

# *Thomas et le Voyageur: Gilles Clément, the landscape, and the planetary garden*

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## ABSTRACT

The philosophical novel *Thomas et le Voyageur: Esquisse du jardin planétaire*, written in 1996 by the French landscape architect and agronomist Gilles Clément, is an essential medium for understanding the aesthetic reflections of its author centred on the delicate relationship between environment and landscape, but also (and above all) between landscape “perceived” and “co-created” by human beings. Here, Clément proposes the idea of a garden in motion, qualified as a “laboratory of human-nature relationship”, where the gardener participates in the vital flux of the territory and defends biodiversity without forcing nature but letting it evolve according to the biological cycles. In the garden in motion, the landscape, rather than being “managed” or exploited, is thus observed and accompanied by a kind dialogue. Starting from these premises, Clément promotes, without any internal theoretical contradiction, the idea of the Planetary Garden that, operating an “enlargement of scale”, proposes a responsible approach to the Earth.

## KEYWORDS

Clément, landscape, Garden in motion, Third landscape, Planetary Garden.

## 1. *Thomas et le Voyageur: two different views about the landscape*

“When I returned from a long journey, the notion of the Planetary Garden became evident, which is very important to me. That was in 1984, but I didn’t formulate the idea until a few years later, in 1996, using writing in the form of an epistolary dialogue in *Thomas et le Voyageur*” (Clément 2017, p. 10).<sup>1</sup> With these words, the French landscape architect Gilles Clément<sup>2</sup> briefly recalls the path that led him to the drafting of the philosophical novel *Thomas et le Voyageur: Esquisse du jardin planétaire* (Clément 2011). A book that is an

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from texts not written in English have been translated by the author of this article.

<sup>2</sup> French landscape architect, agronomist, and writer Gilles Clément is professor emeritus at the École nationale supérieure du paysage in Versailles and holder of the chair of *Création artistique* at the Collège de France (2011-2012), he won the *Grand Prix du Paysage* in 1998. For a concise presentation of the author see: [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/gilles-clement\\_\(Enciclopedia-Italiana\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/gilles-clement_(Enciclopedia-Italiana)/)

essential *medium* for understanding the aesthetic reflections of the author, centred on the delicate relationship between *landscape* and *environment*, but also between landscape “experienced” in the first person and “represented” through imagination, figure, and word.

Before explaining how Clément constructs his landscape theories based on a dynamic reinterpretation of ecology, it is, therefore, appropriate to clarify something about the argumentative structure of his novel and the problematic that underlies the movement of thought of its protagonists.

The starting point for this brief philosophical-literary summary may be the distinction found by Peter Howard in the incipit of the second chapter of his *An Introduction to Landscape*. Here, the author distinguishes between an idea of landscape understood as a *cultural deposit*, i.e. as the expression of a collective identity, and landscape traditionally understood as an *image*, i.e. perceived as an artistic object, as a drawing realised on a canvas together by the human beings and Nature (Howard 2011).<sup>3</sup>

These two gazes, which constitute the starting point for numerous contemporary debates about landscape and the aesthetic-cultural relationship that human beings have with it,<sup>4</sup> can be found in Clément’s philosophical novel. These latter structures itself around the correspondence between two characters which reflect the semantic duplicity of the landscape sketched here. It is a duality representing a fundamental thread in the French landscape architect’s life, well explained in the opening of the essay *Jardins, paysage et génie Naturel*. He states “I owe everything I know to the time spent practicing and observing the garden. To this I add my travels, that is, the possibility of comparing the places that man inhabits and in which each time he builds a relationship with the world, a cosmology, a garden” (Clément 2013, p. 7).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> These two conceptions of landscape have emerged at different times and in various ways. As Siani points out, from a historical and etymological point of view, the origin of the concept is to be found in pictorial practice: the French term *paysage* is attested from the end of the 15th century, and Titian uses the corresponding Italian term for the first time in a letter of 1552 to King Philip of Spain. These are neologisms explicitly introduced in both cases to designate a new artistic genre (that of the painted view). It is in much more recent times, thanks to the pioneering work of geographers such as C. Ritter (1779-11859), A. Oppel (1848-1929), P. Vidal de la Blanche (1945-1918) or C. Sauer (1889-1975), that the concept of landscape begins to become an ‘object’ of science, linking itself more and more to cultural geography and being considered not based on aesthetics, but on the meaning it acquires for a particular population.

<sup>4</sup> For an aesthetic reflection on landscape see: Berleant 1997; D’Angelo 2009; Id. 2010; Godlovith 1995; Vargiu 2015a; Id. 2015b. Cf. also the review *Sensibilia* n° 16. *Il paesaggio esiste davvero?*, LI, n. 26, 2023/2.

