

Dissacrare la memoria del sacro: il caso Mignon

Desecrating the Memory of the Sacred: the Mignon Case

Il caso di studio è la chiesa sconsacrata di San Pietro a Ferrara, risalente al X sec. Dopo aver “perso la sua benedizione” durante l’invasione napoleonica, venne riutilizzata come magazzino, palestra, spazio di incontro e balera - dal 1912 come cinema popolare e, dopo il 1980, come cinema porno: “Mignon. Cinema a Luci Rosse”.

Può uno spazio con origini, vocazioni e fundamenta sacre, essere così drammaticamente manipolato da poter “sostenere” qualsiasi tipo di violazione della “sua memoria”? La memoria del sacro sembra poter contaminare il dominio del “sordido”, creando un curioso ibrido che merita attenzione. Se da un lato il caso Mignon pone diversi dubbi sui limiti del riutilizzo di uno spazio sacro, dall’altro apre la strada ad alcune rischiose, ma possibili, sperimentazioni.

The case study is the de-consecrated medieval Church of San Pietro in Ferrara dating from the 10th century. Having “lost its dedication” during the Napoleonic invasion, it was then reused as a warehouse, a gym, a popular space of cruising, since the 1912 as a movie theatre, and after the 1980s as a porno movie theatre: the “Mignon. Cinema a luci rosse”.

Can a space with sacred origins, vocations and foundations be so dramatically manipulated to be able to “sustain” any kind of violations of “its” memory?

The memory of the sacred seems to have contaminated the domain of the “sordid”, creating a curious hybrid that deserves attention. While posing problems about the limits in the reuse of a deconsecrated church, the Mignon case points toward some unprejudiced and risky possible experimentations.



Claudio Sgarbi

Architetto, M.S. and Ph.D., Adj. Res. Professor (Carleton University) has published several articles, essays and a book, is teaching Design Studio, History/Theory of Architecture and Advanced Building Systems and has been designing and building in Italy and participating at several competitions, researches and artistic experiences.

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SOME FACTS. Concerning the Church and its De-consecration.

The ancient Church of *San Pietro e Paolo* commonly known nowadays as “*Ex Chiesa di San Pietro*” was the most important cult space in the early settlement of the city of Ferrara. It was built around the Xth C. inside the first ancient byzantine *Castrum* where it was used as a basilica when the existing Duomo, the Cathedral of San Giorgio, had not yet been built. The Ferrara’s Saint Peter, not unlike its Roman paradigm, underwent many transformations in time. It was renovated during the Quattrocento and in the 1530 the façade was moved from the west to the east side. The decision, which contrasts the original canonical eastern orientation of the original church, was taken in order to create a façade and an entrance from the main street (now called *Via San Pietro*). Other transformations involving the overall plan of the building took place during the XVIth C. and again in 1745. During the Napoleonic invasion of Italy, the Ferrara’s Saint Peter, together with many other churches and monasteries, was “suppressed”. It was sold in the 1811 to private owners and in the 1813 all the interior paving was demolished and excavations carried out. We can only imagine how many transformations and exploitations happened while the property was transferred between different owners over the centuries. We know it had been used temporarily as a storehouse. Between

the 1891 and the 1895 it housed a sport club (*Società Ginnastica “Pro Italia”*). Then it was used as a popular dancing space reaching notoriousness between the citizens of Ferrara as a vicious meeting place that corrupted the young generations. It gained the epithet of “*scanadur*” (literally “the slaughterhouse” that is a vulgar way to indicate males’ sexual harassment over females). The Ex Church of Saint Peter then became a multifunctional space, the *Politeana Ariosto*, for different kinds of sport spectacles. In 1912 it started to be used as a movie theatre. In 1941, at the beginning of the II World War, following the increase of its popularity, the owner decided to renovate the ex church. The *Soprintendenza ai Monumenti* (that is the historic monuments authority of the time) authorized the renovation but imposed the restoration of the façade following the indications of the superintendent. Since the original church portal had been lost, a new one was designed and built¹.

The *Ex Chiesa di San Pietro* continued to be used as a second round films and art-house cinema throughout the 70s. Then in the 80s it became “*cinema a luci rosse*” (x-rated movie house)². I suppose that the decision to shift its use from movie theatre to porno movie theatre was taken by the owner and it did not require approval from the municipality.

The name, “*Mignon*” (a common name for porno movie theatres in Italy) is somehow

allusive, and provocative. *Mignon* means “little” in French, it is also the name given to little bottles of liquors commonly sold in the Italian shops, but “*mignotta*” is also the vulgar name for female prostitutes and a widely used offensive epithet.

