

images, Isgrò disempowered the tsunami of images that flooded popular (pop) mass consumption, thus reducing their persuasive effect and conformist addictiveness, and restoring primacy to verbal discourse and the critical imagination of each person. This result was followed by further elaborations related to the iconic value that could be assigned to a letter of the alphabet, or to a detail selected from one of a myriad images, by means of enlarging it to the point of rendering it no longer identifiable in relation to its origin. By putting the image-word relationship back into play, the new cycle entitled *Particolari ingranditi* [Enlarged Details] (1970), also demonstrated “the short circuit between image and word. A word is unable to confirm a detail because sufficient data is not provided, and the detail is unable to confirm the word” (Isgrò: **VERIFICARE**). In the meantime, this new form of erasure led Isgrò to move forward in the process of image construction. Considering his work in a broader light today, one can easily understand, for example, the criteria that prompted him to create sculpture, and in particular the series *Seme di arancia* [Orange Seed] (1998). The experience of enlarging a detail gave rise to the goal of increasing the symbolic and ethical value of a natural element like a small seed, into which he managed to successfully project the identity and cultural heritage of an entire community, namely his city and his homeland, Sicily.

A Linguistic Device

Isgrò consistently views the erasure technique not as a style but as a versatile expressive device, namely one in continuous metamorphosis that never fails to respect the decoding and constructive-deconstructive principles of the situations it encounters. During the multifaceted course of his career, Isgrò provides moments of theoretical clarification that have great value in understanding his work. After *Declaration I* (1966), delivered at the International Congress in Opatija just a year after the advent of visual poetry, which Isgrò was part of, declaring his own position as the desire to practise erasure as “a general art of the sign”, he went on to publish many of his observations up until the Locarno Conference in 1987. For this event he drafted and publicly read his *Teoria della cancellatura* [Theory of Erasure], in which he states: “An erased word will always be a mark. But it still remains a word. A greatly enlarged detail of Kissinger or Mao will be an erased image. But it still remains an image. The real power of erasure is not in negation or censorship but in its ability to open the doors of language while pretending to close them.”

In the interval between these two important theoretical documents, Isgrò erased books using black and white. He erased the *Enciclopedia Treccani* (1970), the *Carte geografiche* [Maps] (1970), his own identity (1971), the *Storie rosse* [Red Stories] (1974), and he began to erase photos, without forgetting the fact that in the *Libro dei nati morti* [Book of the Stillborn] (1968), he had already begun to erase portraits as well as words!

As the years have passed, various works and forms have revealed to him that he is a painter. Perhaps at the very point just mentioned, Isgrò discovered he had a

vocation as a poet who writes in images, and so he is therefore (also!) a painter.

But now, to avoid my brief remarks becoming a list of all the subsequent phases of Isgrò’s work, which are indeed many and still unfolding, or a list of those intentionally omitted, I will concentrate on the lexical and morphological approach he has devised and adopted thus far as his personal form of expression, and has employed in the Brescia exhibition, along with many of his other inventions, and even new ones.

Brixia and Classicism

More than one work greeted and impressed me when I visited the many historical sites in Brescia that have hosted the vast programme *Isgrò cancella Brixia*. The variety of work shares a common denominator, namely the relationship Isgrò has established with the city’s historical and classical “signs”, which in the mind of each viewer revitalise all that is still present and enduring. In the rooms of the Museo di Santa Giulia, thirteen canvases portraying images of ancient life in Athens, erased in white, simulate *Brixia as Athens*. Introducing the narrative sequence is a cast of the *Discobolus*, assailed by Isgrò’s erasing ants, a bizarre version that even goes so far as to envision that along with the discus, the athlete also threw his own arm!

Isgrò has also familiarised himself with the austere and solemn silences of the Renaissance cloister at Santa Giulia, where he has installed one of his new “archisculptures”, *L’armonium delle allodole impazzite* [The Harmonium of Crazy Larks]. It is surrounded, under the cloister’s arches, by the sound of the “Casta Diva” aria from Vincenzo Bellini’s *Norma* and by dozens of open, and therefore empty, birdcages.