<sup>5</sup> The quoted text is the transcript of the inaugural lecture Gilles Clément gave on 1 December 2011 at the Collège de France. The video of the lecture is available at the following link: <https://www.college-de-france.fr/fr/chaire/gilles-clement-creation-artistique-annual-chair>

On the one hand, Clément describes an anonymous sightseer – identified throughout the novel simply as *the Traveller* (*le Voyageur*) – who, like a modern Alexander von Humboldt,<sup>6</sup> has chosen to explore natural dimension in all its multiple forms, ranging from the Andes to Australia to create a “manual of wandering geography”.<sup>7</sup> The Traveller is a scientist *sui generis*: Clément defines him as a dreaming researcher (*chercheur rêveur*) (Clément 2011, p. 26) because, like an “anthropologist of the landscape”, he transcribes in long letters with a poetic tone addressed to his friend (the Thomas of the title) his observations of untouched sceneries or exotic cities, landscapes that he investigates and gets to know through the eyes of local people.

On the other hand, his friend, the painter Thomas, is defined as an artist and a tidy gardener: an eclectic personality who observes Nature in its most miniature manifestations, marvelling at the variety of insects he keeps in showcases, and that is part of a collection he inherited from his eccentric uncle Piépol. Thomas (personification of Clément’s entomological interests)<sup>8</sup> takes an interest in botany and zoology to create a fresco with the theme of “herbs and the horizon”: a metaphor that, in our opinion, indicate Nature in its generative and transformative power<sup>9</sup> and our perceptive limit in investigating it or, in other words, the constitutive need of the human being to bring Nature “back to human scale” to be able to confront it.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, he sees the act of drawing as “a way of clarifying the landscape” (Clément 2011, p. 21): he does not discover it by travelling around the world or by conversing with local people in an attempt to grasp their perspective on reality but

<sup>6</sup> Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), younger brother of the linguist Wilhelm (1767-1835), studied natural sciences and attended the Freiberg Academy of Mines, qualifying as a state engineer. A profession he soon abandoned to devote himself to science, distinguishing himself in the studies of botany and animal electricity. Humboldt was the forerunner of numerous scientific disciplines, including ecology, climatology and phytogeography, a discipline developed during a five-year journey (1799-1804) to the Americas. At sixty, he decided to embark on another voyage of discovery of the ‘Old World’, a journey that was certainly shorter (it lasted only nine months) but that pushed the naturalist as far as the frozen Russian steppes. A tenacious spirit, Humboldt continued to work until his death on writing *Kosmos*, an impressive work in which he describes his travels and illustrates the conception of Nature that made him famous in the philosophical landscape of the time. See Humboldt, 1847; Id. 1998. For a more detailed discussion of his scientific studies, see Poggi 2008, p. 149 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Traveller’s Journeys are inspired by Clément’s many travels. See Clément 2017, pp. 27-31.

<sup>8</sup> On Clément’s entomological interests see Clément 2017, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Let us remember that the term Nature derives from the Latin *nascor*, which shows precisely the capacity to give life, to grow and change over time. Cf. Vidali 2022.

<sup>10</sup> That of the horizon as a perceptual limit that aids our confrontation with the grandeur of Nature is undoubtedly a theme dear to the aesthetic tradition. Think, for example, of the Kantian words in the *Analytics of the Sublime* (Kant 2000, p. 140).

by observing Nature through a lens (that of art), and from a limited and specific perspective (that of the small French village of Saint-Sauveur-de-Givre-en-Mai). Already from this summary we realise that the protagonists of Clément's philosophical novel are extremely different in intentions, temperament, and lifestyle. Equally different is, therefore, their approach to the landscape.

However, as Thomas points out in the opening of one of his letters, this manifest diversity proves to be a theoretical complementarity. In fact, in a passage that, in our view, recalls the famous scientific writing of J.W. von Goethe in which the principle of *Polarität* (i.e. the idea that the transformative capacity of Nature is to be attributed by the play of a *centrifugal force* – that tends towards change – and of a *centripetal force* – that acts as a counterbalance to the previous force and tends to maintaining the *status quo*)<sup>11</sup>, Thomas states: “It may be that I am going round in circles while you are going round the world as if in this adventure a unique movement binds us” (Clément 2011, p. 19).

The unity is given precisely by the desire to look at a common theme: the *feeling of being emotionally connected to landscape*, a sense of attachment to people and places that manifests itself in different ways but is rooted in the *human relationship* towards reality. “We are, you and I, great users of the gaze”, says the Voyager, using a synecdoche to refer to the entire sphere of our sensitivity, “also speaking of what concerns us: the place where we live, where souls are stirred, where the multiple beings of this natural history, the landscape, are related” (Clément 2011, p. 16). A connection between the sphere of sensitivity and our emotional reinterpretation of places that is well exemplified by Clément's definition of landscape, which returns incessantly in many of his later works: “landscape is what you see as soon as you stop observing. [...] One must close one's eyes after each journey and let the images decant. It may be that we will find, beyond what remains of the landscape, a means to entertain a different relationship with it” (Clément 2011, p. 14.). And this is the purpose of the two characters: entertaining a different relationship with the landscape, different from the two interpretations of it historically given. To carry out this task,

