

## Inspiration-space

andrea mubi brighenti, 2026

### *Abstract*

*Abstract.* The paper seeks to explore theoretically the relation between space and inspiration. It reviews a series of places, institutions and situations in the light of the notion of inspiration-space, trying to clarify what is at stake in each of them. Inspiration is examined not only from the subjective point of view, but also more amply from a cultural point of view – that is, as a structuring social force. Selectively drawing testimonies from a range of creators, writers, and artists, and engaging in particular Gabriel Tarde's social theory of imitation and invention and Simondon's theory of transindividuality, the paper suggests some possible links between inspiration and everyday life, about their complementarity and intermingling.

*Keywords:* spatial theory; cultural theory; everyday life; inspiration; creativity

## Inspiration-space

*Les choses ne sont pas difficiles à faire, ce qui est difficile c'est de nous mettre en état de les faire.*

[Things are not difficult to do, what is difficult is to put ourselves in the condition of doing them.]

Constantin Brâncuși

## Enter the Muses

The text that follows ponders the importance of inspiration in everyday life, puzzling about the spaces that make inspiration possible and, under some more or less specifiable circumstances, attainable.<sup>1</sup> Inspiration has been often charged with being but a romantic notion, mostly mythical and sociologically void.<sup>2</sup> For sure, the social science does not appear well equipped to tackle it. The reason is that there is no simple causal determination of inspiration, as the latter does not exhibit clear 'correlations' between sets of parameters. Without rushing to decide whether the notion is mythical, or whether the social science is myopic, we can simply note how the indeterminacy of the process may be better appreciated by regarding inspiration, rather than as *an object* located in space, as *itself a space* – like a new dimension opening up where previously nothing existed. Indeed, inspiration is often evoked as an exceptional subjective experience whereby the individual discovers something unique, or is instantly struck by an illuminating idea. Authentic as such experience may be, at the same time, inspiration

cannot be reduced to those eureka moments of blissful subjectivity: to be attended are also its capacities to shape social ensembles, to transform society and affect (or even *effect*) culture. With reference to the psycho-social-cultural nexus, inspiration appears as a special configuration, or as a resonance of the outermost with the innermost: it designates an interface between personal and impersonal modes of existence. As the Korean-Japanese artist Lee Ufan once put it, ‘the creation begins when the inside and the outside coincide’.<sup>3</sup> How to specify this ‘inside’ and this ‘outside,’ though? What sort of spatial imagination is needed to advance a more rounded reflection on inspiration and its environments? These are the driving questions for directing what follows.

A quick roadmap for what follows: the rest of this section excavates the places that have traditionally been linked to inspiration; subsequently, the following section reviews notions of illumination and invention to evince their spatial presupposition. Far from abstract, the space under consideration appears as both ‘elemental’ and ‘durational’. Proceeding through some exquisite cases, a section on open urban space then retraces interesting aspects of anonymity, dullness, bafflement, discomfort and endurance, as they relate to a number of searches for an inspiration that take shape in a dimension that will be called of ‘transindividuality’. And finally, in the conclusions, an attempt to observe the historical present through the lens of inspiration-space is provided.

Interestingly, people go looking for inspiration as if they were looking for a place, either one they have previously visited, or one they have never visited but perhaps dreamt of – and in any case, long for. While it may prove hard, or even illusory, to pinpoint such a place onto a geographic map, the fact that people continue to strive for it attests to the fact that the association of space and inspiration runs deep. It is not only the case with inspiration. In sociology, the idea that places are qualitatively distinct traces back to at least Emile Durkheim, who forcefully made the argument that the basic dichotomy ‘sacred vs profane’ articulates all social activities and institutions.<sup>4</sup> In this vein, the contemporary sociologist Thomas Gieryn has argued that the identity of places is functional to a number of truth-claims that are made possible through them.<sup>5</sup> From Delphi’s Omphalos to contemporary ‘ultra-clean’ scientific labs, a number of techniques and imaginaries have been deployed to single out given places as enabling one to make a certain number of truthful statements. Extending Gieryn’s approach, we

could say that places vary not only for the type of assertions they enable, but also for the intellectual and emotional tone they engender in those frequenting them. Still, the process is not strictly dictated: just as no place automatically confers truth warranties, so none can automatically spur inspiration. Facts of preparation and set-up do matter, yet never determine the outcome. This is particularly important in the case of inspiration, which is much more ephemeral – atmospheric, even whimsical – than the solidly built and forcefully committing ‘truth’.

Traditionally, a range of architectural creations have been designed to encourage the deployment of inspiration. Amongst such spaces, the museum stands as archetypical: quite literally, the museum is the House of the Muses, the latter being the ‘goddesses of inspiration’. One is instantly reminded of Johann Heinrich Tischbein’s *Die Muse Kalliope* (1780), a painting depicting the muse of epic poetry – the ‘beautiful of speech’ – graciously seated inside a neoclassical room, which itself looks like a museum hall. The underlying reason for the existence of museums is that all creators need a source of inspiration, whether it is a person, an item, or an ‘element’ capable of igniting it. The meeting of space and inspiration has in some ways to do with the recognition of the ‘force of the environment’ – but also, the force of precedent, i.e. of ‘example’. In classical art history, for instance, such is the role of the so-called ‘Old Masters’.<sup>6</sup> According to this imagery, a special, secluded space must be set up, so that the creator can operate inside an elective environment, conducive to the desirable state – such is, originally, the space of *otium*, of which Virgil sang praises in his *Bucolics*.

