

[4] Text transcribed by Graf, *Roma*, p. 98ff., on the basis of the codex Marciano ital. cl. XI, CXXVI, fol. 99r. The text, from the fourteenth century, may be the work of Cambio di Stefano of Città di Castello, and seems to be a little later than the time of Henry VII of Luxembourg: Graf, *Roma*, p. 185, n. 13.

[5] Graf, *Roma*, pp. 96ff; Valentini and Zucchetti, *Codice topografico*, pp. 195ff. This imaginary vision of the Colosseum recurs in other redactions of the *Mirabilia Romae*: Graf, *Roma*, p. 97, n. 38.

[6] Rea, *Rota Colisei*, p. 179.

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Fig. 5: Suburra before the earthquake, from the film *Satyricon*, Federico Fellini, 1969.

one of the circles in Dante's inferno, an Expressionistic dark and evil-smelling stage setting like a topped pyramid, torn by flickering flames (Fig. 5). Slaves and horses bear the fragment of the colossal head of an emperor through a gloomy alley: the detached and absent image of an emperor of late antiquity whose deep and expressionless eyes stare at the sky becomes the exceptional, because detached, symbol of oppressive power. In the film by the Indian director Tarsem Singh *The Cell* (2000), the protagonist, Catherine Deane, makes use of a sophisticated scientific experiment to enter the mind of a serial killer. Rummaging in the most remote corners of his warped unconscious, where horror and beauty create a dreamlike fabric of sensations, the woman has the impression of suddenly falling down a well; it is in fact a reproduction of the Pantheon, in which she floats in an attempt to reach the

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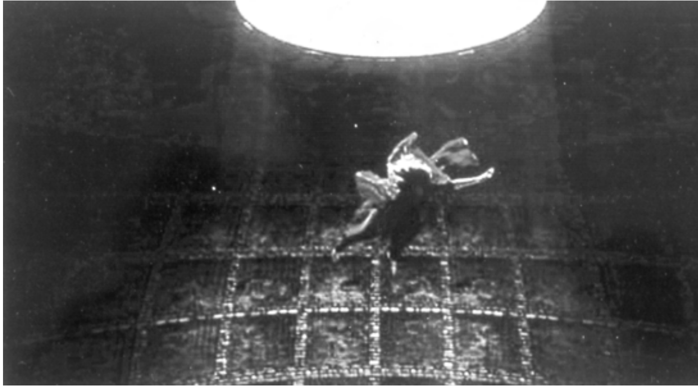

Fig. 6: Catherine Deane fluctuates within a building similar to the Pantheon, from the film *The Cell,* Tarsem Singh, 2000.

bottom and find a means of escape (Fig. 6). So the Pantheon too, the acme of classical culture, can evidently be transformed into a metaphor of everyday fears.

Fig. 7: Giuseppe Sacconi, Monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, Rome.

In each case we are dealing with the phenomenon of the reappropriation of the monuments of the past, even though the reappropriation presents many aspects that are not internally homogeneous. It may be a case of the specific recuperation of the man-made object, as in the exceptional case of the Pantheon or the Colosseum — and often enough the friction between original function and new function assumes contradictory aspects — or of a symbolic recuperation, as a symbolism of values that are just as contradictory, which may be vulgarly manifested by taking the object itself as an ideal model and producing another to emulate or compete with it, though with a marked metaphorical significance, as happened in the case of the monument to Vittorio Emanuele II (Fig. 7).

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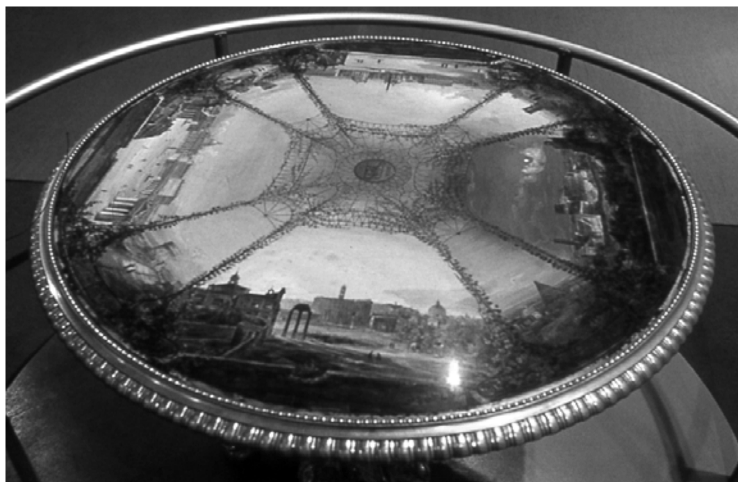

Fig. 8: Michelangelo Barberi, *Twenty-four Hours in Rome*, table top in enamel mosaic, 1839, Saint Petersburg, Ermitage.

The reappropriation of the Roman monuments with an ideological and political twist is a basic characteristic of every period in the city's long history. Here we shall only examine a couple of examples taken from the nineteenth century, that critical period extending from the French occupation and the subsequent papal restoration, down to the annexation of Rome to Italy. In little more than half a century, the most evident contradictions between conservatism and innovation, social reality and utopia, come to light with dramatic intensity and produce conflicts and tensions that have been passed on to the contemporary city in all of their dramatic intensity.

In his *Italian Journey*, in an entry dated 2 February 1787, Goethe describes the Colosseum as follows:

> Nobody who has not taken one can imagine the beauty of a walk through Rome by full moon. All details are swallowed up by the huge masses of light and shadow, and only the biggest and most general outlines are visible. […] The Colosseum looked especially beautiful. It is closed at night. A hermit lives in a small chapel and some beggars have made themselves at home in the crumbling vaults. These had built a fire on the ground level and a gentle breeze had driven the smoke into the arena, so that the lower parts of the ruins were veiled and only the huge masses above loomed out of the darkness. We stood at the railing and watched, while over our heads the moon stood high and serene. […] Like the human spirit, the sun and the moon have a quite different task to perform here than they have in other places, for here their glance is returned by gigantic, solid masses.[7]

[7] Goethe, *Viaggio in Italia*, pp. 168ff.

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Fig. 9: Michelangelo Barberi, *Twenty-four Hours in Rome*, detail of the Colosseum at night, table top in enamel mosaic, 1839, Saint Petersburg, Ermitage.

It is this romantic image, dear to the foreign travellers, of the most impressive Roman monument to survive in spite of the centuries of attacks on its conservation. It is the image that is still found in objects destined for a rich circle of foreign patrons in the first half of the nineteenth century, for example the table made for the Grand Duke Alexander, son of Tsar Nicholas I of Russia, by Michelangelo Barberi in 1839 (Fig. 8). Made with a mosaic surface of coloured enamel, the table contrasts views of ancient and modern monumental complexes — four large ones and four, in the corners, on a reduced scale — seen in the temporal sequence from dawn to night. The four main panels represent alternately an ancient and a modern monument: the Roman Forum seen in the afternoon, the Piazza del Popolo seen in the morning, Saint Peter's at midday and the Colosseum by night, under the white light of a full moon just emerging from the clouds (Fig. 9).[8] But if this was the "tourist" view, destined to immortalise the unparalleled beauty of Rome from the past to the present, how was the Colosseum seen by the pro-papal milieu?

The Museo di Roma in Palazzo Braschi has on exhibit an interesting oval canvas of a rather unknown painter from around the middle of the nineteenth century, A. Zolla (Fig. 10).[9] It is an allegory of pagan and Christian Rome. In the centre, beneath an extremely luxuriant oak, is a statue of the goddess Roma with a helmet and aegis, a lance in her right

[8] *Maestà di Roma*, p. 92, I.13 (R. Valeriani).