The third and most impressive work, also shown for the first time, is *Le api di Virgilio* [Virgil’s Bees], a multimedia work installed in the Roman Capitolium, where a video projection of swarms of bees, themselves “erasers”, simulate an invasion of the room containing the Roman epigraphs. In their thousands they envelop the inscriptions, “erasing” them from view for several moments before departing and leaving the tablets visible once more. The erasure in *Le api di Virgilio* is no longer achieved with lines of ink or a splash of colour on an inscription or an image, but with the film of these industrious insects, whose dynamic flight fills Brescia’s Capitolium with a sense of a “revisitation” and the reawakening of ancient words and history.

This is in fact the dominant leitmotif of the event conceived and executed by Isgrò in Brescia: to turn our attention to history, to our past, not as historic remains or places to be celebrated, or as a showcase for immutable cultural heritage, but as a phenomenon to be reckoned with in order to better understand ourselves and much of what concerns others: the multiple civilisations and cultures that the past and history oblige us to take into consideration.

Earlier in my discussion of Isgrò’s erasure, I stated that this invention could be considered an aesthetic and poetic achievement on a par with those by artists such as Fontana, Burri, Klein, Castellani, Pistoletto, and several others in Italy and Europe, given that in a certain sense each of them could be identified as “classical”, as the

originators of new models and new norms of artistic expression elaborated from something pre-existent that had exhausted its vital élan and therefore needed reviving.

Moreover, if the notion of the classical “can and should be the key to an even vaster encounter with other cultures in an authentically global sense”², then the work of each of the abovenamed artists can claim it has already attained vast international recognition, and therefore is well suited to rationally embrace any other culture into its aesthetic horizon.

In this regard, Isgrò’s tendency to focus on classicism in his work is also evident in his verse drama *Didò Adonàis Dòmine*, staged at the Roman Theatre in Brescia and directed by Giorgio Sangati, where the identity of the ancient figure has transitioned into that of a tragic female narrative of modernity.

In effect, for Isgrò, the act of revisiting and rewriting ancient dramas is an immersion into and re-emergence from the past and present of his homeland, Magna Graecia. In his *Oresteia* of Gibellina trilogy (1982–84), Isgrò “erased” Aeschylus “not to eliminate him, but to enable the key concepts to emerge with greater force”³. On that occasion too, as in Brescia today, the protagonist was the history and vicissitudes of an ancient Sicilian town and its inhabitants under the ambivalent sign of erasure and rebirth.

¹ “Emilio Isgrò, Teoria della Cancellatura”, in Alberto Fiz (ed.), Emilio Isgrò. *La cancellatura e altre soluzioni*, (Milan: Skira, 2007), 183.

² Salvatore Settis, *Futuro del classico* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), 119.

³ Martina Treu, *Contemporaneo classico. Dialoghi tra antico e moderno nel nuovo millennio* (Milan: Editrice Bibliografica, 2022), 93.

The “Classical” According to Isgrò

Conversation between Emilio Isgrò and Martina Treu

Martina Treu: Let’s start from the many definitions of the concept of “classical” and its derivatives that have accumulated and become stratified over time: neoclassical, post-classical ... Do you see yourself in any of them?

Emilio Isgrò: Phidias created the world, Canova decorated it. That’s the fundamental difference between classical and neoclassical. Giorgio de Chirico is classical, Tony Cragg is neoclassical. Albert Einstein is classical, Werner von Braun, neoclassical.

M.T. Twenty years ago, we began a discussion on these themes that has never been interrupted and was recently resumed in your current exhibition, *Isgrò cancella Brixia* [Isgrò Erases Brixia]. Starting from here, let’s retrace your relationship with the classics, a journey that’s not always obvious or self-evident, such as in your maps or the works you define as “verbo-visual writings”. Let’s imagine travelling down the peninsula from Brescia to Sicily, your birthplace. When thinking about the classics, we inevitably start from and return there.¹ You don’t return to the classical as an imitator

or follower. You don’t pursue an ideal, you don’t relate to the classical as something from the past, either in an external, superficial or neoclassical way. Your point of view is radically opposite; it’s totally personal and unique. For you, the classics aren’t an immutable canon or model that inspires you. On the contrary, they help you look ahead: they’re not part of the past but of the future!