How could this happen in a Catholic context?

The common answer is that once a church has lost its “sacred character”, it is not a church anymore and so its uses can be anything we can think of. Practically, either it is a church or it is not! But the issue is not so simple. As we will see the de-consecration of a Church is not an act that per se allows us to imagine any possible future reuse, and the necessity to preserve an appropriate reuse for a building, especially an historical monument, is also one of the concerns of the heritage preservation policies. The past jeopardizes the future and provides us with grounds that are charged with haunting memories. The Church and the State agree upon this aspect. To respect a memory and moreover a sacred one is a basic human necessity. “Even people who don’t think that they care about what is sacred will have lines they don’t cross”³. So the *Mignon* case deserves to be examined because the possible consequences of this apparent “distraction”: something unpredictable and, according to someone, unbelievable and wrong has happened and now we have the opportunity to understand the implications

of this transgression, to imagine possible destinies and to think about the verges of the profanation. It compels us coercively to question the limits in the reuse of spaces.

THE MIGNON CASE: a De-consecrated Porno Theatre.

The Neapolitan born film director Massimo Ali Mohammad became interested in the case of the Mignon in 2009. "When I realized that it was an adults-only movie theatre, I begun to think that the binomial church/porno-movie-theatre was perfect to speak about an Italian uniqueness. The contradictions, well rooted in our society, between religious observance – often flaunted – and the will to be unprejudiced, mostly when it is a matter of showing off the body and its sexuality"⁴. Ali Mohammad liked this kind of "domestic transgression" which is meant to show an apparent anti-conformism while hiding many other taboos. Sexuality and pornography at the Mignon, seem to be conveying something that is still "original" and this originality can be grasped from the interviews to "the users of the space".

With the support of the *Ufficio del Cinema del Comune di Ferrara*⁵, Ali supervised the space for five months, from May to September 2010. The Mignon case seemed perfect to challenge his interest in the so called "*cinema di genere*" (audience oriented movies), and particularly the "*genere porno*", because of its "mixture

of transgression and melancholic decay" and also because it is now "always on the verge of disappearing". And this happens for two main reasons. The first one is the obsolescence of the idea of the porno movie theatre itself. The second is the immoral liaison that the Mignon entertains with its memory, that one of having been a church.

So there are at least two things here that are showing their precariousness: the porno-movie-theatre and the memory of the church: they contradict and support each other.

Ali Mohammad documents perfectly these layers of precariousness of the space in his visual narration: the little, almost minute history of the individuals, the sense of "domestic prohibition" embodied in this kind of place; the presence of the "prohibited place/space" in the historic centre of the city contained inside the evident remains of a church; the common awareness of the acceptance of the banal trivialized transgressiveness to create a secluded atmosphere into the practice of public life.

The documentary presented in Ferrara the 10th of April 2013 is about a place that represent a "criss-crossing of stories of solitude" from "people who live at the margin", but also a place that can be defined as "*porno-cinema d'essai*" or an "anthro-pop-porno" cinema.

Many of the users are all "regulars" ("*abitudinari*"). The cashier is even able to list some of them: three surgeons, one

anaesthesiologist, two bankers, one butcher and one deacon. But the majority wear hats and dark glasses even at night just to preserve a minimum of anonymity. Every adult is welcome but prostitutes are not, according to him, to preserve "a certain decorum"⁶. Each transgression has its own rules. Even desecration might have its ethics.

Today's clientele also come from other cities – both because porno-movie-theatres are no longer that common in the urban contemporary landscape and also because they prefer not to be recognized by other passers-by when they enter or exit the place. Some of the clientele are not even interested to porno movies and they go there just to meet friends "chat about politics and other things, watch two sequences and then go home. This is not just a sex addicts place or a hideout for people with particular obsessions: this is just a meeting place, a hangout [*ritrovo*]"⁷. The darkness inside, like in the more fashionable nightclubs or sex-club's darkrooms, allows for an almost complete anonymity.

The facility includes 400 seats, distributed on the main ground floor room (*platea*) and a balcony (*galleria*) that is the most frequented area in the cinema. A projection and technical control room (*cabina di regia*) is "correctly" (??) located where the altar was meant to be (after the twisting of the orientation of the church in the late Renaissance). The scenes are projected on the screen cladding the

back of the façade, right where, traditionally, in many churches, one can find scenes of the Last Judgement⁸. There might be even a sort of philological coherence in this un-adaptive reuse. The technical operator, who has been employed there for several years and has inherited the profession from his father, works there during the 9 hours of daily programming “365 days per year including Christmas” from 14:30 till midnight, and alternates DVD with 35mm films without interruption. Many of the movies are repeatedly projected with an annual programming and might stay on for more than a week, with some amateur classics replicated more often than others. The users seldom pay attention to which movie is on show, but they might ask instead “who is around?”. The price is 10 euros, with a discount for the over 60 (6 euros). I have not asked if they practice group discounts.

