Aisthesis

Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico

Nature - Aesthetics - Society
What Landscape for the Green Economy?

edited by
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MIMESIS

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Foreword

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In recent years there has been a marked resurgence of interest in the concept of landscape – not only within philosophical aesthetics but also, just to name a few disciplines, in architecture, literature and geography. This renewed focus has gone hand in hand with a growing attention toward a broad set of related notions, such as "environment", "territory", and "nature", which, although deeply interconnected with the idea of landscape, are not entirely synonymous with it.

The foundational premise of this issue of "Aisthesis" is that landscape should not be understood as something purely "natural", especially within the domain of aesthetics. Beyond its material, orographic, and morphological dimensions, the landscape must be recognized as a human construct – shaped by complex interactions involving urban planning, settlement patterns, resource management, economic activities, and, more recently, ecological constraints, and attention to biodiversity. These overlapping practices often generate tensions that are not only difficult to reconcile but, at times, fundamentally incompatible. For instance, issues related to sustainability frequently clash with the imperatives

of profit maximization; similarly, the regeneration of specific landscapes may conflict with prevailing business interests.

In this context, posing the question "which idea of landscape should we favor in response to the challenges of a green economy?" serves, provocatively, to highlight the structural asymmetry between landscape conservation and the so-called sustainable economy, and between – more broadly – aesthetics and ecology. This disjunction becomes particularly apparent when considering the urban landscape, where productivity, housing needs, mass tourism, ecological preservation, and the safeguarding of cultural heritage (both tangible and intangible) converge in a dense and often contradictory network of demands.

The thematic focus of this issue of "Aisthesis" stems from the awareness of the multitude of concerns that the concept of landscape brings into play – concerns which seldom, if ever, combine into a harmonious synthesis or promise any definitive resolution. Rather than offering a pragmatic search for simple or conciliatory solutions, contemporary landscape aesthetics positions itself as an interdisciplinary field that critically engages with a wide array of social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental issues.

This issue of "Aisthesis" brings together a diverse collection of essays on the theme of landscape, organized into two main sections. The first section features contributions with a distinctly historical-philosophical orientation. Valagussa, drawing on Dante, Vico, Cézanne, Simmel, and Merleau-Ponty, explores how the modern concept of landscape emerges through the formation of a mental image within the subject – thereby emphasizing the interplay between landscape, poetry, and painting. Restuccia looks back to pre-modernity, highlighting how a non-instrumental approach to nature – and thus an *ante litteram* "sense" of landscape – can be identified in the experiential dimension of Christian pilgrimage. Gemmani offers a critical analysis of the relationship between the concepts of landscape and environment, contributing valuable perspectives to contemporary interdisciplinary discourse. Essays by Boffi, Gentili, and Giannuzzi focus on authors central to the landscape discourse: Boffi provides a passionate reflection on Gianni Celati and Luigi Ghirri in the context of the Italian landscape; Gentili revisits the work of Rosario Assunto, a pivotal figure in the history of Italian landscape aesthetics; Giannuzzi examines the relationship between climate change and temporality through the lens of Walter Benjamin.

The second section delves more deeply into the intersections between landscape aesthetics, sustainability, environmental protection, and emerging technologies. Portera's essay interrogates the role of aesthetics in strategies aimed at biodiversity conservation; Furia explores the relationship between landscape preservation and renewable energy, articulating an "aesthetics of the solar landscape". Raffa and Calise reflect on the sustainability of digitalizing cultural heritage, particularly in light of UNESCO regulations. Lamberti and Ianniello, in

turn, explore the notion of landscape in the era of Instagram and the socio-material entanglements that define the human ecological niche, including analyses of environmental art practices.

The issue also includes a special collection of three articles – by Mecacci, Ibarlucia, and Montanelli – that approach surrealism and the philosophy of Walter Benjamin from diverse perspectives. A rich "Varia" section follows, featuring articles by Casadio-Chamizo (on Leonardo da Vinci), Carrieri (on aspects of Siegfried Kracauer's thought), and Ferrara (on Cronenberg's *Videodrome*).

Finally, this issue inaugurates a new section titled *Carte d'artista*, which fosters dialogue between aesthetics and the visual arts: the main point, with this new section of "Aisthesis", is not that much to provide new material for philosophical-critical discussion *strictu sensu* but rather to offer to our readers documents and papers (*Carte*) that have exemplary value as works of art. *Carte d'artista* opens, in this issue of "Aisthesis", with a presentation of works by photographer and visual artist Pino Musi.

Philosophy and History
of the Landscape

Aisthesis

Painting the Landscape.
The Landscape that Makes Us Think

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Abstract. The article aims to show how landscape is not a natural datum but a typically modern cultural product, particularly linked to the importance that the subject's point of view has managed to gain over the last few centuries. Using examples taken from Dante, Vico, Cézanne, Simmel and Merleau-Ponty, the article shows how the construction of landscape depends on the presence of a mental image. Such an image, already previously acquired through arts such as painting or poetry, has the effect of gathering and collecting a series of elements, giving them that unity without which it is not possible to speak of landscape. After showing how important the cultural dimension is for the creation of landscape, the second part of the article shows how landscape can in turn become a model for art. From this reciprocal interaction between the two levels, it is possible to rethink the relationship between landscape and environment.

Keywords. Landscape, painting, Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne, climate change.

There is a connection between our vision and the facts, but it is often a strange connection. A man has rarely looked at a landscape, let us say, except to examine its possibilities for division into buildings lots, but he has seen a number of landscapes hanging in the parlor. And from them he has learned to think

of a landscape as a rosy sunset, or as a country road with a church steeple and a silver moon. One day he goes to the country and for hours he does not see a single landscape. Then the sun goes down looking rosy. At once he recognizes a landscape and exclaims that it is beautiful. But two days later, when he tries to recall what he saw, the odds are that he will remember chiefly some landscape in a parlor. (Lippmann [1921]: 88)

A page like this one by Gabriel Lippmann clearly shows how, in the words written by Michael Jakob, «a landscape cannot be realised where the paradigmatic guiding function of images, be it literary or artistic, is missing» (Jakob [2017]: 24).

1. *Mimetic effects*

The importance of this dialogue between the arts, from which emerge new ways of visualising what we commonly and superficially call "reality", has already been pointed out by many authors. In one of his fragments, Nietzsche emphasised the importance of the mimetic relationship between art and reality, reversing the order in which it is commonly understood: «False concept of mimesis. The figures of art are more real than reality, reality is imitation of the figures of art. The world of awakening is perhaps an imitation of the world of the sleeping? It is certain that the world must exist as representation: whereas we are only the object represented» (Nietzsche [1999]: 323, fr. 9 [133]).

Trying to illustrate the problem through a series of examples in which the artistic dimension influences the way we see reality, we would like to cite an analysis found in an essay by Ezra Pound. He showed how in Canto XXIII of *Paradise* there is a passage in which Dante describes the effects of a play of light and shadow: «it is all the more remarkable in having been written centuries before the painters had taught men to note light and shade, and to watch for such effects in nature» (Pound [1910]: 156). Only centuries after Dante, in fact, painters will begin to use the so-called chiaroscuro. But, to stay with Dante and return to our theme, Edoardo Sanguineti wrote eloquent pages commenting on the descriptions of landscapes in Malebolge (see Sanguineti [1961]: 39-43).

Let us take a famous group of verses from Dante:

Io vidi per le coste e per lo fondo
Piena la pietra livida di fori,
d'un largo tutti e ciascun era tondo. (*Inf.*: XIX, 13-15)[1]

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1   «I saw that on its sloping sides and bottom / the livid-colored stone was full of holes, / all of one width, while each of them was round».

Commenting on these verses, Sanguineti shows very clearly how «the landscape first emerges in its technical condition» (Sanguineti [1961]: 40), with a whole series of very precise observations designed to explore the place – just think of terms such as "sloping sides", "bottom", "holes", and then the chromatic relief, achieved through the indication of the "livid-colored stone". Further on, we encounter additional significant descriptions:

> Non mi parean men ampi né maggiori
> Che que' che son nel mio bel San Giovanni,
> fatti per luogo de' battezzatori. (Dante, *Inf.*: XIX, 16-18)[2]

Beginning with a statement rich in technical terms – as Sanguineti again observes – we find a similitude that shifts the description to a subjective register, «therefore in an area naturally destined to be enriched with more vivid emotional colouring» (Sanguineti [1961]: 40). Technical expressiveness is inevitably mixed with a personal element, which is then enriched with anecdotal references. The *Divine Comedy* abounds in landscape descriptions – in a period when landscape, even on a pictorial level, was by no means an acquired and accepted technique – characterised by this mixture of technique and subjective dimension.

Like that man who notices the landscape only when it looks rosy at sunset, because everything depends on identifying images that are familiar to him, Dante too immediately links the holes he sees in the livid stone to those of his "bel San Giovanni": how important is this term "beautiful" to give the description its full meaning! He remembers them because he is not simply talking about the baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence, but of "his beautiful" San Giovanni. It is "beautiful" because it is something that already "belongs" to him so to speak. It is beautiful because it depends on the image already sedimented in *his* soul. The presence of this image in his soul can transform the baptistery into a model to which those holes in the livid stone can be compared. Of course, all this is possible from the point of view that can make such a comparison, namely Dante's point of view.

Taking all this into account, we should understand the mimetic dimension, in general, not on the level of the mere reduplication of reality, but rather as a moment in which a certain angle, a certain point of view, is disclosed. We are talking about that glimmer through which we take a certain perspective on reality for the first time. Things such as landscape do not even emerge to our gaze if we disregard the cultural and social coordinates that allow us to frame it, to recognise it, to distinguish it as such from the background of the reality that surrounds us.

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2   «Nor less nor more wide did they seem to me, / than those which in my beautiful Saint John's / are made as places for baptizing priests».

2. *A brief Aristotelian excursus*

Somehow Aristotle had already foreseen this theme in his *Poetics*:

> We enjoy contemplating the most precise images of things whose actual sight is painful to us, such as the forms of the vilest animals and of corpses. The explanation of this too is that understanding gives great pleasure not only to philosophers but likewise to others too, though the latter have a smaller share in it. This is why people enjoy looking at images, because through contemplating them it comes about that they understand and infer what each element means, for instance that this person is so-and-so. For, if one happens not to have seen the subject before, the image will not give pleasure qua mimesis but because of its execution or colour, or for some other such reason. (*Poet.*: 1448 b 9-17)

By contemplating images rather than things, which only become something because they are seen in the light of certain images[3], we understand and infer that each element takes on its own meaning within an overall context only through the image. In fact, Aristotle does not say that we understand that this person is so-and-so. He literally writes that we understand that "this is that" – which means that through the lens offered by the image we begin to recognise in this element, at first indistinct (this), something precise (that): we recognise it as an exemplification of a model we have in mind, thanks to the image provided by the artist.

Let us return to the landscape mentioned by Lippmann: it is only at sunset that the landscape is recognised as such, because the connection with the paintings hanging in a parlor is activated in the viewer's mind. The image provided by the paintings serves as an authentic interpretative filter, apart from which that complex of elements – the country road, the slopes, the bell tower, and so on – does not in itself constitute a landscape. The landscape is seen as soon as it is seen as an exemplification of a certain model. It is very important to highlight that, after a few days, the man does not remember the real landscape he saw: all that remains in his mind is the model, of which the real landscape was merely an exemplification.

In this regard, we could quote the famous passage from the *Scienza nuova* in which Giambattista Vico shows how «the true war chief, for example, is the Godfrey that Torquato Tasso imagines; and all the chiefs who do not conform throughout to Godfrey are not true chiefs of war» (Vico [1744]: 66). Something similar happened to that man who recognises the landscape only when it looks rosy, just as we acknowledge someone as a captain only if he reminds us of Godfrey of Bouillon.

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3   In fact, things are never something in themselves: things only become something in the light of representation, in the light of a certain vision already present and working in our minds.

3. *Poetry, Painting and Landscape*

In one of his famous essays, Maurice Merleau-Ponty speaks of Paul Cézanne's ability to suspend all the habits[4] that make the world familiar to us, in order to reveal that «base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself» (Merleau-Ponty [1969]: 16). To do this, Merleau-Ponty sets up a comparison between painting and landscapes: we are not necessarily talking about Cézanne as a painter of landscapes – he argues – but rather about Cézanne's approach as a painter. Cézanne studied the geometry of planes and forms; he inquired into the geological structure of landscapes. He was interested in drawing and anatomy, incorporated in each stroke of his brush like the rules of the game in a tennis match (see Merleau-Ponty [1969]: 17). On the other hand – and it is here that the comparison with landscape begins to emerge – no rule, no use of colour or skill in drawing is enough in itself: all these gestures naturally contribute to the emergence of «the landscape in its full reality» (*ibidem*), which is what Cézanne called "motif".

Recalling the words of Cézanne's wife, Merleau-Ponty writes: «he would halt and look at everything with widened eyes, "germinating" with the countryside. The task before him was, first to forget all he had ever learned from science and, secondo, through these sciences to recapture the structure of the landscape as an emerging organism» (Merleau-Ponty [1969]: 17). In these lines, the landscape does not refer to the subject matter of the painting, but takes on a broader metaphorical value. That metaphorical value which Hans Blumenberg has taught us to appreciate insofar as it is able to both veiling and probing a moment of logical awkwardness, in the sense that – quoting a famous passage from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* – the metaphor launches a «the transportation of the reflection on one object of intuition to another, quite different concept, to which perhaps no intuition can ever directly correspond» (Blumenberg [1960]: 4 – see also Kant [1790]: 226). In this case the landscape is not a theme but a "motif", in the sense that the overall effect of a landscape mimics the outcomes that Cézanne's painting seeks to produce.

Let us follow Merleau-Ponty's text, which refers in turn to formulations already present in Gérard Gasquet. The latter intends to "weld together" the partial views and particular viewpoints that our sight can only assume from time to time, side by side: instead, Cézanne aims to reunite what «the eye's versatility disperses», almost as if he wanted «to join the wandering hands of nature» (Merleau-Ponty [1969]: 17). Thus, attacking the painting from all sides he generates «a picture

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4   It is difficult not to recognise in Merleau-Ponty's interest in this gesture by Cézanne a reference – again, in a mimetic sense – to the suspension of judgement, to that "epoché" that constitutes one of the best-known figures in Edmund Husserl's phenomenology.

which took on fullness and density; it grew in structure and balance; it came to maturity all at once. "The landscape thinks itself in me"» (Merleau-Ponty [1969]: 17).

We have seen how landscape is by no means something merely "natural", since it only arises from an image, from a model that in some way anticipates the actual experience, making it possible[5]. The image – be it poetic or pictorial – becomes the fundamental support in the light of which to recognise the landscape, being able to say, in the words of Aristotle, "this is that". The landscape depends on this "gesture of the mind" through which the inner image is reflected on the outside: in this very subtle reflexive bounce, a glimmer emerges which can see the landscape for the first time. Before we can see the landscape, in fact, we must "know" what it is: our eyes are full of knowing things, filters, devices, instruments with which art has endowed us and enriched us. These instruments seem to be very useful for "seeing" things not as they are "on a natural level", but rather completely transfigured on a cultural level.

Yet, if the landscape emerges in the light of a pictorial or poetic image, it is no wonder that – as in Cézanne's painting – a kind of counter-movement takes place, a sort of new rebound, almost a return. If previously the image disclosed the landscape, now it is the landscape – in its ability to weld planes together and reunite what the eyes had dispersed and divided – that becomes a model for painting. We are talking about a primordial painting: Cézanne himself tells us that he writes as a painter what has not yet been painted. And on this primitive dimension Merleau-Ponty would further insist:

> the artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a shout, whether it can detach itself from the flow of individual life in which it originates and give the independent existence of an identifiable *meaning* either to the future of that same individual life or to the monads coexisting with it or to the open community of future monads. The meaning of what the artist is going to say does not exist anywhere – not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in this unformulated life. (Merleau-Ponty [1969]: 19)

4. *Far from the true: the appearance of landscape*

In an essay on the perception of landscape, Massimo Venturi Ferriolo dedicated a short paragraph to the binomial "landscape-painting", recalling Plato's condemnation of mimesis as being far from the truth. In this respect, «painting is the principal model of all forms of artistic imitation insofar as it distances

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5   This shift in perspective actually coincides with what Kant calls his Copernican revolution. In other words, we no longer deal with the object itself, so to speak "in its natural dimension". Rather, the relationship with the object is always mediated by our way of knowing, by the various images through which we literally try to figure out how reality might work.

truth from reality» (Venturi Ferriolo [2009]: 61). Here we need to clarify the terms of the question in Platonic language. In Plato's conception, as clarified in the last book of the *Republic*, we basically have three levels: the idea, the realm of the senses, and the image produced by the poet. The problem is not so much the mimetic dimension. For mimesis is ubiquitous: the sensible real is produced in imitation of the idea, and in the light of the realm of the senses the image is produced by the poet or the artist in general. The problem arises when the poet or artist generates his or her own image without regard to the real and the idea, that is, disregarding actual relations, the appropriate relations dictated by the idea and already respected by sensible things. From this point of view, Plato tells us about a painter – also a painter of speeches, like the orator, or the poet himself – who deceives the young by making them see images from afar (cf. Plato, *Soph.*: 234 b-d), and misleads them by showing that great things are small and difficult things are easy. In this sense, painting becomes an emblem of that possibility of falsifying reality, elaborating mere appearances, distant from the truth.

In short, the Greeks were perfectly aware that there is a distance between reality and the image. Here by reality we mean first and foremost the idea, but in general that complex that holds together the idea and its sensible imitation, what we might call that sensible reality that we can read only in the light of the idea that illuminates it. In relation to this complex, the poetic and artistic image can generate radical alterations and modifications, imagining things that do not actually exist. The reaction that characterizes Greek metaphysics was to give more value to reality, considering the image as something that-if it does not conform to the existing relations between the things present in reality as supported by the authenticity, the truth of the idea-could also be false. In this case "false" is literally a way of configuring things on canvas, on paper, or through speech in a way which is different from how things are arranged in reality[6]. There is always a priority of being over the images that thought can make of it.

In this sense, Guido Calogero spoke of «desperate Greek objectivism» (Calogero [1927]: 63). The real ontological-epistemological problem of the image consists in the fact that the image could also refer to an entity that does not actually exist. If the image could be the image of something which does not exist, it is the image of a non-being. In this sense the image could be something false.

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel will show the complete reversal of this position with the culmination of Romantic art[7], precisely on this point. Progres-

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6   As if things could really be "a certain way" or "another way" regardless of the thought that configures them in a certain order. On the other hand, precisely because of this, Aristotle said that true and false are not in things, but in thought (see Aristotle, *Metaph.*: VI, 1027 b 29-31).

7   Following Hegel's approach, romantic art here is to be understood in a general sense as Christian art, but specifically then the pictorial outcomes produced by Flemish art and modern literature.

sively in Romantic art we cease to be interested in the object as such and subjective skill starts to emerge. What we might call the artist's subjective rendering of the object becomes decisive: the painter or poet try to evoke a particular theme, capturing not its essence, but rather the manner of its appearance.

> Therefore it is not at all the painter's business, as may be supposed, to give us through his work of art an idea of the subject that he brings before us. Of grapes, flowers, stags, trees, sandhills, the sea, the sun, the sky, the finery and decoration of the furnishings of daily life, of horses, warriors, peasants, smoking, teeth-extraction, domestic scenes of the most varied kind, of all these we have the most complete vision in advance; the world provides us with plenty of things like this. What should enchant us is not the subject of the painting and its lifelikeness, but the pure appearance which is wholly without the sort of interest that the subject has. The one thing certain about beauty is, as it were, appearance for its own sake, and art is mastery in the portrayal of all the secrets of this ever profounder pure appearance of external realities. (Hegel [1835]: 598)

In other words, during the modern age, the gaze of subjectivity reclaims its own importance, because it becomes increasingly aware of how its own view is the glimmer, the opening through which the thing itself can be experienced. Indeed, it is the glimmer thanks to which the single object becomes for the first time possible, thinkable, and therefore experienceable. Priority is no longer given to the thing, and when, everything depends on how it appears, appearance has conquered the field.

5. *Wechselwirkung: the subject of the landscape*

The "glimmer of subjectivity", in our view, is the same one that allows us to distinguish between landscape and environment. As is well known, one of the fundamental essays that testifies to a renewed interest in the problems of natural beauty in the philosophical thought of the second half of the twentieth century is precisely *Appreciation and the Natural Environment*, written by Allen Carlson in 1979. It is very important to highlight, as Paolo D'Angelo has done, how in this text the author «never uses the term "landscape", but always speaks of "natural environment", indeed landscape is for him an equivocal concept, a mere pictorial projection on nature» (D'Angelo [2010]: 22)[8].

This "glimmer" is certainly not reducible to a mere emotional nuance: we are not talking about a simple emotion or suggestion that suddenly captures the eyes and mind of an individual, tinging the landscape in front of him with a melanchol-

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8   A broader vision, capable of including a deep and wide-ranging evaluation of aesthetic and cultural issues in general, related not only to the environment, but to the landscape, can be found in Assunto (1973).

ic or nostalgic shade. As George Simmel put it, we could speak of a *Stimmung*: as we saw at the beginning with Lippmann, a complex of things arranged in front of us is not necessarily configured in terms of a landscape. Landscape, to continue with Simmel's thesis, is a mental process. We would say that it is almost a "gesture of the mind": the eye and the gaze of the observer produce a real cut – in an almost photographic sense – within that continuum we are used to calling "nature".

The landscape only arises within what we might call a "framing effect", whereby it is only profiled as an object by the ray of subjectivity: as Simmel points out, it is no coincidence that «in Antiquity and Middle Ages there was no awareness [*Gefühl*] of landscape» (Simmel [2007]: 22). In this perspective Dante is by no means an exception, but a confirmation: he inaugurates a season in which subjectivity was about to emerge in all its force. Schelling called the *Divine Comedy* the first bourgeois novel and Hans Urs von Balthasar defined it as "*ein Ich-Gedicht*" (Balthasar [1962]: 385)[9].

In other words, landscape is nothing merely natural; it is a typical cultural product, historically shaped[10], linked, for example, to a certain kind of development of the arts, particularly painting. If Calogero could speak, as we have already seen, of a «desperate Greek objectivism» (Calogero [1927]: 63), landscape can only arise through a total reversal of perspective that is typically modern. If for the Greeks there is the idea and sensible reality, while the image can also represent things that do not exist and thus can be the locus of falsehood, in the modern conception the object itself cannot be grasped except through the image we make of it. If we wanted to put it in idealistic language, there is no object in itself, regardless of the subject that posits it.

On the one hand, the landscape thus presents itself as a typical product of modernity, of that Copernican revolution, enacted by Kant, whereby I will never arrive at the object in itself, but only at that object already filtered through my way of knowing – that is, the images I can make of it. On the other hand, in contemporary times, the very landscape suffers from a further "leap" at the epistemological level, as has been explained: in the landscape it appears how trivial it is to think that there is a subject on one side and an object on the other side – in this case the object would be the landscape.

Precisely because it is itself a cultural product, the landscape is already affected by the work done by the subject. And conversely, the subject, immersed in the landscape is in turn affected by it. Therefore, we can say that the landscape thinks itself into me and I am its consciousness. Here we really see the rebound, the gesture of the mind that makes the landscape possible.

9   The English edition translates the passage as follows: «And yet the whole *Divine Comedy* is a poem written in the first person».
10   On this topic see Turri (1998).

Landscape is not something that simply surrounds me: landscape is constituted in the eye of the self, and conversely the self emerges – with its conceptions, with its visions – within a social, political, historical, cultural landscape. The landscape is not something that exists around us while remaining far away from us: if on the one hand subjectivity offers the glimmer through which a complex of things is filtered into the form of the landscape, on the other hand in a certain sense the landscape shapes us. In this way we can see in landscape a paradigmatic case of *Wechselwirkung* (reciprocal interaction) in the sense used by Simmel, and by Hegel before him (see Hegel [1812-1816], II: 457-459).

We have seen how the birth of the landscape depends on a somewhat artistic attitude of the gaze, which is able to isolate and frame, recombining in a different way that set of forces that intertwine in nature. In fact, we must recognise that

> It is not that art had its starting-point in the completed work of art. It emerges out of Life, but only because and to the extent to which everyday life already contains these formative powers. What we call "art" is their purified, autonomous outcome which determines its own subject-matter. (Simmel [2007]: 25)

Here we are indeed faced with what we have called *Wechselwirkung*: without the artistic aptitude of the gaze there would be no landscape, but conversely it is clear how this same artistic aptitude is born in life, that is, within that continuum which is nature itself: already there – and where else? – we find at work those plastic forces that later became known as art.

These reciprocal interactions is intensified far beyond what we have shown: the importance of ruins on an aesthetic level – as Simmel has pointed out – is based precisely on the new aesthetic tonality that an artefact takes on when it suffers the returning violence of nature: «Nature has transformed the work of art into material for her own expression, as she had previously served a material for art» (Simmel [1958]: 381).

Indeed, if art with its framing generates landscape, we have seen how in Cézanne the "ability" of landscape to weld together different points of view, to reunite what the eye's versatility had dispersed, becomes the new goal of painting. Art breaks and frames at first but then strives to integrate itself back into the continuum. From this perspective, themes such as green economy and climate change are directly connected to the nature-art relationship that is shown in landscape as a philosophical problem. The very preservation of a presumed integrity of nature, the care not to disrupt natural balances, can hardly be seen as a merely "environmental" requirement: it is well known how sensibility to these issues can differ greatly from person to person, from nation to nation, and can depend on various factors – social, economic and political.

Once again, the environment around us and the view we take to frame it influence each other. It could be very counterproductive to try to block this reciprocal

relationship between the two sides (nature-culture). Believing that nature can dictate a series of "objective tasks" regardless of cultural re-elaboration, or thinking, on the contrary, that the cultural dimension can flourish without listening to the context and environment in which it operates would be equivalent to reducing this process to a unidirectional dynamic, with detrimental outcomes in both cases.

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Aisthesis

Pilgrimage and the Prehistory of Landscape

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Abstract. According to Joachim Ritter, aesthetic sensitivity to landscape arose in the modern age as a response to and a remedy for the objectivation of nature and its alienation from subjectivity. The appreciation of a landscape would compensate for the loss of the holistic relationship with nature that characterized the ancient theoretical worldview. Although Ritter's theory allows us to account for both elements of continuity and discontinuity in the transformation of our relationship with nature, the way he refers to an indeterminate conception of the totality of the Universe, valid from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, is questionable. This article suggests that, prior to modernity, a non-instrumental approach to nature could be found in the practice of Christian pilgrimage, thanks to its experiential dimension. The origin of landscape could be identified in the secularization of the Franciscan experience of nature as a figure of heaven.

Keywords. Ritter, Auerbach, Francis of Assisi, secularization, compensation.

One of the major points of discussion in the debate about landscape aesthetics is its historical character (D'Angelo [2014]: 30-40). Some believe humans have always taken some pleasure in contemplating nature and that this can be explained by evolutionary behavior (Appleton

[1975]); others believe that sensitivity to landscape is strictly modern. According to the second position, people have always found interest in nature – whether for practical and economic reasons or moved by a religious, spiritual or metaphysical sense of wonder – but landscape as an object of disinterested contemplation presupposes the birth of aesthetics. In other words, the debate on the historical character of landscape can be traced back to two issues. The first is whether landscape is considered something that has objective features (e.g., a piece of land with a certain balance of open views and hilly reliefs, or a certain balance between wilderness and domesticated nature), or a way of experiencing nature which involves subjective and cultural aspects. The second issue is whether aesthetics is considered a universal aspect of human life or it is itself culturally and historically determined: there is no appreciation of landscape in a culture that did not develop an aesthetic culture.

Among landscape theorists who assert its historical character, Joachim Ritter (1963) is the one who most systematically linked it with the birth of aesthetic culture in early modern Europe. Moreover, his theory benefits from considering both elements of continuity and discontinuity in the relationship with nature from the ancient world to the present: the experience of landscape would have emerged in the early modern age as *compensation* on the aesthetic level for the loss of the theoretical conception of the totality of nature, typical of ancient metaphysic and medieval religious cultures. Ritter, however, seems to flatten the Christian conception to the ancient one and conceives of the experience of nature in a rather abstract way, without referring to any specific context. Building on Ritter's perspective, this article aims to investigate the hypothesis that landscape sensitivity arises from compensating for the loss of a relationship with nature that was not the ancient one, but one that developed in the context of Christian pilgrimage, especially in the Franciscan sense.

1. *Ritter, Petrarch, and the birth of landscape*

Ritter's reflection begins with an analysis of Petrarch's account of his ascent of Mont Ventoux in 1336, which he described in a letter to Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro (*Familiares* IV, 1)[1]. Burckhardt (1860) already considered this account the first example of landscape appreciation in the Western world. What makes it so interesting is Petrarch's own awareness of the particularity of his excursion, which he recognizes in his motive. Petrarch's ascent is devoid of

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1   It has been said that the letter, probably written much later, is fictitious, an allegory rather than the description of a real experience (O'Connell [1983]: 507; Agamben [2014]: 124). I believe that whether or not it describes an actual excursion, it still shows that such an experience was conceivable.

any practical, economic or strategic interest: he is moved only by the *desire to see* a place famous for its height («sola videndi insignem loci altitudinem cupiditate ductus»). The toil he voluntarily underwent seems significant to him, as he conceives of it in analogy to the toil we undergo to attain a more spiritual life. The mountaintop is as high as the blissful life; in both cases, the path leading there is narrow. Although Petrarch himself describes his experience by comparing it with a Christian model, he also seems to realize that it no longer fits there. When he reaches the summit, he is moved by the vast spectacle he sees («spectaculo liberiore permotus») and as he admires the single elements of the view one by one («que dum mirarer singula») he decides to read a passage from Augustine's *Confessions*, which he always carries with him. He happens to read precisely a page in which Augustine comments on those who go to admire mountains, seas and rivers and forget themselves[2]. Reading this passage causes a crisis in him: he feels now ashamed and angry with himself for his admiration of earthly things («iratus mihimet quod nunc etiam terrestria mirarer»). Petrarch perceives a conflict between the desire that drives him to contemplate the earthly dimension and his belief in the superiority of the spiritual and inner dimension, thought not only by Augustine, but even by the Pagan philosophers.

From Petrarch's account, Ritter draws two main conclusions, which lead him to develop his theory. First, both Petrarch's motivations and the way he describes his experience offer analogies to the contemplation of nature in the ancient world. In particular, Ritter notes how the disinterestedness of Petrarch's action echoes the classic metaphysical belief that contemplation of nature is worthwhile for its own sake and must be devoid of any practical interest. The same attitude is found in the religious experience and practice that dominate the medieval worldview. In contrast, the modern age, beginning with Renaissance humanism, is characterized by instrumental reason, which will lead to the birth of modern science. The economic approach to nature, which in antiquity characterized only labor, in the modern age is found in the field of knowledge as well. Ritter also notes how Petrarch's language recalls that of ancient philosophy, particularly that belonging to the tradition of *theoria tou kosmou*: the contemplation of nature conceived according to an order, a unity (see also Ritter [1953]).

The second conclusion Ritter draws is that no matter how similar Petrarch's conception may appear to the ancient one, it is no longer part of that horizon. Petrarch himself seems to be aware of this when he expresses his inner conflict

2   Agamben (2014) mentions this passage as proof that contemplation of landscapes was common in the ancient times too; Cuniberto (2016: 31) answers to this objection distinguishing between aesthetic contemplation and scientific, theoretical or metaphysic forms of contemplation.

between his aspiration for the earthly world and the intellectual conviction that only the spiritual world is worthy of being desired. According to Ritter, contemplation of nature in the ancient world implied the possibility of ascending from the sensible to the supersensible. Petrarch himself refers to this when he writes of the analogy between a physical and a spiritual ascension, but when he reaches the summit, he is faced with his own failure: he is stuck in contemplation of the sensible world. Through a distorted and specifically modern interpretation of Augustine[3], made possible by the extrapolation of the passage from its context, he becomes convinced that the only access to spirituality is in interiority and not through the external world.

Petrarch's appreciation of the landscape, therefore, must be understood both in continuity and in rupture with the tradition of contemplation of nature. On this basis, Ritter formulates his paradoxical hypothesis: sensitivity to landscape can only arise when the theoretical relationship with nature has broken down. Following Schiller, Ritter states that in antiquity human beings passively welcomed the sensual world: they were one with it; in the modern age, however, they become legislators, subjects who make nature their object. In this way, a split (*Entzweiung*) is produced between objective reality and subjectivity (Griffero [2021]). On the one hand, this split is the condition for modern freedom; on the other hand, it implies the loss of nature as totality, which, unlike the objective world, is not accessible through science. Aesthetic experience must be understood in this context as a compensation for this loss[4]. Through art, and aesthetic experience in general, society gives form to what it is forced to expel by reifying the world. It is no coincidence, according to Ritter, that modern science and aesthetics came into being more or less simultaneously. The aesthetic appreciation of nature as landscape can be understood as a response and a remedy to the objectivation of nature. The totality of nature, once conceived theoretically, is now approached aesthetically. The experience of the landscape is the only chance we have left to grasp nature in its totality.

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3   I had the opportunity to discuss this issue with Daniele Guastini, who in his forthcoming book (Guastini [forthcoming]) offers an extremely interesting reading of Petrarch's *Secretum*. In this fictional dialogue between Petrarch himself and Augustine, the latter is portrayed as a moralist who only quotes Roman-Hellenistic philosophers and condemns any interest in the earthly, sensible world. On the contrary, the real Augustine believed in a typological conception of the world, according to which the sensible things are precious, as they are considered figures (*figurae*) of the supersensible. The opposition between inner and outer dimension, spiritual and sensible world, is specifically modern, as also noticed by Benjamin (1928).

4   Ritter does not employ systematically the term «compensation», which was introduced by Odo Marquard (1989), part of the so-called Ritter school.

2. *The limits of Ritter's theory*

However, when we appreciate a landscape, do we really and always experience the totality of nature? Ritter's theory is overall quite convincing and has had a great impact in this debate, but some aspects of it have been criticized. According to Martin Steel, for example, when we experience a landscape, we appreciate its particularity and diversity and not nature in its totality (D'Angelo [2014]: 38). Ritter refers to the ancient conception of nature as *kosmos* but is rather general when he has to describe the specific contexts in which nature was experienced. When he cites examples of landscape in the modern world, however, he always refers to experiences that occur in the context of an excursion (Petrarch's ascent, Schiller's *Spaziergang*) or a journey (Hirschfeld). The landscape he has in mind is *temporally* framed by the practice of leaving one's home, city, or homeland and accessing a place perceived as foreign (however familiar it may be), as opposed to what we might call architectural landscape, which is *spatially* framed, for example by a window, terrace, or buildings in the perspective view of a street.

If the landscape Ritter is thinking of is the one we experience on a hike or a journey undertaken to have that very experience, can we think of a similar context in antiquity? Ritter's reference to Greek *theoria* might help, but only if we understand it in its original meaning, which Ritter seems to overlook. He notes that the term was often used in reference to a religious festival, but does not investigate further. As Andrea Wilson Nightingale (2004) has noted, the term *theoria* was originally used to refer to a civic pilgrimage to religious festivals: the *theoroi* were delegates who embarked in a journey to a sanctuary to represent their city and attend the festival, contemplating the spectacle, and then returned to their hometown to report what they had seen. The notion of theory, as understood in the philosophical tradition, was first introduced by Plato in the *Republic* with a metaphor: the philosopher is like a *theoros* who makes a pilgrimage (*theoria*) to the supersensible world to contemplate the spectacle of truth and then returns to report what he learned to his fellow citizens.

Classic civic pilgrimage was focusing on religious celebrations and not directly nature, but through the study of this practice we can realize one thing: pilgrimages, however short, were the main kind of travel in the ancient world characterized by the lack of economic or strategic interest. In other words, if we are looking for the antecedent of those modern excursions and trips whose main motive is the aesthetic experience of landscapes and landmarks, we will find it in pilgrimage.

However, and herein lies the second main problem with Ritter's hypothesis, can we really assume that the world of *theoria* survived until the late Middle Ages simply because both Pagan philosophers and Christian theologians believed that the sensible world was a gateway to the supersensible world? According to Auerbach, a theorist who gave one of the most complete overviews on

the history of Western (literary) culture, the rupture between Pagan and Christian worlds was much deeper than that between the Medieval and Modern ages (Auerbach [1946]; see also Guastini [2021]). The continuity-discontinuity relationship between the late Middle Ages and the early Modern age can be explained in terms of a secularization of Christian models that are shifted out of their original religious context, but whose logic is preserved[5]. On the contrary, the transition from the Hellenistic-Roman to the Christian world must be understood as the replacement of one logic with a new, incompatible one, however much the same cultural references are retained[6]. On this basis, Ritter's hypothesis may still be useful in researching the origins of modernity, but only if one understands compensation as a reaction to the secularization of medieval Christian models. The same applies to the specific case of travel and pilgrimage: if modern travel as an aesthetic experience can find its antecedent in pilgrimage, it is medieval Christian pilgrimage and not Greek *theoria*.

If we think back to Petrarch's ascent to Mount Ventoux from this perspective, we can find several elements that might confirm this hypothesis[7]. If we learn not to trust Petrarch's many scholarly references to the ancient Pagan world, we will notice that the model of his excursion is the Christian pilgrimage. Not only does he conceive his ascent in analogy with the quest for a blissful life, but he explicitly calls it pilgrimage (*peregrinatio*)[8]. Even the seemingly unusual action of reading a passage from Augustine once he has reached the summit can be understood in this context: pilgrims used to read a passage from the Bible related to the place that they were visiting.

3. *Early Christian pilgrimage and sacred places*

How did Christian pilgrimage differ from the Pagan one and why is this significant for the study of the aesthetic experience of the landscape? This has mainly

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5   Still in Shakespeare, for example, we can find the same contamination between humble and sublime, comedy and tragedy that we first find in early Christian narrative (such as the Gospel of Marc) and in Dante. This *Stilmischung* would be unacceptable in the ancient logic of ontological correspondence between reality and representation, according to which a serious topic can only be represented with a sublime style.

6   Guastini mentions the examples of Pagan models, such as Orpheus, that are retained in the Christian iconography of the catacombs but with a radically new typological meaning, guaranteed by the humble, kenotic style of the representation (Guastini [2021]: 426).

7   A reading of Petrarch's ascent in continuity with Medieval culture was already offered by Bertone (1999).

8   «On the summit is the end of everything, it is that end toward which our pilgrimage is headed» (Petrarch, *Familiares* IV, 1). It is true that in early Christian times other terms were used to refer to pilgrimage (*orationis causa*, *itinerarium*, *passagium*), but around the age of Petrarch the term *peregrinatio* was already used with this meaning, although not systematically.

to do with the relationship between space and the sacred. In the Pagan tradition, the sacred is localized, belonging to some places and not to others: one must travel to access the sacred (Saggioro [2014]). Sometimes the presence of the divine is known by an established tradition – it is the case with sanctuaries, oracles and festivals – sometimes it is individually revealed to someone in a dream (Petsalis-Diomidis [2005]). Some of these pilgrimages are even obligatory, at least in the form of a civic delegation. The journey itself may be important as part of the rituals of preparation and purification for access to the sanctuary, but it is the actual physical presence in the sacred place that allows a participation in the divine, which may lead to the acquisition of knowledge or another benefit such as healing. The beauty of the location could have been a sign of its holiness, but the experience of it did not play a direct role in access to the sacred.

Early Christianity departed decisively from this tradition. Not only are there almost no records of Christian pilgrimages before the 4th century (Cozzo [2021]: 17-22), but even when this phenomenon began to spread after Helena's journey to the Holy Land, many Church Fathers advised against it (Bitton-Ashkelony [2005]; Frank [2008]: 830). This was mainly due to a theological issue: the Christian God does not dwell in one place on earth more than in others, «for we are the temple of the living God as God said, I will dwell in them and walk in them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people» (2 Cor 6, 16). Gregory of Nyssa, for example, warned some monks not to travel to the Holy Land not only because the journey would be full of temptations, but especially because «to seek God at a distant place confines God to that place» (Gregory, *Ep*. 2). Good people can find God's grace anywhere, within themself, but if you are filled with evil thoughts, «even if you are on Golgotha and the Mount of Olives, and even if you are at the Anastasis, you are far from receiving Christ within you» (Gregory, *Ep*. 2, 16-17). Even Jerome, who had moved to Palestine, reminded Paulinus of Nola that «change of place does not bring us closer to God» (Jerome, *Ep*. 58, 3). Nevertheless, the Christian practice of pilgrimage developed anyway, despite Gregory's objections and the more temperate reservations of Jerome and Athanasius. It is evident, however, that those journeys were not aimed at reaching a place conceived as the only access to the divine, since that would have confined God to an earthly place. Why then did so many people decide to undertake such a perilous journey?

Based on the travel diaries of early Christian pilgrims, we clearly notice that the main purpose of these journeys was prayer and meditation. When Egeria reaches the summit of Mount Horeb, for example, her group follows a ritual that seems to have been well-established at her time: they celebrate the Eucharist, have a «particularly fervent prayer» and read a passage of the Bible related to the place they are visiting: «for this I greatly desired, that wherever we went, the relevant passage from the book of the Bible should always be read» (*Itiner-*

arium Egeriae 4, 3). Station after station, they pray and meditate on the episode related to their location. In other words, it seems that Egeria and the other early Christian pilgrims are making two journeys at the same time: a pilgrimage of the body and a pilgrimage of the mind. The outer pilgrimage appears to be an aid to a parallel inner pilgrimage[9].

The practice of the journey and the experience of the places related to the episodes of the Bible and to the life and death of Apostles and martyrs might put the traveler in a state of mind that is the condition for a spiritual encounter of the divine. While pilgrimage in the Pagan world almost always resulted in an acquired knowledge[10], which was revealed during the spectacles of the festival, by the oracle, or in a dream during the ritual of incubation, Christian pilgrims do not travel to learn something, as all the knowledge they need has already been revealed: they travel to obtain a certain emotional disposition, which in its turn can lead to an inner conversion and to experiencing the sacred[11]. This can be obtained everywhere, even at home, but the journey to the sacred places appears like an extraordinarily helpful exercise[12]. Early Christian pilgrims, at least until the beginning of the secularization of this practice in the late Middle Ages, only demonstrated interest for visiting the places they already knew of from the reading of the Bible, the Gospels and other Christian oral or written traditions, and almost completely ignored the rest. It has been thought that this was due to a lack of sensibility; in fact, this shows that the early Christian pilgrims were not driven by curiosity to learn, but by a desire to fill what they already knew with sensible impressions.

In some of these early Christian travel accounts, such as Jerome's letters on the pilgrimage of Paula, or Egeria's diary, we can find some remarks on what we would call today elements of the landscape. When Egeria describes her visit to Mount Sinai or to Moses' Spring near the Jordan river, she does so with

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9   Natalucci writes of a continuous merging of inner and outer pilgrimage (Natalucci [2015]: 14).
10 This knowledge could have been theoretical or practical (for example in the form of thera-peutical instructions), of collective or of individual interest, but in either case it had a cogni-tive character. When Plato introduces his philosophical *theoria* in analogy with civic *theoria*, he considers knowledge as the goal of both practices and prefers the first one as he believes it to guarantee a higher sort of knowledge.
11 Guastini (2021) convincingly proved how the centrality of knowledge in classic antiquity was replaced by the centrality of affect in Christianity. As an example, consider Aristotle's *Metaphysics* A («All men by nature desire to know») and 1 Cor 8, 2 («Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up»).
12 In addition to the experience of the pilgrimage destination places, several other aspects are involved in this regard, such as the fatigue of the travel and the fact of being far from home, which can be read as a spiritual exercise that helps Christians loosening the bond with their social background and learning how to be foreigners in this world: «For them, any foreign country is a motherland, and every motherland is a foreign country» (*Diognetus* 5, 5). All these elements are related to an emotional dimension, while the cognitive one is secondary.

great emphasis on the emotion she felt, despite the humble style typical of early Christian literature. She refers often, specifically, to the fulfilment of a *desire* to see – a desire so strong that it overcomes fatigue. Still, there is no interest for the observation of nature, neither in a metaphysical nor in a scientific sense. The description is strictly limited to the experience of religiously relevant landmarks: «scenery speaks of religious rather than geological formation» (Leyerle [1996]: 119). In Christian travelogues, almost every location is introduced by a phrase such as: «this is the place where this or that event occurred» (Ibid.: 122). However, this approach is exactly what makes these descriptions so interesting for a genealogy of the landscape. Nature is not observed as an object of knowledge but experienced for its (religious) significance for the subject. This significance is attributed by the pilgrim based on what Maurice Halbwachs (1941) called *legendary topography*. In his famous study on collective memory[13], he wrote that the localization of evangelical and biblical facts – which happened quite late, around the 4th century – had two main consequences. On the one hand, it allowed to use concrete places as *aide-mémoire* to topologically organize biblical memory; on the other hand, it projected value and meaning to those places. When collective memories settle on certain locations, these appear transfigured to the eyes of the pilgrims.

This is particularly evident in Egeria's description of her visit to Mount Sinai. She has been longing to visit it and she observes it from the standpoint of her previous expectations: some details of the sensitive aspect of the Mount appear significant to her.

> And although those [mounts] around are so high that I think I have never seen any equal, nevertheless the middle one, where God's majesty had descended, is so much higher than all the others […]. But the prodigious fact […] is that although the middle one, properly called Sinai […], is higher than all the others, yet it cannot be seen until you come to its very base, before you begin the ascent: when, on the other hand, if you have descended, having satisfied your desire, you see it as well in front, which was impossible before you ascended (*Itinerarium Egeriae* 2, 5-7).

Although her approach is not exploratory – she is not discovering something new –, she is neither simply projecting her beliefs on the land as it were an empty canvas. Rather, she observes it in search of something that might correspond to her previous knowledge and finds some *affordances* in what she sees. The height of the mount and the way it becomes completely visible only to those who already hiked it, appear to her in analogy with the glory of God, which is fully perceivable only by those who already believe in Him. This has been explained

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13 See Feyles (2012: 123-153) for a discussion of the limits of Halbwachs' theory of collective memory.

using MacCannell's theory of sight-marker interaction (Leyerle [1996]: 127): when tourists visit a place, they first notice what they recognize. They already have an expectation, based on off-site markers (books, pictures, souvenirs) and on-site markers (brochures, guides, the behavior of other travelers). When they recognize a place, they connect the sight with the prior knowledge based on the markers and replace anticipated representation with experience. In this case, off-site markers would be the Holy Scriptures and the travel accounts of other pilgrims, while on-site markers would be the information given by the local monks. However, the specific experience of early Christian pilgrims cannot be totally reduced to a model designed for contemporary tourism.

4. *A typological approach to space*

The reference of a sensitive aspect (the height of Mount Sinai) to a spiritual one (the glory of God) could be understood using a theological category: that of *figura* (or *typos*). This term must be distinguished from allegory, as Auerbach (1939) suggests. The object, or event, interpreted allegorically has no concrete and historical consistence, it has no value for itself other than its spiritual meaning. If we understand an ostrich as an allegory of justice – the ostrich's feathers having all the same length, therefore being equal – we are not referring to any actual ostrich, living somewhere in a particular time and place. On the contrary, the object, or event, interpreted typologically is concrete and historical and at the same time it prefigures a future event which will fulfil it[14]. Jonah being eaten by the whale and emerging after three days is interpreted as a prefiguration of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection after three days: a *real prophecy* (Auerbach [1939]), a prophecy in flesh and bones, because those who propose this interpretation also believe that Jonah actually existed as a person who lived in a certain time and place. Although allegories can still be found in early Christian and medieval texts, according to Auerbach they must be considered as a legacy of Pagan culture, while only figures authentically reflect the Christian conception of the world.