<sup>11</sup> “The idea of metamorphosis is a gift that comes from above, very solemn, but at the same time very dangerous”, Goethe wrote in the essay *Probleme*. “It leads to formlessness [*Formlose*]: it destroys knowledge, it disintegrates it. It is like the *vis centrifuga* and would be lost in infinity if it did not have a counterweight, I mean the instinct of specification [*Spezifikationstrieb*], the tenacious capacity to persist [*Beharrlichkeitsvermögen*] of what has once become a reality. It is like a *vis centripeta* that no exteriority can damage in its deepest foundation” (Goethe 2008, p. 144). For a more in-depth look at Goethe's scientific writings see: Amrine, Zucker (eds.) 1987; Breidbach 2006; De Biase 2011; Giacomoni 1993; Giorrello, Grieco (eds.) 1998.

the protagonists set out to reflect around a list of words with a solid evocative impact (garden, grass, city, horizon, order, ecology, biodiversity, erosion, etc.), critical terms for the construction of a new lexicon linked to the concept of landscape, to which several epistolary exchanges are dedicated.

## 2. Ecology as a testing ground for reconciling environment and landscape

Having explained the structure of the epistolary novel and clarified the personalities of its characters, we can now highlight the problem (never clearly expressed in the book but constantly evoked) which constitutes one of the common threads in Clément's entire philosophical production. Thomas says to his interlocutor that when we confront the landscape theme, "We are invited to feel, and we know that the irrational is in us, that it participates in knowledge. We work [...] on the affective part of the landscape" (Clément 2011, p. 25). As explicitly highlighted in *Jardins, paysage et génie Naturel*, landscape

Indicates that which is within the reach of our gaze. For blind people, it is what is within the reach of all the other senses. To the question 'what is landscape?', we can answer as follows: what we store in our memory after we have stopped looking; what we store in our memory after we have stopped exercising our senses within a space invested by the body [...]. Being a perception [...] the landscape seems essentially subjective. It is read through a powerful filter made up of personal experience and cultural armouring (Clément 2013, pp. 10-11).

However, in addressing this issue, we cannot only turn our attention to our interiority, our emotional sphere or the historical understanding that people have aesthetically contributed to construct. The landscape does not end with our emotional-cultural construction (the binomial highlighted by Howard) but forces us to engage with the *vital concreteness of what surrounds us*, in other words compels us to have a relationship not only with disciplines such as geography, anthropology and the arts but also with the *life sciences*. "This means", translating this concept into the words Clément uses in *Thomas et le Voyageur*, "that we live with the subjective fluctuations it [the landscape] provides us with, but at the same time that we cannot ignore the conditions of its existence" (Clément 2011, p. 27). We cannot ignore the *environment*.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> As Berleant points out, in the middle of the last century, it was not thought that Aesthetics would be able to contribute significantly to any discourse on the environment; in the common imagination of those years, in fact, the arts "stand in the minds of most people as the epitome of contrivance, a manipulation of materials such as stone, wood,

In *Jardins, paysage et génie Naturel*, the environment is defined as

The exact opposite of landscape, insofar as it attempts to give an objective reading of what surrounds us. It is also the sharable side of landscape: a scientific reading conveyed by analytical tools that anyone, whatever their culture, can understand and evaluate comparably. [...] The sound value of a place, the radiation emission of a rock, the percentage of carbon monoxide in the atmosphere, the pollution rate of a watercourse, etc., are established comparably and rigorously over the entire planet, giving rise to a 'technical Esperanto' aimed at a scientific reading of the *milieu* in which we live (Clément 2011, pp. 11-12).

Reflecting on the intrinsic relationship between *landscape* and *environment*, Thomas says in Clément's novel that he and his friend are about to "reconcile the irreconcilable: on the one hand, the state of things – the environment, which you seem to know – and on the other hand, the feeling you get from it – the landscape, where I am most comfortable" (Clément 2011, p. 26). However, in our opinion, this apparently contradictory reconciliation is possible by distancing oneself from the concept of environment as understood by common sense and reflecting on the deeper meaning of the latter, thanks to a comparison with other languages. The Italian word *ambiente* derives, for example, from the present participle of the Latin verb *ambire* and means "what surrounds us". The idea that the environment is connected with a *circular dimension* also recurs in the corresponding terms of many other languages: in the English word *environment* and in the French *environnement* (from *environ*, "around"), in the Mandarin *huanjing* (composed of the words "ring" and "borders") and in the German *Umwelt* (from *um*, "around" and *Welt*, "world") (Iovino 2004, p. 17). On a superficial reading of this etymology, we might think that in the structuring of the environment, the organic entity plays a passive role: according to this conception, the environment – understood as the set of geographical, physical and climatic circumstances that condition the existence of an organism – is something objective and external that begins where the entity's morphological boundary ends and has its autonomous existence. "It is the administrative product of a perception of space", says Thomas (Clément 2011, p. 25). In other words, it is a natural container, variously characterised, in which organic entities are inserted. But is this so?