A similar ideal of protection somehow underpins the museum: just as the creator must be shielded from trivial interferences (chiefly, preoccupations with money), so must the artwork be protected by preserving its aura: the awe it emanates keeps people both engaged with, and at a distance from, it. It is an ambivalence inscribed in the sacred.<sup>7</sup> The museum has more than an incidental resemblance with a temple. As a shrine of the ‘original’ piece of work, however, the museum easily turns into a mixed blessing, to the extent that the seclusion of the artwork from the lifeworld and the everyday imperils inspiration: the museum then reveals itself as an ambivalent *pharmakon*. It comes as no surprise that a no less archetypical association of the museum idea, is with dust. The process of *museification* is also one of *mummification*:

the museum can only host dead art, as opposed to living art, which always occurs elsewhere – precisely, in the places towards which inspiration flies. This suggests a sombre insight, namely that while the right environment cannot per se warrant inspiration, the wrong environment can almost instantly kill the spirit, leaving behind barren corridors and fruitless rooms.

A trope in 20th-century avantgarde art is, not by chance, the revolt against the museum. In a move that may amount to actually giving in to such attacks, contemporary museums seem to have mostly relinquished their classical mission of being inspirational places, privileging the function of *showcasing* artworks. The exhibition format has, on average, tended to produce situations that are more stressful than pleasant – to the point that, if an exhibited artwork is still capable of inspiring, that can be said to occur largely *despite* the context, rather than thanks to it.<sup>8</sup> One could counterargue that exhibition space is only a small fraction of what goes on in a museum today – which is true; but the archive, workshop and lab sections of museums are mostly precluded from lay people. In addition, there is a tendency for art education workshops there to be supplied as guided, strictly supervised activities, fashioned in accordance with the most successful and consolidated *methodologies* on the market. Through such templates, matters of information, efficiency and knowledge are necessarily privileged over inspiration.

Fleeing the museum, inspiration may have relocated to the artist's private studio, or the writer's private cabinet. The American filmmaker and artist David Lynch dubs what goes on in such ateliers, 'the art life' – that is, life entirely devoted to, and in the permanent pursuit of, creation.<sup>9</sup> Each creator, says Lynch, needs a 'setup', that is, a working space furnished with the tools of the trade, well equipped to pick the inspiration of the moment and cast it into the expressive materials of choice. The New York writer Paul Auster speaks, for his part, of a certain 'attitude for solitude' that contradistinguishes the literary author: he concedes – or reclaims – having spent most of his adult life alone in a room filled with sheets of paper, writing.<sup>10</sup> In this Franz-Kafka-trademarked lineage, where creators entertain with one another a spiritual correspondence that must, of necessity, unfold at a wide remove, and where even the line between the living and the dead thins down, the private room of the writer

embodies the new *sancta sanctorum*, a kind of personal museum of creation. In *Self-Portrait as a Coffee-Pot*, a documentary film feature in nine episodes, the South African artist William Kentridge is seen dwelling in his own studio, where he engages in a tight dialogue with duplicate versions of himself.<sup>11</sup> It is a dialogue about creation, where partial versions of Kentridge's overabundant persona argue, disagree, rectify one another, constantly introducing variations and new themes, and where creation unfolds in majestic playfulness.<sup>12</sup>

The museum and the studio are only two outstanding exemplars from a larger constellation of inspirational places. Libraries can perhaps be called 'museums for books', clearly meant to continue the Muses' calling. Lexicographically defined by the function of being a book collection (*bibliothèque*, 'a bookshelf'), the library has been often pictured as a mysterious, wild territory of discovery – as in Peter Snowdon's *Bewick's Mambo*, which plays cunningly with the classic tropes of book, paradise, night, transgression, and sex.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, the secular fall from the Divine Grace somehow corresponds to the shift from the library to the bookshop. Bookshops, records shops, and all the other places where goods from the 'creative industries' are retailed inherently contain a mission – at the very least, a whim – to lay out some inspiration-space for their users. They are places where people spend a lot of time immersed in a contemplative, sedated mood; there, one can 'take a trip' and, possibly, encounter others *through the veil of creation*, i.e., thanks to shared inspiration – such as in the case of being fans of a genre, an author, a band, and so on. In *Bookshops*, Jorge Carrión weaves a rhizomatic narration around the inspiration motif that imbues these environments.<sup>14</sup> Carrión describes bookshops as places caught in a tension between immobility and change: bounded to a physical location as well as peculiarly located in the urban geography, bookshops are elective spaces that prepare readers for mental travelling. The sheer name of some of them is so *mythical* (think of Bertrand in Lisbon, Foyles in London, Shakespeare&Co. in Paris, Librairie des Colonnes in Tangiers...) that by just hearing it one trembles at the thought that some of the most brilliant intellectuals of the past generations frequented them assiduously, almost daily – *et in Arcadia ego*, the casual visitor feels entitled to exclaim. The same logic can be found, albeit perhaps in diluted form, in the shop more generally. Here, it becomes clear that

capitalism seeks in all ways to be ‘inspirational’, based on the understanding that every buying decision is largely grounded in engendering some state of inspiration in the customer. In fact, that inspiration supports business is attested by the fact that today all major publishers sport their ‘Self-improvement & inspiration’ category. But because all capitalist attempts to *inspire* are self-interested and functional to reap an economic gain at all costs, they also inevitably tend – in the short or the long run – to deplete inspiration-space, downgrading it in the very moment they try to hype it up.

The blame is not all on capitalism, though. True, the capitalist economy parasites inspiration-space, but beyond such mechanism there lurks other deeper tensions. As considered above, it is far from sure that inspiration can be confined within any deputed enclaves. If so, there is obviously some inherent contradiction in the search for such places in the first instance; and especially absurd is the desire to keep them rigorously *separated* from the rest of life. In Auster’s case, for instance, the solitary writer’s room turns out to be mysteriously and yet intimately connected to the street, the writer’s cabinet directly plugged into the undercurrents of the urban cosmos. Without such a connection, without such a wider *respiration*, the artist’s studio is bound to turn into a wasteland: a prison cell, a death sentence. There is no dearth of artists and writers completely paralysed, incapable of entering their own studio – expelled, so to speak, from the paradise of creation while standing in the eye of a perfect storm. ‘Now I have taken a closer look at my desk – Kafka noted dryly in his diary – and realised that nothing good can be done on it’. The writer’s block, in other words, must be the desk’s fault! As soon as inspiration vanishes, creation turns to shit.