At first, this exegetic practice only allowed to interpret historical concrete facts as anticipations other future historical concrete facts: mostly, episodes of the Old Testament prefiguring episodes of the New Testament. In the 4th century, starting at least with Augustine, typological interpretation would also allow to read historical facts as figures of their future spiritual condition. As Auerbach notices, this new enlarged conception would slowly lead Christian literature to

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14   Georgia Frank (2008: 834) writes about a «typological» approach to pilgrimage, but she means scholars studying the different typologies of this practice. I use this term in Auerbach's sense, referring to the exegetic dispositif that saint Paul called *typos*, and Tertullian and Augustine called *figura*.

apply the typological approach to all sensitive reality and not only to the exegesis of sacred texts (Auerbach [1946]). The figural meaning of an event is what makes a story worth being told[15]. This is why Auerbach connects the dispositif of *figure* with the origins of realism in Western literature. If every aspect of sensitive reality, even the most daily and humble, is potentially a figure of truth, then, for the first time, all of reality is worth being represented.

Recently Guastini (2021) proposed to read early Christian visual culture through the lenses of the typological approach. In other words, he suggested that we can extend to images what Auerbach wrote about literature. Christians did not introduce images within their cult simply under the influence of Pagan culture, but as a result of their own specific conception of the sensitive world. The delay of around two centuries between the birth of Christianity and the first Christian images was often taken as a proof of the thesis of an external influence (Renan [1885]: 540-546); Guastini interprets it as an *incubation time* that Christianity needed in order to elaborate its own conception of visuality, different both from the idolatrous Greek-Roman one and from the iconoclast Jewish one. Just as Christians valued a *sermo humilis*, a humble language capable of rendering the most trivial aspects of reality, they also discovered something like an *imago humilis*. Although images are almost never defined as *figurae* in early Christian literature[16], the comparison between the exegetical-literary dispositif and early Christian iconology is legitimized by a similar logic. The linguistic representation of a historical event is advocated if it is recognized as a figure of a higher truth and so is its visual representation, if its style suggests the typological nature of its object. It is no coincidence that among the first Christian images are those of the episodes of the Old Testament that were already considered *figurae Christi* in the traditional exegesis, such as the story of Jonah.

Based on these premises, can we further extend the semantics of the typological approach to the experience of space? Auerbach convincingly argued that the use of this hermeneutical tool is linked to a new way of conceiving the relationship between the sensitive and the spiritual world; then, the same logic could be found in other areas of sensory experience. The same historical events are narrated in sacred texts, are represented in sacred images, and are settled in sacred places. Around the 4th century, right after the birth of a Christian practice of images, the cult of martyrs and relics starts being established, and with it the habit of pilgrimage. Although this public display of religiosity can be partly explained with the new freedom of Christians after Constantine, the fact that the sacred is to be found in the external world is also due to the theological elaboration men-

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15 Frank defines Christianity as «a movement of storytellers» (Frank [2008]: 828).
16 Tertullian (*De idololatria* V, 3) refers to the bronze snake – fixed horizontally on a vertical stick – that God makes Moses build in the desert as a *figura crucis*, a prefiguration of the cross.

tioned above: the sensitive world is now a repository of potential figures. Icons, relics, *loca sancta* get their value from the spiritual dimension they refer to, their prototype; they are not idols that pretend to be valuable for themselves. At the same time, they are not simple allegories, pure inconsistent signs: they exist concretely and historically in the world, they can be experienced, visited, touched as material gateways to the spiritual world, anticipations of the Kingdom of God. «All pilgrimage is a prefiguration of the eschaton, with the pilgrim "experiencing proleptically the joys of worship amid the cultus of heaven"» (Pullan [2005]: 393). In sum, the places visited by pilgrims, where a collective memory of biblical events is sedimented, could be understood in a wide sense as *figurae veritatis*, figures of the truth.

In her essay on early Christian pilgrimage and landscape, Blake Leyerle notes that in the different travelogues from the 4th to the 6th century we see not only how the Holy Land changed, but also how the way it was experienced changed. At first, the Bordeaux pilgrim (around 330) was only interested in churches, monuments and landmarks: he did not go to Nazareth, for example, because «there was nothing to see». Egeria started being interested in natural elements, but she did not dwell much on their sensible aspect: she wrote what she saw but not what it looked like (Leyerle [1996]: 127). In Jerome the descriptions became more vivid: the terrain was conceived as a vehicle to evoke biblical history. In a letter to Marcella, he promised that she would see not only the places where scriptural events occurred, but indeed the events themselves (Jerome, *Ep.* 46, 13). Finally, «in the eyes of the Piacenza pilgrim […] the terrain, in all its variety, had become holy and potentially powerful, it had therefore also […] become visible. For the first time in this literature, we can see a real interest in local flora, fauna, and peoples» (Leyerle [1996]: 138).

Is this enough to state that the modern aesthetic experience of landscape was born as a compensation for the loss of this specific early Christian approach to space? Although we can see some elements of continuity – such as the stress on the affective rather than the cognitive dimension, or the way an external, sensitive experience may trigger an inner one – there are still other aspects that prevent us from firmly asserting this hypothesis. First of all, early Christian pilgrimage seems to be characterized by a dialectic between two poles: the experiential dimension we described (the sensitive experience of the *loca sancta* as an occasion and a support for a meditation and an inner, spiritual experience), and a theophanic dimension (the miraculous power of relics and icons, which is not replaceable and is not accessible everywhere)[17]. During the Early Middle Ages, the

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17   Guastini describes the icons of the Byzantine tradition as a *trinitarian* theophany, to distinguish it from the Pagan one (Guastini [2021]: 477-494). He emphasizes how, despite their grandiose elements, they are still in the groove of the Christian tradition of contamination and *kenosis*.

theophanic dimension becomes gradually dominant, as it can be noticed reading the description of the practices and beliefs of pilgrims of this time, which almost have a magical component[18]. Secondly, the memorial dimension of space might explain the interest we have for some places of great historical and cultural interest but cannot account for the aesthetic appreciation of landscape, which can potentially occur anywhere. In fact, the lack of a strong historical characterization appears as an essential element of the disinterested experience of the landscape.

However, there is a moment in the history of Christian pilgrimage when the experiential pole becomes predominant and the whole of nature, as creation, becomes relevant: the time of Francis of Assisi.

5. *The Franciscan turn*

In a recent book, Flavio Cuniberto (2016) suggests a connection between the origins of the landscape and Franciscan culture. Far from considering Francis of Assisi the beginner of modern aesthetic experience[19], he believes that the first real examples of landscape date from the 15th century. Sassetta's *Mystic Marriage of St. Francis* (1437), for example, would be the first painting in which a specific natural element is recognizable, in this case Mount Amiata[20]. Not only was this painting born in a Franciscan context (Sassetta's Altarpiece was painted for the church of San Francesco in Sansepolcro) and it portrays Francis himself, but it depicts a Franciscan land. According to Cuniberto, the fact that central Italy – in particular, southern Tuscany, northern Lazio, Umbria and Marche – is considered so picturesque and offers some of the landscapes we now consider ideal is also related to the fact that these are the lands crossed by Saint Francis. The way he saw and interacted with those places and the way those experiences and those wanderings were narrated might have had a role in the shift of perspective that later led to the discovery of the landscape, and of those landscapes in particular.

18 The magical aspect consists in the fact that the virtue of the relic was believed to pass by contact to another object. For example, water, dust or oil was poured on the relics, then collected and distributed to the pilgrims (Frank [2006]: 194). The Piacenza pilgrim, who traveled to the Holy Land between 570 and 580, reports many similar facts, such as the habit of drinking from the skull of a martyr.

19 Henry Thode (1885) was probably the first to suggest a connection between Francis of Assisi and the origins of the Renaissance, and therefore modern art. The main flaw in his theory is to flatten Francis himself within modernity, instead of considering different turning points. In this regard, Émile Mâle's theory (1908) – who conceived 15th and 16th century art in the light of the Franciscan worldview as the last episode of Medieval art, before the Reforms and the beginning of Modernity – seems more convincing.

20 Cuniberto is aware that in the same years, or even earlier, landscapes appeared in Flemish art, but he does not elaborate; Mâle's research on the Franciscan influence on Flemish art might be helpful in providing answers.

According to Francis' biographers, his relationship to the practice of pilgrimage was not limited to his journey to Galicia and much less to his trip to Egypt in the context of the Fifth Crusade; his entire itinerant life, with its tireless wanderings, can be conceived under the mark of pilgrimage. In his 1226 testament (*Test. 24 / Fontes Franciscani* 122) he writes that his friars should live as «foreigners and pilgrims» (*aduenae et peregrini*). On the one hand we can see a revival of the Augustinian idea of Christians as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem who are resident aliens on the earthly one; on the other hand, these words appear having a new radical meaning: to lead one's life as a pilgrimage through God's creation.

As once again Auerbach notices, by considering all elements of nature, including the humblest and most detestable ones, as God's creatures, Francis extends the typological approach from the holy Scripture to the whole book of nature (Auerbach [1946]: 165-173; see also Valagussa [2021]: 26-27). Every single creature can be conceived as a figure of its Creator and therefore is worth being loved and experienced. This new worldview (which is nothing more than a radicalization of the early Christian one) leads him to a new practice of pilgrimage that does not prioritize memorial sites and places hosting relics. He fully believes that God can be found everywhere, but he has a predilection for some particular places. This predilection, however, is not based on authority and collective memory, but on personal experience.

> For though he knew that the kingdom of heaven was established in every place upon earth and believed that divine grace was given to the chosen of God no matter where, he had discovered from experience that the Church of St Mary of the Portiuncula was filled with richer grace than anywhere else and was visited by heavenly spirits (1 Cel 106).

Even stronger is the role of experience in his discovery of Mount Verna, where Francis receives the stigmata. It is extremely significant that his most intimate encounter with God did not happen in a place that was traditionally considered sacred, such as a sanctuary, a tomb of a martyr or a holy city: it happened in a countryside location that is distinguished from other natural places only by its sensible appearance[21]. Before receiving the stigmata, Francis had visited Mount Verna several times and had been impressed by the looks of the mount and of the land surrounding it. In the *Reflections on the stigmata* (*Fontes Franciscani* 984-988), the part of the mount found by Francis is described as very apt to con-

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21   As Cuniberto notices (2016: 54), it is probably no coincidence that the spiritually most significant place for Francis is also one of the most geologically interesting places that he visited. As it has already been noticed (D'Angelo [2014]: 45), the concepts of *Stimmung* and attuned space might be useful to account for the interplay between objective affordances and subjective *Sinngebung*. Recently Pietro Montani reconsidered the relationship between salient affordances and the work of imagination in a way that could be applied to the experience of space (Montani [2022]).

template: there Francis paused to consider the lie of the land and the landscape («*la disposizione del luogo e il paese*»)[22].

6. *The Secularization of the Christian experience of space*

Of course, Francis' experience at Mount Verna cannot be considered an aesthetic experience of a landscape. What Francis was contemplating was the creation as a figure of the Kingdom of God. According to Auerbach, after Francis, the earthly pole of the typological relationship slowly became so prominent as to obscure the divine one. Dante, who started from a Franciscan perspective, would reach a balance point: after him, we should not speak of a «figural» or typological dimension, but of a «creatural» one. In other words, the Franciscan worldview, soon after it became prevalent in the Western world around the 13th and 14th centuries, underwent a process of secularization that at first did not eliminate the divine but pushed it to the horizon[23].

This is where we meet Petrarch again. While Francis of Assisi ascended Mount Verna and encountered the seraph, Francis Petrarch ascended Mount Ventoux in search for spiritual elevation, but only found an admiration for the sensitive world. He perceives his undertaking as a failure, or at least this is how he represents it, as a sort of justification. In this way, he feels allowed to say that he has no choice but to continue contemplating the sensible world.

What in Petrarch still happens in a dramatic way, as an inner contrast between a rational will and a sensory desire, in Montaigne, two centuries later, takes on the contours of peaceful acceptance. In a chapter of his *Essays*, «On Vanity» (III, 9), he compares his two favorite practices: writing and traveling. He recognizes that both practices are useless, having no theoretical or instrumental purpose, but he no longer apologizes for this vanity: he claims it. On his journey to Italy, in effect a secular pilgrimage, he is now able to appreciate the landscapes he passes through, between a stop at the Holy House of Loreto and one at Ariosto's Tomb[24].

22   The Italian term «paese», country, has been used to refer to the landscape until the 17th century, when «paesaggio» became established (D'Angelo [2014]: 15).
23   Although Petrarch anticipated some typically modern elements, the medieval, religious, typological worldview survived at least until the Counterreformation, as shown by Émile Mâle (1908: 526-541). This might explain why the aesthetic experience of landscape in the proper sense, even if anticipated by Renaissance Humanism, fully established only in the 17th century.
24   To explain the origins of the landscape experience, we have resorted to the Franciscan conception of nature; to account for the cultural dimension of travel we can still refer to what I called memorial pilgrimage, which also survived in secularized form.

If Petrarch witnessed the moment when the human dimension started exceeding the divine, Montaigne lived in the time when this process almost reached completion: «religious ideas were drawn away from their wrapping in the element of sense and brought back to the inwardness of heart and thinking» (Hegel [1835]: 103): the age of the Reformation, the threshold of modernity. Now what Ritter calls *Entzweiung*, the split between objective reality and subjectivity, is produced.

In the modern age, the sensitive world still appears interesting, valuable and meaningful, beyond its practical employability, but its meaning is now indetermined. The landscapes seen by the travelers appear meaningful to them, although they cannot relate them to any particular meaning, like a *typos* after the eclipse of its *prototypos*. In this logic, we can already see an anticipation of the classic Kantian idea that experience of beauty is grounded in «a purposiveness without an end» (Kant [1790]: 111).

The possibility to experience nature as a figure of the Kingdom of God is lost and this is the condition for the birth of the modern appreciation of the landscape: a compensation, but not for the loss of the Universe as *kosmos*, rather for the loss of a typological experience of nature as a figure of the Kingdom[25].

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25   «[La] grandiosa elaborazione di una perdita: non dell'universo come *kosmos*, secondo la confusa interpretazione di Joachim Ritter, ma appunto di quel pre-paesaggio o non paesaggio che è il Regno come natura originaria» (Cuniberto [2016]: 120).

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Aisthesis

Sulla morte del paesaggio. Dalla natura all'ecologia

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Abstract. The paper aims to elucidate the critical issues that arise from the overlapping of the concepts of environment and landscape. Initially, it contrasts two opposing perspectives: the view held by some scholars, particularly in France, who emphasize the importance of distinguishing the theoretical domain of landscape from other disciplines, such as geography and ecology, and the perspective of those, like A. Carlson, who have proposed the Natural Environmental Model as a means to provide a robust foundation for aesthetic appreciation of nature. The discussion will first demonstrate how the concept of environment is intrinsically linked to a notion of nature that reduces it to its objective and measurable aspects. Subsequently, it will be revealed how this concept is itself a product of landscape aesthetic culture. Finally, the paper will suggest how landscape and ecology intersect in defining the boundary that simultaneously unites and separates nature and culture.

Keywords. Landscape, nature, culture, environment, ecology.

1. *Le due minacce*

Nel 1982 veniva pubblicato in Francia dell'editore Champ Vallon un libro per certi versi centrale per la storia della filosofia del paesaggio. Realizzato sotto la direzione di François Dago-

gnet, il contenuto e il progetto di questa pubblicazione collettiva si riassume tutto nella domanda posta a titolo: *Mort du paysage*? Il volume, a cui contribuirono autori come Michel Corajoud, Pierre Sansot e Alain Roger, che saranno prota-gonisti nel dibattito che riaccenderà l'interesse per la filosofia del paesaggio in Francia negli anni avvenir[1], ha rappresentato quasi un manifesto di rinascita e una ritrovata passione per l'estetica della natura e per la categoria del paesaggio. D'altronde, una serie di ravvicinate pubblicazioni sullo stesso tema, e spesso per lo stesso editore, è un'ulteriore riprova di come fosse nata l'urgenza di trovare uno spazio di discussione in cui elaborare una vera e propria teoria del paesaggio.

Si trattava di una necessità divenuta impellente a fronte di un pericolo perce-pito come sempre più incombente. Se si ricostruisce infatti il dibattito di que-gli anni, emergono con forza due elementi di inquietudine che accompagnano quasi tutte le riflessioni sul tema. *Il primo*, riguarda le preoccupazioni legate alla scomparsa del paesaggio *di concerto* alla questione ambientale. Diventa plasticamente evidente e si incomincia finalmente a realizzare come *La grande accelerazione* (Engelke, McNeill [2015]) e la distruzione del paesaggio siano tra loro direttamente proporzionali. Si potrebbe arrivare a dire che, con la distanza, i tempi si erano resi maturi per l'elaborazione di uno sguardo critico retrospettivo, che portasse avanti con gli strumenti dell'analisi concettuale quella denuncia ini-ziata già in altra sede, se vogliamo, da John Ruskin agli albori della rivoluzione industriale. Diventano sempre più evidenti, ormai, le cicatrici provocate dalle profonde ferite inferte al paesaggio all'indomani del secondo conflitto mondia-le. La precipitosa ricostruzione e la tumultuosa industrializzazione che ne sono susseguite, hanno sovvertito per sempre il profilo delle città e delle campagne europee. Non solo in Francia, ovviamente. Per quanto riguarda l'Italia, ad esem-pio, rimane emblematicamente esplicativo e riassuntivo di un percorso di pre-sa di coscienza collettivo il libro *Le belle contrade* di Piero Camporesi (1992), dove a un sentimento di nostalgia e rammarico per la perdita di un mondo an-tico rurale, per sempre compromesso, si unisce una lucida analisi dei profondi sconvolgimenti socio-economici che hanno segnato la fine del *Bel paese*. Un discorso analogo, poi, può esser fatto anche per i lavori di Eugenio Turri[2], che

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1   Oltre al testo citato (Dagognet [1982]), occorre menzionare un altro importante volume, sem-pre a firma di più autori, che si pone dichiaratamente in continuità con il precedente (Roger [1995]). Qui, oltre ai nomi già citati, compaiono significativamente i contribuiti di tre autori che saranno emblematici per i successivi studi, perché espressione dei tre principali approcci contemporanei al paesaggio: A. Berque, M. Conan e G. Clément. Se il primo e l'ultimo sono forse più noti, in quanto ideatori, l'uno dei *quattro criteri di esistenza* che dividono in mon-do in civiltà paesaggiste o meno (Berque [1995]), l'altro del manifesto del *terzo paesaggio* (Clément [2004]), a Conan si deve tuttavia un'analogia tra paesaggio e *palinsesto* (Conan [1992]) che ha goduto di molta fortuna all'interno del dibattito.

2   Sono molti, per Turri, quei fattori che hanno provocato un tale stravolgimento delle coor-dinate di senso all'interno del linguaggio geografico e paesaggistico, da richiedere l'ela-

hanno mostrato come la geografia italiana, in quegli anni, abbia subìto un vero e proprio cambio di registro linguistico all'interno dell'interlocuzione tra essere umano e ambiente; o per le denunce di Rosario Assunto, che hanno sottolineato l'inutilità mistificatoria degli *spazi verdi* (Assunto [1988]: 109) a fronte di una natura esautorata della sua armonia e della sua grazia; o infine per l'attivismo di Fulco Pratesi e molti altri, a cui ha fatto seguito la nascita di svariate associazioni ambientaliste, come Italia Nostra prima, il FAI e Legambiente poi.

Il secondo elemento di pericolo per il paesaggio, invece, è assai più sottile e controverso, e rappresenta il punto di avvio di tutto il discorso che segue. Esso riguarda, in maniera simmetricamente opposta, le preoccupazioni legate alla scomparsa del paesaggio *di contro* alla questione ambientale. Il paesaggio, cioè, come categoria specificatamente estetica, come espressione di un sentimento della natura particolare e di una riflessione storica sulle modalità attraverso cui è possibile percepire uno scenario naturale, sembra minacciato dall'emergere con sempre più forza di altre categorie teoriche e di altre discipline che trovano il loro oggetto specifico nel medesimo campo di interesse. Su tutte, è certamente la categoria di ambiente, appunto, a rappresentare per il paesaggio, il rivale più significativo nel portare all'attenzione il proprio del fenomeno naturale. Il campo su cui insiste il paesaggio diventa un territorio *conteso* con altre forme di sapere, con altre forme di esperienza. In particolare, quelle scienze della natura che si interessano a quel difficile dialogo tra l'essere umano e il suo ambiente, come l'ecologia e la geografia, sembrano maggiormente in grado di restituire analiticamente il complesso processo attraverso cui si mostra, da una parte, la dipendenza e l'appartenenza dell'essere umano al mondo circostante e alla natura, e, dall'altra, le modalità attraverso cui si realizza l'antropizzazione del mondo. Non solo, la forza di queste discipline consiste anche e soprattutto nella capacità di offrire una gamma di parametri oggettivi come base di appoggio solida per chi volesse esprimersi in giudizi sulla bontà di un ambiente naturale. Ciò comporta, evidentemente, un vantaggio pratico-politico non indifferente quando si tratta di superare i punti di vista particolari e convergere verso decisioni condivise, come nel caso in cui si tratta di rispondere collettivamente alle emergenze e alle problematiche ambientali.

borazione di una nuova semiologia; ma a riconferma di quanto detto sinora è significativo citarne almeno due tra quelli che l'autore menziona. Il primo è la «febbre cantieristica» (Turri [1979]: 56) che colpisce l'Italia tra il 1951 e il 1971, e che, a seguito del boom economico, e quindi demografico, affolla le campagne e le città di cemento. Il secondo, ancor più significativo, è il nesso rintracciabile tra saccheggio dei beni artistici e culturali e conseguente crisi ecologica (Turri [1979]: 125-157). Turri rileva come la distruzione dell'identità estetica dei luoghi, seguita alla compromissione di quei simboli che ne avevano costituito l'immaginario, si traduca immediatamente in crisi ecologica, cioè in un'interruzione del dialogo ambiente-società. *Spaesamento* e *inquinamento*, se ne deduce grazie a questa prospettiva, vanno di pari passo.

Si può notare, se si vuole, anche la percepita *violenza* di questa minaccia, che il concetto di ambiente e queste discipline rappresentano per il paesaggio, leggendo l'altrettanto violenta risposta di uno degli esponenti della rinascita della teoria del paesaggio in Francia tra quelli sopra citati. «Depuis près d'un siècle, au nom de la rigueur scientifique, la géographie et l'écologie aient voulu s'approprier, et comme phagocyter le paysage, n'enlève rien à l'irréductibilité esthétique de celui-ci, et nous impose, au contraire, de réfuter cet *écolonialisme* et cette *géophagie*» (Roger [1997]: 144). Si può così anche notare che la strategia di questi autori, davanti al rischio di fagocitazione del paesaggio per conto di altre categorie, come quelle di ambiente o territorio, oggetti di studio designati dell'ecologia e della geografia, è duplice.

Da una parte, si tenta di rivendicare uno spazio irriducibile a ogni altro, quello che si aprirebbe, cioè, davanti al solo *sguardo* paesaggistico, alla contemplazione e considerazione estetica-percettiva di un luogo. E anche in Italia, molti optano per insistere su questa *potenza dello sguardo*, per citare soltanto Venturi Ferriolo (2009), come proprietà candidata a diventare il tratto distintivo e la *conditio sine qua non* del paesaggio. Dall'altra, in modo più netto e radicale, si incomincia a sottolineare con sempre più forza che, tanto la nascita del concetto di natura, come è giunto fino a noi a partire dell'età moderna, quanto la messa a tema dell'interazione natura-cultura, sono entrambi movimenti che sorgono di concerto, e arrivano a una loro espressione perspicua, proprio grazie anzitutto alla forma paesaggio. Tuttavia, se questa seconda strategia di risposta apre il campo a una fruttuosa discussione con le altre discipline, trovando un punto di contatto proprio nel concetto di interazione e nella necessità di stabilire o meno un limite determinante tra natura e cultura, lo stesso, per contro, non può dirsi considerando la prima. Anzi, la pretesa del primato estetico, qualora la si assegni esclusivamente alla visione paesaggistica, porta a uno scontro diretto con tutte quelle altre posizioni che, da prospettive di tipo ambientale-naturale, paventano l'opportunità di ampliare, ancorché forse indebitamente, il campo dell'estetico anche alla categoria di ambiente in quanto tale, o, per meglio dire, alla natura interpretata secondo le scienze naturali. L'assunto di questa ultima ipotesi, si potrebbe riassumere nella convinzione che, per apprezzare un fenomeno naturale al meglio, la strategia più sicura ed efficace, dal punto di vista per lo meno di un'ampia condivisione intersoggettiva dei risultati, sia di vederlo sotto la lente di quelle discipline che meglio sanno interpretarne i comportamenti. Ossia, quelle capaci di interpretare la natura a partire da se stessa, secondo i suoi propri principi, e dunque *oggettivamente*. «The natural world must appear aesthetically good when it is perceived in its correct categories, those given and informed by natural science» (Carlson [2008]: 227).

Schematizzando. Sebbene esista un possibile punto di incontro tra i concetti di ambiente e paesaggio, soprattutto in quell'accezione del primo che rimanda

alle relazioni ecologiche prodotte dell'azione ad arco riflesso di un soggetto rispetto al *circostante*[3], restano delle differenze tra le due prospettive che emergono, *a fortiori*, laddove i due concetti sono considerati in senso ristretto: ambiente come espressione della somma delle qualità misurabili di un luogo, paesaggio come espressione squisitamente estetica della natura. Prendere in esame questi estremi, anche correndo il rischio di un'eccessiva semplificazione, permette, tuttavia, di mettere maggiormente in evidenza le differenze. Di fondo, d'altra parte, anche al netto di posizioni più ponderate, sono due i punti in cui la divergenza rimane di più difficile soluzione. Ovvero, la priorità conferita al momento estetico rispetto a quello epistemico: non esistono dati, ma *fatti*, il conoscere il mondo dipende dal modo di percepirlo e *inventarl*o in sede estetico-artistica. E, in secondo luogo, come conseguenza, l'irriducibile necessità di porre una differenza – sebbene in costante ridefinizione – tra natura e cultura; assumendo questa come continuo e infinito moto di invenzione di quella, che diventa così il resto mostruoso, il rimosso, che giace sullo sfondo oltre il punto di fuga della prospettiva. Questo moto di approssimazione infinita si dà, perciò, solo grazie alla realtà e all'efficacia di quel limite e di quell'orizzonte ogni volta posposti. In questo senso, anche le riflessioni *olistiche* di un autore altrettanto paradigmatico come Arnold Berleant, in cui si avanza l'ipotesi di un'ecologia culturale, dove «l'esperienza estetica dell'ambiente è la controparte percettiva dell'ecologia» (Berleant [2014]: 340), e dove natura e cultura finiscono per fondersi – e confondersi – rischia di compromettere, dal punto di vista del paesaggio, quella necessità di uno scarto che è alla base dell'energia inventiva di quest'ultimo.

2. *Lo sguardo naturale e l'invenzione della natura*

Così, è all'interno di questo quadro teorico che *alcune* prospettive dell'*Environmental Aesthetics*, e nella sua forma iniziale emblematica soprattutto Allen Carlson, possono concludere la corrispondenza tra bontà ambientale di un luogo, *id est* la sua adeguazione o meno rispetto a parametri misurabili e verificabili dalle scienze naturali, e il suo valore estetico. Tuttavia, attraverso questa sovrapposizione, il rischio è quello di, non solo far coincidere la nozione di paesaggio con quella di ambiente, ma di ritenere quella, proprio in forza dell'ob-

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3   Ci si riferisce specialmente al concetto di ambiente così com'è stato formulato da Jakob von Uexküll, in cui a ogni immagine percettiva corrisponde un'immagine operativa, di modo che, quasi kantianamente, l'autore possa arrivare a dire: «ogni soggetto vive in un mondo nel quale esistono solo realtà soggettive: gli stessi ambienti non rappresentano alto che realtà soggettive» (Uexküll [1933]: 150). Per una storia della genesi del concetto di ambiente, tra filosofia e scienza, cfr. Casetta (2022: 19-42).

solescenza dovuta al suo superamento in favore di questa, perfino fuorviante e dannosa per una considerazione estetica e una valutazione precisa dello spazio e del fenomeno naturale *tout court*. Così, ad un *Landscape Model*, per Carlson, è da preferisti piuttosto un *Natural Environmental Model*; soprattutto perché un ulteriore vantaggio di questa prospettiva è riscontrabile nel fatto che esso «gives to the aesthetic appreciation of nature a degree of objectivity that helps refute environmental and moral criticism, such as that of anthropocentrism» (Carlson [2008]: 128).

Questo modello naturale-ambientale, dunque, non solo consentirebbe una considerazione estetica oggettiva *a parte obiecti*, attraverso una valutazione del fenomeno estetico che si rende traducibile in termini scientifici, ma anche *a parte subiecti*: la natura, in questo caso, parla da sé, secondo i suoi propri termini, galileianamente si potrebbe dire, secondo un linguaggio matematico, il solo capace di interpretare la natura al netto delle posizioni particolari. Di pari passo con una natura considerata nei suoi termini oggettivi, anche l'osservatore, dunque, finisce per assumere uno sguardo *naturale*. Lasciando che la natura si esprima da sé, ci si trova emancipati proprio da ciò che è ritenuto, dalla prospettiva opposto a questa, il punto di forza della visione paesaggistica, cioè il suo dover scaturire sempre da una *prospettiva* particolare, da un punto di vista orientato, da un progetto frutto di un'intenzione nello sguardo. Ma nel modello naturale-ambientale è esattamente tutto questo ad esser programmaticamente tolto; e su questo aspetto si gioca e se ne deduce tutta la forza e assieme la debolezza della posizione di Carlson. Dentro l'ossimorica espressione *sguardo naturale*, in cui si riassume, potremmo dire, uno dei punti di vista ambientali assieme più eccentrici e coerenti rispetto all'estetica della natura, riposano i limiti e le possibilità di questa prospettiva. Essa, sintetizzando, opera una doppia problematica riduzione: da un lato, naturale diventa sinonimo di oggettivo, dall'altro, ambientale diventa sinonimo di naturale. A questo punto, occorre fare solo un altro passo per dedurne che ogni estetica della natura debba essere, da una parte, sempre risolvibile nei termini di un'estetica ambientale e, dall'altra, anch'essa sempre traducibile in termini scientifici, oggettivi, universali.

Di contro, la posizione opposta è molto chiara nell'escludere, sotto un profilo storico anzitutto, la possibilità di uno sguardo naturale: «Il s'agissait non pas d'un regard innocent, mais d'un projet. La nature ne se donnait qu'à travers un projet de tableau, et nous dessinions le visible à l'aide de formes et de couleurs empruntées à notre arsenal culturel» (Cauquelin [1989]: 9). Non solo – si potrebbe aggiungere quindi da questa prospettiva – non esiste uno sguardo innocente sul mondo, di modo che la natura è sempre di volta in volta *inquadrata*[4] secondo

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4   È stato notoriamente G. Simmel (cfr. 1912: 329-342), il primo a parlare di filosofia del paesaggio, a insistere maggiormente su questo aspetto.

le varie prospettive culturali, che maturano storicamente anzitutto in ambito artistico figurale; ma, soprattutto, anche la stessa categoria di natura, di concerto alle altre che ne misurano l'oggettività, sono espressione dell'evoluzione di un armamentario simbolico in evoluzione, prodotto di uno stile, di un gusto, di una visione estetica del mondo che rappresenta la prima sede di accesso per esso. In particolare, il nesso attraverso cui è possibile tracciare una linea che unisca la genesi delle categorie scientifiche a partire da elaborazioni artistiche e simboliche, è particolarmente evidente quando si parla di paesaggio. Ciò per due ragioni tra loro connesse.

La prima riguarda la dipendenza del paesaggio, testimoniata anche dalla sua contemporanea insorgenza, rispetto allo strumento della *prospettiva.* Già Erwin Panofsky (1927) aveva rilevato come l'introduzione della prospettiva in sede artistico-figurativa, o meglio, il passaggio da una prospettiva angolare ad una piana, fosse la forma simbolica attraverso cui fosse possibile seguire l'emergere di una nuova concezione dello spazio: misurabile, omogeneo, quantificabile, potenzialmente infinito e composto di elementi e corpi non inerti, ma inseriti in un reticolo di coordinate tra loro *reciprocamente* determinanti. E da questo punto di vista, si potrebbe dire che il paesaggio, soprattutto in ambito artistico ma non solo, nasca anzitutto come applicazione di questo reticolo di relazioni prospettiche alla natura, che solo allora diventa spazio *oggettivo* (Cauquelin [1989]: 25-38). L'elemento prospettico, quindi, al contrario di quanto ritenuto dal modello naturale-ambientale, non esclude affatto la possibilità di una descrizione oggettiva della natura, ma, *anzi*, ne è la precondizione. La seconda ragione, poi, della visibilità di questo nesso tra arte e scienza, potremmo dire, è invece constatabile con forza agli albori della nascita della geografia, in personalità come Alexander von Humboldt e non solo. L'attività di scoperta ed esplorazione è inseparabile, nei primi atti di questa disciplina nascente, da una precisa e analitica riproduzione del reale e, tanto la cartografia, quanto la rappresentazione accurata e proporzionata a coordinate ottiche e figurative prestabilite del reale, sono elementi essenziali a queste attività di ricerca, ancora ampiamente soggette all'arte, alla tecnica pittografica e in ultimi termini allo *stile,* al gusto e all'interesse del pioniere. La scoperta del paesaggio, come elemento figurativo e non, è in questo senso un tassello fondamentale nella storia de *L'invenzione della Terra*, come spazio da abitare, misurare e conquistare, come banco di prova di quell'armamentario geo-metrico che rappresenta la base delle scienze della natura (cfr. Farinelli [2016]: 121-150).

Ma a onore del vero, tornando a esaminare la prospettiva di Allen Carlson, anch'egli sembra avvedersi della connessione tra arte e scienza e tra apprensione estetica del mondo e conoscenza; d'altronde, il punto di partenza della sua riflessione consiste proprio nell'analogia per cui, se si può applicare

all'arte le categorie della critica, per comprenderla e apprezzarla, lo stesso dovrebbe dirsi della scienza nei confronti della natura. Alla radice di questa connessione, c'è appunto il riconoscimento, anche da parte di questo autore, di una certa unità tra momento estetico ed epistemico. Ciò traspare con forza in vari punti dei suoi lavori, ad esempio quando asserisce emblematicamente che le «qualities that make the world seem comprehensible to us are also those that we find aesthetically good» (Carlson [2008]: 229). E tuttavia, proprio nel punto in cui le due prospettive a confronto sembrano avvicinarsi maggiormente, si nota come divergano radicalmente su un aspetto fondamentale. Il senso dato a questa affinità tra estetico ed epistemico, infatti, è totalmente invertito, diametralmente opposto.

L'impostazione naturalista, che ipotizza un mondo di qualità date, autonome, sussistenti di per se stesse, a cui la percezione deve soltanto adeguarsi, è conseguentemente indotto a dedurre dalla comprensibilità del mondo le forme del suo apprezzamento estetico. Di contro, sono le forme della percezione (e ciò vale sicuramente per la prospettiva estetica di Alain Roger) che devono adeguare a sé il mondo: i dati sono tali soltanto per le forme in cui sono dati. Il paesaggio, come si vedrà anche più avanti, è emblematico sotto questo punto di vista, paradigmatico nella sua capacità di *artefare* (Roger usa il termine *artialisation*) il mondo fino a farlo sembrare naturale e, quindi, farlo apparire non come un *fatto* ma come un dato. Anzi, esso è esattamente una di quelle forme simboliche attraverso cui si mostra come lo stile, potremmo dire, tipico della visione oggettivante della natura, che caratterizza proprio la scienza moderna, si è fatto largo fino a noi. È stato il paesaggio a inventare lo sguardo naturale, a fingere, cioè, che la natura fosse anzitutto un oggetto misurabile dato. A riprova di ciò, basti notare che è proprio alla luce di questo suo valore *ancillare* rispetto a un'immagine oggettivante della natura, che il paesaggio è divenuto un bersaglio polemico tanto per alcuni teorici dell'immagine contemporanei, come W.J.T. Mitchell, che ne hanno sottolineato proprio la capacità di *dissimulare* sotto la categoria di natura la sua origine artificiale[5], quanto per alcuni

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5   Ai fini del nostro discorso, è doppiamente interessante la posizione di Mitchell: «Landscape as a cultural medium thus has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable» (Mitchell [1994]: 2). Si potrebbe aggiungere che il paesaggio, presentandosi come naturale pur essendo un prodotto frutto di un lavoro di elaborazione culturale, collocabile *storicamente*, non solo è considerabile come un'ideologia in senso propriamente marxiano, ma è riuscito a tal punto a rimuovere questo antecedente storico, a naturalizzarlo come dato, da risultare il prototipo stesso della *naturalità* e quindi di quella oggettività indipendente da ogni forma di percezione. Accade così, che il concetto di paesaggio apre la strada a quella oggettivazione della natura che permette il suo sfruttamento e reificazione, distruggendo da ultimo il paesaggio stesso.

geografi[6], antropologi[7] e filosofi della scienza *sui generis*, come Bruno Latour, che hanno tentato di slegare il paesaggio tanto da questo «regime scopico» (Latour [2015]: 40) oggettivante (in cui il mondo naturale non è nient'altro che il prodotto di una ripartizione prospettica dei due astratti operatori soggetto-oggetto), quanto dalle gabbie di una scelta reciprocamente escludente tra natura e cultura, per riconquistarlo a una visione più ampia, comprensiva di un significato propriamente ecologico.

3. *Dalla confusione di ambiente e natura al green*

In Italia, è stato soprattutto Paolo D'Angelo a mettere a più riprese[8] in luce da un punto di vista filosofico le problematiche che sorgono se si segue fino in fondo un'indebita sovrapposizione tra categorie estetiche e prerogative delle scienze naturali e, più in generale, tra concetto di natura e quello di ambiente. Una prima criticità, in parte già esplorata ma ora visibile anche sotto il suo risvolto pratico, è la seguente. Se da un lato è vero che ancorare un giudizio estetico a delle qualità misurabili facilita una maggior universalizzazione dei risultati, agevolando così le operazioni di salvaguardia e di tutela dei luoghi agli occhi della comunità, dall'altra, ridurre ogni considerazione valida sulla natura al ristretto campo delle valutazioni rigorose e oggettive asseribili su di essa, non solo presuppone una problematica omogeneità della nozione di valore all'interno di un giudizio scientifico *determinante* e di un giudizio estetico *riflettente*, ma soprattutto subordina, così facendo, il valore del secondo a quello del primo. Il risultato è che, seguendo questa prospettiva:

> Il ruolo dell'esperienza estetica che compiamo dinanzi al paesaggio risulta, una volta ancora, marginalizzato a favore di approcci che appaiono suscettibili di una fondazione più rigorosa, meno soggetti alla variabilità e alla precarietà che si ritengono inseparabili dall'esperienza estetica, almeno quando quest'ultima viene vissuta in relazione con la natura. (D'Angelo [2021]: 44)

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6   Oltre al già citato Augustin Berque – che, proprio nel tentativo di distinguere il suo modo di intendere il paesaggio come *ecumene*, è costretto a riconoscerne un ruolo centrale nella creazione di quel paradigma scientifico moderno che è solito abbreviare come POMC (Berque [2016]: 47-499) – occorre anche segnalare almeno Jean-Marc Besse, che, in controtendenza a quanto detto finora, sottolinea: «Il paesaggio è sinonimo di *assenza* d'oggettivazione; *precede* la distinzione di soggetto e oggetto e l'apparizione della struttura dell'oggetto. Il paesaggio appartiene all'ordine del sentire, è partecipazione *a* e prolungamento *di* un'atmosfera, di un clima (*Stimmung*)» (Besse [2000]: 98).

7   Tra i molti, Ingold (1995: 111-141) e, soprattutto, Descola (2005: 73-103).

8   L'analisi dei punti di contatto e di divergenza tra paesaggio e ambiente, sia a livello concettuale sia a livello di espressione artistica, è un *fil rouge* che accompagna e caratterizza gli studi di D'Angelo (2001: 67-115; 2010: 103-130; 2021: 38-58) sul paesaggio fin dal loro inizio. In questa sede si è fatto ampio uso di questi materiali.

Il valore conferito alla natura – e alla luce del quale è opportuno tutelarla, si potrebbe aggiungere – non è mai primariamente di tipo estetico; e qualora lo fosse, è sempre alla natura apprezzata *in quanto* ambiente e solo allora, quindi, considerata legittimamente come paesaggio, che ci si rivolge. Ma una seconda criticità che D'Angelo ci invita a osservare, quando si confondono e sovrappongono in particolar modo i concetti di paesaggio e ambiente, riguarda le ricadute pratiche di questa ambiguità concettuale. Quando le categorie di paesaggio e ambiente invece di esprimere punti di vista differenti attraverso cui è possibile valutare una medesima porzione di spazio, si trovano a coincidere, allora anche i diversi interessi in gioco risultano compromessi nella loro capacità di gareggiare ad armi pari nell'esprimere il valore di un luogo. Ecco allora che il significato estetico di un luogo, diviene solo un elemento accessorio, che solamente si *aggiunge* alla conservazione e alla salvaguardia di un sito; la quale, per contro, risponde anzitutto a ragioni di carattere *ambientale*, ritenute in ogni caso prioritarie rispetto a quelle di tipo *paesaggistico*. In ciò confermando nuovamente, da un lato, la marginalità riservata al discorso estetico sulla natura rispetto ad altri approcci, poiché ritenuto incapace di formulare giudizi di valore validi, dall'altra, suggerendo surrettiziamente la convergenza e interscambiabilità tra qualità estetiche e qualità ambientali. Da ciò ne consegue che le caratteristiche naturali e ambientali di un luogo divengono la sola condizione *necessaria e sufficiente* affinché un luogo possa dirsi dotato di valore estetico. Ogni ambiente sano da un punto di vista ambientale è quindi, in questa prospettiva, anche un ambiente bello. Per contro, non basta che un ambiente sia bello affinché sia ritenuto anche sano, dotato di un valore ambientale. L'origine di questa asimmetria è da rintracciarsi, come detto, nell'assunzione di una certa *insufficienza* attribuita al giudizio estetico *tout court*. Esso non sembra in grado di restituire quel carattere di granitica certezza, invariabilità e oggettività che si associa alla natura in quanto tale. Ma paradossalmente, come è emerso dal nostro discorso sempre più chiaramente, in realtà è esattamente quella *riproduzione* oggettivante della natura che il paesaggio contribuisce a formare, ad introdurre come stilema culturale.

Alla luce di queste criticità, poi, confondere paesaggio con ambiente e ambiente con natura, subordinando di concerto il valore estetico, squisitamente paesaggistico, della natura alle sue qualità ambientali, comporta la perdita all'interno del discorso di due elementi essenziali.

Il primo riguarda una capacità unica del paesaggio, quella di saper esprimere l'identità di un luogo, la sua inconfondibile *silhouette*, ciò che lo rende anzitutto *quel* luogo. Ed è questa prerogativa ad esprimere la singolarità di un luogo, piuttosto che la sua traducibilità in termini generali parametrizzabili, a collocare *in primis* agli antipodi paesaggio e ambiente. Il paesaggio, allora, pensato nella sua essenzialità, secondo quelle caratteristiche cioè che lo contraddistinguono in quanto tale e che non condivide con altri se non con se stesso, è da intendersi

come la forma estetica attraverso cui un luogo si auto-conferisce un'identità. Il paesaggio, in altri termini, rappresenta «*l'identità estetica di un luogo*, perché l'aspetto estetico determina il costituirsi di un luogo come *quel luogo*» (D'Angelo [2010]: 163). Detto altrimenti, «nel paesaggio ogni cultura si identifica, trova rispecchiata se stessa» (Turri [1974]: 138); e ciò avviene essenzialmente perché il paesaggio è esattamente quella forma attraverso cui i luoghi *nascono* come luoghi; diventano, cioè, riconoscibili, identificabili e quindi, in ultima analisi, in quanto tali *abitabili*. Ciò è possibile in quanto si tratta precisamente di luoghi dotati di qualità tra loro non mutualmente paragonabili, generalizzabili secondo unità di misura, ma uniche, perché frutto di quella storia singolare attraverso cui quella*, e soltanto quella*, determinata esperienza della natura si è potuta auto-rappresentare a se stessa. Ecco allora che, da questa prospettiva, emerge da ultimo come sia corretto dire che nel paesaggio si esprima a tutti gli effetti una relazione etimologicamente ecologica; ma nel senso per cui, di nuovo, esso testimonia storicamente come si possa *inventare la natura*, e cioè darle una forma nota. Se, sulla scia di queste considerazioni, ancora Assunto poteva esprimersi così: «non c'è alcuna differenza tra il punto di vista estetico e il punto di vista che oggi diremmo ecologico, sono due facce di una stessa medaglia» (Assunto [1973]: 189), oggi, forse, nonostante un'ampiamente giustificata maggior cautela sul tema, continueremmo probabilmente a concordare con lui. Perché è certamente vero che un certo modo di intendere l'ecologia e un certo modo di intendere il paesaggio presentano punti di divergenza incolmabili, ma di contro è anche riscontrabile una profonda sintonia. E precisamente, ciò è in ultima analisi rintracciabile nel fatto che entrambi abbiano come per oggetto specifico quella linea di faglia in cui natura e cultura reciprocamente *si* agiscono e si distinguono, dando vita a un chiasmo, a uno spazio in cui «la natura diventa cultura e la cultura diventa natura» (Assunto [1988]: 70). Ciò è tuttavia possibile, solo se si mantiene la distinzione, mostrando al contempo la reciproca dipendenza, tanto di natura e cultura, quanto di paesaggio e ambiente. E d'altra parte, già lo stesso Assunto (1976) metteva in guardia rispetto alla necessità di tenere fermamente distinti paesaggio, ambiente e territorio. L'indebita sovrapposizione, specialmente in ambito estetico, di paesaggio e ambiente, e di ambiente e natura, rischia di compromettere la comprensione e l'apprezzamento di ciascuno.

Il secondo elemento centrale, infatti, che spesso confondendo paesaggio con ambiente e ambiente con natura viene tralasciato, rappresenta una qualità inseparabile da quest'ultima, se la si vuole considerare secondo tutti gli aspetti che ne compongono l'immagine e l'esperienza che di essa si fa. E si tratta, quindi, in particolare del suo aspetto selvaggio, perturbante, mostruoso, tutto ciò che la rende per definizione essenzialmente inabitabile, radicalmente altra da ciò che è appunto domestico, civilizzato, prodotto del lavoro di assoggettamento culturale. Lungi dall'essere un fattore che colloca la natura al di là dell'esperienza di

paesaggio, ovvero, oltre quel dialogo natura-cultura che ne costituisce la foca-
le, la natura come alterità profonda, che resta tale a fronte di ogni tentativo di
addomesticazione, come *residuo impensato*[9] e impensabile di ogni movimento
inventivo di appropriazione culturale della stessa, è ciò che rappresenta il vero
elemento propulsivo della carica immaginifica da cui sorge il paesaggio. Ed è
questo aspetto irrequieto della natura, percepita come alterità terribile e, allo
stesso tempo, affascinante, a venir meno, evidentemente, in ogni sovrapposizio-
ne di ambiente a natura[10]. E nonostante non si tratti, ammesso che sia possibile,
di recuperare un sentimento della natura forse estinto, occorre tuttavia notare
che questo modo di sentire la natura giocò un ruolo centrale proprio in una sta-
gione d'oro per l'arte figurativa del paesaggio, come fu il romanticismo. La cui
pittura di paesaggio trovava il suo ottimo proprio nella tensione suscitata dall'e-
strapolare un frammento perfettamente e armonicamente concluso di natura da
una totalità sconfinata, altrimenti incomprensibilmente soverchiante (cfr. Carus
[1831]: 24-30).

