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## *Il profilo delle nuvole.* A Letter to Gianni Celati

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**Abstract.** The aim is to show that the landscape is a fiction (of course not a reverie). If it is permissible to speak of landscape in the singular, prescinding for a moment from its places, then it must be understood as a kind of both collective thought and affection in which one is immersed. Landscapes belong to their real effects, which orient their views. They belong to the affective perceptions and mental images of those who pass through them. They belong to local communities, their histories and their industriousness, which cannot be brought back into the abstraction of objective data, good anywhere, under any sky. If a landscape is understood in the manner of a physical or patrimonial entity, then it has no chance, its only survival will have to be guaranteed by (green?) profit: Luigi Ghirri and Gianni Celati's *Il profilo delle nuvole* invites us to think so.

**Keywords.** Landscape, way of seeing, fiction, atmospheric vision, Luigi Ghirri.

Dear Gianni Celati,

Late is late. I have never written to you before and only decide to do so today, out of time. Exacerbating my embarrassment about this failure to show up, and my regret at having thrown away every previous opportunity to write to you, I find myself having to assume your language of

choice, addressing you in the English that is yours as an Anglicist and translator of Jonathan Swift, William Gerhards, Mark Twain, Jack London, Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce – as well as Hölderlin, Stendhal, Céline, Barthes, Michaux. While unable to rely on the benevolent understanding that usually accompanies personal acquaintanceship, I nevertheless hope that you will forgive what may sound to you, God forbid, like a crude formula or, worse, a veritable *faux pas*.

I do not know exactly where these lines of mine will reach you: I do know that it will be three years, precisely, next 3 January. You are gone. I was not ready to lose you; one is never ready.

There has been no lack of reasons to write during this period, yet, until now, I have let them slip away. But now? What has – finally – prompted me to begin this letter? The landscape. A desire to talk about it, to take it as a theme, to make it the subject of discourse. The voice of a young researcher friend persuaded me to take up my pen. Here you will immediately interrupt me: why, was there a need? – and I am sure that your dear friend Luigi Ghirri would have shared your scepticism. Ghirri... even to mention him is to bring images from perhaps his most influential photographic project flooding through one's mind. The project you shared and «walked» side by side from 1981 until his premature death in 1992, first with other photographers brought together by Ghirri and then just the two of you. A project whose realization you finally arrived at through your individual expressions, literary and visual, of your shared quest: the questioning of the «new Italian landscape». Where «new» means the «post-industrial» reality of everyday life – beyond the old stereotypical depictions of now obsolete subjects in the Alinari postcards – such as those subjects depicted by contemporary American photography (Stephen Shore, Lewis Baltz, William Eggleston, Robert Adams): streets and urban peripheries, abandoned buildings, petrol pumps, gardens, living and working places. A landscape that lies at the heart of debates on representation of space, the ability to look outside, and ways of seeing, their implicit frames, in particular, as well, of course, as their affective resonances. You got involved and your literary voice, which, towards the end of the 1970s, had fallen silent, found radically new expression in the «observation stories» born out of the many notebooks and journals filled during years of wandering.

I am not sure whether or not I have made up my mind about this... a few days after talking to that friend I was reminded of *Il profilo delle nuvole. Immagini di un paesaggio italiano*, Ghirri's splendid book of photographs for which you wrote an introduction that is itself an important text: *Commenti su un teatro naturale delle immagini*. And it occurred to me that I could try to question you directly, although through this hybrid fiction of a letter in a magazine and without having had time to reread your paper, as would be appropriate. What was holding me back from speaking about landscape? An increasing impression of the vanity

of «expert» speech, I would say: the proliferation of monotonous inferences, of epistemic bubbles. But also of analytical positivisations of the «environment» understood as standing in opposition or radical alterity to the landscape approximating to separate metaphysical entities, posited against, moreover, a real, interpellating, urgency that does not separate social, landscape and environmental aims. Discourses, models, knowledge which, however exact, are all too often arid, somehow lifeless, unfeeling, lacking eros, or that passion for the world that you embodied and without which – my dear Celati – what remains of landscapes? Fragments of fleeting experiences, mountains of photographs in smartphones (that obtain that effect abhorred by Ghirri of covering real landscapes until of replacing them with their excessive over-visibility, rendering them inaccessible), wordy bureaucratic regulations, devices that in one way or another disregard the intrinsic *culturality* and social wellbeing of landscapes: perhaps all of this?