E.I. That’s true, I don’t approach the classics “classically”. I don’t see beautiful, white idealised Greek statues. I’m not interested in recreating them, dressing them up, draping them or decorating them. In the *Odyssey*, or in my epic poem *Odissea cancellata* [Odyssey Erased] (2004), I see Ulysses as a castaway who has come ashore in front of my house in Sicily. He’s just emerged from the sea in ragged clothes, dirty with sand and mud. He needs to take a bath! You see, a Ulysses who doesn’t feel the need to wash is too pure for me. I believe in art that’s full of life and contradictions.

M.T. This attitude shines through your plays, which cover a period of more than thirty years: from *Didone*, which you revived for the Brescia exhibition, we can go back as far as *Odissea cancellata*, which you’ve already mentioned, and, earlier still, to your “Sicilian trilogy” *L’Oresteia di Gibellina* from the early 1980s. At the beginning of that trilogy, you imagine a carter who falls from his horse and begins to speak Greek “which is a pleasure to hear”, as if it was all innate. And as if it was natural to you to transfer it to the theatre ...

E.I. In fact, as I once said to Germano Celant: “Theatre has been for me the natural outcome of verbo-visual writing, where all languages come together.”¹ And for my debut as a playwright in the Gibellina plays (*Gibella del Martirio*, *San Rocco* and *L’Oresteia*), it came naturally to me to draw on the culture of my birthplace, Sicily, the “Greece of the West”, not classical Athens, but more on a culture I’d define as archaic, even pre-Aeschylean. For that matter, in my plays, first of all there’s the chorus and then a voice emerges. Only later do you hear the actors’ individual voices.

M.T. This evolution is crucial in the history of Greek tragedy, as we can see by comparing the surviving works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. First of all there’s the chorus, from which one voice gradually emerges, then two and finally three. It’s not by chance that before Aeschylus moved to Sicily, where he died, he constructed the *Oresteia* with a principal actor alongside the chorus in *Agamemnon*, two in *The Libation Bearers* and three in *Eumenides*. Your relationship with Aeschylus is a model: you allow yourself extreme freedom with his work; you use him as a starting point and as a basis for comparison, but then you write an original play. In this sense you’ve been a pioneer in Sicily, and elsewhere: the first to repurpose the classics in this way, precisely because you’ve always known and loved them. You’ve been steeped in Greek culture since birth, even if this approach has sometimes hindered you in your own land. Let’s not forget that in the early 1980s your *Oresteia* didn’t debut in the Greek theatre at Segesta because at the time only ancient original texts, not reinterpretations, were allowed there. It took decades to grant other plays space, even ones inspired by the classics, which is now finally the

case. And the same applies to other Greek and Roman theatres, including Syracuse. Once again, you were ahead of your time.

E.I. From the very beginning, from when I first started working, I was never tempted to use the classics to gain attention or to refer to, in order to boost my self-esteem or my reputation. For me, the classics should not represent formalism but form, of thought and potential human progression. Humanism demonstrates this, through Petrarch, who reinterpreted the classics and made them his own. As a Sicilian, it’s always been natural and spontaneous for me to approach the Greeks instinctively, without constraints. That goes for the Latins too, as in *Didone*, for example, or in my work for Brescia. In verbo-visual writing or in plays, I don’t feel like a translator, let alone a “foreigner”. I don’t recur to any “unusual”, polished language. Since my earliest works, I’ve never thought of imitating “refined” translators, not even Ettore Romagnoli, who was an unparalleled creator of forms.³ I chose to draw directly from dialect and transform it into a language of art. Even the Greeks used dialects in this way: not in a realistic way, but recreating them and using them in judicious doses as “other” languages.

M.T. In fact, the choruses in the tragedies and the characters in Greek comedies are inspired by real dialects. And even Ettore Romagnoli, whom you mentioned, enjoyed translating the playwright Aristophanes with a real sense of the theatrical and in a very lively way, using comparable Italian dialects. You’re neither a translator nor a classicist but you do know Greek and Latin; you studied them at high school in Messina. And in the prologue of the *Agamènnuni*, which opens your *Oresteia di Gibellina*, you cite Milio, an illustrious Greek scholar who was from Messina.