"The concept of the environment as external to the human or-

metal, paint, sound, and words that carries them far beyond their ordinary appearances. Nothing seems further removed from environment than this, for environment in its purest form connotes the natural world, while the arts represent the height of artifice" (Berleant 1992, p. 1). On the concept of environment and its relationship with aesthetics, see Casetta 2023; Iovino 2004.

ganism is a comforting notion”, but it is today “completely discarded by both ecological studies and post-Cartesian philosophy” (Berleant 1992, p. 5). This interpretation is already challenged by the simple observation of metabolic phenomena, i.e. those chemical-physical phenomena that allow each organism to renew its constituents and to make the components coming from outside by reworking them: for example, human beings breathe air and release carbon dioxide into the environment, a waste material that is useful to plants for photosynthesis. The environment is, therefore, not a neutral container that begins where the boundary of my skin ends but can only be defined as a two-way interaction between outside and inside, between the *Nature that surrounds us* and the *Nature that we are*.

Clément writes: “The French term *environnement*, which we have traced [...] designates an almost elusive whole composed of many fluctuating parameters, all of which have to do with the *living*” (Clément 2013, p. 12). It is, therefore, necessary to rethink the idea of the environment as an integrated experience in the process. This understanding is crucial: the environment is a natural space shaped and inseparable from those who perceive it. Living beings and the environment *correspond to each other* in the sense of the term we have outlined above, giving rise to a network of *space-time interdependent* relationships that define every organism (including the human one) in its very being. This conception allows us to understand why environmental space does not oppose the observer but extends to encompass him as a participant. Hence, it is impressive, according to the French landscape architect, that the Spanish language makes use of another term, translated by him into French as *milieu ambiant*, which suggests a condition of *immersion* rather than a *distancing* of the human being:

While environment desolidarises us from the ‘living around’, the *milieu ambiant* makes us in solidarity with it, immediately including humankind in a planetary ecosystem [...] And, from this point of view, it may be interesting to metaphorically pose a question: which language do we want to speak? That of supremacy over the living and that of equality with it? (Clément p. 14).<sup>13</sup>

That expressed by Clément is a conception that also finds support in some interesting perspectives of ecology<sup>14</sup> and contemporary Environmental Aesthetics.<sup>15</sup> Let us recall that ecological sci-

<sup>13</sup> See also: Clément 2015. On the centrality of the concept of immersivity in aesthetic consideration see Maggiore 2023, p. 20 ss.

<sup>14</sup> For a brief history of ecology see: Worster 1985; Valera 2011. For a philosophical analysis of ecological issues see: Dini 2022; Hösle 1992; La Vergata, Ferrari (eds.) 2008.

<sup>15</sup> For a concise analysis of the history, characteristics and main themes of investigation of this movement of thought, see the following encyclopaedia entries: Carlson 2001; Id.



ence arose in the 19th century with Haeckel (known as Darwin's 'populator' on the European continent) due to evolutionary theory. With the publication of 1859 of *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin 2006) and a few years later, in 1871, of *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Darwin 1990), Darwin had dealt a blow to the image of the human being traditionally shared up to that time in the European philosophical-religious scene. He had helped to clarify (by limiting it) what role the latter plays in the general economy of nature. Paraphrasing the title of a famous work by Thomas Huxley (1825-1895) – one of the main popularisers of evolutionary thought in Britain – we could say that man's place is *in nature, in continuity* with other life forms (Huxley 2005). As Iovino suggests in this regard, the fact that the same, observable evolutionary dynamics involve all forms of life excludes from nature both the action of metaphysical forces and a finalistic development in the function of human centrality: this undermines the idea of a hierarchy in the "great chain of beings" that places at the apex, as we have previously pointed out, the human being as a rational entity created in the image and likeness of God (Iovino 2004, p. 22). The theory of natural selection not only helps to undermine such anthropocentric attitudes but also shifts the focus of attention to the relationships between species in the struggle for existence, studying the populational and inter-populational *dynamics* that determine their modification over time.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, from its origins, ecology has conflicted with anthropocentric attitudes that still consider the environment only as a place essentially opposed and hostile to the interests of human beings. As pointed out in the essay *Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty* – a seminal work for Environmental Aesthetics, published in 1966 by the Scottish philosopher Ronald W. Hepburn

2020; D'Angelo 2010a; Feloj 2018; Fisher 2003. Cf. also the following collections of texts: Afeissa, Lafolie (eds.) 2015; Nasar (ed.) 1988; Sadler, Carlson (eds.) 1982.