The multiple views on landscape that have been produced and reproduced in recent years, born out of the *particular* and *partial* pertinences of different disciplines, have set the scene for a bewildering number of notions, theories, incursions, claims, a great hustle and bustle of art historians, artists, anthropologists, geographers, semiologists, etymologists, philosophers, geologists, ecologists, environmentalists, economists and others. Each with their own diagnosis. One is left speechless, unmoored in the face of discourses full of oppositions, of unilateral statements, of clear-cut but exclusive visions. Or perhaps, on the contrary, in the face of their uncertainties: whether a landscape is a natural reality or a figurative module; a historical-cultural construct, a geographical place or a place of the soul, consubstantial with humankind or an invention characteristic of the modern mind.

On the other hand, my dear Gianni Celati, few discourses today seem to me more inconclusive than those which, in a manner opposite and complementary to those mentioned above, deal with landscape *in general*, convinced that they grasp its essence, probe its true *nature*, in short, that they can correctly define any and all landscapes, regardless of their places, presence, or frequent cancellations. On the basis of all the mental conversations I have had with you while reading your stories and interviews, I believe not only that you understand my perplexity very well, but that you find in this critique of mine your own calm aversion to theoretical presuppositions being placed before the flow of things, things from which they are, as an inevitable result, then separated. Don't we both know the paranoiac effects (exquisitely academic, though without exclusive rights) of certain spasmodic searches for truth, the impossibility of defending thoughts that have ossified into lazy, self-satisfied views? Opinions, beliefs, explanations, models, judgements on the world that lose sight of the world itself. Thoughts that are expressed from a desk and only register what they already expect – or need – to see. They project themselves onto the outside world, without listening to it.

Why is it, I presume you will ask, that I have chosen to again pick up *Il profilo delle nuvole*, at this time in which I find myself caught up in this kind of antinomian situation in which, on the one hand, specific approaches risk multiplying images that cannot be recomposed, and, on the other, general approaches seem to be losing their concrete reference to places? To very different places, to landscapes that are such even when they are not at all «textbook», extraordinary and enchanting. Landscapes of what you have often called the «everyday obviousness» or «everyday vertigo». Residual, peripheral, banal landscapes, redrawn by their very abandonment and scattered in their degradation. Those to which you allude in critical tones while Ghirri seeks the irruption of a more peaceful light, because photography, even while moving «into squalid places of sensory deprivation», retains its ability «to represent the outside, fundamental task, choosing to simply accentuate the incomprehensible, fragmentary and senseless aspects of the outside world». Desertified landscapes alternating with landfills, industrial plants (large or small), the infrastructure of our supply chains. Landscapes ravaged by the metastasis of inequalities, privatisations, urban planning regulations that authorise mineralisation and endless concrete. And, everywhere, commodification and consumption. So why *Il profilo delle nuvole*? For these reasons: because I believe that, in focusing on *an* Italian landscape, the book can help me find a compass that can orient me within landscape. A compass *among* real landscapes, free of the ancient contrasts between purity and contamination, natural and artificial, wild and urban, human and non-human. Landscapes that we are rarely able to observe as they are: clusters of known or new forms, or unclassifiable remnants and deformities, that can evoke the feeling of loss delineated by their thorny outlines. The feeling, too, of what has been thrown away in them forever (the means and gestures of producing such waste may be dubbed capitalocene, wasteocene). With Walter Benjamin one might say: landscape, a *Trauerspiel*. What do you think: will landscape still be a viable concept (i.e. be operative) for future generations, who will in all likelihood live more often without place-affects? What will our legacy be, in this regard? An archaeological relic seen from this other side of the glass, with nothing left to do or say?