E.I. Yes, I studied Greek and Latin at the Messina classical high school. And at the end of my school days, before leaving Sicily and moving to Milan, I was involved in staging Sophocles’ *Ajax*, directed by Michele Stylo, which reinaugurated the Greek theatre in Tindari in 1956. By studying the classics I learned an approach to language and reality that I then developed over the years in my work and plays: from the *Oresteia* to the *Medea*, and from the epic *Odissea cancellata* [Odyssey Erased] to my play *Didone Adonàis Dòmine*, which was revived in summer 2022 at the Roman theatre in Brescia. **M.T.** In that last play, you created a very free version of Dido, a character from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Like a number of your other female figures — Tinestra and Electra in the *Oresteia*, Medea and Joan of Arc — we are struck by the way Dido knows how to transform herself, how she assumes different forms and personalities and can travel from ancient to modern times. It’s a good example of the capacity of the classics, which Calvino also mentioned, for continual renewal and revival’. It’s happened even now, between the pandemic and war. In the past, I’ve often compared your work and your entire career to the ancient practice of the palimpsest: the manuscript that is written, **cancellato [erased]** and rewritten again and again. This has been a constant in all your work over the decades. Even in Brescia, you involve Athens (*Brescia come Atene* [Brixia as Athens] is the title of a section of the exhibition), and before that,

with *L’incancellabile Vittoria* [The Unerasable Victory], against a backdrop of Virgil’s *Aeneid* you celebrated the restoration and return to Brescia of the *Winged Victory* statue, which is a symbol of resistance. You also brought to the Capitolium of ancient Brixia the bees that had swarmed earlier, in a previous artwork of yours, on the tombstones of the Bernabò Brea Archaeological Museum in Lipari. And hovering over everything is your unmistakable signature: irony.

E.I. It’s true. I have to say that I’m so afraid of uncertainty that I can’t stop returning to the classics, but I do so with irony. Given my origins, my irony is of course more Socratic and Sicilian than like Guido Gozzano’s. Without irony I’d be a neoclassical artist.

M.T. Your ironic and self-ironic vein is already notable in your installations (for instance, *L’avventurosa vita di Emilio Isgrò* [The Adventurous Life of Emilio Isgrò]), but even more so in your narrative and dramatic texts. Typical of this is what you wrote about the play *Didone Adonàis Dòmine*, which was revived in Brescia: “The theatrical tension that flows from the verses continually oscillates between two poles: the more clearly tragic (abandoned love, homicidal craving, passionate incitement to revolt) and the more openly parodic and paradoxical.”⁵ This “oscillation” is also present in the foreword, in the opening caption and in the entire script of the book *L’Oresteia di Gibellina e gli altri testi per il teatro*.⁶ “Classical Despite Himself” was the title I gave my introduction in that book, precisely because you won’t allow yourself be put on a pedestal, you don’t want to be called “maestro”...

E.I. The classical can’t be taught, it’s not made of formalisms, it’s a form of art and thought, and it loses its energy in its transfer to a new vision of things. The classical creates energy, the neo-classical exploits it. I say this because right now some people mistake the neoclassical as a bearer of moral energy, which only the classical has. I’d like a less rhetorical and less consolatory view of the classical.

M.T. This can be seen very well in all your works: visual, literary and poetic ... You don’t depend on a model. You were born and grew up in Sicily, where Greekness still exists and permeates everything, and where many forms of art coexist. This inevitably conditions your point of view. When you consider the classics, you don’t stand “downstream”, so to speak, like the Epigones, but “upstream”, like the ancestral Greeks of Sicily. Which is why we can define you as “pre-classical”, archaic.

E.I. In the beginning, my fellow travellers accused me of being too structured. That’s why in the course of my career I haven’t ignored any form of literary experimentation, not even the most ambitious. I’m not a formalist, but I do have a sense of form that haunts me. For me, even a painting has to have words!

