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Landscape and Time: Retracing an Italian Theory of Landscape Through the Work of Rosario Assunto

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Abstract. The paper reconstructs the multifaceted concept of landscape by tracing its historical development and examining the engagement of Italian aesthetologist Rosario Assunto with this notion in the 1970s, a period when the notion of landscape had been largely overlooked by both philosophical and political movements focused on ecology and the environment. Assunto reconfigures landscape as an aesthetic category that transcends its traditional association with art, extending it into a phenomenological and historical framework. Central to his analysis is the temporality of landscape, particularly as manifested in the organic movement of the animal. This approach challenges rigid conservationist paradigms and provides a dynamic conceptual model that remains highly relevant for contemporary discussions on landscape regeneration and restoration.

Keywords. Animal, landscape, movement, restoration, temporality.

The concept of landscape has undergone a series of turbulent transformations since its emergence in European thought. Following its initial prominence, it experienced phases of decline and conceptual displacement, as philosophical and ecological discourse redirected its focus toward

notions such as *environment*, *ecosystem*, *biome*, and *niche*, all of which seemed more aligned with the growing public consciousness surrounding ecological concerns. Today, however, we are witnessing a renewed interest in landscape thinking. Yet, the fundamental question that animated the earliest reflections remains unresolved: *What do we mean when we speak of landscape?* Like many concepts pertaining to nature, landscape resists a univocal definition, an issue Aristotle had already identified when he noted that nature *is said in many ways*.

To address this question, this paper first offers a concise historical overview of 20th-century aesthetic reflections on landscape (Section 1). It then examines Rosario Assunto's distinctive contribution to the concept, emphasizing his treatment of temporality and movement, which set his work apart from previous approaches (Sections 2 and 3). However, this is not merely a matter of retrieving a definitive concept of landscape through historical reconstruction, particularly in light of the Italian tradition (a country that was among the first to enact specific legislation on landscape, largely due to the efforts of Benedetto Croce). Rather, this study seeks to explore how Assunto's reconstruction of landscape remains conceptually potent in addressing contemporary challenges and how it can engage in a meaningful dialogue with the present (Section 4 and Conclusion).

1. *The fluctuating fortune of the notion of landscape: a brief overview*

In the early 1900s, European intellectuals were proposing new and original theories on landscape, almost simultaneously with each other, as if guided by a secret coordination. As Alain Roger (1997: 5) notes, in the early 1910s there is a certain convergence on landscape studies, as we see in the work of French aesthetologist Charles Lalo, whose *Introduction à l'esthétique (Introduction to Aesthetics)* is from 1912, in Georg Simmel's short text *Philosophie der Landschaft (Philosophy of Landscape)*, from 1913, and in Croce's *Breviario di estetica (Breviary of aesthetics)*, also published in that same year.

In these three texts evoked by Roger we are confronted with heterogeneous considerations, which nevertheless allow us to evoke the concept of landscape in all its polyvocality, which is also indicative of its problematic status. However, the starting point still remains the same, namely, the relationship between nature, as it is perceived by us, a human observer, and an aesthetic consideration of it, i.e., related to a judgment of taste. Among these thinkers, Simmel and Croce stand out, as their theories, though distinct, provide essential foundations for Assunto's later elaborations.

Nature, in Simmel's Goethean account, is a unity that ceaselessly produces and unmakes its own forms, and that knows no element that is unrelated or detachable from her. It is the gaze of the human subject that "individualizes" a part

of that monistic totality and forms it as landscape, or as a work of landscape art, by framing it. The starting point is a rupture between subject and nature, which for Simmel cannot be maintained as such, but is to be reconducted, as far as possible, to its wholeness. The *Stimmung* of the subject, through which the landscape is perceived as landscape, is not a mere psychological feeling, but is something that must already be contained *a priori* in the landscape itself: nothing other than life reflecting itself and thus grasped in its own unity (Simmel [1913]; see also Boella [1988]).

Regarding Croce, on the other hand, there is no philosopher in Italy more frequently associated with the question of landscape. I believe, however, that this association stems more from Croce's political activity than from his properly theoretical work. Indeed, it will be remembered that, as Minister of Education during the last Giolitti government (June 1920-July 1921), he proposed the law, which has remained known by its eponym, "For the protection of natural beauty and properties of special historical interest". This legislative measure was a very important novelty in the European context and would be expanded several times over the years. However, it might surprise us that, in Croce's texts devoted to aesthetics, the concept of landscape is not particularly developed. Perhaps its most extensive consideration is found precisely in the brief *Report to Bill 1274*, which would later become the law 778/1922 (available in Croce [1979]: 209-228). However, in the major texts we certainly find significant insights.