A compass: although I had not thought of it before, the metaphor that has just come to mind is, perhaps, rather accurate, with all due respect for that wandering around not without orientation but certainly without a destination that marked your last literary writing, a sort of inebriation of the occasional walk that I, too, love even if it produces in me only a few rare, tired thoughts. What is the north towards which the needle of such a compass points? That of a precise methodological direction. This can be expressed in the simplest of ways, one that you have always loved: *learning to look*. Is this reductive?

*Il profilo delle nuvole* is important not because it is a beautiful «photo album». (I like this definition of yours, whose minor key conceals all the irony

that presumptions of artisticity, authoritativeness, originality aroused in you both. You will remember better than I that Ghirri was wont to say that when someone has artistic pretensions, he is thinking about the wallpaper without realising that the problem is that he is always banging his head against the wall). You know this better than I do: it is not a matter of devaluing the quality of the photographic text, which is, unquestionably, high, but rather of recognising it as lying at the very core of thought. «Learning to look» is that kernel: tell me, however, am I going astray if I state that it is a theoretical and meta-theoretical kernel? That is, that the photographic text has metalinguistic value, reflexively implying, also, an important questioning of thought inherent in the syntax and modalities of photography, and in its (explicit) premises and (implicit) assumptions of giving to see as well as teaching to look? If so, Gregory Bateson, whom I don't recall ever seeing mentioned in your work, though I could easily be mistaken, would be pleased. If this, as I believe it to be, is the case, to focus only, or even largely, on the contagious formal charm and compositional and chromatic magnetism of Ghirri's photographic landscapes would involve a reductionism bordering on incomprehension, or idiotic «oversight». Reductive, firstly, of that peculiar concept of «thinking through images» that Ghirri took from Giordano Bruno and declared to be the key to his own photography: «to think is to speculate with images».

Landscape as something in *everyone's sight* does not subsist. It is not a something at all, although one can experience it. As you taught us, it does not exist as an ideal-idyllic condition of nature, nor as a universal. Rather, it is a multifaceted, plural mode, effectively shaped over time, according to which the natural and artificial surroundings *can* appear and be experienced with emotions (joyful or sad). Landscapes always appear as stratified artefacts, located and organised spatially in specific locations. Locations in which geographic, historical, civilisational arrangements blend, or accumulate, together, heterogeneously, sometimes as arrays or collections of fragments that cannot be recomposed into any whole. Stratified landscapes that appear only through performances of interactions – sensorial, medial and perceptive – of the bodies-minds that pass through them and are profoundly, intimately, moved and thus pushed to imagine them. Body-minds in front of a landscape as it is appearing, within a landscape, weaving it into existence, in a constant experience of entering and leaving its imaginal and sensorial *texture* moment by moment. As Andrea Zanzotto might say: these body-minds are – like needles through fabric – quilting the landscapes of their experience. We must learn how these landscapes are constructed and represented, what it entails to imagine and be affected by them, far from separating and quarreling over what they are or are not supposed to be. Is it evasive, insufficient, to settle for simply affirming through proactive practices that landscape is a common civic good? Is this not «scientific», in your opinion? Is that the point?