Inside many porno-movie-theatre like the Mignon there is a special ritual that takes place. The pornographic images are projected on the screen but the spectators create their own “show off”. Yet this is not a cult movie live re-enactment like in the Rocky Horror Picture Show. The scenes might not even serve as an inspiration but they are meant to dissimulate, and create a possible distraction.

The spectators create their own micro spectacle that might or might not involve one or more “spect-actors”. So the scenes of the movie are just a background for the real

spectacle that takes place between the seats: the projected images are a marginal setting for a sensuous experience that is bounded into darkness. There is another interesting dissociation that takes place here – as in many other porno movie theatres: while the contents of the movies are mostly addressing hetero-sexual pornography, inside the theatre the sexual rituals are mostly homosexual. A sort of psychological double denial that could trigger an analyst as it does excite the users. Ali defines the Mignon a deconsecrated porno movie theatre⁹.

His documentary describes the people who work in this place, their unique stories and the way they meet users, ghosts and creatures of habit. Elderly people, students, couples, disabled and marginalized beings are in search of a lost intimacy, but also look for contradictions, irrationality, extravaganza and unpredictable experiences.

Without any doubt the porno-cinema is a phenomenon that is disappearing.

Ali suggests to explore different alternatives that might be part of its future “adaptive reuse” like “ifeelmyself”¹⁰ or other form of public autoerotism, schools for orgasmic exploration, erotic public therapy or even ecstasy meditation classes. An interesting program for a decaying porno-movie-theatre but what an “adaptive reuse” for a deconsecrated church!

The coexistence of porno-and-ex-church allow

now us to reflect upon our contradictions: sexuality and catholic heritage, political progress and morality, the Italian impossibility to abandon this ambiguity, the necessity for the city to marginalize this coexistence and yet speculate on it and use it as a landmark. Things will remain probably what they were and are but the awareness of this minor and marginal deep story is worth being discussed. The porno-eroticism is something that resists any possible (literary, cinematographic, sociological, anthropological and philosophic) intellectualization. This is what it is. The sexual organs seem just vulnerable pieces of flesh that became the obsessive targets and exclusions of many religious practices and systems of power. So they might react quite illogically, as illogically as they were identified and persecuted.

In the Mignon case we are facing an anthropoporno atmosphere that now contains such a degree of decadence that it even begins to show the necessity to preserve (*tutelare*) its memory of transgressions and contradictions as an imminently intangible historical heritage. I think that this might turn out to be a rather pathetic endeavour. Pathetic in the full sense of the word.

The ambience created by the presence of the porno movie theatre inside the deconsecrated church make it “more interesting than the movies it shows”¹¹.

Following the police decision to close many

porno-movie-theatres in Italy, because they were used for promiscuous practices, the Mignon was spared probably because of its character as a popular hangout (*ritrovo*) between common people, mostly retired. The entrance looks like an hybrid “between an oratory and a bar”. This movie theatre “resists because here friends come to chat. You are free to say anything you like, in respect to legal limits. But sometime some ‘words’ are above the lines. Well, if you reach the gallery now you might find someone naked. One comes here to lay bare (*mettere a nudo*) his instincts, if not his whole body. This is why this movie theatre endures while many others are closing. What we recommend is that there must be no money trafficking (*giri di soldi*)”¹². The image of “porno-church” is at the ground of this attention and peculiarity that becomes particularly provoking in Christian Catholic country.

PROFANE BUT NOT SORDID. The Church and the State Laws.

The limits in reusing a deconsecrated Church are defined both by the Church’s Code of Canon Law (1983) and by the Code of Cultural Heritages and Landscape (2004). I can mention here only their latest editions but they both have a very complex history that would be worth being analysed in detail because of the crucial use of terms and prescriptions. The Church Canon does not use the verb

to “deconsecrate”¹³ but only to “violate” (translation of the Italian “*profanare*” and Latin “*violare*”), and the expression “loss of dedication or blessing” (translation of the Italian “*perdere la dedicazione o la benedizione*” and Latin “*Dedicationem vel benedictionem amittunt loca sacra*”).