Ma forse, da ultimo, il modo migliore per esaminare gli esiti dell'esclusione
di questi due elementi centrali, l'identità estetica dei luoghi e il perturbante della
natura, dal paesaggio, a fronte della sovrapposizione ambiente-natura, è final-
mente uscire dai confini della discussione concettuale e rivolgersi direttamente
all'architettura di paesaggio. È qui infatti possibile saggiare quasi plasticamente
ciò che rischia di significare questa confusione concettuale, e spesso attraverso
ciò che finisce per essere il *green* per l'architettura. Quando il giudizio estetico,
come si è mostrato, risulta insufficiente a giustificare il valore di uno spazio o
di un luogo, e quando, di contro, ogni ambiente sano, in quanto tale, è ritenuto
di per sé foriero di un valore estetico, ecco che è sempre più facile imbattersi,
anche alla luce della sovrapposizione ambiente-natura, in un ulteriore slittamen-
to di significato. Se una natura bella immediatamente coincide con un ambiente
sano, un ambiente sano coincide, dalla sua, immediatamente con un ambiente
sostenibile. Ed è *green* l'attributo che spesso sta a significare interamente questa

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9   Questa suggestione è mutuata da Jullien (2014: 89-107), dove è affascinante notare almeno
     altri due aspetti. Intanto, che all'interno di questa tensione dialettica tra pensato e impensa-
     to all'interno dello spazio naturale, il paesaggio non rappresenta altro che quel residuo di
     impensato che è tale fin tanto che è *agito* piuttosto che concepito, o meglio, che sopravvive
     come azione-affezione ogni volta che il pensiero compie la sua invenzione della terra. E, in
     secondo luogo, è doppiamente interessante rilevare come una medesima dinamica paesag-
     gistica, e un medesimo sentimento naturale, si possa ritrovare in Cina, sotto il segno di una
     storia alternativa ma parallela.
10   Da questo punto di vista, bisogna sottolineare un punto di contatto imprevisto tra la prospet-
     tiva paesaggista qui delineata e l'estetica ambientale, specialmente quando questa prende
     le mosse da quegli autori della *wilderness* (Leopold, Miur, Thoreau) che in qualche modo
     hanno dato avvio a questa prospettiva proprio collocando al centro l'aspetto quasi auratico,
     intangibile e immacolato di una natura radicalmente altra – perché infinitamente superiore –
     rispetto all'essere umano. Su questa continuità cfr. Iovino (2004: 126-140).

equivalenza. La categoria del *green* restituisce unitariamente l'immagine di natura bella perché ambiente sano, e sano perché sostenibile.

Il *green* allora finisce per rappresentare non, appunto, la natura con la sua carica affascinante e terribile, ma «il più innocuo dei fondali. [..] Ciò che vediamo nei florilegi dei render della città clorofillica non è affatto la natura: è il "verde", per l'appunto, che nulla a che fare con i suoi incanti portenti, pericoli e accidenti» (Metta [2022]: 88). E ancora, continuando con le parole di Annalisa Metta, si può notare come il *green* diventi un colore per tutte le stagioni, per tutte le situazioni, valido per tutti i progetti e per tutti i prodotti, «è il colore del futuro pacificato e confortante. Il verde è in fondo il nuovo beige» (Metta [2022]: 89). E non occorre, a questo punto, scomodare la categoria – abusata – di *nonluogo* di Marc Augé, ma è sufficiente riprendere e concludere secondo il filo del discorso. Come il *green* è quanto di più lontano dal concetto di natura, intesa come quel residuo di alterità inalienabile ad ogni cultura, e perciò rappresenta sempre una natura tradita in *ambiente mansueto*, accomodante, sostenibile e perciò sano – e quindi bello; così il *green* è, allo stesso modo, quanto di più lontano per quanto riguarda il paesaggio, inteso come espressione dell'identità estetica di un luogo. In altri termini, le architetture *green* non appaiono come luoghi unici, singolari, identitari, ma, all'opposto, sono quanto di più spersonalizzante e di meno tipico, caratterizzante e riconoscibile che ci sia – il Bosco Verticale, in fondo, potrebbe essere a Milano così come altrove. Ma soprattutto non sembrano luoghi fatti per abitare, anzi, non sembrano luoghi *tout court*. Sono ambienti.

4. *Morte del paesaggio?* Verso un'ecologia del paesaggio

Si possono a questo punto incominciare a tirare le fila del discorso fin qui fatto. Dopo aver mostrato come non solo il concetto di natura delle scienze non sia applicabile al giudizio estetico sul paesaggio ma, anzi, sia da questo stesso in qualche modo inventato; e dopo aver messo in luce quale siano le problematicità che sorgono una volta che si confonde natura con ambiente e ambiente con paesaggio, occorre ora quanto meno abbozzare i possibili punti di contatto che restano tra ciò che si è rivelato essere l'essenziale del paesaggio, o per meglio dire, quelle sue due caratteristiche *irriducibili* alla categoria di ambiente e una visione ecologica di quest'ultimo. Come è emerso sottotraccia precedentemente, è lo spazio di interazione tra natura e cultura il luogo elettivo che accomuna i due. Allora, più precisamente, la domanda che ci si pone alla fine di questo percorso, pensando soprattutto a quella da cui si è partiti (cioè se il paesaggio rischiava o meno di scomparire di fronte ai due pericoli che lo minacciavano), è la seguente: come si può pensare il paesaggio senza cadere, da una parte, nella trappola dello sguardo naturale e, dall'altra, nel cortocircuito di quel *regime scopico* che a quello sguardo ha dato adito?

Detto altrimenti: se lo sguardo naturale, si è visto, conduce alla problematica fagocitazione del paesaggio da parte dell'ambiente, di contro, il fatto semplicemente di riconoscere e decostruire storicamente, se si vuole, questo sguardo, mostrando che anch'esso è frutto di un modo di vedere il mondo *paesaggistico*, nulla dice su ciò che resta da fare del paesaggio, ora che quel regime scopico, per dirla con Latour, è diventato dominante. Bisogna forse ripartire cercando di sottolineare quali siano i punti in cui i tratti rilevatesi centrali del paesaggio possano dialogare con una prospettiva autenticamente ecologica, attenta ai modi in cui il paesaggio «traduce una volontà di abitare» (Besse [2018]: 68); bisogna forse trovare le modalità attraverso cui sia possibile agire non *su*, ma *con* la natura, per dirla con Besse. Sempre a patto che questa natura resti quel pungolo, quel residuo perturbante che alimenta lo spazio vivente che «non è lo spazio del vivente e neppure lo spazio vissuto» (Besse [2018]: 118), ma è, se mai, lo spazio ecologico e di significato che intercorre tra i due.

Il paesaggio, si è detto a più riprese, non è un mero spazio ambientale e neppure, per contro, solamente una forma di rappresentazione, uno stile di figurativo, ma è appunto anzitutto una «natura percepita attraverso una cultura» (D'Angelo [2010]: 13). Tuttavia, esso è in realtà molto di più: nel paesaggio si manifesta un doppio movimento. Il paesaggio è infatti quel movimento attraverso cui avviene lo «storicizzarsi della natura e il naturalizzarsi della storia» (Assunto [1973]: 315). Si è visto: come forma simbolica il paesaggio è protagonista, da una parte, dell'elaborazione stessa del concetto di natura, di ciò che darà avvio poi, a quel che si è chiamato sguardo naturale; ma dall'altra, forse più significativamente, il paesaggio è stato in grado anche di trasformare questo prodotto storico, il concetto di natura che attraverso di esso giunge a rappresentazione, come qualcosa di assolutamente naturale, da sempre dato. Il paesaggio è dunque un dispositivo riflessivo: riflette su se medesimo le categorie che ha inventato. Esso è, per dirla in altri termini, «lo spazio nel quale la natura viene trasformata in storia e nel quale l'umanità, i suoi valori e le sua azioni, diventano natura» (Besse [2018]: 37).

È questo chiasmo a rappresentare la relazione ecologica che ha luogo nel paesaggio. Un chiasmo, tuttavia, che non è perfetto. Affinché continui il movimento tra un polo e l'altro della relazione, infatti, occorre sia che i due termini rimangano distinti, sia che qualcosa rimanga sempre fuori, un residuo di natura che dà alla cultura sempre qualcosa in più da pensare. E così, sintetizzando, in conclusione si potrebbe dire che:

> il paesaggio è il risultato artificiale, non naturale, di una cultura che ridefinisce perpetuamente la sua relazione con la natura. Questo rinvia a un paradosso: l'esperienza *del* paesaggio è, in generale e in primo luogo, un'esperienza *di sé*. È importante sia ciò che il soggetto percepisce sia l'atto di percepire in quando tale. Il soggetto fa interamente parte

del paesaggio che compone. Da qui la *non identità* profonda del paesaggio, la *storia* del paesaggio o meglio la *storia della coscienza* del paesaggio. Il paesaggio non esiste che in quanto coscienza, o anzi *è* questa coscienza. (Jakob [2008]: 29)

Paesaggio ed ecologia convergono quindi in questo: il paesaggio è qualcosa sempre strutturalmente in *movimento*, un percorso di autoconoscenza di sé che non ha mai fine; perché quella soglia tra natura e cultura che esso abita e a cui esso dà luogo, non è anzitutto un qualcosa che si pensa, anzi essa è semmai il residuo di quel pensare; ma il paesaggio è soprattutto qualcosa che si vive, si agisce e si *fa*.

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Aisthesis

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 polyvocity, 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 reentered 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 contribution[1].

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.

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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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Aisthesis

From the Sublime to the Cosmic. Walter Benjamin's Planetarium

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Abstract. This contribution surveys the presence of Walter Benjamin's philosophy in the environmental humanities. As I argue, Benjamin's philosophy emerged in the debate on the temporality of climate change and instantiated a *cosmic predicament*. To clarify the meaning of the cosmic predicament, first, I reconstruct the terms of the debate; second, I analyze Benjamin's aphorism *To the Planetarium* that concludes the experimental prose collection *One-Way Street* (1928). By reading the aphorism closely, I emphasize Benjamin's quite explicit critique of Kantian modernity, which is defined as *domination over nature*, as Benjamin's text posits. Through the scientific formulation of natural laws, morality, and the feeling of the sublime, according to Benjamin, modernity has relinquished a performative approach to nature, which, in turn, can reconfigure nature as an experience of cosmic trance (*Rausch*).

Keywords. Planetarium, cosmic, *Rausch*, *kairos*, climate change.

1. *Walter Benjamin and the Temporality of Climate Change*

Literature that questions the temporal perception of climate change[1] often evokes some of Walter Benjamin's most famous catchphrases.

As postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty writes in his own theses on history, the temporality of the climate is a «negative universal history» that «flashes up in the moment of danger» (Chakrabarty [2009]: 222). Elsewhere, in the *climate blues* of Mark Levene, climate change entails «a *kairotic* time: a time to strive for what the kabbalists call *tikkun olam*, some healing of our condition on this earth and thereby, with it, some measure of cosmic repair» (Levene [2013]: 164). To Elizabeth Callaway this same cosmic temporality is too often represented as «a time out of joint»: «The figures of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change depict a disjointed present […]. Every figure is either a reconstruction of the past climate or a projection of the future climate – never a reconstruction of the past that moves through the present and projects the future» (Callaway [2014]: 13).

Benjamin's notion of *kairos* is a precious tool to conceptualize historical changes in relation to the present. The concept envisions a nonteleological relationship among past, present, and future (there is a right time for doing the right thing, the famous *Jetztzeit* or now-time of Benjamin's late thought)[2]. In this framework, time is a form of action distributed through objects, places, technologies, and works of art as a set of «temporal affordances» (Wells [2022]).

As Callaway proposes, the Hamletic *time out of joint* that institutional reports exemplify leaves blank the present situation. This is rendered either completely banal, or so incremental and so vast that it resists conceptualization. In other words, public rhetoric imposes a scale of action that exceeds individual engagement with temporality. It demands new ways to describe planetary affects, i.e., as shared feelings of presence.

Temporality deprived of individual free will can hence be considered, on the one hand, as Callaway suggests, an *operational time* (see Agamben [2000]), or

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1   For empiricist perspectives on the temporality of climate change, see Kolbert (2015); Dürbeck (2017); Wallace-Wells (2019). For an early fundamental sociology of temporal language in the context of climate change philosophy, see Clark (2005).

2   Fabrizio Desideri has proposed a translation of *Jetztzeit* as time *in actu*, in Italian, *tempo attuale*, namely, timely time, rather than now-time. Considered as the opposite of mourning, of lamentation, the *Jetztzeit*, or *tempo attuale* is a *differential time* defined as the interim space between symbol and allegory in perception (Desideri [2018]: 113). For Desideri, this interstitial perception of truth *qua* time entails a messianic and hence paradoxical restauration, which inserts what has never happened into the fabric of historical occurrence. For a detailed interpretation of how the *Jetztzeit* is imaginal, dialectical, i.e., *dialectics under arrest*, and a «temporal index» of image-like ideas' incoming dissolution, as these attributes emerge from the *Theses on the Concept of History* (1942) and the related preparatory notes, see Desideri (2018): 111-114.

«the structure of messianic time as the measure of the disconnection of oneself from one's image of time» as Jenny Doussan claims in her study of presence through Giorgio Agamben's critique of deconstruction (Doussan [2013]: 199).

Disconnecting from temporal representations does not deny the existence of chronological time, or the need to represent time in the sciences. But the "disconnection" uncovers the fold of the represented through language. It discloses an existential temporality that is apt to rethink the gap between the time we have and the time we are[3]. As Agamben's stance seems to promise, this existential maneuver should turn perception of represented and exponential change into the experience of presence, that is, being structurally *out of sync* with the course of history.

What the existential approaches to planetary temporality have in common is the critique of linear time. Therefore, perceiving the several processes that compose climate change as kairotic means dissolving the old model of progressive linearity to be later sublated in a theological and revolutionary doctrine (which is the site of Benjamin's philosophy of history, when elaborating on the ancient notion of *kairos*)[4].

Instead of grounding planetary affects – that is, shared feelings of presence that embody attunement with nonhuman temporality – in the theological and revolutionary experience, as the concept of kairotic time implies, in my contribution, I reconstruct Benjamin's planetary metaphor. I want to show that this metaphor conveys a stringent characterization of post-individual temporal

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3   The concept comes from Jean-Luc Nancy's reading of the Christian body in *Corpus* (Nancy [1992]). The place of Giorgio Agamben's development of the corporeal manifold in the light of "cairology", however, is *The Time That Remains* (Agamben [2000]), in which Agamben takes operational time as an analogue for messianic time: «In every representation we make of time and in every discourse by means of which we define and represent time, another time is implied that is not entirely consumed by representation. It is as though man, insofar as he is a thinking and speaking being, produced an additional time with regard to chronological time, a time that prevented him from perfectly coinciding with the time out of which he could make images and representations. This ulterior time, nevertheless, is not another time, it is not a supplementary time added on from outside of chronological time. Rather it is something like a time within time – not ulterior but interior – which only measures my disconnection with regard to it, my being out of synch and in noncoincidence with regard to my representation of time, but precisely because of this, allows for my achieving and taking hold of it» (Agamben [2000]: 67).

4   The secondary literature on Benjamin's elaboration of the link between theology, politics and history is incredibly vast. For this reason, every genealogy will be a partial restitution that I run the risk of undertaking only to frame the context of this paper. As an overview of historicist and anglophone research on Benjamin's early philosophy of history, see Newman (2011). For a comprehensive introduction to Benjamin's conceptual entanglements of aesthetics and theology in Italian see Baldi, Desideri (2008) and, above all, Desideri (1995) and Desideri (2018). For a philologically grounded reconstruction of the Theses' conceptual framework as an alternative to Agamben's interpretation see, in particular, Desideri (2018): 132-133. For a thematic approach to Benjamin's philosophy (and bibliography), see Pinotti (2018).

apprehension related to the Planet, a characterization that has not received the attention it deserves. Before and next to the (theological and revolutionary) *Jetztzeit*[5], there is a (cosmological and performative) notion of *cosmic experience* as it is described in the text *Zum Planetarium* [To the Planetarium] in *Einbahnstraße* (Benjamin [1928]).

In what follows, first, I highlight Benjamin's configuration of the Planet as an anti-modern stance[6]. Second, I render the characterization of cosmic experience as an effect of writerly practices. Literary landscapes such as those crafted through geographical writing, as Jason Groves argued by focusing on Benjamin's *Ibizenkische Folge* [Ibizan Suite] (1932), peculiarly translate the geo-affectivity of the Earth's movement under the steps of someone who writes while walking (Groves [2020]). As for our case, the planetarium, literary and kinesthetic landscapes of this sort can offer a valid metaphor to formulate a cosmic predicament, that is, the possibility of perceiving nature immediately albeit technologically, therefore accepting even the contemporary IPCC image of the present left blank.

Unraveling into Benjamin's *Theses on the Concept of History*, where Callaway, Levene, and Chakrabarty find food for thought in the wake of climate change, might be the most obvious pathway to time-travelers who want to figure out how the language of tradition has articulated planetary temporality: the *Jetztzeit* or kairotic time is the concept Benjamin offers to a subjectivity in crisis; it promises conceptual vertigo; it foresees a reconciliation of experience and memory (see Desideri [1995]); the redemption of and from the major illusion of history, that is, the perceived perfection or *perfectum* (completion, pastness, irrefutable conclusion) of events recollected and remembered (Desideri [2018]: 101-111)[7].

My reading rests on this same basis, that is, the need to restore the critical power of theology upon history. Theology is apt to question received historical representations, as Benjamin's endeavor has made clear to many. But the same critical function can be exercised by literature, specifically, profane literature that Benjamin has devoted to landscapes and environments. Departing from theological critical agency, in my reading, I emphasize "metaphorical critical agency" as one of the several pathways to process history not so much as a progress and a

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5   For another relevant articulation of temporal experience in Benjamin's philosophy, that is, *repetition*, between the concepts of construction and eternal recurrence, see Montanelli (2017).

6   The most important site of confrontation with the theme of modernity, however, remains Benjamin's copious materials for the uncomplete and only partially published *Passagenwerk*. To explore recent research on modernity, imperialism, urban environments, modern politics and historical temporality related to this work, see Montanelli (2022).

7   For an alternative interpretation in which the power of totality is performed by the language of names rather than by the idea of history, see Carchia (2010).

cycle, but rather, as a fragment. «Metaphorical agency translates oblivion in the time of memory, and eternity in the (messianic) time of fulfillment» (Desideri [2018]: 116), which, according to Fabrizio Desideri, is an (always) fragmentary, catastrophic, and intermittent temporal modality, without end of times, without final resolution.

As Desideri posits in *Walter Benjamin e la percezione dell'arte* (2018), in continuity with Hannah Arendt's profile of Benjamin as a cultural critic (Arendt [1968]), the critical power of metaphors can be rescued (against Brecht's dissatisfaction with Benjamin's fondness for theology when it comes to revolutionary practice):

> Of this unutterable in-stant of his thought (nothing other than a quiet dwelling in the in-stant, in the *Ein-stand*, in the temporal arrest: in the *Jetztzeit*) the *Theses* are the most limpid expression. Their decisive *Methaphorik*, which Brecht seems to disavow when attempting a "constructive" consideration of the *Theses*, lies on the effort to connect politics and theology under the Idea of historical time: on the one hand, a kind of politics, whose subjects live in the most radical crisis, on the other, a kind of theology, whose objects are enclosed in negation (once theology has dimmed its revealing symbols). In the horizon of the *Theses*, however, metaphor and construction are not mutually exclusive: the metaphorical disclosure is a window inside the monadic constitution that is crystallized by thought, when the process of thought operates according to the constructive principle; their tension identifies the regressive movement of constructivity toward the un-constructable site of the origin. (Desideri [2018]: 116)[8]

I suggest that we trace the planetary fact through the metaphor of the planetarium. This means a consideration of time beyond the question of historical time and toward the question of spatial intensity – something Desideri has also examined through the Origenian idea of *apokatastasis*: the idea of «a world of strict discontinuity; what is always again new is not something old that remains, or something past that recurs, but one and the same, crossed by countless intermittences» (Desideri [2016]: 177; see also Montanelli [2022]: 259-276).

Searching for fragments that can express the exorbitance of climate change – and the intermittence of climate action – metaphorically, I propose to read Benjamin's less explicit meditations on time, *To the Planetarium*, the text that concludes the experimental prose collection *One-Way Street*. Here, planetary perception is configured through the metaphor of a kinesthetic optical device, the planetarium: a kind of cinema in which images of planets, stars, moons, asteroids and other celestial bodies are projected on a dome. Planetaria spread all over Europe by the end of the 19th century, often built around pre-existent zoos or natural history museums, as showed by the cases, respectively, of Berlin and Milan.

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8   My translation from the Italian text.

2. *Walter Benjamin's Planetarium*

To the Planetarium marks the final entry among Benjamin's brief essays and aphorisms comprising *One-Way Street*, his inaugural editorial project on urban experience and the thought-images (*Denkbilder*) urban environments record.

As the text begins:

> If one had to expound the doctrine of antiquity with utmost brevity while standing on one leg, as did Hillel that of the Jews, it could only be in this sentence: 'They alone shall possess the earth who live from the powers of the cosmos.' Nothing distinguishes the ancient from the modern man so much as the former's absorption in a cosmic experience scarcely known to later periods. Its waning is marked by the flowering of astronomy at the beginning of the modern age. Kepler, Copernicus, and Tycho Brahe were certainly not driven by scientific impulses alone. All the same, the exclusive emphasis on an optical connection to the universe, to which astronomy very quickly led, contained a portent of what was to come. The ancients' intercourse with the cosmos had been different: the ecstatic trance. For it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest to us, and never of one without the other (Benjamin [1928]: 80).

From the use of a Kantian lexicon disseminated through the text (i.e., beautiful starry nights, *Schwärmerei* or fanaticism, reference to Copernicus and modern astronomical discoveries, to high mountains or Southern seas as places characterized by epiphanies of finitude), above all, in the context of a discussion on the openness or closure of the immediate, suprasensible experience of nature – a peculiarly Kantian theme – one can infer that the philosophy of Immanuel Kant does represent the implicit critical target of Benjamin's *Denkbild* here.

Notwithstanding the importance of the Kantian connection, the aim of this contribution is to clarify Benjamin's approach to planetary temporal perception, that is, the disclosure of that cosmic experience banned by representational engagements with the temporality of climate change. For this reason, Kant's complex aesthetics will assume a merely contextual relevance to identify Benjamin's critique to (Kantian) modernity. The center of my focus is Benjamin's cosmic predicament, because Benjamin's temporal concepts are frequently appropriated through the environmental humanities, with the notable exception of an affective, or better, geo-affective approach to planetary temporality. By affective, I mean here the situated feeling of being in contact with one's history, language, memory, place, and epoque, rather than with an intellectual apprehension of universals.

As an overview, at the heart of *To the Planetarium* lies a stark antithesis: the modern versus the ancient. Benjamin constructs a dichotomy between the man of antiquity and his modern counterpart, each defined by a distinct relationship to nature. Whereas the modern places faith in astronomy to orient humanity's place on Earth, the ancient aspires to merge with the elemental forces of the

cosmos. To grasp this shift – and the potential it unlocks for those critical of modernity – Benjamin urges attention to cultural practices of *Rausch* (polysemic of intoxication, trance, ritual dance), which he describes as an affect of cosmic distance: being there, reaching out, at once, to the closest and to the furthest point in space. It is through ecstatic trance «that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest to us, and never of one without the other» (Benjamin [1928]: 81). Such experiences, imagined to be typical of Dionysian antiquity, are supposed to be inaccessible to modern cosmologists like Kepler, Copernicus, or Tycho Brahe. They become possible, however, through the technological innovations of the current epoch, a motif that Benjamin elaborates on shortly thereafter.

The convergence of cosmic forces with the human body – both individual and collective – is most strikingly illustrated in what Benjamin calls «the technological convulsion of the human frame provoked by the war» (Benjamin [1928]: 82). This convulsion, or *Schauer* (paroxysm), gestures toward performed temporalities that exceed the scientific gaze, which Benjamin associates with an *optical*, i.e., representational conception of nature – one rooted in the Kantian project, for, in a pointed middle passage of the aphorism, Benjamin ironizes «beautiful starry nights», a figure Kant famously employed to circumscribe reason's access to the suprasensible to the moral law[9], whereby nature is reduced to the domain of sensibility, an object for the intellect to process – its transcendent dimensions foreclosed.

> […] this means that man can communicate through trance with the cosmos and only communally. It is the threatening aberration of the newer ones to consider this experience as trivial, as avoidable, and to entrust it to the individual as a rapture (*Schwärmerei*) in beautiful starry nights. (Benjamin [1928]: 81)

As the text unfolds, Benjamin identifies the *domain* of sensibility with the *domination* of reason upon the senses and hence upon nature itself (*Naturbeherrschung* or mastery on nature), as the primary – mistakenly so – aim of modern cosmology. By contrast, Benjamin argues that unity with the cosmos is, first, accessible; second, it is a form of collective experience; third, it has assumed catastrophic contours through the war, because of what he defines as an imperialist articulation of technology, which, nonetheless, has disclosed a *planetary* temporal dimension; fourth, attempting a non-destructive cosmic experience requires the development of a new political body: the species. The four lines of the

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9   See the lemma *Categorical Imperative* by Konstantin Pollok: «In the famous words of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me" (CPrR, 5:161/CEPP:269)» (*The Cambridge Kant Lexicon* [2021]: 86).

argument are written in a fast, cinematic style, like a scene grasped both from above and from the inside, like in a planetarium:

> [Cosmic experience] strikes again and again, and then neither nations nor generations can escape it, as was made terribly clear by the last war, which was an attempt at new and unprecedented commingling with the cosmic powers. Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurled into the open country, high-frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug in Mother Earth. This immense wooing of the cosmos was enacted for the first time on a planetary scale, that is, in the spirit of technology. But because the lust for profit of the ruling class sought satisfaction through it, technology betrayed man and turned the bridal bed into a bloodbath. The mastery of nature, so the imperialists teach, is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a cane wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? Is not education above all the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery, if we are to use this term, of that relationship and not of children? And likewise technology is not the mastery of nature but of the relation between nature and man. Men as a species completed their development thousands of years ago; but mankind as a species is just beginning his. In technology a *physis* is being organized through which mankind's contact with the cosmos takes a new and different form from that which it had in nations and families. One need recall only the experience of velocities by virtue of which mankind is now preparing to embark on incalculable journeys into the interior of time, to encounter there rhythms from which the sick shall draw strength as they did earlier on high mountains or at Southern seas. (Benjamin [1928]: 82)

Communion with cosmic forces is inherently collective. This ecstatic experience, embodied in trance-like rituals, cannot be dismissed as madness or *Schwärmerei* – a term Kant uses frequently in the sense of fanaticism to exclude suprasensible experience from legitimate thought[10].

Alternative technics for attuning nature to cosmic communication are not mere vestiges of antiquity either, as Benjamin asserts. They reemerge with the

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10   As Robert Clewis reconstructs «Kant discusses *Schwärmerei* or fanaticism in his pre-Critical works, in lectures and notes, and in his Critical writings on metaphysics, theology, and ethics. According to the third Critique, fanaticism is «a delusion of being able to see something beyond all bounds of sensibility, i.e., to dream in accordance with principles (to rave with reason)» (Kant [1790]: 275). According to *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, it is «a pious brazenness» occasioned by a certain pride or overconfidence in oneself «to come closer to the heavenly natures» and to «elevate» oneself by an «astonishing flight above the usual and prescribed order». The fanatic speaks only of «immediate inspiration». Kant occasionally associates fanaticism with mental disorder (hence one could sometimes translate the term with "delirium"). Kant attributes "fevered brains" to "deluded" fanatics. A fanatic has «wild figments of the imagination» and fantasies of the afterlife. Fanaticism, generally, is an overstepping of the bounds of human reason undertaken on principles. It promises an extension of concepts by means of supersensible intuition or feelings». For further refence see the full lemma *Schwärmerei* (*The Cambridge Kant Lexicon* [2021]: 186-187).

total war. Crucially, the text proclaims that commonality – the shared trance, the collective convulsion – ushers in a new political concept: the species. This emerging category, Benjamin suggests, has the potential to rule out liberal signifiers of nations and family. Thus, a new *planetary* temporal perception finds its proper correlate through collective, impersonal, technological prowess.

Benjamin's anti-modern stance is based on the affect of *Rausch*. The meaning of *Rausch* is controversial, given its wide presence in the philosophy of Nietzsche as well as in the vitalist Nazi-leaning discourse. According to Nitzan Lebovic, Nietzsche took *Rausch* as one of his principal concepts, a thread that united all his writings, beginning with the theory of Dionysian *Rausch* versus Apollonian order in his *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and still much in evidence in *The Twilight of the Gods* (1889), written in his final year of sanity (Lebovic [2004]).

In the posthumously published *Nachgelassene Fragmente* (written 1884-1885), *Rausch* is «the result of all great enthusiasms… all the extreme movements; the *Rausch* of destruction, the *Rausch* of cruelty; the *Rausch* of meteorological influence, for example, the *Rausch* of spring, or the influence of narcotics» (Lebovic [2004]: 4). The *Rausch* (also, flow as in today's psychology of meditation), has hence several markers: individual *and* group ecstatic experiences; the vanishing of personal self; instinctive understanding; intense technical activity.

Cosmic trance as Benjamin describes it – experienced as *Rausch* and unleashed, exemplarily, through military techniques – can righteously be considered as the predominant aesthetic value of nature appreciation *after* modernity, a value that replaces the experience of the sublime. For Benjamin, sublime landscapes such as «high mountains or Southern seas» that used to prepare «journeys to the interior of time» are replaced with another non-landscape experience[11].

3. *From the Sublime to the Cosmic*

In a 1979 English translation of Benjamin's text prefaced by Susan Sontag and reprinted in the 2021 Verso editions of *One-Way Street*, Sontag defines Benjamin's *Denkbild* as «a pean to the technological wooing of nature and to sexual ecstasy» (Sontag [1979]: 12). Nothing could be more stylistically divergent than Walter Benjamin's orgiastic conceptual sketch and Immanuel Kant's elegant argument around the sublime in the third *Critique* (Kant [1790]). As said, conspic-

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11   For a detailed account of how contemporary philosophies of landscape have challenged a
     visual understanding of landscape and introduced synesthetic and kinesthetic models see
     D'Angelo (2021).

uous references in Benjamin's text to the *Schwermärei* (madness, fanaticism) to which the moderns have reduced corporeal trance and disavowed its cognitive productivity as well as further references to the placid «starry nights» the moderns seek (Benjamin [1928]: 80-81) are famous quotations of Kant's critical project. In fact, ecstasy or transcendence of the embodied mind, of the projective quality of the mind (Monod [1970]), for Benjamin is not entirely immediate. Perhaps it is mediated otherwise: by dancers performing the trance, by gardeners landscaping the land; more soundingly, by motors and fuels, new synthetic worlds (Leslie [2004]).

To better grasp the difference between this kind of connection to the cosmos (as in the manic state) and the Kantian disavowal of non-conceptual pathways to the suprasensible, we must consider the *Critique of Judgement*. Here, the feeling of the sublime consists in a feeling of the superiority of reason as a suprasensible faculty over nature (Kant [1790]: 250-262). Reason can extend itself beyond sensorial limits through feelings of infinity. The fact that we are capable, through reason, of thinking infinity as a whole, «indicates a faculty of the mind which surpasses every standard of sense» (Kant [1790]: 254).

As Hannah Ginsborg commented, while Kant's discussion of the mathematical sublime mentions monuments such as the Pyramids in Egypt and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, it is not clear if these are intended as examples of the sublime, for Kant claims explicitly that the most appropriate examples are of *things in nature*. The demarcation rules out animals connected with the idea of biological function, but includes mountains and the sea, the concepts of which do not connect to any teleological drive (although they nourish the feeling of infinity). Episodes of the mathematical sublime are hence occasioned by visions of mountains and the sea mainly. For Kant, large and inanimate as it is (thus, non-teleological like animals are), the surface of the Earth presents the reasonable man with the dynamical sublime when feelings of infinity become in fact the faculty of dominion upon nature (*Kraft* being polysemic of ability, force, power, and right). Nature is thus redefined as «a power that has no dominion over us» (Kant [1790]: 260). The experience of natural things as fearful turns into the certainty that *we* are in a position of safety and hence not really threatened by natural powers:

> The irresistibility of [nature's] power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of nature and a superiority over nature […] whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion. (Kant [1790]: 261-262)

As the excerpt suggests, judgement overcomes fear, addressed now as inhuman or nonhuman. We recognize we belong to nature, but in this recog-

nition, we also gain a *superior* and *independent* standpoint on both contingency and greatness[12].

Kant's examples of judgements that let us overcome the narrow limits of our naturality while submitting to it (by gaining an external view from the right distance) include visions of overhanging cliffs, thunder clouds, volcanoes, and hurricanes. These geological formations and phenomena are scenarios in a literal sense. They constitute the background, the landscape of reason[13], on the backdrop of which our humanity takes shape.

This is neither the place to engage in a detailed account of what humanity means for Kant in relation to the sublime (therefore see Brady [1998] and Brady [2013]), nor the place to assess how climate change in fact challenges modern, non-catastrophic assumptions of landscape aesthetics (also, see Brady [2022]). This is the place of considering, instead, how the vision of geological landscapes can perform (affirm, restore, and consolidate) the boundaries of the self, while the opposite, manic vision of Benjamin, so often enveloped by the messianic correction to the *time out of joint* of IPCC representations, disperses the self within the world. While the Kantian dominion on nature constitutes a moment of clear delimitation between the self and the world, Benjamin's trance or *Rausch* performs identity with nature.

After detecting the centrality of ecstatic affects such as *Rausch* and *Schwärmerei* to define Benjamin's cosmic predicament, this is the place to focus on a third element: the *paroxysm* «of genuine cosmic experience». Cosmic natures of Benjamin's kind now include machines, the war, the masses – a human/nonhuman collective body that «in the experience of the total war resembled the bliss of the epileptic» (Benjamin [1928]: 82). As the text goes: «The paroxysm of genuine cosmic experience is not tied to that tiny fragment of nature that we are accustomed to call Nature» (Benjamin [1928]: 82). As stated earlier in Benjamin's text, mankind has long been a species naturally, but it has just started engineering the naturality of the species politically. To this extent, socialism is a cure to the *paroxysm* of the unskilled but mechanized body of the species, in which destruction and procreation (quite paradoxically) coincide.

As Jason Groves argued, paroxysm is the essential phenomenon explored in Walter Benjamin's *Ibizan Suite* (1932). Published in *Die literarische Welt*, the literary supplement to the Frankfurter Zeitung, the travelogue from Ibiza offers what Groves defines as the geo-morphism and geo-affectivity of the

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12 For a defense of Kant's potentially "environmental" view of nature and further reference on *greening Kant* see Vereb (2024), i.e., issue of "Environmental Ethics" dedicated to Vogel (2015).

13 For a study on the intimate relation between landscaping and the metaphysical tradition, see Weiss (1995). For a recent study on the role of geography in the constitution of Kant's thought see Morawski (2024).

Erschütterung (tectonic tremor and somatic shudder, synonym of paroxysm, *Schauer*) as an aesthetics of and for the mineral imaginary, which is distinct from «the visual impressions and electrical discharges peculiar to the experience of moving through the modern city» (Groves [2020]: 93). The geomorphic shake or *Erschütterung*, induces immersive motorial schemes in response to a shaken, erratic subjectivity that identifies with the land, or rather, the landless of the geological surrounding. Behind the geo-semantics of *Erschütterung*, Groves discovers the footwork of the long walk. It is this rhythm of walking exposed, exposed to the harsh morphology of the landscape, that characterizes the somatic experience responsible for the structural syncopation of the text.

From a perspective that retains the concept of individuality as an operator of Benjamin's philosophy, Jason Groves remarks that tracking the movement of the individual body always bears the mark of a larger political condition. It addresses but also exceeds the orogenetic, telluric, and tectonic experience of crossing a landscape individually:

> The insistence on the essential solitude of this endeavor in "Downhill" would unduly isolate the shuddering mountaineer's body (*Körperbau*) from that revolting political body (*Gliederbau*) of "To the Planetarium," if Benjamin were not elsewhere insistent that even the most idiosyncratic gestures performed in solitude bear the mark of a historical conditioning. (Grooves [2020]: 111)

In contrast to Grooves' reading, I do not believe that we can rescue a notion of individuality to be cashed out from the aphorism. Attacking the modern moral pathway to the cosmos, *To the Planetarium* proposes «to live out of the force of the cosmos», that is, collectively rather than individually; to embrace the forces of the Earth unbound by technology; and, at last, to de-visualize the cosmology of the moderns that prioritized vision upon performativity. Thus, how and in which ways does the perception of *cosmic forces* dissolve the integrity of the individual self?

After recalling how the moderns had rejected the ecstatic bond between communities and the cosmos as a form of mere individual irrationality, the *Denkbild* engages with the last (fundamental) question, that is, the telos (*Sinn*) of technology. The ruling class has betrayed the possibilities of technology. It has imposed an ideology of *Naturbeherrschung*, dominion over nature, while the real essence of technology is in fact «dominion over the relation between humanity and nature» [*Beherrschung vom Verhältnis von Natur und Menschheit*] (Benjamin [1928]: 82).

The question at stake is how to define this «dominion over the relation between humanity and nature». At a first glance, the cosmic predicament seems to take an esoteric stance in favor of the German "secret science" valorizing the technological forces unleashed by the war, and the war as an eminent form of

collective trance that instantiates the new kind of *relational* domination. However, the new political concept, the species, differs from both *mankind* and *the ordering structure of the human* (*Gliederbau der Menschheit*) revealed by the war. The species represent a new project after the shipwreck of humanity as a political and aesthetic value. We need a post-humanity. As the text goes, through rhythms (both political phases and medial tempos), various technics organize their own nature(s) («a physis»). These natures are said to be time-folds and time-travels; sites of new pilgrimages and sanatoria. Through these technical sites where deep time is imagined and performed («unpredictable travels in the inside of time»), the text envisions the relational cosmos as impersonal perception of velocities (*die Erfahrung von Geschwindigkeiten*), as a territory where new velocities hence define the thinking rhythm of the species as much as the modern walks «on high mountains and Southern seas».

A last relevant aspect that Groove's study can illuminate is the strange beginning of our aphorism. At the beginning, we were invited to «think on one foot» like Hillel, the Jewish teacher (Benjamin [1928]: 80). Performing this peculiar footwork means to perform an Earth-story while reading: something that deviates from institutional natural history and produces, instead, an experience of the Earth both choreographically and *in aller Kürze*, at high speed. The distinct textual paroxysm produces a kind of reading that requires standing *out of balance*, on one foot. In this sense, the designated standpoint of modern landscapes is translated as a direct instruction for readers. The place where one stands remains kinesthetic, suggesting pathways to bodily movement and its perception, and performative, a place designed and engineered, like the planetarium.

4. *Conclusion*

In revisiting Walter Benjamin's *To the Planetarium*, this paper has traced a fault line between two different cosmological orientations: one grounded in reason's mastery over nature, the other in the manic dissolution within it. If the first experience of the sublime reaffirms the boundary of the self, establishing judgment as the stabilizing force that allows humanity to transcend its natural limits while maintaining a distinct kind of sovereignty, in stark contrast, Benjamin's *Denkbild* stages a cosmic dramaturgy in which the individual is absorbed into collective affects, machinic rhythms, and geological forces. Here, technology is not the agent of domination over nature but the medium through which a new relational *physis* emerges – one that annuls partitions between nature and culture, subject and object, self and cosmos.

By centering paroxysm as inner tie of somatic tremor and tectonic shudder (as in the lexicon of *Schauer* and *Erschütterung*), Benjamin sketches a post-human

terrain where perception is no longer tethered to the sovereign individual but instead redistributed across species-being through geomorphic behaviors that can express our attunement with the temporality of the Planet. The planetarium, in this sense, is not an aesthetic object to be interpreted, but a metaphor to be used in literature as much as in life, for it produces affective, de-individuating, and intermittent historical times.

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Aisthesis

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 transla-
tor of Jonathan Swift, William Gerhardie, 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 sub-
jects 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, gar-
dens, 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 im-
plicit 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 visuality 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

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Landscape, Environment, Technologies

Aisthesis

"Far from the Shallow"?
Aesthetics in Conservation Biology

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Abstract. What role, if any, does aesthetics play in the development of biological conservation strategies? Should we consider beauty – and, more broadly, the aesthetic dimension of human experience – as a source of bias that risks distorting scientific judgments (and, therefore, something to be carefully managed or even eliminated in the pursuit of objective scientific truth)? Or, conversely, might beauty be seen as a legitimate and powerful motivator – an emotional and perceptual force capable of promoting conservation efforts? The interplay between aesthetics, beauty, and scientific inquiry has long been a subject of relevant debate within the philosophy of science. In this paper, I aim to investigate the role that aesthetic values and perceptions play in the context of conservation biology – particularly in light of a growing and renewed interest among conservationists in the aesthetic aspects of nature and environmental engagement. The argument I will make is that eliminativist approaches – which frame the aesthetic *mostly and primarily* as a source of potential distortion – are based on an overly simplistic and impoverished conception of what "aesthetic" means.

Keywords. Biodiversity, bias, truth, knowledge, understanding, beauty, distortion.

1. *Introduction*

The focus of this paper is on the role of aesthetic values and perceptions within the field of conservation biology – particularly in light of the growing scholarly interest in the aesthetic dimension among conservation biologists, as evidenced by a recent increase in critical literature on this subject. My aim in this contribution – which is meant to serve as an introduction to a broader, ongoing project on the conceptual foundations of an *aesthetics of biological conservation* – is to offer a preliminary critical assessment of this recent resurgence. I argue that eliminativist approaches in conservation biology – i.e. approaches which conceptualize the aesthetic as a bias or a potential source of distortion to be carefully managed, minimized or even eliminated in conservation theory and practice – rely on an impoverished notion of the aesthetic. Such perspectives miss the opportunity to reconsider and reimagine both conservation sciences and aesthetics through their rich, dynamic, and mutually transformative relationship.

2. *The state of the art*

The assessment of nature's intangible (i.e., non-material) contributions to human well-being has become a central challenge in contemporary conservation sciences (Dìaz et al. [2018]). Among these contributions, the aesthetic value of nature is particularly salient. As is well known, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) included aesthetic values in the set of ecosystem services, i.e. those "benefits" (or services) that nature offers to human beings for free.

More precisely, the aesthetic dimension of nature seems to have a twofold relevance: on the one hand, it is acknowledged for its contribution to psychological and cultural human well-being; on the other hand, particularly in recent years, it has emerged as a crucial asset in motivating and promoting collective commitment to conservation efforts (Tribot et al. [2018]; Tribot et al. [2016]; Stokes [2007]; see also Hettinger [2010], Lintott, Carson [2013]; for a critical assessment, Hall, Brady [2023]). Coming from different perspectives and working on a wide array of case studies, researchers have increasingly realized that human perceptions and attitudes, including *aesthetic* perceptions and attitudes, play a much more relevant role than previously thought for the effective implementation of conservation programs, especially at the local and community level. Natural beauty, thus, seems to be the key to motivate people to protect nature.

What is particularly noteworthy, however, is that this *general* growing recognition of the aesthetic dimension as central in shaping the human experience of the non-human natural world – especially in its motivational role – has, quite paradoxically, gone hand in hand *within the field of conservation biology* with

an increased emphasis on the aesthetic understood as a source of bias. This so-called "aesthetic bias" is perceived as being at odds with the supposed "objective" criteria used to set conservation priorities and it is increasingly framed as a potentially distorting influence on the effective management of nature degradation and biodiversity loss (Shaw et al. [2024]; Bellwood et al. [2020]; see also Troudet et al. [2017]). These two lines of reflection on the role of aesthetics in science are clearly in tension with one another and must be examined and, if possible, reconciled. What follows is a concise review of key studies published over the past few years that have addressed the emerging concern in conservation biology about the "aesthetic bias".

A wide diversity of taxonomic groups have been examined by researchers investigating the aesthetic bias. Studies range from mammals (e.g., Landová et al. [2018]) to snakes (Knight [2008]; Landová et al. [2012]), reptiles more broadly (Janovcová et al. [2019]), birds (Frynta et al. [2010]; Lišková, Frynta [2013]; Brambilla et al. [2013]; Haukka et al. [2023]; Santangeli et al. [2023]), and tropical frogs and insects. Recent efforts to quantify the aesthetic value of coralligenous reefs along the French Mediterranean coast using deep learning techniques (Langlois et al. [2021]; see also Bellwood et al. [2020]) have revealed a potential correlation between aesthetic appeal and ecological significance. However, Langlois et al. (2022) have also emphasized a global mismatch between the aesthetic appeal of reef fishes and their conservation priority. The problematic link between the aesthetic value of ornamental plants and the increased risk of biological invasions is addressed in several studies (e.g., Hu et al. [2023]; Kueffer, Kull [2017]). In botanical research, evidence shows that plant scientists tend to disproportionately focus on colorful, visually striking, and widely distributed alpine flowers – essentially, those with high aesthetic appeal rather than on species most in need of conservation attention (Adamo et al. [2021]). Aesthetic values also influence bird conservation strategies and the dynamics of the wildlife trade (Senior et al. [2022]). Concerning landscapes, research suggests that areas perceived as aesthetically pleasing are more likely to receive public support and protection, often independently of their ecological importance (Gobster et al. [2007]; Lindemann-Matthies et al. [2010]). In the case of butterflies, researchers found that species included in the EU Habitats Directive tend to be rated as more charismatic – a concept closely linked to, although not synonymous with, aesthetic appeal (see Portera [2025], in preparation) – than both conservation-priority species and those not listed at all (Habel et al. [2021]; van Tongeren et al. 2023). Furthermore, the presence of eye-like spots on butterfly wings has been shown to enhance human perception of their attractiveness, thereby shaping conservation attitudes (Manesi et al. [2015]). The potential impact of aesthetic biases – reflected in tendencies such as, "I am more willing to protect what is aesthetically appealing to me rather than what is actually under threat" – is wide: if confirmed, this aesthetic dynamic could become one of

the most powerful drivers of human-mediated evolutionary pressures in the An-thropocene (aesthetic-based anthropogenic selection)[1].