The needle of that particular compass that one can use in conjunction with *Il profilo delle nuvole* orients itself precisely with certain lines of force. A line of force is, I would say, the mode of perceptual interaction that *makes* landscape. Obviously, *the landscape* is not the line of force, and nor are *landscapes*, which, if anything, act as a vector field. The ways in which we interact with it, organising spaces, gazes, paths, perspectives, flows and points of attention – this, I submit, is landscape. So: we can assume that the material basis of a landscape is a portion of the earth's surface with its precise geographical and physico-chemical (environmental) characteristics. Its physico-geographical contours are never purely themselves but always organised in «planned» views, already codified before bodies encounter the spaces, choose to identify them as memorable locations, feel and imagine them with pleasure or displeasure. For its part, the human animal not only experiences them and imagines them, but also speaks of them, negotiates with them, and precisely by naming them and talking about them it conditions the human perception of its own finding itself there, frequenting, perceiving, remembering these landscapes (that language is the creator of facts, all three of us learned from Wittgenstein, I know). Language is made up of affective filters, you say, and there is indeed affective and imaginative interaction with those pleasant or unpleasant meeting places with the world, those phenomena of the world that we remain affected by and that in some way shape us, those mutable spaces of the imagination that we call «landscapes» (I am pleased that you and Ghirri insist in no uncertain terms on the fact that states of affection, of empathy with the outside world, do not exist except as states of imagination, I agree). There is body-mind interaction, observational, perceptual strategy, and representational relation: it is these interactions and observations that provide the conditions of material, formal, medial, technological possibility of any landscape. Imaginative-perceptual interaction transforms the human animal's surroundings, that which is there as it appears in the place. It transforms it into images, that is, into internal sensible realities (the «intentional», «intelligible» *species* encountered during our philosophical studies as the medium between the object in the mind and the real thing, but at the same time depending on neither the subject nor the object). Images that touch us (how deeply, of course, is an individual affair) and which, in the resulting resonance, we shape into landscapes (with figures – visual, verbal, aural, i.e. pictorial and photographic and filmic, as well as poetic-literary and musical).

Another line of force on which you and Ghirri insist so much self-organises as a little-used but crucial observational-perceptual strategy: the unlearning, the opening, the displacement of the gaze. You both say, and I fully agree, that it is a matter of unlearning the *planned* and codified way(s) in which we look at what appears.

I would say – without, I hope, horrifying you –, that we should practise a true *visual illiteracy* to unlearn the ways of seeing we have been conditioned into (trained at the unconscious level by dominant perceptual styles, by environmental habits, by the semiotic codes of shared culture, be it high or low, by the inputs of aesthetic consumption). In fact we often unconsciously surrender or delegate the act of vision and thus end up looking by proxy: the «visual» is the name for this expropriation which presents us with a sort of prepackaged set of visible perceptions, that constructs visibility and, in doing so, the invisible. To unlearn heterodirected visibility in order to learn to look *again* at what we are seeing and the invisible that it conceals within: this task cannot be eluded. It requires an *ignorant gaze* – smile at this statement of mine, it pleases me. We need to look as if neither we nor anyone else had ever before seen or spoken of what we begin to observe. Ghirri, as you know better than I, would like to affirm that this is the only path, the only way that enables us to really look at a landscape: by opening it up, by «displacing the gaze». That is: casting off the wrappings of the already seen and said, without feeling compelled to chase the fallacious myth of the new. And yes, also «said», because language organizes our experiences. Language makes us think the visible, placing us incessantly in the mode of representation, which, you have taught me, is also the mode of communication. Photographing («making») a landscape, according to Ghirri, is a matter of seeing a place through all its previous images and simultaneously dropping those images, letting them go, erasing them, until the place can portray itself in the photographer's «first vision». This is an ignorant gaze, sustained in order to allow us to see, and thus, finally, to re-educate the gaze itself. Seeing a landscape *as if for the first and last time* produces a feeling of belonging to every landscape in the world. It is a feeling that reminds one of the natural state of «being in the world». This approach is even more surprising when directed at well-known places, those in which we live ordinarily, which not by chance are the focus of Ghirri's photography, and in/from which it requires the greatest effort to produce novelty and beauty. Landscape thus becomes, Ghirri writes, «a passageway that cannot be delimited geographically, or better, a place of our time, our epochal cipher».

Forgive me, as usual my thoughts have run away with me, and I risk neglecting *Il profilo delle nuvole* without which, after all, I would have little to say and very possibly would not even have had the courage to write to you. It is still a splendour. Leafing through it, studying it, produces an incomparable state of mental well-being. Ghirri's photographic text and yours are coessential: questions of priority or value have no place. It has always seemed to me, if I may say so, that I could recognize the provenance, the forerunner of *Il profilo delle nuvole*: Walker Evans and James Agee's ground-breaking collaboration between photographer and writer, published more than eighty years ago, the



unmissable *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Am I mistaken? Is not this book itself – though this may simply be my opinion, it is one of which I am convinced – a dual text, photographic and narrative, on landscape? A highly unusual work in a culture whose image of the landscape had been modelled on a vast, untouched wilderness *à la* Anselm Adams, Evans and Agee's book takes as its subject the rural landscape of the *Dust Bowl*, ravaged by drought and the consequent misery, also described in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Ford's subsequent film (1940).