[9] Leone and others, *Museo di Roma*, pp. 164ff., II B.14 (M. E. Tittoni).

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Fig. 10: A. Zolla, *Allegory of Pagan and Christian Rome*, middle of the nineteenth century, Rome, Museo di Roma.

hand, and a globe — symbol of imperial power — in her left (the globe is surmounted by a cross to give a Christian gloss to the imperial symbolism). She stands on a pedestal with a relief showing the device of the Papal State, the tiara, and the keys of Saint Peter. At the foot of the statue, Romulus and Remus are being nursed by the she-wolf. On either side of the goddess Roma are two other statues, turned and leaning on amphorae from which water pours. The one on the left is the Tiber with an oar and a horn of plenty; the one on the right is a more generic aquatic nymph, also with a cornucopia, to bear witness to the abundance of springs (and fountains) in the city. In the foreground there is a body of water in which the statues are reflected. The oak tree divides the canvas into two parts. In the left-hand part is a view of the Colosseum, with the ruins of the temple of Venus and Rome, the Meta Sudans, and the Arch of Constantine; in the right-hand part is a view of Saint Peter's Square. Both panoramas contain luxuriant vegetation in the foreground.

Zolla's painting, which was produced for the visitors of the period who wanted a condensed memory of the city, clusters the key elements of an essentially rhetorical vision of Rome, frozen outside real time, or even outside historical reality. This somewhat distorted recalls in some way the solution adopted by today's illustrated travel brochures which sing the praises of exotic places, seen

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with naïve and captivating innocence, but avoid showing the real environmental conditions, which are often accompanied by extreme social degradation. The pagan and the Christian city live side by side in a harmonious fusion of multiple interpretations. The first impression is of a serene coexistence of the pagan and the Christian city in the name of a common denominator: the imperishable glory of Rome. But it is Christian Rome that dominates, a Rome that has reappropriated its original pagan iconography in a conveniently Christianised form. For a traveller of the period uninterested in the themes of the temporal power of the papacy, and in fact not very concerned about the religious and political problems, the painting offered two of the greatest masterpieces of Roman architecture, one from the imperial era and the other from the Renaissance, within a mannered, but very popular frame of the dense spontaneous vegetation of the Roman countryside. In fact, the entire countryside is Christianised with learned allusions. The stereotypes of pagan iconography — the inspiration for the goddess Roma is evidently antiquity — are embedded in a generic image in which the sense of harmony between pagan and Christian prevails, albeit with a subtle distinction, inasmuch as the pagan element is absorbed within a Christian setting. It is not just the choice of the Colosseum from among the numerous ancient monuments of the capital, by now consecrated to the Holy Martyrs who had shed their blood there for the true religion, which conveys this message. When Clement X had solemnly consecrated the arena of the Colosseum to the Christian martyrs and placed crosses at its entrances, as well as an even taller one on its summit, on the occasion of the Holy Year of 1675, this meant something of a change to the image of the famous monument, tending to erase its pagan origins. This is borne out by two inscriptions in the plaster, of which the one inscribed on the western side ran:

Amphiteatrum Flavium
non tam operis mole et artificio
ac veterum spectaculorum memoria
quam sacro innumerabilium martyrum
cruore illustre
venerabundus hospes ingredere
et in augusto magnitudinis romanae monumento
execrata Caesarum saevitia
heroes fortitudinis christianae suscipe
anno jubilari et exora MDCLXXV[10]

[10] Colagrossi, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, p. 215: "The Flavian amphitheatre, famous not for the construction and the artistic quality of the work or for the memory of the ancient spectacles, but for the sacred blood of the countless martyrs. Devout visitor, enter, and, in the august monument of Rome's greatness, experience admiration for those who, through the execrable cruelty of the Caesars, are heroes of Christian fortitude, in the jubilee year 1675, and pray". During the papacy of Benedict XIV, in 1750, it was replaced by a similar inscription, in marble, which is still visible: Colagrossi, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, p. 221; Rea, *Rota Colisei*, figure on p. 214.

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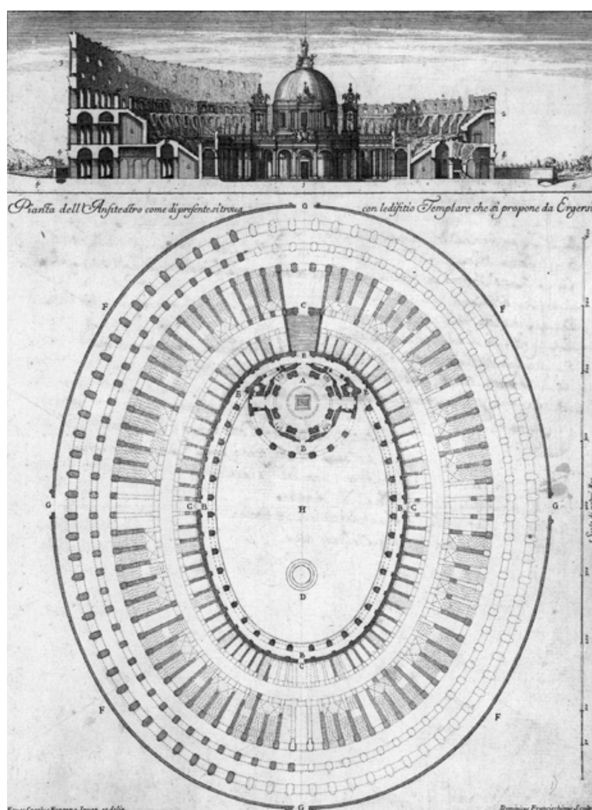

Fig. 11: Carlo Fontana, Plan for a church dedicated to the Christian martyrdoms in the Colosseum, beginning of the 18th century.

The Colosseum is perhaps still the most impressive of the ancient ruins to have survived to the present.[11] As a castle of the Frangipane and Annibaldi families, acquired several times by the public administration in an extreme attempt to stop the plundering, it had already been used now and then for profane spectacles such as bullfights,[12] or for Christian ones, such as the Passion of Christ.[13] Sixtus V, who showed little affection for pagan memories, wanted to defend the supposed sanctity of the site, which was believed to be consecrated with the blood of Christian martyrs, even though, as is well known, there is not a shred of evidence for this ("let whoever wants relics take the soil of the Colosseum", had said Pius V another pope hostile to pagan Rome and to its extant monuments);[14] that is why he commissioned Domenico Fontana to restore it completely and to transform it into a residential quarter with a mill for working wool and a big fountain in the centre.[15] Fortunately no action was taken, that is until Clement X dedicated it to the Christian martyrs in the Holy Year of 1675.[16] It

11 On the history of the Colosseum in the Middle Ages: Colagrossi, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, pp. 135ff; Rea, "Il Colosseo e la valle", pp. 71ff; Rea, *Rota Colisei*, pp. 180ff.

12 Adinolfi, *Roma*, pp. 367ff.

13 Adinolfi, *Roma*, pp. 376ff, pp. 379ff; Colagrossi, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, pp. 177ff; Wisch, *Colosseum as a Site*, pp. 94ff; Fontana, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, pp. XIVff.

14 Colagrossi, *Anfiteatro Flavio,* p. 214; Rea, *Rota Colisei*, p. 209; Fontana, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, p. XIV. It is said that Pius V planned the destruction of the Colosseum, but there seems to be some exaggeration here: Pastor, *Storia dei papi,* p. 78; Di Macco*, Colosseo,* p. 79.