Something similar may also have occurred with universities over the last decades: *the class* as veritable inspiration-space has been progressively drained and replaced by lectures as mere technical tools for conveying information – with the result that students drop out of them due to boredom, and lecturers are seized by nausea at hearing their own voice repeating the same slides over again. Such a curse, Nietzsche called ‘the eternal return of the same things’, which he ranked as the most frightening thought of all. When I took my university studies, in Italy in the mid-1990s, in addition to the regular classes there were thematic seminars. Already the classes were much more open than they are today. One could find among the audience, not only students, but

people from all walks of life, who came and went in no particular order and without any clear logic. The class was, above all, a loitering space, a kind of subdued market square, where, besides lecturing, a number of literal *trades* were ongoing. Seminars were more advanced situations. Completely free in terms of topic and admission requirements, they were not linked to any grades or credits. No registration was needed: one had just to show up and join in. With no formal requirement attached to them, but a strong focus on advanced contents, the seminars provided a veritable inspirational platform where researchers, professors and students at different stages of their curriculum could indulge in often wild adventures of ideas. These sorts of spaces have been completely erased by the transformations of university curricula into grades-giving machines. Part of the problem has to do with the master narrative of competence, performance, and efficiency, which has led to over-specifying the functions of each teaching space, annihilating the smallest chance of a fluke. Even windows become a rarity – just try a random web search with input ‘university classroom’ to get an array of rather terrifying pictures. We have already learned that the search for inspiration cannot be satisfied by the institution of dedicated spaces, however notable these can be. In addition, inspiration has increasingly lesser chances to unfold the more spaces get regulated and codified. Although often inspiration irrupts into places that are frequented and familiar, it concurrently embodies a plea to break out of one’s regular habits and consolidated expectations: it calls for a passage to the unknown.

## Vital matters

There is a famous saying, apocryphally attributed to Edison, that the work of genius is ‘1% inspiration, 99% perspiration’. The process of invention, on this account, is one of working out a fleeting inspiration through methodical discipline and *métier*. The largest share of what a profession is and how it functions has to do precisely with mastering the needed skills. The creative professions are no exception: they are practice and tradition as much as any other job. Already Walter Benjamin sought to de-exceptionalize (and hence, politicize) the *métier* of the writer by calling it a ‘producer’.<sup>15</sup> Placing a number upon the inspiration/perspiration ratio is quite likely delusional; still, it is certain that, without inspiration-space, no process of invention could ever be set in motion. What the

Edison adage hints at is, in other words, that inspiration-space may be modest, tiny, hard to locate – and yet crucial. More intriguingly still, the inspiration adagio seems to beg for an ‘elemental’ explanation of sort: just as perspiration is a mix of ‘flesh + water’, so inspiration should be seen as a mix of ‘air + flesh’.<sup>16</sup> The airy element is of the essence here – for, corporeally, inspiration is but a fraction of the complete phenomenon of respiration.<sup>17</sup>

To inspire, means to breathe in: inspiration is, at bottom, a manifestation of the desire to live. Its connection to the divine sphere simply descends from this. ‘Being in one’s element’ indicates the condition of a lucky – *inspired and inspiring* – creature capable of combining itself with one’s environment in a vital way. This is, again, an excellent case of elemental constitution. At the other extreme, it is quite certain that, without inspiration, one dies; depression, in this sense, can be understood as a chronic lack of inspiration towards living.<sup>18</sup> And it is not only at the biological level and the psychological level that we need inspiration in order to carry on. That the same necessity also holds for social life is proved by the simple thought experiment of a social arrangement completely devoid of inspiration: it would be horror, a nightmare impossible to endure for more than a minute (although one suspects that, in many cases, we do endure it for more than a minute, and that this very condition may explain the degree of violence into which societies sometimes plunge). In this sense, inspiration is to be regarded as an integral part of those facets of society evoking change, novelty, improvisation, relief, distraction, and fun. One day, it is hoped, the war and the terror will end, and we will be able to breathe again.

These considerations suggest the idea that inspiration can be counted as a constituent component of social life at large. A classical author who turns out particularly handy here is the late-19<sup>th</sup>-century French sociologist and criminologist, Gabriel Tarde. By and large, Tarde is remembered for his contention that ‘society is imitation’.<sup>19</sup> In fact, in Tarde’s work, the social operation is reconstructed on the basis of two additional operations, besides imitation: *doubt* (which he calls, perhaps confusingly ‘opposition’) and *invention* (which he calls, again confusingly, ‘adaptation’).<sup>20</sup> Tarde sees sociability as grounded in imitative flows of beliefs and desires, which spread throughout social ensembles and reach out to individuals. Such

imitative streams can only be interrupted by doubt: doubting moments are instants when the individual *hesitates* to take up either one or the other belief, either one or the other desire being offered to him or her.<sup>21</sup> While hesitation represents a first instantiation of the individual's *débrayage* (detachment) from the impelling rhythm of the social operation, it is only with *invention* that such disconnection reveals its true potential.

Invention, in Tarde's reconstruction, amounts to a synthesis of previously received ideas into some brand-new insight. The botanical image of the dicotyledon expresses such a pivotal unity – at some point, Tarde also dubs it a 'logical hymen'.<sup>22</sup> The veritable object of imitation is then revealed to be nothing else but invention: what spreads around, generating imitative streams, are inventions.<sup>23</sup> This way, the cycle looks complete. Most interestingly, invention does not indicate exclusively Promethean achievements, such as major technological breakthroughs or the like – to the contrary, *everybody* is an inventor at some moment in her or his life, in everyday life, although not all inventions are successful to the same extent: some travel quite far and become canonical, whereas others wane promptly. We should not, however, be misled into assessing an invention on the basis of its pragmatic success (its diffusion); what truly matters is the synthetic capacity of bringing together disparate ideas with a priori little chance of becoming interrelated, so as to forge them into a new synthesis. Not all inventions have the same degree of probability, and the most improbable ones are also the most precious ones (also because the most probable ones have already been found). Sometimes, Tarde indulges in saying that invention is but a strike of 'good luck' – still, his whole oeuvre can be read as an attempt to circumscribe such a randomness, so as to clarify its circumstantial (societal) and inner (logical) workings. This juncture recalls precisely the 'coincidence of the inside and the outside' indicated by Lee Ufan. One can see better now that these two sides are not simply psychological in nature. We return more amply to this point below; for now, let us just look at what is at stake in the act of 'synthesizing'.