There are no interpretative doubts here, and the message is clear: if a church cannot be used as a church it can be “relegated” to “profane but not sordid” uses. We do not know exactly the meaning of the word “sordid” but we know for sure that what is taking place at the Mignon now could just be it. Obviously the Canon Laws fully apply only to buildings that are Church’s property. But the logic of the laws is meant to be maintained in the conscience of any future owner and user.

The bureaucrats of the historic preservation committees perfectly conform to this logic: it is forbidden to “designate” buildings to a kind of “use that is not compatible with their historical or artistic character”¹⁴. The historic and artistic character of the *Ex Chiesa di San Pietro*, is that of having been a church. To use it as a porno-movie-theatre openly contradicts that character and is certainly not compatible with the original use.

Sordid and incompatible are the key words and concepts; and obviously the important difference that exists between de-consecration (the act of deconsecrating) and desecration (the act of desecrating).

One might even wonder why should a porno-movie-theatre be housed inside a deconsecrated church when all around the city there are plenty of abandoned insignificant buildings with no cumbersome past.

The case is not at all coherent and, just because of that, is particularly interesting. Its “original” de-consecration cuts out a certain time lapse of its history, but the sequence of its desecrations compel us think about different destinies. Moreover it obliges us to think about its prehistory as a possible stratification of other profanations (i.e. the church was founded on a pagan ground that had been a consecration of another profane ground and so on ad infinitum). So there are many layers of denials and affirmations and when the world presents itself in this way we should be particularly grateful to the gift of the complexity of the evidence.

The restrictive norms – guided, for sure, by the good intention to respect the diversities – concerning the idea of the conservation of the cultural heritage in our epoch, has been even dramatically complicated by the inclusion within the same domain of the called “intangible” and “natural” aspects of the historical “values”¹⁵. Historic preservation policies are as conservative as the Canonical dogmas: they imply that there must be forever a kind of appropriateness, coherence and compatibility in the adaptive reuse of a

building which presupposes that something cannot fade away and die.

So the Mignon case is certainly incompatible and represents a transgression of the norms. But is its current “biodiversity” – an error of the church species, a contamination of the religious type – going to be included within our heritage? Is it going to be a precedent of some significance?

Since the Church cannot interfere with the free will of its souls – if we want behave sordidly we can, because we must be free to sin – paradoxically the bureaucrats seem to be willing to supply the citizens with a legal norm to avoid mortal sins. They turn out to be more fundamentalist than religious people. In Italian we call it an over-zealous deed “*un eccesso di zelo*”.

At least theoretically, many religious people are more keen to the pious encounter of the transgressive other (the mission of the Church is to encounter the sinners) that the bureaucrats do.

This said I do not know if you sin more by frequenting the Mignon or a regular porn-movie-theatre hidden in any anonymous urban sprawl. No doubts that, every time you enter the place, you cannot maintain that you were not reminded that a church existed here and you are getting inside it.

The Mignon is to be banned. It is a monstrous birth. The bureaucrats are waiting for its natural death to avoid causing any conflict

that would give to the case a resonance that must be avoided. It should be neglected: its damnation must be its oblivion.

The problem of the “cessation of a sacred building” has been correctly raised by the symposium and has become an urgent problem¹⁶.

The Mignon case teaches us that there is still an important asymmetry between what can be done in a deconsecrated church and what cannot be done.

But I believe that if we try to list all the good and all the evil functions and programs that are recommended, possible or prohibited we are going to get lost in a labyrinth of words and papers.

Discussing the Mignon case with friends and colleagues many of them brought up the issue of a very disturbing coherence presented here because of the “carnality” of Christian Catholic religion and more generally the relation between the sacred, the irrational and the prohibited.

The Mignon is a minor case: we cannot push it too much. But, being it so extreme, it can provoke relevant theological and philosophical reflections. To separate the sacred from the profane is still our duty.

The complex ceremonies for the dedication (Latin *dedicatio*) of a church are performed in order to prevent certain things to happen

inside a sacred space, so that the space of the church is separated and cut out (ideas that are rooted in the etymology of the word “sacred”) from profane world. The ceremonies include prayers, chants, eulogies, processions, relics’ disposals and unctions; perfusions and ablutions with holy water of objects, walls, columns or pillars; ritual inscriptions and crossings, solemn ceremonies inside and outside the space, deposition of the relics in the sepulchre that will become the altar, benediction with the chrism, vesting of the altar, celebration of the mass, holy communion and enclosure of the holy sacrament inside the tabernacle, and so on. Obviously there are certain basic things, like the altar and the holy sacrament, that can be removed when a church is “turned over permanently to profane uses” losing its dedication, but many others intangible presences are and remain immovable. All these “immaterial” phenomena, that are not objectified and cannot be undone, constitute “the memory of the sacred”.