M.T. It’s true, at different times, but also in the same period, your modes and means of expression change and vary from poetry to theatre to verbo-visual writing, and yet they’re always consonant and matching with each other. We can verify this if we look back at your career. We can compare your course to a zigzag line, but a continuous one. However disparate the forms you use, they reflect a coherent unitary vision of the classics: you don’t need to embrace them because

they’re already a part of you. Your relationship with the classics is not a point of arrival, if anything it’s a point of departure: your entire career is a circular path composed of comings and goings.

E.I. Michelangelo returned to the classical when he revisited forms and took them to the limit. This is borne out by an anecdote about him, perhaps untrue but cleverly imagined. Michelangelo asks his Moses: “Why don’t you speak?” The neoclassical doesn’t allow mistakes, in this sense it can even border on the exaggerated or kitsch. The classical, on the other hand, tolerates all errors, because it is strong and powerful. **M.T.** Speaking of “errors”, in your work you “revisit” famous models in an ironic and disorienting way, for instance with enlarged or missing details, inserting apparently incongruous elements in an anomalous context, like puzzle pieces that don’t fit. This is also evident in works where you play with the classics, often disconcerting the viewer. In this regard, the Brescia exhibition provides us with some striking examples, even for the uninitiated, such as Myron’s *Discobolus* covered in ants and missing one arm. But this choice, like others, is not a simple homage: it would be a mistake to decontextualise it. We have to see it in a broader context, namely your entire career, and then in the context of the exhibition. In the room following the *Discobolus*, the surprised visitor finds the statue’s missing arm lying on the ground, as if it had been torn off and hurled along with the discus. The statue still speaks to us, it’s no mere piece of marble!

E.I. It’s neither the perfectly created Greek statue nor its Roman copy, nor even its bloodless imitation. Instead, I imagined it was the statue itself inviting us to follow its momentum, to go into the other room. In a first working hypothesis, I wanted to make a dramatised statue, but then I realised that the broken arm and the sand, in other words the ants, were enough. For me, that is the most tangible sign of classical energy. Not a neoclassical homage to classical statuary, without arms, without strength, inert, stripped of its vitality. On the contrary, my discobolus isn’t white, he’s covered in ants, like Ulysses re-emerging from the sea covered in sand.

M.T. And so we return to the image of Ulysses that you evoked at the beginning, thus closing the circle. After all, the *Odyssey* is a hymn of return (*nostos* in Greek), and you’ve continually returned to it throughout your career. You wrote the novel *Polifemo* [Polyphemus] and *Odissea cancellata* [Odyssey Erased]. You’ve also played Ulysses on stage, and several times, from Prato (2014) to Milan (2017), also acted in *La pelle scorticata* [The Flayed Skin] (as well as playing the dual role of Malaparte in exile in Lipari, and Ulysses at the court of Aeolus). In addition to the key word “return”, a term which really defines your relationship to the classics, is “circularity”: starting from the classics, moving away from them, returning to them periodically. Each of your works seems to be a foretaste of something that is coming, a new beginning, not a conclusion. You never give the impression of turning back, but of looking forward. Neither do you follow the original meaning of “classical” in the etymological sense, because you don’t accept its prescriptive value as a norm or canon. You don’t imitate, you don’t allude to, you don’t make copies,

you don’t replicate models as bare forms, instead you reinvent them each time. You “live” the classics, you feel them on your skin. Perhaps that’s why you’ve avoided the neoclassical throughout your career. You’ve been able to maintain the right distance from the classics, sometimes approaching the coast, sometimes venturing into the open sea. But always returning to your island. Whatever it is.

E.I. The journey continues. And that’s why — age permitting — I have to keep working; it’s the best way to amend and correct one’s mistakes. When you close a chapter, a project or a speech, you remain a prisoner of your mistakes. Once you deliver a finished work, you can no longer change it, you fix it forever in that form. Instead, I like to take it apart, reassemble it, recreate it again and again. In that way the classical remains alive, but it also revives creativity. It keeps us on our toes; it keeps us in the game. Like perpetual motion.

^[1] M. Treu, “Classici siciliani ‘nell’occhio del Ciclope’, tra testi greci e riscritture moderne”, in A. Lezza, F. Caiazzo, E. Ferrauto (eds.), Antologia Teatrale. Atto Secondo, Naples: Liguori 2021, 225–239.