15 Colagrossi, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, pp. 209ff; Di Macco*, Colosseo,* pp. 75ff.

16 Colagrossi, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, pp. 214ff.

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was the first step towards a more consistent reappropriation, documented by a grandiose project of Carlo Fontana, which can be dated to the first years of the eighteenth century, that would have transformed the entire Colosseum into a magnificent court with a basilica dedicated to the Christian martyrs (Fig. 11).[17] The plan did not materialise because of the controvery between those who wanted to preserve the past glories and the innovators. This, of course, does not diminish the brilliancy of Fontana's idea. In a work published after the Holy Year celebrations of 1675, Carlo Tomassi mentions an intervention by Prince Giovan Battista Pamphilj in the Flavian amphitheatre after having consulted Gian Lorenzo Bernini:

> When the matter had been discussed with the cavalier Bernini, he with his great skill and equally great piety, considering that this was a necessary and very worthy undertaking, not only for the devotion to the holy martyrs, but also for the preservation of a monument that, as it showed the grandeur of Rome, was also the idea of the architecture of the same; and for that reason it was necessary not only to avoid touching any part of the ancient construction, but also to avoid obscuring it from view, considered that only the arches should be closed with perforated walls so that the interior could also be enjoyed from outside [...].[18]

In 1749, on the eve of another Holy Year, Benedict XIV consecrated the arena to the Passion of Christ and of his martyrs, and in 1756 the Colosseum was declared a public church in every respect. A chapel dedicated to Santa Maria della Pietà had stood for some time overlooking the arena in an easterly direction, which the Arch confraternity of the Gonfalone had restored and reopened for Christian services in 1622.[19] During the papacy of Clement XI fourteen stations were erected around the arena for the *Via Crucis*, which Benedict XIV had rebuilt in the same Holy Year in accordance with a design by Paolo Posi, entrusting them to the Arch confraternity of the Friends of Jesus and Mary on Calvary, appositely founded to organise the celebrations of the rite of the *Via Crucis*.[20] The chapels are still visible in nineteenth-century canvases, among them one which presents a splendid, though partial view (dated 1815-1816) by the Danish artist Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (Fig. 12).[21] Eckersberg wrote to his friend the engraver J.F. Clemens on the processions of the *Via Crucis*: "[...] it is very curious that, in the place where in antiquity the crowd enjoyed watching criminals attacked by wild animals [...] today the devout meet in a large procession every Friday to find relief in remembrance of the sufferings and death of Christ".

[17] Fontana, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, pp. 33ff, pls. I-III; Leone and others, *Museo di Roma,* p. 137, I D.50 (H. Hager).

[18] The title of the work is: *Breve relatione dell'Anfiteatro Flaviano detto comunemente il Colosseo consacrato col Sangue Pretioso d'innumerevoli Santi martiri serrato, e dedicato a onore, e gloria de' medesimi gloriosissimi Martiri l'Anno del Giubileo MDCLXXV. Da un chierico regolare, Roma 1675*. See: Colagrossi, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, pp. 214ff.

[19] Colagrossi, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, pp. 187ff.; Armellini, *chiese di Roma*, pp. 638ff. The church is perfectly visible in two perspective sections of the Colosseum by Carlo Fontana: Fontana, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, p. 85, pl. XIII. It is doubtful that one should follow Colagrossi in identifying the church with S. Salvatore de rota Colisei, which is not mentioned after 1500: Adinolfi, *Roma*, pp. 375ff.; Hülsen, *chiese di Roma,* p. 452; Armellini, *chiese di Roma*, pp. 1438ff.

[20] Colagrossi, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, pp. 221ff.; Rea, *Rota Colisei*, pp. 209, 213.

[21] *Maestà di Roma*, p. 188, VI. 15 (F. Giacomini). The text of the letter is in: Bramsen and others, *Eckersberg*, p. 70.

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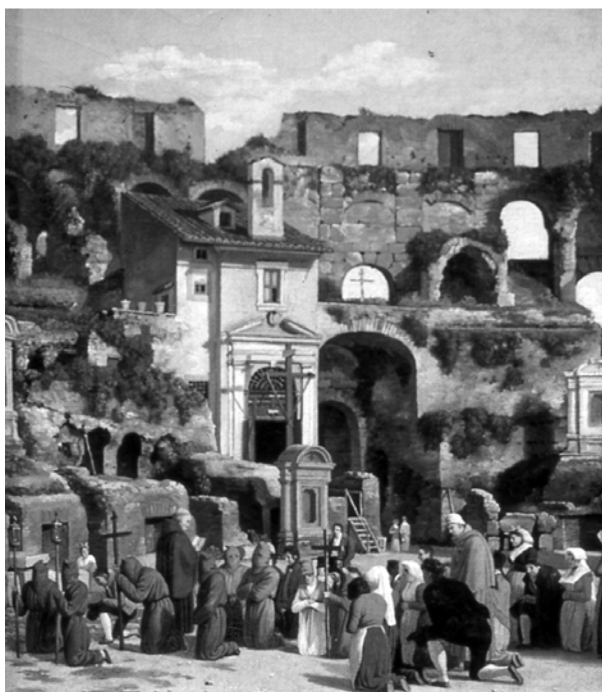

Fig. 12: Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, *The Procession of the Via Crucis going to the Colosseum*, 1815-1816, Den Hirschsprungske Samling, Copenhagen.

It was also Benedict XIV who place that cross[22] in the arena, which despite the fact had been removed several times and finally restored two years after the Holy Year in 1925, still dominates the interior of the Colosseum.

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, when Zolla's canvas was executed, the Colosseum was considered in all respects as a sort of church, and yet a monument Christianised by the blood of the martyrs and dedicated to them. Like so many other monuments of the past that had undergone the same fate they were therefore protected from external damage and destruction: the Pantheon, which became Santa Maria ad Martyres; the columns of Trajan and Antoninus, which were transformed into pedestals for statues of the apostles Peter and Paul; the temple of Antoninus and Faustina, converted into the Church of San Lorenzo in Miranda. An anniversary medal of Gregory XVI's pontificate signed by Giuseppe Girometti and dated 1835, shows this very church with the motto "Monum[enta] vet[era] servata" (fig. 13),[23] therefore emphasising that the ancient monument — the temple of Antoninus and Faustina — has been preserved by virtue of its Christian consecration.

[22] Colagrossi, *Anfiteatro Flavio*, p. 222.

[23] Leone and others, *Museo di Roma,* p. 211, III B.24 (L. Pirzio Biroli Stefanelli). On the restoration of the monument in the nineteenth century: Jonsson, "cura dei monumenti", pp. 28ff., 59ff., 90ff., and 117ff.

