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Screening Nature: The Landscape in the Age of Instagram

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Abstract. This paper explores the complex and dynamic relationship between digital media, screens and nature, proposing a reinterpretation of landscape in the age of Instagram: this should not be appreciated both as an immutable natural entity and as a touristic commodity object, but as an aesthetic assemblage reshaped and renegotiated through digital practices and experiences. Starting from the Schellingian conception of nature as a work of art in the making, landscape is not a static reality, but an aesthetic form in continuous transformation and entangled with phenomenologies and technologies, with bodies, technical cultures and scopic regimes, with cultural positionings and pragmatic attitudes. In contrast to ecocriticism and with an unilateral negative and nondialectical perspective, sometimes all too pronounced and explicit, which denounces the reduction of landscape to mere anthropocentric, socio-economic and cultural, aesthetization, the paper – through a specific analysis of three instagram profiles – aims to show how social media foster the rediscovery of nature – both as intact beauty or as terrific wasted land – through participatory and interactive narratives. The role of digital media in the aesthetic renegotiation of landscape is explored, emphasising the mix of image, text and social interaction. Finally, future perspectives are sketched, because digital visual culture can transform and re-activate the landscape as a dynamic archive of memories, identities and ecological awareness.

Keywords. Digital media, landscape, anthropocene, ecocriticism, visual culture.

Introduction

Landscape has been the topic of intense philosophical and theoretical reflection, oscillating between a view of nature as all-embracing ontology or an autonomous factual reality and its interpretation as a socio-cultural construct (Mitchell [1994]; Mirzoeff [1999; 2015; 2024]; D'Angelo [2021]; Siani [2024]). Contemporary ecocriticism, in particular, has argued that landscape is now reduced to a pure media aesthetization, deprived of its ontological depth and singularity, disguising its secular extractive devastation by idealistic abstractions of untouched and pristine nature. This notion, deeply rooted in Western discourses about paradise (Deckard [2009]) and a romantic affinity for wilderness (Nash [2001]; D'Angelo [2023]), assumes an inherent opposition between the aestheticization of landscape and its ecological and political depth. However, this perspective risks overlooking the active role of digital media in an aesthetic renegotiation of landscape as an experiential, relational, and phenomenological space.

Indeed, landscape has never been a mere aesthetic, or fictitious, fictional and artifactual setting but rather a shifting *assemblage* – a dynamic confluence of nature, culture, and technology – where mediated representations play a fundamental role. Moving beyond the static and idealized landscape of ecocritical discourse – or at least of the more rigid positions and non-dialectical statements that are often the historical premises of such discourse –, the approach outlined in recent studies of *Assemblage Geographies* (Briassoulis [2024]: 69-80) considers landscape as a relational configuration that is constantly produced and reconfigured through socio-material, affective, and technological interactions. In this perspective, digital transformation is not an alienating factor that abstracts landscape into an aestheticized spectacle, but an active agent of re-narrativization, allowing for new forms of aesthetic experience that foreground participation, heterogeneity, and contradiction.

Social platforms such as Instagram exemplify this shift: rather than simply reinforcing a commodified, standardized vision of nature, they operate as spaces of aesthetic assemblage, where multiple narratives, affects, and perspectives collide and negotiate meaning. The *assemblage-nature* of digital media destabilizes the static notion of landscape as a fixed and passive object of contemplation or commodification, reconfiguring it instead as a field of confrontations, memories and ghosts (Gordon [1997]; Tsing, Swanson, Gan, Bubandt [2017]), ruins, and potentialities (Perng [2019]; Smith [2024]: 1-21). Through these dynamic digital interactions, landscape ceases to be a neutral aesthetic (and thus already anesthetized) background and becomes an affective and material field, traversed by human and non-human agencies, technological mediations, and contingent re-territorializations.

This paper thus argues against the ecocritical tendency to view digital mediation only as a process of alienation that detaches landscape from its ecological vibrant materiality. On the contrary, digital platforms function as catalysts for an aesthetic attitude that not only looks at the *beautiful* but also moves to the *terrifying* – including the anthropogenic sublime – thus revealing the entangled, precarious, and contested nature of contemporary landscapes. As Friedrich Schelling suggested, nature is not a static reality but a work of art in the making. In this light, digital media do not merely commodify or flatten the landscape; they re-inscribe it as a dynamic, pluri-relational space, where aesthetic experience becomes an active mode of engagement with the world.

1. *Landscape between ecocriticism and aesthetisation*

The concept of landscape has changed deeply in contemporary critical theories, particularly in the field of ecocriticism, which has challenged the traditional representation of landscape as an idealized image of nature. Ecocriticism, a discipline that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a response to the environmental crisis and the need for a new interpretative paradigm in literature and the visual arts, denounced the risk of landscape representation being reduced to a pure aesthetization, emptied of its more-than-human, ecological and political depth (Buell [1995]: 6). Lawrence Buell, for example, points out how this traditional view privileges a contemplative approach that separates nature from its historical reality and ecological dynamics (Buell [1995]: 6–22), while Timothy Morton argues that the idea of “nature” is a cultural construction that, through its media representation, becomes a “hyperobject” with no real value or agency (Morton [2007]: 14; Morton [2013]: 37; Valenti [2025]).