Heavily influenced by Hegel, Croce's approach diverges from the German idealist tradition in one crucial respect: whereas Hegel relegates natural beauty to the lowest form of aesthetic experience, one that remains mired in the empirical and sentimental, tied to the contingency of organic formation and the necessity of the physical and biological laws, Croce acknowledges natural beauty as a legitimate form of artistic expression. He does not deny that natural beauty, that landscape, is in fact «art» (Croce [1912]: 25). However, this is only possible insofar as nature is recognized as landscape within a process of self-reflection mediated by human subjectivity. For Croce, Nature is considered art as landscape solely in the self-recognition operated by a self-conscious subjectivity. Aesthetic experience is fundamentally a cognitive act; it is not merely an apprehension of beauty but a mode of self-knowledge through which subjectivity comes to understand its own rational structure. Thus, while Croce does not reduce landscape to a picturesque scene or a decorative panorama, he nevertheless subordinates its natural dimension to the workings of the spirit. This position could thus be summed up in the observation that «nature is beautiful only for him who contemplates *her with the eye of the artist*», and that «without the *aid of the imagination*, no part of nature is beautiful» (Croce [1902]: 99).

Despite the richness of these early reflections, a fissure was already beginning to emerge. The dependence of natural beauty on subjective perception presents

a paradox: the very history of human subjectivity, through its technological and industrial advancements, has been a history of the progressive deterioration and disappearance of the landscape. Who saw this most clearly was perhaps Joachim Ritter (1963), who proposes a tragic conception of landscape. As he argued, the concept of landscape emerges when the domination and reification of nature reaches a certain intensity, whereby the natural is definitively subdued to the social-historical world of man. Nature ceases to be something terrible and unknown, it responds to scientific-mathematical models, and it is at that point that it begins to dissolve and we begin to no longer perceive its presence, but rather its absence. This nostalgia for nature, which could only develop in a civilization that had lost it, is what gives rise to landscape. Landscape would therefore be a consideration of nature *in absentia* of nature itself, an aestheticized *memento* of a nature already dissolved.

This rupture became explicit in the 1970s, in a seemingly unexpected way. It was, in fact, the same decade that witnessed the rise of environmental consciousness on a global scale. The establishment of Earth Day, the 1972 Stockholm Conference, and the increasing prominence of ecological discourse across philosophy, economics, and the social sciences marked a decisive shift in how nature was. Edgar Morin (1972) hailed the beginning of the '70s as the «first year of the ecological era». Yet, reflection on the concept of landscape, as Paolo D'Angelo ([2010]: 152-153; see also [2021]) points out, seems to arrest and vanish in the ecological literature of almost all of the Western countries (with the exception of France where the term *paysage* continues to be productively engaged). While it reemerged in the 1980s, particularly in the United States, Germany, and Italy, it never fully reclaimed the speculative vigor it had possessed before.

The reasons for this disappearance are complex, but they can largely be attributed to the increasing politicization of environmental discourse. As legal frameworks and grassroots movements sought to address ecological crises, the notion of landscape was met with skepticism. It was perceived as an outdated remnant of an idealized vision of nature, one that, in line with Ritter's thesis, had already been thoroughly subordinated to human enjoyment and control. In this new paradigm, the very concept of "natural beauty" was overshadowed by alternative discourses, whether functionalist (focused on the preservation of ecosystems and endangered species) or ethical (centred on environmental responsibility and future-oriented obligations). Thus, while landscape has re-entered contemporary discussions, it has done so in a diminished form, lacking the speculative and theoretical centrality it once held within aesthetics and philosophy. The challenge today is not merely to reclaim landscape as a theoretical category but to reassess its conceptual significance in light of contemporary ecological and aesthetic concerns, precisely the task that Assunto's work invites us to undertake.

2. Rosario Assunto: the temporality of landscape

Assunto's engagement with the concept of landscape presents itself as a untimely endeavour, not due to any shortcomings in his theoretical contributions, but because of the historical-intellectual context in which his work emerged. On one hand, as we have seen, the preceding generation of European thinkers had extensively reflected on landscape, and Assunto's idealist background remains deeply rooted in that intellectual *parterre*. On the other hand, the rise of contemporary environmentalism in the late 20th century marked a decisive departure from aesthetic considerations of the environment, as the notion of landscape was temporarily eclipsed by more functionally and politically oriented ecological concerns.