While the main spatialist insight in Tarde's sociology lies in the idea that humans are essentially a 'horizontal' race, whereby diffusion occurs mostly horizontally, i.e. geographically, there is also another spatial insight hidden inside the notion of invention

itself. The proprium of the latter is, as just considered, to bring together a selected number of varied ideational influxes and come up with a new ‘little something’ that bridges the gap between them. This is said to occur thanks to a special synthetic power – *synthesis* being precisely the capacity to hold the collected things together. As can be seen, a peculiar space is needed here – which may also help explain why inspiration is itself so often imagined as a place: in order to synthesize, one needs an operational area sufficiently generous to host the different items being operated upon. In the generation after Tarde, in somewhat Tardeian vein, the English social psychologist and educator Graham Wallas – remembered mostly for his association with the Fabian Society and the foundation of the London School of Economics – underlined the relation between the synthetic act and the materials at hand available for creation.<sup>24</sup> In particular, Wallas argued that the proverbial ‘flash of illumination’ can only emerge out of long-honed preparation and a slow incubation stage, during which the ‘art of thought’ is to be constantly kept in exercise. Such an art, we could also liken to an intensive patrolling of an ideational territory.

By breaking free of causal determinations, the spatial metaphor of synthesis also breaks free of the utilitarian approach. If invention calls for inspiration, then the latter is, in and by itself, neither useful nor useless: it exists in a domain that is indifferent vis-à-vis efficacy, and resembles more an urgency, a compelling need. Through inspiration, the space of possibilities is reconstructed and reinstated. However, inspiration does not perform the concrete action by itself. It does not yield results and is, rather, a sheer matter of *perception*. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many authors have assayed the crucial problem of how to attain a renewed perception. It was in pursuit of a similar idea that the French writer Georges Perec advanced his notion of ‘infra-ordinary’.<sup>25</sup> In Perec’s view, the infra-ordinary is not simply that, which is negligible, but that, which is ordinary *to an excessive extent*. Excess is the key here: the infra-ordinary is so stubbornly ordinary that it becomes perplexing to the inquiring gaze. In those moments the banal acquires the features of a hieroglyph. The infra-ordinary notion indicates the unsettling presence of something ineffable that persists throughout the ordinariness of the ordinary. It can be unnerving, obnoxious, scary, this infra-ordinary: it opens a avenue towards inspiration that proceeds from and lingers in the irrelevant; it indicates an

endurance of the dreary that, for some reasons, ends up transcending it – and here again, one cannot fail to notice the ‘pharmacological’ structure of the whole process. Inspiration can feed even on what it seemingly contradicts it, once one’s synthetic powers are gathered through peculiar experiences of space.

## What space

Another saying of practical wisdom holds that, whenever looking for inspiration, one should *go for a walk*. The walk epitomises a larger number of ‘collateral’ activities, minor and more or less spontaneous practices to which one does not devote much attention because they tend to occur anyway *habitually*. The background persuasion is that, since inspiration cannot be planned, the best thing to do is to let oneself go, roaming around aimlessly. In a similar way, Walter Benjamin drifted along the streets of 1920s-1930s Paris in search of those ‘profane illuminations’ to which Hannah Arendt later attached so much importance for political theorizing.<sup>26</sup> More recently, Paul Auster has described the condition of the solitary walker-writer as follows: ‘You’re just alone, you’re just flowing through the crowd ... Some of my best ideas have come from walking with no particular purpose. Ideas usually sneak on me from behind, and catch me unaware’.<sup>27</sup> While museums and studios are institutionalized spaces, purposefully designed to harness inspiration and manage its outcome (creations), urban walking tends to unfold in loose, interstitial spaces that lack a clear identity and have no clear mission of their own. In a writer so deeply urban as Auster, such in-between space equates with the city itself. Circulatory and perambulatory, the city forms a vast, nondescript terrain meant for strolling – a veritable ‘country of last things’ that will never be rescued, but can nonetheless be experienced.<sup>28</sup> And while, of course, one can walk in not only cities, but virtually everywhere (Robert Walser *docet*), the urban public domain presents us with a peculiar situation, due not so much to the fact that the urban landscape is an artificial one, as much as to the fact that it enables a fundamental shift towards anonymity.

A city, is like a large Lost&Found office. A found object, is a lost object found anew – still, there is an important step from losing to finding: the loss of one’s name. The name

of the previous owner is ostensibly gone before someone else appears on the scene and self-appoints as the new owner. The public domain is such a space: one not devoid of contacts with people, but rather, replete with *persons without a name* – swathes of untracked ‘previous owners’ one walks by. In this gap between one and another, between former and next, urban space presents itself as punctuated, perhaps punctured, by fleeting encounters of all sorts. A new domain of reality can be accessed this way. It is in this sense, for instance, that the British author Iain Sinclair speaks of ‘autobiographies without author’ when describing his approach to the city: as the city makes itself, its biography remains strictly authorless, even while we urban rambles are formed by the same process, all enthralled as we are in spectating it. For his part, Tarde famously claimed that social life is a state akin to somnambulism. Counterintuitively, though, the urban walker’s daydreaming resembles more *waking up from slumber*. The lure of the walk as inspiration-space descends from here – namely, that urban space appears as the veil *through which* a perceptual reconstitution, that special ‘synthesis’ we can call inspiration, becomes attainable: in it, one can turn into a true *perceiver*.