Little wonder then, given the body of research rapidly summarized above, that the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* published, in July 2024, a highly critical paper regarding the potential benefits of employing aesthetic arguments and/or aesthetic values in addressing global biodiversity loss (Mikkonen, Raati-kainen [2024]). The aim of the paper, as the authors state, was to explore «the possibility of grounding biodiversity conservation on aesthetics» (Ibi: 185). The outcome of this exploration paints a rather pessimistic picture: there is a mis-match, they argue, «between apparent and real biodiversity» (Ibi: 175). People's direct and sensory-based observations and perceptions of biological variety – that is, people's *aesthetic* experience of biological variety, assuming, as the authors do, that the aesthetic is equivalent to the immediate apprehension of what strikes the senses, mostly in the visual domain – is fundamentally different from actual, existing biodiversity. Therefore, they conclude, conservation cannot be based on aesthetic experience.

As already mentioned, I aim to challenge the premises of this conclusion: is understanding aesthetics in terms of a sensorial, superficial, immediate, and largely visual experience of what captivates the senses the only viable approach? Is there no room for aesthetics beyond its role as a distortion of knowledge? Should this be the case, the tension (Plato's "ancient discord", *Rep. X*) between aesthetics and ecology (coming closer to the main topic of this issue, between "landscape" as an aesthetic concept and "sustainability") would be further con-firmed, and aesthetics would be seen purely as a disruptive force in scientific discourse. To better understand the point, I suggest we first take a closer look at what conservation science – specifically, conservation biology – is.

3. *Conservation*

3.1. *Before turning into a science*

As Jax ([2024]: 25 ff.) observes, the emergence of the first Western conservation movements in the second half of the nineteenth century was driven not primarily by scientific reasons, but rather by symbolic, cultural, and *aesthetic* motivations. Nature needed to be protected not exclusively nor primarily because biologists or

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1   An interdisciplinary research group has been active at the University of Florence since 2021, bringing together researchers from the Department of Humanities and Philosophy (DILEF) and the Department of Biology (BIO) around the topic "aesthetic bias". The group is work-ing on a comprehensive study focused on the identification, evaluation, and re-modulation of aesthetic biases in conservation strategies targeting endangered species. Additional informa-tion about the project is available at: www.unveiling.eu.

natural scientists said so or proved it, but because it was beautiful – or because it was felt as part of a community's identity or symbolic heritage. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution on one side, and colonialism and imperialism on the other – for example, just think of the over-collection of beautiful plants and exotic animals as part of colonial trade – a perception of nature as something *beautiful yet increasingly endangered* began to take shape. A growing awareness arose of the imminent loss of a precious and fragile natural diversity (Jax [2024]: 32).

If we focus on the reasons that led to the foundation of the first *animal* protection societies, aesthetic considerations once again emerge as a central factor. The case of birds offers a particularly instructive example: the Society for the Protection of Birds was founded in the United Kingdom in 1889 as a response to the widespread use of bird feathers in women's fashion hats. In this case, aesthetic values – understood in a broad sense – played a dual role: they were implicated both in the problem and in the solution. On the one hand, the aesthetic attractiveness of feathers contributed, within the fashion industry, to the threat of extinction of several species of birds; on the other hand, the beauty of birds – viewed as living organisms in their own natural environments, not just bundles of feathers to be used in millinery – was recognized as a value to be preserved and protected (Jax [2024]: 11; see also Doughty [1975]; Woolf [1920]) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *The woman behind the gun*, Gordon Ross. N.Y. Published by Keppler & Schwarzmann, Puck Building, 1911 May 24 (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA)

A similar pattern of prevalence of aesthetic-cultural reasons over scientific ones can be seen in the Netherlands, where the early nature conservation movements (van der Windt [2012]) were strongly influenced by the involvement of amateur naturalists. These amateurs, who, in the initial phases, played a more significant role than professional scientists, were crucial precisely because «they were able to combine different types of academic and non-academic knowledge, ethical and aesthetic arguments for the protection of nature, and organisational and educational practices» (van der Windt [2012]: 231).

3.2. *Conservation as a science*

The integration of Western conservation movements with science and scientific methodologies *strictu sensu* came much later, roughly between the 1970s and 1980s. It was during this period, against the background of ecology and through the application of scientific research methods to conservation practices for the first time, that conservation biology took shape in the form we recognize today. A key moment in this process was marked by Michael Soulé's seminal 1985 paper, *What is Conservation Biology?*, the aim of which was twofold: on the one hand, to establish conservation biology as a scientific discipline; on the other, to emphasize its essential distinctiveness – or at least partial non-assimilability – to other biological disciplines. Soulé ([1985]: 727) writes:

> Conservation biology differs from most other biological sciences in one important way: it is often a crisis discipline. Its relation to biology, particularly ecology, is analogous to that of surgery to physiology and war to political science. In crisis disciplines, one must act before knowing all the facts; crisis disciplines are thus a mixture of science and art, and their pursuit requires intuition as well as information. A conservation biologist may have to make decisions or recommendations about design and management before he or she is completely comfortable with the theoretical and empirical bases of the analysis. Tolerating uncertainty is often necessary.

The epistemological framework of conservation biology as originally formulated by Soulé, (i.e., the idea that conservation biology is a crisis discipline, a mixture of art and science) has been – and continues to be – a subject of debate. A crucial contribution in this ongoing discussion is the paper by Kareiva and Marvier (2012), which suggests that *conservation biology* is replaced with a broader *conservation science*. This approach, the authors argue, would integrate an important element neglected in Soulé's vision: the role of human well-being within conservation practice. As Kareiva and Marvier ([2012]: 968) write: «Our vision of conservation science differs from earlier framings of conservation biology in large part because we believe that nature can prosper so long as people see conservation as something that sustains and enriches their own lives. [W]e

are advocating conservation for people rather than from people» (see also Mace [2014]; on this point, Jax [2024]: 44 ff.).

Setting aside for a moment this still ongoing debate, I suggest that we keep in mind two key points highlighted by Soulé in his paper: 1) conservation biology is a crisis discipline – operating under pressing constraints of time, space, and resources, and in the constant need of making decisions before being completely comfortable with data and evidence; 2) the critical nature of the contexts in which conservation biology operates makes it, I argue, particularly vulnerable to biases; the urgency of action often discourages deep thinking and prioritizes action and immediacy, while marginalizing complexity and multi-perspectivality (on this point, Malavasi [2025]). Biases in science can be understood as tendencies, often implicit or unconscious, to deviate from normative standards (see Ballantyne, Dunning [2022]): it seems that the aesthetic, at least according to Soulé-inspired conservation biologists, belongs to the realm of (powerful) biases.

3.3. *The crisis discipline seeks aesthetic shortcuts*

In a leading piece that contributed to the history of the relationships between humans and nature, between art and science, E.O. Wilson makes a point that goes in the direction of what has been argued in the previous paragraph. *Biophilia* – published in 1984, more or less in the same years in which the concept of biodiversity was first coined, also thanks to Wilson's own direct involvement – addresses, among others, the question of the role of beauty (and its related categories, such as elegance and simplicity) in the production of scientific knowledge, from the unique perspective of a passionate naturalist:

> Elegance is more a product of the human mind than of external reality. It is best understood as a product of organic evolution. *The brain depends upon elegance to compensate for its own small size and short lifetime.* As the cerebral cortex grew from apish dimensions through hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, it was forced to rely on tricks to enlarge memory and speed computation. The mind therefore specializes on analogy and metaphor, on a sweeping together of chaotic sensory experience into workable categories labeled by words and stacked into hierarchies for quick recovery. To a considerable degree science consists in originating the maximum amount of information with the minimum expenditure of energy. Beauty is the cleanness of line in such formulations, along with symmetry, surprise, and congruence with other prevailing beliefs. […] Mathematics and *beauty* are *devices by which human beings get through life with the limited intellectual capacity inherited by the species* (Wilson [1986]: 60-61, my emphasis).

In Wilson's understanding, elegance and beauty are devices to get the most effective "combination of effectiveness and economy" in science (see on this point Elgin [2020]). Due to the limited capacities of the human brain and to the

necessity to deal with huge amounts of data and with uncertainty, scientists – even more so, today, conservationists and conservation biologists – chase (consciously or not) after beauty and are vulnerable to its charming allure because beauty subtly promises to simplify their work. We prefer beautiful things over non-beautiful or ugly ones because beauty seems to offer a sort of dynamic tool to master effectively multifaceted hypotheses and overwhelming research materials, and to orient ourselves within complexity.

The point is, since according to Wilson beauty seems to be humeanly «no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them» (Hume [1757]), that there is always a risk that the aesthetic dimension may slip beyond scientists' grasp of reality; to it put differently, that the pursuit of beauty might distance science from "reality", whatever one intends by this term. In contemporary physics, this risk seems to have already taken shape in recent research developments, as physicist Sabine Hossenfelder argues in her book *Lost in Math: How Beauty Leads Physics Astray* (Hossenfelder [2018]). Is conservation biology perhaps also facing the same danger?

Let us summarize our key points so far: conservation, even before establishing itself as a science, is already deeply entangled with aesthetic and cultural values; once it does take shape as a scientific discipline, it is primarily defined as a *crisis discipline*, one operating under intense temporal and resource constraints. I argue that one of the side-effects of this crisis-oriented narrative, with regard to the aesthetic, has been its conceptualization as a bias – a non-cognitive, superficial and immediate apprehension of what strikes the senses, in contrast to the presumed objectivity of science (I shall come back to this point later).

The recent surge, in conservation biology, of papers that explicitly frame the aesthetic as a (negative) bias points in this direction[2]; only within certain limits the aesthetic can perhaps function in a Wilsonian sense as a pragmatic tool for the efficient management of vast and complex material under pressing conditions, but this is more an exception than the rule.

This framework gives rise to a dichotomy within conservation: the dichotomy between aesthetics and science, between (supposed) subjective values and descriptions, between the aesthetic dimension and the "reality" or the "objective fact." This growing divide ultimately betrays the original entanglement between aesthetics and conservation as it was at the time of the Western first conservation movements. To complicate the picture further, the very concept of biodiversity – which is central to conservation science and

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2   In a sense, one might perhaps even argue that, as a crisis discipline and in order to protect itself as much as possible from potential distortions due to pervasive time- and resource restrictions, conservation biology tends to be highly alert to potential biases – sometimes so much so that it risks seeing biases where there may be none, or where biases are, at least, not the primary issue at stake.

which I have assumed and employed so far, throughout this paper, in its most common-sense meaning – is multifaceted and difficult to grasp, positioning itself beyond the value-fact dichotomy (see, on this point, Casetta [2018, 2024]; Casetta, Delord [2018]; Casetta, Marques da Silva, Vecchi [2019]). In its standard formulation, biodiversity refers to the «variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part: this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems» (UNEP [1992]; for a philosophical discussion, see Casetta, Marques da Silva, Vecchi [2019]). Evidently, we can directly and sensorily perceive only a very narrow portion of biodiversity, *so* defined (Mikkonen, Raatikainen [2024]). But this brings us again to the crucial question: can we really be satisfied, in dealing with conservation, with (1) such a "shallow", immediate, sensory-based role for the aesthetic – and, *therefore* (2), with its almost complete assimilation into the category of a bias? More broadly, can we really be satisfied, in conservation, with the idea of a "pure science" to be liberated as much as possible from values, pleasures and interests?

4. *From the shallow to the deep: rethinking aesthetics in science*

4.1. *Back to Darwin*

When challenges arise within biology, it is always a good idea to return to Darwin's writings for inspiration and possible ways out of the impasse – and the present case is no exception. Darwin offers at least two valuable insights into the relationship between aesthetics and science. First, aesthetics does not emerge at the end of scientific inquiry, but rather precedes and orientates it: it plays a constitutive role in scientific creativity and in theory construction and development – in both the context of discovery and the context of justification (see, on this point, Kohn [1996]; Portera [2015]; Prum [2017], Bartalesi [2024]). Second, the aesthetic should not be regarded as merely superficial, or "shallow". It does not simply reflect or describe how the world presents itself to us in an immediate, purely perceptual way. Instead, it points toward deeper, more intricate dynamics and entanglements (where perception, cognition, emotion, values, and habits deeply intertwine with each other; see Desideri [2011, 2018]; Portera [2020, 2020a]) that shape and modulate what "becomes" visible on the surface. To put it differently, the aesthetic seems to constitute a dynamic experiential field of stratifications and appearances, of deeper forces and superficial trends, of visibility and invisibility. This is expressed with special clarity in the following widely cited passage from the first edition of *On the Origin of Species*:

We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we *do not see*, or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey; we do not always bear in mind, that though food may be now superabundant, it is not so at all seasons of each recurring year. (Darwin [1859]: 63, my emphasis)[3]

The fact that, in contemporary conservation science, beauty and the aesthetic are largely understood *only* as immediate sensory appearances – as superficial pleasures that *strike the senses* but remain disconnected from deeper dynamics – suggests that we have not yet fully grasped the implications of Darwin's insights on evolutionary theory and on the relationship between aesthetics and biology, between beauty and science. In his recent work on conservation concepts, Kurt Jax (2024) characterizes nature conservation as a contested field, where competing approaches seek legitimacy and no single, definitive method can claim universal validity. Instead, the challenge lies in identifying approaches appropriate to specific problems, experiences, objectives, and contexts. I suggest that a similar pluralistic perspective should be extended to aesthetics and to its multifaceted role within conservation biology.

4.2. *The aesthetic and the cognitive*

The set of questions raised thus far regarding the role of aesthetics in conservation biology, if pursued in full, would require a substantial reconsideration of at least two foundational assumptions: (a) the predominantly (visual-)perceptualist conception of the aesthetic commonly invoked in conservation discourse; and (b) the dominant framing of conservation biology as a crisis discipline. These two frameworks are closely interlinked – arguably in a near cause-and-effect relationship.

Given the scope and limitations of the present paper, I am unable to develop these two points in detail and must instead postpone their fuller treatment to future work.

Accordingly, rather than offering a comprehensive analysis, I will focus here on a more narrowly defined – though by no means marginal – related issue: the widespread idea (particularly prevalent among conservation biologists) that, once the aesthetic bias is identified – a bias which, like most biases, tends to op-

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3   Scholarly work on Darwin has emphasized his integration of the sublime into the category of the beautiful. In Darwin's aesthetic theory, the beautiful – serene, harmonious, and graceful – and the sublime – violent, excessive, powerful, and immense – are conceived as complementary dimensions of a unified aesthetic experience. For an in-depth discussion of this point (among other points on the general topic "Darwin's aesthetics"), see Bartalesi (2012), Portera (2015), and Bartalesi (2024).

erate implicitly and must therefore first be made explicit – scientific knowledge and cognitive information represent the most effective tools for correcting or recalibrating our distorted aesthetic experience of nature. In short, this position advocates for a *cognitively* informed aesthetics – or, I would rather say, for an absorption of the aesthetic (so understood) into the cognitive realm.

As Mikkonen and Raatikainen ([2024]: 185) explicitly argue, cognitivist approaches represent the only viable path for developing an aesthetic framework adequate to conservation/biodiversity, since «non-cognitivist approaches seem ill-suited to the aesthetic appreciation of biological diversity whose assessment is, by definition, part of the cognitive domain» (It is worth noting here the persistence of a sharp division between the cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions of the aesthetic, between facts, values and emotions, as if they were mutually exclusive spheres). But what assumptions underpin this view? What are its implications for how we understand the relationship between aesthetics and knowledge, between aesthetics and science, or between the aesthetic and "objectivity"? Let us begin to tackle some of these questions through a step-by-step approach.

Figure 2. *Eichornia crassipes*, commonly known as water hyacinth
(courtesy of Claudia Giuliani and Elena Tricarico).

Research has suggested that informing individuals about the rarity or endangered status of an animal – particularly one they do not initially find aesthetically appealing – can lead to a slight increase in its perceived attractiveness. This effect, however, is not observed when the animal is already regarded as beautiful (Gunnthorsdottir [2001]; Brambilla et al. [2013]; see also Angulo et al. [2009] on the "rarity effect"). Nevertheless, it would be misguided to assume that, under any circumstances, the mere communication of scientific facts regarding an animal's or species' conservation status can fully and durably re-shape, as if by waving a magic wand in a single gesture, the nature of aesthetic appreciations/appearances. What can reasonably be expected is that cognitive information has the potential to re-modulate, through time, repeated embodied exposure and within certain limits, human perceptual and emotional engagement[4]. For instance, a species of butterfly that initially fails to captivate the observer may, upon learning of its endangered status and upon gaining "embodied" experience of it, acquire a new emotional resonance and aesthetic significance[5]; similarly, a visually captivating mountain landscape that reveals itself to us after a long trek does not, upon learning that it is doomed to disappear within fifty or forty years due to anthropogenic glaciers melting, entirely lose its beauty; rather, that beauty acquires a "touch" of melancholy, anger, or sorrow (Saito [2010], Brady [2022]).

The relationship between what we know (about something) and the comprehensive *aesthetic* experience we have (of/with *that* something) is multifaceted and multi-layered. As briefly mentioned above, but now from a different perspective: while contemplating its delicate appearance, are we truly moment-by-moment aware that the water hyacinth, with its vivid shades of blue and lilac glistening in the streams, ponds and lakes that we may frequent, is one of the most invasive alien species ever introduced into our ecosystems (Figure 2)? Aesthetic appearances, *per se*, should not be demonized; rather dynamized.

4.3. *Philosophy of science: where's the "objective truth"?*

Recent discussions in the philosophy of science can offer further valuable insights into the issues with which the previous paragraph concluded, approaching them from an alternative perspective. I will organize my discussion in two

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4   On the role of habits and habituation processes in aesthetics and aesthetic experience, also in terms of the re-modulation of aesthetic experiences of nature, see Portera (2020, 2020a, 2022).
5   I do not mean here by *embodied experience* solely or exclusively direct, first-hand experience – something clearly impossible in the case of certain endangered species that are extremely rare or located far from us. Rather, I also refer to the use of narratives, poetry, performances, and the full range of tools offered by the performing arts and literature to give (through time) shape, body and substance – alongside science (not apart from it) – to our experience of the non-human living world. The whole project of contemporary Environmental Humanities relies on this assumption.

parts: first, an examination of the relationship between truth, understanding, and embodied experience in scientific theories and practices; second, an applied discussion of the supposed separability between descriptive and appreciative/ evaluative components in conservation biology, with specific reference to the paradigmatic case of the concept of biodiversity.

Let us start from the first point. Lately, scholars have increasingly returned to a focus on the role and status of models, representations, and idealisations within scientific practice. Models and representations are research tools that are frequently employed by scientists without strict regard for their literal truth, and often with full awareness that they are, in fact, false (Cartwright [1983]; Potochnik [2017]; Elgin [2017]). Scientific modelling, in particular, regularly involves the use of distortions, abstractions, and idealisations. For example, economic models typically assume the existence of perfectly rational agents – entities that, strictly speaking, do not exist. Risk prediction models for invasive alien species rely on probabilistic assumptions, which are essential in attempting to estimate, with the highest possible reliability, whether an organism is potentially harmful – without the need to wait for its impacts to become observable. In population biology, likewise, models that attribute population self-regulation to size-dependent mechanisms often presuppose processes that have been only partially clarified by scientists. Nevertheless, this incomplete knowledge does not prevent the formulation of predictions for population dynamics.

The reliance on such idealized constructs has led several philosophers to contend that the primary aim of science is not necessarily to arrive at truth, but rather to promote understanding of the world's underlying patterns (de Regt, Leonelli, Eigner [2009]). In this vein, and following a path already traced by Nelson Goodman regarding the analogies between art, the aesthetic, and science, Elgin has introduced the concept of "felicitous falsehoods" (Elgin 2017, 2022) – i.e. idealized representations whose epistemic value is not undermined by their inaccuracy. She writes: «*felicitous* because their inaccuracies are epistemically fruitful; they are not defects. The falsehoods are inaccurate in ways that enable them to non-accidentally provide epistemic access to obscure or occluded aspects of their targets. Not despite, but because of their inaccuracy, they afford the access that they do» (Elgin [2022]: 12). Elgin, in the framework of a conceptual distinction between scientific knowledge and scientific understanding, suggests that understanding be viewed as a *skill* (or, I would say, as a habit or habitual acquired disposition: Portera [2020]), i.e. the ability to discern, also by direct, transformative intervention in the world (see Leonelli [2009]), how facts cohere within a general framework. In a similar vein and focusing more directly on the role of tools and *knowing-how*, Leonelli (2009) argues that «within most of biology […] the development of skills, procedures, and tools appropriate to researching specific issues is valued as highly as – or, sometimes, even more highly than –

the achievement of theories or data. The evolution of tools and procedures (as in the case of modeling) is not only crucial to furthering theoretical developments: it constitutes an important research goal in its own right» (Leonelli [2009]: 194-195). She makes a persuasive case for the relevance, in the process of gaining biological understanding, of embodied knowledge and of the researcher's sensory experience of the phenomena under scrutiny, up to the point that, according to Leonelli, «understanding a claim or explanation is [particularly in biology] a largely subjective matter. Understanding is not an attribute of knowledge itself, which can be measured quantitatively (as in "how much do you understand?"). Rather, it is a cognitive achievement that is acquired by individuals in a variety of ways and that can therefore take different forms depending on the instruments that are used to obtain it» (Leonelli [2009: 199]). Crucially, this kind of biological understanding, rooted in the skills, habits and embodied abilities possessed by each subject (by each scientist), becomes properly scientific only when it is shared inter-subjectively and it circulates within a community of peers, promoting (indirectly: see Leonelli [2009]: 199) other subjects' chances to gain similar understanding. Might is be the case, as Darwin's biography seems to suggest, that also the scientist's aesthetic experiences play a role in this multifaceted process of understanding (in Leonelli's sense) at the heart of scientific theorizing and practices?

As for the second point, I will restrict myself to a couple of remarks. Conservation, by its very nature, implies as one of its foundational steps a process of prioritization. From a policy-oriented conservationist standpoint – particularly within a crisis-driven framework – not all species or ecosystems can or should be preserved. To what extent can or should our aesthetic engagement with the non-human natural world be guided exclusively by the "objective" conservation priorities set by scientists? More broadly, what kind of concept is the concept of conservation? And, in parallel, what kind of concept is biodiversity – the paradigmatic focus of conservation efforts? Casetta, in numerous contributions, highlights how the concept of biodiversity has been designed, from the very beginning, as an almost inextricable entanglement of facts, values, interests, and demands: a quasi-concept (Casetta [2018]). This quasi-concept reveals that a "pure" science of conservation – entirely free from the entanglement with values, intentions and interests – is, at best, a theoretical fiction. It is worth quoting once again – despite its familiarity – the statement by Dan Janzen, invited by E.O. Wilson to speak at the 1986 Forum that marked the official birth of the very notion of biodiversity:

> The Washington conference? That was an explicit politic event, explicitly designed to make Congress aware of this complexity of species that we're losing. And […] the word was punched into that system at that point deliberately. A lot of us went to that talk on a political mission. (Takacs [1996]: 37)

In a nutshell, the word "biodiversity", when invented, was mainly and primarily intended to serve as a socio-political tool: it was coined in the attempt to gain the attention and support of policy makers, stakeholders, governments and citizens towards the rapid decrease in the number of species all over the world. It has been since the beginning a notion in which scientific facts and values, descriptions, policies and norms deeply and structurally intertwine. Against this background, dismissing the aesthetic in biodiversity conservation because it is merely a "shallow" subjective appearance and *therefore* a bias sounds like throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

By now, it should be clear – if my argument so far has been even minimally convincing – that the dichotomy between biases and "truly objective facts" is an overly simplistic way of framing the discourse on aesthetics in conservation. The point is not whether aesthetic values should be excluded from science nor whether it is possible to "redeem" them by subordinating them to scientific knowledge. Rather, the key issue is how we can reconceptualize and critically reassess the fundamental concepts at play – namely, conservation biology, conservation practices, and aesthetics – by attending to their reciprocal interrelations. I shall restrict myself here to a few preliminary remarks specifically concerning the aesthetic dimension, which I just outline for now, reserving a more thorough exposition and analysis for future work.

In order for the aesthetic to be recognized not just in a negative sense but as playing a constructive role within conservation biology, two conditions must be met: 1) it is necessary to adopt a genuinely *relational* concept of the aesthetic – one that avoids insular or exceptionalist models (such as those drawn exclusively from the art) and capable of overcoming the static dichotomy between an evaluating subject and an evaluated object (see Perullo [2025]); 2) the aesthetic should be conceived as a multi-layered and dynamic field of experience, in which surface appearances and underlying depth, as well as immediate perceptions and mediated understanding, visibility and invisibility are not considered as oppositional or discrete, but as interrelated and mutually shaping dimensions. This second point is relevant since such a framework would allow a focus onto the role of habits (as "second nature"), of embodied experience, and skills in both aesthetic perception and scientific practice (as illustrated, for example, in the work of Leonelli [2009]; see also Portera [2020, 2022]).

A relational and multi-layered perspective on the aesthetic – alongside a reassessment of the crisis-discipline narrative and of the fact-value dichotomy in conservation biology, and together with a transdisciplinary, intersectoral, and community-based approach in conservation science and aesthetics (see Ludwig et al. [2024]; Poliseli, Leite [2021]) – may offer a promising trajectory for articulating a yet-to-be-formulated *aesthetics of biological conservation*.

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Aisthesis

Solar Landscapes. Aesthetics in the Energy Transition

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Abstract. This essay explores the aesthetics of solar landscapes in the framework of a broader investigation about the concept of landscape and its semantic richness. The article consists of four paragraphs. In the first, the terms territory and landscape are introduced to properly distinguish between disputes over land use and landscape perception. The second paragraph reflects on energy landscapes as particular cases of cultural landscapes that are typical of modernity and are generally not associated with positive aesthetic values. After a brief examination of the aesthetic issues related to energy landscapes in general, the third paragraph deals specifically with solar landscapes and offers a philosophical commentary on part of today's literature, which is mainly drawn from the fields of energy economics and landscape planning. Finally, in the fourth paragraph, I will show that energy and solar landscapes also deserve attention from an aesthetic point of view: Although they are unavoidable from a territorial point of view, they still need to be socially and aesthetically accepted to be fully realised as full-fledged landscapes.

Keywords. Energy landscape, modified environment, patch, solar landscape, territory.

1. *European solar energy targets and related controversies*

The European Union (EU) has set ambitious targets in its energy policies concerning solar plants as part of its wider efforts to transition towards clean and renewable energy sources[1]. These goals are outlined primarily in the European Commission's strategic documents, such as the European Green Deal[2] and the Clean Energy for All Europeans package[3]. The EU has set a binding target to achieve at least 32% of its energy consumption from renewable sources by 2030. This includes solar energy, among others. The EU's solar energy capacity increased significantly from 164.19 GW in 2021 to 259.99 GW by 2023, with employment in the sector growing from 466,000 workers in 2021 to 648,100 by the end of 2022, representing a 39% increase. The European Commission adopted in May 2022 an EU solar energy strategy, which identifies remaining barriers and challenges in the solar energy sector and outlines initiatives to overcome them and accelerate the deployment of solar technologies. It aims to deliver over 320 GW of solar photovoltaic by 2025 and almost 600 GW by 2030.

In order to reach the targets on schedule, not only rooftops and abandoned factories have been identified as locations for the installation of photovoltaic panels, but also farm fields and green spaces. According to Chatzipanagi:

> Although considerable capacity can be installed on roofs, in urban areas, on brownfield sites and on infrastructure, approximately 50% (SolarPower Europe, 2022a) are expected to be ground mounted systems using land in agricultural areas. Indeed, agricultural land is already extensively used for energy: bioenergy crops occupy approximately 10 Mha at present, accounting for around 2.4 % of the total EU land area (Strapasson et al., 2020), whereas existing utility-scale ground mounted PV systems (approximately 92 GW) use 0.1 Mha. (Chatzipanagi et al. [2023])

The use of photovoltaics is nonetheless controversial in at least two respects: first, large-scale solar energy facilities installed at the level of the ground come into conflict with other land uses, like agriculture and livestock; second, ground photovoltaics heavily affect the perception of the landscape and, hence, the very sense of place (Relph [1976]) of the involved site. Land use conflicts can be seen as part of a territorial controversy, that is, a controversy that concerns the ways in which a portion of space is materially shaped by the productive forces active in the area; conflicts about place-perception constitute a landscape controversy, concerning the transformation of a portion of space's appearance and character induced by the installation of solar facilities and the ways in which people per-

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1   https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/renewable-energy/renewable-energy-directive-targets-and-rules/renewable-energy-targets_en.
2   https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/green-deal/.
3   https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/energy-strategy/clean-energy-all-europeans-package_en.

ceives and appreciates it. The two controversies are clearly interlinked, yet they maintain a certain distinction: in fact, one refers to space understood in terms of territory, the other to space understood as landscape.

Territory and landscape are polysemic and multidisciplinary concepts: how we define them is not obvious and depends on the adopted scientific framework and theoretical perspective. In philosophical aesthetics, for instance, the conceptual tension between territory and landscape is not addressed[4]. This may be due to the birth of the territory concept in the political, administrative and military ambits (Elden [2013]), which are traditionally far from the interest and the inquiries of aestheticians. The conceptual distinction between territory and landscape has been addressed in the framework of human geography. In both aesthetics and human geography, landscape has been and can be defined in multiple ways, according to different cultural sensitivities and theoretical frames, but its link with the sphere of aesthetic appreciation and experiential/existential perception, however addressed, is generally accepted, as it is implied in the «intuitive sense of the term landscape» (Turner, Gardner [2015]: 1). In human geography, the recognition of the inherent aesthetic character of the landscape concept immediately highlights the need to use different concepts to emphasize more objective, economic, or socio-political structures and meanings of spatiality. According to the influential geographer Claude Raffestin, territory is the product of «the projection of labour – energy and information – by a community into a given space» (Raffestin [2012]: 126). In this framework, territory is a spatial configuration whose elements and functions depends on quantifiable processes such as economic flows, labour organization, used technologies. A territory is a material and social entity and its specific layout depends on the part played by that territory throughout the supply chain. When a socio-economic structure is superseded by a new one, the signs of the old territorialization remain on the same portion of space as marks of a past that will very soon be idealized by local communities: this territorial desire of the past, inevitably bound up with nostalgia, is what Raffestin calls

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4   In aesthetics, the concept of landscape is often coupled and paralleled with the notion of environment. The field of environmental aesthetics has among its defining questions the distinction between environment and landscape. Allen Carlson (2000, 2009) has framed it in an oppositional sense: landscape has to do with art and cultural gaze, whereas environment is nature, characterized by its own balances and dynamics: to aesthetically appraise nature as landscape means to mistake nature, wrongly confusing it with nature. However, the conception of landscape assumed by Carlson is based on prior separation between nature and culture, which is strongly discussed. Already in 1997 Arnold Berleant proposed a different conceptualization of environment, landscape, and their entanglements, by claiming that environment is «the more general term, embracing the many factors, including the human ones, that combine to form the conditions of life», while landscape is «an individual environment, its peculiar features embodying in a distinctive way the factors that constitute any environment and emphasizing the human presence as the perceptual activator of that environment» (Berleant [1997]: 12).

landscape (Raffestin [2005]). Landscape emerges as a sort of «convivial utopia» (Quaini [2006]), in which the real conflicts and struggles connected to the former territoriality have been removed; but such removal is only achieved through imagination, as an aesthetic compensation of the lost territory[5].

Nowadays, in many geographical approaches, differences between landscape and territory have faded, partly under the impulse of the landscape definition provided by the European Convention signed in Florence in 2000. According to the Convention, landscape is: «an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors»[6]. In this definition, the aesthetic question survives in the reference to the perception of people and to the character of landscape. Perception is always connected to imagination, imaginaries, nostalgias and desires, but it returns us to the actual presence of its object: all territories (and not only the disappeared ones) are always already landscapes, in that they take on meaning for people via perception. In this perspective, the interplay between territory and landscape is deeply rephrased: they become two coexisting aspects of the very same spatial entity, like two sides of the same coin.

At the price of some risk of confusion, the definition proposed by the European Convention attempts to restore the unitary character of the spatial phenomenon, which has been too often considered in a fragmented manner because of the multiple disciplines in which it is framed. Nevertheless, it is useful to maintain a minimal difference between the territorial and the aesthetic side, if only because, at the operational and practical level, arguments based on taste judgement and aesthetic appraisal are improperly employed to evaluate the rationality, sustainability, and equity of the land use. The interference of taste judgements in land use assessments is perfectly normal precisely because of the always also aesthetic character of any territory. Nonetheless, this interference risks to mistake what is at stake in the land use controversy. For example, we may prefer a picturesque, yellow oilseed rape field or a gently manicured lawn to a solar power plant regardless of whether they are actually more ecologically sustainable or socio-politically equitable than SPP: we intuitively associate agriculture and gardening to something more natural than energy extraction or production and this is quite relevant in a taste paradigm like ours, particularly sensitive to the aesthetic value of nature (Parsons [2008]).

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5   The analogy between the conception of landscape as aesthetic compensation for the loss of the territory, discussed by geography, and the conception of landscape as aesthetic compensation of the loss of cosmic nature, famously provided by Joachim Ritter in 1963, cannot be neglected.
6   Council of Europe Landscape Convention * 1 as amended by the 2016 Protocol Florence, 20.X.2000, 2, site consulted June 25, 2024.

Realizing that green lawns and crop fields are not necessarily more sustainable than an agrivoltaic plant, especially considering the irrationalities and inequities of today's global agricultural production and distribution system, may be disturbing, but it helps to recognize the conflict between agricultural use and energy use of a land for what it is: a clash between two different ways of configuring that portion of space depending on the role it is given in the economic system. Incidentally, this does not detract from the controversy about landscape aesthetics: the fact that a certain economic activity leads to an appearance, an aesthetic quality of the landscape that is perceived as ugly, disturbing or problematic by percipients is relevant because the processes of self-knowledge and mutual recognition also depend on how communities perceive the places where their existence takes place. In short, even if from a conceptual point of view a certain convergence of the notions of territory and landscape is acceptable, as opposed to a too rigid and outdated separation of object and subject and nature and culture, there is nevertheless a specificity of the aesthetic sphere that must be recognised in order for it to be seriously taken into account in landscape planning, whose aim should be precisely to mitigate the spatial impact of a given regime and make it socially acceptable.

After this philosophical clarification about the legitimacy and the limits of the distinction between territory and landscape and the controversy they respectively give rise, in what follows I will deal, first, with the aesthetics of energy landscapes in general and, second, with solar landscapes in particular.

2. *Energy Landscape: a modern problem*

It is possible to classify landscapes not only according to representational parameters such as artistic style or media, but also according to the morphological characteristics of the considered area. Morphology, in this context, does not only refer to the natural forms characterizing a certain landscape (mountains, rivers, native vegetation), but also to the shapes that result from the set of human activities insisting on that area. This inclusion of human-induced modifications of landscapes in the scope of morphological inquiry has already been claimed about one century ago, when Carl Sauer published the essay *The Morphology of Landscape* (1925) in which the expression «cultural landscape» (Sauer [1996]: 342) appeared for the first time[7].

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7   In Sauer's approach, every portion of land is a landscape as long as it is perceived, and every landscape can be labelled as cultural insofar as it shows the presence of some kind of human activity. Even though the nature/culture dualism that clearly characterizes Sauer's approach has been repeatedly deconstructed in philosophy and the human sciences (Duncan 1980, Descola 2005), we continue to distinguish between natural and cultural landscapes in everyday discourses as well as in many legal sources, such as, for instance, the UNESCO documents.

From the perspective of environmental aesthetics, cultural landscapes can be better grasped as «modified environments» (Brady et al. [2018]: 7): natural environments that bear the marks of human activity. Brady, Brook, and Prior argue that the notion of modified environment is preferable to cultural landscape, claiming that:

> While we see this category as a useful means to properly foreground the work of human labour, propagation, and territorialisation, in shaping the land (including its aesthetic qualities), as well as cultural readings of landscape, it does so in a manner that risks downplaying the role of non-human nature. (Brady et al [2018]: 9)

It is undeniable that in many traditional approaches to landscape the role of non-human agency, i.e. the landscape formation, shaping and transformation brought into play by non-human forces, processes, and «actants» (Latour [1996]: 8), has been overlooked. However, the definition of landscape provided by the European Convention includes non-human factors and processes into the scope of the concept. Such an inclusion is paralleled, in recent theoretical developments, by a growing emphasis on the material and performative dimension of landscape, testifying of the efforts to retrieve the substantive nature of landscape. According to the geographer Kenneth Olwig, for instance:

> Landscape, I will argue, need not be understood as being either territory or scenery; it can also be conceived as a nexus of community, justice, nature, and environmental equity, a contested territory that is as pertinent today as it was when the term entered the modern English language at the end of the sixteenth century (Olwig [1996]: 630-31).

The recent development of the concept of landscape on a theoretical and normative level downplays its representational and aesthetic character and brings it closer to the more objective concepts of territory and environment. The significance of this conceptual rapprochement is not the dissolution of the aesthetic sphere into the spatial and ecological sphere, but rather the overcoming of those dualisms that have interrupted the fundamental continuity of the spatial phenomenon: every modified environment is also a cultural landscape, insofar as the complex of transformations that a particular environment undergoes is essentially dependent on a cultural set of actions, techniques, and goals. At the same time, the notion of landscape preserves a connection with the sphere of aesthetic appreciation that is more explicit than the notions of environment and territory: Even if the strictly visual and representational character of landscape has been downplayed, the term landscape is retrieved in territorial planning and environmental policies to the extent that it raises issues concerning how people perceive and appraise a certain territory or environment.

After these conceptual clarifications, we can introduce «energy landscapes» (Pasqualetti, Stremke [2018], Jørgensen [2018], Yuqing [2021]) as a subcategory

of cultural landscapes, or modified environments, whose aesthetic character is deeply affected by the presence of energy infrastructures and the associated signs and effects. The term "landscape" is used in contemporary energy studies to refer to the experience that it is possible to have of an environment characterized by a land use related to energy: An experience that is not only visual, but includes visibility as part of a more complex, multisensory experience rooted in the affectivity of the perceiver and the cultural history of taste. Examples of energy landscapes are: «scars left from mining, patchworks of drilling pads, cleared routes for pipelines and canals, harbours for large tankers, oil refineries» (Pasqualetti, Stremke [2018]: 95). All examples are drawn from a kind of territorialization that is clearly interlinked with the industrial age.

One can certainly claim the «universality of the energy concept» (Geerts et al. [2014]: 109), where energy is defined as the capacity to do work and create material change[8]: this definition clearly comes from modern physics, yet material processes based on energy transfer and transformation have always existed. The very fact that it is modern physics that takes hold of the concept of energy, giving it a general and quantifiable meaning, is nevertheless a sign of an important change in the way energy is produced, stored, used, and transformed during the modern era. It has been noted that: «changes in energy practices became increasingly visible and influential in industrial societies» (Geerts et al. [2014]: 110). The specific interrelations between the passive, materialistic, desacralized understanding of nature implied by modern science, the capitalist mode of production characteristic of the industrial revolution, and the rapid development of ways to use natural resources for the production of goods and commodities are the foundations of what we recognize as energy landscapes.

So, energy landscapes are a modern problem in two respects: first, capitalism produces specialized territories that fulfil a specific function within the economic system, and energy landscapes embody and reflect one of these functions; second, landscape aesthetics in general emerges as a reaction to the loss – or better, the reinvention – of the sense of nature experienced by Europeans and North Americans during the industrial age (Ritter [1963]). In other terms: modern industrialization has laid the basis for both the shaping of energy landscapes and the aesthetic sensibility towards landscape, seen as a compensation for the birth of what we now call industrial or energy landscapes. The paradox, here, is that today, at least if we follow the European Convention definition, we use the term landscape to refer also to portions of land that are transformed according to the dictates of the economic system (following Raffestin, territories), regardless of

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8   The semantic complexities of the energy concept from Aristotle to Einstein has been remarked (Coehlo [2009]); we assume here the common notion of energy adopted by modern physics: «a quantitative, abstract concept of the ability to do work that mutually interconnects a broad range of physical phenomena» (Geerts [2015]: 109).

their aesthetic value, which is often felt as negative in the case of energy landscape. Such a use of the term landscape would have been impossible for most of the modern age, when it was mainly used to identify the aesthetic, even pictorial, value and quality of a portion of the land, however that value is assessed. In my view, the semantic paradox of landscape can be resolved by identifying a conceptual tension between two levels of meaning in the concept of landscape itself: I will go into this in some detail in the conclusions.

The modern character of energy landscape lies also in the dramatic, fast changes that have modified environments during the industrial age. In that respect, energy landscapes can be easily opposed to agricultural landscapes. Agricultural and energy landscapes share the fact that their aesthetics «sits alongside or is integrated within practical, productive activities which are not ordinarily or mainly aimed at an aesthetic effect» (Brady et al. [2018]: 51). However, agricultural landscapes are often associated with more traditional «modes of inhabiting the land» (Brady et al. [2018]: 50): the aesthetic appreciation of agricultural landscapes is often interwoven with a positive axiological and ethical attitude towards the rural way of life. Traditional agricultural landscapes are considered as «tangible witnesses of ancestral values anyone can perceive and experience directly in the landscape. Symbolic and cognitive values pass through aesthetically felt scenery» (Antrop [2005]: 32). Such a depiction of the agricultural landscape is perhaps a little idealized and does not take into account the enormous changes that have taken place in the practice of agriculture in recent centuries, so that it seems very difficult to find a patch of traditional agricultural landscape anywhere that corresponds to the ideal. It is undisputed that energy landscapes feel anything but traditional and have little to do with dwelling: their modern character lies precisely in their break with traditional landscapes as we are used to imagining and representing them. Energy landscapes indicate a less direct relationship between humans and nature than agricultural landscapes, for they usually require heavier use of technology and machines. It is however clear that, today, a too sharp opposition between agricultural and energy landscapes is illusory and deceitful at the level of land-use controversy: intensive farming, the standardization of crop production to meet the demands of the global food supply chain, the use of all kinds of artificial products (which are sometimes harmful to health), advances in satellite technology and GiS in precision agriculture are just some of the factors that make today's agricultural landscapes as technologically informed (and potentially damaging) as energy landscapes. This is why the aesthetic dispute about landscapes must be practically distinguished from the land-use controversy: the very fact that energy landscapes are often judged as ugly, machinic, depressed does not necessarily entail that they are more harmful or irrational or unsustainable than agricultural landscapes.

Energy development produces «marks, structures, excavations, creations, and supplements» (Pasqualetti, Stremke [2018]: 96) that also depend on the kind of energy we are dealing with. In this sense, it is appropriate to speak of energy landscapes in the plural, because there are as many types of energy landscapes as there are types of energy. Pasqualetti and Stremke argue that the societal hardships of energy landscapes are connected to the different temporal consequences of a certain land-use: are the environmental consequences of a certain kind of exploitation «temporary or timeless» (Pasqualetti, Stremke [2018]: 96)? In answering this question, a distinction must first be made between different types of energy landscapes: On the one hand, we are dealing with traditional energy landscapes based on non-renewable sources such as carbon and fossil fuels; on the other hand, we are dealing with energy landscapes based on renewable and (at least partly) circular resources such as solar power plants, wind turbines and so on and so forth. Despite the scientifically confirmed association of traditional energy landscapes with timeless consequences for the environment (the very term «non-renewable resources» implies this), they are perhaps less aesthetically problematic for today's beholders. Suffice it to think to the aestheticization of mines implied in contemporary practices of mining heritage and tourism:

> the process of de-industrialisation and the subsequent transformation of mining areas is proceeding very rapidly, with mines closing at short notice. They are, however, a very important element in the development of society and should not be completely erased from memory. Indeed, vanishing remains could be treated as part of our heritage that help preserve its values and meaning. Cultural tourism is one way of ensuring that it is preserved and passed on to a wider audience and to future generations (Jelen [2018]: 94).

In this case, the aesthetic potential of mining landscapes only manifests itself after the territorial processes that shaped them have run their course and the vivid memories of the struggles associated with mining have been dissolved and reshaped into tales of an exotic past. Such a nostalgic aestheticization of mining landscapes is not related to the careful consideration for the timeless environmental consequences of mining. A renewable energy landscape can be problematic from an aesthetic point of view because of its uncommon visual impact, because of the unnatural shape of the employed infrastructures, and above all because of its evident link to the non-aesthetic sphere of production and consumption – a link that has been severed in the case of decommissioned energy landscapes that are now considered as a heritage of historical value[9]. This does not mean that we have to wait for the dismissal of solar power plants or wind turbines to have solar

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9   «Large scale PV arrays in particular, makes new energy-oriented land uses and landscape transformations visible because the energy generators are close to the places where people live» (Scognamiglio [2016]: 630).

or wind landscapes. Once the aesthetic controversy is recognised in its relative autonomy, it can be addressed through a series of arrangements and solutions aimed at reducing the sense of alienation and contempt that can arise in the face of an anonymous, desolate landscape dominated by thousands of photovoltaic panels.

3. *From solar power plants to solar landscapes*

In the second part of the article, I focus on a specific, yet highly relevant case of renewable energy landscape: the solar or photovoltaic landscape, i.e. landscape characterized by the presence of solar energy infrastructures. The landscape effects of energy new demands are often considered by the institutional and economic actors as «collateral damage» (Pasqualetti, Stremke [2018]: 95) of decisions necessary to achieve the renewable energy production and distribution targets mentioned in paragraph 1. However, the literature is mostly aware of the problems of public acceptance of the landscape transformation brought about by the implementation of photovoltaics. Making the required room for large photovoltaic facilities «means significantly altering existing natural or cultural landscapes, a matter which has been met with resistance by local residents». (Car et al. [2024]: 1). The «opposition of local stakeholders» (Sirnik et al. [2024]: 1) to the SPP alteration of existing landscapes represents «a challenge to the expansion of the renewable energy sector» (Car et al. [2024]: 1). Since this opposition is often motivated by the fact that solar power plants affect «how landscape is perceived by inhabitants and other users» (Oudes, Stremke [2021]), it is important to address the aesthetic issues that can hinder public acceptance of solar landscapes.

Among the research dealing with the experience of solar landscapes, the study sponsored by Oudes and Stremke stands out for its clarity in identifying the aesthetic question for empirical purposes. They propose an analysis of 22 front-runner cases of solar power plants landscape throughout Europe. Three macro parameters are taken into account: 1) the host landscape features; 2) the solar infrastructure design features; 3) the solar landscape final features. We will briefly discuss them below, also taking into consideration other contributions coming from specialized literature.

1. Taking into account the prior morphological features of the landscape where the new solar park will insist is already a sign of the adoption of what has been called «acting-with attitude» in landscape planning research:

> In this case, human action is not exerted from the outside on matter understood as lifeless, but blends into the movements, the contours and the morphologies of a matter endowed with its own vital animation, with which human action interacts in responsive and dynamic ways. That sequence of interactions deals more with transformation than produc-

tion. Whereas in the demiurgic paradigm of the technical action, which corresponds to the implementation of a plan previously elaborated, the technical action understood as transformation is rather defined through adjustments and corrections, which allow us to tailor our action to an evolving situation. (Besse [2017]: 61; my translation)

According to Oudes and Stremke, it is important to assess the host landscape type by checking whether its morphology is open or enclosed, whether it includes slopes or bodies of water, and by listing the existing landscape elements and the size of the eventual parcellation. It is also useful to associate the existing elements to the previous land use: agriculture, husbandry, uncultivated meadows, brownfields. The evaluation of the morphology, aesthetics and the land-use of the host landscape is fundamental in order to make appropriate design-oriented decisions about the solar infrastructures themselves.