In this perspective, digital media only amplify the modern and post-modern aestheticization, transforming the landscape into a visual surface packaged for consumption – a *tourismscape* – and devoid of ontological singularity and density.

This critique interprets the landscape as an aestheticized anthropic construct, which highlights how nature is perceived through cultural lenses that emphasize its visually satisfying aspects, but conceal its ecological and social contradictions (Heise [2008]: 55). Ursula K. Heise, in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, also argues that globalization and the dissemination of nature images through digital media have contributed to a standardization of landscape perception, where beauty becomes synonymous with visual pleasantness and landscape itself loses its role as a living, transformative ecological space (Heise [2008]: 73). This tendency is particularly evident in social media, such as Instagram, where the representation of the landscape is often filtered through recurring visual patterns that emphasize symmetry, color saturation and the spectacularity of the im-

age (Manovich [2017]: 112). In this perspective, the critique typically modernist, spanning ecology, the social sciences, media studies, and everyday aesthetics – of the loss of a living relationship between users and landscape merges with that of distraction by technological overstimulation and oblivion by iconic saturation and media captology.

Ecocriticism, therefore, brings to light the problems linked to the reduction of landscape to an aestheticized – and therefore anaesthetized (Furia, Romele [2024]) – image, but it often tends to underestimate the potential of digital media as tools for rediscovering and renegotiating the nature as an assemblage of human and nonhuman histories and ontologies (and hauntologies, too), of discourses and living beings, of cultures and technologies, of powers, potentialities and meanings. While digital platforms favour a certain iconographic standardization, they also offer unprecedented possibilities for interaction and participation, which can contribute to redefining landscape as an active and dialogical aesthetic space.

The assemblage approach to landscape proposes in fact a multi-disciplinary, dynamic and evolving approach, in which material and immaterial elements – nature, culture, digital technologies and subjective perceptions and representations – that intertwine in a continuous process of production and transformation. The assemblage key, as illustrated in the chapter *Assemblage Tourism Geographies* of *The Routledge Handbook of Tourism Geographies* (2024), offers an innovative perspective for understanding the landscape as the set of multiple heterogeneous components – material, immaterial, social and digital – which interconnect, influence each other and continuously reconfigure themselves. Helen Briassoulis proposes to overcome the traditional dichotomies (local/global, physical/digital) to grasp the complexity of the processes of territorialization and deterritorialization that characterize the tourist space. This approach is inspired by the theories of Deleuze and Guattari (1984), as well as by the methodological developments of Manuel DeLanda (2006; 2016), who see assemblage as a model for interpreting non-linear connections and multiple interactions between actors and technologies. In this sense, digital technologies are not considered simple tools of representation, but full-fledged actors who, by integrating into the assemblage, mediate spatial and cultural relations and technological innovation. This means that the landscape, understood as an assemblage, is not an aestheticized and pre-packaged image, as a one-sided ecocriticism often criticizes, but a participatory and transformative process in which each component – from social actors to digital infrastructures – contributes to its production and its continuous redefinition. This vision allows us to grasp the complexity of contemporary spatial dynamics, offering analytical tools capable of questioning the transformations induced by globalization, climate change and digital revolutions. Therefore, adopting the assemblage approach means overcoming a reductive and static conception of the

landscape, opening the way to an analysis that embraces the multiplicity of interactions and the continuous flow of relationships that define the tourist space and, more generally, our environment. This critical and inclusive approach represents a fundamental interpretative key to face the challenges of contemporaneity and to promote a more articulated and participatory vision of the landscape.

In this context, the thought of a great philosophical classic, Friedrich Schelling, offers an interesting opportunity to rethink his conception of the relationship between aesthetization, digitalization and landscape, offering a theoretical alternative to the dichotomy between aesthetization and ecological authenticity.

1.1. *Nature as art in becoming in Schelling's thought*

Friedrich Schelling does not understand nature as a passive entity or subordinate to humans, but as an active, autonomous force endowed with its own intrinsic rationality. In fundamental works such as *Presentation of My System of Philosophy* (*Darstellung meines Systems der Philosophie*) and *The philosophy of Art* (*Philosophie der Kunst*), he develops a dynamic idea of nature, comparing it to a work of art in perpetual development, in which beauty emerges as a synthesis between the finite and the infinite, the visible and the invisible (Schelling [1859]: 32). Art, according to Schelling, is the culmination of nature itself, its highest expression, as it manifests the creative principle that pervades the natural world. In Schellingian thought, nature is not conceived as a static set of entities, but as a living, creative process, a dimension in which beauty is manifested in the continuous tension between matter and spirit (Schelling [1807]: 89). This perspective diverges from mechanistic and materialistic conceptions of nature, which reduce it to a mere object of scientific study, depriving it of its ontological depth. For Schelling, nature is autonomous and endowed with its own creative activity, a principle that is expressed through artistic making and figurative shaping and forms.