Assunto's major work, *Il paesaggio e l'estetica* (*Landscape and Aesthetics*), published in two volumes in 1973, emerged in the midst of the long silence over the concept of landscape, too late to engage directly with its philosophical predecessors, yet too early to catalyze the renewed interest and later rediscovery of the notion of landscape (D'Angelo [1995]: 42-43). However, despite this untimeliness, a fact that Assunto himself acknowledged with a certain proudness and irony (Assunto [1994]: 12), the theoretical elaboration of the work still offers original and significant insights. In what follows, I will examine some of the key conceptual junctures that define his contribution¹.

At first glance, Assunto's conceptualization of landscape appears to align with classical aesthetic traditions, particularly those of Croce and classical German philosophy. We see this, for example, in a definition of landscape as «nature in which civilization reflects and recognizes itself» (Assunto [1973a]: 365). It would thus be presented *prima facie* as a product of the civilization and culture of men, in which those artificial forms are instantiated to retrieve an «identity of nature and spirit» (Assunto [1973a]: 381). As forms objectified by the spirit within nature, landscapes are considered on the whole as «historical-aesthetic monuments» that display a profound «unity of history and nature» (Assunto [1973b]: 154). If we were to limit ourselves to these lines, we would perhaps find little that is original, but they serve to introduce the process that leads to their confirmation, because it is precisely in the process by which this result is achieved that we find all the effort and novelty of Assunto.

1 The secondary literature on Assunto remains sparse. Among the few existing studies, Claudio Cesa's *memoriale* (1994) offers a valuable reconstruction of Assunto's intellectual trajectory, tracing his speculative itinerary back to his teacher Pantaleo Carabellese and his engagement classical German philosophy and poetry (see also Brescia [1980] and Russo [1995]). Cesa (1994: 102) further observes that much of Assunto's work, despite its quality, has appeared fragmented and unsystematic, as a consequence, he suggests, of the author's generosity, which often led him to prioritize dissemination over consolidation.

The first inquiry is phenomenological, and concerns the problem of how the landscape appears as such. Here it becomes relevant what Assunto defines as the «metaspatiality» of landscape. By this Assunto intends to claim that landscape is certainly spatial, therefore first and foremost an experience of space, but not so in the sense of mere extension. Rather, it is space as a place (*luogo*), which is defined precisely by the fact that it transcends spatiality. What takes place is a veritable «epiphany of landscape» (Assunto [1973a]: 39). This perspective explains why not all spaces constitute landscapes. There is an essential perspectival element that determines whether a given spatial configuration can be perceived as a landscape and not just as space or as a pleasurable panorama. A highly industrialized coastal city, for example, is unlikely to be regarded as a landscape when viewed from within its dense infrastructure, amid the noise of production and the ceaseless accumulation of waste. Yet, if one takes a boat and observes the same city from a distant point offshore, its industrial functionality recedes, and it may suddenly appear as a landscape. The spatiality remains unchanged, but its meaning shifts due to the change in perspective.

This emergence of landscape is intimately tied to the notion of *infinity*, an idea to which Assunto repeatedly returns. The infinity of which he speaks is not a quantitative infinity but, echoing Leibniz, an «Absolute prior to every composition», which is itself not an assembly of parts and found in «aesthetic contemplation or speculative theoresis» (Assunto [1973a]: 49-50; and already [1955]: 158). Here, Assunto engages with Kant's distinction between the *mathematical* and *dynamical* sublime. While the former allows us to represent infinity in terms of magnitude (albeit imperfectly), Assunto insists that landscape reveals a different kind of infinity – one that is bound to *time* rather than space. This is the infinity of *eternity*, in which past, present, and future are not distinct phases but exist in a state of mutual interplay, each implicated in the other. So we can grasp this infinity bound to the emergence of landscape only within a temporal consideration, as the truly infinite time, i.e., as eternity. The metaspatiality of landscape, then, is inseparable from its peculiar temporality. The essence of landscape is in fact that of being a «spatial image of time» (Assunto [1973a]: 72).