A film where such dynamics become palpable is Jim Jarmusch’s *Paterson* (2016). The protagonist is a bus driver and amateur poet named Paterson, living in the city of Paterson, New Jersey (with a nod to William Carlos Williams).<sup>29</sup> During his rides at work and dog-walking after work, the city increasingly appears to Paterson as a peculiar state of mind, where the ordinary gets counterpointed – or outweighed – by a series of tiny happenings, virtually invisible events compounding an infra-ordinary, which, in Paterson’s eyes, acquires the halo of wonder. The peculiar atmosphere in which Paterson participates in the urban space borders with uneasiness, all while remaining contained within exceptional parentheses in the flow of otherwise decidedly unexceptional days. Through daydreaming, Paterson enters the mental terrain vague of urban observation to encounter a series of peculiar, mostly unnamed, characters. We hear his inner voice penning down rhymes that, instead of describing the reality before his eyes, emanate a sort of quiet bliss, linking the trivial and the ephemeral to the deep and the eternal (the poems read in the movie are, in fact, by the American poet and translator Ron Padgett).

Inspiration-space entails a sensory alteration of sort. Quite revealing, in this respect, is the short film *The Others* (2016) by the Japanese video-artist Hiroshi Kondo. At a busy intersection in Tokyo Shibuya, suddenly the rhythm of the city gets warped. A new dimension of time pops up from nowhere, which also affects the way individuality occurs. In this remarkable experience, a bifurcation takes place, whereby some individuals stand out and become ‘enhanced’ (more individuated) at the same time as others (*the others*) become less so – distorted, stretched, ghostly, ultimately vanishing into a blurred background. Like a dramatization of what The French philosopher Gilbert Simondon called the process of ‘individuation’. Whereas Kondo’s visions are made possible by high-tech manipulations of digital images through advanced filtering, a route to sensory alteration is attained with entirely different means by the British filmmaker and author Patrick Keiller, particularly with his *London* (1993) (as well the subsequent *Robinson in Space* [1997] and *Robinson in Ruins* [2010]).

Keiller’s footage looks quite documentarian in approach, detailing the aesthetic features of industrial decay and dilapidation in the London landscape, interspersed with slices of ordinary life in the metropolis. There are no special effects, only fixed shots and long sequences, following a visual composition the film-maker himself describes as ‘stolid, often symmetrical’.<sup>30</sup> Superposed to the visuals is a voiceover. The narrator recounts his complex relation to another elusive character, a certain Robinson. What drives the work is the fact that the script does not match the images, being only obliquely related to them. Keiller declares having undertaken the process of making *London* as type of a personal therapy in the midst of the degrading cultural-political situation of the late 1980s in the UK. Accompanied by, or juxtaposed to, Robinson (an indirect, enigmatic character, a bit like Nadja in Breton’s novel), the narrator turns into a wandering daydreamer, conveying the sense of an inspiration that operates by distraction and transfiguration.

Even to reject reality, one must first do something with it. Inspiration, in this sense, might be said to embody the spirit of that peculiar *something*, which might also be called its ‘problem’. Cultivating an attitude or resistance enables one not to give in to the actually existent for the sheer fact that it exists. In Keiller, it is the *décalage* between image and voice that activates such a shift; yet perhaps not even an explicit gap is

needed to make the trick. More subtly, the Taiwan-based film-maker Tsai Ming-liang has, in his 20-minute feature *The night* (2021), taken footage of some streets and a pedestrian overpass in Hong Kong's Causeway Bay area. A certain hypnotic quality, impossible to pinpoint, looms over Ming-liang's night. Any attempt to explain how is it that such a straightforward, uncut camera footage can disclose inspiration-space ends in bafflement. The only element of *décalage* is introduced in the last five minutes of the video, when an old Chinese love song starts being superimposed to the images. The weight of recent tragic political history, with the repression of pro-democracy movements, mixes with some unspoken personal memories, compounding an inspiration-space out of urban anonymity. Slightly more constructed, yet still quite minimal in deployment, Cynthia Beatt's *The invisible frame* (2009) represents the second instalment of a bicycle ride in Berlin. Indeed, Beatt first filmed Tilda Swinton in 1988 cycling along the back-then-still-existent Berlin Wall. Twenty years later, it's again Tilda Swinton – who surprisingly looks *younger* than in the first film – who retraces the wild landscapes surrounding the former military zone. As a pure *flânerie* with no specific purpose (except that of *going for a ride*), *The invisible frame* tells a story of the suspended urban reality accompanying a silent character. The Wall – what it was, and what remains of it – is present not as a monument, but as a fossil, a ruin, an enigma: impossible to decipher and to make sense of.

No one can specify why inspiration should happen at this or that time, in this or that location – except perhaps because, *then and there*, one is looking for it with sufficient fervour, with enhanced synthetic powers. From this perspective, public space is akin to a cell culture for growing germs of inspiration. But *who* exactly gets inspired? In Beatt's movie, Tilda Swinton offers her elegant *figura* cast upon the historical 'frame' evoked in the title. In Keiller, a protagonist, in the shape of a disembodied narrator, is still present, albeit invisible to the audience and always referring to another, even more remote protagonist (Robinson); in Ming-liang, the subject has almost completely evaporated. If the subject of inspiration ceases to be an individual, it may turn into a perspective – perhaps, a story. We need to take a small detour through philosophy (i.e., fairly abstract thinking) to come up with a more apposite name for this new subject. In his theory of individuation, Gilbert Simondon identifies a domain of existence, which he considers as

the prolongation of psychological individuality into social collectivity – the ‘transindividual’.<sup>31</sup>

The situation of transindividuality differs from an inter-individual relation, which presupposes already-constituted individuals getting into contact with one another. From Simondon’s perspective, the individual is a type of reality that comes into being by operating upon a number of pre-individual elements. Physical, biological and psychological individuations, each with its specificities, proceed this way. The crucial point is that, because of its genesis, the individual being maintains within itself, throughout its whole existence, a reservoir of a pre-individual reality, which Simondon sometimes calls an ‘associated nature’. The transindividual appears when the individual manages to ‘pump up’ the pre-individual level of reality it contains within itself, funnelling it into a novel dimension. The psychological material then necessarily becomes social: this occurs not so much in the form of cognition or action, as much as in the shape of *emotion*. An emotion is, Simondon theorizes, an ‘affective contradiction’, which can only be solved by the prolongation of the individual into a different order of reality. The individual experiences emotion as a problem it cannot resolve, and yet the transindividual domain is neither exterior nor superior to the individual itself: it is the natural continuation of psychological individuation in terms of an operation now made fully social.