A central point of Schelling's aesthetic philosophy is his concept of nature as art in the making. He argues that art is not a mere imitation of nature, but its fulfilment, since only through art can nature fully realize its ideal essence (Schelling [1859]: 57). This view suggests that the landscape should not be considered as a mere aesthetic backdrop, but as an active presence, communicating through forms, colors and movements, making possible an aesthetic experience in which the observer participates in the revelation of the truth hidden in nature. A participation that, especially when the individual walks through the landscape, has a multi-sensory character (D'Angelo [2021]: 82): the nature is perceived not only through the theoretical senses (sight and hearing) and the practical senses (touch, smell, but sometimes also taste) but also through the "sixth sense", the mind. As will be considered below, and as the non-representational turn in landscape studies shows

(Doran [1995]: 113; D'Angelo [2021]: 80-84): memory, imagination, imaginary and emotional... sensitivity play a crucial role in the experience of nature.

The relationship between nature and the imaginary is another fundamental element in Schelling's thinking. On this point, indeed, particularly exposed to the attacks of ecocriticism on the human-centred perspective, like all classical idealism and beyond: perception of the landscape is never neutral, but is always mediated by the human imagination, which transforms raw material into aesthetic and spiritual experience (Schelling [1807]: 122). The figurative arts, in this sense, become privileged instruments through which man grasps the profound essence of nature, going beyond its superficial appearance to reveal its inner essence and complexity.

According to Dewey, art is not separate from life, but emerges from our active relationship with the environment, just as Schelling considers art as the culminating expression of nature in the making (Dewey [1934]: 45; Matteucci [2016]: 9-28). As is well known, in *Art as Experience*, Dewey extends the horizon of aesthetics to everyday life and proposes an "aesthetic" paradigm of experience in general, understood as a never-ending instance of refinement and fulfilment of man's psycho-physical unity, at once sensitive, emotional, cognitive, moral and practical. The result is a concept that is focused on grasping and critically sifting the dense relations of art and the aesthetic with both the experiential dynamics and the social realities that nourish them, since the human being is strongly dependent on the environment in which he lives. In this context, all experience is aesthetic: the organism, which interacts with the environment, is continually finding itself in situations that it perceives as threats or benefits to one's existence. Dewey sees art as a practice that is not necessarily artistic but, rather, as an expansion and enhancement of life, thus restoring continuity between the restricted and intense experience offered by art and the events that constitute everyday experience. And this happens above all by virtue of the interaction with the external environment; after all, «all art is a process aimed at making the world a better place to live in». In this sense, Dewey (1922) understands an activity such as, for example, gardening as a participatory art: this transforms the way in which the individual perceives and interacts with the environment, also resulting in personal change (e.g. the establishment of new habits, the rediscovery of new forms of identity, and social inclusion). Planting a tree, therefore, does not necessarily end with artistic performance – as happens in Land Art (Defranceschi [2022]; Di Stefano [2024]) – but lasts over time through the daily practice of care: performance in nature becomes an integral part of our relationship with nature – which includes instruments, technologies, skills, actions, and so on and fosters a sense of belonging and shared responsibility.

The "performance of the care" is a type of narrative of the relationship between the self and nature that is finding more and more space on social network-

ing platforms such as Instagram: we do not only find photos of landscapes that are victims of overtourism, but there are also Reels that tell of moments of strong connection and discovery of the self through a walk in nature, in places that are not always known, in everyday places but also in well-known forests or beaches. And these experiences are assemblages, because engages instruments, tools, technologies, elements, human (socio-cultural, institutional, political) and non-human bodies and entities, because sets and fits encounters, collaborations, uses, pauses, reflections and contemplations, and so on (Barry, Keane [2019]: 1-20; Barry [2021]: 404-423). Allowing to overcome the dichotomy between aestheticized landscape and “authentic” landscape, if everyday aesthetics emphasizes the importance of the ordinary/extraordinary dialectics, Schellingian thought shows that nature itself is endowed with a creative impulse that manifests itself not only in art but in human life: aesthetic experience is not a separate act from everyday life, but a dynamic and participatory process. Active involvement with nature and its representation becomes an act of co-creation, rather than mere unidirectional contemplation (Saito [2007]: 63; Saito [2025]).

In this sense, and although not taken into account by the everyday aesthetic, today digital and social media, such as Instagram, should not only be considered as tools for superficial aesthetization, but as devices that foster participatory aesthetic experience, in which the landscape is continually renegotiated through the interaction between the individual, technology and nature, the users, the media and the images (Fimiani, Sabatino [2023]). Following this perspective, the digital representation and visual narrativization of landscape becomes a shared and ambivalent settlement and a singular screening of everyday experience, a medium through which aesthetic attitude continuously develops and evolves (Manovich [2017]: 145).