Now, the temporality taken into consideration by Assunto needs to be distinguished from what he instead refers to as *temporariness*. Temporariness is mechanical, meaning that it belongs to a quantitative consideration of time, while true temporality is historical, or qualitative (Assunto [1973a]: 80). This distinction enables Assunto to situate landscape within a broader conception of history, one that is not limited to human civilization but extends to nature itself. This historical-qualitative aspect is not exclusive to the history of human civilization. Nature's historical time is intertwined with human history. Nature, for Assunto, possesses a historical dimension that is neither reducible to human history nor entirely separate from it. Human civilization emerges from nature but does not

detach itself from it in an irreparable hiatus. There exists, in fact, nature «*before* history and *after* history» (Assunto [1973a]: 93). In contrast to mechanical temporality, which develops in a unidirectional manner and has no way of tracing its own past or anticipating its own future, natural time is expressed in cycles. This cyclical structure grants significance to otherwise fleeting moments, which, in their contingency, would have no significance if they were not embraced in this spiral of return and repetition:

The ephemeral returns, and what returns is ephemeral: the temporality of nature manifests itself in temporariness – not as a contradiction, but as a justification of temporariness itself, of the very passing of time, insofar as it is a movement that returns to itself. Indeed, according to the Platonic definition, *a moving image of eternity*. (Assunto [1973a]: 96)

The infinity of temporality is therefore found not in a static image, but in a *process*, characteristic of the natural, that renders landscape a *tableau vivant* of the eternal. We then find the first and most important definition of landscape as «*a living environment*», in which everything, without exception, is alive. For Assunto, the vitality of landscape is characterized by its diversity and unrepeatability: «being multiple and diverse, not subject to serialization, just as the products of nature are not subject to serialization» (Assunto [1973a]: 106). This leads him to reframe the conceptual opposition that typically structures discourse on landscape. The fundamental dichotomy, he argues, is not between nature and culture or nature and history, but rather between nature and artifice (see also Dufrenne [1955]). While the natural world is governed by cyclical, self-renewing diversity, the artificial world is aligned with mechanical temporariness, a linear trajectory marked by standardization and homogeneity, the straight line of identity.

It is from this perspective that Assunto launches his critique of industrial modernity. The mechanical time of factories and mass production is inherently temporary – it lacks the depth of historical temporality and, consequently, the vitality that characterizes both human and non-human histories. The industrial world operates according to a logic of repetition and replication, stripping away the organic particularity that defines landscape. However, what remains to be determined is the precise element within landscape that enables its historical dimension to be reactivated. The question, then, is not simply how landscape resists industrial modernity, but how it actively asserts its own mode of historicity, an issue that will be explored in the following section.

3. *Diversity and cycle: animal movement through the landscape*

Thus far, we have examined how Assunto conceptualizes natural temporality as cyclical. However, a fundamental issue remains unresolved: landscape is,

first and foremost, an objective reality, one that we apprehend through sensory perception. Even if we recognize a historical dimension within it, one might argue that this historicity is ultimately a subjective reconstruction – a temporality accessible only through human self-consciousness. This concern risks reducing landscape either to a Crocean-Hegelian framework, in which it remains subordinated to the spirit, or that feeling of life (*Lebensgefühl*) that animated Simmel's vision but remained above any singular experience. Assunto, however, seeks to distance himself from both of these perspectives while still acknowledging their insights. The key question, then, is whether historicity can be said to exist *in* nature itself and *for* nature itself, independent of human perception.

Here, we must consider another aspect of the movement, beside the cycle, something fundamentally obvious: the dynamic of the individual living being. While he considers organic life as a whole, including the plant world, he identifies the animal as the privileged site in which nature's temporality manifests itself most explicitly:

Animals, within the landscape, are life present to itself, an image of life as such, in which every life mirrors itself and recognizes itself as living. We may say: a form of infinity inasmuch as it appears as finiteness, under the guise of the absolutely finite, of the creaturely. Infinity as the unpredictability and inexhaustibility of living life, one that cannot be designed or programmed, and as *absolute novelty* within the *absolute repetition* of biological laws. (Assunto [1973a]: 136)

Nature, of course, operates according to stable laws, which provide the structural framework for its functioning. However, these laws alone are insufficient to fully account for natural phenomena, particularly when observed in their singular manifestations. This is especially evident in animal life. While general patterns can be discerned, such as migratory cycles or reproductive behaviors, animal activity also introduces an element of unpredictability. This is a dynamic we closely observe in organisms, especially non-human ones. In animals, we «can know, through observation and study (...) *how* they will do what they do, but we can in no way predict *what* they will do or *when*» (Assunto [1973a]: 136). Thus, while nature's cycles create a sense of continuity, they also contain an inherent openness, an ever-present potential for variation and novelty. It is this interplay between the necessary and the contingent, between recurrence and the emergence of the unexpected, that restores significance to what might otherwise appear merely ephemeral. The unpredictable can be meaningless, but can also be the manifestation of a mode of life that could not have been anticipated. It is, therefore, the presence of the contingent within the necessary that restores significance to the ephemeral, as a fleeting component of necessity itself.