2. Oudes and Stremke identify three nested levels of design-oriented choices to be made for photovoltaic infrastructures: «the system as a whole, the patch as distinct group of arrays, and the array as specific object» (Oudes, Stremke [2021]). The system level corresponds to the solar park in its entirety; its final configuration will determine the new landscape layout. At this level, it is important to assess the number, size, and spatial arrangements of the patches. It has been noted that public acceptance of solar landscapes diminishes as the size of the solar system increases (Späth [2018], Lucchi et al. [2023]). This clashes with the preference of economic actors for large-scale solar parks, which are justified by the need to create economies of scale. Very influential is also the level of the patch, which is also very interesting for landscape theory more broadly. The term patch comes from landscape ecology, where it is defined as follows: «a surface area that differs from its surroundings in nature or appearance» (Turner, Gardner [2015]: 3). Landscape is a composition of patches: we go from the system as a whole to the patches that compose it by analytic reduction. This kind of analytic reduction is perceptually driven and phenomenologically based: we just recognize the patches by virtue of their peculiar way to appear. Of course, the patches only attain their full experiential meaning when they are considered in their context: Isolated from each other, the patches are mere abstractions. Yet, the inner diversity of a landscape depends on the variety of the patches that compose it: this is what renders them quite important also from the aesthetic point of view. Sirnik et al. note that «the shape of the patch occupied by the photovoltaic unit affects the landscape experience» (Sirnik et al. [2023]). The density and the ground coverage of the arrays have an impact on how the patches on which the solar power plants insist appear as a last resort. The third level depends on the design of the solar power plants arrays themselves: their orientation, the number and type of rows, the tilt of the modules, their length, width, length. It is of course important to analyse the colour of the modules and the materials used to build the supporting structure.

As one can see, only the third level of analysis of the solar infrastructure concerns it as a design object, and not even fully, since the landscape planner is invited to design the single arrays by taking in ongoing consideration the other levels of analysis and the existing features of the host landscape. In this analysis, the patch already results from a peculiar combination of nature and culture, so to speak: on one side the plot of the host landscape, on the other side the module selected for planting. Of course, the plot of the host landscape is not necessarily natural, as it may bear traces of previous land use and exploitation. From the perspective of landscape planning, assessing whether or not a spatial spot is fully natural or cultural in principle is not so important. It is more relevant to assess whether the new graft on the considered plot results in a harmonious patch. About this topic, Sirnik et al. (Sirnik et al. [2024]) have distinguished four kinds of patch configurations: responsive, irresponsive, split, and island. Different design solutions are possible in order to realize a harmonious patch, but the responsive one has the advantage of being site-specific: «it mimics the shape of the plot» (Oudes, Stremke [2021]), creating a temporal continuity between the inherited shape of the land and its new layout. Thanks to similar design-oriented choices, an aesthetic continuity is achieved with a view to reducing the percipient's bewilderment and resistance against dramatic landscape changes.

3. The solar landscape features taken into account in the analysis carried out by Oudes and Stremke include both aesthetic and non-aesthetic factors, in coherence with the definition of landscape provided by the European Convention. The first features included in the landscape assessment are the ecological ones: «features that support ecological functions, such as patches of wild flowers and hedgerows» (Oudes, Stremke [2021]). The second considered landscape features concern the presence of recreational and educational spaces close to the facilities of the solar park. The third and fourth features concern agriculture and water management. In all cases, the aesthetic quality of the solar landscape also depends on the types of land-uses and socio-spatial practices that can be carried out. These parameters suggest the adoption of a more-than-representational conception of landscape, which emphasizes the multisensory nature of environment, the perceptual richness enabled by environmental immersion, and the incorporation of visual landscape experience into a variety of embodied socio-spatial practices. I prefer to adopt here the term "more-than-representational" in lieu of the more exigent version "non-representational" (which is preferred by some human geographers such as Nigel Thrift, Candice Boyd, Christian Edwardes) because visibility remains an important trait of the landscape experience.

According to Sirnik et al., the factors that shape a landscape experience are: accessibility, visibility, patch configuration and agricultural land use beneath PV arrays. Accessibility concerns the sphere of spatial practices, whereas visibility

concerns the representational character of landscape. There is no point in opposing them: landscape is made to be seen and crossed, contemplated, transformed, and cared. As a matter of fact, negative appraisals of solar power plants are often centred on the visual impact it produces on a beholder who has in mind other models of landscape beauty. From such a visual, immediate negative aesthetics we often draw undue consequences concerning eco-ontological aspects (for instance: the solar power plant destroys biodiversity) or societal implications (for instance: local farmers are struggling against the project of the solar park) that need to be verified case by case. It is therefore of pivotal importance to adopt design choices with a view to promoting a positive visual impact on possible beholders. A number of cases analysed by Oudes and Stremke address visibility issues by reducing the overall visibility of the solar park, with some exceptions represented by specific vantage points from which visibility is enhanced. The aim is to «reframe visibility from a mainly negative impact into a potential positive impact» (Oudes, Stremke [2021]).

The compatibility and complementarity of energy and agricultural land use has been pursued for a long time (Goetzberger, Zastrow [1982]), but only in recent years have relevant successes been achieved in the field of agrivoltaics (Rule [2014], Toledo, Scognamiglio [2021], Sirnik et al. [2023], Sirnik et al. [2024]). The combination of different land uses under or near the energy modules is also important for aesthetics: it emphasises perceptual variety and diversity, and promotes a practical understanding of landscape as an operational context in which people do something and, through their doing, develop a general sense of their own self in relation to their living landscape.

4. *Conclusion. From solar power parks to solar landscapes*

Public acceptance issues of energy landscapes can be linked to the land-use (territorial) controversy, the aesthetic (landscape) controversy or, most of the time, a mix of the two. In the preceding sections, I have attempted to distinguish the two controversies from a logical and conceptual standpoint, by linking the territorial controversy to the socio-economic processes that give structure and function to a geographic area, and the aesthetic controversy to judgments of taste that are embedded in the everyday landscape experience of a percipient. From a phenomenological point of view, both controversies are important. Addressing the landscape controversy in its relative autonomy means overcoming a conception of the judgement of taste as the expression of a distanced and contemplative relationship between a perceiving subject and a perceived object (Berleant [1991]). Of course, taste judgements also reflect historical and cultural developments that may depend on multiple external factors, such as, for instance, the

influence of successful place-images in the global market image or the fascination for the picturesque, the wild, the exotic. Nonetheless, taste judgements about places and landscapes also arise from our locally based aesthetic habits, that «extend the self and one own's personality» by scaffolding our «ecological niche aesthetically» (Bertinetto [2021]: 10). In other words: our aesthetic judgements testify to the quality of the relationship between the percipients and the living environment.

Such a constitutive relation between the percipients and their living environment makes of landscape something more than a representational construct: the landscape is not only the scenery we contemplate from a distance, but also the «horizon that determines our perceptions and preferences» (Haapala [1999]: 260). The stability of our home landscapes elicits a sense of familiarity and safeness, which are fundamental aesthetic and affective stances in everyday life: «the everyday attitude is coloured with routines, familiarity, continuity, normalcy, habits» (Naukkarinen [2013]). A dramatic change of our home landscapes affects our sense of place and hence our sense of self, putting us into a state of uncanny bewilderment and disorientation. Much of the negative aesthetics related to solar landscapes can be explained by considering the imbalance that a too rapid transformation of the landscape creates in the relationship between the inhabiting community and its environment. This imbalance should not be understood as the result of either the improper application of abstract and contemplative judgments of taste on the part of a subject or her prejudicial aversion for the new: it is rather the result of the challenge that a new territoriality poses to the sense of belonging and continuity that phenomenologically binds the inhabiting community and the living landscape.

Within this onto-phenomenological framework, the landscape desire or nostalgia discussed by Claude Raffestin is not reducible to a childish imagination or a pleasant but pointless retrotopia (Baumann [2017]), as provisionally suggested in the first paragraph. That desire of landscape often arises from the disruption of our home landscape – the landscape in which we grew up, which has accompanied us until now, that we have taken for granted for too long and that now is challenged by new territorializations. In this sense, the aesthetic controversy is always already more than aesthetic, in that it thematizes our very existence as «being-in-an-aesthetic-world» (Haapala [1999]: 257). This does not only apply to energy landscapes or solar landscapes, although they reflect it particularly well today. By bringing this dynamic into focus, we finally meet again the paradox of landscape to which we alluded in paragraph 2: On the one hand, every spatial reality is a landscape insofar as it is perceived; On the other hand, the landscape is an area which I can experience in an aesthetically positive way, not because it is consistent with external parameters of judgement, like criteria drawn from visual arts, but because of the possibility of feeling at home in it.

We can conclude by arguing that solar power plants are always already landscapes in the first sense, but they must become landscapes in the second sense – and this will only happen if they are perceived as part of the domestic landscape by a community of perceivers. If landscapes in the full sense are only those areas that we can positively appreciate in our aesthetic experience, as opposed to areas whose design strictly depends on the functions they serve within economic system, it would be pointless to call landscape a modified environment whose outlook depends on activities concerning energy extraction, production, and distribution. Even without sharing the dualistic view that underlies an overly rigid separation between landscapes, i.e. environments or areas available for positive aesthetic appreciation, and territories, the design of which is the result of economic practices with no inherent aesthetic value, it seems important to retain at least one aspect of this view: that a solar power plant is not synonymous with a solar landscape, if by landscape we mean a place where we recognize ourselves and that we can call home. But a solar power plant can become part of a domestic landscape if right design choices mitigate its impact, allow continuities between the host landscape and the new landscape experiences, integrate a variety of social and ecological functions, and remain partially visible and accessible so that they are gradually incorporated into the framework of our aesthetic habits.

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Aisthesis

Sustainable Digital Landscapes of Experience: The *Unesco Memory of the World Programme*

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to address the importance of sustainability standards in the creation of heritage digital landscapes, which are essential to ensure the longevity and meaningful impact of cultural heritage in the digital era. The present research stresses how the concept of sustainability should be addressed in its multifaceted nature, accounting not only for ecological but also social, economic and cultural perspectives, and that it should be taken into consideration in all the phases of digitization, ensuring a comprehensively sustainable process. In order to shed light on these issues, this paper introduces the current state of the art of the matter; examines the challenges of digitizing cultural heritage; argues for a broader perspective on sustainability and presents the case study of the *UNESCO Memory of the World Programme* to evaluate the sustainability of digitization efforts within the creation of an international and cross cultural experiential field.

Keywords. Sustainability, digital archiving, cultural heritage, landscape experience, UNESCO.

1. *Introduction*

The concept of sustainability is one of the most investigated by the literature of the last 15 years. However, its definition remains open to a myriad of interpretations. The first definition of "sustainable development" was formulated in 1987 during the *World Commission on Environment and Development*. The document that was drafted at that time was named the *Brundtland Report*, after the commission chair Gro Harlem Brundtland, or *Our Common Future*. Specifically, sustainable development was defined there as «meet[ing] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs». Similarly, the National Research Council describes it as «the reconciliation of society's developmental goals with its environmental limits over the long term» (Brundtland [1987]: 2). Based on these definitions, sustainable development can be viewed as a process of change where resource consumption, investment direction, technological development orientation, and institutional changes unfold harmoniously, enhancing both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations. This definition emphasizes the importance of meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Twenty years later, Crutzen (2006) described sustainability as maintaining resources within certain levels to ensure survival in a constantly changing environment. This remains arguably the greatest challenge of our time, especially when viewed through the lens of digitalization (Paschalidou et al. [2022]). The intersection of sustainability and digitalization raises new questions, particularly when applied to cultural heritage preservation, where the ecological, economic, social and cultural dimensions of sustainability need to be comprehensively addressed (Preuss [2016]).

Indeed, despite its significance, the concept of sustainability is often marginally addressed within the cultural heritage sector, particularly in digital contexts, as it will be argued throughout this paper. Mostly, it appears to be a general concern of which art institutions are aware, yet do not feel strongly responsible for. It is debated in terms of its survival (Loach, Rowley [2016]), managerial (Wroblewski et al. [2019]) and regulatory (Trimarchi [2004]) importance, but rarely addressed strategically. Nevertheless, we argue that it can no longer be treated as a secondary issue, especially since cultural institutions have begun to engage frequently and widely in digital endeavors: a set of activities which displace cultural relations and experience on a new level, creating new spaces of experience and thus calling for a sustainability check of these new environments.

Whilst digital technologies transversely entertain the museum sector (Giannini, Bowen [2019]), this paper refers to sustainability in relation to the digitization of archival cultural content. Through these kinds of processes, museums, libraries and archives have been having the opportunity to design new cultural and experiential

spaces, made of the combination of elements of diverse origins, and destined to be accessed and viewed from multiple geographical locations. These types of digital spaces offer an interesting opportunity as objects of study, as they carry many of the characteristics which identify the notion of landscape. They engage with the same conceptual, ecological, social and cultural complexity, being new fields of experience which transcend the physical realm yet continue to exercise their impact on it. To analyze them from the perspective of sustainability entails ensuring, following Brundtland's definition, that these programmes truly meet the needs of future generations, not only of the communities of the present. Before delving into this matter, however, it is necessary to frame digitization within the cultural system.

While the preservation and transmission of heritage has been for centuries a task granted to museums, libraries and archives, today it depends, necessarily, on the investment that these institutions devote to digitization (Perry [2010]). Digital archiving has become a normative practice in the global management of cultural heritage. It is promoted, incentivized and financed for a variety of reasons, spanning from conservation to administration, research and safekeeping (Grau [2017]). In the cultural industry, it is advertised also as a crucial way to preserve traditional identities, ensuring their long lasting through time and space (Manovich [2013]), as well as the one possible path towards the creation of a universal digital memory (Lévy [2010]).

Through this process, a new digital landscape is being created: one which derives its aesthetic and formal identity from the cultural and practical choices of the institutions engaged in digitization. The digital platforms which host and make accessible cultural contents vary greatly, shaped by the combination of social, political and economic characteristics of the stakeholders, the technologies and the contents involved.

While the necessity to digitize seems to be nowadays granted in the institutional scenario (Katre [2011]; Chan [2014]), there is still a very open debate on which are the best methodologies and technologies that have to be employed for this process to be successful (Santos et al. [2021]).

All that considered, this paper tackles digital archiving from the perspective of sustainability, trying to investigate what should be meant by sustainable digitization in this field. Claiming that a sustainable digitization requires more than meets the eye. While questions of ecological sustainability are at times discussed in relation to digital technologies and digital archiving (Pendergrass et al. [2019]), a more complex understanding of what sustainability can mean for a community and its heritage – on a social, economic and cultural level – is rarely taken into account.

Moreover, we argue that the necessity for a comprehensively sustainable digitization is justified within the shared and widely accepted goal of digitization: allowing individuals to make knowledge connections between past, present and

future. Digitization, in fact, serves the scope of enabling people all over the world to engage with collections they would have not been able to discover otherwise: building a new playground for the creation of memory and identity (Van Dijck [2007]). For this to happen, however, a sustainable process needs to be enforced and cultural heritage would need to be curated, stored and delivered through methods and platforms which meet the experiential needs of new generations. In this sense, discussions on interface, new media, and new technology need to be at the forefront of digitization efforts.

In order to deal with the aforementioned issues, this paper is organized in other 4 sections, as follows: Section 2, titled "The challenges of digitizing cultural heritage" sketches generally the problematic aspects of digitizing in the field of cultural heritage. It addresses the numerous steps which partake into the digitization process, listing the different limits and concerns with reference to each passage. It serves the aim to clarify the nature of a very multifaceted and complex phenomenon. Section 3, "Sustainability for digital heritage", addresses digitization from the perspective of sustainability, stressing why it is important to employ a comprehensive sustainability approach to digitization. It describes what can today be defined as the four pillars of sustainability: the environmental, economic, social and cultural ones. The first three are the most discussed in the literature, but we argue here that a fourth, relating to culture, should also be included as a central aspect. These four pillars, understood in their collective and interdependent importance, empower a more structured and reliable understanding of sustainability. Afterwards, Section 4, "UNESCO Memory of the World Programme" focuses on the Unesco initiative *Memory of the World Programme*, which we have chosen as a representative case in the landscape of digitized heritage, through the creation of a platform where the concepts of time, presence and memory can openly dialogue. By aiming to «achieve the different aspects of documentary heritage, including identification, preservation, access, policy mechanisms as well as national and international cooperation» (UNESCO [2022]), and thanks to its more than 3 decades of cross-national experience, the project stands as an ideal candidate for analysis. Indeed, our aim is to assess the extent to which it can be considered an example of good practice with reference to sustainability. Lastly, Section 5 wraps up conclusions.

2. *The challenges of digitizing cultural heritage*

As anticipated, there are a variety of widely discussed issues with the digitization of cultural heritage.

To begin with, the digitization of cultural heritage stands on an ideological bias. Which is tied to the fact that policy and content choices in the digitization

process depend on the people who work in cultural institutions, and who end up becoming the decision makers of a process which regards an entire community. These processes are rarely collective processes (Kizhner et al. [2021]), making the implementation of fair principles (Vlachidis et al. [2022]; Wilkinson et al. [2016]) a challenging task. This translates into a visibility issue, as these choices, which become representative of a community, end up becoming visible on a much larger scale than when they were confined to the physical realm.

Adding to this scenario, there is the functioning of the technological apparatus which operates the digitization process. The algorithms used to digitize heritage perform better some tasks than others, like object recognition (Madhu et al. [2019]; Crowley, Zisserman [2014]; Torresani et al. [2010]), style recognition (Lecoutre [2017]; Arora, Elgammal [2012]; Karayev et al. [2014]) and classification (Saleh, Elgammal [2017]), canceling other relevant aspects of heritage identity. Moreover, algorithms operate by creating metadata on the objects, tagging them, and attributing problematic descriptions to images (Campolo, Crawford [2020]). The reasons underlying such biases are various, depending both on the technical limits of the algorithmic processes (Sachs [2020]) as well as on the choices made by humans beyond them (Bode [2020]).

Further, it is important to consider that, once digitized, the heritage is made accessible and experienceable through other media, drastically changing its identity. Encountering processes of remediation (Bolter, Grusin [2000]) and relocation (Casetti [2012]), and being heavily affected by the technological possibilities and choices of the institution it belongs to. Lastly, digitization is rarely done in a transparent manner, i.e., communicating which are the steps, decisions and issues involved (Craig [2021]). This lack of transparency can lead to misunderstandings, mistrust, and potential setbacks in the implementation process. On the other hand, clear communication about the digitization process, including the rationale behind decisions and the challenges encountered, is essential for gaining stakeholder buy-in and ensuring the successful adoption and integration of digital technologies.

While these issues are widely accounted for in the literature, there is a further problem with digitizing cultural heritage: the sustainability of this process. This aspect, which has become more and more relevant in the scientific literature regarding digitization and the digital ecosystem – not necessarily related to heritage cases – is one worth expanding on. Digitization, while providing opportunities for cultural preservation and global accessibility, also involves significant environmental and social impacts. The extraction of raw materials for Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) infrastructure, such as rare earth elements, has adverse environmental consequences, contributing to climate change and resource depletion (Paschalidou et al. [2022]). Additionally, the energy demands of digital storage and computing power, especially in data centers, continue to grow

at an unsustainable pace (Preuss [2016]). Evangelia Paschalidou and colleagues (2022) stress that the integration of strong sustainability principles – emphasizing "eco-sufficiency" over efficiency – into the digital preservation of cultural heritage is essential for mitigating the environmental impacts of the ICT infrastructures. Indeed, sustainability in the context of digitizing cultural heritage involves ensuring that digital preservation efforts are economically, environmentally, and socially viable in the long term. It encompasses considerations such as the long-term accessibility and usability of digital records, the environmental impact of digital storage and maintenance, and the economic costs associated with ongoing digital preservation. Additionally, it addresses the need for robust and adaptable digital infrastructure, as well as the training and support required for professionals managing these digital assets. By expanding on these considerations, we can develop more comprehensive strategies to ensure that the digitization of cultural heritage is sustainable, preserving our collective cultural memory for future generations and avoiding a negative impact on the technological and natural environment which hosts and surrounds us.

3. *Sustainability for digital heritage*

In the previous section we addressed the most important and discussed challenges of digitizing cultural heritage. Procedural and ideological issues which inevitably impact the efficacy and success of this process. Amongst these, the concept of "sustainability" stands out, with the need to be addressed in its multifaceted complexity. Indeed, when we generally deal with sustainability, the literature usually refers to the so-called «three pillars» (Purvis et al. [2019]: 681), i.e., the environment, the economics and the society. These pillars are embedded in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out in 2015 by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Agenda for 2030. It is worth noting that, despite its widespread use in the literature, the conceptualization of sustainability as a tripartite object, has been challenged as lacking theoretical foundations. Indeed, they are generally referred to as the three aspects that need to be taken into account when assessing if something – a device, a process, a community – is sustainable. On closer inspection, however, there seems to be no original urtext from which this formulation derives: it seems to be used in the literature and generally taken at face value. Ben Purvis and colleagues note as early as 2001, this approach has been presented as a «common view» of sustainable development (Giddings et al. [2002]): «so commonplace it seems not to require a reference» (Purvis et al. [2019]: 685).

However, the pillars represent a theoretical guideline which can be followed in order to embrace the complexity of what it means for a process or project to

be "sustainable". Indeed, since our planet is facing crucial global challenges, governments and institutions are engaged in a race for sustainable solutions that, if not properly pursued, can lead to forms of green-washing, i.e., what we might call a kind of ethical sophism, which seeks to conceal the negative impacts of a given object or circumstance, cloaking it instead in alleged benefits from the standpoint of environmental and ecological impact (Floridi [2022]).

Since it appears there is no compelling argument for the three pillars of sustainability to be considered so immutable, Kirsten Loach and colleagues (2016) argue for the integration of a fourth pillar, which is largely overlooked by the literature: cultural sustainability. The utility of this fourth pillar lies in preserving and maintaining communities' cultural beliefs, practices, and heritage conservation through time by safeguarding their memory. Cultural sustainability ensures that the intangible heritage of communities, including traditions, languages, and arts, is protected and nurtured. This pillar recognizes that cultural diversity and heritage are crucial for social cohesion, identity, and resilience, especially in the face of global challenges and changes.

By integrating cultural sustainability into the broader framework, the importance of cultural heritage in fostering a sense of belonging and continuity is acknowledged, enriching the overall sustainability agenda. This fourth pillar, moreover, falls under one of the SDGs, i.e., SDG 16: «promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels». Specifically, target 16.10 aims to «ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements». Cultural heritage, indeed, beyond any empty rhetoric, represents a crucial resource essential to the development of the next stages of humanity. It provides valuable insights into past human experiences, guiding us in making informed decisions for the future. By understanding and preserving our cultural heritage, we can draw lessons from history, appreciate diverse perspectives, and foster innovation rooted in traditional knowledge. This continuity and adaptation of cultural practices enrich our collective wisdom, enabling societies to navigate contemporary challenges with a deeper sense of identity and purpose. Thus, cultural heritage is not just a relic of the past but a dynamic and integral component of sustainable development and human progress.

If culture should be an important perspective when addressing the sustainability of a process, how is the sustainability of culture theorized? Strictly concerning digital preservation, usually the terms refer to economics, namely to financial and staffing resources. When discussing environmental sustainability, the efforts go in the direction of reducing organization impacts through improvements to the built environment and on adapting, or reacting, to the effects of climate change. Awareness of the negative environmental impact of digital pres-

ervation practice has increased over the last years, yet the focus mainly remains on developing sustainable financial models and staff workflows to cope with the increasing scale of digital content (Pendergrass et al. [2019]).

Moreover, sustainable digital preservation also refers to the longevity of a digital preservation program. For example, the Digital Preservation Network's Digital Preservation Workflow Curriculum includes a model on ensuring that a digital preservation project endures beyond the project phase, and that the practices developed as part of the project become systematic. Furthermore, UNESCO's guidelines for selecting materials for digital preservation refer to sustainability as endurance, encouraging to evaluate the sustainability of materials to assess their capacity to preserve it for long-term access and use (Pendergrass et al. [2019]).

All the above considered, this section addresses how the notion of sustainability in general, and sustainability tied to cultural heritage and the specific branch of digital archiving in particular, are matters that should be carefully and further researched This should be taken into consideration when presenting, discussing and analyzing initiatives that are labeled as sustainable (Figure 1). Even more, this perspective becomes important when the initiatives in question are internationally led and aim to establish a cross-cultural landscape of experience, which in turn impacts multiple cultural, social and physical environments.

4. *UNESCO Memory of the World Programme*

The case study that will be analyzed in this section of the paper aims to provide a relevant example for the above discussion and to try to understand in practice how the complex and multifaceted requirements of sustainability can be further discussed with reference to a concrete project. The reasons why this specific project appears promising are multiple. Firstly, it is an international and cross cultural digitization project, and therefore it is characterized by the complex nature described above. It involves all the layered steps of digitization aforementioned, and it embodies the multifaceted aspects of a landscape digital environment. Secondly, it was framed specifically within the discourse of sustainability by its curators and programmers, hence endorsing the same awareness and care for sustainable development which has been argued as necessary through this paper. As such, it appears as an ideal candidate to advocate for consciously sustainable programming. Lastly, its distributed geographical origin and pertinence makes it relevant on a plural level, aspiring for a wide degree of interest.

The idea of the *UNESCO Memory of the World Programme* was conceived in the early 1990s, when digitization and online accessibility in the cultural sector was at its very beginning (Bowen [1995]). The vision of the programme was,

and is, that «the world's documentary heritage belongs to all, should be fully preserved and protected for all and, with due recognition of cultural mores and practicalities, should be permanently accessible to all without hindrance». The programme was developed with the mission to «increase awareness and protection of the world's documentary heritage, and archive its universal and permanent accessibility. To be accomplished through three key objectives. The first to facilitate preservation, by the most appropriate techniques, of the world's past, present and future documentary heritage. The second to assist universal access to documentary heritage, which may be done by encouraging institutions and individuals holding documentary heritage to make it accessible as widely and equitably as possible, in analogue and/or digital form, as appropriate. The third to increase awareness worldwide of the existence and significance of documentary heritage and thereby foster dialogue and mutual understanding between people and cultures (Di Giovine [2015]).

Facilitating preservation, assisting documentary access and increasing awareness are three objectives that the UNESCO empowers on a global network level, as they are meant to be fostered within an interconnected system, which unites digitized content transnationally within one cultural landscape. In so far as this programme is concerned, the international dimension, and its complex social, political and cultural nature, is central. It defines the identity of the project, which finds its reason for being within the aim of connecting diverse cultures in one unitary space.

For its 30th anniversary, in 2022, the programme decided to celebrate with a shared theme: «Enlisting documentary heritage to promote inclusive, just and peaceful societies». This choice is directly inspired by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the SDG16. The celebration of the programme was organized on a double level, both globally and nationally. Globally the following forms were chosen: an exhibition of 30 posters displayed along the face of the UNESCO headquarters in Paris for 1 week; an on-line symposium with speakers and testimonies, and the publication of an anniversary statement. Locally, national and regional communities were given the chance to organize exhibitions, launch publications, create new digitization registers, media events, quizzes for children, and the production of YouTube videos.

With the details of the programme in mind, and with reference to the openly declared intent of the organization to operate within culturally sustainable goals, it is worth trying to assess the event with reference to the four pillars of sustainability.

Being sustainable from an environmental perspective would require reducing the organization's impact and acting in a way which is conscious of climate change. The programme, however, does not seem to explicitly address environmental sustainability in its operational guidelines. Different contents have been produced for the occasion (from paper products to exhibitions to a series of digi-

tal initiatives and materials), with no reference to a comprehensive strategy to minimize the footprint of the event. There is little evidence of a comprehensive environmental strategy that tackles energy use, material sustainability, or digital lifecycle management. This lack of direct focus on minimizing the ecological impacts of the digitization process weakens the programme's overall sustainability efforts. Indeed, we should not overlook the fact that the programme undirectly supports a larger system that relies on energy-intensive data centers that consume huge amounts of electricity, much of which is still generated from fossil fuels. This reliance on non-renewable energy sources ties the programme to extractive energy systems, which further contribute to environmental degradation through their heavy impact on people and land. Furthermore, this issue also concerns the raw materials that are extracted to build the equipment needed for digitization. These devices tend to have short life spans due to technological obsolescence, which contributes to huge amounts of electronic waste. They often contain harmful substances such as lead, mercury and cadmium, which, if not properly managed, can leach into ecosystems and contaminate soil and water. Without a strong commitment to renewable energy data storage, the environmental sustainability of the programme remains a significant challenge.

In terms of economic sustainability, which refers to staffing and financial resources, the project stands on the contribution of local and national committees and regular programme contributors. This proves a sustainable account in terms of resource allocation, coherent with regular spending strategies. By employing professionals which are already part of the workforce of the institutions involved, and also distributed geographically in all the countries engaged, the project proves a wise and sustainable use of economic resources.

From a social perspective the digitization efforts, in order to be sustainable, would require a comprehensive and tailored understanding of the experiential needs of today's digital public, towards which the programme is supposed to be directed. For the new content produced to be socially sustainable it would have to be designed and made available via a media environment which specifically serves a contemporary audience. However, the types of events, contents and activities organized do not seem to be particularly updated, and are hardly different from the ones the organization has been working on for the past 3 decades. This proves continuity and the capacity to capitalize on acquired knowledge and practices, but a scarce ability to innovate in line with developing social needs.

Lastly, the programme explicitly states to be addressing cultural sustainability, which relates to institutional accessibility, freedom, peace and inclusion on cultural grounds across different societies. It is however hard to observe a strict link between the above-mentioned activities and these very strong objectives, as they do not seem to impact the communities they were designed for in such a powerful manner as to build new perspectives of freedom, peace and inclusion. Neverthe-

less, the accessibility aim is undoubtedly partly addressed, as more information and content is preserved and made available through the digital platforms engaged.

Overall, it seems that even this programme, with such a strong and explicit commitment to sustainability in its digitization efforts, lacks a comprehensive and effective strategy to actually implement the core aspects of a sustainable endeavour within digitized cultural landscapes. On the other hand, it is one of the first initiatives in the cultural heritage field to explicitly seek to raise awareness of the key issues in addressing sustainability. Moreover, it does so on a broad international scale, broadening the debate on the subject to include a complex environmental dimension, that of digital heritage landscapes. It can therefore be seen as a reference for future events and projects.

5. *Conclusions*

So far, this paper has sketched the complexity of the notion of sustainability for digital archiving in international cultural networks, by attempting to encompass all the multifaceted aspects of this issue. Given the increasing importance of digitization in the creation of cultural landscapes of experience, this analysis has attempted to assess the different components that need to be taken into account in order to assess and ensure the sustainability of digitization in the arts. The challenges of digitizing cultural heritage have been described, and the importance of dealing with them from different perspectives has been stressed. The relevance of a sustainable perspective, which becomes even more pressing when international network endeavors are addressed, has been also underlined. The *UNESCO Memory of the World Programme* served as a case study worthy to be analyzed to evaluate in which direction we are moving to assess the criticalities related to a sustainable digitization of cultural heritage. As an international project, which connects and merges professionals and heritage from different parts of the world, it testifies to the global trend of transcending physical borders and creating new geographies, relocating the landscape debate on a digital, and transnational, level. As an environmental project, which aims to design a new space of experience for the encounter of arts around the world, it stands to all the political, social and cultural complexities of wide territorial and medial programmes. In its analysis, the difficulties of successfully implementing sustainable projects, even when there is a stated and defined intention to do so, have been shown. Ultimately, it can be considered as a reference experience to benchmark international digitization networks programmes to a sustainability check. All the above considered, the core claim of this paper is that digitization in this specific field requires more than literature seems to have addressed so far. And that to fulfill *real* sustainable processes, a more in depth, strategic and comprehensive account should be considered.

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Aisthesis

Seeing Differently: *Infinity Pool* as a Prototypical Exploration of Perceptual Field Reconfiguration Processes

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Abstract. In this article, drawing on an ecological-enactive approach to human cognition, we introduce *Infinity Pool*, a work-in-progress performance that will serve as a platform for conducting phenomenological and cognitive-behavioral research, ultimately culminating in the development of a 4E Performative Lab. The lab will integrate artistic performance with phenomenological research into a unified event, aiming to establish a unique, real-life instance of collective imagination. Its purpose is to study how we intersubjectively reconfigure the individual perceptual fields during participatory performances. By approaching embodiment not merely as an object of study but as a practical investigation of our bodily engagements with the environment, *Infinity Pool*, when performed in polluted areas, could prompt us to confront the climate crisis by rendering invisible threats into monstrous forms.

Keywords. Imagination, performance art, monsters, crisis, environment.

1. *Introduction*

Our proposal is rooted in the field of embodied mind studies, with a particular focus on an ecological-enactive approach to human cognition (Rietveld, Kiverstein [2014]; Gibson [1979]; Varela et al. [1991]). This framework allows us to investigate how imaginative processes can initiate a reconfiguration of the perceptual field within a group, fostering a collectively structured capacity to perceive what was previously inaccessible or unnoticed (Noë [2015]) that involves multi-level synchronization (Gallagher [2020]).

We illustrate this approach through *Infinity Pool*, a work-in-progress performance that will culminate in the larger 4E Performative Lab project. *Infinity Pool* integrates performance art and video installation, drawing on the situated aspects of the environment and the embodied skills of participants. It aims to "give a face" to its surroundings; when enacted in spaces profoundly shaped by human intervention, it can evoke unsettling, monstrous forms. To expand this proposal and outline its future directions, we explore the figure of the monster and its invisibility, a defining feature of contemporary climatic threats (Weinstock [2013]). This exploration emphasizes how such figures might emerge by molding an "imaginative niche" (Ianniello, Habets, [forthcoming]) that facilitates an "estranged education of attention" (see Ianniello [2024b]).

The article is organized as follows: first, we introduce the ecological-enactive framework underpinning our investigation (Section 2). We then present *Infinity Pool* as a prototypical performance for the forthcoming 4E Performative Lab (Section 3) and contextualize the figure of the monster within the broader themes of invisibility and the climate crisis (Section 4). Finally, we conclude by discussing the concepts of "estranged education of attention" and "imaginative niche", outlining the significance and future development of *Infinity Pool* (Section 5).

2. *Ecological-enactive account: Sociomaterial entanglement and situated imagination*

In the early 1990s, foundational works such as *The Embodied Mind* by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) and Hutchins's *Cognition in the Wild* (1995) began to challenge the traditional internalist view of cognition as a brain-centered process (Fodor [1975]; Pylyshyn [1984]). These contributions, alongside Clark and Chalmers's (1998) influential essay "The Extended Mind" and Gibson's ecological approach to psychology, laid the groundwork for what is now referred to as 4E cognition (Newen, De Bruin, Gallagher [2018]). This framework encompasses four interrelated perspectives: embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive cognition. Together, these approaches argue that cognitive processes are

shaped by the dynamic coupling of brain, body, and environment, and often rely on external artifacts, social systems, and ecological contexts. Despite offering a unified critique of cognitivist paradigms, 4E cognition remains a site of ongoing theoretical debate, particularly regarding the nature of embodiment, the integration of external and internal processes, and the role of representations in cognitive activity. In this context, some approaches stand out as radical departures from the old paradigm, characterized by functionalism and representationalism, while others are considered weaker because they retain these elements (see Gallagher [2017]).

The ecological-enactive approach developed by Rietveld and colleagues, which serves as a reference point for our exploration, aligns with the more "radical" perspectives (Hutto, Myin [2013; 2017]).

This approach integrates complementary insights from philosophy, ecological psychology, emotion psychology, and neurodynamics, centering its proposal on an expanded interpretation of the Gibsonian concept of "affordance" (Rietveld, Kiverstein [2014]; Gibson [1979]). In *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Gibson defines affordances as the opportunities the environment offers to animals – what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill – emphasizing the complementarity between the animal and its environment (Gibson [1979]: 127). The concept of affordance is highly complex and remains a topic of active discussion (see Heras-Escribano [2019]). The interpretation offered by Rietveld and Kiverstein is exposed in the seminal essay *A Rich Landscape of Affordances* (2014) where the central idea is that the affordances of the environment depend on the abilities an animal has, since the abilities we have as human beings are varied, the landscape of affordances we inhabit turns out to be extremely rich. Starting from the Gibsonian conception of "niche" understood as a set of affordances (Gibson [1979]: 129-128), to do justice to the variety of practices available to our species, that is to account for our rich ecological niche, and thus for the «whole realm of social significance» (Gibson [1979]: 128), the solution proposed by Rietveld and Kiverstein is to situate the notion of "affordances" within the Wittgensteinian one of "form of life" – *Lebensformen* (1953). Thus, affordances turn out to be relationships between aspects of the sociomaterial environment and the abilities available in a form of life (Rietveld, Kiverstein [2014]).

In the human form of life, the social and material are intertwined and best understood as sociomateriality (Van Dijk, Rietveld [2017]), intended as the constitutive entanglement of social practices and material aspects that together shape the possibilities for human action. There is no clear separation between the social and the material because both are mutually constitutive in shaping the landscape of affordances. The material details of the situations in which we act matter because it is precisely in that context in which we develop our practices that one aspect of the environment presents itself as an opportunity to act. Materials con-

strain behavior, that is, they invite an ability to continue within a practice that has organized them, but they do not pre-exist our practices (Van Dijk, Rietveld [2017]). A practice forms the terms in which the materials currently constrain further activities to continue that practice in a particular way. In a nutshell, between practice and affordance, there is a constitutive relation, they are interdependent, and there is no priority; practices and affordances are jointly unfolded in concrete situations in real life, they are «two sides of the same coin, i.e., of the same sociomaterial entanglement of people, activities, places, and things» (Van Dijk, Rietveld [2017]: 4).

In the case of humans, abilities are acquired through a history of interactions in sociocultural practices, which means we learn to act appropriately according to the norms of context-sensitive practices. One will respond to environmental solicitations differently from those who have not been trained to grasp certain sociomaterial invitations. This is what Gibson refers to as «education of attention» (Gibson [1979]) through which a novice is subjected to a normative evaluation in relation to his or her way of proceeding within a practice in a specific situation. In this sense, agents are educated to find affordances in their surroundings that are relevant to their interests based on acquired practices, that is to act to a selected aspect of the environment, thus being able to grasp some invitations and ignore others. Crucially, this means that the practices in which we engage enable us to open ourselves to the world in a specific way. To explain why certain affordances rather than others guide an individual in a given situation, that is, why certain aspects of the environment stand out as solicitations to act, we could speak of "skilled intentionality" (Bruineberg, Rietveld [2014]) in terms of selective openness to the sociomaterial environment. An affordance becomes a solicitation as a result of a process of self-organization through which an animal, from a position of disequilibrium, tends toward an optimal grip to restore relative balance.

Action must be understood in a very broad sense to encompass processes often considered "higher cognition", typically characterized as "representation-hungry" (Clark, Toribio [1994]), such as imagining, planning, and remembering. These could therefore be viewed as «skillful activities in practices and terms of the material resources exploited in those practices» (Rietveld, Kiverstein [2014]: 346). This means that imagination should not be seen as "the pinnacle of representational cognition" (Van Dijk, Rietveld [2020]: 1), but rather as part of long-term processes that arise in response to indeterminate invitations in specific situations. The notion of "radical situated imagination" proposed by Van Dijk and Rietveld builds on a processual approach where affordances are determined in action over time (Van Dijk, Rietveld [2020]). According to this approach, imagination is not a decontextualized cognitive activity but emerges as continuous coordination with multi-scaled processes characterized by indeterminacy. This

indeterminacy, intrinsic to every possibility for action, enables the emergence of new opportunities, making imagination a key driver for opening and expanding practical possibilities.

Imagination is situated within temporally extensive processes and arises from coordination with multiple affordances that mutually shape each other over time. The indeterminacy of affordances, described as a "friction" between different temporal scales, allows individuals to experience activities as imaginative, opening spaces for novel configurations. A cornerstone of this situated concept of imagination is the "philosophy of the particular" (Van Dijk, Rietveld [2020]), a methodological approach that shifts focus from generalized, abstract accounts of imagination to the nuanced, concrete details of specific situations. Traditional philosophical strategies often privilege abstraction, treating imagination as a universal cognitive mechanism divorced from its contextual and material foundations. In contrast, a philosophy of the particular emphasizes prolonged engagement with specific practices and environments, revealing imagination as an emergent, situated phenomenon. Through philosophical ethnography employed by the authors – a method intertwining observation and conceptual analysis – it is possible to illustrate how concrete, small-scale activities are dynamically interconnected with large-scale, temporally extended processes. By attending to the interplay between these scales, it is possible to uncover how imagination is not a pre-determined capacity but a relational and responsive process that emerges through interaction with affordances that change and co-determine one another over time.

Although we are selectively attuned to certain aspects of our sociomaterial environment, shaped by the practices in which we are trained and the history of our interactions with that environment, it is nevertheless possible to open ourselves to new possibilities – to perceive opportunities for action that were previously inaccessible. This is where art and philosophy play a crucial role, as they challenge and expand the habitual ways we engage with the world (Noë [2015]; Rietveld [2022]). Alva Noë describes this transformative process as a shift «from not seeing to seeing, or from seeing to seeing differently» (Noë [2015]: xii).

"Seeing differently" happens when *indeterminacy* comes to characterize the act of perceiving and is experienced as imaginative; when things can become different from what they appeared to be. In *Strange Tools* (2015), Noë underscores the necessity of what he terms "reorganizational practices" to interrupt the habitual flow of perception in everyday life. These practices rely on the introduction of something new and unanticipated – a "strange tool" – which, devoid of a defined or practical purpose, disrupts our activities and opens a space for reflection. Essentially, art and philosophy make things strange to set in motion an imaginative and interactive process that can potentially "reorganize" us. From within everyday activities like walking, talking, and perceiv-

ing, emerge re-organizational practices that put "on display" the activities that organize us, exposing them for reflection and critique (Noë [2015]: 11-12). In this process, they "loop back down" (Noë [2015]: 16), providing new materials – concepts, images, movements, or gestures – that alter and expand the raw material of our daily activities and "give us resources for doing things differently" (Noë [2015]: 226).

In the approach to cognition employed here, perception is not regarded as an automatic process that occurs "in" the brain; instead, it is an active and embodied engagement with the sociomaterial environment. Perception is a dynamic and effortful achievement, arising «against the background of our skills, knowledge, situation, and environment, including our social environment» (Noë [2015]: xi-xii).

Art, as Noë explains, can encapsulate and recapitulate this process of perception. Every work of art challenges us to engage with it meaningfully – "see me if you can" (2015) – demanding that we move "from not seeing to seeing, or from seeing to seeing differently". For instance, when visiting a gallery, the initial experience might be one of confusion or indifference, where the artworks appear as «a sea of undistinguished stuff» ([2015]: 102). However, through active observation and thoughtful engagement, the pieces gradually "come into focus", much like individual faces at a crowded party.

As Ianniello has pointed out (2024a), the challenge posed by a performative piece – "see me if you can" – is not directed solely at an individual, but at a community as well (see Fischer-Lichte [2008]). This means that, in this case, this challenge underscores that the "achievement" of perception is, fundamentally, a "we-achievement". Performance art exemplifies the idea that perception is not an isolated act but something we accomplish together, *among* and *through* others. By inviting collective engagement and shared focus, performance art recapitulates the inherently social and participatory nature of how we perceive and make sense of the world around us.

Crucial for the current article to underline is that we propose an understanding of *strange tools* and the *estranged situations* that contemporary performance art can produce should be understood as intersubjective achievements (Ianniello [2024a]). We set out to lay the groundwork for enriching our understanding of perceptual and imaginative processes that underlie the shift "from seeing to seeing differently":

– We are interested in studying intersubjective and group dynamics that are set in motion by what Noë has dubbed as a "strange" aspect of the environment;

– In particular, we are interested in how "strange tools" can set in motion a rearrangement and resynchronization of the overall configuration of the perceptual field of a group, a collectively structured "seeing differently" – that involves synchronization at many levels (Gallagher [2020]);

– We hypothesize that the introduction of *uncertain* and *surprising* aspects into the group situation can act as pivotal moments in such a perceptual shift and rely on the establishment of an attitude of trust towards *ambiguous* and *indeterminate* aspects of the environment (Ianniello, Habets [forthcoming]).

To make a more concrete illustration of these research aims we will outline the performative research program we set out to develop further in the coming years.

3. *Infinity pool as a prototype for a new 4E Performative Lab*

Infinity Pool is an art project that integrates performance and video installation, first enacted by the collective *Future Monsters* on July 7, 2024, at the Sarno River (Salerno, Italy) – one of the most polluted rivers in Europe (Lofrano et al. [2023]).

Its primary purpose is to investigate how the perceptual field could be reconfigured in highly polluted contexts. In this article we will use this performance as exemplary for the wider *performance* as *research* (Riley, Hunter [2009]) approach we are developing.

Figure 1. *Infinity Pool.* Sarno (Salerno, Italy), June 2024. Picture by *Future Monsters*.

Future Monsters is an international shifting collective of researchers, performance, and visual artists founded by Antonio Ianniello and David Habets*,* whose aim is to imaginatively shape the looming threats emerging in our society, defined by its state of ecological and climate crisis.

Future Monsters work revolves around the enactment of "imaginative niches" (Ianniello, Habets [forthcoming]) aimed at the *estrangement* of people's engagement with the sociomaterial environment (Section 5) through the introduction of tools like masks, costumes, and other props (like puppets, etc.). This process of estrangement allows out-of-ordinary figures, uncanny situations, or even monsters to appear – we will focus specifically on the historic and theoretical underpinnings of the latter in Section 4.

In the coming years, *Future Monsters* will present *Infinity Pool* (Sarno 2024), *Biston Betularia carbonaria* (Milan 2024), and *Nova Naumachia* (Rome 2025), performances that will serve as the platform to conduct phenomenological and cognitive-behavioral research that will flow into a new 4E Performative Lab. By integrating artistic performance and phenomenological research into a singular event, the lab aims to offer a unique real-life situated "collective imagination" (to an extent) that can be a reoccurring and reproducible situated research setting.

The long-term 4E Performative Lab aims to research how we can understand "seeing differently" by analyzing participants' experiences through developing a style of video-elicited phenomenological interviews (Petitmengin [2006]; Heimann et al. [2022]; Høffding, Martini [2015]) and analyzing group dynamics by a multimodal approach to ethnographic fieldwork based on Perspectival Kinaesthetic Imaging (Malafouris et al. [2023]), and participatory ethnographic research (see Van Dijk, Rietveld [2020]). Crucial for our approach, is the two-fold introduction of the recording and installment of the time-based material, within both the artistic performance and as part of qualitative research methodology, as a way to evoke a reflection on the group dynamics.

We will illustrate the advent of this approach by introducing the prototype performance *Infinity Pool* enacted at Sarno River. We will highlight a few of the initial explorative methodological results. First, we will explain the setup of the performance.