<sup>16</sup> By this term, we do not intend to refer strictly to the biological discipline that emerged around the 1960s in response to the environmental crisis linked to air pollution and the progressive erosion of natural resources. Instead, we propose to refer to the term's original meaning, coined by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) in 1866 and first used in the second volume of his *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen*. Here, ecology is defined as 'the whole science of the relations of the organism to the surrounding external world, in which we can include all the conditions of existence in a broad sense. These are partly organic and partly inorganic; both are of the greatest importance for the form of organisms (Haeckel 1866, p. 286). Ecology is, therefore, the science of the relationships that allow an entity to feel at home in a given context, as the very etymology of the suffix 'eco' in the word (derived from the Greek oikos, i.e. 'home') testifies: it is the discipline that aims to study the relationships between living beings and their environment, understood both as a set of chemical-physical factors (light, type of soil, climate, nutrition, etc.) and as a set of biological factors that can influence the life of these organisms (parasitism, symbiosis, etc.).



– “the characteristic image of contemporary man, as we all know, is that of a ‘stranger’, encompassed by a Nature which is indifferent, unmeaning and ‘absurd’” (Hepburn 1966, p. 286). According to such an attitude, Nature would thus be our bitter adversary, the source of those forces that conspire to subvert human purposes with disease, natural disasters and death. To curb such opposition, in this view, Nature should be ‘tamed’, its forces ‘kept in check’ and ‘harnessed’ to serve the purposes humans assign to it, turning Nature in its entirety into an object of human action (Berleant 1992, p. 7).

The counterpart of this attitude is, in fact, the centrality of the human being, well expressed by an image evoked by Clément in his novel and repeatedly taken up in his writings that of the second vision of Hildegard of Bingen in which the whole of the cosmos seems to determine itself according to man (Clément 2011, p. 44).<sup>17</sup> As Clément points out, ecology produced an authentic *cultural shock* by collapsing this relationship of opposition and bringing the human being fully back into Nature. It highlighted “that living beings are connected within a complex system comprising mankind, air, water, rocks and the invisible magnetic field, a system in which each element influences all the others within a finite space: the planet” (Clément 2013, pp. 20-21). Ecology allows us to place man in a position of *biological equivalence* with other living beings, proposing a *biospheric egalitarianism* that leads us to realise that the human being



Figure SEQ Figure \\* ARABIC 1. The Universal Man, from the Liber Divinorum Operum, folio 9, 13th century (State Library of Lucca)

is no longer the being through whom everything is regulated and organised, he is no longer the one towards whom everything converges, he is now in direct relation

<sup>17</sup> See also Clément 2011, p. 96: “The triple figure embraces the entire universe: a circle of light fire, another of black fire, a circle of humid air, another of white air. A human figure standing in the centre, arms outstretched, receives the breath sent from the four sides by the heads of the animals – leopard, lion, wolf, bear, crab, deer, snake, lamb – while the planets radiate towards the heads of the animals and the human figure”.

with the components of the Earth's universe, and he lives from day to day the consequences of his actions. He can no longer attribute the great changes to natural and supernatural forces alone; he must now admit his active part in the biological readjustments of the planet (Clément 2013, p. 20)<sup>18</sup>

In *The Cultural Aesthetics of Environment*, Berleant identifies environment as “an object that becomes more personal when we ponder the effects of global warming, since all living creatures, humans included, are affected by climate change and its consequences” (Berleant 2014, p. 338). Considering the environment from an ecological perspective transforms our understanding of it, because it “is not experienced objectively but always here with us, where we are” (Berleant 2014, p. 339).<sup>19</sup> In other words, the environment must be considered not as what surrounds our skin but as a system of *participating, interacting and interdependent* factors encompassing human beings, living organisms, physical, chemical and climatic characteristics. As the Traveller says in *Thomas et le Voyager*: “I was born without distances. [...] The universe did not present itself to me as a canvas but as a thickness. Distance? I looked for it later, when I asked myself for explanations. Before I did not need to step back to understand that everything is connected, that no object exists, and that nothing presents itself in isolation in space. This interconnectedness, this web of existence, binds us together, and no horizon can separate us” (Clément 2011, p. 32). Thanks to ecology, as Berleant suggests the environment

becomes a complex whole. Because of this interdependence, an ecosystem is not the sum of independent parts or organisms. Rather it is an unstable complex in precarious balance striving to sustain its coherence. I use the word “complex” rather than “whole” because the coherence of an ecosystem is the outcome of a dynamic process involving a multitude of organisms, objects, factors, and conditions. It may achieve balance but that is as a complex, never a unity. We can think of an ecosystem, then, as a context rather than a thing or an object (Berleant 2018, p. 336).

Aesthetics is thus necessarily a crucial point at which environmental concerns intersect with human experience and activity because our sensory involvement in the environment precedes and underlies all other concerns (Berleant 2018, p. 335).<sup>20</sup> This under-

<sup>18</sup> “We are far from the time when mankind, from the height of an advantageous pedestal, observed the *environment* with calculation [...]; here we are now swimming in the great pool of the planet, in a water that is shared, drunk, sweated, digested, evaporated and redistributed over and over again over time, always the same under ever new forms; this is the *milieu ambiant*” (Clément 2013, p. 21).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. also Linder 2018.

