Passeur Theory

Andrea Mubi Brighenti

Andrea has now put 10 uninterrupted years of effort into editing this journal.

www.losquaderno.net

www.capacitedaffect.net

andrea.mubi@gmail.com

By and large, the passeur – or smuggler – tends to be a sad figure. A by-product of closure immigration policies, he acts as a parasitical creature that exploits the fallacies of mobility regimes in place. The passeur installs himself in an ecological niche from which a marginal advantage can be extracted, acting as a service provider of illicit transportation against prescribed immobility. In theory, the passeur might even be regarded as a facilitator for the freedom of movement in a world system that, since the late 19th century, has increasingly aimed to curb it. Such, for instance, was the romantic image of Lisa Fittko who, in the late 1930s, smuggled refugees across the Franco-Spanish border (fleeing the Nazis and the Vichy Collaborationist regime), including – although unsuccessfully – Walter Benjamin.

In fact, however, today we know that the passeur can hardly be separated from the human trafficker. In other words, he sadly resembles more of a cog in the machine of contemporary slavery than a liberator of humanity. It is just enough to recall that the way in which passeurs routinely operate across the Mediterranean has caused probably as much damages in terms of human lives as the very closure policies that have made the existence of passeurs possible in the first place. An uncanny complicity between the two side of the same coin (forced official immobilisation and illegal facilitation of mobility) is thus looming large at the horizon of the picture.

This short introduction is meant to enter a caveat about a too quick, unripe celebration of the passeur as such. Nonetheless, as a next step, this piece also invites to consider things from a different perspective: indeed, the argument presented here is that such a disreputable personage can also be appreciated as embodying a more general function in the domain of culture, maybe even a necessary function. How would a theory of the cultural passeur look like? And why is it relevant to provincial life?

First of all, as hinted above, the passeur is an interstitial creature. 'Interstitial' does not mean lacking firm belonging. Quite on the contrary, the passeur is integrally a figure of belonging, and even of an especially advanced belonging. As a guide and conductor, he must possess an absolutely fine-grained, indigenous knowledge of the territory to be crossed, the routes and the trails and the shortcuts to be taken. Taking such inside-ness into account gives the key to his interstitial quality. Interstitiality refers not to groundlessness, but to a specific relation with instituted, official categories of understanding and action. Vis-à-vis those normative categories, the passeur is bound to remain an outcast. His existence, in this sense, is not and cannot be legitimated, least regularised – it just takes place and unfolds in a factual, a-moral ecological niche.

A certain ruthlessness, as we have noted, is connatural to the personage: the passeur is not a gentle guy, for his business is not gentle – it inherently trespasses the rules and forces the categories in place. By this same virtue, however, the passeur can also successfully act as a mediator. Its basic function is, as the name suggests, to 'pass on'. He may pass on people, such as immigrants, refugees and other displaced persons, but can also pass on *knowledge*. Which sort of knowledge? This is important: it is a systematically disqualified, illicit knowledge; it is knowledge articulated in a language that is not and cannot be officially recognised and sanctioned. If the passeur looks a bit like

a trickster, that cannot be entirely blamed on him; the knowledge to be delivered is itself tricky.

Here is where the passeur finds his place in the provincial landscape we are interested in probing. In order to know the province, you need an 'inside man'. A deeply territorial yet unregistered guide, the cultural passeur may make the province speak, where nobody expects the province to have anything to say. The passeur's service costs a price, though, usually not a cheap one. Yet, such a price might not be monetary in nature. If we take for instance an insider and veritable passeur to the deep heart of the American province, the filmmaker David Lynch, we soon realise which sort of price we pay to Lynch when watching his movies – the psychological stamina needed not to be completely overtaken and destabilised by his visions.

A deeply territorial yet unregistered guide, the cultural passeur may make the province speak, where nobody expects the province to have anything to say

This means that, in order to follow a cultural passeur into provincial life, you must be prepared to hear strange stories. The passeur is the exact opposite of the 'populariser' who is in charge of making official science understood by lay people. This comes in conjunction with a vector of escape that is expressed by the province itself ("I've got to get out of here!", cries Guy Maddin in *My Winnipeg*). When, in 1981, the South-Tyrolese activist and writer Alex Langer interviewed the Sicilian intellectual Leonardo Sciascia, the two pointed out the self-denigration that contradistinguishes provincialism, as well as that inextricable link of xenophobia and xenophilia that lies deep-seated in regionalism. The province is a deep, slow, solitary (or left-alone) territory. Characteristics of depth, slowness and solitude have been remarked by several observers of the province, including in this issue of *lo Squaderno*. Jointly, such aspects evoke the idea that the proper language of the province is a sort of *secret* language. In respect of this, the passeur acts not only as a mediator, but especially as a veritable *articulator* of that secret language and its untold stories. Such was, for instance, the encounter between the French ethnographer Marcel Griaule and the blind Dogon hunter Ogotemmêli (*Dieu d'eau*, 1948).

The passeur is not an idealist and has no grandiose vision to put forth. The passeur-function is not about the beautification or mythologisation of the territory. This is why, arguably, to be able to follow a passeur to the illicit knowledge of the province, one should get prepared to hear stories not told in the *right* way, in the right order, not affirming, that is, the right morality. The disquiet of the province, in this respect, can be troubling. The 'gift' of the province is not something that can be spelt easily. If gift there is, it requires, not only a long-term acquaintance, a psychological make-up imbued in a given territoriality, as well as a certain laziness in residing within the territory – it also necessitates distance (so, for instance, Luigi Meneghello began writing *Libera nos a Malo*, the experimental novel about his native village in the province of Vicenza, while working in the UK) and even a certain *infidelity* (who would otherwise open up the irregular secrets of one's territory to outsiders?).

To get to know the province, there is not other way but to pay that territorial character which is the cultural passeur, and follow his trail. Again, payment might not be in currency. Some passeurs, for instance, have long, irrelevant stories to tell – they are talkative to the extreme, and extremely boring. They waste a lot of your time with their babbling before they bring you to the place where the true secret passage can finally be spotted. In any case, because of his rootedness and advanced belonging, there cannot be doubts about the truthfulness of the provincial stories revealed. The very language in which they are articulated testifies their genuine nature: far away from the national-popular, as well as from a parrotting of the metropolitan and the 'global', far from the social-science jargon, the cultural passeur speaks in a language that sounds at the same time thoroughly foreign (even if the province is, say, just a couple of hundred kilometres away) and uncannily familiar. Such a language is intimately linked to the three features of the passeur described above – namely, being interstitial, irregular, and paid-for. It is a language that surprises in that it stands at the polar opposite of the – usually 'regional' – stereotypes of the territory. The deepest message of the passeur never confirms what the urban mind expects.

In conclusion, a word on method, in view of the development of a possible research project

on the cultural passeur. The title of this short rant, 'passeur theory', contains a double invitation: on the one hand, it contends, we need to develop a theory *of* the passeur as a peculiar character in the ecology (and the geography) of culture; on the other hand, we also need to advance towards a theory that itself contains and valorises its own passeur-function. If it is inevitable that theory, just like the passeur, 'passes on', still, most theories look for legitimacy, acceptance and good reputation, often at the expense of the actual knowledge they are able to produce. Needless to add, a passeur theory stands at the polar opposite of such an attitude. How to open new illicit trails in the provincial territories of ideas without becoming complicit with a cultural slave-holding system? This is the major question ahead of a passeur theory.