With these complex ceremonies the church tries to keep outside all the possible evil. This prohibition is obviously an act of faith and remains as such for the community of believers: a hope cast into a future that makes that sacred space unique in the scenario of human settlement. A hope cast into the future using the space as resonance chamber cannot be undone. No one can doubt that the sacred

tries to prohibit the different to happen. It occupies a space in order to set aside what it forbids, it asserts itself denying what it does not want to happen.

The church, that has often occupied pagan pre-existent grounds, wants this process of appropriation to be irreversible. The Christian sacredness is meant to overthrow the profane once forever but it cannot prevent the other people from sinning either. Can the space be recalcitrant toward sacrality? Would this resistance define another kind of sacrality? The space has an absence that seems exactly that which the sacred wants to ward off. It is very complex to try to define the original idea of sacred space for the Christian church. The so called physical space of the church meant something quite different for many different group of Christians, and the contamination with archaic Greek and Jewish ideas of sacred space complicates the matter even further. According to the Gospels, the church is not just the “physical space” but, when it takes place, its memory of hope cannot be undone: it is irreversible because it happens in a time that makes sense until the end of time.

This is an argument that has always been at the core of Christian religion and sacredness. But religion is a domain that includes always also its historical progressive and changing traditions, rules, moral predicaments, indications and dogmas – contradictory as they might seem to be in relation to its original principles. If

the original principle of Christianity is “love”, the dogmas make a clear distinction between absolute and relative love affairs. The sacred and the prohibited have very malleable boundaries. The Christian religion often calls for individual consciousness and personal sense of good and evil. Each individual is responsible not only for the facts but mostly for the intentions: “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:28), and nowadays we assume that the same will apply if you look lustfully at a man. Lust is a very important sin.

The Old and the New Testament seem to leave little doubts on what is appropriate and what is not appropriate. Around these little doubts many heresies were created and can still be created.

I do not know if the alliance between Church Canons and Preservation Policies will allow anyone to practice these heresies inside a de-consecrated church. Why should it happen there while it could be avoided there and it could happen somewhere else? What is necessary?

Our society pretends to be permissive and differences should be manifested without creating conflicts. Conformity, may be conformism, is a mandate. The transgressions that our sense of plurality and openness seem to be willing to accept within its mesh must respond to a zoning in the logic of urban

planning – to respect and not offend other people’s sensitivity. Intransigent orthodoxy is no longer at stake but the problem of what should and what should not be allowed is even more urgent. The ideas of militant church, apostolate, evangelism, sanctification, missionary proselytism, and conversion of the heathens are all under deep reconsiderations. The church of soldiers is now more a church of prayers. The activism of the church is mostly dedicated to spiritual matters. The issue of complicity and co-responsibility of the Christians – the commandment to prevent the others from sinning¹⁷ – are all under constant revisions and are often left to personal interpretation in the age of technocracy.

The Mignon case is an evident conflict. It can be seen as a provocation and an offense for the memory of the sacred for a community of believers. Yet, while being on the verge of its disappearance, the Mignon case also leaves its imaginary open. Will the Church and the Civic laws dare to venture into this irrational conflicting domain? Officially they cannot. Will they allow the Mignon error to be committed covertly, deceitfully? Do we prefer another hypocrisy (or rather hypo-crypticity)?

Conflicts are more interesting than superficial accommodations; but since they disturb the quiet domain of indifference they should be banned. Conflicts cannot be accepted within the profane sphere of the city laws.

CONCLUSIONS

The issues here are the desecration, the sacrilege, the profanation and the blasphemy¹⁸ that can still be committed on the deconsecrated space. The memory of the sacred has its own peculiar sacredness that can still be desecrated. The deconsecrated spaces can be desecrated. But we have to avoid to create a list of definitions where we identify what is desecration and what is not, when does it become a profanation and so on. I suppose that the occasion, presented here to the Church and to the City in this historical moment, is different and more challenging.