Infinity Pool is structured as a participatory masked performance that involves the inhabitants of a place as its performers. It includes a series of qualitative interviews and a video installation, which will be projected onto screens set up within the explored space itself. The collective *Future Monsters* developed the reflective mask in collaboration with sculptor Ivano Troisi at his studio in Montecorvino Pugliano (Salerno, Italy) during the weeks leading up to the inaugural performance. The mask was modeled in clay and made reflective through a three-step firing process: a biscuit firing, followed by an underglazing, and a second firing that rendered the glaze reflective (Figure 2). Its design features ambiguous

Figure 2. Mask creation for *Infinity Pool.* (Montecorvino Pugliano, Salerno, Italy),
June 2024. Picture by *Future Monsters*.

characteristics inspired by both ancient Greek masks and those of Noh theater (Meineck [2019]: 90-96). In line with the "Noh effect" (Lyons et al. [2000]), the mirror mask's expression shifts when tilted, dynamically altering what it reflects. This interplay underscores the relationship between the environment's expression and the actions we take within it. In practice, the reflective mask assumes a distinct "expression" by mirroring, for example, leaves, concrete, water, or waste, depending on the performer's movements and the sociomaterial aspects encountered – aspects shaped and organized by the particular practices employed in the given environment. An ultra-wide-angle camera was mounted on top of the mask pointing at it to capture the mask itself and the distorted reflections it generates (Figure 3).

The reflective mask, equal in size to the actor's face, was worn in its prototypical and experimental version by Antonio Ianniello (Figures 1, 3, 4) – as previously mentioned, the ultimate goal is for each participant to wear the mask, enabling them to explore the polluted environment in which they live.

The mask is employed here as a tool that has historically enabled performers across cultures to act and perceive in novel ways within the performing arts. It facilitates alternative gestures and movements for the performer while simultaneously encouraging the audience to expand their perceptual field, fostering

a deeper engagement with the action and its context (Meineck [2019]; Wiles [2007]; Bell [2001]). The artistic intention to reflect the surroundings was an attempt to embody the characteristic of inviting exploration of the actions and the surrounding environment. A video recording is employed as a means of analyzing how one reconfigures one's perceptual experience[1].

Figure 3. *Infinity Pool.* Sarno (Salerno, Italy), June 2024. Picture by *Future Monsters*.

In our prototypical case, the exploration took place at three specific locations connected to the Sarno River: 1) at its source, in Sarno (SA), 2) where the river

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1   This mask employed in *Infinity Pool*, in a sense, parallels the experiments with glasses and mirrors conducted by Köhler ([1951] 1964) and Taylor (1962). These studies, which utilized inverting glasses to "estrange" the way light entered the eye, led to what Noë (2004) refers to as "experiential blindness". Despite being visually unimpaired and receiving clear environmental stimuli, participants were rendered unable to see. This demonstrated that the inability to perceive does not stem from the nature of the stimulation but rather from the perceiver's sensorimotor understanding of it (Noë, 2004). *Infinity Pool*'s aim to "enstrange" is achieved through the use of reflective masks in a group context. What is seen through the mask and the various stages of the performance tends to highlight, paraphrasing Noë, that the ability to see (differently) stems not only from the perceiver's sensorimotor ability but also from the contextual and intersubjective engagement.

flows through an inhabited area in Scafati (SA), and 3) where it empties into the sea in Castellammare di Stabia (NA)[2].

The interviews are interwoven into the performance following the initial scheme below:

A. Masked performance: A group of participants, residents familiar with the specific area to be explored, wear masks, and traverse a designated space.

B. First interview: Each participant undergoes a first round of qualitative interviews to analyze how the mask helped reconfigure their perceptual field.

C. Video screening: The group of participants watches a loop of each video they singularly recorded during their performance on a screen set up in the space explored (Figures 4, 5).

D. Second interview: Each participant takes part in a second interview to investigate how the perception of the visual field has ultimately changed.

Figure 4. *Infinity Pool.* Sarno (Salerno, Italy), June 2024.
Still image from video registration by *Future Monsters*.

A two-step interview enables participants to explore their relationship with the surrounding environment by observing how their orientation and movements influence the emergence of a specific "face", and reflecting on the mate-

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2   A partial outcome of the initial experiment at the Sarno River can be viewed at the following URL: https://vimeo.com/1041077889 (password: infinitypool).

rials – such as leaves, water, concrete, and waste – and how they are organized through our practices, as mirrored in the mask and captured on video. In addition, a more general reflection on a group's ability to reconfigure the perceptual field is provoked.

In an explorative installment of *Infinity Pool* conducted in September 2024 during the Microphenomenology Interview seminar led by Katrin Heimann at the Interacting Minds Centre (IMC) at Aarhus University, Denmark, there was the opportunity to experiment with the functionality of the mask and its use within a qualitative interview framework. One of the participants noted: «I could not distinguish between my face and the environment; I did not recognize the direction of my face; is it my face penetrating the environment or the environment penetrating the concave shape of my face?».

To be able to analyze the participants' experiences in more depth, we opt to use a phenomenological interview technique, to address significant challenges in qualitative research, such as the "Schneider Problem" (Cole [2008]) and the epistemological discontinuity between participants' data and the researcher's interpretation[3]. This approach ensures that empirical data remains open to re-evaluation and reinterpretation, fostering more accurate understandings. Moreover, this method bridges the gap between subjective experience and analytical interpretation through reciprocal interaction. It engages the interviewee not as a passive data source but as an active collaborator, ensuring that the resulting descriptions reflect nuanced, first-person perspectives (see Høffting, Martiny [2015]).

As anticipated, learning from the initial studies, the conduction of singular first-person interviews will be expanded to the conduction of simultaneous first-person and post-event group interviews in future iterations. Additional gestural and group behavioral analysis will be performed by analyzing interaction (see Lindblom [2015]; Nalepka et al. [2015]; Richardson et al. [2007]). The prototype performance *Infinity Pool* and test interview analyzed here serves as an initial sketch for a research program and, at this stage as proposed here, it aims specifically to explore how we intersubjectively achieve to see differently an environment in crisis.

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3   The "Schneider Problem" (Cole [2008]; Høffding, Martiny [2016]) refers to the misinterpretation and misuse of pathological cases in phenomenological research, exemplified by Merleau-Ponty's (Merleau-Ponty [1945]) on the case of Johann Schneider, a World War I veteran who suffered brain injuries. Merleau-Ponty, while analyzing Schneider's motor impairments, mistakenly attributed Goldstein's general descriptions of normal human behavior to Schneider's pathological condition. This conflation of normality and pathology led to inconsistencies in Merleau-Ponty's interpretation (Dreyfus [2007]: 63-69; Cole [2008]). We believe phenomenological interviews maintain epistemological continuity by allowing researchers to clarify ambiguities through direct interaction with subjects.

4. *Monsters: Facing invisible treats*

In this section, we will consider a particular type of "estrangement" in participatory performance, where "monstrous figures" make their appearance. *Future Monsters* deliberately focuses on monsters and estranged situations as a directive strategy to invite performers and the audience to reflect on what is taken for granted in everyday life. We will outline the theoretical trajectory along which monstrous performances have formed, tying *Infinity Pool* to a lineage of premodern theater in which "monsters" prominently feature. The phenomenon of the monster we propose to understand as a protoform of estrangement[4]. In recent decades the monster has become ever more an invisible being. In this section, we will link the monster's invisibility to the stunned awareness of the ongoing climate crisis.

The figure of the monster and monstrosity appear in extremely different contexts ranging from art to anthropology, from medicine to religion, from sociology to medieval studies, or from ecocriticism to terrorism studies. Diverse characterizations from various fields have been suggested to define the concept of "monster". The philosopher Noël Caroll, for example, argues that the monster arouses curiosity because we want to try to understand how we will succeed in dealing with it, and as we entertain ourselves with the monster it challenges our categories of knowledge: «monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge» (Caroll [1990]: 34). Literature, film, and media scholar Jeffrey Weinstock defines our interest in monstrosities as an expression of «desire for other worlds» (Weinstock [2013]: 20). Medieval studies scholar Asa Mittman refers to epistemological vertigo through which established cognitive categories are challenged (Mittman [2013]). Anthropologist Timothy Ingold speaks of the monster as a «form of fear» (Ingold [2013]) through which an otherwise undefinable terror is attempted to be concretely articulated.

In his seminal essay *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*, Jeffrey Cohen, a foundational figure in Monster Studies, explores the concept of monster by formulating «breakable postulates» toward «understanding cultures through the monsters they bear» (Cohen [1996]: 4). Cohen argues that the monster's body is cultural – a physical manifestation of society's fears, anxieties, and desires. Monsters, Cohen contends, always escape; they transcend boundaries and structures, persistently defying categorization.

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4   The folkloric monster was often embodied in various European rural performances during times of shared anxiety – sometimes cyclical, such as the changing of seasons at solstices – to address communal threats (see Frazer [1890]; Wittgenstein [1967]). These figures typically represent beings other than human, creating a liminal space in which ordinary social rules are suspended. This temporary rupture gives rise to a sense of "communitas" (Turner [1969]), a state that fosters unexplored possibilities for social interaction and promotes equality and solidarity among participants.

As religion scholar Timothy Beal explains in "Religion and Its Monsters", «"monster" derives from the Latin *monstrum*, which is related to the verbs *monstrare* ("show" or "reveal") and *monere* ("warn" or "portend")» (Beal [2002]: 6-7). The etymology suggests, as philosopher Stephen Asma observes, that the monster is «a message that breaks into this world from the realm of the divine» (Asma [2009]: 13). The monster is thus a kind of omen indicating something threatening that populates one's world. In this sense, as Cohen suggests in the fifth thesis, «the monster stands as a warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes» (12). What we want to foreground here is that the monster shows us something and, by showing what we cannot usually see, warns us.

One of *Infinity Pool*'s artistic aims is to display our relation with the socio-material environment. This, in times of ecological and climatic crisis, can appear frightening. We mean the seemingly disastrous trajectory by which our everyday ways of living continuously worsen the ecological state of our planet. Many people at times feel caught in a societal and political situation that revokes the change necessary to avert disaster, yet in their everyday engagement, they take for granted the impact of their actions on the direct environment (see Slaby [2024]; Brand, Wissen [2020]).

Monsters can serve as harbingers of category crisis: «they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration» (Cohen [1996]: 6). It is a «difference made flesh» (Cohen [1996]: 7), representing otherness and inhabiting society's margins. The monster polices the borders of the possible, functioning as a mechanism for regulating societal norms and boundaries. In this sense the monster calls «horrid attention to the borders that cannot – *must* not – be crossed» (Cohen [1996]: 13). Cohen argues that the fear of the monster is a kind of desire (Cohen [1996]: 16) meaning that the monster not only provokes revulsion but also attracts toward forbidden practices allowing «safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space» (Cohen [1996]: 16).

Regarding *Infinity Pool*, our primary focus is on exploring the monster's ability to be a "difference made flesh". By introducing the reflective mask, the participant/performer is transformed into a *strange being* and directs joint attention onto the direct surroundings via the reflection in the mask (see Ianniello [2024a]; Meinek [2019]). In this sense this particular mask can be used to "personify" the concept of living environment, it imaginatively gives it a face and a body. It does so by distorting and remapping the entire perceptual field onto the facial features of the performer. It makes something that is almost always taken for granted and makes the concept of *living environment* salient and intractable.

Since the last century or so, the monster as it has been represented has gradually become invisible by decoupling from morphological features to show itself exclusively through its actions (Weinstock [2013]: 276). Four contem-

porary manifestations of invisible monstrosity can be defined: the psychopath, corporations, the virus, and nature (Weinstock [2013]). These have in common an «epistemological anxiety related to visibility» (Weinstock [2013]: 287). An epistemological barrier blocks us from contemporary monstrosity: we cannot see who or what threatens us except when the murder has already been committed. The contemporary monster constitutes a challenge to our perceptual capacities. Norman Bates, for example, who has the reassuring face of Anthony Perkins in Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film *Psycho,* is a psychopath, but one cannot tell this just by looking at his face, indeed his appearance matches the characteristics of what would normally be called a good guy. Simply by looking at him, one cannot see him for what he is: a monster. An example of a contemporary corporate monster may be the 1973 eco-horror classic film, *Soylent Green*, directed by Richard Fleischer and loosely based on the science fiction novel *Make Room! Make Room!* by Harry Harrison. In a future where humanity resides on an overheated and overpopulated planet, with extreme social polarization, food scarcity is widespread. The Soylent Green bar appears to be the only viable solution to feed the global population. However, after an extended investigation, it is discovered that these bars are made from human corpses. Beyond its appearance, one must engage in a chase to understand what the Soylent Green bar really is and what it had made of us – cannibals. A last example, again drawn from the world of cinema, is that of the invisible climate monster presented in Night Shyamalan's horror film *The Happening*, where a wind-borne neurotoxin of unspecified origin leads infected people to commit suicide. The wind that passes through tree foliage and ripples the surface of the water redefines the constituent elements of our environment, on which we have always been able to rely, as potential threats. In the course of the film, we learn that trees and other plants could release the neurotoxin that is causing the extinction of our form of life as a defense against human invasion. Beyond the development of the plot, this type of narrative brings to the forefront how we have always considered our relationship with our surroundings. Emerging, thus, as monstrous – as bodies begin to form piles – the environment no longer presents itself as merely an inert backdrop to our actions.

Such a monster, then, from the last century or so, constitutes a challenge to what we can see, or rather the monster questions our claim to grasp with a glance what threatens us. Confronted with Norman Bates who despite his reassuring face reveals himself to be a monster, the *lectio facilior* we get from this is that it is important not to trust first impressions. But the crucial point we want to foreground is that the contemporary monster, and even more so the climatic monster, tells us that to see what is in front of us and what poses a threat to our lives, we have to engage in a process that unfolds over time; "to see differently" and move from «not seeing to seeing» (Noë [2015]: xii) we

have to follow the monster, engage in concrete and situated investigation, flush him out. This is closely tied to the habitual practices we enact based on the material invitations sedimented over the years and the skills we have developed in our lives.

We regard *Infinity Pool* to enact precisely such an ephemeral monster. In the next section, by introducing the notions of "imaginative niche" and "estranged education of attention", we will investigate how the "evoked" monsters of *Infinity Pool* might invite us to uncover what has remained hidden.

5. *Molding imaginative niche to enact an estranged education of attention*

Through *Infinity Pool*, we propose that to confront the environment – "turned bad" – and to grapple with the climate monster, we must imaginatively enact it by exploring the sociomaterial entanglements.

We suggest understanding the possible monsters "evoked" by *Infinity Pool* as linked to a very specific form of "education of attention" that is enacted through the molding of an "imaginative niche" (Ianniello, Habets [forthcoming]).

To present our proposal, we will briefly introduce an enactive approach to "play" developed by Marc Andersen and colleagues. This approach suggests that humans intentionally engage in play to create surprising situations (Andersen et al. [2022]). They argue that play serves as a form of informal experimentation, enabling individuals to acquire practical knowledge and deepen their understanding of the world. According to the authors, play fosters creativity and innovation by crafting environments rich in unpredictability, which lies at the heart of its enjoyment and appeal (Andersen et al. [2022]: 467). They describe play as a variety of niche construction where «the organism modulates its physical and social environment in order to maximize the productive potential of surprise» ([2022]: 463). In this sense, we suggest that "imaginative niches" open individuals to a realm of possibilities that they may not have encountered without engaging in the activity. Building on the work of Andersen and colleagues (2022), we propose that the urge to play arises from an intrinsic motivation to face the unexpected.

We sustain that an imaginative niche represents an openness to what diverges from everyday practical engagement with the world. By outlining the broader practice within which an imaginative niche is situated, it becomes possible to identify the typical affordances likely to be explored. For musicians, activities such as jamming and improvisation serve as ways to explore musical gestures. Through playful and interactive coordination, a group can discover rhythms, counterpoints, and melodies that evoke a range of feelings, emotions, and thoughts (Krueger [2019]; Høffding et al. [2024]).

We propose referring to the environments that enable and shape such playful activities as "dynamic imaginative niches". Individuals and communities create these niches to facilitate playful experimentation that prepares them for future surprises. The pleasure derived from imagination in play comes from the feeling of overcoming challenges or reducing surprise more quickly than expected (Andersen et al. [2022]: 468).

The core idea of the "imaginative niche" is that we intersubjectively mold the living environment as a means to explore new and unexpected possibilities to act. Within imaginative niches, unlike affective and cognitive niches (Colombetti, Krueger [2014]; Sterelny [2010]) the object of our imagination is not anticipated to be effective in a specific way; that is, the meaning of the object for an individual and the group within the activity remains open, and can allow new possibilities for action to enter (Ianniello, Habets [forthcoming]). When a monster is staged, an aspect of the ecological niche such as an object, artifact, or tool is used to enact an imaginary being that foregrounds looming dangers that remain obscured or denied by many in a community. The monster is a specific engineering of our niche that enacts an "estranged attention education" by bringing to the foreground threats that for some reason do not concern us. Humans, as anticipated, are selectively open to the sociomaterial environment. The practices in which we are educated through "education of attention" have pre-selected and organized for us the materials on which we find ourselves operating: this in practice leaves underdetermined certain aspects of our environment that remain effectively invisible. We suggest that the monster enacts an "estranged education of attention" in that it invites a specific community to focus on what typically remains hidden. It calls attention to aspects that have not been selected by our current practices and thus have been made invisible.

Through *Infinity Pool*, the environment can acquire imaginatively a "face" if the performer/participant engages in an "estranged education of attention" by framing the devastated environment with their "reflective face", through movements, interactions, and linguistic descriptions. This process actively molds an "imaginative niche" that allows an otherwise invisible "monster" to emerge.

What could potentially make this "monster" unsettling – both during the performance and in the video installation – is not only the transfiguration of the masked performer, whose "skin becomes a mirror", but also the output of education of attention that lets aspects of the extremely polluted environments emerge during the exploration, making them effectively become part of the performer's new reflective face. In the case of the Sarno River, for instance, the mask could incorporate reflections of waste materials, while the qualitative interview might uncover the nauseating odors encountered near the polluted water and refer to illegal industrial discharges.

This monster, his face assembled in a dynamic flow of distorted objects and blurred colors, with voices reflecting on and probing their significance for specific lives, is one of "our children" (Cohen [1996]: 20) asking us why we have created it. We, as participants/performers, leave him to enact and lead us to the borders, trampling «the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind» (Cohen [1996]: 20). After the exploration of underutilized – invisible – aspects of our sociomaterial environment, it returns – and we return – to confront ourselves, questioning our lives.

Figure 5. *Infinity Pool.* Castellammare di Stabia (Naples – ITA), June 2024.
Still image from video registration by *Future Monsters.*

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Aisthesis

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 scketched, 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 aestheticization, 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 inter-actions 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 sentities, 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 multisensory 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 (Defranceski [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 narrativitization 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 #NatureIn-Focus, users can link their images to broader narratives that integrate elements of environmental criticism, historic ecology and historical memory, and not only a perpent 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-anthropic 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 is 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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Varia

Aisthesis

Erotic Leonardo: Eroticism in Leonardo da Vinci's Sketches[*]

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Abstract. Though dissected under countless lenses, Leonardo Da Vinci's art continues to pulse with enigmatic work. This study ventures beyond familiar territory, unearthing potential erotic undercurrents within his sketches, anatomical studies, and paintings. It employs a multifaceted lens, weaving together threads of philosophy, aesthetics, and psychoanalysis to illuminate the subtle interplay of form and hidden psychology embedded within his works. More than mere discovery, this analysis seeks a critical revaluation. By incorporating gender-critical perspectives, it challenges established interpretations, offering a fresh and nuanced understanding of the master's enduring legacy. This approach not only delves into underexplored territory but also invites broader conversations about representation, power, and the very nature of artistic expression.

Keywords. Leonardo da Vinci, *Angel in the Flesh*, eroticism, psychoanalysis, gender studies.

1. *Introduction*

A burning question in today's art history and criticism, especially within postmodern thought, is the revaluation of ideas long confined by narrow interpretations within the classicist tradition. Leonardo da Vinci, whose art demands fresh inquiry, exemplifies this need. This article moves beyond historical limitations to analyse Leonardo's work as aesthetic expressions of human emotions, behaviours, and societal identity. By exploring his depictions of nature and the human form, we delve into the psychological dimension he emphasized: «A good painter has two chief objects to paint, man and the intention of his soul; the former is easy, the latter hard, because he has to represent it by the attitudes and movements of the limbs» (Leonardo da Vinci [2008]: 168).

Psychoanalytic theory has significantly influenced art criticism, as Blass ([2008]: 1259-1276) argues. This study examines Leonardo da Vinci's sketchbooks through a psychoanalytic lens, building upon existing art historical and psychological analyses. By mapping the current scholarly landscape, we can identify areas for further exploration. This research will delve into the intellectual reflections catalysed by these drawings within the frameworks of art psychology and classical psychoanalysis, focusing on aspects that have not been extensively examined before.

Freud's psychoanalytic analysis of Leonardo, while influential, has limitations. It focuses on childhood memories and homosexuality, neglecting the role of specific artworks. The 1991 discovery of *Angel in the Flesh*, a drawing depicting a nude male figure, opened new avenues for exploration, particularly regarding the erotic dimension of Leonardo's work. I will dwell on this at length later, but I can advance that the available evidence does not allow us to confirm that this drawing is by Leonardo. Its authorship is not important in this sense, but the analytical possibilities that it represents for Leonardo's graphic work from a deeper level. Scholars like Murat Aydemir have argued that this drawing suggests homoerotic desires beyond what Freud's framework could capture, while Luciano Bottoni emphasizes the drawing's connection to themes of death and rebirth. These recent studies demonstrate the value of moving beyond Freud's initial analysis and incorporating diverse perspectives for a richer understanding of Leonardo's complex psychology.

While Freud's influence on psychoanalytic art analysis persists, recent critiques highlight the inherent limitations of his approach. Sarah Kofman incisively exposes the inherent power imbalance within Freud's framework, wherein the psychoanalyst assumes the role of supreme interpreter of the artist's mind: «If we accept this reading within the reading, we can say that the artist […] plays out the unconscious processes without understanding them and that the psychoanalyst

alone […] can interpret them» (Kofman [1988]: 43-44). This intellectual hierarchy risks overlooking the artwork's unique operational modes and its distinct functionalities within everyday life. This shift in focus underscores the need for alternative approaches that move beyond singular interpretations of the artist's unconscious.

Contemporary trends in psychoanalysis and art psychology offer promising departures from the Freudian framework. These newer approaches prioritize intersubjectivity, collaboration, and the artwork's inherent capacity to shape meaning and understanding. For example, relational psychoanalysis examines the dynamic interplay between artist, artwork, and viewer, recognizing the artwork as a catalyst for shared emotional and psychological experiences. Similarly, social art history explores the artwork's embeddedness within its historical and cultural context, highlighting its ability to reflect and challenge social norms and power structures.

This paper delves into the psychological depths lurking within select drawings by Leonardo da Vinci, specifically focusing on those engaging in unconventional or provocative depictions of the human form. We will explore the potential homoerotic subtext and voyeuristic elements present in these drawings, engaging with and critically evaluating existing scholarly psychoanalytic interpretations. The analysis will begin by contextualizing these themes within the broader tapestry of Leonardo's oeuvre, followed by a close examination informed by both Freudian and alternative frameworks. Ultimately, this study aims to develop a nuanced understanding of the erotic and critical dimensions within these seemingly peripheral works.

2. *The Sketch of Leonardo da Vinci: Art and Psychoanalysis*

In 1899, during his series of three lectures on Leonardo da Vinci, Aby Warburg (2019) cemented his position as a prominent art historian. His focus was to analyse three key aspects: his education, his artistic independence from mainstream styles, and the psychological depth he conveyed in his creations. Notably, in the third lecture, Warburg presents a key argument about Leonardo's work in Milan, stating that «he diligently strove to render the inner person as a whole, the complex world of thoughts and emotions, in his diverse figures, granting them an alluring quality that opened up a new realm of deeper emotional engagement with art for his contemporaries» (Warburg [2019]: 39). Warburg guides us into an introspective and psychological interpretation of Leonardo's sketches.

Leonardo da Vinci's artistic and scientific works demonstrate a profound exploration of visual perception. His extensive notebooks reveal a wealth of knowledge: detailed sketches, anatomical studies, meticulous observations of nature,

and innovative technical and military designs. This exploration transcends mere depiction, delving into the physiological and epistemological foundations of human vision and its interaction with the environment: «The eye, which is called the windows of the soul, is the principal means by which the brain can most completely and abundantly appreciate the infinite works of nature» (Leonardo da Vinci [1883]: 327). This emphasis on the eye as a bridge between the internal and external, coupled with his comprehensive understanding of the world, likely contributed to Aby Warburg's fascination with Leonardo's work. Warburg, in his own studies, explored the cultural memory embedded in visual representations, potentially finding resonances with Leonardo's ideas about perception and the evolution and philosophical underpinnings of imagery.

Furthermore, for Leonardo, the world perceived through our senses, particularly through vision, is inherently connected to a reality expressed through both internal mental images and external depictions. This perspective aligns with Aristotle's notion that art, by imitating nature and offering idealized representations, serves as a powerful tool to complement our understanding of the world, facilitating our journey toward comprehensive knowledge[2].

Martin Jay, in his seminal work on the primacy of vision in Western thought, identifies a pervasive tendency within European Modernity's epistemological frameworks: «ocularcentrism». This philosophical movement cemented the epistemological significance of the arts by associating them with visual imagery. Consequently, Renaissance artists, with Leonardo da Vinci as a prime exemplar, elevated drawing, and painting to the pinnacle of artistic expression (Jay [1993]: 21-48).

For Leonardo, the visual representation of all natural phenomena held paramount importance. He asserted that every observable event, accessible through sight, should be translated into visual form to facilitate comprehensive analysis and dissemination across other visual media. In this sense, the eye was an organ that projected the expansiveness of the body: «If the object in front of the eye sends its image to it, the eye also sends its image to the object; so, of the object no portion whatever is lost in the images proceeding from it for any reason either in the eye or the object» (Leonardo da Vinci [2008]: 107). On the art space, notably: «paintings have been known to make the point, visually, of showing vision's own inadequacies» (Feagin [2005]: 524).

His relentless visual exploration extended to human behaviour and movement, the interplay of light and shadow, and preparatory studies for his famed paintings. Within these notebooks, Leonardo unveiled a profound analytical depth, delving not only into the physicality but also the psychology of his subjects. This meticulous attention to both physiological and psychological dimensions further

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1   «The one, then, is for the sake of the other; and generally art in some cases completes what nature cannot bring to a finish, and in others imitates nature» (Aristotle 199a 15-17 [1995]: 340).

illuminates his unwavering commitment to translating observed reality into a comprehensive visual language.

This is indeed pertinent. While depicting the images unveiled by his discerning gaze within the realm of nature, he allocates a space for the meticulous examination of the intricate interplay among these phenomena. However, this heightened depth of inquiry is most conspicuously manifest in his studies of human countenance, particularly in his drawings of faces. Within these depictions, he delves into the analysis of moods, facial expressions, and the circumstances of individuals. Notably, in numerous physiognomic sketches, a discernible psychological fascination with the portrayal of mental disturbance and madness can be discerned:

> Five faces remain that – in terms of quality – grasp the problem of Madness where Leonardo da Vinci had left it, faces that seem to know everything about the advances of psychological science not only in the past decades but centuries, and that place the theme of Physiognomy, and therefore of the Deep, on the anatomical table where the positivist psychiatry of the young Sigmund Freud would operate. (Caroli [2012]: 189-190)

Leonardo da Vinci's work includes precise studies of nature but also explores affective and sexual themes. A striking phenomenon in his art is the emotional detachment of figures from their actions, creating a puzzling disconnect. This enigmatic quality caught Freud's attention in his psychoanalytic essay *Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*. There, he developed what some call a «pathography» of artistic forces shaped by sexual inhibition and childhood creativity (Spector [1988]: 54).

While Freud's essay explores various aspects of psychology, including childhood development and the then-controversial link between homosexuality and paranoia (Freud [2002]: 49-50), his core argument centres on sublimation. He interprets the emotional detachment and «purely rational mood» in Da Vinci's drawings as manifestations of sublimated desires. Freud argues that «his urge for knowledge was always directed to the external world; something kept him far away from the investigation of the human mind» (Freud [2002]: 23). Although some claims have limitations given contemporary research (Eysenck, Wilson [2013]), sublimation remains a valuable framework for analysing Da Vinci's work and its complexities.

From a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, life assumes an aesthetic quality in that it involves a fusion of bodily sensations with symbolic representations. This dynamic entails an ongoing interplay between the physical body and the realm of the mind, where symbolic constructs informed by societal norms and regulations are internalized by the individual. This notion encapsulates a psychosomatic aesthetics that is intimately concerned with the entirety of human existence. However, a seemingly contradictory perspective emerges when analysing Freud's own interpretation of da Vinci in his essay:

> In the first of these, research shares the fate of sexuality; thenceforward curiosity remains inhibited and the free activity of intelligence may be limited for the whole of the subject's lifetime, especially as shortly after this the powerful religious inhibition of thought is brought into play by education. (Freud [2002]: 26)

Through a Freudian lens, Leonardo da Vinci's artistic production can be seen as driven by a powerful force of sublimation. He channelled his creative energy into intellectual pursuits, often favouring theoretical exploration over emotional expression. Freud identified this dynamic in various artworks, including anatomical drawings of coitus (Figure 1), where emotional detachment suggests a focus on anatomical accuracy rather than subjective experience. In another drawing analysing coitus, this rational, mechanical approach leads to the depersonalization of the act (Figure 2). Similarly, many of his preparatory sketches prioritize technical precision and the aesthetic beauty of the human form, possibly at the expense of a deeper psychological exploration of the figures.

Figure 1. Leonardo da Vinci, The hemisection of a man and woman in the act of coition, c. 1490-1492, pen and ink (sheet of paper), 27.6 x 20.4 cm. (From folio RL 19097v, by permission of Royal Collection Trust; copyright © 2024 His Majesty King Charles III.)
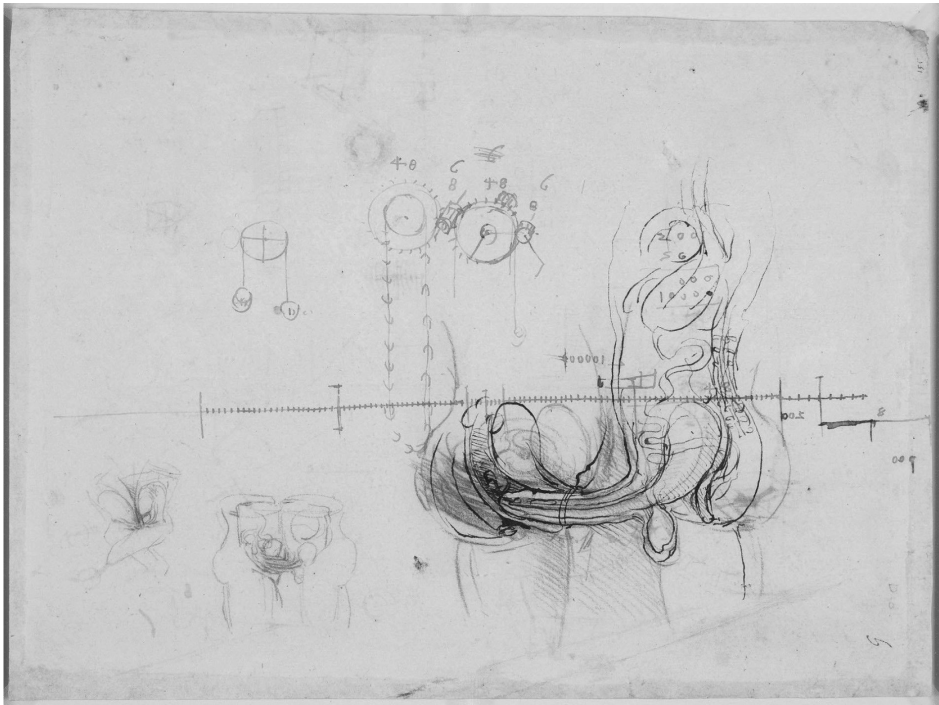
Figure 2. Leonardo da Vinci, Anatomical studies of the act of coitus, etc, c. 1490-1493,
pen and ink and red chalk (sheet of paper), 21.3 x 28.5 cm. (From Folio RL 19096,
by permission of Royal Collection Trust; copyright © 2024 His Majesty King Charles III.)

Leonardo's artistic intent in these works clearly leaned towards scientific re-search, prioritizing anatomical accuracy over emotional expression: «Leonardo drew the most complete representation of sexual intercourse yet made. But this famous anatomical section-drawing […] is probably the least erotic image of copulation in art» (Turner [2017]: 47). Regardless of the validity of Freud's as-sertions, many of Leonardo's artworks, especially those emphasizing technique and form, reflect a connection to rational inquiry. His figures, drawings, and paintings often reveal a preoccupation with the human form's physical beauty. Yet, within his detailed studies of bodily mechanics, emotional expression is obscured, leaving limited space for emotional engagement with desire.

Caution and scepticism are essential when evaluating Freud's assertions about Leonardo. In his essay on da Vinci, Freud connects daydreaming with play and fantasy, where the child plays, the adult imagines, and the artist transforms these relationships into artistic representations (Freud [1981]: 145-146). As Christo-pher Bollas suggests, dreams can be seen as self-constructed through imagery:

«the dream constructed by a unique aesthetic: the transformation of the subject into his thought» (Bollas [1987]: 64). However, Lou Andreas-Salomé offers a contrasting view, building on Freud's later ideas. She argues against seeing art merely as the ego's relationship with desired objects, proposing instead that it stems from a deeper, passionate, erotic nature. This interpretation places a greater emphasis on the emotional and sensual aspects of artistic creation:

> Just as artistic excitement is rooted in imaginative processes, from which the artist's whole being is affected, so also erotic excitement is rooted in sexual life, and just as the artistic process can nowhere leave the imagination as the fertile centre, no matter how much it wants to take up, no matter how much it wants to encompass the whole world, so too the erotic process never leaves the sphere of sexuality, no matter how many psychic forces it encompasses, no matter how far its effects extend. (Andreas-Salomé [1900]: 1024)

Freud's focus in his analysis of Leonardo's work shifts from daydreaming to a realm of imagination more readily grasped as intricately connected to the physical body. Consequently, the concept of sublimation, central to Freud's arguments, becomes subtler and less overt. This implies a deliberate attempt at concealment or hidden meaning within the artwork. Building on this, Jacques Lacan emphasizes the symbolic role of the veil, highlighting the inherent gap between the object of desire and its artistic representation, reflecting an underlying absence:

> What can materialise for us, as it were, in the sharpest way this relationship of interposition, which means that what is aimed at lies beyond what presents itself? Well, something that is truly one of the most fundamental images of the human relationship with the world, namely the veil, the curtain. […] The curtain is, so to speak, the idol of absence. If the veil of Māyā is the most commonly used metaphor to express man's relation to all that captivates him, this is surely due to his sense of a certain fundamental illusion in all his relations of desire. (Lacan [2020]: 173)

In this manner, the elements concealed in Leonardo's work now emerge in unique ways within the context of his psychology (Lichtenberg [1978]: 874). While an enduring absence persists, it points to a hidden presence framed by temptation. As Murat Aydemir observed, Leonardo's *St. John the Baptist* (Figure 3), painted between 1513 and 1516, expresses this dimension (Aydemir [2009]: 127). The painting features St. John in the foreground, with his head and arm bathed in light, while the rest of his torso and waist remain semi-dark. Everything appears illuminated, yet simultaneously shrouded, leaving the viewer uncertain about the true nature of what is being observing:

> The iconographic and anecdotal elements are reduced to a minimum: a dark background replaces the landscape and the figure is characterized only by the soft golden glow of the face without other colours: one could therefore appreciate the painting without being forced

to decipher it – the beauty, the smile and the gesture immediately trigger emotions. There is nothing to read. Nothing alludes to the earthly experience of the saint who lived as a hermit on the banks of the Jordan River and who is usually depicted with an emaciated and savage aspect; this work only asks to be lived through emotions. (Bramly [1991]: 263)

Figure 3. Leonardo da Vinci, St. John the Baptist, c. 1513-1516, oil on wood (walnut),
73 x 56.5 cm. Louvre, Paris.

This interplay of presence and absence constructs a space that provides the viewer with a considerably expanded access, allowing figures to intertwine with a multitude of gazes. What we encounter here is a connection that enables us to preserve this artistic access rooted in the realm of dreams, albeit without fully adhering to Freud's viewpoint. Instead, it regards the oneiric space to interpret the dreamer's relationship with that which they hold dear:

in the so-called waking state, there is an elision of the gaze [...]. In the field of the dream, on the other hand, what characterizes the images is that it *shows*. [...] Look up some description of a dream, anyone – not only the one I referred to last time, in which, after all, what I am going to say may remain enigmatic, but any dream – place it in its co-ordinates, and you will see that this it shows is well to the for. So much is it to the fore, with the characteristics in which it is co-ordinated – namely, the absence of horizon, the enclosure, of that which is contemplated in the waking state, and, also, the character of emergence, of contrast, of stain, of its images, the intensification of their colours – that, in the final resort, our position in the dream is profoundly that of someone who does not see. (Lacan [1998]: 75)

This provides a foundation to explore how dream, memory, desire, and art intertwine. The *Baptist* painting is especially significant for probing the amorous emotions Freud linked to desire, which Andreas-Salomé later explored in the erotic sphere. This analysis will gain precision as we engage with Lacan's theory of the veil, tracing its direction. By examining the historical evolution of the painting through Da Vinci's preparatory sketches, our goal is to clarify this psychoanalytical interpretation and access the erotic dimension embedded in his graphic oeuvre.

3. *The Angel in the Flesh*

It is uncommon to move beyond Leonardo's major paintings when examining his work, yet it is misleading to consider *The Baptist* a minor piece, despite its relative neglect. Housed in the Louvre, the painting initially appears as a straightforward allegorical depiction of John the Baptist. However, a deeper analysis reveals its complexity. Unlike the mature Baptist in works by Masaccio and Domenico Veneziano, Leonardo presents a youthful male figure with soft features and an innocent expression. Set against an indistinct, shadowy backdrop, the figure is lit by a beam of light from his raised arm pointing heavenward. This dramatic chiaroscuro aligns more with Baroque aesthetics than Renaissance conventions. Martin Kemp notes that *The Baptist* occupies a unique position in Leonardo's work, not only for its innovative portrayal but for its ability to evoke emotional depth (Kemp [2006]: 337; Clark [2005]: 232). This introspective quality influenced Caravaggio's later depictions of John the Baptist.

This work stands out as a key example in the vast artistic field and in Leonardo da Vinci's prolific body of work. Applying the proposed psychoanalytic framework to explore latent eroticism in his paintings involves delving into their hidden psychological layers, investigating the enigmatic shadows of his compositions, and examining the sketches that reveal his unconscious. Since its discovery, many researchers have attributed the drawing entitled by Carlo Pedretti as *Angel in the Flesh* (Figure 4) to Leonardo. It portrays a youthful male figure, likely representing the angel Gabriel from the Annunciation. However, the figure

bears a strong resemblance to John the Baptist, suggesting a possible symbolic or visual connection between the two.

The physiognomic identification of the Baptist with Salai is now further endorsed by the discovery of an erotic Nuncius, the so-called Angel in the Flesh. This establishment has put in motion – after the contested diagnosis advanced by Freud – a debate that, referring to the androgyny of the Saint, warned the audacity of disrespect and, at the same time, brutally denounced the effusions of an old homosexual. […] The angelic nuncius in the drawing is depicted in the same position as the Baptist, except for the foreshortened arm indicating upwards. (Bottoni [2009]: 141)

Despite uncertainties about its provenance and authorship, the drawing's value lies not in its attribution to Leonardo, but in its potential to illuminate interpretations of his work, particularly the eroticism in his depiction of the Baptist. Through Lacanian psychoanalysis, we explore psychological dimensions and symbolic meanings, offering insights into Leonardo's artistic vision and cultural context, enriching our understanding of his proposal:

> But beneath his face, lit by an ephebic sensual ecstasy, instead allows a glimpse of a turned breast and a female nipple, the other hand, folded over his chest, holding a veil which falls to the groin revealing, with provocative pornographic ostentation, an erect penis. (Bottoni [2009]: 141)

Beyond the explicit sexual rendering in the purported angel and the potential for arousal, what stands out is the prominently featured erect phallus within the composition. Bottoni's characterization is accurate: we encounter a young man exuding ephebic allure, with androgynous features that give him a divergent corporeal presence. His physiological traits refuse to conform to the conventional male-female dichotomy. This incongruity is highlighted through the erotic implications of these attributes, as Bottoni notes the pornographic connotation associated with the male member depicted. Therefore, it becomes manifest that the image and corporeal representation articulated by Leonardo transcends and diverges from the established norms governing the portrayal and discourse surrounding cisgender bodies.

This representation has been extensively analysed from multiple perspectives, including biographical connections to Leonardo's disciple, Gian Giacomo Caprotti (Salai), and historical interpretations of Leonardo's artistic intent. Some theories explore cryptic implications, such as the alignment of the hand pointing to the heavens and the phallus extending in the same direction (Aydemir [2009]: 133). While speculation about Leonardo's emotional and sexual life has sparked considerable discourse, there is insufficient evidence to support a definitive interpretation based on these conjectures (Turner [2017]: 42). However, a drawing like this would not be unusual in Leonardo's notebooks. In the Codex Arundel, there is a depiction of a naked ephebic body with an erect member. The uniqueness of these

drawings lies not only in their analysis but in the dilution of logos and pathos. In this context, many elements merit exploration, particularly the hidden erotic dimension, which intriguingly intersects with Lacanian theory regarding the Phallus.

In Lacan's framework, the concept of the «phallus» represents an empty signifier, defined by its relational ties to other signifiers through opposition and combination. It is not directly equated with the male genital organ but instead exists within the symbolic potentiality inherent to the phallus. Lacan emphasizes that the signifier of the phallus «is wedded to the advent of desire» (Lacan [2002]: 581). This means that, across all domains of life, whenever a collective consensus forms around an image that embodies desire, it influences the subject when it intersects with the phallus signifier. Though the phallus itself holds no fixed meaning, any signifier tied to it absorbs the connotations of desire. However, Lacan distinguishes between discourse in a linguistic or cognitive sense and discourse in a representational one. In this regard, he introduces the notion of the «imaginary phallus», which functions as a representational emblem of desire, further complicating its symbolic meaning:

> The phallus can be better understood on the basis of its function here. In Freudian doctrine, the phallus is not a fantasy, if we are to view fantasy as an imaginary effect. Nor is it as such an object (part-, internal, good, bad, etc.) inasmuch as "object" tends to gauge the reality involved in a relationship. Still less is it the organ – penis or clitoris – that it symbolizes. And it is no accident that Freud adopted as a reference the simulacrum it represented to the Ancients. (Lacan [2002]: 579)

This analysis suggests that artistic expression of desire relies on creating an imaginary representation, aligning with Lacan's notion of desire's signification. Through this framework, divergent interpretations of Leonardo's works with erotic undercurrents converge, particularly in sublimation and the portrayal of beautiful youth. While Andreas-Salomé cautions against equating these with Leonardo's personal desires, the concept of imaginary desire offers a unifying lens, helping us understand how various interpretations converge in the artistic expression of veiled eroticism.

On the back of the *Angel in the Flesh*, three Greek words appear: «astrapen», «bronten», and «ceraunobolian». These terms reference Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*, specifically Apelles' skill in depicting the unrepresentable forces of nature – lightning, storms, and thunder – manifesting invisible forces (Pedretti [2009a]: 72). Some scholars interpret Leonardo's anatomical sketches as suggesting a belief in the penis's autonomous will and capacity for erection (Goldstein [2000]: 70). However, a closer examination reveals a more nuanced interpretation. Leonardo appears to understand the physiological processes behind erection, notably the role of blood pressure (Figure 5), but lacks the knowledge of blood circulation that Harvey would later discover. Like many of his contemporaries, he is still influenced by the neo-Aristotelian paradigm (Noble, DiFrancesco & Zancani [2014]: 401). In this light, Leonardo's representation of the erection can be seen as

a force of nature at the centre of the human being: «The penis begins at the centre of the man» (Leonardo da Vinci [2008]: 141). Thus, Leonardo's anatomical explorations reflect a deeper connection between the human body and natural forces.
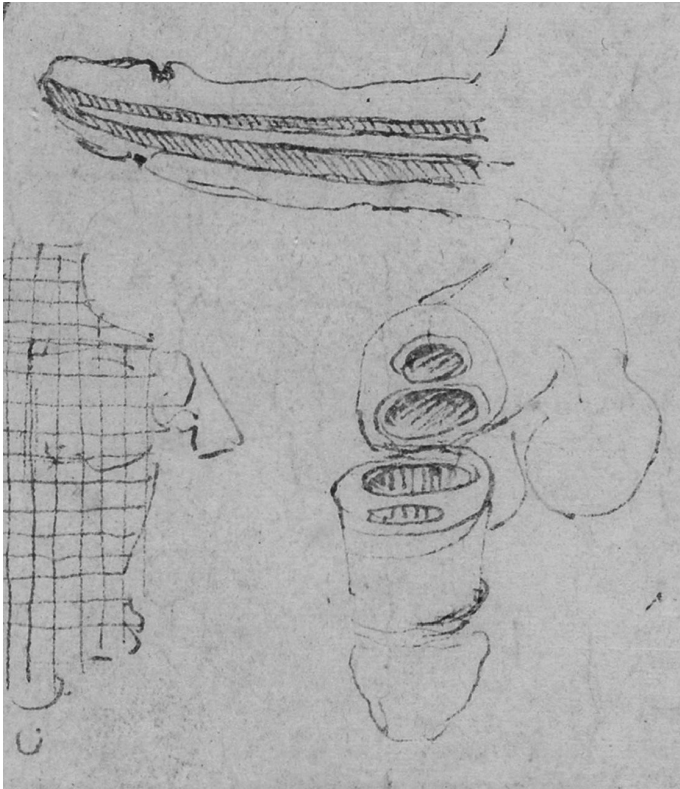

Figure 5. Leonardo da Vinci, Structure and function of tubes in longitudinal and cross sections of the erect penis. Section of Folio RL 19097v, c. 1490-1492, pen and ink (sheet of paper), 27.6 x 20.4 cm. (From folio RL 19097v, by permission of Royal Collection Trust; copyright © 2024 His Majesty King Charles III.)

This analysis posits the existence of a hidden force represented in the anatomical drawing, echoing Freudian interpretations. However, solely referencing Freud provides limited context. Examining this motif in relation to the preparatory drawing of an erotic Nuncio like *St. John the Baptist* offers a richer perspective. While sublimated through a Freudian lens, the anatomical drawing provides a rational examination of the phallus. Conversely, *Angel in the Flesh* presents a veiled depiction, aiming to create a liminal space between the physical and the unseen.

Figure 4. Annunciating Angel with Erection (The Angel in the Flesh), c. 1513-1515,
black chalk or charcoal on rough, blue paper, 26.8 × 19.7 cm. German private property, in trust of
The Pedretti Foundation, Los Angeles. Extracted Pedretti [2009]: 71.

The distinction between a drawing – *Angel in the Flesh* – and a painting – *St. John the Baptist* – seems clear, but in this case, it is more metaphorical than real. Bottoni ([2004]: 98-103) finds significant common points between the two works, suggesting that *Angel in the Flesh* offers an alternative representation of the Baptist. However, this erotic density that moves between the latent and the manifest makes it clear that we are looking at two expressions and one and the

same work. The solemn and harmonious beauty of the Nuncio contrasts with the more pronounced thematic weight and emotional density in the *Angel*. From this perspective, we are not only dealing with a painting and its sketch, but with two manifestations of erotic psychology: the intellectual and restrained in the painting, and the more corporeal and rawer in the drawing. This veiled eroticism, especially in the hidden limb of the angel, resonates with Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the veil. The play between presence and absence in the drawing enhances this psychoanalytic lens, revealing a deeper connection between the works and the symbolic nature of desire. Let's look at this more closely.