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In Restoration Rome the Colosseum was a fully Christianised monument, sanctified by the presence of chapels and of the cross of Christ inside it. But the real aspect of Rome, beyond the lively imagination of writers and artists, beyond the production for the educated tourists of the period, escapes us, or rather, should be the sum of so many not always mutually consistent pieces of information. It does not require much effort to understand that each artist, whether writer, poet or painter, constructed the Rome of his choice, a "potential" Rome, the result of a cultural memory rather than of an actual examination of the real urban and social situation. The most precise and fascinating picture of Rome seen through that distorting mirror is the one offered by Gogol in a page of the unfinished story *Rome*, published as a fragment in 1842, which contains several interesting critical points and acute reflections on the city in relation to the European metropolises.[24] A young Roman prince returns to the city after a long cultural apprenticeship in what was rightly considered the capital of Europe, Paris:

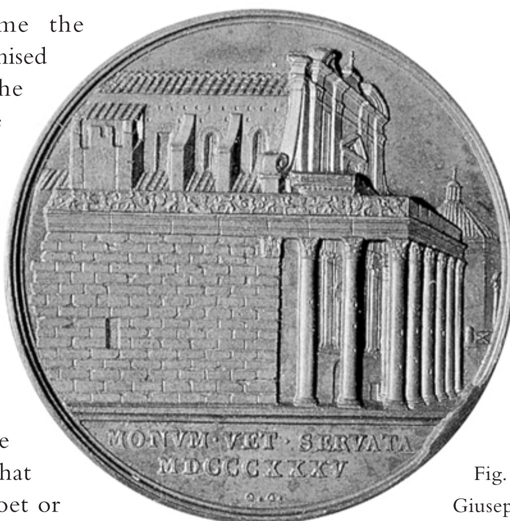

Fig. 13: Giuseppe Girometti, Commemorative medal of the restoration carried out by Pope Gregorio XVI showing the Church of San Lorenzo in Miranda, 1835, Rome, Museo di Roma.

> […] he began to visit Rome and in that respect came to resemble a foreigner who was at first struck by the miserable, far from brilliant appearance of the grimy houses covered with stains, and bemusedly asked himself, as he wandered from one alley to another, "but where is the great Rome of antiquity?", but afterwards gradually came to recognise it as little by little he left the narrow alleys and came across a blackened arch, a marble frame embedded in the wall, a column of darkened porphyry, a pediment right in the middle of a smelly fish-market, or an entire portico in front of a new church, until eventually, in the distance, where the living city came to an end, ancient Rome rose grandly amid the time-hallowed ivy, aloe and open plains with the immense Colosseum, the triumphal arches, the ruins of the boundless palaces of the Caesars, with the imperial baths, the temples and tombs scattered through the countryside. And the visitor no longer saw the narrow streets and cramped alleyways of today, enthralled as he was by the ancient world: the colossal images of the Caesars arose in his memory;

[24] The following citations are taken from: Gogol, *Roma*.

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> his ear was still stunned by the shouting and dancing of an ancient crowd […].[25]

But our prince was not like those foreigners who, filled with memories of the ancient writers, would have left all the rest aside and "would have wished, in a fit of noble pedantry, to demolish the new city in its entirety". He loved it all equally, the Rome of the Caesars and the Popes, of antiquity and the Middle Ages, he even loved the fusion of all this in a harmony that only few were capable of understanding:

> […] he loved […] the signs of a populous and at the same time deserted capital […] the bustle of a market amid dark and mute architectural masses with their foundations hidden, the lively cry of a fishmonger next to a portico, the lemonade-seller with his airy cart decorated with frills in front of the Pantheon. He loved the squalor of the dark and dirty streets too, the absence of yellow, bright tints on the houses or the idyllic scene in the centre of the city: a herd of goats resting on the paved street, the cries of small children and that kind of invisible presence composed of a serene and solemn silence that enwrapped everything and everybody. [26]

In this magnificent description, however, the Rome that emerges is one that foreign artists and writers dreamed of, and therefore desired, satisfied with the — supposed — serene grandeur of an unparalleled urban spectacle. The fact that this picturesque landscape bordered on an unspeakable poverty, a social condition at the limits of public maintenance (fig. 14), in a state of hygiene incredibly below that of the European average, all this concerned the artists little, if at all, fascinated as they were by the beauty of Rome:

> Here even misery appeared in a brighter light and, carefree and heedless of torments and tears, encouraged picturesque and nonchalant behaviour; the suggestive groups of monks who crossed the streets with their long black or white cowls; a filthy capuchin friar, whose red hair suddenly blazed a camel colour in the sun; finally, the population of painters, gathered together from every part of the world, who had freed themselves from the constricting European-style clothes to reappear in wide and picturesque robes. [27]

Then, in the cafés and taverns, the talk was not, as it was in the cities of Europe, of the decline of capital, parliamentary debates or Spanish affairs, but the ancient statue that had recently been discovered, the value of paintings, the popular

[25] Gogol, *Roma*, pp. 53ff.

[26] Gogol, *Roma*, pp. 54ff.

[27] Gogol, *Roma*, p. 60.

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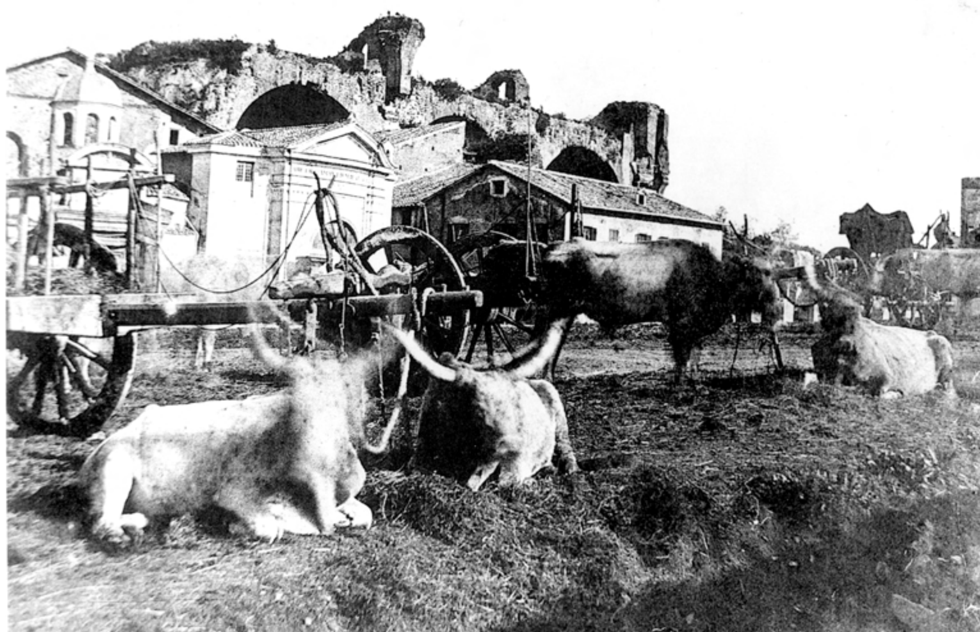

Fig. 14: G. Caneva, Photo of cattle and wagons in front of the Basilica di Maxentius, Rome, middle of the nineteenth century.

festivals. People lent an ear to those discourses that had been banished by now from the rest of Europe "by tiresome social chatter and political opinions that had wiped the expressions of their hearts from people's faces".

Certainly, Gogol was well aware of the vast difference between a bourgeois, merchant city like Paris and a city with a glorious past, splendid and proud of its monuments, but on the edge of the world, caught in the grip of a political system bordering on asphyxia, as Giacomo Leopardi saw it with greater lucidity — though not free from traces of a mannered vision, due to his exacerbated spirit — in contrasting, for example, the streets that lead to Sant'Onofrio, flanked by houses engaged in manufacture, with the rattling of looms and the singing of women, with the parasitical and lazy population of papal Rome.[28] He attributed the incapacity to weave human relations with the residents to the excessive monumentality of Rome itself: a place where "people live without the slightest contact with those around them, because the sphere is too large for them to fill or to feel around them".[29]

A canvas by a foreign painter living in Rome shows Piazza del Tritone as seen from a high flowery loggia in a building of Via San Nicola da Tolentino (fig. 15). Two wagons drawn by oxen carry heavy blocks of marble into the studio

[28] Letter of Giacomo Leopardi to his brother Carlo, dated 20 February 1823: Leopardi, *Opere*, p. 1150. Leopardi saw these workmen as persons "whose life is based on truth instead of falsity, that is, they live from work and not from intrigue, imposture and deceit, as the majority of this population does." See further: Bellucci and Trenti, *Leopardi*, pp. 130ff.