^[2] G. Celant (ed.), Emilio Isgrò, exhibition catalogue (Venice, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, 13 September – 24 November 2019), Rome: Treccani, 2019, 32.

^[3] Ettore Romagnoli (1871–1938) was a Greek scholar, translator and the first artistic director of the INDA (National Institute of Ancient Drama) in Syracuse.

^[4] I. Calvino, Perché leggere i classici, Milan: Mondadori, 1991.

^[5] E. Isgrò, “L’attrice cartomante si trasforma in tre donne pericolose”, in Corriere della Sera, 1st August 1986.

^[6] E. Isgrò, L’Oresteia di Gibellina e gli altri testi per il teatro, ed. M. Treu, Florence: Le Lettere, 2011, 67–72, 358–395.

Brixia as Athens

Francesca Morandini

The starting point of the journey proposed by Isgrò in *Brixia come Atene* (Brixia as Athens), a section of the exhibition *Isgrò cancella Brixia* (Isgrò Erases Brixia), is simple, almost familiar, and transports us to a vision of the ancient world that we probably developed as children from the “scenes of civilisations” often found in school texts or children’s books. In thirteen airy canvases (acrylic on canvas mounted on panel) we find pictorial depictions of the major sites of Greek culture. There are buildings, easily recognisable from their form and function, such as the theatre, agora, gymnasium and acropolis. There are epoch-making historical events — the Battle of Marathon and the Battle of Salamis — and famous personalities the likes of Pericles, Aspasia and Phidias. And finally there are places defined as the “cradle of civilisation”: the Acropolis of Athens and the Parthenon with their religious rites, still portrayed today by metres of friezes in crystalline white marble on the top floor of the Acropolis Museum in Athens, or in the halls of the British Museum in London.

These pictorial reconstructions show ruins that still stand silhouetted against the Athens skyline, or ones that historians and archaeologists have attempted to recreate on the basis of data provided by excavations and the study and interpretation of ancient sources, scientifically combined and re-elaborated, and often proposed in publications through 3D reconstructions or graphic renderings. They are hypotheses of possible ancient landscapes, functions and modes of use.

But the canvases on display do not provide a sharp image. The filters that Isgrò has applied, according to his characteristic method of **cancellatura [erasure]** and his personal aesthetic, oblige us to sharpen our senses and memories. Milky velature, almost limewash colours, coat the images, while thick white marks, like those of a corrector brush, prevent us from smoothly reading the accompanying texts. We are required to make an effort; we have to discover and make sense of the selection available to us by going beyond what seems familiar from our school-days.

The thickness of the velature on the forms varies in a regulated way, and paradoxically, the denser it is the better we are able to identify them, guided by their outlines. Since the details (colours, decorations, types of material) have been removed from view, we are required to study the object in itself, distilling its generic and universal traits.

This is the case with the double order of columns in the Parthenon’s inner cella (*Atena la Vergine* [Athena the Virgin]), its unmistakable mass rising towards the Athenian sky. It is true for the slender forms of the long ships engaged in the Battle of Salamis (*I gabbiani di Salamina* [The Seagulls of Salamis]); for the furnishings of intimate domestic settings (*Il piede di Aspasia* [Aspasia’s Foot]); for *L’educazione di Pericle* [Pericles’ Education]); and for the undulating hilly landscape behind the scene in the theatre of Dionysus on the slopes of the Acropolis.

Where the overlay is light and transparent, the sensation is of seeing a gauze put in place to protect precious, vulnerable elements, like those restorers use during the first stage of a dig, when the newly unearthed finds are fragmented but considered suitable for reconstruction. The “velatura” is applied by restorers to the surfaces of artefacts that have undergone an initial cleaning, to ensure that no part of their material is lost before further phases of restoration can take place in the laboratory, where time and more adequate tools are available. In some panels, the coating resembles a light canvas stretched over the specific area as a sort of protection, to provide shade, almost like the covers sometimes found spread over archaeological sites to safeguard particularly vulnerable and valuable remains. It is true that these layers with their anomalous shape interrupt the view of the ancient landscape, but at the same time they announce the presence of something we are meant to focus on: they attract us. In Isgrò’s canvases, coatings that act like real veils are reserved for certain elements, in particular for the