Don't tell me you and Ghirri didn't have that book in mind, at some point. I wouldn't believe you, given the love you have both expressly declared for the naturalness and «tenderness for the things of the world» characteristic of Evans' photography. There is a substantial difference, however: they design and produce two autonomous texts within one book, without reference to each other despite the fact that they deal with the same theme and the same subjects: the sharecropper families with whom Evans and Agee stayed together, their grueling, materially impoverished but luminous lives. Instead, as the title makes explicit, your text introduces and discusses Ghirri's photographs. A kind of reading diary but one which also includes many of the reflections that you and Ghirri exchanged over the course of eight years, exchanges which resulted in frequent convergences, but also distances. Fifteen short pieces, each dated: 10 May to 6 October. Some excerpts from the text have been placed beneath the photographs.

I am now going to ask you to join me in a game which I occasionally play by myself, not to push thoughts away, on the contrary, to allow them to find me. I enjoy picking up and musing on the first and last words of a novel or poem. Beginning and end, two thresholds. Here I would like to attempt this, with both Ghirri's text and yours. In any case, let's give it a try, and see what happens.

The beginning – *Veduta di Fellegara, Scandiano*: not, in fact, a photograph by Ghirri but the reproduction of an oil painting by one of his painter uncles, Walter Iotti. Fellegara is a tiny village (now suburb) close to the Ghirris' hometown, Scandiano. A dirt road, running past the village on one side and fields on the other, rises gently from the lower left corner towards the right, then bends left again, before disappearing over the horizon which lies across the painting's middle ground, enclosed by the group of houses and dominated by a blue sky. A cart, perhaps abandoned, stands on the road, while a (probably old) man with a stick is walking down the other side of the road, towards the observer. The only element in the scene that does anything to «make» the landscape is the road. Or rather, the perspective that it draws by dominating the view. The theme of the book has been declared: the «view» as perspective framing.

The end – *Marina di Ravenna* (1986): a photograph that owes its fame partly to the fact that it appeared on the cover of the Lucio Dalla's album *Questo è amore* (2011). The framing and its shadow: a short section of beach, a blue sky



with a (cut in half) wisp of mist on the horizon, the sea furrowed by the white crests of a few waves as they come in to shore. The framed subject, an empty curtain stand, stands in the centre foreground. Quite simply, a kind of wooden frame painted white. Without the base, one might be more likely to think it a football goal. In its emptiness, layers of sky sea sand. But also the dark trapezium projected onto the sand by the shadow of the support.

Now a question, which I am asking because who knows how many times you and Ghirri will have discussed this. Does his visual emphasis on the central perspective shot not betray a desire or some form of nostalgia for a classical vision of landscape, in which the observer is also a human being, and thus an integral part of nature? The very fact that in the photographs that he took during the 1980s Ghirri proceeds to visually erase the presence of the human being in his scenes, the fact that he insists on pointing out their disappearance: is this not a well-constructed artifice conceived precisely in order to assign to their absence the evocation of a demand that is flung here, there, everywhere by the gaps that open up between things?

The central perspective, dominated by the symmetry of the elements depicted, is also the theme of the photograph next to Iotti's painting. The caption: *Boretto. Albergo «Il Bersagliere», camera n. 8*. Another surprise at the opening of a book of landscape photographs? An explicit invitation to rethink the worn out «naturalistic» concept of landscape? Yes, Boretto is, indeed, a town on the banks of the Po. The subject in the foreground of the photo, however, is a solid wooden bed with two monumental and symmetrical headboards, reminiscent of Romanesque architecture. That the book's theme is «the view» as a construct of frontal symmetry is immediately reiterated on the next double page by a montage through analogies, of both form and perspective. On the left, the photograph shows two square columns emerging from the edge of the piazza in Pomponesco, giving the observer a view of the Po embankment. Everything is covered in a thick blanket of snow under a clear white sky. On the right, two small brick pillars at the entrance to a farm in the Formigine countryside: in the middle, the unpaved avenue leading to a farmhouse announced by the photo's caption but invisible, hidden in the low mist that fills the background.