The implications of this view are profound for the contemporary debate on the relationship between media and landscape. In the digital age, in which landscape is often reduced to an aestheticized representation, we have to recognize the potential of new “vedute”, actually of the availability and spreadability of ordinary visualizations by platforms and devices.

Digital images are not fictitious standards that reshape or replace the reality, but tools through which the landscape is “screened”, in the double sense of viewed through screens and observed by a visualization which is at once critique, clinical and can be creative: the landscape is continuously reconstructed and transformed as an ontology (even an hauntology) of becoming. Social media, in particular, represent platforms where landscape is not imposed as a pre-established model and pre-given whole, possessing a distinct (unstructured or “wild”) nature, but is an assemblage of heterogeneous elements such as users, devices, data, infrastructures, places, environments, memories or ghosts, socio-techno-ecological-cultural milieux, texts and images, imaginaries, stabilized

from time to time through provisional networked relationships between the actors involved by a process of mutual agency, of collective participation and aesthetic negotiation. Landscape's, beauty emerges as an interactive and dynamic experience, which is constructed in the dialogue between memory, identity and digital creativity.

2. Digital media and the rediscovery of beauty: new visual practices

With the advent of digital media, landscape has acquired new dimensions of representation and fruition. Interactive technologies have made possible a radical transformation in the way landscape images are produced, shared and interpreted. In this context, platforms such as Instagram emerge as powerful tools for renegotiating the concept of beauty, going beyond a mere superficial aestheticisation and offering spaces for interaction and participation.

The digital transformation has radically changed the paradigm of artistic representation too. Whereas in the past landscape images were art-based and created through painting techniques or analogue photographs, today the digital landscape allows for a multiplicity of forms of expression. The possibility of using filters, digital editing and post-production tools allows users to manipulate the visible, creating new “versions” of reality that reflect individual and collective aesthetic choices.

According to Bolter and Grusin (1999), the concept of “remediation” describes how digital technologies integrate and transform pre-existing visual forms, reinterpreting them through new devices. This dynamic is evident in digital photography, where each image is no longer a simple document of reality, but an elaborate product that transforms the landscape into a subjective and participatory aesthetic experience. Instagram, in particular, stands out for its ability to enable such practices, offering a platform where each user becomes an author and interpreter. Instagram is characterized by a profoundly democratic model of cultural production. The platform breaks down the traditional barriers that, in the past, reserved image creation for a few specialists (Fontcuberta [2016]). Thanks to intuitive editing tools and easy sharing, each user can contribute to a vast network of landscape representations, generating a global and constantly evolving visual archive.

Instagram's structure, based on visual posts enriched by captions, hashtags and geolocation, allows for a mix of image and text that amplifies the meanings and the uses of the representations. One of the most innovative aspects of Instagram is the possibility it offers to transform users from mere users to active co-creators of aesthetic online and connected discourse. Interaction tools, such as likes, comments and shares, facilitate a continuous dialogue

and conversation around images, making each post part of a dynamic and syncretic – through touching, writing, seeing and reading –, inter-modal and inter-contextual network of sociability in constant evolution. This active participation allows the concept of beauty to be renegotiated in real time, overcoming the idea that the beauty of the landscape is canonical or standardized, iconic or stereotypical. In this process, visual activism plays a key role. Many users and influencers use Instagram to create environmental awareness campaigns, turning landscape images into tools for criticism and denunciation. These acts of “visual activism” help create a “politics of beauty” that integrates aesthetics and ecological engagement, going beyond mere passive contemplation or superficial consumption driven by two instances: a gesture of caring for the environment and simultaneously for oneself as an inhabitant of Earth. Images thus become vehicles, matters and goals for a participatory narrative, in which the landscape is transformed into a space for cultural confrontation and regeneration.

As early in 1989, Umberto Eco pointed out how the discursive context in which an image is placed determines its meaning, allowing for a layered reading that is open to multiple interpretations. Today it is thematic hashtags that create shared archives and link images to broader narratives, transforming the landscape into a field of collective dialogue that integrates memory, identity and social critique. In fact, a further element that characterizes Instagram is its algorithmical fitness to archive and organize images in ways that amplify their narrative potential through the systematic use of hashtags and geolocation, which allows landscape representations to be grouped into shared visual archives that function as dynamic databases of collective memory – and even beyond the intentions and operational possibilities of individual users. These databases are not static, but are continually reshaped and re-positioned by users interactions and algorithmical agencies, creating visual maps that link personal experiences to cultural and historical references. The seriality and iconographic repetition, analyzed by researchers such as Joselit (2012), reveal how the flow of images contributes to a global narrative of the landscape, in which beauty emerges in multiple settings of nuances and contexts of interpretations.

2.1. Renegotiation of the beauty: the aesthetisation of the landscape and the risk of superficiality

The representation of landscape in digital media is often criticized for the risk of reducing nature to a simple aesthetic commonplace, a perfect, pre-packaged surface, devoid of its ecological and political implications. However, this dynamic does not exclude the possibility of a redesign of the landscape's beauty, understood as a participatory and constantly evolving experience.