[29] Letter of 6 December 1822 to his brother Carlo: Leopardi, *Opere*, p. 1132.

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Fig 15: Danish painter active in Roma before 1838 depicts the transportation of marble to the studio of Berthel Thorwaldsen, detail, private collection.

of Thorwaldsen. The date is therefore before 1838, the year in which the artist left Rome for good. The sculptor follows the wagons as if in a procession, accompanied by an elegant couple (the woman is wearing a wide-brimmed hat) and by a man with a little lackey. The whole piazza is like a *tableau vivant*. To the right is a procession of capuchin friars, perhaps having emerged from the neighbouring church of San Francesco, and to the left is a row of clerics in white. A hooded figure begs alms, workmen make barrels, there are retailers with small stalls, a variegated crowd of men and women wearing local dress, aristocrats in carriages or walking dogs on the leash, animals scattered over the unpaved square, and in the foreground oxen resting, freed from the yoke. In the background there is a breathtaking view of Rome with its domes. It is one of those images that sum up in a glance what the artists wanted to see in Rome.

It is hardly surprising if the genuine Romans were somewhat annoyed by the vision of a city seen exclusively through the eyes of Romantic artists imbued with classicism, or worse still, of revolutionary idealists overwhelmed by the idea of Rome as a capital, capable of driving Italy into becoming a great nation: all of them were in fact incapable of observing the social reality critically. Nor is there anything surprising

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about the ambiguity of the reactions in the confrontations with the new Italy created after the wars of independence, neither that the politicians who came to Rome after its annexation had preconceived ideas about the city: from an ill-concealed dislike to a euphoric panegyric, in every case always at the limits of rhetoric, without an objective vision of the state of things.

As had happened in Camille de Tournon's Rome,[30] after 1870 the idea of superimposing the new capital on the papal city prevailed, in spite of the fact that the same Haussmann had wisely suggesting building the new quarters far from the old city. The preferred solutions, in open antagonism with the papal city, although in accordance with the taste that was prevalent all over Europe at the time, were the demolition of entire districts that were considered unhealthy, such as the Ghetto, the isolation of the principal monuments of antiquity, and the competition with them involved in the construction of new buildings. As an unknown English commentator remarked in an article in the *Saturday Review* on the gutting indicated in the Regulatory Plan of 1883, the city authority seemed bent on transforming the eternal city into a third-rate Paris. In 1874 the Catholic accretions in the Colosseum were removed, which provoked very strong reactions because they were interpreted, perhaps not wrongly, as anti-clerical actions,[31] and the Pantheon was transformed into an edulcorated sanctuary of the newly formed state, but as a dynastic monument of the Savoy alone, not of the heroes of the unification of Italy:

> […] the Pantheon with that everyday survival almost has for us a lofty mission […] it […] rises as the link that reconnects the ancient past with the present, the art of our ancestors with that of our own day, the power of Rome with the nationality of us Italians today, and as an example and incentive to us for a glorious future. [32]

To facilitate this process, the Minister of Public Education, Guido Baccelli, commenced the work of isolating the monument in 1881, inaugurating the demolitions with his own hand, exactly as Mussolini was to do later with the Mausoleum of Augustus. Thus the project already envisaged by Carlo Fea in connection with a controversy that had emerged concerning the presence of the baker's *alla Palombella* next to the prestigious monument,[33] and budgeted but not carried out by Camille de Tournon,[34] was finally implemented along with the demolition of Bernini's two turrets, the famous "donkey's ears".[35]

[30] Madelin, *Rome de Napoléon*; Patrizi, "prefetto de Tournon", pp. 3ff.; Jonsson, "cura dei monumenti", pp. 41ff.; *Camille de Tournon*.

[31] Rea "fasi dello sterro", pp. 71ff.; Rea, *Rota Colisei,* p. 221. In fact Pietro Rosa sent a letter to Cardinal Guidi, Protector of the Confraternity of Jesus and Mary to which the organisation of the Stations of the Cross (*Via Crucis*) had been entrusted, asking for permission to remove the sacred stations and the cross in order to conduct excavations. (This note continues on p. 168)

[32] Passefont, *Pantheon*; Nispi-Landi, *Marco Agrippa*, pp. 109ff. (citation from p. 109); Manetti, *Panteon*. (This note continues on p. 168)

[33] Fea, *L'integrità del Panteon*; Fea, *Conclusione per l'integrita*. The dispute was settled in favour of the baker's: Jonsson, "cura dei monumenti", pp. 26ff.

[34] Boyer, "Le Panthéon", pp. 210ff.; Jonsson, "cura dei monumenti", pp. 66ff., pp. 72ff.

[35] In this case too, the action was merely the implementation of a proposal that had already been discussed, but not implemented, in the circle of the Accademia di San Luca at the time of the French domination: Jonsson, "cura dei monumenti", p. 89.

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The city today continues to pay the price for these interventions, which have decided the destiny of the historic centre. Two macroscopic examples alone are enough to reveal the continuity of the mistakes.

In 1882, after almost a century of investigations into transforming the Campidoglio into the new Palace of the Caesars, as favoured by the Napoleonic circle, it was decided to construct the monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, cutting off the hill and destroying millennia of history in one swoop (Fig. 7).[36] The polemics were tremendous, although the position of Depretis prevailed who recalled "that political considerations cannot be ignored in making the choice", and these were to link themselves to the glories of the ancient kings of Rome and to emulate imperial and papal Rome while surpassing them in grandeur.[37] The young Italy that had just been born needed, according to its politicians, the tangible construction of symbolic forms of the new power: and the Campidoglio together with the new Vittoriano, the name for the monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, would be an excellent counterweight to Saint Peter's. The "minimalist" proposal to remove Marcus Aurelius from his piazza, to put him in a museum, and to replace him with an equestrian state of Vittorio Emanuele came close to being implemented, while the Palazzo Senatorio would have been transformed into a theatre wing and its interior would have been reduced to a loggia to house the statues of the heroes of the Risorgimento.[38] This project proved inadequate to the grandeur that was expected of an architectural work that was to overshadow, in the hopes of the organisers, the Ara Coeli and even the brilliant Michelangelesque design of the Piazza del Campidoglio. There were certainly many fears, and they were justified. It was feared, in the words of Primo Acciaresi, that "anyone, even a great artist, raising the monument among the marvels of the Fori Imperiali and the Christian basilicas would run the risk of incurring other people's compassion".[39] There was not the slightest concern about the difficulty of fitting such a gigantic monument within the stratified context of the historic centre, but only about its possible inability to compete with the great products of antiquity. Acciaresi must have been satisfied, because the new shrine of the fatherland designed by Giuseppe Sacconi, praised beyond any logic at the time of its construction, entered as victor in competition with the Fori Imperiali and, has been pointed out, imitated some of their architectural solutions. The Vittoriano, according to Acciaresi, should be:

> [...] the monumental synthesis of the three great civilisations of Rome — the ancient, the papal and the modern — [...] this

[36] By now there is an enormous bibliography on the ideology of this exceptional monument: Venturoli, *patria*; Porzio, *Vittoriano*; Bertelli, "Piazza Venezia"; Brice, *Monumentalité publique*; Tobia, *Altare*. (This note continues on p. 168)

[37] Acciaresi, *Sacconi e l'opera*, pp. 56ff.; Berggren and Sjöstedt, *L'ombra dei grandi*, pp. 59ff.; Tobia, *Altare*, p. 33. It is difficult to know whether the rumours were founded that Depretis had opted for the Campidoglio to prevent the hill from being chosen by the "more extreme political parties" as the site for a monument to Mazzini or Garibaldi: Acciaresi, *Sacconi e l'opera*, p. 57.