<sup>20</sup> More generally on the relationship between aesthetics, environment and ecology see: Blanc 2008; Brady 2000, p. 142-163; D’Angelo 2001; Fel 2008; Iannilli 2020; Kemal, Gaskell (eds.) 1993; Maggiore, Tedesco 2023; Seel 1991.

scores the practical role of Aesthetics in *environmental design*, especially with the *practice of gardening* so dear to Clément, as it shapes our perception and interaction with the world around us.

### 3. *The Landscape as a Garden in Motion*

“The garden is a landscape factory [...], it lends itself to the plays of *the environment*, but because it contains the *dream*, it carries within itself the project of a society” (Clément 2013, p. 19). Everywhere in the world, the word “garden” signifies both the *enclosure* and *paradise*, two terms that share the same etymon (Clément 2013, p. 15).<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, in a conception bordering on utopia, within the enclosure of the garden, *the best* (thus, what is considered most precious and worthy of protection) should be kept. But we must ask ourselves, what does the best consist of? It varies from era to era, but today it can only be the attempt to harmonise landscape and environment in the light of ecological theories. An attempt that the French landscape architect has relentlessly pursued in his landscape design work (Clément 2007),<sup>22</sup> but which finds a source of inspiration in entirely random events.<sup>23</sup>

In 1977, Clément bought a plot of land not far from his home in the Creuse, a department in the New Aquitaine. He intends to turn it into a private garden. However, the land, which has been abandoned for fifteen years, is covered by a thick layer of foliage and tangled vegetation: it is a *friche*, i.e. an “uncultivated” place, a land abandoned by human beings after having been working for a long time for agricultural purposes (Berleant, Delbaere-Garant 2011).

The encounter with such a place triggered a personal experimentation that led him to confront terms and concepts that challenged the traditional opposition between Nature and culture, between the wilderness (Nature in its “original state”, uncontaminated by human intervention)<sup>24</sup> and a Nature intended as the object of human atten-

<sup>21</sup> If the term “garden” derives from the German *Garten* and means “enclosure”, the term *paradise* also shares the same meaning as it derives from the Latin *paradisus* and the Greek *paradeisos*, which can be translated as “enclosure”. See also Clément 2012.

<sup>22</sup> To mention a few of his most famous works: in Paris, the Parc André-Citroën (designed in collaboration with A. Provost, P. Berger and J.-P. Viguier), the Jardins de l’Arche à la Défense, the Jardin du musée du quai Branly à Paris (designed with P. Blanc and J. Nouvel); in Lille, the Parc Matisse à Euralille (created in collaboration with É. Berlin and S. Flipo); in Aix-les-Bains (Savoie) the Jardin Vagabond; in Turin the Jardin Mandala for the PAV.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Clément 1991; Id. 2014; Id., 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Brook 2008; Centini 2003; Oraezie Vallino 1993; Ead. 1993; Padoa-Schioppa, Zanzi 1999.

tion and care, between the natural landscape that evolves according to its own rules and the “represented” landscape constructed by human beings in an explicitly artificial manner (Rancière, 2020). Clément realises that that land, in which Nature appropriates its space in a wild and shapeless manner, still possesses some “configuration”: it possesses a structure, so it is a garden, albeit distant from the idea of a garden that we usually have in mind because, in this case, we do not establish a form based on the garden project, and we cannot foresee and imagine what aspect the land will take on. This observation leads him to question the very meaning the garden can have today and the task that, historically, its guardian, the *gardener*, has set himself. As he points out in *La Sagesse du Jardinier*, “the gardener, convinced of his right to uproot, lives immersed in a paranoia actively fuelled by the sellers of poisons. He makes himself subservient to a complicated, useless and harmful practice. The historical aspect of his task, which involves erasing everything that does not conform to his design from the landscape, is a cause for reflection” (Clément 2021, p. 19).

The art of gardens has expressed excellence through architecture and ornamentation: criteria that we need to revised today. Since it is threatened, the life that develops there becomes the project’s main subject: we must now deal with what is alive: consider it, get to know it, and make friends with it. As Di Salvo points out, distilled in the nurturing environment of the garden, the gardener’s wisdom is enriched by experience. It emerges from the intricate network of relationships with soils, plants, animals, skies, methodologies, forms, and imaginary temporalities. This wisdom, still in its early stages, is awakened by the realization of being an integral part of the ever-present interconnected whole that envelops the garden. It then begins to refine itself in the act of creation, actively participating in the “to come”. Even though it is an artificial nature, this participation is characterized by careful observation, sharing, knowledge, discreet orientation, and most importantly, always respectful action towards nature (Clément 2021, p. 5).

Clément, therefore decided to turn this land into a field of experimentation, seeking an encounter between the traditional idea of the garden and the uncultivated: it became the “laboratory of a man-nature relationship where the gardener, after studying it, collaborates with nature’s power of invention” (De Pieri 2005, p. 91), letting nature “take its free course”, intervening as little as possible and only after long observation of natural processes. Clément’s garden is, therefore, a *Garden in motion*. The concept of the “garden in movement” is a key aspect of Clément’s philosophy.