The perceptual reconstitution experienced in the city through its anonymous veil thus effectively prolongs the individual subject into a transindividual domain of shared emotion and signification. The shift from the psychic to the social – or, if one prefers, the midway now traced *between* the psychic and the social (given that the latter two are only limit-cases of the transindividual operation) – equates with the discovery of new, more-than-individual significations within oneself. Inspiration-space has a lot to do with transindividuality, insofar as it concerns the capacity to recognize the free potentials of impersonal energy inherent in any given situation and any given locale. Storytelling is an important example of this, since the emotional palette of both inspiration and storytelling corresponds to that ‘coincidence of the interior and the exterior’ evoked by Ufan. The onset of creation effectively unfolds from the middle, where the anonymous city gives way to the discovery of inspiration-space.

## Room for discomfort

The Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson says that public space is a sum of stories, and what an artist can do is simply *add one more* story of his own making.<sup>32</sup> The possibility of hosting an incremental number, however, raises a question of limits – not so much ‘How many stories can be accommodated in total?’, but rather, ‘Where is the limit between a sheer variation, and a veritable invention?’ Indeed, most stories heard in the city do sound as recapitulations and variations of already-told stories – in the Tardeian vocabulary, they are more imitations than inventions. Urban legends and preposterous statements (such as fake news, conspiracy theories, and so on) are echoed everywhere, lulling, in some debased mode, our need for wonder. But, as variations proliferate, they also pollute the air, making respiration difficult, and inspiration increasingly hard to reach. We live at a time when Artificial Intelligence promises to empower us with infinite creativity, but what it actually delivers too often feels as trite. Flat aesthetic stereotypes and tired ideological refrains abound in AI productions, giving a dizzying sense of *déjà-vu*, *déjà-lu*, *déjà-écouté*...<sup>33</sup> The imperative of flawlessness has delivered, so far, mostly icy results. Because of their design grounded in statistical correlations, current AI models reinforce the mainstream gaze and are thus inherently conservative – a wonderful baroque machine, in which everything is narrated, sounded, pictured, or even reasoned, *à la manieur de*. Short of style, we are left with atomistic ‘stylemes’ lacking any veritable ‘synthetic power’ in Tarde’s sense.<sup>34</sup>

While certainly ‘creative’ (or better, ‘generative’, as per current parlance), these systems are unsurprisingly only rarely inspirational. On the other hand, AI is certainly not the only case in which the very undertaking of creation thwarts inspiration. In practice, we may say that any attempt at strategically manipulating inspiration is likely doomed to fail – which, on balance, is probably good news. These topsy-turvy situations can be quite discomforting, yes. But they also offer the chance to learn something deep about the nature of inspiration-space. The vagaries of storytelling and narrative invention always occur *in limine*, at the thresholds of inspiration. That such a location is not necessarily a comfort zone, seems a necessity. The south African painter Andrew

Kayser, for instance, discusses his process of inspiration in a short video documenting his cycle of paintings, *At Home After Dark*. He insists on the importance of practice, as opposed to contemplation; but he is also adamant that a large part of the creative process entails a ‘struggle’ with the materials on the canvas as well as with ideas in his head – all this revolving around the question of understanding *what is it that one is in the process of doing*. The urban landscape of Johannesburg infuses deeply, if transversally, Kayser’s work: the words he uses to depict it are ‘gritty’ and ‘uncomfortable’.<sup>35</sup> Fellow Johannesburg visual artist Vusi Beauchamp similarly expresses his belief that art must force the beholder to look at something, even – or especially – when that something is, in fact, an unpleasant reality.<sup>36</sup> Both Kayser and Beauchamp somehow hint at a type of inspiration that is reactive vis-à-vis urban realities scarred by toughness, violence, and injustice.

Inspiration-space thus endorses an attitude of *endurance*. The North-American artist Pope.L, who passed away recently, is famous for his crawling performances across the dirty streets of the New York metropolitan area, which he first undertook in the 1970s. Crawling, says the artist, is about ‘struggle, pain, hope’.<sup>37</sup> In 2019, Pope.L organized in New York City a collective crawling event named *Conquest*, performed by over 140 crawlers of different age, gender, race, and body ableness. Urban inequalities, the legacy of colonialism and slavery, are all evoked by the performers’ bodies as well as the grounds traversed as is – in Pope.L’s own words – people’s ‘troubled relationship to art’.<sup>38</sup> Restlessness often accompanies artists. One is reminded of Bilal Berreni, a.k.a. Zoo Project, who got killed in 2013 in the urban underworld of Detroit, aged 23. Despite his life having been cut so short, Zoo Project has left a mark as a highly dynamic artist with a peculiar approach to wall painting and travelling – always in search of ways ‘good enough to be crazy’. Inspiration-space always comes with such irregular, aberrant movements. In literature, W.G. Sebald’s work instantiates another exquisite illustration of the darkest states of inspiration. Suffice to recall the description of Liverpool Street Station in *Austerlitz* (2001), where the London railway building appears through the lenses of a Katabasis both personal and historical, relaying urban misery and forceful modernization as well as deportation, denied childhood, and trauma.