[38] Berggren and Sjöstedt, *L'ombra dei grandi*, pp. 60ff. There was a precedent for the proposal already at the end of 1876 in a similar one by Achille Monti printed in the literary review *Il Buonarroti* (Monti, *Cose Romane*, pp. 410ff.; see also Berggren and Sjöstedt, *L'ombra dei grandi*, pp. 53ff.), which was also based on the serious deterioration of the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius. In 1878, after the death of Vittorio Emanuele II, Monti took up the proposal again, emphasising the economy of the solution and its extreme symbolic value: Monti, "statua equestre", pp. 104ff.

[39] Acciaresi, *Sacconi e il suo monumento*, p. 14. Acciaresi included a text by Primo Levi (*La Lettura*, April 1904, pp. 113ff., transcribed in Acciaresi, *Sacconi e l'opera*, pp. 58ff.) that contains a balanced and just criticism of the choice of the site and of the rhetorical function of the monument, destined to serve as a backdrop to the colossal equestrian statue of the sovereign.

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> poem of history and the fatherland […] whose aesthetics are due to a single chosen genius of Italy, will not be interpreted properly, nor serve as a warning to the future, unless the Roman council and the State free it from the disgusting buildings nearby that degrade it and amid which the superb and eloquent volume cannot recall, as it should, the annals of the fatherland and the ever self-regenerating greatness of eternal Rome. [40]

Not only the monuments of ancient Rome, but also those of the new Rome were supposed to tower in isolated beauty. And that is inevitably what happened.

On the one hand, the Italians had great expectations of a monument that would epitomise the unification of Italy and thereby give rise to a genuinely Italian, national architecture, overcoming the linguistic and formal traditions with their predominantly urban or regional characteristics. In rivalling in grandeur the most extraordinary monuments of the papal city, and even the harmonious and anything but gigantic piazza designed by Michelangelo, the new national State wanted to affirm its power over the papal State, and over the local authority, which it should have had as an ally but found hostile at times because of an ill-concealed distrust. However, the colossal scale of the construction, which was patently "heroic" and theatrical, like an isolated citadel (a new Campidoglio) and destined to be viewed from the front, and therefore only capable of being appreciated fully when seen from the Corso, had its points of reference in ancient architecture, and in many respects in the — supposed rather than documented — monumentality of imperial Rome, the unsurpassed architectural model of the new Italy taken over in the decorative stylistic elements and compositional orders, but not in the relation between their volume and function. There is no reference, therefore, to the system of domes which still dominates the panorama of Rome today, but a mixed, contrived form of classicism and grandiloquence designed to intimidate the spectator, who feels crushed under the weight of such an imposing and gigantic structure, an authentic symbol of the authority of the unified State.[41] Sacconi displayed an obvious desire to separate his work from its urban surroundings and a taste for experimentation with new decorative and architectural elements derived from the most disparate historical periods, with the ambition of constituting a climax of Italian architectural culture: a climax not lacking in original accents, above all in the numerous, sometimes refined details, which have made it possible to engage on a reassessment of the monument in recent times and to pass a not entirely negative

[40] Acciaresi, *Sacconi e l'opera*, p. 296.

[41] Beyme, *Die Kunst der Macht*, pp. 239ff., esp. pp. 244ff.

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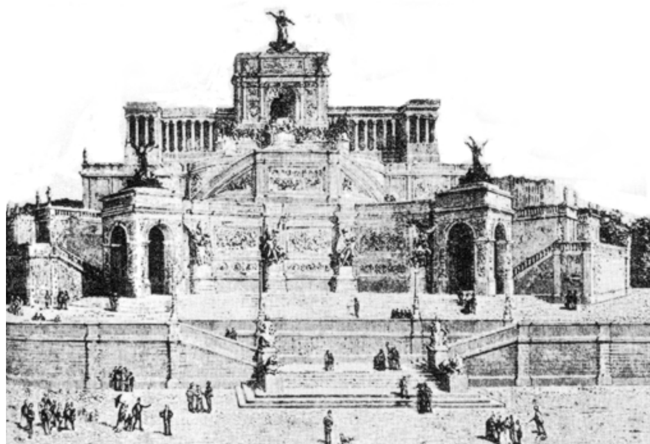

Fig. 16: Project presented by Schmitz to the second competition for the Monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, 1880-1884, Rome.

judgement on it in the context of European figurative culture of the late nineteenth century.[42]

But what is still most striking today at first sight is the way it looks like "an incredible Hellenistic altar".[43] In fact, the Vittoriano does have a certain external analogy with the monumental complexes consisting of an altar with podium, colonnades and antae from Asiatic Greece — the altar of Asclepius on Kos, the temple of Artemis Leukophryene in Magnesia on the Meander, the temple of Athena at Priene, and, of course, the Great Altar of Pergamon.[44] However, at the moment when Sacconi presented his project — in a more compact version that is nevertheless more or less similar to the work that was finally implemented — before the closing date of the contest on 15 December 1883, he could not have been familiar with those examples, because their earliest and more reliable graphic reconstructions are subsequent to that date.[45] It is therefore logical to suppose that Sacconi had in mind the more common portico in antis. The differences from the monumental Hellenistic altar complexes, however, are evident. In the case of the Great Altar of Pergamon, the imposing staircase leads to a magnificent portico that gives access to an inner courtyard dominated by the altar itself. Here lies an enormous difference. The solemn steps of the Vittoriano — one of the basic elements of the work, evidently recalling the solutions effected in Piazza di Spagna and in the Porto di Ripetta — are deprived of an effective function in their gigantic dimensions, as though they are intended to compete with all the complexes scattered through Europe with a monumental façade. They lead to a grandiose portico that is a visual barrier and behind which there is nothing. The most

[42] Borsi, *Arte a Roma*, pp. 88ff.

[43] Borsi, *Arte a Roma*. The idea that Sacconi was inspired by the Great Altar of Pergamon is a recurrent motive in the literature on the Vittoriano, but has never been examined in depth: e.g. Tobia, *Altare*, p. 37.

[44] Yavis, *Greek Altars*, pp. 196ff, n. 74.