Figures 2-3. Glimpses of the Jardin Mandala, PAV – Parco Arte Vivente (Torino). Photographs by V. Maggiore (2024).

It does not intend to create *the illusion of the natural*, as in the English garden, but to *participate in a vital flow already present and active* there. It is “not forced into a static and closed form by the ordering power of man [...] but allowed to evolve according to the biological cycles of plants; rather than ‘managed’ or exploited”, it is “observed and accompanied in a kind of dialogue” (Pezzini 2012, p. 139).

Indeed, as Clément emphasises, the *Garden in motion* interprets and develops the energies present on the site and attempts to work *as much as possible with, and as little as possible against, Nature* (AA. VV. 1997, p. 6). The *Garden in motion* is a concept that refers to a constantly evolving and changing garden. The centre of this garden is the *field*, a place “of variable moods” (Clément 2021, p. 24), conceived as an epicentre of floral diversity (Di Salvo 2021, p. 7) or, as the Traveller says, an *index planétaire*, an example of compatibility of life that allows species from different parts of the world to coexist and evolve freely (Clément 2011, p. 37). Here, the role played by movement is highlighted by *vagabond grasses*, i.e. short-cycled plants that in gardens tend to disseminate and “wander”. This kind of herbs travel through generations, reconquer neglected places and then perhaps abandon them, identify new environments, do not invent new situations, transform relationships of scale, and reshape space so that, against any predetermined arrangement, the beauty of

the unexpected is revealed (Di Salvo 2021., p. 9). Of such “nomadic” grasses – often accused of undermining the indigenous flora – the French landscape architect provides a *veritable eulogy* in his writings (Clément 2020), as they reveal Nature’s potential for creative invention (Clément 2022), the so-called natural genius, exalting ordinary extravagance of the landscape and, in particular, “the dimension of a dynamic disorder, the non-existence of those supposed boundaries continually redefined by the unfolding of interactions between the species that inhabit the garden, the animals that settle there, the plants that wander or settle” (Di Salvo 2021, p. 9).<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the *Garden in motion* owes its name to the physical movement of plant species on the ground, which the gardener interprets in their own way, promoting a particular *landscape morphology*. Flowers establish themselves in the middle of a path and force the gardener to choose: preserve the passage or the flowers? The *Garden in motion* recommends respecting the species that settle in autonomously: it is the design that changes in response to the ecological needs of the terrain, constructing an *evolving landscape* in which the role of the human being is not only to be a designer who gives the order to reality but a respectful co-constructor of biodiversity. This “indefinite zone in which nature’s elemental domain – contingencies – and man’s marked territory intersect” is, for Clément, a *morphological and ecological dimension of the landscape*.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to these considerations, Clément specifies that a landscape is designed by *time* and *erosion* because, as Thomas points out,

Erosion does not mean ruin. Cities are built on the ruins of past cities, but the face we give them is not the result of the physical action of time on them. It is the result of overlapping or juxtaposed cultures. [...] In erosion, there is displacement of energies and the construction of something different. Nature erodes, and culture produces ruins (Clément 2011, p. 91).

These considerations became concrete in 2004 when Clément published the famous *Manifesto of the Third Landscape*, a short but programmatic text destined to achieve great success, being translat-

<sup>25</sup> Cf. also Clément 2015.

<sup>26</sup> The use of the term ‘morphology’ is not corroborated by Clément. Still, we use it because the French landscape gardener expressly refers to thinkers more related to the transformational and morphological hypotheses rather than the Darwinian evolutionary-population hypotheses (cf. Di Salvo 2021, p. 6). As illustrated in *La Sagesse du Jardinier*, Darwin’s position promotes an idea of evolution by selective pressure based on the assumption that ‘nature invents and the environment sanctions’; ‘Lamarck’s transformist position, on the contrary, leaves the field of the possible open’, because in the course of its life the plant, animal or human being can change by its own desire or by external pressure (Clément 2021, pp. 32-33).



ed into Italian, Spanish and German within a few years (Clément 2005).<sup>27</sup> In this work, alongside the term *friche*, the notion of *délaissé* becomes central, a French term that can be translated into English as “residue” and that indicates what remains on a territory when its habitual use (not only agricultural but also industrial, urban, etc.) is discontinued. “Suppose one stops looking at the landscape as the object of human activity. In that case, one immediately discovers [...] several undecided spaces, deprived of function” (Clément 2005, p. 16): places exempt from human intervention due to disuse or difficulty of access, but also “all the spaces directly linked to the organisation of the territory: field boundaries, hedges, margins, roadsides, etc.” (Clément 2005, p. 19) and, more generally, all green areas on the edges of built-up zones that are usually not considered useful because they are unproductive. As Clément points out,

For a long time, these residues have attracted the attention of territorial administrators – parliamentarians, local community leaders – but also of those who intervene in the territory: planners, town planners, landscape architects... In the official context, the answers expected by sponsors of projects concerning residues correspond to a traditional and moralising vision of the landscape: how to make them disappear? The third landscape is not interested in residues to make them disappear, but to enhance them (Clément 2005, p. 69).