In the context of digital media, the tendency to emphasise “postcard” images has led to a representation of the landscape that tends to neglect its intrinsic complexities. Wolfgang Welsch and other scholars (1996) have pointed out how aestheticization reduces nature to a set of almost idyllic representations, eliminating the contradictions and tensions that characterize environmental reality. In this scenario, the landscape becomes a consumer object (Smith [2018]), a marketing product that co-responds to pre-established aesthetic canons and risks relinquishing its critical and historical dimension. The dominant visual system, fueled by algorithms and media dissemination logics, privileges images that conform to easy-to-use aesthetic standards, obscuring alternative narratives that could highlight environmental and social issues. While the use of digital filters and editing tools allows for a personalisation of images, it can also lead to a standardization that homogenizes visual experiences. This trend, criticized by ecocritics and media and, finally, consumer studies, poses a challenge to the ability of digital media to convey a complex view of the landscape.

In Modernity, the idea of beauty emerges from a process of negotiation involving perception, culture and active participation (D’Angelo [2021]: 114). On Instagram, the assemblage dynamic is manifested through the interaction between image and text: captions, hashtags and comments enrich the meaning of photographs, allowing a multiple and contextual reading-seeing of the landscape.

Through the use of thematic hashtags such as #EcoLandscape or #NatureInFocus, users can link their images to broader narratives that integrate elements of environmental criticism, historic ecology and historical memory, and not only a perpert the iconographic archive of the present, actually of the Anthropocene. This process of renegotiating beauty implies that beauty is not imposed as a predefined model or a standard tropism but is constructed/deconstructed in the dialogue between individual subjectivity and collective participation *via* the technology. The practices of editing and sharing images, far from being mere instruments of aesthetisation, thus become means for a critical reflection that recognises the complexity of the landscape and its ethical and political dimension. The eco-aesthetic critique shows the risk that the visual consumption of “perfect” images leads to a dissociation between beauty and environmental responsibility. However, the interactive nature of digital media itself offers tools to overcome this dichotomy. Instagram, for example, can be read as a device for “visual activism”, in which the representation of the landscape becomes a tool for denunciation and ecological awareness. The active participation of users, through critical comments and thematic campaigns, makes it possible to transform the aesthetic image into a political message, capable of highlighting the environmental and social issues that characterize our time. In this way, beauty is not only aesthetic, but also takes on an ethical and committed dimension, reflecting a vision of nature as a living, evolving entity, rather than a mere decorative

setting. Assembling landscape's beauty – the terrific one too – through digital media highlights that the landscape can be continuously reshaped in a critical manner, integrating perception, imagination, memory and meaning, and ethical and political engagement. The recovery of beauty, in this sense, is not a return to a nostalgic idealism, but a dynamic operation that admits the complexity of nature and invites active and conscious involvement in environmental challenges.

2.2. Instagram-Land: the visual practices of Chris Burkard and Benjamin Hardman

Instagram is still a digital platform where the relationship between individual and landscape is continuously redefined through a participatory aesthetic.

Instagram operates as an assemblage: a dynamic convergence of technological, social, and aesthetic forces that redefine the way landscapes are perceived and experienced (Briassoulis [2024]: 69-80).

Rather than reducing the landscape to an alienated visual commodity, the digital practices of photography, geolocation, and thematic hashtags facilitate an interactive re-narrativisation of place. Users actively co-construct a phenomenological and situational assemblage (Eugeni [2017]) in which landscape ceases to be a static background and instead becomes a relational field where memory, identity, and emotion intersect. Hashtags such as #NatureLover and #EarthVisuals exemplify this shift, fostering an aesthetic network where landscapes are no longer simple contemplating artefacts but nodes in an evolving matrix of engagement and signification (Manovich [2017]: 153). Digital photography, far from being a mere act of aestheticization, functions as a process of reconfiguration – what Deleuze and Guattari would describe as a form of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of landscape –. Filters, post-production techniques, and compositional framing should not be interpreted as superficial modifications, but as means of screening, observing and exploring unseen aspects of nature, reworking its affective and perceptual dimensions. This interaction between representation and experience dismantles the ecocritical notion that digital mediation necessarily leads to an epistemic and ontological rupture between humans and more-than-human natural being. Instead, it suggests that media can enhance the phenomenological and ontological depth of landscape, revealing it as an aesthetic assemblage rather than a fixed construct.