In Sebald, the Victorian railway station catalyzes fateful moments of epiphany, in which a sombre inspiration transfigures the dusty everydayness. Similar climacteric metamorphoses of the urban space are sometimes at work in Iain Sinclair's 'psychoarcheological' journeys through London and beyond.<sup>39</sup> Sinclair's extended territoriality of the London terrain probes neighbourhoods and locales through stories, imaginaries, contingencies, accidents, returns, fidelity, serendipity.<sup>40</sup> The relation between street and inspiration is of the essence, to the extent that the reality on the ground is uncomfortable. Sinclair's inspiration-space-Hackney, for example, proceeds from the inchoate urban offerings of – so goes the writer – 'a word, a broken sentence, an unnoticed detail in a dull painting hanging in an unvisited municipal gallery'.<sup>41</sup> If the museum looks abandoned, then it is perhaps because its driving force, inspiration, has been swept away and forcefully scattered through the streets. It is never easy to recognize this most elusive quid, since the spatiality of transindividuality, as well as of inspiration, is not bare and abstract; to the contrary, it implicates a whole temporal order that is not linear, but grounded in an intrinsic, or intimate, feature reminiscent of what Henri Bergson as called 'duration'.<sup>42</sup> Invention is suspended between past and future, between memory and desire – simultaneously, a 'memory of the future' (to have it with Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky) and a 'premonition of the past'.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusions

Certifications mirror a systemic lack of trust in society. That our society finds itself in such a predicament is proven by the proliferation of activities aimed at warranting that certain things are in the state they are supposed to be. The spread of authentication and verification technologies in response to the escalation of AI-generated deepfakes, for instance, means that we have increasing troubles with connecting to authentic situations. The logic of certifications contradicts that of inspiration-space, to the point that the hegemony of certifications may have something to do with the collectively experienced crisis of inspiration. Certification procedures reduce phenomena to script-based verification steps; but, to return to the claim made above, no fixed recipe for harnessing inspiration exists. Although life is replete with mechanisms, it is not itself one such mechanisms.

In the varied experiences reported above, inspiration-space acquires the contours of a 'zone' (in Tarkovsky's rendition): a vague territoriality to be probed by means of direct experimentation conducted outside of all possible stipulations, at the edge of control. Famously, Elias Canetti compared the writer – or the artist more generally – to a hound who cannot stop snuffling around, always seeking to inhale the true spirit of one's times.<sup>44</sup> The artist figure, in this sense, epitomizes inspiration being bestowed upon someone 'elect'; yet it is also important to recall that inspiration itself does not belong exclusively to the artist. In one way or another, we all need it: even a dog nosing the ground to find the right spot for urinating, is mainly looking to be inspired. Everyday life is often portrayed as drab and dull; in fact, however, the secret sources of inspiration are never far away from it. Inspiration-space can be regarded as a special atmosphere, an elemental mix of air and water in which one's body can be immersed to recover from overworked routines. Within such a sensible, fine-grained zone – a 'durational' space, as we have also called it – inspiration has to do with creating new conditions for life. And the first such precondition is, as considered, the deployment of a new regime of perception. To the extent that inspiration can be said to resemble a 'reaction', it is reaction to a stimulation unknown: it is impossible to know which is the stimulation being called forth until its reaction is on its way.

Perhaps, inspiration reveals more about ourselves than about the world per se; yet, it is not just enough to 'know thyself' in order to ignite inspirational dynamics. Another insight deriving from the discussion conducted above is that, whenever partaking in inspiration, the individual domain is superseded, or completed, by a different reality. This additional dimension of existence, which Simondon called 'the transindividual', appears with the discovery of new significations already potentially present within biological and psychological individuality. This insight helps to explain why inspiration-space can never be conceptualized in terms of utility or usefulness: in a sense, there is no further vital function *beyond* inspiration. This fact may have to do with the peculiar temporality of inspiration-space: never simply 'present', inspiration compounds intimation, anticipation, memory, procrastination, eschewal. It is a counterintuitive, 'chronic' temporal framework that engenders discomfort, but also hones resistance.<sup>45</sup> That inspiration cannot but relate to discomfort should not completely take us by

surprise: true as it is that an utter lack of inspiration equates with depressive outcomes, discomfort *animates* a dynamism of social intensification that recuses any easy-going acceptance of the given, and thus enriches the present. Inspiration-space is space made *pregnant*.

---

<sup>1</sup> This think-piece accompanies an empirical research I have been conducting over the last couple of years through interviews with creators in various domains of practice (writers, painters, dancers, musicians, rappers, chefs, etc.). While the interview materials are not directly brought up here, the reflection developed in this text is clearly indebted to those rich conversations. Accordingly, I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to all the participants. I would also like to acknowledge the precious help from the Editor and two anonymous reviewers for a number of comments that were not simply useful, but truly *inspirational* to me. Limitations are, as usual, my own.

<sup>2</sup> The message shines through all of Theodor Adorno's oeuvre. See, classically, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002[1944]).

<sup>3</sup> Nowness, *Meet the artists by Art Basel: Lee Ufan*. Documentary Video (2021). Online at: <https://vimeo.com/540683915>

<sup>4</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris : Alcan, 1912).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas F. Gieryn, *Truth Spots. How places make people believe* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Think about the protagonist of Thomas Bernhard's *Alte Meister* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), the 82-year-old music critic Reger who, for over thirty years, has sat almost every day in front of Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man* in Wien's Kunsthistorisches Museum.

<sup>7</sup> Such considerations were first developed by Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay 'The work of art in the age of technical reproducibility', in *Selected Writings Vol. 3* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). The wild ambivalence of the sacred, as both attractive and repulsive, is a theme that runs across Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, including in their work for *Le collège de sociologie 1937-1939* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Following Michel Foucault, Tony Bennett has, in his *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1995), argued that the main function of the exhibition form is 'disciplinarian', consisting in the production of the visitor's subjectivity through the deployment of what he calls 'exhibitionary apparatuses'. One is reminded that, in Foucault's work, discipline is theorized as grounded in the methodical arrangement of grey, bureaucratic routines to be performed in enclosed spaces, as detailed in *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975). In a similar way, but with a nod to Norbert Elias, Carol Duncan has reconstructed the main function of the museum exhibition as a ritual meant to 'civilize' the visitor; see her *Civilizing Rituals. Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Olivia Neergaard-Holm, Jon Nguyen & Rick Barnes, *David Lynch: The Art Life*. Documentary Film (2016). <https://www.janusfilms.com/films/1841>

<sup>10</sup> The French Studio, *21CM Avec Paul Auster* (2018). Online at: <https://vimeo.com/265050968>

<sup>11</sup> William Kentridge, *Self-Portrait as a Coffee-Pot* (2024). 9 episodes. South Africa, United States.