Writing about the tone of these views in the *Commenti*, you say that the landscape that they portray is one of the most architectural in the world, and that this kind of Italian architecture that Ghirri shows us has always contained «an inherent tendency towards a theatrical vision» (5 September). Clearly, you had no choice but to entitle your introduction to «theatre»: *Commenti su un teatro naturale delle immagini*. And *Il profilo delle nuvole* provides us with a double page that makes this photographic statement definitively. On the left: *Bologna. Villa nei pressi di Gaiana*. One of Ghirri's enchanting nocturnal photographs: a horizon in the middle-ground, in the foreground misty earth, the

violet sky above, in the centre, glimpsed through the surrounding trees, the shining façade of a neoclassical villa bringing warm light to the scene. Beneath is the excerpt from his text: «...I realise that not even melodramatic illusionism has been discarded, that which leads one to see all landscapes as if they were painted backdrops».

On the right, another famous photo at night, magical and suggestive: *Ravenna. Scenografia di Aldo Rossi, alla Rocca Brancaleone*. Taken from above, three actors on an illuminated stage during an opera performance among the various buildings of the dwellings, with the orchestra in the pit in front of the stage, and in the almost completely dark lower frame of the photograph a sprinkling of barely visible patches, the occasional light-coloured shirt worn in the audience. «The theatrical tone is clearly set by Aldo Rossi's stage design, an extraordinary Italian architect, where the difference between the staging for the opera being performed and the architectural forms that envelop it is not easily seen» (5 September). *Natural* architecture and *natural* theatre. You remember, of course, that Ghirri liked to speak of «natural framings» or even «natural stage curtains». But what does «natural» mean? Original, perhaps? Or, I would venture, «fake» – but I will come back to that in a moment.

Ghirri elegantly returns to the theme of «the view» to conclude what you have called the «overture» to the album that opens with Iotti's painting. The twelfth photograph – succinctly captioned *Spezzano. Castello, Sala delle Vedute* – is of a fresco depicting the village of Manzina. The image is part of a wall cycle in a room in the Castle of Spezzano, in the Fiorano Modenese area. Not only do painting and cartography mingle on the walls, posing the aesthetic and geographical problem of representation, but Ghirri's choice is full of acumen. You will, I know, remember the detail of the flush door on the painted wall, almost as if it were an invitation to enter the landscape: an invitation to us, the readers of photography, to proceed? To walk through the landscape? Perhaps. But above all, I believe, an invitation to grasp again the aspect of the theatrical backdrop, of perspective illusionism, of a catrotic representational system.

I link here to your beginning, to the first of your *Commenti*. «Ghirri [...] says that the world seen is not the same as the world photographed, just as the world of a man who cries is not the same as that of a man who laughs, and the world of a person who inhabits a place cannot be the same as a scientist who manipulates models which no one can inhabit» (10 May). I have always found it very significant that your opening salvo affirms a real difference (i.e. the «real» as difference or remainder of reality and the visual, as stumbling block, the thing that doesn't fit, the uncontrollable thing that you run into). I ask you: are you not perhaps talking about a difference, about a gap that opens up, not only at the very moment the photograph is produced, but also between environment and landscape, territory and map, scientific description and affective perception?

«Landscape», «territory», «environment», but also «nature» are *fictions*. Of course I use the term because of its semantic proximity to *inventio* and without in any way meaning the more negative connotation of «fictions». To see is natural: but what is seen is no longer «something to be seen» but rather a «way of seeing», a «representation». This is also the case in relation to the delimiting of a certain portion of the earth's surface simply because it is *named-represented* as «landscape», «territory», «environment», «nature». A representing and at the same time a pretending, i.e. the shaping of an otherness, a distance, a simulacrum of reality, which photography always illuminates.