Animal movement within the landscape is not only unpredictable; it is also complete in itself. It is a movement «that carries within itself its own reason

and its own goal: presence of pure movement», and what it reflects is «an image of infinite temporality as living infinity» (Assunto [1973a]: 139). Here, the landscape ceases to be a static entity, a mere setting for human contemplation, and instead becomes animated by the dynamic presence of non-human life. The distinction between general processes and individual realizations collapses: the universal rhythms of nature intersect with the particular and unrepeatable movements of each living being. As a result, landscape is no longer solely a human construct, it is also shaped by the vitality of a form of movement that eludes any attempt at planning or control (Assunto [1973b]: 172).

This insight leads Assunto to a decisive shift: the landscape is no longer exclusively a product of human spirit (*Geist*), nor is it a passive object of appreciation. Instead, the presence of non-human life reactivates its vitality, ensuring that it remains dynamically open. In human history, which civilization builds within the landscape, the irruption of a mobile non-human element reactivates a vitalistic understanding of nature; the animal in the landscape becomes a living element of the landscape, and what results is a not objectifiable and dynamic notion of landscape. This idea resonates with Dardel's (1952: 42) definition of landscape as an *unfolding*, «not a fixed line, but a movement, a leap». As this *leap*, the landscape reveals itself not as a static image, but as a site of continual transformation, where multiple forms of life emerge and interact.

The landscape demonstrates not only that it is alive, but that it produces a multiplication of diverse lives. It is, Assunto writes, «the presence of life in action or of possible life, or of life metamorphosed, because nature is beyond life itself», so that the natural does not resolve into vitalism, since it produces life, «calls it to itself; and always generates *diverse* and new life, individual life» (Assunto [1973a]: 107). And it is at this point that we can answer the preceding question. The individuality that becomes relevant in the landscape is not just that of the observer or the artist, of a subject, nor is it life itself as a transcendence that surpasses individuality. It is precisely that individuality, which also belongs to the animal, that in the landscape «becomes an event [*si eventizza*]». This event-like quality of the animal's presence underscores its role in activating the landscape as a space of historical significance. In its realizing itself as something unique, the individual is still particular, but points to the infinity of ever-changing quality. That same individuality triggers an epiphany of landscape, as a «a finite spatial image of the absolute infinite temporality in the finiteness of its new appearance», in which «our own finite existence, in that it rediscovers its own differentiated identity in the different identity of that landscape, so to speak, unbinds itself from the ties of its own finiteness, and rejoices in itself as infinite» (Assunto [1973b]: 173).

There is, therefore, an interplay. It is not merely that the subject perceives the landscape, nor that the landscape stands as an autonomous object of contempla-

tion. Rather, the subject's being-in-the-landscape, its participation in the organic movement that animates the scene, constitutes a reactivation of the landscape's inherent vitality. In this sense, every manifestation of landscape is an event: contingent and ephemeral, yet fundamentally continuous with the dynamic cycle of nature. Crucially, this production is not the production of fixed forms but of activity and interaction: it is the production of life itself, in its ongoing self-surpassing. This is where the true theoretical force of the concept of landscape lies: it serves as a *liminal category* that holds together both the subjective and objective dimensions of the aesthetic experience of natural beauty, resisting reduction to either extreme.

This is in itself a noteworthy result, especially when considering studies like Lothian (1999), which attempt to distinguish two primary paradigms in the history of landscape thought: an objectivist paradigm, which sees landscape as an inherent quality of the world, and a subjectivist paradigm, which locates landscape within the realm of human perception. Assunto's theory, however, offers an alternative that moves beyond this dichotomy, revealing landscape as a generative process in which human and non-human temporalities intersect. It is at this juncture that I believe a productive comparison with contemporary ecological discourses on landscape restoration becomes possible.