- 
- <sup>12</sup> Kentridge's peculiarly playful style is reminiscent of the Italian designer, artist and educator Bruno Munari (1907-1998), whose gaze always capable of being transformative and evocative seemed to cultivate and liberate the intrinsic powers of the child.
- <sup>13</sup> Peter Snowdon, *Bewick's Mambo* (2008). Video. Online at: <https://vimeo.com/2057602>
- <sup>14</sup> Jorge Carrión, *Bookshops* (London: Maclehorse, 2016).
- <sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The author as producer', in *Selected Writings Vol.2 pt.2* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- <sup>16</sup> A memorable description of the role of sweating in tennis, and its attending states of mind, is offered by David Foster Wallace in his 1990 essay 'Derivative sport in tornado alley', in *A supposedly fun thing I'll never do again* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1997).
- <sup>17</sup> The elements are not just chemical compounds, but veritable *styles of being*. I have attempted to develop elementalism in social theory in Andrea Mubi Brighenti, 'The elemental forms of social life', *Cosmos and History*, 20.2 (2024), pp. 158-74.
- <sup>18</sup> The correlation between the absence of inspiration and mental health deterioration is well attested in the psychological literature. See Tobin Hart, 'Inspiration: Exploring the Experience and its Meaning', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 38.3 (1998), pp. 7-35.
- <sup>19</sup> Gabriel Tarde, *Les lois de l'imitation* (Paris : Alcan, 1890).
- <sup>20</sup> I have reconstructed the problems with Tardeian terminology in Andrea Mubi Brighenti, 'Tarde, Canetti, and Deleuze on crowds and packs', *Journal of Classical Sociology* 10:4 (2010), pp. 291-314.
- <sup>21</sup> Gabriel Tarde, *L'opposition universelle* (Paris : Synthélabo, 1999[1897]).
- <sup>22</sup> Gabriel Tarde, *La logique sociale* (Paris : Synthélabo, 1999[1895]).
- <sup>23</sup> Gabriel Tarde, *Les lois sociales* (Paris : Synthélabo, 1999[1898]).
- <sup>24</sup> Graham Wallas, *The Art of Thought* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1926).
- <sup>25</sup> Georges Perec, *L'infra-ordinaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).
- <sup>26</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections* (New York: Harcourt, 1968).
- <sup>27</sup> In Susan Shaw, *Paul Auster* (2018[1997]). Documentary Video. Online at: <https://vimeo.com/258524357>
- <sup>28</sup> The social theorist Zygmunt Bauman used the action of roaming around to lay out a sociological notion of 'freedom'. The spatial underpinnings of the latter often become painfully clear to migrants who are denied such freedom of movement. See Bauman, *Freedom* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988).
- <sup>29</sup> The fact that the protagonist has the same name of the city makes this 'autobiography without author' even more compelling – not to mention the oblique reference to the 'Son of the Father'.
- <sup>30</sup> Patrick Keiller, *The View from the Train* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 81.
- <sup>31</sup> Gilbert Simondon, *L'individuation, à la lumière des notions de formes et d'information* (Paris: Millon, 2013[1964–89]).
- <sup>32</sup> In Martin Køhler, *Space is Process. A film about Olafur Eliasson* (2010). Documentary Video. Online at: <https://vimeo.com/10508111>
- <sup>33</sup> Certainly, the literature on AI is growing exponentially, so these remarks remain impressionistic. Yet, for a recent take on AI from the perspective of social imaginaries, see Paul Blokker, 'Is (Post-)Human Creativity Dead?', *lo Squaderno* 72 (2025), pp. 57-62.

- <sup>34</sup> See Berel Lang, 'Looking for the Styleme', *Critical Inquiry* 9:2 (1982), pp. 405-13.
- <sup>35</sup> In Christiaan Rautenbach and Jamie Taylor, *At Home After Dark. A collection of work by Andrew Kayser*. Documentary Video (2018). Online at: <https://vimeo.com/257468181>
- <sup>36</sup> Christiaan Rautenbach, *Black Pawn* (2020). Documentary Video. Online at: <https://vimeo.com/387411641>
- <sup>37</sup> Public Art Fund, *Pope.L: Conquest*. Documentary Video (2019). Online at: <https://vimeo.com/367788739>
- <sup>38</sup> *Conquest's* itinerary unfolded through Washington Square, the place where, historically, the freehold known as 'Land of the Blacks' was located. The first half-free, and then free, people of African descent in America lived there.
- <sup>39</sup> Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory* (London: Granta Books, 1997).
- <sup>40</sup> Iain Sinclair, *The Last London* (London: Oneworld, 2016).
- <sup>41</sup> Iain Sinclair, *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire. A Confidential Report* (London: Penguin, 2009).
- <sup>42</sup> With *durée*, Bergson criticized the spatialized image of time; here, on the other hand, the space of inspiration is revealed as 'durational' through and through. See Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les donnée immédiates de la conscience* (Paris: Puf, 2013[1888]). From the perspective of utopian action, Ernst Bloch called 'not-yet' (*Noch-nicht*) a temporal order defined, not by external coordinates, but by pure *longing*. See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*. 3 Vols. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995[1947]).
- <sup>43</sup> I would like to specially thank one anonymous review for suggesting the latter expression.
- <sup>44</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Conscience of Words* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979).
- <sup>45</sup> On chronic temporality, see Andrea Mubi Brighenti and Mattias Kärrholm, *Animated Lands. Studies in territoriology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), pp. 57-68.