This reminds me of one of the most amusing and thought-provoking scenes in your movies. In *Strada provinciale delle anime* (1991), you bring a cheerful brigade of relatives and friends for a ride, packing them into a coach that takes off around the Emilian villages through which you loved wandering. Ghirri is also present, and, among other things, gives a short speech on the countryside as «places of destruction», that is, places of abandoned rural architecture that would soon disappear. Then, at a certain point, he gathers everyone together for a group photo. It is at that moment that you exhort: «Pretend to be yourselves». That is, *fake it, pretend* that you can re-present yourselves in the photograph, as a point-by-point copy of yourselves, when in fact you will be other than what you are and what you are here thinking you are or appear to be. You will be *represented*, you will have meaning as something other than you, other than the so-so existence of today.

Any reference to nature, and particularly to landscape, territory, environment must be distinguished from the point of the event, of what is there, what happens, with respect to its meanings (even those of my evolutionist philosopher friend of the environment or my materialist philosopher friend of language, no less than those of literary, photographic, or environmentalist mythologies about the landscape as *wilderness*). And the meanings of landscape, environment, and territory conflict because no meaning is neutral, just as no epistemology can be neutral in the name of a self-styled objective truth. In concrete terms, every material portion of the earth's surface differs from the conceptual or figurative or literary representation that names it or gives it meaning: political-administrative as «territory»; ecological as «environment»; aesthetic as «landscape».

Therefore, at least for the sake of clear communication and of shared understanding even before common practices of preservation or protection, it is necessary to articulate the differences, not to reinforce or nullify them, nor to juxtapose them (as in the exemplarily botched case of the text of Article 6 of our Constitution in the light of the institutional «tampering» of 2022). Yet, from the outset, the point where the existent (or event) and the signified are distinguished is not in itself distinguishable or determinable, although the two can at any mo-

ment spill over into each other as the signified of the existent (or event) and the existence or event of the signified. All that is perceptible (i.e. intelligible, sayable, visible) of what is observable is already signified. That is, it is already said and already seen. Everything is meant *for us*. It is a question of «ways of seeing», as you would say with Ghirri and your dear friend John Berger, writer and art critic.

The landscapes that Ghirri photographs in the Po delta crown the book's warp and weft of images. «Atmospheric vision and song of horizons at their highest point» (4 October): this is how you comment on them in one of your most beautiful and subtle passages. The theoretical discourse on the constitutive *limits* of representation, whatever it may be, is exquisitely expressed in the verses of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. «Wir haben nie, nicht einen einzigen Tag, / den reinen Raum vor uns [...]. Immer ist es Welt / und niemals Nirgends ohne Nicht» (*Eighth Elegy*, 14-17). Rilke's italics underline what I have just said about the all-pervasiveness of meaning (of the world). Humans can make incessant calculations about space, they can measure and re-measure spaces again and again, yet what is in front of them is always and only the world. Never the «nowhere without negations», the openness that precedes determinations of meaning.

The world is *for us*. That is, the signified-world as a sphere of relations of any kind is immanent, is here, in what is here and in what happens to us. The whole (the world) of meaning is nothing other than the very world of the being and the happening of meanings, that is to say, it is the one and the same world of natural existents and events. There is no difference, although this very «no difference» is equivalent to a cancellation and not a deprivation: to having cancelled the difference, in fact. Cancellation which, however, again, always necessarily proceeds from the fact that what is there differs from its own meaning. In the words of our beloved Spinoza: everything is nature, although with attributes (extension/ thought) that will always differ.

Everything is nature, everything is world – in the attribution of meaning, of name, of visibility to that which appears and is watchable, perceptible, transformable into images. It is nature, it is world in representation, in focus and in perspective, in framing (all of which include and exclude at the same time). The «open», the immeasurable «pure» space of the Rilkean «nowhere», quite independent of any concepts of space-time, is inaccessible to human eyes; to their gaze, irrevocably «overturned» (*Eighth Elegy*, 3) in the representation, «in der gedeutete Welt» (*First Elegy*, 13) – «interpreted world» – which is then its own «natural theatre of images».