4. *Why this landscape still matters, the problem of restoration*

From a practical perspective, the concept of landscape remains complex and difficult to delineate with precision. This difficulty is reflected in its legal and policy frameworks, a tension already apparent in Croce's 1922 legislation and still present today. The European Landscape Convention of 2000 (also known as the Florence Convention) extends the designation of landscape to encompass all territory, including both natural and urban spaces. The rationale behind this broad definition was likely an attempt to detach landscape from a narrowly aesthetic interpretation, one that had long been criticized for its perceived elitism. However, by defining all territory as landscape, the concept risks being stripped of its specificity, leading to an emptying the category of its meaning.

Here, it becomes interesting to note how a recent regulatory intervention, such as the *Nature Restoration Law* of 2024, although it does not use the category of landscape, ends up interacting with issues and problems connected to the landscape (which, moreover, for European legislation is now synonymous with territory). Under this law, EU member states are required to *restore* 20% of degraded ecosystems by 2030 and all ecosystems classified as degraded by 2050. This is an ambitious plan (and for all the specific problems of implementation and comply see at least Lees e Pedersen [2025]), but what seems particularly interesting for

our discussion is the very notion of *restoration* employed by both the regulatory framework and the contemporary ecological science (see Shen et al. [2023]).

The notion of *restoration* has long been a subject of debate in aesthetics, particularly concerning works of art and architecture, and more recently in film conservation. It has also become a contested issue in ecological thought. The philosophical tensions inherent in the restoration of nature were first brought to public attention by Krieger's (1973) now-classic thought experiment, later expanded upon by Elliot (1982). Krieger asks us to imagine replacing a forest of *natural* trees with *artificial* ones that serve the same ecological function and to consider whether such an act could truly be called *restoration*. He argues that it could not, neither from the perspective of nature's intrinsic value (*objective level*) nor from the standpoint of human experience (*subjective level*), which would lose its authenticity and aesthetic significance. Subsequently, there have been various positions, ranging from the extreme possibility of geoengineering to total intransigence (for a more comprehensive overview, see Casetta [2023]: 127-168).

Eric Katz, involved in the debate since the 1990s, has always positioned himself as the great opponent of restoration and continues to argue that: «the issue is not what we do. It is what our actions mean. Ecological restoration will always be an expression of the human project of the domination of nature, the attempt to control the world that is distinct and separate from humanity» (Katz [2012]: 97; see also [2018] and the very first articulation of his critique in [1992]). For Katz, every act of restoration is ultimately a form of technological control that reinforces the rupture between humanity and nature rather than healing it. His critique, however, does not amount to a rejection of all environmental intervention. As even his most attentive critics acknowledge (see Mahoney [2014]: 281-282), Katz does not adopt a Luddite or anti-technological position; rather, he recognizes the necessity of intervention while simultaneously lamenting its inescapable anthropocentrism. His vision of landscape restoration is, therefore, profoundly tragic, resonating with Ritter's earlier thesis that landscape emerges as an aesthetic category only when nature itself has already been lost, making restoration little more than an expression of nostalgic longing.

At the heart of the restoration debate lies a fundamental question: *What, precisely, are we restoring?* Restoration presupposes the existence of an *original* state to which we can return, but what if such an original no longer exists, or never existed in a stable, fixed form? In the history of art, where restoration has a long and contentious legacy, the identification of an *original* work or a definitive and authentic *mise en œuvre*, is often difficult, if not impossible. Even so, paradoxes abound. Consider the case of Viollet-le-Duc's restoration of Carcassonne in the 19th century: despite its historical infidelity, the restoration itself has now become a monument. This raises some complex questions, that even ecological

restoration cannot evade: *What does fidelity to an original mean? Can a restoration be successful even if it is, in some sense, unfaithful? When does preservation and intervention derail into the opposite extreme of a museification?*