How many precedents of profaned deconsecrated churches are there already in the global scenario? Leaving aside all the innumerable fictions where something transgressive and violent is imagined inside a Christian church – and we should wander why the Christian church attracts this desire to desecrate! – the list of cases would be countless now. Deconsecrated churches have already been turned into banks, night clubs, discotheques, meeting rooms, fancy shops, supermarkets, fast-foods, animal farms, food markets, bazars, workshops, garages, conference rooms, showrooms, lofts, swimming-pools, gyms¹⁹ and obviously museums and theatres. If the choice of the museum or the theatre as an ideal adaptive reuse of a church, seems obviously appropriate, the problem becomes even more complicate

when we consider all the blasphemous and desecrating forms of contemporary art. What then? The deconsecrated church should just be a museum of itself?

Priests, cardinals, bishops, friars and believers are ashamed about so many “inappropriate reuses”, profanations, obvious provocations, blasphemes practices performed into “places that housed the Holy Sacrament” and the problem is becoming a cultural emergency²⁰, considering the number of churches that are in the process of being abandoned and deconsecrated.

Once the transgression of the memory of the sacred has taken place, then the cascade of further transgressions might be inexorable – leading eventually to a mystical reunion with a common lost prohibited principle. An endless profanation then?

To alimnt the Mignon virus, imagining other transgressive ways of dealing with the memory of the sacred, is too predictably desecrating. No ways. What's next? “Ifeelmyself” open public theatre? A meeting room for perverse sacred experiences? But why should it be inside a deconsecrated church? Does it make the experience more exciting? How about other kind of deconsecrated religious buildings like ex Synagogues, Mosques or Hindu temples?

The problem might get even more complicate. Why not open the deconsecrated church to Black masses and Satanist practices? Aren't they also part of our cultural heritage?

Indeed the Satanists seem to practice the only contemporary activity that requires a deconsecrated church to be really effective. The Mignon Satan Horror Picture Show!

Transgressions add something to emotions. But they can also offend others' emotions. Who is taking this risk? Can't we just say that the deconsecrated church could be just a place dedicated to what we do not know? Can we just leave it to its destiny like a ship in turbulent waters? Is this image too Christian? I propose not to generalize and consider case by case. The Mignon could become an experimental space to test what happens to the memory of the sacred when it is miscarried through possible sacrilegious desecrations. Is this too provocative?

I suggest to work on the Mignon case precisely trough one of the inner qualities of Christian religion that is already exposed by the Mignon case itself: that one of being a religion that potentially, potentially can still accept within the memory of its own sacredness the “other” (an acceptance that is a great challenge and is the essence of a certain kind of sacredness), without reacting against it violently, without being intransigent, but on the contrary jeopardizing its own integrity, leaving its own vulnerability to play its role. Who is your neighbour?²¹ Do we intend to predetermine the character of our neighbours or do we accept to explore its unpredictable diversity? To call “other” a bunch of common people who

practice some sexualized perversions might seem a bit exaggerate. They are not the big “Other”. But this is what happens in the folds of reality. When I see this “other” happening inside a place that bears the memory of the sacred, it looks to me a very little other. The memory of the sacred changes its scale and its relevance. This is how easily we can miss the point: we exaggerate the problem or we make it too insignificant. Is this a sacrilege or is it just a deconsecrated porno movie experience? The observation of the Mignon case causes a blur.

It is exactly this destabilizing opportunity that which the memory of the sacred can promote here.

I wish it was possible to erase from the Church Canon (Can. 1222)²², the word “sordid” and add a sentence that might sound like this: “The memory of the sacred is not scarce, it is a gift for which the Church asks no reward and upon which the Church does not exercise any form of control”. The sacred itself cannot be scarce so why should the deconsecrated be as such? This could make the deconsecrated churches a factory of the imagination, a possible unpredictable terrain of encounter, where the conflicts can be explored.

Unfortunately this libertarian disposition contradicts one of the co-responsibility principles of the Church, but it would not prevent a religious person from sharing this desecrating space for her or his religious

proselytism. If the soul is pure the flesh cannot be corrupted. Can you imagine a priest trying to convert the Mignon’s clientele inside or right outside the movie-theatre? May be some confessionals could be installed in the space? The space where the memory of the sacred is still alive might contribute to create a different consciousness.

Dealing with the memory of the sacred is even more provoking than dealing with the sacred itself, both for the believers and the non-believers, and for different reasons. It means to practice on a level of denial – “this is not sacred anymore! Why bother then?” – that digs even more deeply into human necessity: that one of identifying a meaning, whose scale is impossible to decipher, a meaning which exists on the verge.