Figures 4-5. Glimpses of the of the Parc Henry Matisse in Lille.  
Photographs by V. Maggiore (2016).

In the garden conceived by Clément, such configurations find their place: in the *Garden in motion*, there is no ruin but transformation. The gardener’s task is not to *design* a beautiful garden, but as Thomas points out, to “anticipate a scenario to facilitate its coming” (Clément 2011, p. 93), giving space to every living being and

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Facciolongo 2018.



preserving biodiversity. These principles overturn the formal conception of the garden, which, in this case, finds itself entrusted not to the *ideas imposed* on Nature by the designer but to the hands of the gardener, who, as the Traveller points out, is a *bumble king* reigning over an environment that reigns over him (Clément 2011, p. 114). The design of the garden, which is constantly changing, is the result of the work of the person who maintains it and not of an idea elaborated on the drawing board (Clément 2007, p. 13). It is precisely this “accompaniment” of Nature that justifies Clément’s very use of the term “garden” about such experimentation: it is not wilderness, it is not a cultural space, it is a “middle ground”.

#### 4. *Conclusions. From the Garden in Motion to the Planetary Garden: literary utopia or metaphor for a new ecological activism?*

“In recent decades, the garden circumscribed to the gardener’s space – the *hortus conclusus* – abruptly changes its status, leaving the enclosure. Starting in the first half of the 20th century, an important contribution coming directly from society not only modifies the idea of the ‘better’ within the enclosure but subverts the register itself, to the point of making it disappear” (Clément 2013, p. 19). In the years following the publication of *Thomas et le Voyager*, Clément set in motion a series of reflections that, drawing on the particular case of his garden, operate an “enlargement of scale” attempted to perfect that *Esquisse du jardin planétaire* already outlined in the 1996 novel. In the incipit of the novel Thomas and the Traveller decided “that the Earth is one small garden”: (Clément 2011, p. 13) they can carry on this similarity because, as Coccia points out in his rereading of the novel, “in all cases where ecology speaks of the ecosystem, one should say ‘garden’” (Coccia 2020, p. 72).

This transition is possible because the French term *jardin* has a broader meaning than its English counterpart. It is used to indicate not only a portion of land cultivated with ornamental plants but also the vegetable garden and, more generally, any enclosed green space. This metaphor is further supported by the fact that, behind every biome, there is an order resulting from contingent associations (i.e. random in their origin but not lacking in internal legality) built up over time and constantly redefining the world’s landscape. All living beings, including plants, are not passive spectators but active players in these associations. Even when they are apparently incapable of any movement, they are still contributing to the shaping of the world. We use the word *apparently* because,

as some scientists have shown, even plants are actresses of their movements thanks to complex mechanisms of long-distance dispersal of seeds and spores (Nathan, et al. 2008): plants cultivate the world by dispersing their offspring, becoming active protagonists of the landscape. As Coccia states, “the planet [...] *is an enclosure artificially shaped by the living itself*” (Coccia 2020, p. 72). They are gardeners of the landscape, like any other living being on planet Earth, the *Blue Planet*, a *Planetary Garden* in the Universe.

In this garden, man, like all other living beings, can play an important role: all those who intend to work the Earth by taking care of it and respecting its biodiversity (following the flow of natural vegetable and animal processes, sometimes even subjecting themselves to them, and inscribing in the biological current that animates a given place, orienting it without altering it) will be *planetary gardeners*. In the pre-eminence of links and connections over structured forms, both in small gardens and on the planetary garden, the ethic of a respectful, responsible relationship with nature is not just a suggestion, but a vital foundation of our existence and survival. This relationship is where we discover our purpose and our place in the world (Di Salvo 2021, p. 9).

If, therefore, “Gardening in motion was above all a practice, the planetary garden is a principle that calls into question the whole of humanity and brings into play an individual and collective responsibility” (De Pieri 2005, p. 98) Therefore, the ecological approach that characterises the peculiar relationship between human beings and nature described by the French landscape architect invites us to perceive the Earth as a living and unified entity, as a great garden in which all the fragments of the landscape, even those commonly ignored, offer us opportunities for regeneration. “The natural garden becomes biological”, says Clément. “The domination is transformed into association, the spectacle gives way to participation, the observation of vital processes replaces manipulation, and the static becomes dynamic” (Clément, Jones 2006, pp. 74-75). Because, as Di Salvo emphasises, “the landscape teaches us non-neutrality, not to entrust ourselves, not to delegate; to no longer be spectators but compulsorily protagonists” (Di Salvo 2021, p. 10).

Hence, in Clément’s landscape theory, the gardener, in both large and small scale, must learn to

read and understand the mutability of the living, welcoming movement, integrating it into a light, metamorphic landscape project, capable of returning and returning to the land, observing over time, operating flexibly according to receptive logics, adapting to absorb and orientate the transformations of the living in a new responsible aesthetic (Di Salvo 2021, p. 8).

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