A compelling illustration of this “assembling renegotiation” of landscape is found in the photographic work of Chris Burkard (@chrisburkard) and Benjamin Hardman (@benjaminhardman), two contemporary artists who use Instagram to craft distinct yet complementary visual narratives of nature. Both reshape the digital landscape through aesthetic and experiential perspectives, moving beyond the passive aestheticization critiqued by ecocritical scholars. Through an

aesthetic that evokes the romantic sublime and wild nature, both male artists expand the concept of the digital landscape, transcending mere aesthetization to foster a deeper connection between the individual and nature. However, in the first case study the representation shows a Promethean relationship in which the individual confronts the environment in a direct, very physical and almost agonistic engagement, documented by the screen. The second case study, on the other hand, is more reminiscent of the Romantic iconography of the solitary figure in the midst of vast wild landscapes, emblematic of both awe and existential perturbation, which in this case, however, is represented as a deeper connection between the individual and nature (Manovich [2017]:140; Lüneburg [2018]).

Chris Burkard, a self-trained photographer from California's Central Coast, explores in his images the complex relationship between man and landscape, showing a dialectic between ordinary and wild nature. His work, while based on themes of surfing, adventure and travel, reflects a tension between the reassuring dimension of anthropized spaces and the indomitable force of nature. The sea is a constant protagonist and is often represented through expansive, timeless landscapes that capture both the peaceful beauty and unpredictability of the natural world. Burkard uses Instagram as a platform to promote an immersive, strongly embodied experience of extreme landscapes, focused on a physical and active relationship with the environment and a colossal "elemental". Through digital screens, Burkard creates a complex dialogue with the landscape, where the picture is an instrument of bodily mediation and sensory activation, amplifying the struggling connection with the natural environment. Burkard emphasizes the first-person and physical relationship with the landscape, showing climbers, surfers and adventurers immersed in wild scenery, promoting an aesthetic that transcends mere contemplation and invites the viewer to actively experience the landscape. As in the romantic sublime, in which human beings are faced with the majesty and unpredictability, the nature, while becoming accessible through technology, remains just out of control. This dialogue with nature, mediated by screens, reflects the ambivalence of our relationship with the landscape: on the one hand, it is a domain to be explored, but on the other, it is a land that challenges our ability to completely dominate. Burkard's integration of adventure and movement aligns with the mobilities paradigm, in which landscape is not a static object but a space of traversal and interaction. His photography encapsulates a form of deterritorialized landscape experience, in which nature is an active, immersive terrain of negotiation – often, a Promethean struggle – between body and environment. This challenges the ecocritical view that media reduce landscapes to consumable images, showing instead that they can foster an affective ecology where nature is experienced through motion, risk, and engagement.

In contrast to Burkard's emphasis on embodied interaction, Benjamin Hardman employs a minimalist aesthetic that strips the landscape of human presence,

foregrounding its alien and inhospitable character. His photography of Arctic and sub-Arctic environments subverts conventional romanticization, offering an alternative interpretation of landscape that highlights its fragility and estrangement. Benjamin Hardman is an Australian nature photographer and cinematographer based in Iceland. Focusing on photographic and film productions in the polar regions, his work focuses on in-depth visual storytelling of nature in the Arctic and sub-Arctic, both as a traveler and as a local resident. Hardman, adopts a radically different aesthetic than Burkard, focusing on glacial landscapes and suggestive environments. His work is characterized by the use of cold color palettes, minimalist compositions and the almost total absence of the human figure. This aesthetic choice emphasizes the alienating and inhospitable character of nature, transforming the landscape into a contemplative space reminiscent of the Romantic painting of Friedrich and Turner (Bate [2016]: 102). Hardman uses photography to evoke a sense of loneliness and mystery, subverting the traditional aestheticization of the landscape as an idyllic and welcoming place (Heise [2008]: 94): his work shows how digital media can be used for a critical renegotiation of the concept of beauty, emphasizing the most stunning aspect of the natural landscape in the era of climate crisis.

Both artists share a deep connection to the cold and remote landscapes of the North, but their interpretations differ significantly. Burkard tends to emphasize human interaction with nature, often incorporating human figures into his compositions to convey a sense of scale and adventure. His images evoke a feeling of wonder and aspiration, inviting the viewer to explore and connect with the natural. Hardman's use of cold color palettes, stark compositions, and an absence of human figures resonates with the sublime of absence, where nature is presented as an autonomous, almost otherworldly and alien entity. This aesthetic choice aligns with the assemblage perspective in that it dismantles traditional anthropocentric narratives, presenting landscape not as an idyllic refuge but as a space of ontological uncertainty. Rather than upholding the ecocritical view of landscape as a commodified aesthetic construct, his photos capture the savage and beautiful essence of the wild with the spectacular and non-anthropocentric elements of nature, showing its wild and uncontrollable qualities. In this sense, the use of the screening process is not limited to a simple visual mediation of the landscape, but activates an expanded relationship that challenges the usual aestheticization of nature. This technological interaction – which in its representation of the intimate and at the same time critical relationship between human beings and nature reminds the majesty and vastness of the Romantic tradition – allows the landscape to be experienced as a space of fracture, where the absence of control and the tension with nature are brought to the fore. In this sense, Hardman's photography enacts a form of critical deterritorialisation of landscape representation. By avoiding overtly picturesque depictions, he challenges the

assumption that digital media necessarily reinforce an idealised, consumable vision of nature. Instead, his work problematises the very notion of beauty, suggesting that landscape is as much about rupture, fragmentation, and absence as it is about harmony and visual pleasure (Heise [2008]: 94).