The memory of the sacred is fully charged with all its ambiguity, because it is more vulnerable. The memory of the sacred has already undergone a first layer of erosion and denial. It is space of fragility: “I know that if I step into that domain I am going to get a little bit confused, so I like to know it’s there but I also like the fact that it is aside”. This is the memory of the sacred where the Mignon case indulges through an unbalancing scale of motivations, fortuities, mistakes and casual, illogical and contradictory ideas, as if something had not happened enough yet before eventually fading away. May be the destiny of the Mignon is to conquer this

beside-ness. Is this somehow related with a nostalgia of marginality? May be this space need just a long respite. We all prefer to keep the memory of the sacred there somewhere at the margins without us disturbing it or it disturbing us too much. The memory of the sacred works pretty well when it means almost nothing to anybody. At the Mignon it seems for a moment to mean still something for someone...and then it gets so precarious, on the verge of indifference, to emerge again immediately after as a useless provocation. It might all spontaneously die away. What are we ready or willing to loose or gain? When the present is so contradictory, when the lack or the absence of a clear future poses some questions insistently, I think we should not retreat into anonymous solutions and rather make a guess about a daring destiny, take a risk toward the enigma without prejudices. *Ecclesia permittens.*

The deconsecrated church and the porno-movie-theatre, two manifestations of immanent oblivions, occupy the same space: they are like two crippled that in turn are at odds or seem to be supporting each other. They both end up declaring the same absence. It is, anyway, this emptiness that we have to learn to care about.

Notes:

1. See Francesco Scafuri, *Passeggiando per Ferrara. Tre itinerari alla scoperta della città antica*, Comune di Ferrara, Assessorato alle Politiche ed Istituzioni Culturali e Assessorato all'Edilizia Monumentale, 2009, pp. 16-17.
2. "Red lights movie theatre" is the literal translation of cinema a luci rosse. There are many accounts on the origin of "red lights" to indicate the presence of prostitution. The hypothesis that this tradition might refer to the Biblical account (Book of Joshua 2: 1-23) about Raab, the name of a Gerico's prostitute, who supported Joshua's spies by indicating her house with a scarlet string, is the most interesting in relation to the Mignon case.
3. From a conversation with Kevin Tom.
4. Interview with Massimo Ali Mohammed in *estense.com*, lun 11 Feb 2013 <http://www.estense.com/?p=277002>
5. The documentary was produced by the Ferrara association *Feedback* (www.feedbackvideo.com)
6. Prostitution is admitted in Italy but to promote prostitution is forbidden by state laws. So, if inside "a space open to the public", the police detects a buying and selling of sexual "services", the common offence of "prostitution abetting, exploitation and induction" is identified and the space must be closed. The whole argument of prostitution (or more precisely the self-determination and state control on "sex workers") is at the centre of a complex political debate that still involves the millenarian problematic relationships between the State and the Church.
7. "Non è una cosa da malati di sesso o da persone con esigenze particolari: è proprio un ritrivo." <http://www.vice.com/it/read/cinema-porno-mignon-ferrara>
8. As for example in the Abbey of Novalesa (Torino), the Notre Dame des Fontaine (La Brigue), the Abbazia di Pomposa (Codigoro), and in the Cappella degli Scrovegni (Padova). One of the best examples is the counter façade of the Chiesa di Santo Spirito in Vipiteno.
9. "Lontano da ogni forma di stereotipo con cui spesso vengono etichettati i cinema a luci rosse, il Mignon è diventato, negli anni, parte del tessuto sociale di Ferrara. Un luogo dove si va oltre il porno e si proietta l'eroticismo, che è cosa ben diversa. [...] c'è ancora possibilità per svilupparlo in un certo modo, penso al cinema d'autore, ma anche ad esperimenti interessanti come lfeelmymself. [...] Hai dichiarato che l'eroticismo può avere un lato goliardico e uno malinconico, insieme. Il Mignon ne proietta entrambi i lati? L'eroticismo, la nostra sessualità, dovrebbero essere sempre vissuti con serenità, ridendo. Sappiamo che purtroppo non è sempre così [...] Però il Mignon, come la nostra vita, è anche pieno di solitudine. L'eroticismo è anche questo, è trovare un proprio spazio per sentirsi meno soli e forse non riuscirci, è attaccamento alla vita è nostalgia del tempo passato.