From this Lacanian perspective, the artist engages in a creative play by incorporating various signifiers that beckon the viewer and interweave with an array of erotic elements, thereby prompting a heightened state of contemplation and arousal. The phallic signifier in this imaginary sense implies an unfolding of the spectator's cognitive processes and active engagement with the artwork:

> For the phallus is a signifier, a signifier whose function, in the intrasubjective economy of analysis, may lift the veil from the function it served in the mysteries. For it is the signifier that is destined to designate meaning effects as a whole, insofar as the signifier conditions them by its presence as signifier. (Lacan [2002]: 579)

Angel in the Flesh presents a compelling case of layered veils disrupting conventional representational norms. The artwork shows a nude young man in a state of arousal, but the phallus remains obscured, raising the critical question: is it vanishing or emerging? While this effect is the result of later censorship (Turner [2017]: 43), it contributes to the image's ongoing ambiguity. The figure's inherent eroticism is clear, but it is hidden through symbolic elements, effectively creating a «simulation» that engages the viewer's gaze and invites further interpretation. The veil serves as an interruption, rendering the status of the erect member uncertain. This deliberate obfuscation places the viewer in a position to project fantasy, exploring the language and meanings of the phallus. In doing so, the work encourages an active engagement with its latent eroticism and psychological dimensions, creating a space for both conscious and unconscious interpretations[3].

It is important to recognize that the painting cannot exist without the outline of the Angel. Leonardo emphasizes in his notes that painting, using shadows

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2   Carlo Pedretti has dealt with the linguistic presence of phallus – cock – in da Vinci's notebooks through the Codex Arundel: «here there are ten notes words on theme of "cock", followed by an eleventh one with equivalent meaning "putz"» (Pedretti [2009b]: 209). However, he has also devoted special attention to the space occupied by the anatomical study of the limb and its relationship with the *Angel in the Flesh*: «On a sheet of the Codex Atlanticus, f. 249 r-c [647 r], with notes on mechanics, hydraulics, and painting – which can be related to those of Ms. E. *c*. 1513-1514, and therefore belonging to the time of the "Angel in the Flesh"» (Pedretti [2009b]: 207).

and light, represents physical distances on a flat surface: «Painting, however, by means of shadows and lights presents upon level surfaces, shapes with hollowed and raised portions in diverse aspects, separated from each other at various distances» (Leonardo da Vinci [2008]: 195). This insight offers a resolution to Freud's query: in Leonardo's work, rather than sublimation, there is a multidimensional expansion of erotic sensibility. Later psychoanalytical perspectives, particularly Lacan and Andreas-Salomé, examine the interplay of veils that shape both the painting and the sketch.

In Leonardo's work, the signifiers are veiled by John the Baptist and the final painting's execution: «Whereas *The Baptiste* suspends the penile referent from sight with the heavy and dark tunic, the promise of its eventual reappearance is kept in the "Angel"» (Aydemir [2009]: 133). In this shared visual experience, within an intersubjective realm, it's tempting to speculate that Leonardo manipulates the viewers with a drawing not meant to stand alone, inviting further interpretation and engagement. This playful dynamic is central to understanding the veiled eroticism in Leonardo's work:

> The veil intimates that signification be situated within a theatral frame, a performance of addressing and being addressed. The frontal position, the turned head, the ingratiating smile, and the offered bare shoulder in *The Baptist* all engage the viewer. Those signs invite or enlist the second person to join the manual gesture of the figure. (Aydemir [2009]: 133)

The *Angel in the Flesh* presents a captivating case study for exploring the interplay of desire and representation through a Lacanian lens. The artwork depicts John the Baptist imbued with suggestive elements, yet the phallus remains veiled. This intentional obfuscation invites nuanced interpretation, moving beyond simplistic Freudian readings and revealing a multifaceted engagement with desire.

The artwork's layered structure invites analysis through Lacanian psychoanalysis, with *St. John the Baptist* masking the underlying «imaginary phallus», a symbol of repressed desire. The absence of the phallus in the Angel drawing amplifies its symbolic presence, creating tension between concealment and revelation. Lacan's concept of the gaze highlights how desire emerges in the interaction between subject and object. While artistic intent remains uncertain, Lacanian analysis offers a framework to explore desire's complexities in the work, revealing a richer understanding of how the piece engages with the viewer's subjective desires.

4. *Ambiguity and Eroticism: An Artistic Relationship*

Leonardo's artwork presents a deeper exploration of erotic themes when analyzed aesthetically and psychologically, especially through his drawings. Among

them, a presumed preparatory sketch for *St. John the Baptist* reveals a strikingly explicit erotic dimension. *Angel in the Flesh* is not merely a nude depiction of John; it is a provocative image that exposes a network of psychophysiological relationships, engaging in an analysis of the genetic origins of the image. This interpretation extends beyond the psycho-physiognomic perspective emphasized by Caroli, highlighting an absence that never fully materializes – or rather, an ambivalent presence that lingers between concealment and revelation.

Freud suggests that this content reveals a latent desire rooted in Leonardo's childhood, later developed through his art (Freud [2002]: 61). However, Vygotsky challenges the direct psychoanalytic reading of art alongside love drives within the dreamscape. He acknowledges, though, that «dreams, they say, awake the desires of which we are ashamed; thus only in art are expressed those desires which cannot be satisfied in a direct fashion» (Vygotsky [1971]: 76). This perspective deepens the discussion on the relationship between desire, artistic expression, and the unconscious.

Indeed, art serves as a channel for expression, offering a privileged avenue for analysing the unconscious. Vygotsky explored connections between artistic creation and behaviour, while psychoanalysis views art as a metalinguistic expression of personality. For Freud, dreams reveal hidden drives, whereas art represents a means to depict unattainable desires.

Returning to the insights of Andreas-Salomé, who offers a correction to Freud's perspective by framing art as an erotic space, we venture into a liminal realm where the delicate shades of meaning transition into ambiguity. In this ambiguity, we encounter the essence of a boundary or borderline aesthetic experience, one that is marked by the interplay of tenuous and indistinct qualities:

> the artist's act brings into play and reveals archaic forces, with passionate emotion, beneath those that have been individually acquired: in both cases containing mysterious syntheses of past and present – i.e., fundamental experience – and in both cases the rapture of their secret interaction. (Andreas-Salomé [2013]: 67)

It is precisely this undercurrent of eroticism that we can explore in *The Angel in the Flesh*. The figure he portrays exists at the boundaries of all aspects of seduction. Through the androgynous representation and the (dis)appearance of the erect member, he confronts us with two opposing positions: the dissolution of sexual archetypes, or conversely, the affirmation of sexual binarism:

> In fact, the design of the phallic angel, mixing the masculine with the feminine, the angelic with the demonic, sacredness with pornography, juxtaposing the forefinger raised for a proclamation of salvation with the turgidity of an erect penis, creates a sense of unease, *the incongruity of a disturbing "Unheimliches"* that already emanates from the provocative smile of the lips to infect the viewer with the ultimate revelation of phallic prominence. (Bottoni [2004]: 100)

The resurgence of androgynous presence is a pertinent question within the realms of art and aesthetics, particularly in an era witnessing a revival of Platonic myths concerning beauty and love. This resurgence has sparked numerous debates within the domains of art and psychoanalysis. Freud himself acknowledged the psychological and genealogical aspects associated with the androgynous figure. Drawing inspiration from Plato's description in his *Symposium* of the androgyne as a «third sex» that unites male and female attributes, Freud proposed a hypothesis in which the androgyne, a body repeated as a duality that is subsequently separated, symbolizes «a need to restore an earlier state of things» (Freud [1955]: 57; cf. Plato 189c2-193e1 [2008]: 22-27). For Freud, the androgynous figure thus serves as a symbol, a reminder of the lack of unity that has been lost in human development.

Freud's analysis remains relevant to this study, as androgyny extends beyond *Angel in the Flesh*. Had Freud examined Leonardo's drawings further, he might have recognized the artist's own psychological explorations through allegorical representations of pleasure and pain (Figure 6) (Nova [2001]: 381-386; Keizer [2012]: 433-455). This is significant because, with this drawing, Leonardo engages in psychological analysis – an aspect Freud did not explicitly acknowledge in his work. Leonardo's art thus reveals a deep, introspective engagement with human emotion and identity.
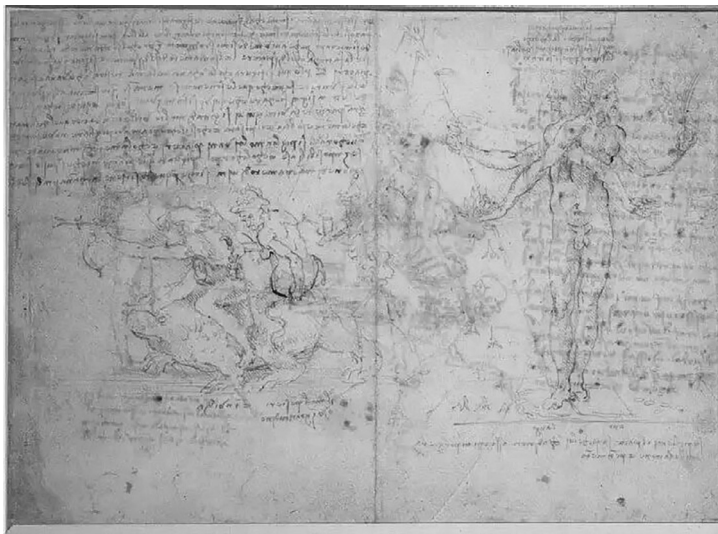

Figure 6. Leonardo da Vinci, Allegory of Pleasure and Pain (on the right), c. 1483-1487 (1494), pen and brown ink on paper. 21 × 28.9 cm. Christ Church, Oxford
(Photo: Christ Church Picture Gallery©).

Freud's framework provides insight into the psychology of androgyny but often diminishes the agency of androgynous individuals, conflating androgyny with bisexuality. Julia Kristeva critiques this reduction, arguing that it risks collapsing androgyny into a singular, self-contained entity: «As to the androgyne, he is unisexual: he is two of himself, conversant onanist, bounded totality, heaven and earth jammed together, a blissful coalescence a hairsbreadth away from catastrophe» (Kristeva [1987]: 70). In Freud's interpretation, androgyny ultimately resolves into a veiled signifier: the phallus, reducing its complexity to a fixed symbolic structure. However, this perspective overlooks the fluidity and transformative potential of androgyny.

Hélène Cixous's concept of «bisexual writing» offers a more dynamic approach, rejecting rigid categorizations and embracing multiplicity: «To this self-effacing, merger-type bisexuality, which would conjure away castration […], I oppose the other bisexuality on which every subject not enclosed in the false theater of phallocentric representationalism has founded his/her erotic universe» (Cixous [1976]: 884). From this perspective, artistic representations of the body are not merely reflections of fixed identities but sites of transformation and interaction with otherness. Eroticism ceases to be a mere expression of latent desire and instead becomes a process of transcendence, where the body functions as a space of difference and fluidity. Art, in this sense, does not simply depict desire but reconfigures it, positioning the body as an open, evolving site of identity and meaning.

The critical insight we can glean from the eroticism present in Leonardo's depictions of young androgynous figures centres on the theme of indeterminacy concerning identity and the narratives associated with the bodies of others. As Susan Sontag asserts, the body, in its androgynous form, challenges fixed interpretations, positioning everything in «quotation marks» (Sontag [1966]: 280) and thus destabilizing conventional understandings. This ambiguity inherent in the androgynous body goes beyond mere cynicism; it becomes an active force for deconstruction, leading to a new sensibility and a transformed approach to gender expression. Sontag's vision of the androgynous body evolves, aligning with the notion of «queer» as a space for fluid identities. It becomes a powerful aesthetic force, contributing to the creation of new poetics, narratives, and images that break away from traditional gender norms. In the Nietzschean sense, this process fosters «new values», offering a rupture with established categories and giving birth to an eroticism that transcends conventional frameworks of understanding. This erotic body reveals a disquieting emptiness beneath regulatory masks, embraced through ironic inhabitation. It reflects a creative tension with norms, provoking ironic detachment and challenging established meanings.

The eroticism we find in Leonardo's drawings reveals to us that, although Freud was not entirely off the mark with his conceptualization of sublimation,

we can appreciate, through alternative readings of psychoanalysis, that we are in a different space within the artist's psychology. In this way, the eroticism that Leonardo displays in his drawings suggests a reflection on the transparency of the body between intellect/psychology and the body, fostering an alternative desire that does not confine itself to modern gender categories.

5. *Conclusions*

Through a psychoanalytic examination, I have conducted an analysis of selected drawings from Leonardo da Vinci's graphic portfolio, particularly focusing on the unique erotic dimension presented in the drawing *Angel in the Flesh*. In this endeavour, I have drawn upon Sigmund Freud's theoretical framework to explore: firstly, the potential applications of this theory within the context of the Florentine artist's works, using psychoanalysis; finally, I have undertaken a critical appraisal of Freud's perspectives with the assistance of contemporary art theorists and psychoanalysts.

By incorporating Lou Andreas-Salomé's insights, we've critiqued the connections between the oneiric, atavistic, and artistic elements, focusing on aesthetic and psychological considerations beyond Freud's framework. This has allowed us to reassess Leonardo's works and extend these insights to other boundary-pushing artistic expressions, highlighting erotic engagement and rapture:

> That is why the erotic, much more than the aesthetic, expresses its rapture in pure fantasies, images of a much "more mendacious" kind. True, in the artist too, the special state erupts in each case through the normal state, like an anomaly, a violation of the present, of the firmly hierarchical datum, by the stimulating interaction of past and future imperatives that occurs in this state. (Andreas-Salomé [2013]: 68)

Through this perspective, Leonardo's drawings gain renewed significance, especially in relation to the Angel. Freud's analysis overlooks the depth of erotic elements present in Leonardo's work. *St. John the Baptist*, though mathematically analysed, retains a sensual quality, with both form and expression inviting a new way of perception. In this context, sublimation operates differently, shifting paradigms rather than following traditional interpretations.

In Leonardo's works, intellectual concealment aligns with Lacan's theory of the veil and the Phallus, offering a fresh perspective for interpreting these artworks. By examining the eroticism in *Angel in the Flesh*, we situate it within an androgynous body. Freud's framework falls short in this case, and Kristeva critiques the reduction of androgyny to the phallus, noting: «the androgyne is unisexual: he is two of himself» (Kristeva [1987]: 70). Cixous offers a recalibration through her concept of «other bisexuality», recognizing gender identity's

complexities (Cixous [1976]: 884). Building on these insights, Sontag's analysis of camp sensibility reveals that this ambiguity carries a critical dimension: «the androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility» (Sontag [1966]: 279). The androgynous body embodies a dissident, critical disposition, expressing a new, baroque sensibility, disrupting established norms. It inhabits an ambiguous realm, offering a demoralizing critique of traditional identities and norms, providing a fresh perspective on both art and identity.

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Aisthesis

Forgetting Orpheus: Toward a Politics of Awakening

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Abstract. This brief essay, based on a Kracauerian consideration of the *surface level* as the result of both a specific dominant economic and political rationality and the struggle between conflicting social instincts and drives, aims to highlight how this surface has never stopped to affect and shape, in turn, specific individual and social behaviours. The convergence between the offer of innumerable forms of unreality adorned with illusory promises of salvation and the inexhaustible demand resulting from the absence of reality itself, which present society compensates for with surrogate and consolatory expedients, produces a rarefied and narcotizing atmosphere, what Günther Anders called an *eschatological calm*. If it ensnares all criticism and every action, even and especially in the face of catastrophic events threatening the very survival of humanity, the decoding of its dreamlike images can still unveil its phantasmagorical essence and open our eyes to the *world in which we really live*.

Keywords. Siegfried Kracauer, surface level, phantasmagoria, ratio, dream.

1. *Introduction*

The radical changes in 20th-century life and thought, driven by the rise of mass society and mass media, bear many analogies to those shaped

today by globalization, the digital and virtual revolution, and the internet, which despite some obvious differences mainly constitute their natural heirs. Indeed, most of the traits ascribed to the emerging consumer society by some of its major interpreters[1] – the myth of progress and infinite growth, commodity fetishism, the primacy of the economic over the political, the phantasmagoria that envelops communication and social spaces, the scotomization of the tragic, social homologation, etc. –, not only persist but appear today at their apogee, having found two powerful allies in late neoliberal capitalism and postmodern technophilic nihilism[2]. To say it with Augusto Del Noce, the technocratic consumer society is in fact permeated by a «blatant contradiction between the humanitarianism theoretically professed and the spirit of dehumanization practically implemented» (1970: 16), a «jarring contrast between an apparent tolerance and a real totalitarianism» (1970: 17). The emancipatory promises that such a society broadcasts through its constant self-promotion – «everyone can be happy if only they hand themselves over to it body and soul and relinquish their claim to happiness» (Horkheimer, Adorno [1947]: 124) – clash with the barbaric traits of a world, the real one, ruled by wars, oppression and social inequality, driven by the sole pursuit and defence of economic profit through the exploitation of nature and humans, a world that is gift-wrapped and barcoded, discounted and home-delivered but of which, actually, all that remains is a landscape of ruins and piles of junk and garbage[3].

These premises should hopefully justify the theoretical attempt to borrow and actualize categories and concepts with which thinkers such as Siegfried Kracauer or Walter Benjamin – whose mutual contamination, especially concerning the social critique of expressive and aesthetic forms, is so intricate that it is quite impossible to mention one without the other[4] – dissected their own time, exploring their applicability in the present. As a matter of fact, such conceptual categories seem to retain an unadulterated potential to crosscut the texture of the phenomenal real and unveil its imagistic and oneiric nature, representing thus a legitimate way of deciphering and describing the contemporary condition of society. The retranslation of the meanings transfigured there, therefore, can still

1   See Simmel (1905); Benjamin (1940, 1982); Kracauer (1963); Horkheimer, Adorno (1947); Debord (1967); Pasolini (1975) and Baudrillard (1970, 1986), just to cite a few.
2   See, to this extent, the considerations of some of the leading exponents of the so-called "Turin School," notably Augusto Del Noce (1963; 1978; 1989), Luigi Pareyson (1995) and Giuseppe Riconda (2017).
3   On the dissonance between the perception of the "availability-world" – as a preconceived and illusory image of the world that portrays the infinite availability and abundance of resources – and the reality of a planet plagued by reckless exploitation and ecological collapse, see Cuozzo (2017).
4   For an in-depth focus on their reciprocal influence and on the affinities between some of their philosophical *leitmotive*, see Carrieri (2024).

effectively bring to light a certainly distorted and approximate, but nevertheless comprehensive picture of the existing, unveiling at one and the same time the constitutive unreality of a society ruled by a merely calculating and instrumental rationality and the reality that such a society had to renounce, which resurfaces transfigured in its most hidden and inapparent elements.

Kracauer's concept of *surface level*, for example, seems to be particularly effective when applied to the virtual universe – as an amorphous reflection of reality, as a renewed dreamlike phantasmagoria and as a new ornamental configuration adopted by the masses. The *wall* of any social network is ultimately nothing but a form of surface, an epidermal manifestation constituted precisely by that *flow of life* that is the object of Kracauer's critical sociology. A surface that on the one hand gives rise to spontaneous – and therefore completely real – forms, expressions and instances of deep life, but on the other hand appears as a product and manifestation (or *mise en scène*) of that empty and abstract rationality that permeates the whole of society. For this reason, the phenomena that arise at this surface, just like the superficial and micrological ones analysed by Kracauer and Benjamin in their works, not only constitute worthy objects of reflection, but can conceal an «unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the *state of things*. Conversely, knowledge of this state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions» (Kracauer [1963]: 75).

2. *The mass ornamental configuration between* dream *and* ratio

In his short essay *The Forbidden Gaze* (*Der verbotene Blick*, 1925), Siegfried Kracauer described the activation of a *Pianella*[5] by a pub waiter – whose white «spreads a glow that arouses the illusion of a superior world and mercilessly exposes the misery of the real one» (Kracauer [1925]: 297) – as a mechanical action capable of «disturbing and awakening a furious mythical creature from its sleep» (Kracauer [1925]: 297). This operation, which the waiter performs with ritual and reverent movements, sets in motion a demonic mechanism which, with its gears and clanking levers, first evokes a «satanic military march without motive» (Kracauer [1925]: 298) and then, «once the monster has revealed its secret» (Kracauer [1925]: 298), stages a dance in an illuminated hall surrounded by mirrors, in which puppet dancers move to the sound of a «ghostly and remote»

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5   This was a popular model of musical automaton (*Musikautomat*) – an instrument capable of reproducing, by means of a repeatable mechanical and pneumatic system, entire musical pieces by reading punched cards wrapped in rolls. Widespread in city venues and in some public places, the automaton sometimes included, as in this case, a glass box inside which a sketch was brought to life by puppets performing predefined movements, seemingly synchronized with the music, and at times even mimicking its execution.

(Kracauer [1925]: 298) music that seems to come straight «from Hell» or whose mechanised steps perhaps follow «lost sounds that remain inaudible» (Kracauer [1925]: 297).

The bliss produced by such a technical illusion lasts, according to Kracauer, «infinitely long» (Kracauer [1925]: 298): during the mechanical execution «time is forgotten», but when it came to an over, «one suddenly wakes up from the dream […] and only now, precisely now, does the phantom appear», for it «can only appear in this hour, the hour in which one lingers like a night wanderer on the dividing line between dream and reality. It is the hour in which nothingness disappears, the hour of illicit glances that cling to the slippery abyss» (Kracauer [1925]: 298), in which it becomes clear that «every novelty is an illusion, every miracle a reflection resulting from the mirrors that always reflect the same thing» (Kracauer [1925]: 299) and the glittering world of modernity with its iridescent ornaments, dazzling illuminations and winking goods – just like the waiter's shirt – finally appear for what they are: «glassy phantasmagoria» (*gläsernen Phantasmagorie*) (Kracauer [1925]: 299).

The analysis Kracauer develops from this anecdote, which at first sight might seem to describe a world and an imaginary that are completely extinct today, is all the more relevant to the description of *our present condition*, just as Kracauer's method and categories do not seem to have lost their ability to dismantle the texture of reality. He describes the *surface* (*Oberfläche*) as the form that life (i.e. the depth) takes and suggests that it should be seen as «the surface level is the dream society dreams of itself and enables an interpretation of society» (Koch [1996]: 29). In this sense, it can be said that it is the substantive content of this dream that informs and consolidates the social basis of the dreaming mass: Namely, when the latter dreams in the form of its aesthetic ornaments, the dream in turn «illuminates the dreamers» (Koch [1996]: 29). In other words, as Koch recalls, Kracauer was firmly convinced that the collective unconscious contains the keystone to the consciousness that a historical epoch can achieve of itself: The phenomena, images and places that consciousness fails to illuminate are precisely those that enshrine the privileged threshold to the essential content of that consciousness and allow for a critical hermeneutics of it. In this sense, what Benjamin said about the last century has not lost its validity:

> It is not only that the forms of appearance taken by the dream collective in the nineteenth century cannot be thought away; and not only that these forms characterize this collective much more decisively than any other – they are also, rightly interpreted, of the highest practical import, for they allow us to recognize the sea on which we navigate and the shore from which we push off. It is here, therefore, that the «critique» of the nineteenth century – to say it in one word – ought to begin. The critique not of its mechanism and cult of machinery but of its narcotic historicism, its passion for masks, in which nevertheless lurks a signal of true historical existence, one which the Surrealists were the first to pick up. To decipher tills signal is the concern of the present undertaking. (Benjamin [1982]: 391)

The visible exteriority of collective existence, its aesthetic configuration, within which it is possible to read «the world of objects contemplated as a picture» (Koch [1996]: 6), still represents in fact the constitutive surface of social reality, whose structure can become the object of a formal analysis that starts from the unconscious elements of this existence, from its lapsus, from what escapes consciousness or what it denies or removes. For just as the overall ornamental configuration that the mass assumes cannot be grasped by examining its individual elements, so too the flow of life in its entirety eludes our gaze and thus our understanding: we cannot fully grasp the meaning and course of events, since «all we see are the traces it has left» (Koch [1996]: 13).

Rather, starting from the superficial exteriority of phenomena, it is possible to reach the invisible structures that animate and govern *the world in which we really live* from within: Even «the most trivial event leads down into the shafts of the soul» (Kracauer [1920]: 253). On the contrary, given the inhomogeneous structure of the intellectual universe, philosophical abstractions and generalisations cannot but fail in their attempt to account for all the particular cases subsumed under them: truth unfolds *through things* and not above them. For however much abstract generalisation may tighten the meshes of its weave, there will always be something that escapes it, a residuum that cannot be assimilated, that is able of questioning the entire construction.

This is why, as Graeme Gilloch reminds us, «for Kracauer, as for Benjamin and Bloch, the inconsequential manifestations of the cityscape were "surface expressions", "hieroglyphs", "dreams" to be recovered and deciphered by the critical theorist. For them, such fleeting traces were the very stuff from which modernity was made and the very basis of its legibility» (Gilloch [2015]: 79). In other words, reality does not surrender to an abstract and generalising gaze, but can offer itself in epiphanic forms, in its fragments and superficial manifestations. Indeed, «it is what consciousness rejects, what it wilfully ignores, that contributes to its spatial configuration. […]. Once the hieroglyph of a spatial image is decoded, this always reveals the ground of social reality» (Kracauer [1964]: 74).

Nonetheless, the unconscious aspirations, transcendental longings and innermost dreams of the collective constantly rise to the surface of social life – revealing the intimate link between forms of existence and social spaces, *habitus* and *dispositio* – and any attempt to suppress, imprison or manipulate them is always countered by the resurgence of an irrepressible repressed that not only overwhelmingly affirms what was intended to be removed, but also unmasks and denounces the removal itself. It is worth recalling here that Kracauer shares with Benjamin the conviction that the rise of rationality and the dissolution of traditional values in no way correspond to the decadence of myth and the emancipation from superstition, but rather contribute to their reproduction and strength-

ening, which justifies the persistence and rebirth of various anti-scientific and pseudo-magical beliefs in a seemingly hyper-rationalised society. Forms and tendencies of thought that Kracauer unmasked as essentially reactionary, as well as the current and increasing ones that deny the most elementary and established scientific truths: «Most of these movements are regressive in the sense that they revert to fashions of thought and argument preceding the scientific revolution. […] Apathy spreads like an epidemic; the "lonely crowd" fills the vacuum with surrogates» (Kracauer [1960]: 291).

Foreseeing by two decades some of the theses that Horkheimer and Adorno would later expound in *Dialectics of the Enlightenment (Dialektik der Aufklärung,* 1944; 1947), in *The Mass as Ornament* (*Das Ornament der Masse*, 1927) Kracauer intuited that the *ratio* of the capitalist economic system (i.e., of its later forms as well), «is not reason itself but a murky reason» (Kracauer [1963]: 81), a blurred and debased rationality exhausted in the constant self-reiteration of its own formal structure. Its greatest «core defect» is that «it rationalizes not too much but rather *too little*. The thinking promoted by capitalism resists culminating in that reason which arises from the basis of man» (Kracauer [1963]: 81). In the presence of Reason, he states, *ratio* barricades itself and «gets lost in an empty formalism […]. The prevailing abstractness», Kracauer continues, «reveals that the process of demythologization has not come to an end» (Kracauer [1963]: 82). The ratio of modern society – which «for irrational reasons» produces «abstract-formal relationships that are indifferent to rational [*vernünftige*] reality» (Kracauer [1927]: 44) –, is constitutively antinomic and paradoxical: «The rationality with which society proceeds in the areas of technology and economics is determined by the immediate practical interest, which in many cases closes itself off to true knowledge», because «the exclusion of the real content of knowledge from the social context leads to its repression» (Kracauer [1927]: 44).

On closer inspection, however, such considerations not only provide the basis for the so-called *Critical Theory*, that was to mature at the *Institut für Sozialforschung* in the following years, but also contain *in nuce* the reasons that were to lead Kracauer to gradually diverge from it, as well as the seeds of his later aversion to Adorno's negative dialectics – which seemed to him «inseparable from a certain arbitrariness» (Kracauer [2012]: 128):

> In sum, all that exists, exists only to be devoured in the dialectic process which Teddie keeps going on and on because of his lack of substance, of vision. To Teddie, dialectics is a means of maintaining his superiority over all imaginable opinions, viewpoints, trends, happenings, by dissolving, condemning or again rescuing them, as he pleases. Thus he establishes himself as the master controller of a world he has never absorbed. […] all his undeniable finesse in this respect is, alas, used in such a way that it results in sheer adornments of an otherwise hollow and insubstantial dialectics. The aesthetic concretions at which he arrives do not really enter into action. (Kracauer [2012]: 131)

The fundamental objection he addresses to orthodox critical theory concerns its constitutive intransigence, which leads it to overlook crucial material dimensions of reality – especially the more interstitial, marginal, and obscure – and which condemns it to a substantial immobility, hindering its potential to be translated into praxis. In fact, both Kracauer and Benjamin – drawing quite different conclusions from those reached by, for example, Horkheimer, Adorno or Günther Anders – transcend the preliminary negative diagnosis about media and mass culture products, recognizing in them an albeit weak and latent utopian-political and redemptive-revolutionary potential.

I ruthlessly hit Teddie some more by drawing a graph illustrating his, Benjamin's, and my own way of thinking. Both Benjamin and I coinciding in not accepting immanent dialectics, I subtly implied that we are engaged in terms of substances. We think under a sort of ontological compunction, Utopian or not, whereas Teddie is, indeed, free-hovering and does not feel any such compunction. At this point, I believe, Teddie was at the end of his rope. I am sure, however, he will not admit this to himself – nor will Gretel – but immediately manage to believe that all my thoughts are in reality his own, annex these thoughts, which he already considers his property, to his «system», and pass them off as the natural outgrowth of the latter. There is something paranoiac about him. You cannot upset Teddie; he grabs everything he is told, digests it and its consequences and then takes over in a spirit of superiority. (Kracauer [2012]: 129-130)

The pathological enthusiasm for the ephemeral of mass society, as well as the emerging (trivial) aesthetic cults, according to Kracauer, are primarily expressions of a metaphysical emptiness resulting from the decline of religious beliefs and values, which the atomized man of modernity tries to sublimate with compensatory phenomena (cinema, travel, dance, etc.). Among these, we should today include, in addition to video games and endless forms of entertainment, the so-called *second life*, the *web-society*, and *virtual* (immersive) *reality*, which often exceed and overwhelm the model to which they refer, the *non-place* where everything seems possible and can be simulated, where each individual, like an omnipotent Prometheus, can turn himself into whatever he most desires. In Kracauer's analysis, these phenomena take on a downright theological character, as they reveal elements of an irrepressible longing for redemption: in the liberating tension that these can generate, human beings are in fact searching for that transcendence that is constantly denied by the «murky reason» (Kracauer [1963]: 81) of capitalism.

In their desire to once again give man a link to nature that is more solid than the one he has today, they discover the connection to the higher sphere, not by

appealing to a still unrealized reason in this world but by retreating into mytho-
logical structures of meaning. Their fate is *irreality*, for when even a glimmer of
reason shines through at some point in the world, even the most sublime entity
that tries to shield itself from it must perish. (Kracauer [1963]: 86)

3. *Don't look back: the ecstatic elation and the* end without tragedy

Today, more than ever, the real is swept with a magical blow of broom beneath
the phantasmagorical carpet of virtual, simulation and appearance, leading to a
constant and ever more irruptive emergence of a repressed – no longer only psy-
chological, social and historical, but also and above all ecological: «No sooner
do we emancipate ourselves from the "ancient beliefs" than we are led to elimi-
nate the qualities of things. So the things continue to recede» (Kracauer [1960]:
300). Far from being the realized utopia it claims to be, the present technological
civilization, which produces a growing number of marginalized and oppressed
people, is still ruled by a blind and narcotizing faith in progress «as a historical
norm» (Benjamin [1940]: 392), even in the face of self-evident ecological and
geopolitical catastrophes. Such an «emphasis on progress without limits, rights
without responsibilities, and technology without cost» (Postman [1993]: 179)
is indeed not located in a rational and empirical sphere, but in an irrational and
dogmatic one, and its main purpose «is to produce functionaries for an ongoing
Technopoly» (Postman [1993]: 179). If the eternal return of the new, the produc-
tion of the ever-identical, seems to be the necessary consequence of the «shallow
rationalism» inherent in the belief in progress, then this latter «turns out to be
part of mythical thinking» (Benjamin [1982]: 119).

Underlying the longevity of this myth is the clearly false belief that progress
is an indisputable good and necessarily leads to emancipation and social justice;
«such a concept, which in the past was a thorn in the side of the restorers, had
now become an argument for successful restoration» (Anders [1980]: 14). In-
deed, present society is still flattened onto a wholly immanent dimension, exclu-
sively oriented to the present, perfectly pacified, and liberated from «every echo
of a "lament"» (Benjamin [1940]: 401): its order – under whose dominion «men
are reduced to atoms or complexes of atoms» (Kracauer [1971]: 114-115) – ap-
pears therefore as a «caricature of the real order» (Kracauer [1971]: 157).

The Edenic and immortal expectation that the myth of progress brings with
it finds new nourishment in virtual reality, which is able to wrest the individual
from factual reality and, above all, can analyse, predict and organise his needs
and preferences. Cyberspace as a new comforting and domesticating chimaera
promises social relationships, emancipation and diversity, but on closer inspec-
tion the individual has never been so isolated, delegitimised and homogenised.

To say it with Baudrillard (1981), the proliferation of simulacra, the loss of any referentiality, the overlap of reality and fiction, mark the advent of *hyperreality*, where the desire for simulated reality fuels its further production and consumption. Thus, the derealized society achieves its state of *relaxation* (*Entspannung*) precisely through the expulsion and abolition of every tragic element, every pain, and every transience – which, on the contrary, constitute, for both Kracauer and Benjamin, the starting point for any possible redemption, for any *eschaton*, which can only occur in that *tension*.

In the face of the objective tragedy of a world torn apart by conflicts, inequality, and ecological upheavals, today's spectators – unlike the Greek spectator who, as Jean-Pierre Vernant (1982) writes, identified with the protagonist due to the verisimilitude and the probability and necessity of the catastrophe represented – are completely detached and unable to empathize even with themselves. If the Greek *agon* was indeed «the *constitutive core* of the political in the *polis*» (Moro [2023]: 36), the spectacle today seems to represent its essential negation. Instead of witnessing a radical and redemptive transformation, we are currently experiencing the course of a «air-conditioned» Apocalypse, to borrow Jean Baudrillard's (1982) expression, marked by a veritable «eschatological calm» (Anders [1956; 1980]). As Slavoj Žižek underlines, «the gap which makes these paradoxes possible is that between knowledge and belief: we know the (ecological) catastrophe is possible, probable even, yet we do not believe it will really happen» (Žižek [2010]: 328). That's precisely what Anders (1956) defined the «apocalyptic blindness» (*Apokalypse-Blindheit*).

Nonetheless, the disappearance of the tragic, the power of distraction, and the phantasmagoria of the everyday, distinctive and indispensable elements of the techno-capitalistic society, produce a narcotizing slumber in relation to the *end* – which is entirely banished from the collective imaginary. The Adam McKay's movie *Don't Look Up* (2021) has masterfully revealed this complete lack of awareness and the schizophrenia of a civilization that constantly rejects and removes its own end – even when it stands right before its eyes or looms over its head. Such emerging social schizophrenia can be understood through a dual dimension. On one hand, there is individual dissociation, where viewers fail to emotionally identify with others or with global crises. On the other hand, there is collective dissociation, where the whole society seems to deny its own vulnerability and the ongoing issues, pervaded by a kind of collective blindness, a collective ostracism of reality that hinders an effective response. Political polarization, denial of scientific facts, and a lack of coordinated action hinder the creation of common ground where people can address and overcome collective challenges. The fact that the movie was received and digested only as a hilarious entertainment comedy, while the desperate cry of alarm it sought to convey largely fell on deaf ears, epitomizes again the complete disconnect between the real and the perceived.

The scotomization of the tragic and the «eclipse of the death» (Redeker [2017]), coupled with a culture of opulence and the myth of progress promoted by the technocratic consumer society, not only impoverish humanity of any sense of transcendence and annihilate any critical faculty of judgement – what Pier Paolo Pasolini (1973) called a «shrinking of intellectual and moral faculties» –, but also generate the apocalyptic blindness mentioned above. Indeed, the further the hyperreality we inhabit diverges from its model, the more individuals dull their emotional, ethical and critical faculties to the point of complete anaesthetisation[6]. Not in the sense that the whole of contemporary aesthetics should be understood as an *an-aesthetics*, as Susan Buck-Morss seems to suggest[7], but rather in the sense that the cloak of virtuality, simulation and spectacle, which together give rise to a perpetual, pervasive and inescapable synaesthesia, produce a kind of numbness, a blunting of the very faculties of feeling. If, as Anders already asserted, our imaginations and emotions are in fact unable to embrace the enormity of our technologically mediated actions, let alone controlling or even predicting their effects[8], the actual proliferation of what Timothy Morton (2013) calls *hyperobjects* can only exacerbates the cognitive dissonance between perception and reality. Humanity, co-opted by a permanent and highly invasive *colonisation of the imaginary*[9], seems to welcome the given state of things with exultation and naivety, in the sign of a total laceration between human and world, *logos* and *kosmos* and of the triumph of a nihilist and bioclastic acosmism (Cuozzo [2013]) – ready to mortgage the future in the name of the immediate satisfaction of some present vice – which sets the stage for the final act of the human tragedy. The affirmation of a «soft and climatized» nihilism (Baudrillard [1970]), able to obliterate every non-economic value and to scotomise every sense of the tragic, proceeds synchronically with the liquidation (or the absorption) of every instance that could undermine the statute of the existing (Del Noce [1989]; Riconda [2017]).

The everyday phantasmagoria transfigures «the messianic end without implying the reality in which the end can be tested» (Kracauer [1971]: 205). Like that offered by the *DetektivRoman* analysed by Kracauer, the one toward which humanity rushes breathlessly, without ever looking back, appears indeed as an «end without tragedy» (Kracauer [1971]: 205), a *catastrophe without catharsis*, an *apocalypse without redemption*. In other words, it is a caricature of the *parousia* and *apocatastasis* since, as Kracauer writes «if there is an end, it exists only where there is tragedy» (Kracauer [1971]: 205), which constitutes the true and indispensable «sign of reality» (Kracauer [1971]: 204). Indeed, as Benjamin also

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6   See Baudrillard (1981; 1986) and Anders (1956; 1980).
7   See Buck-Morss (1992).
8   See Anders (1956; 1980).
9   See Castoriadis (1975; 1996).

asserted, only «in tragedy demonic fate is breached» (Benjamin [1919]: 203): the latter is defined as «the guilty context of the living. It corresponds to the natural condition of the living – that semblance [*Schein*], not yet wholly dispelled, from which man is so far removed that, under its rule, he was never wholly immersed in it but only invisible in his best part» (Benjamin [1919]: 204).

Somehow, it is as if humanity, having taken too seriously the lesson offered by the myth of *Eurydice* and *Orpheus*, proceeds without hesitation along its trajectory – illusioned that it leads to earthly bliss – never looking back, lest it lose all progress acquired so far. The myth that dominates our civilisation appears as a reversal of the original: if humanity (*Eurydice*) wants to be free – as promised – it must blindly follow progress (*Orpheus*), which will eventually lead it out of *Uranus* into the realm of earthly bliss; but only on the condition that it never turns back. As in the mythical tale, the enchantment would vanish into darkness if humanity looked behind: if it did so, turning its back on the future – like Benjamin's angel –, it would see nothing but a heap of ruins and rubble, and the fairy tale of progress would turn out to be what it really is: a «glassy phantasmagoria [*gläsernen Phantasmagorie*]» (Kracauer [1925]: 299). The ironic paradox lies precisely here: contrary to the myth, such a halt and a look back would likely be the only possible hope for salvation. The only conceivable redemption today seems to lie in the act of stopping such an arduous and optimistic journey, in *awakening* meant as the irruption of «awakened consciousness» (Benjamin [1982]: 388). The illusion of a promise of ever-renewed and never-fulfilled happiness, repeatedly deferred and postponed, is actually a trap of *Hades*: the infinite task of progress as ascent from hell and access to paradise is, upon closer examination, the very hell itself.

4. *Conclusion: Transfiguring the transfigured to redeem reality*

So, if on the one hand the aesthetic and ecstatic atmosphere of the technocratic society of the virtual and the spectacle reproduces and spreads an apologetic and narcotizing nihilism, on the other hand it can be subjected to that «minimal operation» that Kracauer ascribed to «aesthetic existentiality: to constitute from the blindly swirling elements of a world in ruins a totality that – although it only apparently reflects this world – contains it in its wholeness and thus enables the projection of its elements onto the real facts» (Kracauer [1971]: 113); that is, the analysis of «the way in which it distributes weights and connects events allows the non-speaking world to speak» (Kracauer [1971]: 111-112). Like Benjamin, he was convinced of the fundamental impossibility of grasping the essence of reality through generalizations and abstractions from top to bottom, and of the

resulting necessity of identifying and gather together those intermediate and residual elements that necessarily elude any ostensible systemic unity: «In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes» (Benjamin [1982]: 456).

The phantasmagorical atmosphere enveloping society and conditioning its existence is not a work of art, it has nothing to do with the aesthetic experience it evokes, nor does it exhaust its atavistic and spiritual need. On the contrary, the «lower life slips, the more it needs the work of art, that unseals its closure and puts back in their place the elements lying scattered alongside one another, enriching them with connections» (Kracauer [1971]: 85). In fact, the aesthetic and cultural manifestations of society can act as a mirror of the instincts, struggles and tensions dwelling within it, providing an undoubtedly deformed but nevertheless integral and detailed image: although they represent only an opaque and distorted reflection of the world, a disjointed mosaic of transfigured images of reality, the retranslation of these reflections can unveil the «world of appearances» (Kracauer [1971]: 91), that is, the mythical phantasmagoria that surrounds derealized society. In other words, it is a question of adopting a deforming perspective in order to liberate the true meaning of reality which is concealed in the appearance of the everyday. The latter, Benjamin would say, reveals its «true – surrealist – face» (Benjamin [1982]: 464) and betrays its essentially oneiric character: «The social in its present state is the manifestation of spectral and demonic powers» (Benjamin [2014]: 95-96).

The image offered by this mirror, Kracauer also warns, «is frightening enough: it shows a state of society in which the disinhibited intellect has achieved the final victory, a confused and now purely external collection of facts and figures» through which the disengaged intellect «transforms an artificially removed reality into a grimace» (Kracauer [1971]: 102). Ultimately, all manifestations emerging to the social surface represent and describe a specific portion of unreality on the one hand, but on the other hand betray a reference to a denied but not-quite-obliterated reality, whose absence and nostalgia faintly surface there.

Furthermore, if, as Guy Debord (1967) observed, the spectacle presents itself as society itself and *vice versa*, it is quite possible to decode the latter with keys and interpretive tools usually reserved for its cultural productions. Agreeing with Baudrillard that reality is nowadays completely indistinguishable from fiction, simulation and the virtual, we can ask ourselves whether the spectacle, which has now taken hold of all areas of life, – can still convey and awaken a critical consciousness and a political content, or whether it does not rather inevitably disarm and render harmless it by exhausting all its potential in the spectacle itself. If Baudrillard's intuitions are correct and there is nothing but the spectacle, then the second option is correct, but this would inevitably mean that any interpretation or action, whether individual or collective, must necessarily take place

within the spectacle. Whereas every action, including the political, is «an action aimed at a *mise-en-scene*» (Böhme [2010]: 182), the phantasmagorical spectacle that envelops the everyday, as well as virtual reality, distance us from experience and yet (or perhaps precisely because of this) themselves constitute real forms of experience – furthermore, totalizing and immersive – that cannot be overlooked or underestimated.

The *authentic* aesthetic experience as such can thus constitute a *shock*, an interruption and disruption of everyday perception which is conditioned by a ratio that keeps it trapped in the phantasmagorical sphere of illusion and unreality, under the sign of a collective adhesion to a *Luna Park ecstasy* – as a contemporary and parodic *fuga mundi*. Kracauer's and Benjamin's considerations, in this respect, also develop in the wake of the so-called Warburg tradition: the concepts of *Denkraum* (*space of thought*) and *Zwischenraum* (*interstitial space*), introduced by Aby Warburg in the introduction of his famous *Mnemosyne Atlas* (*Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, 1924-1929), would become central categories in Kracauer's and Benjamin's thought. In fact, the concept of *Zwischenraum* has its roots in the Latin *intervallum*, which can take on both spatial and temporal meanings, such as *arrest* or *suspension*: it indicates, at one and the same time, the *space* opened by an interruption (the Kracauerian *In-Between*) and the *interruption* itself (the Benjaminian *dialectical standstill*).

Unlearning Orpheus' lesson thus means pulling «the emergency brake» (Benjamin [1940]: 402), to borrow Benjamin's words again, in order to stop and look back; acknowledging the path taken and hopefully correcting its trajectory; waking up from the narcotic, phantasmagorical sleep of unreality, and *dynamiting the dreamworld*. As taught by Kracauer and Benjamin, the estrangement, the specific *epoché* that results from the lightning-like irruption of an image or a space of thought (*Denkbild*; *Denkraum*), can rise to a true form of knowledge, insofar as it allows us to cast our gaze on the reality that lurks right beneath our eyes. This means that it is possible «through the medium of aesthetics to unveil the mystery of the de-realised society and of its puppets devoid of substance», and such an operation is also capable of transforming «incomprehensible life into a translatable reversed image of authentic reality» (Kracauer [1971]: 113). The assumption of a transfiguring gaze capable of grasping the ripples and gaps on the phenomenal surface of the given world, illuminating its paradoxes and antinomies and allegorically retranslating its meanings, still thus constitutes the indispensable premise of every critique, every transformation and every utopia:

> The mimetic function of the utopian object is a «deforming mirror», a caricature of the given world, in which the here and now is rendered with an upside-down image that shows the narrowness of the present situation, the need to transcend the given present through an anticipatory image that hides in the folds of the ever-present. (Cuozzo [2015]: 195)

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Aisthesis

Videodrome, a Ghost Story

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Abstract. The following article offers an analysis of the movie *Videodrome*. It provides an analysis from a phantasmal point of view. We try to highlight two aspects: the phantasmal content of visual products and the psychic phantasms that they are able to arouse. This conceptual apparatus will be the basis for an analysis of the use and construction of images in photojournalistic contexts.

Keywords : Videodrome ; ghosts ; psychoanalysis ; photography photojournalism

En 1983, David Cronenberg a réalisé *Videodrome*, une œuvre cinématographique au contenu complexe et stratifié qui réfléchit, de manière pionnière, à la relation de l'homme avec les nouveaux médias. Toutefois, l'aspect de *Videodrome* sur lequel nous nous concentrerons dans le cadre de cet article peut être considéré comme marginal, *autre*. *Videodrome* sera analysé sous l'angle d'une histoire de fantômes, des fantômes qui se font parfois chair. Au cours de notre analyse, nous analyserons et entremêlerons, deux aspects en particulier: le contenu fantomatique renvoyé par les médias et le type de fantômes qu'ils suscitent. Autrement dit: des fantômes qui convoquent des

fantômes. En nous penchant sur ces deux thèmes du génie de Cronenberg, nous réfléchirons enfin sur la manière dont ces phénomènes jouent sur l'une des ambiguïtés qui habitent l'objet image aujourd'hui et sont constitutif de celle-ci: la limite entre l'image comme moyen privilégié de l'information sur la violence dans le monde et l'image elle-même comme moyen de violence du monde.