Exactly a decade before *Il paesaggio e l'estetica*, a thinker close to Assunto, Cesare Brandi (1963), had proposed his own influential theory of restoration. Brandi emphasized the *materiality* of the work of art, which was to be the sole object of restoration. Materiality meant two things, however, *structure* and *aspect*. The aspect, the final figure or image that the work rendered as a whole, would not coincide with the structure, the materials used to generate and support the figure. Hence, even the presumed philological fidelity of restoring a work by remaking the degraded elements with the same materials betrays the overall unity of its look (e.g., employing colours and woods of the same workmanship does not guarantee that they blend harmoniously with the work because they have not undergone the same aging process and the same environmental factors). It is therefore recognized that, in a work of art, there is an original and potential unity to be reestablished, the predominant character of which is that of the figure. All this, however, cannot be translated directly into the problem of nature, as Katz seems to do, because here the starting issue is something utterly distinct. Nature does not have an absolute original to refer to. The landscape is not a *Ship of Theseus*, which can be gradually reassembled in a way that remains indistinguishable from its original form. It is, instead, a continuously evolving entity, shaped by complex historical and ecological processes. Thus, Assunto's lesson can again become productive in contemporary times. The issue of restoration would reveal itself as a false problem. The elevation of the natural to the aesthetic intensity of the landscape entails the character of event, of the uniqueness of each significant living manifestation. As Paulsen (1889: 30) wrote, «the value of a work of art, of a poem, is based on the fact that it only exists once». This is equally true of the landscape. From a perspective we might call performative, one that emphasizes movement and eventfulness, there is no true restoration, because nature does not return to identical states. It exists in a state of perpetual transformation (movement, leap). But restoration is not the only positive approach of human intervention.

Rather than striving to restore an unattainable original, human action should be directed toward sustaining and enhancing the landscape's capacity for diversity. Even Katz, despite his skepticism, acknowledges that certain forms of intervention may be ameliorative rather than domineering. The key question, then, is not whether restoration can recover a lost past but whether it can contribute to the ongoing production of landscape as a site of organic diversity and historical becoming.

The risk of seeking to preserve nature as *it was* is that such efforts may impose an artificial stasis, one that contradicts the very nature of the landscape as a place

of flux and renewal. If nature is inherently a process of continuous differentiation, by what criteria can we establish a definitive order to be restored? Rather than attempting to fix nature in a predetermined form, the task should be to ensure that this dynamic process continues to unfold, perhaps even enriched by human intervention. In this sense, restoration is not a return but a generative act, one that expands the landscape's capacity for transformation. Restoration then becomes not an impossible retracing of what was in the beginning, but an opportunity to make that continuous production of vital events – which constitutes the authentic core of the concept of landscape – grow even richer.

5. Conclusion: the concept of landscape as in-between

D'Angelo (2010: 13) highlights the liminal nature of the concept of landscape, which exists at the intersection of multiple disciplines (ecology, biology, architecture, geography, law, painting, photography, and so on) without being fully subsumed by any single one (see also Hennrich [2019]). Landscape, by its very nature, resists disciplinary confinement, lacking a fixed epistemological domain. Yet, this threshold existence may not be a limitation but rather its greatest strength. Precisely because landscape does not belong exclusively to any one field, it remains open to multiple interpretations and applications, allowing it to integrate into diverse domains while retaining its conceptual flexibility.

Thus, landscape emerges, time and again, as a bridge concept, a notion capable of fostering dialogue and connection across distinct areas of knowledge. It is in this very capacity for mediation that both the difficulty and the richness of the concept reside. In aesthetics, landscape embodies the tension between nature as a given background and its artistic or theoretical apprehension. In architecture and engineering, it negotiates the boundary between artificial intervention and natural form. Its conceptual value, therefore, lies in its ability to hold these poles in productive tension rather than resolving them into a single, reductive framework. From this perspective, landscape should be recognized for its polysemy and versatility, not as a weakness but as an essential feature of its conceptual structure. It operates as an in-between category, one that enables communication between disparate fields precisely because of the diversity it encompasses. Landscape, in this sense, is not only a subject of interdisciplinary inquiry but an interstitial concept, an *in-between*, a space of encounter where different epistemological frameworks can intersect and interact (on this interpretation of Assunto, see Furia [2020]: 159-161).

This metafunctional quality of landscape, the way in which it serves as a conceptual intermediary, further underscores the relevance of Assunto's approach. As we have seen, Assunto conceives of landscape as a continuous metamorpho-

sis, a site where human and non-human temporalities intertwine, where forms are constantly transformed, and where the flow of life is materially inscribed in historical and natural configurations. The diversity that emerges in the theoretical application of the concept is the same diversity with which it is encountered in experience. This guarantees its uniqueness: if landscape, in its temporality, constitutes a kind of history, and history never repeats itself in identical form, then its fundamental characteristic must be an openness to contingency, a projection into the future that resists static determination. Such an approach not only reaffirms the philosophical significance of landscape but also allows it to remain dynamically engaged with other disciplines, disciplines that, as contemporary discourse increasingly demonstrates, are increasingly realizing how much they still need it.

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