This is the absolute limit of all representation: «a spatial limit. It is the horizon as the ultimate proscenium of all possible appearances, and the sky as the ultimate backdrop of the colours and tones that have [*sic* – do you confirm that you want use «have», as it would seem to me more grammatically correct to

instead use «give»?] an affective quality to the phenomena around us» (4 October). «The ultimate backdrop», indeed, one with which Ghirri is intimately acquainted with and has been engaging since his first series *∞ Infinito* (1974) in which he exhibited a series of three hundred and sixty-five photographs (one a day for a year) of sky and clouds taken from his own backyard. Ghirri has always maintained that what really counts in a photograph, even more than the subject depicted, is what is on the margins – an opinion shared by that other great photographer friend of yours, Guido Guidi. *Marina di Ravenna* is, I believe, the most striking example of this. So, the real subject of the photo is, metalinguistically, the photographed as an out-frame: not the frame of the curtain stand, not its meaningful shadow nor that which is framed within it. But the «outside», the *extraterritorial*. The unlimited sky, the «beyond-world»: nothing could better exemplify the out-framed. Its lack of footholds, its elusive absoluteness, mean that the sky is everywhere the symbol of the otherworld, of the open, of the Rilkean nowhere. Here, too, imagining the extraterritoriality of the infinite sky must entail modes of affection: and yet what is the eros of the infinite, to the infinite? Is eros not, in fact, the demon mediator, always caught in poverty, in finiteness, and therefore condemned to pursue *on earth* the escape and appearances of the infinite (of the beautiful)?

There is a need for what you call «atmospheric vision» (but how much will old Lucretius have like this idea of yours?). «Atmospheric vision is in itself a celebration of phenomena, in relation to which every historical document becomes a vanity of knowledge» (6 September). The celebration of appearances – this is what landscape calls for, when it simply appears as such. Celebrating the sky as background and proscenium of colours and forms, which appear and pass away in impermanence. Proscenium and background of clouds, almost always present, their morphology so rich. Clouds everywhere: in the most diverse views and in the panoramas produced by every culture, in almost every landscape in which the sky appears, and yet, equally, ignored in habitual conceptions of landscape, too «faithful to the earth», to paraphrase our Nietzsche.

To conceive landscapes within the common good of the biosphere implies enlarging them, rousing them from within, giving them air, giving them the future, opening up the lines, making space. On the occasion of the exhibition «Italian Landscape» held in Reggio Emilia in the same year that *Il profilo delle nuvole* was published, Ghirri wrote: «Sometimes in clouds you can pick out likenesses of animals, objects, even the profile of a face; they are surprises you encounter now and then, looking into the landscape. [...] Nevertheless these suspended profiles seem close enough that the fluffy lightness of the clouds appear to contain the secret geometry of a drawing sketched by a skillful hand. I would like my work on the Italian landscape to seem a bit like these mutable drawings, lacking precise coordinates or orientation, more about the percep-

tion of a place than about its cataloging or description, like some sentimental geography in which the itineraries are not marked and precise, but obey the strange confusions of seeing».

Only the appearance of «colours and tones» will make the sky a sensitive, a lovable, a desirable presence. It will make it «narrative vividness». A phenomenon full of signs and omens, of tones and voices, of figurations and meanings. So, here too, landscape needs air, clouds, sky, to make it, as you wrote of Evans, «a caress given to the world». It's essential that we move from landscape as a part of a contested, shrouded earth to landscapes as parts (figures) of the open. It's essential that we allow landscape its plurality, its openness, free from the smog of our wranglings. Is it a coincidence that your book dedicated to «images of an Italian landscape» has as its title: *Il profilo delle nuvole?*

A title on which you and Ghirri invite us to think – we can only be grateful.

With the embrace I could not give you in person, yours  
Guido Boffi

### *References*

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