[45] The surprising resemblances to the Altar of Pergamon and, almost to the same extent, to the altar of Magnesia, are coincidental. It is true that the first stones of the Pergamon monument were discovered in 1871 and that the official excavations at Pergamon under Carl Humann commenced in September 1878, immediately bringing to light a considerable number of stones from the Great Altar. However, the first reconstruction sketch by Humann, dating from 1879, does not offer a precise idea of the monument. (This note continues on p. 168)

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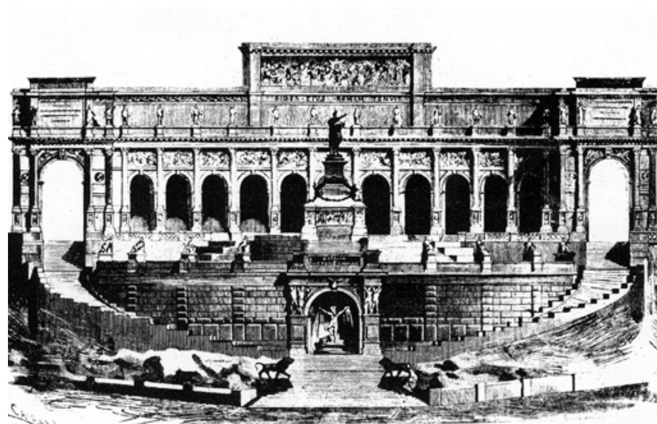

Fig. 17: Project presented by Piacentini-Ferrari at the first competition for the Monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, 1880-1884, Rome.

critical immediately realised the lack of any useful function for such a stage device intended to serve as a rhetorical backdrop for the equestrian statue of the sovereign, while the possible sources of inspiration from classical antiquity, though often just as theatrical, had been conceived and implemented to perform certain functions of a religious or civil and administrative nature. Nevertheless, the theme of the contest won by Sacconi was in fact this: "an equestrian statue with an architectural background and appropriate steps".[46] It is sufficient to cast a glance at the many projects presented in the second contest (Fig. 16) — the main but not sole theme of the first contest was a triumphal arch, but it determined the presentation of projects which, while giving rise to the most incredible polemics,[47] were already ideologically close to the winning project of the second context (Fig. 17) — to realise that none of them abandons this connection, with the plethora of Neo-Renaissance, Neo-Baroque and Neo-Classical staircases that accompany, and in actual fact obliterate, the equestrian statue of the sovereign. Although the winning project has a stronger pseudo-Hellenistic character than the others, it is completely in line with the eclectic tendencies of the period, with an architecture in which an overabundance of ornamentation predominates.

The vicissitudes of the Vittoriano have not actually had any repercussions on its international resonance, demonstrating once more that the fame of certain monuments is not in fact connected with their artistic quality. Cinema, this apparent and faithful mirror of our time, has contributed to its ambiguous fame in the last few decades. The monument was chosen by Peter Greenaway as one of the privileged sets for his film

[46] Acciaresi, *Sacconi e l'opera*, pp. 56ff. In his 1904 article, Primo Levi had already written: "Unable to escape the consequences of the programme, the project had rendered the greater part of the building idle, which appeared thus blind, idle, useless, except for the upper part, where the propylaeum and portico paid homage to the demands of space and light".

[47] Typical is the pamphlet by Dossi, *I mattoidi*. It is significant that the Piacentini-Ferrari project applied to the slopes of the Campidoglio in the greatest structural confusion adumbrates the solutions adopted by Sacconi in the monument that was finally constructed: Accasto and others, *Roma capitale*, p. 77 with fig. 17.

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Fig. 18: The destruction of the monument to Vittorio Emanuele II, from the film *The Core* by John Amiel, 2003.

Fig. 19: The destruction of the Colosseum, from the film *The Core* by John Amiel, 2003.

The Belly of an Architect (1987). For its marked Neo-Classicism, or rather, for its multiplicity of architectural styles, ranging from the glory of the ancient world to the tolerated presence of the contemporary idiom, it was made the conclusive and all-embracing symbol of the eternal city seen as a belly that swallows and metabolises everything. In an interview,[48] Greenaway has tried to define the sensations experienced upon seeing the Vittoriano:

> The monument to Vittorio Emanuele II right in the middle of Rome is striking, this enormous construction for which I have always cherished a particular affection and which the Romans call "the wedding cake" or "the typewriter". It is a rather vulgar building, closer to French than Italian beaux-arts; glistening white marble, which seems totally alien to the urban landscape that surrounds it. Frankly, when I wrote the screenplay I did not imagine that they would allow us to film inside the "typewriter", an emblem of the worst and most curious architectural constructions [...] And then, as always happens, so many important associations of ideas emerged from nowhere. For example, the man who built it, Sacconi [by the way, we used his bust in the film] was a rather melancholy type who got into a lot of trouble for having imported the

[48] The interview given by Peter Greenaway to the review ActivCinema (Rivista attiva di archeologia cinematografica) contains some errors: I have emended one of them in the text (where Greenaway had referred to the architect of the Vittoriano as Zucconi instead of Sacconi), but it is impossible to emend another without altering the meaning of his words (Sacconi did not commit suicide, as Greenaway claims).

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> marble from his native town. He was a typical provincial kid who "made his fortune in Rome", but like Stourley Kracklite [the protagonist in the film, an architect from Chicago who has come to Rome to promote an exhibition on the French architect Étienne-Louis Boullée], he committed suicide.

In the film *L'ora di religione* (2002) by Marco Bellocchio, during a casual conversation with the protagonist, Ernesto Picciafuoco, a hallucinating inmate of a clinic blames his madness not on the beauty but on the ugliness of the Vittoriano, which had clouded his mind and led him to the conclusion "that ugliness had inhibited the architects of the whole world, frightened them, terrorised them". At the end Picciafuoco, who tries in every way to defend his sanity against the formalism of his family and society that want to force him to accept the process of beatification of his mother (a bigot with a stupid grin), recalling this meeting, virtually destroys a Vittoriano entangled in a dense cluster of banana trees in a computer animation.

Finally, in Jon Amiel's film *The Core* (2003), both the Vittoriano (Fig. 18) and the Colosseum (Fig. 19) disintegrate, and not virtually, because of a destructive mass of electromagnetic waves directed for their devastating effect on, note well, two monuments that are considered to symbolise Rome. And since the eternal city has had the honour of being chosen among the capitals of the old world for the shooting, they have inevitably become comprehensive symbols of European culture.

This tragic final shared destiny of the Colosseum and the Vittoriano is striking. The disintegration of the Roman monuments suddenly does not seem as unreal as it would have done a few years ago. In a period in which a sort of collective madness seems to have been regenerated that is no longer controlled on the basis of the existing political schemes or human conviviality, and which is leading uncontrollably to a crisis of identity; in which the media dwell on tragedies and horrors without parallel seen from a distance, almost exorcised in an aesthetic of grief about which Susan Sontag has written so lucidly,[49] a distance that scarcely involves us — just like in war of science fiction films which sometimes include the cathartic weeping that makes us feel better — unless our own personal interests are affected; it makes us aware that what has been preserved of our artistic heritage to date is the result of a miracle and there is no guarantee that it will continue for ever.

The reappropriation of the Campidoglio by the third Italy was the tip of an iceberg that touched, for better or for worse, almost all the ancient monuments of the city. It is a

[49] Sontag, *Davanti al dolore*.

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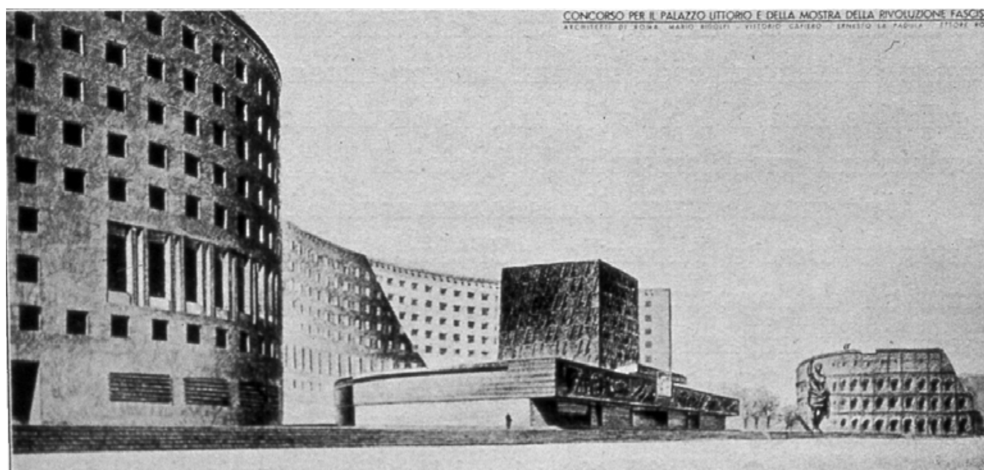

Fig. 20: Project presented by Ridolfi, La Padula, Cafiero, Rossi for the Palazzo del Littorio in Via dell'Impero, Rome.