- Prima di salutarci: definisci il Mignon in tre parole.* Cinema porno sconsecrato". From an interview to Massimo Ali Mohammad by Pier Luigi Saggese, "Mignon, il porno sconsecrato", 23 maggio 2013 <http://www.facemagazine.it/mignon-porno-sconsecrato/>
10. Ibid.
 11. "Insomma, l'ambiente stesso è decisamente più interessante delle pellicole che proietta." Leonardo Bianchi su Twitter: @captblichero; <http://www.vice.com/it/read/cinema-porno-mignon-ferrara>
 12. "Resiste perché qui si trovano gli amici e si fanno due chiacchiere. C'è anche la libertà di poter dire e fare quello che si vuole [...] Poi a volte si va anche sopra le righe." Tipo? "Be', se uno va lassù in sala magari adesso trova uno nudo," dice il cassiere ridendo. "Uno viene qui e mette a nudo i propri istinti, se non proprio tutto sè stesso. [...] Quello che ci raccomandiamo è che non ci siano giri di soldi." Ibid
 13. "Can. 1212: Sacred places lose their dedication or blessing if they have been destroyed in large part, or have been turned over permanently to profane use by decree of the competent ordinary or in fact.". Even if the Canon implies that there should always be a certain kind of coherent continuity and appropriateness in the use of a deconsecrated church: Can. 1222 §1. If a church cannot be used in any way for divine worship and there is no possibility of repairing it, the diocesan bishop can relegate it to profane but not sordid use. §2. Where other grave causes suggest that a church no longer be used for divine worship, the diocesan bishop, after having heard the presbyteral council, can relegate it to profane but not sordid use, with the consent of those who legitimately claim rights for themselves in the church and provided that the good of souls suffers no detriment thereby" Church's Code of Canon Law (Book IV, Part III, Title I, cann. 1205-1222) http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_INDEX.HTM
 14. "Decreto Legislativo 22 gennaio 2004, n. 42 (Modificato dal D.Lgs 26 marzo 2008, n. 62). Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio, ai sensi dell'articolo 10 Legge 6 luglio 2002, n. 137; Capo III (Protezione e conservazione), Sezione I (Misure di protezione), Articolo 20 (Interventi Vietati, 1. I Beni culturali non possono essere distrutti, deteriorati, danneggiati o adibiti ad usi non compatibili con il loro carattere storico o artistico oppure tali da recare pregiudizio alla loro conservazione".
 15. The domain of Cultural Heritage now includes, beside the so called "tangible culture" (buildings, monuments and every work of art), also the "intangible culture" (language, traditions, habits, folklore), and the "natural heritage" (landscapes, ecological milieus and biodiversity).
 16. G. Paolo Montini, "La cessazione degli edifici di culto", *Quaderni di diritto ecclesiale*, n. 13, 2000, pp. 281-299.
 17. That is the necessity for the Christian Catholic to prevent

others from sinning. "If the soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but the one who causes the darkness". (Monseigneur Bienvenu in *Les Miserables*).

18. Sacrilege, desecration, profanation and blasphemy have different meanings and different ethical implications according to different habits, ethics and morals, and shared knowledge but I suggest that the Mignon case points at something that is deeper than terminological discussions.
19. See the article by Giacomo Galeazzi <http://www.libertaeipersona.org/wordpress/2014/09/chiese-dismesse-tranight-e-balere/> 9 settembre 2014.
20. «Non è solo questione di decoro o di buon gusto, ma anche di sensibilità verso la religione – osserva il cardinale Giovanni Battista Re -. Occorre vigilare sulle trasformazioni improprie e rispettare tracce di religiosità e simboli di storia del cristianesimo»[...] Si tratta, aggiunge il direttore della «Rivista liturgica», di «un'emergenza culturale», quindi servono «soluzioni concordate con le autorità civili per impedire che proseguano simili scempi a un patrimonio di tutti». All'incanto non può finire la fede né «i luoghi che l'hanno trasmessa per generazioni». Dov'era il Santissimo, niente «sacro sbalzo». Ad absidi e navate non si tagliano tavoli da biliardo e luci stroboscopiche. Il battistero e la collegiata non siano «location» per nottambuli". Giacomo Galeazzi, op. cit., e Pucci Cipriani, "Memoriae tradere. La dissacrazione del patrimonio artistico e liturgico: la chiesa di santo Stefano al Ponte di Firenze", *Riscossa Cristiana*, sabato 12 Gennaio 2013, <http://www.riscossacristiana.it/memoriae-tradere-la-dissacrazione-del-patrimonio-artistico-e-liturgico-la-chiesa-di-santo-stefano-al-ponte-di-firenze-di-pucci-cipriani/>
21. See Ben Kautzer, "An Essay Introduction: Reading the Good Samaritan with Ivan Illich", <https://kautzer.wordpress.com/2009/06/19/an-essay-introduction-reading-the-good-samaritan-with-ivan-illich/> ; and Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor. Three Inquiries in Political Theology*, The University of Chicago Press, 2006
- 22 See note n. 13