Both Burkard and Hardman exemplify how Instagram functions not merely as a platform for aestheticization but as a (*online*) *place of landscape assemblage*, where different aesthetic models and cultural imaginaries – romanticism, minimalism, adventure, and contemplation – collide and coalesce. Their work shows that the digital landscape is not a homogenous entity or iconography but a field of negotiation where different experiences, affects, and imaginaries converge.

Burkard's photography constructs a landscape of participation and movement, aligning with the notion that nature is an immersive and affective force. Hardman, conversely, deconstructs this engagement, presenting a landscape of estrangement and fragility. Their work challenges the ecocritical argument that digital media reduce nature to an idealized spectacle, showing instead that digital platforms can serve as critical spaces where landscape is reworked and reinterpreted through different aesthetic strategies. In this context, landscape is a dynamic and plural territory, where tensions between contrasting aesthetics and divergent cultural imaginaries meet and intertwine, giving rise to new ways of perceiving and experiencing nature in the digital context.

Thus, rather than seeing Instagram as a medium that distances individuals from ecological realities, this analysis suggests that it operates as an *assemblage machine*, a space where landscape is continuously reconstituted through a multiplicity of perspectives, interactions, and mediations. Through their distinct approaches, Burkard and Hardman reveal the landscape as a site of ongoing aesthetic and ecological negotiation – one that is neither fixed nor purely aestheticised, but in perpetual and ambiguous transformation.

These artists offer new perspectives on natural beauty, stimulating a critical debate on the perception of landscape in digital media.

2.3. *For a collective narrative: the "Visit Faroe Islands" case study*

The case of the Instagram profile Visit Faroe Islands (@visitfaroeislands) represents a paradigmatic example of how digital media function as *assemblage machines* that mediate and redefine the relationship between landscape, experience, and collective narration. Moving beyond a static and aestheticized representation of place, the account managed by the Faroe Islands Tourism Board enacts an interactive process in which the landscape, even as a touristic destination, is a dynamic, relational, and participatory construction.

Visit Faroe Islands generates a shared storytelling process in which landscape ceases to be a passive backdrop and becomes an *active assemblage*: a conver-

gence of visual aesthetics, user-generated content, and local narratives that transform the perception and the experience of place. This aligns with Briassoulis' (2024) argument that landscapes are never pre-existing, bounded entities, but rather emerge from a complex interplay of socio-material, affective, and technological forces.

The case of the Instagram profile Visit Faroe Islands (@visitfaroeislands) is a significant example of collective landscape storytelling through digital media. The profile, managed by the Faroe Islands Tourism Board, uses a visual and communicative strategy that combines elements of territorial marketing, identity storytelling and active user participation, redefining the relationship between image, tourist experience and landscape perception.

The Faroe Islands, a remote archipelago in the North Atlantic, have developed a strong visual identity on Instagram, based on three key elements:

1. Aesthetics of the Nordic sublime: the published images emphasize the rugged and pristine landscape with the use of visual breadth, dramatic natural light and cool tones. This aesthetic recalls the Romantic painting tradition and contemporary travel photography. (Manovich [2017]: 145)

2. Centrality of local experience: the narrative is not limited to natural beauty, but incorporates stories of local inhabitants, traditions and sustainable practices, with a clear intent of cultural enhancement. (Jenkins [2006]: 89)

3. Participation and User-Generated Content (UGC): the profile encourages visitors to share their images using hashtags such as #VisitFaroeIslands and #FaroeIslands, building a collective archive of visual experiences. (Heise [2008]: 67)

“Instagrammability” of the landscape, as the images shared are characterized by a strong repetition of visual patterns (imposing cliffs, isolated villages, green pastures with sheep and fog-shrouded fjords); this type of representation, while enhancing authenticity, contributes to the creation of an iconographic standardization of the place, in which certain elements become iconic of the Faroese landscape (Urry, Larsen [2011]: 58). The “slow narrative” combined with sustainability: in contrast to other destinations, the profile promotes slow and responsible tourism, with initiatives such as the *Closed for Maintenance* campaign, which invites travelers to participate in the maintenance of nature trails instead of simply passive consumption of the landscape. Visit Faroe Islands' use of Instagram aligns with the growing trend of experiential tourism, where travelers do not just visit a place, but seek an emotional and narrative connection with the area. Indeed, the profile not only promotes spectacular nature, but also places the visitor's experience in a network of relationships with the local community, reinforcing the sense of authenticity (Franklin, Crang [2001]: 74) and the experiential shift from landscape to community.

Finally, through the interactivity and digital storytelling of Instagram Stories and Reels, the profile creates mini-documentaries that mix local testimonies, travel experiences and immersive visual storytelling, amplifying user engagement and transforming the landscape into a living, evolving narrative (Rose [2016]: 33).