Leitmotiv which dominates the entire thinking about the urban fabric of the Fascist era: particularly clear examples of this are the construction of the Via dell'Impero to which the ruins of the Fori Imperiali serve as a backdrop, and the contest for Palazzo Littorio, in which the projects presented seem to be competing with the Basilica of Maxentius and with the Colosseum (Fig. 20).[50]

It still seems possible to find traces of this cultural reference in the post-war period. In 1959 the competition was announced for the new premises of the Biblioteca Nazionale at the perimeter of the walls of Castro Pretorio.[51] The contest, which was won by the Castellazzi, Dall'Anese, Vitellozzi group, was an important moment in the architectural debate of those years. Yet few voices were raised to point out that the new library buildings would be erected on top of the Tiberian *castra*, with a sovereign disregard for any earlier remains. Even the Policlinico had been wisely constructed outside the walls. Now, the impressive mass of the central body of the library dominates the panorama, rising above and competing with the beautiful section of the walls on Via del Policlinico.

Perhaps in a city like Rome it is difficult to be free from the aspiration to compete with such and so many architectural masterpieces. But the fact is that these monuments have acquired stratified symbolic values that lie outside their effective artistic value.

Nowadays, as an inevitable and logical reaction, nothing can be touched in the urban fabric of the historic city without the emergence of a chorus of polemics of unprecedented bitterness. This has happened at the very moment when the

50 Rossi, *Roma*, pp. 104ff., n. 52. Many of the projects vie with the neighbouring Colosseum in the use of grandiose curvilinear surfaces.

51 Rossi, *Roma*, pp. 281ff., n. 161.

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disciplines concerned with guardianship, the landscape and urban planning have reached very high levels of critical self-awareness, in the meantime refining their specific techniques, particularly in the field of historical knowledge that is not tied, as it has often been in the past, to preconceived ideas about golden ages and decadent ages, the latter regarded as not worth studying or preserving. Renzo Piano's Auditorium project is an interesting example of a completely successful cooperation between archaeology and an architectural project. However, the system in its totality seems to have got stuck instead of proceeding with maximal collaboration.

The result is the diametrical opposite of what might be expected. The discussion within a democratic political structure is leading to a widespread paralysis in which the few buildings that are implemented, in the context of an urban planning that seems to have lost its basic role, are the result of a series of compromises which are certainly not positive for the creation of architecture at a high formal level. One might wonder to what extent this phenomenon is connected with that widespread loss of identity that seems to be involving the whole of the Western world, and which leads people to dig their heels into the past without a critical examination of the causes which have led to the interruption of the dialogue and therefore to the social and political disasters of the moment.

Reflecting on all this, one is bound to conclude that the basic task that awaits us is not only the preservation of our cultural memory — that is, that collective memory based on remembrance, on identity and on the perpetuations of culture that form the tradition[52] — but also the specific demonstration, in the face of the dominant uncertainty, that such a task is imperative if we are to accept with lucidity, tolerance and a critical spirit (the great gifts that we have inherited from the Enlightenment) the current changes that affect us, and is not reduced to a mere conservation of the artistic heritage as a fetish divorced from its context, and even less to a quantification of its monetary value as a function of its supposed profitability. Perhaps the moment has come to propose again the unity of the disciplines on a new foundation to promote the construction not of a new Rome — there is no need of other Romes — but of a Rome whose entire history, and whose entire articulated memory, are active protagonists in the inevitable transformations and choices that we will still have to make. The collective memory does not have a price: we should all ponder this.

[52] I am referring, of course, to the text by Assmann, *memoria culturale*.

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Continuation of footnotes from p. 159

[31] ... When Pius IX heard of this, he threatened to excommunicate anyone who changed Benedict XIV's arrangement of the area. When the demolition work began, however, the clerical press of the day launched a real defamatory campaign against Rosa, calling him a "yokel architect", and maintaining that the excavations would not throw any fresh light on the Colosseum besides what was already known from the work of Carlo Fea (on which see Jonsson, "cura dei monumenti", pp. 90ff.). The foul-smelling stagnant water inside the area was called "Rosa water", with a sly allusion to the archaeologist's surname, who thus suffered the consequences of decisions that were certainly not taken by him alone. In fact, in the same months the Member of Parliament Giuseppe Ferrari declared that Rome would not be able to make progress unless it combated Religion. It was not until 19 May 1927 that a new cross was erected in the amphitheatre (the old one, temporarily placed in the church of San Francesco di Paola, could no longer be exposed to the elements), which had already been carried there in a solemn procession on 25 October 1926.

[32] ... As Bruno Tobia has remarked (Tobia, *Altare*, p. 23), the plan to turn the Pantheon into a genuinely national shrine was turned down (and the idea of burying Garibaldi there was rejected too), in favour of the plan "to devote the temple of Agrippa exclusively to the glorification of the Savoy, and to build on this, in the papal seat of Rome, a patriotic tradition in opposition to a different tradition of anti-Italian hatred which was heard at the time."

Continuation of footnote from p. 160

[36] ... The ideological debates around the Vittoriano were to be continued with its transformation into a monument to the Unknown Soldier after the Great War: Labita, "Milite Ignoto".

Continuation of footnote from p. 162

[45] ... It was not until the excavations of 1884 and 1885, and above all the reconstruction put forward by Richard Bohn in 1885 — though still lacking a basic structural element, the transversal portico that gave access to the altar courtyard — that, taking everything into consideration, an exact idea of the monument could be formed. But by then Giuseppe Sacconi had already completed his first sketch, which was presented before the final date for submissions for the second contest, 15 December 1883: Humann, *Pergamon Altar*, pls. I (sketch by Humann from 1879), II (sketch by Humann from 1884); Sculte, *Chronik*, p. 125 (letter of Bohn to Humann of 17 February 1885), p. 134 (sketch by Humann from 1885), plate facing p. 161 (Bohn's proposed reconstruction). On the history of the discovery: Kunze, "Pergamonaltar" pp. 60ff. On the reception of the Altar in Germany: Schalles, 'Rezeptionsgeschichtliche', pp. 188ff. As for the altar from Magnesia, the first reconstruction proposal from 1904 is incorrect because it still lacks the transversal colonnade giving access to the altar proper (Humann et al., Magnesia am Maeander, pp. 91ff., figs. 93-95). The first reliable reconstruction was that proposed by Armin von Gerkan in 1929 (Gerkan, Altar des Artemis, esp. pls. VIII-X). The altar of Kos, which is smaller and lacks a transversal colonnade, was published in 1932 (Schazmann and Herzog, Kos, pp. 25ff., fig. 22, pls. 12-13). The altar of Priene, first published in 1904 (Wiegand and Schrader, Priene, pp. 120ff., figs. 91, 92, 96), and more thoroughly, though not entirely accurately, by Armin von Gerkan in 1924 (Gerkan, "Altar des Athenatempels", pp. 15ff., pls. I-III) also lacked the transversal row of columns.

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