The case of Visit Faroe Islands demonstrates how Instagram can be a device for the collective assemblage construction of the landscape, in which the tourist image is no longer just an aestheticized representation, but a participatory and shared narrative. What is worth reflecting on are the following points:

- The digital landscape is not a static entity, but a network of meanings built through images, stories and interactions;
- Place identity is formed in the interaction between local and global, where tourism becomes a mediating space between authenticity and visual construction;
- The use of social media redefines the concept of travel, transforming it into a narrative, sensory and community experience.

In this context, the Visit Faroe Islands profile is not only an example of tourism promotion, but a veritable laboratory of digital landscape storytelling, in which the visual and cultural experience merge into an ever-evolving collective narrative.

One critical aspect of this assemblage process is the tension between standardization and heterogeneity. On the one hand, the Instagrammability of the Faroe Islands' landscapes generates a repetition of visual motifs – steep cliffs, isolated villages, fog-covered fjords – as markers of place identity (Urry & Larsen [2011]: 58). This standardization risks reducing the landscape to a recognizable set of aesthetic signifiers, reinforcing a tourist-oriented gaze. However, within an assemblage framework, this repetition or agencement (Casetti [2015]: 129) does not necessarily fix meaning; instead, it becomes a generative structure through which new interpretations and interactions emerge.

The slow narrative approach promoted by Visit Faroe Islands counters the passive consumption of landscape. Initiatives such as the Closed for Maintenance campaign invite travelers to actively participate in conservation efforts, transforming the act of travel into an experiential and relational process rather than mere visual consumption. In this way, the landscape is reconfigured as a site of ecological and communal engagement.

3. Towards an assemblage aesthetic of the digital landscape

While ecocriticism has exposed the risks of reducing nature to a visual spectacle, it is important to recognize that digital media offer new possibilities for

aesthetic experience and environmental awareness. The landscape is no longer just an aestheticized field, but a aesthetic assemblage accessible through digital visual practices in new and dialogic forms.

Platforms such as Instagram are not simple tools of aesthetic consumption, but spaces for the exploration and rediscovery of beauty, where the landscape is not only represented, but experienced, shared and continuously reshaped. The beauty rediscovered through digital media is not a return to the idealisation of the landscape, but the emergence of a new aesthetic sensibility, capable of recognizing in nature its intrinsic creativity and vitality, in accordance with the Schellingian vision of nature as art in the making.

The dialogue between digital media and landscape is an evolving field: digital platforms offer spaces for active participation, where the image becomes a dynamic and interactive element, integrating memory, identity and political engagement.

The rediscovery of beauty through digital media is thus configured as a process that goes beyond the simple act of contemplation, becoming an performative task of collective construction and cultural transformation. The landscape is screened, actually is rediscovered through visual practices that make it alive, participatory and critically involved. The new technologies, together with the interactive dynamics of social platforms, open the way for a new aesthetic of the landscape, in which beauty manifests itself in multiple forms and is continuously reshaped according – or not – to the needs and experiences of the public.

An interdisciplinary approach that integrates studies in philosophy, media theory, ecocriticism and visual culture, can help us to approach, without ideological bias, the assemblage machine of digital media in landscape representation. The implications for academic research are many: methodologies need to be developed to analyze the production and circulation of digital images, but also to assess the impact of new technologies on aesthetic perception and ecological engagement. From the point of view of cultural practice, the challenge is to promote forms of expression that integrate beauty with a critical consciousness, capable of responding to the environmental challenges of our time. Digital platforms, in fact, are not only communication tools, but can become real spaces of cultural regeneration and visual activism, in which the representation of the landscape becomes a means to stimulate social change.

The analytical approach developed in this paper has shown how the relationship between digital media and landscape is configured as a dynamic field in continuous transformation. Starting from the Schellingian vision, in which nature is conceived as a work of art in the making, and opposing the ecocritical reading that reduces landscape to a simple aesthetic setting, it was emphasized how digital media, in particular Instagram, offer new possibilities for the rediscovery and redefinition of the concept of beauty. Digital images, thanks to their ability to be

manipulated, shared and contextualized, become vehicles for a participatory and critical narrative, in which the landscape is no longer a passive object, but a field of interaction between memory, identity and ecological engagement.

Future perspectives, fueled by technological innovations, promise further developments in this field, opening up spaces of reflection for a new landscape aesthetic that integrates visual, historical and political dimensions. The challenge for researchers is to develop interpretative and methodological tools capable of grasping the complexity of this phenomenon, promoting a conscious and sustainable culture of beauty.

After all, the rediscovery of beauty through digital media is not only an aesthetic act, but also a political and social one, capable of transforming the relationship between man and nature into a participatory one that is constantly evolving. This new “politics of beauty” invites us to rethink the landscape as an open and assembled narrative, in which each image becomes a contribution to collective dialogue and the construction of a shared visual memory, able to respond to the environmental and cultural challenges of our time.

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