1.*The Cathode ray mission*

Le premier fantôme sur lequel nous nous attarderons est celui du professeur Brian O'Blivion. Le professeur est présenté au cours de la fiction filmique comme «l'apôtre des médias de masse'». Mais parler de présentation serait impropre car le professeur O' Blivion à chacune de ses apparitions est toujours le résultat d'une re/présentation. L'homme n'apparaît jamais en chair et en os, son image est seulement et exclusivement reproduite à travers une télévision. Le protagoniste, Max Renn, découvrant l'existence d'un lien entre O'Blivion et des émissions à contenu sado-masochiste, les *Videodrome*, se rend à son institut de recherche avec l'intention de le rencontrer en personne. Max Renn se retrouve dans un lieu très particulier, la Cathode Ray Mission, un endroit fréquenté principalement par des sans-abris, où ils ont la possibilité de regarder la télévision. Lorsque Max Renn s'interroge sur ces pratiques, Bianca O'Blivion, la fille du professeur, lui explique que grâce à la télévision, ils «patch them back into the world's mixing board» (Cronenberg [1983]). C'est la composante la plus marginalisée de la société qui est choisie par la Mission Rayons Cathodiques, la télévision est chargée de les réintégrer dans le tissu social, dans la réalité. Cependant, il convient de se demander quel type de réalité ils vivent. «C'est un *artefact*» (Derrida, Stiegler [1996]: 11).

Le philosophe Jacques Derrida, dans un entretien accordé à Passages, a défini le temps du direct, de la parole publique, comme un temps caractérisé par l'artefactualité, c'est-à-dire un temps où l'actualité est construite. Les interventions publiques se déroulent devant des appareils technologiques particuliers, avec des temps et des espaces précis, avant d'être diffusées, elles subissent un processus de sélection, de réélaboration; les chaînes de télévision, d'ailleurs, ainsi que les agences de radio, sont dirigées par des sujets ayant des intérêts particuliers qui peuvent décider de ce qui peut réellement être diffusé.

Ce mot-valise d'«artefactualité» signifiait d'abord qu'il n'y a actualité, au sens de «ce qui est actuel» ou plutôt de «ce qui se diffuse sous le titre d'actualités sur les radios et les télévisions», que dans la mesure où un ensemble de dispositifs techniques et politiques viennent en quelque sorte choisir, dans une masse non finie d'événements, «les faits» dont sont nourries les «informations». […] Toute actualité compose avec l'artifice, en général dissimulé, de ce filtrage. (Derrida, Stiegler [1996]: 52)

Il s'ensuit que quelque chose est effectivement diffusé en direct sur nos écrans, capable de restituer la présence de l'autre, est une illusion, c'est-à-dire que ce avec quoi nous entrons en contact est une image reproduite. Un temps reproduit est toujours un temps différé, caractérisé par une marge de retard, ce retard, même minime, en fait déjà quelque chose d'autre.

> Il y a bien, en effet, ce qu'on appelle la transmission en direct, le transport, par «reportage», d'évènements politiques par exemple ou d'une guerre […] Bien que, en effet, ce prétendu «direct» introduise une nouveauté structurelle considérable dans l'espace dont nous parlons, il ne faut jamais oublier que ce «direct» n'est pas un direct absolu, seulement un effet de direct, une allégation de «direct». Quelle que soit l'immédiateté apparente de la transmission ou de la diffusion, elle compose aves des choix, du cadrage, de la sélectivité. En une fraction de seconde, CNN, par exemple, intervient pour sélectionner, censurer, cadrer, filtrer l'image dite «live» ou «en direct»; sans parler du choix et de la programmation, qu'il s'agisse des «choses à montrer» et des «montreurs». (Derrida, Stiegler [1996]: 48-49)

L'effet direct exerce, cependant, un pouvoir de fascination sur le public, lui donnant l'impression d'être en relation avec quelque chose de présent. Cette valeur de présence a été largement analysée et déconstruite par le philosophe Jacques Derrida, elle caractérise la majeure partie de l'élaboration philosophique de la culture occidentale, comme l'idée qu'il existe des concepts absolus, autonomes, éternels, immuables, auxquels on peut toujours se référer à la même manière qu'ils sont toujours présents.

> L'être est présence ou modification de présence. Le rapport à la présence du présent comme forme ultime de l'être et de l'idéalité est le mouvement par lequel je transgresse l'existence empirique, la factualité, la contingence, la mondanité, etc. Et d'abord la *mienne*. Penser la présence comme forme universelle de la vie transcendantale, c'est m'ouvrir au savoir qu'en mon absence, au-delà de mon existence empirique, avant ma naissance et après ma mort, le *présent est.* (Derrida [1967]: 60)

La notion de présence existe non seulement d'un point de vue épistémologique, mais aussi d'un point de vue temporel. Dans cette perspective, le moment présent n'est pas simplement conçu comme isolé (et isolable) du passé et du futur, mais comme un noyau ponctuel toujours perceptible: c'est «un centre indéplaçable, un œil ou un noyau vivant, et c'est la ponctualité du maintenant actuel» (Derrida [1967]: 69). L'instant conçu comme «stigmé», où la forme reste inviolée avec une matière toujours nouvelle.

> La dominance du maintenant ne fait pas seulement système avec l'opposition fondatrice de la métaphysique, à savoir celle de la forme (ou de l'eidos ou de l'idée) et de la matière comme opposition de l'acte et de la puissance […] Elle assure la tradition qui continue la métaphysique grecque de la présence en métaphysique moderne de la présence comme conscience de soi, métaphysique de l'idée comme représentation. (Derrida [1967]: 70)

Et c'est une valeur de présence qui est reproposée par ce que Derrida appelle les télétechnologies, qui redonnent l'idée de quelque chose de plus réel en ce qu'il est plus présent ou, mieux, plus vivant. Derrida, cependant, souligne comment les télétechnologies nous mettent en contact avec une dimension qui, au lieu de se référer à la vie, est plus proche de la mort ou, plutôt, qui, au-delà des oppositions binaires qui caractérisent la métaphysique de la présence, se situe entre la vie et la mort: dans une dimension fantomatique.

L'INA, c'est une machine, et cette machine marche comme une sorte de pompe funèbre qui registre des choses et archive des moments dont on sait a priori que, si tôt que nous mourions après ou même pendant l'enregistrement, voilà, ce sera et cela restera «vivant», simulacre de vie: le maximum de vie (le plus de vie), mais de vie déjà pliée à la mort («plus de vie»), voilà qui devient exportable le plus longtemps et le plus loin possible – mais de façon finie: ce n'est pas inscrite pour l'éternité, car c'est fini et non seulement parce que les sujets sont finis, mais parce que l'archive dont nous parlons est aussi destructible. La plus grande intensité de vie «en directe» est captée au plus près pour être déportée au plus loin. S'il y a une spécificité, elle tient à la mesure de cette distance, da tient à cette polarité qui tient ensemble le plus proche et le plus lointain. (Derrida, Stiegler [1996]: 47-48)

Derrida avait déjà proposé ce type d'observation lorsqu'il s'était interrogé sur la photographie. En réfléchissant à *La chambre claire*, œuvre du sémiologue Roland Barthes, l'auteur souligne comment Barthes identifie la valeur de la présence comme l'élément de la photographie qui pique l'observateur et l'oblige à la regarder. Dans le texte, Barthes indique certains aspects liés à l'expérience photographique. La photographie se caractérise tout d'abord, selon Barthes, par une parfaite adhérence du référent; ce qui est dans la réalité est exactement ce qui est capturé par le clic photographique, «le référent adhère» (Barthes [1980]: 18). Dès le début du texte, ce référent, semble prendre forme dans une relation obsessionnelle avec la mort: «le référent, sorte de petit simulacre, d'*eidolon* émis par l'objet, que j'appellerais volontiers le Spectrum de la photographie, parce que ce mot garde à travers sa racine un rapport au ''spectacle'' et y ajoute cette chose un peu terrible qu'il y a dans toute photographie: le retour du mort» (Barthes [1980]: 22-23). Cet aspect reviendra à plusieurs reprises dans le texte, et nous pouvons supposer que Derrida lui-même le partage puisque, dans d'autres textes, il commente l'expérience photographique en termes d'expérience de deuil. «Devant garder ce qu'elle perd, à savoir le disparu, toute photographie n'agit-elle pas en effet à travers l'expérience endeuillée d'un tel nom propre, par la singularité irrésistible de son référent, de son ici-maintenant, de sa date?» (Derrida [1998]: 11). L'obsession pour le retour du mort qui caractérise la photographie est sans doute la composante même qui

pousse Barthes à écrire ce texte, dans la mesure où l'ouvrage tourne autour d'une photographie en particulier, *Jardin d'hiver*, une photographie de la mère de Barthes, récemment décédée. Cette photographie incite l'auteur à reprendre certaines théories déjà formulées dans des ouvrages antérieurs à propos de la photographie (Barthes [1982]), en particulier, la distinction entre *studium* et *punctum*. Le *studium* est un intérêt général pour une photographie, «l'étude, plutôt l'application de quelque chose, un goût pour quelqu'un, une sorte d'intérêt, solliciteur, certes, mais sans intensité particulière» (Barthes [1980]: 47), tandis que le *punctum* est littéralement une piqûre, un élément particulier qui attire irrévocablement l'attention de l'observateur. Dans la seconde partie de l'ouvrage, le lexique de Barthes se rapproche de plus en plus de celui de la phénoménologie, et le *punctum*, composante unique et disruptive, se superpose à l'élément mortifère qui n'a jamais cessé d'hanter les réflexions de Barthes. En effet, ce que l'auteur met, petit à petit, en évidence, c'est précisément cette capacité unique de la photographie à nous montrer ce qui *a été* sans équivoque. Barthes est très clair dans sa référence à la phénoménologie «le nom du noème de la Photographie sera donc: ''ca-a-été''» (Barthes (1980): 120). En analysant la photographie, Barthes, presque de manière obsessionnelle, veut mettre en évidence la référence à la présence: «toute photographie est un certificat de présence» (Barthes [1980]: 135); c'est une présence vivante qui semble émerger chaque fois que nous regardons une photo, car la photographie présente non pas ce qui n'est plus, mais ce qui a certainement été; cette conviction prend presque les traits d'une hallucination, au point que Barthes voit dans la photographie une forme de résurrection «la photographie a quelque chose à voir avec la résurrection» (Barthes [1980]: 129). La résurrection, selon la doctrine chrétienne, est faite de chair vivante et présente et Barthes, à travers le paradigme photographique, semble effectivement reprendre la conception husserlienne du *présent vivant* selon laquelle la présence de la conscience est un point source du flux temporel auquel il est toujours possible d'accéder par rétention. Mais la résurrection, même si elle est faite de chair, est aussi le récit d'un *retour, le retour du mort*. Malgré l'insistance de Barthes sur la présence réelle du référent, il ne parvient pas à échapper à la dimension spectrale à laquelle la photo nous confronte, une dimension qui suggère un retour continu d'un corps virtuel; nous ne sommes pas dans l'ordre de la présence mais de la re/présentation qui, en se présentant, est toujours autre. De la même manière, Brian O'Blivion se re/présente. L'homme, comme nous l'avons mentionné, n'apparaît jamais en chair et en os mais uniquement à travers un écran. Au cours de sa première apparition dans le film pendant l'émission *Renaking Show*, O'Blivion ne se présente pas physiquement en studio, contrairement aux autres invités, mais il est en direct d'un autre endroit, donc présent grâce à un support technologique. Toutes les personnes présentes, y compris le protagoniste Max Renn, avaient cru à l'authenticité de la diffusion en direct, mais ce n'est que plus tard que Max découvrira que O'Blivion n'est qu'un fantôme maintenu en vie par sa fille grâce aux

cassettes qu'il avait enregistrées avant de mourir. «I keep him alive as best I can» (Cronenberg [1983]), déclare Bianca O' Blivion en faisant référence aux archives audiovisuelles laissées par son père. O' Blivion est cependant un personnage fondamental dans l'histoire, comme nous avons brièvement analysé; bien qu'il soit mort, sa présence différée et reproduite le rend vivant, bien que d'une manière différente, pas vivant, ni mort, mais un spectre.

Et si cette frontière capitale se déplace, c'est que le medium dans lequel elle s'institue, à savoir le medium des médias même (l'information, la presse, la té-lé-communication, la techno-télé-discursivité, la techno-télé-iconicité, ce qui assure et détermine en général l'espacement de l'espace public, la possibilité même de la res publica et la phénoménalité du politique), cet élément même ni vivant ni mort, ni présent ni absent, il spectralise. (Derrida [1993]: 89)

Le mot fantôme, en grec φάντασμα, est lié à une double dérivation, au verbe φαντάζω, montrer, et au verbe φαντάζομαι, apparaître. Le sens de montrer est lié à la dimension du visible, de ce qui est touché par une source lumineuse mais, par ailleurs, l'apparence a surtout une nuance de signification négative dans son lien avec l'obscurité, l'ambiguïté, la tromperie, le manque de clarté. Ainsi, Max Renn se laisse tromper par le fantôme de O'Blivion; bien qu'il ne voie jamais l'homme en chair et en os, il est convaincu de son existence, alors qu'il regarde l'une de ses cassettes, une hallucination lui fait croire que l'homme lui parle directement à travers la télévision. Nous analyserons dans le paragraphe suivant la nature et les conséquences de cette illusion, décrite par Cronenberg comme illusion qui devient chair.

> Max. I'm so glad you came to me. I've been through it all myself, you see. Your reality is already half video hallucination. If you're not careful, it will become total hallucination. You'll have to learn to live in a very strange new world. I had a brain tumor, and I had visions. I believed the visions caused the tumor… and not the reverse. I could feel the visions coalesce and become flesh. Uncontrollable flesh. (Cronenberg [1983])

2. *Long live the new flesh!*

«Long live the new flesh!» (Cronenberg [1983]) est un concept clé dans le film *Videodrome,* cette expression est une métaphore de la transformation et de l'hybridation entre le corps humain, la technologie et les médias de masse. Dans la fiction cinématographique les *Vidéodrome* sont des produits capables d'avoir un impact sur le cerveau humain, ils génèrent des tumeurs qui, à leur tour, peuvent provoquer des hallucinations. Le concept de «nouvelle chair» dans

l'œuvre de Cronenberg, comme il a lui-même déclaré, a des liens avec les travaux du théoricien canadien Marshall McLuhan. Selon McLuhan, en effet, les médias de communication sont une extension des sens, ce sont des prothèses capables d'en renforcer les capacités humaines, d'où l'idée, parfois révolutionnaire, selon laquelle «the medium is the message» (McLuhan [1967]). Cependant, nous allons essayer ci-dessous de mettre en évidence un point de vue différent sur la question, en nous attardant sur la possibilité que les illusions se matérialisent. Dans le film de Cronenberg, cette idée est représentée à travers une réalité hallucinatoire vécue par le protagoniste, dans laquelle la frontière entre réalité et fantaisie, (terme qui partage la même racine grecque que fantasme), devient progressivement de plus en plus imperceptible. Dans ce cas, nous pouvons parler de *Tagtraum*, ce que Freud désigne comme un rêve éveillé ou un fantasme conscient. Freud, en analysant ce phénomène dans la *Traumdeutung,* met en évidence comment ces fantasmes laissent leurs traces dans le psychisme, dans certains cas retravaillés pendant les rêves nocturnes, de la même manière que ces traces, en cas de dérives pathologiques, deviennent la première étape des névroses hystériques. Comme les rêves nocturnes, les rêves éveillés sont le résultat croisé de la tension vers un désir inassouvi et des souvenirs d'enfance. Ce type de traitement peut atteindre un niveau hallucinatoire que Freud désigne par le terme d'amnésie: «le délire hallucinatoire de l'amentia est une fantaisie de souhait nettement reconnaissable, souvent totalement ordonnée comme un beau rêve diurne» (Freud [2010]: 97). Dans cet état de psychose hallucinatoire du désir, le sujet fait remonter à la surface ses désirs les plus cachés, normalement inconscients, qu'il imagine comme satisfaits. Freud, étudiant l'origine de l'hallucination, souligne qu'elle ne peut pas être attribuée au processus de régression typique des rêves. Dans le cas d'hallucination, c'est l'examen de la réalité qui est suspendu, contrairement aux images oniriques qui sont toujours capables de maintenir cette frontière. Dans le processus hallucinatoire, le Moi se heurte à une réalité insupportable pour lui, qu'il décide de ne pas percevoir, privant ainsi le conscient de cette implication. En privant le conscient de la réalité, le Moi donne libre cours à des fantasmes conscients non refoulés, qui sont reconnus par le système comme une meilleure réalité.

> Dans le contexte qui est présentement le nôtre, l'hypothèse peut nous être accordée que l'hallucination consiste en un investissement du système Cs (Pc), qui ne produit pas, comme il serait pourtant normal, da l'extérieur, ma da l'intérieur, et qu'elle a pour condition que la régression aille nécessairement jusqu'à atteindre ce système lui-même et pouvoir ainsi passer outre à l'examen de réalité. (Freud [2010]: 99)

Selon les théories du sémiologue Christian Metz, cet état hallucinatoire, au-delà de sa dérive pathologique, peut être atteint, même si ce n'est que pour de brefs instants et avec des niveaux d'intensité moindres, il a des points communs avec

le stade filmique. Pendant le processus d'élaboration d'une imagination éveillée, le sujet est conscient mais les images élaborées proviennent de l'inconscient. Pendant le stade filmique, c'est le contenu visuel qui parvient à stimuler nos pulsions les plus sédimentées.

Ainsi, bien que le fantasme soit toujours proche de l'inconscient par son contenu, et que le fantasme conscient ne soit seulement une version un plus distante, une prolongation bourgeonnante («rejeton», comme on le dit) du fantasme inconscient, le fantasme, d'un autre coté (et jusque dans ses parties immergées), porte toujours l'empreinte plus ou moins nette du préconscient dans ses modalités de «composition» et son agencement formel; c'est pourquoi Freud y voyait une sorte d'hybride. (Metz [1984]: 120)

Christian Metz souligne que, pendant le visionnage d'un film, des processus très élaborés impliquant le système psychique du sujet se déclenchent. Metz parle de transfert perceptif au cours duquel la conscience de l'observateur tombe dans un état de torpeur, et le coefficient d'illusion augmente: le sujet est poussé, donc, même si ce n'est que pour de brefs instants, à croire que la réalité filmique est la réalité effective. Ces processus impliquent que les instances inconscientes peuvent être stimulées par la vision cinématographique, incitant l'observateur à éprouver du plaisir ou du déplaisir cinématographique, dans un stade parfois hallucinatoire.

En situation de veille, et donc en situation cinématographique, le trajet le plus ordinaire des excitations psychiques dessine une ligne à sens unique, une ligne orientée qui est la «voie progrédiente» de Freud. Les impulsions ont leur source première dans le monde extérieur (entourage quotidien ou bande filmique), elles atteignent l'appareil psychique par son extrémité perceptive (= système perception-conscience) et elles viennent enfin s'inscrire, sous forme de traces mnésiques, dans un système psychique moins périphérique qui est tantôt le préconscient, (comme dans les souvenirs au sens ordinaire du mot), et tantôt l'inconscient, avec sa mémoire propre, lorsqu'il s'agit d'impressions du monde qui ont été refoulées après réception. (Metz [1984]: 139)

Pour en revenir à l'univers de *Videodrome*, c'est, précisément, la vision de contenus visuels qui déclenche la production d'hallucinations chez le protagoniste. Les *Videodrome* sont des vidéos au contenu violent et, pour la plupart, sadomasochistes, que nous identifions aujourd'hui comme des *snuff movies*. L'histoire commence lorsque le protagoniste entre en possession du *Videodrome*. La curiosité mais aussi le plaisir qui se cache derrière le visionnage de ces contenus poussent le protagoniste à vouloir en savoir plus à leur sujet. Et bien qu'il

découvre que le signal Videodrome peut provoquer des lésions cérébrales, il ne cesse de regarder. Mais pourquoi?

> But why would anybody watch it? Why would anybody watch a scum show like Videodrome? Why did you watch it, Max?
> Business reasons.
> Sure. Sure. What about the *other* reason? (Cronenberg [1963])

Les questions posées par Barry Convex ouvrent la deuxième partie de notre enquête. Nous avons observé que le contenu des médias de masse est artificiel et fantasmé; ces composants sont capables d'agir sur l'observateur en le piquant et en créant les conditions pour le traitement de fantasmes conscients mais d'origine inconsciente. Mais pourquoi tout cela se produit-il? Pourquoi Max Renn ne peut-il s'empêcher de regarder?

Le désir de voir, dans ce cas, doit être identifié comme une pulsion. Freud décrit la pulsion comme une poussée interne et constante, elle peut être comprise comme un besoin dont la satisfaction n'est pas facile à identifier et, en ce sens, la pulsion n'est pas alimentée par un besoin biologique mais par une force psychique, la libido, alimentée par la distance entre le sujet et son objet de désir, le but de la pulsion. La pulsion traduit une tension entre le désir de satisfaction et le besoin de manque. «Inversement, elles demeurent toujours plus ou moins insatisfaites, même ayant atteint leur objet; le désir renait bien vite après le court vertige de son apparente extinction, […] la manque est ce qu'il veut combler, et en même temps ce qu'il a soin de toujours maintenir béant pour survivre comme désir» (Metz [1984]: 83). Satisfaire une pulsion implique d'atteindre son but afin d'arrêter son stimulus interne, le but d'une pulsion n'est pas fixe et peut être atteint en suivant différents chemins; dans certains cas il ne peut pas être atteint, surtout si son atteinte mettrait en danger l'organisme, dans ce cas on parle de déviation ou d'inhibition du but. Parmi les pulsions originelles, Freud distingue les pulsions du Moi et les pulsions sexuelles. Comme toutes les pulsions, les pulsions sexuelles ont un objet et un but. Le but des pulsions sexuelles est le «plaisir d'organe» (Freud [2010]: 15). Freud souligne que il existe pour les pulsions sexuelles de nombreuses déviations, tant en ce qui concerne le but que l'objet. C'est précisément en réfléchissant à ces derniers que Freud introduit la pulsion de voir, la scopophilie ou le voyeurisme, qu'il classe donc parmi les pulsions sexuelles. «L'impression optique reste le voie par laquelle l'excitation libidinale est le plus fréquemment éveillée» (Freud [1987]: 66). La pulsion de voir reproduit de manière encore plus nette le mécanisme de la pulsion. Si la pulsion, comme nous l'avons vu, est un mécanisme de force constante vers un objet imprécis et difficile à atteindre, un mécanisme qui s'autoalimente précisément à cause de cette distance entre le sujet et son but, le désir de voir maintient constamment cette distance; la combler

signifierait priver le sujet de son objet de désir. «C'est que la ''pulsion perce-
vante'' […], contrairement à d'autres pulsions sexuelles, figure concrètement
l'absence de son objet par la distance où elle le maintient et qui participe à sa
définition même: la distance du regard» (Metz [1984]: 83). Freud, en analysant
les destins qui caractérisent les pulsions sexuelles, souligne que, ces pulsions
peuvent se transformer en leur contraire, cela consiste en «de l'activité vers la
passivité, et le renversement quant au contenu» (Freud [2010]: 16), raison pour
laquelle Freud associe le voyeurisme à son contraire: l'exhibitionnisme. Freud
met en évidence une coïncidence avec un autre binôme de pulsions, le ma-
sochisme-sadisme: le voyeur est, selon Freud, à l'origine un exhibitionniste,
puisqu'il commence par éprouver du plaisir à observer ses propres organes
génitaux, de même, le masochiste est déjà un sadique, puisqu'il prend plaisir
à la douleur, même celle qu'il s'inflige à lui-même. Le fait que Freud analyse
ces deux binômes l'un à côté de l'autre n'est pas sans conséquences; en menant
une enquête sur l'origine et le comportement des pulsions sexuelles, il mène
une étude sur l'enfance, mettant en évidence comment le plaisir de regarder
se traduit dans certains cas par le plaisir de regarder la souffrance d'autrui, le
plaisir de la cruauté.

> Après l'entrée en jeu du refoulement de ces penchants, la curiosité dirigée vers les parties
> génitales des autres (du même sexe ou de l'autre) subsiste en tant que poussée lancinante
> qui, dans bien des cas névrotiques, devient la plus puissante force pulsionnelle participant
> à la formation de symptômes. C'est dans une indépendance encore plus grande à l'égard
> du reste de l'activité sexuelle, lié aux zones érogènes, que se développe chez l'enfant la
> composante cruelle de la pulsion sexuelle. Le caractère infantile est en général facile-
> ment porté à la cruauté, car l'obstacle qui arrête la pulsion d'emprise devant la douleur
> de l'autre: la capacité de compatir, se forme relativement tard. L'analyse psychologique
> approfondie de cette pulsion n'a, comme on sait, pas encore abouti; nous sommes en droit
> de supposer que la motivation cruelle provient de la pulsion d'emprise et surgit dans la
> vie sexuelle à un moment où les parties génitales n'ont pas encore pris leur rôle ultérieur.
> (Freud 1987: 120)

Grâce à l'analyse de la vie infantile, Freud met en évidence la présence de fan-
tasmes qui, au cours de la croissance, sont refoulés et poussés dans l'inconscient,
raison pour laquelle la période de l'enfance et la sexualité qui la caractérise sont
soumises à un processus d'amnésie, mais ceci ne signifie pas qu'elles n'in-
fluencent pas la vie consciente du sujet. Freud retrouve ces mêmes mécanismes
dans l'amnésie hystérique.

Relier les amnésies infantile et hystérique n'est pas, au demeurant, qu'un
simple jeu de l'esprit. L'amnésie hystérique, qui est au service du refoulement,
ne s'explique que par le fait que l'individu possède déjà un trésor de traces mné-
siques qui sont soustraites à la disposition consciente et qui, dès lors, attirent à
elles par liaison associative ce sur quoi agissent, du côté du conscient, les forces

répulsives de refoulement. On peut dire que sans amnésie infantile, il n'y aurait pas d'amnésie hystérique. Je crois dès lors que l'amnésie infantile, qui fait de l'enfance de chacun une sorte de passé préhistorique et qui lui dissimule les débuts de sa propre vie sexuelle, porte la responsabilité de ce que l'on n'accorde généralement pas d'importance à la période infantile dans le développement de la vie sexuelle. (Freud [1987]: 97)

La vision d'un certain type de contenu et le plaisir qu'on en retient sont le symptôme de la présence latente de ces mêmes phénomènes. En ce sens, la curiosité pour *Vidéodrome* manifestée par Max Renn est le symptôme de la présence combinée des deux binômes voyeurisme-exhibitionnisme et sadisme-masochisme. Dans la dernière partie de cette étude, nous analyserons comment ces composantes, au-delà des images de Cronenberg, se retrouvent dans l'histoire de l'utilisation des images qui, se cachant derrière l'intention de montrer la violence qui habite le monde, deviennent elles-mêmes un instrument de violence sur les référents des images, témoignant en réalité de la présence latente des tendances que nous venons d'analyser.

3. *Le trou de serrure sur le monde*

L'expérience de voir sans être vus est la condition du voyeur, l'observateur est dans une position de pouvoir comme un Dieu qui voit tout le monde(Metz [1977]). Voir et montrer avec insistance une photo prise à des sujets inconscients d'être photographiés, prise dans une situation de souffrance et de danger, veut dire participer, consciemment ou non, à cette pulsion. En effet, comme l'analyse Christian Metz dans *Cinéma et psychanalyse,* bien qu'il existe dans le cadre du cinéma une sorte de consensus institutionnel, en fait, lorsque le spectateur est seul, plongé dans l'obscurité de la salle et complètement projeté dans la clarté de l'écran, il éprouve la même sensation que l'enfant qui observe dans le noir à travers le «trou de la serrure», regarde sans être regardé, et surtout, sans consensus. Cette absence de consensus *augmente l'attraction.* L'impression qui se dégage des photos prises sur les champs de bataille, ou du moins dans des conditions où le sujet est immortalisé alors qu'il se trouve dans une situation de profonde vulnérabilité, semble être similaire. Combien de ces sujets aimeraient vraiment voir leur souffrance et leur terreur médiatisées à la télévision et dans les médias sociaux? En effet, l'absence de consensus accroît le désir, et les mécanismes voyeuristes se mêlent aux mécanismes sadiques. Notre relation avec l'image représentant la violence devient elle-même une violence exercée sur le référent. L'image devient un symbole, un stéréotype, et ce dernier semble en quelque sorte prendre le pas sur le véritable sujet de l'image, l'être humain en chair et en os.

Kim Phuc Phan Thi[1], désignée comme *Napalm girl*: petite fille immortalisée par le photographe Huynh Cong Ut en 1972. L'image de Kim Phuc a sans aucun doute marqué l'histoire. Elle était la petite fille au centre de l'image, complètement nue, qui s'enfuit avec d'autres enfants, tous criant de douleur à cause des effets des bombardements au Napalm.

Kim Phuc donne un interview au *New York Times* cinquante ans après la prise de cette photo. Elle est maintenant une femme adulte qui portera pour toujours les cicatrices de la guerre. Dans l'article, intitulé *It's Been 50 Years. I am Not* «*Napalm Girl*» *Anymore*, la femme raconte non seulement les traumatismes irréparables qu'elle a subis à la suite de la guerre, mais se concentre aussi sur la photo qui a été prise d'elle. «I am a little girl. I am naked. Why did he take that picture? Why didn't my parents protect me? Why did he print that photo? Why was I the only kid naked while my brothers and cousins in the photo had their clothes on?» (2022). Il n'a pas été facile de vivre avec cette image et d'être devenue un symbole de l'horreur de la guerre, et pendant des années, cette femme a vécu avec un sentiment de honte. Kim Puch fait une déclaration importante dans cet entretien: «We are not symbols. We are human». Et avant d'étaler leurs visages sur les écrans, il faut les considérer comme tels. Cinquante ans après la photo prise par Huynh Cong Ut, de nombreuses autres photos des victimes ont été prises et diffusées, et aujourd'hui il y en a de plus en plus, on pense par exemple à la guerre en Ukraine. En janvier 2023, parmi les nombreuses images de cette guerre qui continuent de circuler et de se multiplier depuis son déclenchement, l'une d'entre elles a commencé à devenir particulièrement populaire. L'image a été prise à Dnipro par un photographe amateur, Arsen Dzodzaev, avec un téléphone et immédiatement postée sur les médias sociaux. Aujourd'hui, la popularité se mesure à l'aune des *likes*, et grâce à eux l'image a immédiatement prouvé son potentiel. La photo représente un gratte-ciel éventré par un bombardement et, ce qui a suscité tant d'intérêt pour cette image, parmi les décombres, un petit point rouge, une femme tremblante et désespérée dont nous savons maintenant qu'elle s'appelle Anastasia. En fait, la jeune fille commente cette image, son image, en disant: «Je suis devenue populaire même si je ne le voulais pas, tous les médias parlent de moi. Est-ce que j'existe vraiment?»[2].

En passant de l'histoire de l'art à la guerre du Vietnam, Susan Sontag mène une enquête sur les images de la violence. Dans un petit essai intitulé *Regarding the pain of others*, l'autrice, en réfléchissant à la relation que le spectateur entretient avec ces images, s'attaque à l'analyse d'un courant iconographique qui se concentre sur l'exposition d'images de souffrance et de douleur. Ce dernier,

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1   Le sujet est abordé par André Gunther lors de l'émission *Le dessous des images*, https:// imagesociale.fr/11050.
2   Ces déclarations proviennent du compte Instagram d'Anastasia.

selon Sontag, est manifestement conditionné par une pulsion intérieure à l'observation: «It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked» (Sontag [2003]: 33). Il s'agit d'une pulsion que l'autrice n'hésite pas à appeler par son nom.

> Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it – say, the surgeons at the military hospital where the photograph was taken – or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be. (Sontag [2003]: 34)

Le médium photographique joue un rôle fondamental à cet égard. La photographie, en tant qu'instrument de capture instantanée du présent, capable de saisir «la plus petite étincelle de hasard»(Benjamin [1931]), est «l'analogon parfait» (Barthes [1982]). Ces caractéristiques confèrent à la photographie un pouvoir que l'on pourrait qualifier de magique. Une magie liée à une sorte d'instinct humain primitif et enfantin qui consiste à croire que ce que l'on voit dans une photographie décrit forcément quelque chose de réel. Lorsque on est devant une photographie, on a une tendance à croire que ce que on a devant est une reproduction fidèle de la réalité, l'hypothèse de la manipulation ne prend le dessus que plus tard, la première réaction est l'étonnement. L'homme désigne la photographie comme son outil de prédilection pour capturer la réalité et investit cet outil d'une foi aveugle. «Everyone is a literalist when it comes to photographs» (Sontag [2003]: 38). Ce type d'attitude peut également conduire, plus pu moins consciemment, qui utilise le médium photographique à exercer une sorte de coercition à l'égard de la réalité qu'elle entend immortaliser. Toutes les images sont, en quelque sorte, le résultat d'un point de vue, dont il s'agit de déterminer le degré d'intrusion, les moyens utilisés et, surtout, la finalité. Ces analyses ne peuvent que nous conduire à un autre protagoniste de l'histoire de la psychanalyse: Charcot. Celui qui, dans la «*città dolorosa*» (Didi-Huberman [1982]) de la Salpêtrière, «*redécouvrit l'hystérie*» (Didi-Huberman [1982]). Certains disent même qu'il l'a inventée, car Charcot, précisément à travers l'image, a mis en scène un véritable spectacle de la douleur.

> Nous restent aujourd'hui les séries d'image de *l'Iconographie photographique de la Salpetrière*. Tout y est: poses, crises, cris, «attitudes passionnelles», «crucifiements», «extases», toutes les postures du délire. Tout semble y être parce que la situation photographique cristallisait idéalement le lien du fantasme hystérique et d'un fantasme du savoir. Une réciproque du *charme* s'instaura: médecins insatiables des images de l'«Hystérie» – les hystériques toutes consentantes, surenchérissant même en théâtralités des corps. C'est ainsi que la clinique de l'hystérie devint spectacle, *invention de l'hystérie*. (Didi-Huberman [1982]: 5)

Georges Didi-Huberman, dans ces premières lignes de son texte *L'invention de l'hystérie*, réussit à fournir une série de thèmes utiles à notre discussion.

L'hystérie à la Salpêtrière devient un spectacle au service du savoir, mais c'est précisément derrière la bannière du savoir que se cache le fantôme d'une attirance pour l'exposition de la douleur. Ce n'est pas un hasard si l'hôpital de la Salpêtrière est qualifié par Charcot lui-même de musée pathologique du vivant, soulignant ainsi son aspect d'exposition et d'objectivation des malades. En tant qu'objet d'étude, Charcot voulait étudier l'hystérie s'inspirant de la méthode expérimentale de Claude Bernard. La méthode expérimentale, affirme Bernard, n'est pas l'observation proprement dite, mais l'observation «provoquée», c'est-à-dire qu'elle signifie d'abord l'art de soutenir les faits (Bernard [1865]). Et Charcot disposait d'un outil exceptionnel pour obtenir des faits: la photographie. À l›aube de son apparition, la photographie était considérée comme «the retina of the mind's eye» (Cronenberg [1983]). On considérait que la sensibilité de l'objectif photographique était supérieure à la sensibilité humaine, et ce caractère lui donnait l'idée qu'elle pouvait être un instrument de prédiction de la réalité.

Nous savons que la plaque photographique n'est pas sensible aux mêmes rayons que notre rétine: elle pourra donc, dans certains cas, nous donner plus que l'œil, nous montrer ce que celui-ci ne saurait percevoir. Cette sensibilité particulière a une valeur toute spéciale. (Londe [1888])

La photographie se voit confier le monopole de la connaissance, Charcot, bourreau et victime du médium photographique, crée des atlas d'images de la souffrance. Son objectif est, sans doute, de connaître ou plutôt de dominer l'hystérie, en en enregistrant minutieusement toutes les manifestations; mais cet amour de l'image le pousse à vouloir en posséder toujours plus et à tout prix, l'amour devient obsession «Et l'on s'y étouffe: c'est l'obstruction, l'étranglement, par trop d'amour» (Didi-Huberman [1982]: 47). En effet, Charcot exerçait un fort pouvoir de coercition sur ses patients, car pour eux, être soumis à l'expérimentation signifiait qu'ils n'étaient pas considérés comme incurables et donc qu'ils n'étaient pas condamnés «au noir» (Didi-Huberman [1982]: 169). Être exhibées était une forme de salut, même si cela signifiait: à être photographiées après une crise provoquée par Charcot, à être hypnotisées, à être littéralement exhibées lors des «conférences du mardi» et à être les victimes d'un véritable sadique.

Ainsi à la Salpetrière l'hystérie ne devait-elle plus cesser de s'aggraver, toujours plus démonstrative, haute en couleurs, toujours plus soumise à scénarios (et ce, jusqu'à la mort de Charcot, environ). Une espèce de fantasme masochiste fonctionnait à plein, selon son trait démonstratif (se faire voir souffrir), selon son caractère éminent de pacte, de connivence aussi. «(Connivence: connivere: veut dire en même temps: je cligne de l'œil, je ferme les yeux)». Et cette connivence, quoique contrainte, fut un rapport presque amoureux, parce que le chance

s'opérait, était même moteur (quoiqu'«illusoire») effectif, efficace, de toute
l'opération. (Didi-Huberman [1982]: 169)

L'objectif photographique devient ainsi un instrument de torture au service
de la visibilité. Corps entièrement soumis à la vision, mis à nu par un exercice
mental et corporel coercitif, dans quelle mesure peut-on dire que ces images ont
une valeur de vérité? Et est-ce vraiment la seule soif de connaissance qui poussa
Charcot et ses disciples à l'exercice de telles pratiques?

Analysons à présent le spectacle de la guerre, un type de manipulation et de
spectacularisation de l'image qui a toujours trait aux corps, mais d'une manière
différente. Je parle de spectacle en pensant à un épisode bien précis, à une pho-
tographie bien précise, et à un photographe, Eddie Adamas, auteur d'une prise
de vue au Vietnam en 1968. L'image représente le chef de la police sud-vietna-
mienne Nguyen Ngoc Loan tirant sur un Vietcong. Comme le souligne Susan
Sontag, en regardant cette photo qui capture le moment exact de la mort, per-
sonne ne penserait qu'il s'agit d'un faux. Découvrir l'arrière-plan de cette image
est au contraire effrayant. En fait, il semble que Loan ait fait emmener l'homme
captif dans cette rue spécialement pour être immortalisé par les journalistes: s'il
n'y avait pas eu de reporters, l'exécution n'aurait jamais eu lieu. La mort vio-
lente est un spectacle qui fait toujours les salles combles et la guerre est le réali-
sateur le plus primé.

> To catch a death actually happening and embalm it for all time is something only cameras
> can do, and pictures taken by photographers out in the field of the moment of (or just
> before) death are among the most celebrated and often reproduced of war photographs.
> (Sontag [2003]: 47)

L'image est toujours un résultat artefactual, mais quel est l'impact de cette
dernière sur le rendu de l'image ? Pendant les guerres, y-compris pendant la
Première et la Seconde Guerre mondiale, les photographies prises, dont certaines
ont marqué l'histoire, sont également le résultat d'une construction minutieuse.
C'est le cas du studio photographique Brady et de deux photographes, Alexander
Gardner et Timothy O'Sullivan, qui sont les auteurs des premières photographies,
parfois très gores, prises pendant la guerre de Sécession. Les photographies en
question, bien qu'elles représentent des épisodes très crus de la guerre, bien trop
réalistes pour être considérées comme des faux, sont en fait le résultat d'une
manipulation de l'espace et des sujets qui y sont impliqués. «To photograph was
to compose» (Sontag [2003]: 42). Il semble en effet que Gardner et son équipe
aient préparé l'environnement de la manière la plus appropriée pour prendre la
photographie. Nous savons aujourd'hui que pour réaliser l'image *Shelter of a
Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg* Gardner a traîné le cadavre d'un soldat à l'en-
droit qu'il jugeait le plus approprié. Susan Sontag souligne ainsi est que la dé-

couverte de telles constructions a surtout déçu le public, qui, en revanche, a pris une sorte de plaisir sinistre à l'idée de pouvoir observer des images représentant des moments authentiques volés en quelque sorte au temps.

> What is odd is not that so many of the iconic news photos of the past, including some of the best remembered pictures from the Second World War, appear to have been staged. It is that we are surprised to learn they were staged, and always disappointed. (Sontag [2003]: 44)

A travers ces exemples nous avons essayé de montrer le fantôme de l'attrait indéniable pour voir, voir et ne pas être vus.

> We want the photographer to be a spy in the house of love and of death, and those being photographed to be unaware of the camera, «off guard». No sophisticated sense of what photography is or can be will ever weaken the satisfactions of a picture of an unexpected event seized in mid-action by an alert photographer. (Sontag [2003]: 44)

Alors que nous approchons de la fin de ce parcours, nous nous posons une dernière question: existe-t-il un moyen d'enquêter sur la violence dans le monde sans produire un énième instrument de violence? En d'autres termes, existe-t-il une autre façon de construire l'image?

4. *«You do not take a photograph, you make it»*

Malgré tout, la photographie de Kim Phuc reste dans l'imaginaire de l'histoire.

L'image a parlé et parle encore au monde. Elle raconte les effets du napalm, d'une guerre dévastatrice, des civils sacrifiés, de l'effritement des droits humains les plus fondamentaux pour opposition aux intérêts du pouvoir.

Mais y aurait-il eu d'autres moyens de rendre ce morceau d'histoire au monde?

Le réalisateur Harun Farocki tente de répondre à cette question. Filmé dans une pièce dépouillée, assis à une table, Farocki commence à lire le témoignage d'un survivant d'une bombe au napalm, qui s'est réveillé à l'hôpital après 30 jours de coma avec la majeure partie de son corps brûlée. Après la lecture, Farocki se demande comment montrer les effets du napalm aux spectateurs occidentaux sans qu'ils détournent le regard, sans qu'ils continuent à regarder ailleurs. Soudain, Farocki allume une cigarette et l'éteint sur sa propre main: «Une cigarette brûle à 400°, le napalm à 3000°».

Les scènes que nous avons décrites sont tirées du film Feu inextinguible, réalisé par Harun Farocki. L'auteur nous confronte à une autre façon de construire l'image.

Au cours de notre analyse, nous avons mis en évidence certaines des différentes composantes qui entrent en jeu lorsque nous sommes face à une image. D'une part, qu'il s'agit d'un résultat artificiel, d'autre part, que l'observateur

est psychologiquement impliqué par cette artificialité, même de la manière la plus inavouable. Cela n'implique toutefois pas que l'observateur doit renoncer à l'image, mais ces observations nous poussent à réfléchir à d'autres manières de construire et d'expérimenter une image.

> L'image […] exige de nous, à chaque fois, un art de funambule: affronter l'espace dangereux de l'implication où nous nous déplaçons délicatement en risquant, à chaque pas, de choir (dans la croyance, dans l'identification); rester en équilibre avec pour instrument notre propre corps aidé du balancier contre-dit l'improbabilité de l'air. (Didi-Huberman [2007])

Nous concluons donc cette réflexion en nous attardant brièvement sur un artiste polyvalent qui a cherché, au cours de sa production, à réfléchir à une autre manière de rendre l'image: Alfred Jaar. Alfred Jaar est un artiste politiquement engagé, qui considère l'art comme une arme de résistance et non comme une forme de divertissement «son travail représente l'un des engagements les plus forts de l'art contemporain, […] par la façon résolue dont il saisit le lien structurel entre éthique et esthétique, entre art et politique» (Jaar [2009]). Bien que toutes ses œuvres nous poussent à réfléchir sur la forme de l'image, sur la frontière entre violence et sensibilisation, entre censure et surproduction, sur le rôle du spectateur, nous nous attarderons ici, en conclusion, sur une œuvre en particulier qui semble mettre en évidence toutes les contradictions qui, par rapport à l'image, sont apparues au cours de notre réflexion: *The sound of the silence*.

The sound of the silence est une installation multimédia centrée sur le photographe sud-africain Kevin Carter. Ce dernier est devenu célèbre pour une photographie en particulier: *la petite fille et le vautour*. L'image représente une petite fille soudanaise souffrant de malnutrition sévère, à côté d'un vautour. La photo a été reprise par les principaux journaux, Carter a remporté le prix Pulitzer mais peu de temps après, en proie à une dépression aiguë, il s'est suicidé. La photo avait en effet suscité une vague de critiques à l'encontre du photographe, qui se décrivait lui-même comme un vautour, soucieux d'immortaliser la souffrance.

> *The sound of the silence* reprend cette histoire. Jaar construit une grande boîte noire dans laquelle le public peut entrer, à l'intérieur de laquelle une série de mots sont projetés sur des écrans lumineux, dont certaines déclarations de Carter. À la fin du récit, la photo apparaît pendant huit secondes, suivie d'une obscurité totale.
>
> «You do not take a photograph, you make it» est l'une des phrases de l'installation. Jaar veut avant tout souligner la valeur artificielle de l'image, on ne prend pas une photo, on la construit, c'est exactement pour cela qui existe de nombreuses façons de le faire.

Jaar, par la reprise de l'histoire de Carter, des modalités du photojournalisme, de l'impact médiatique de son image, de son suicide, met l'accent sur le récit qui précède une image et le silence qui devrait en suivre. L'observateur, enveloppé d'obscurité, est invité à prendre son temps.

L'image n'est donc pas seulement ce qui «a été». L'image est une forme d'écriture, avec ses propres caractères et sa propre spatialité, elle fait partie d'un texte long et complexe qui nous demande de nous placer à la bonne distance pour le lire, et d'être lu et relu à l'infini, en acceptant de lui redonner à chaque fois un sens.

Les images ne nous disent rien, nous mentent ou demeurent obscures comme des hiéroglyphes tant qu'on ne prend pas la peine de les *lire,* c'est-à-dire de les analyser, de les décomposer, de les remonter, de les interpréter, de les distancier hors des «clichés linguistiques» qu'elles suscitent en tant que «clichés visuels». (Didi-Huberman [2009]: 36).

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La bellezza dell'atto fotografico equivale alla bellezza di un *esprit de géométrie* da rigenerare costantemente. Mi interessa che l'umore dei luoghi e gli enigmi dei volumi siano tradotti attraverso griglie visive appartenenti al frutto del perseverare del mio sguardo sul mondo. La prerogativa è, però, quella di evitare che l'utilizzo di queste griglie diventi condizione di esercizio scolastico pericolosamente replicabile, che subisca l'ordine precostituito che ogni gabbia ha di *default*. Smontando e rimontando i segni attraverso l'inquadratura della mia fotocamera, provo a sperimentare relazioni diverse, continuando a riflettere sui tessuti associativi tramite i quali si organizzano le immagini del serbatoio del mio immaginario, cercando uno stato di disorientamento, un equilibrio instabile che, pur ancorato alla rappresentazione, inserisca sottili elementi che la contraddicano o, quantomeno, che la destabilizzino. L'idea di paesaggio mi si rivela attraverso una stimolazione random e prende forma quando traiettorie di suoni e immagini diventano intersecabili, in una costante ricerca di nuove frequenze visive nell'ascolto dei luoghi.
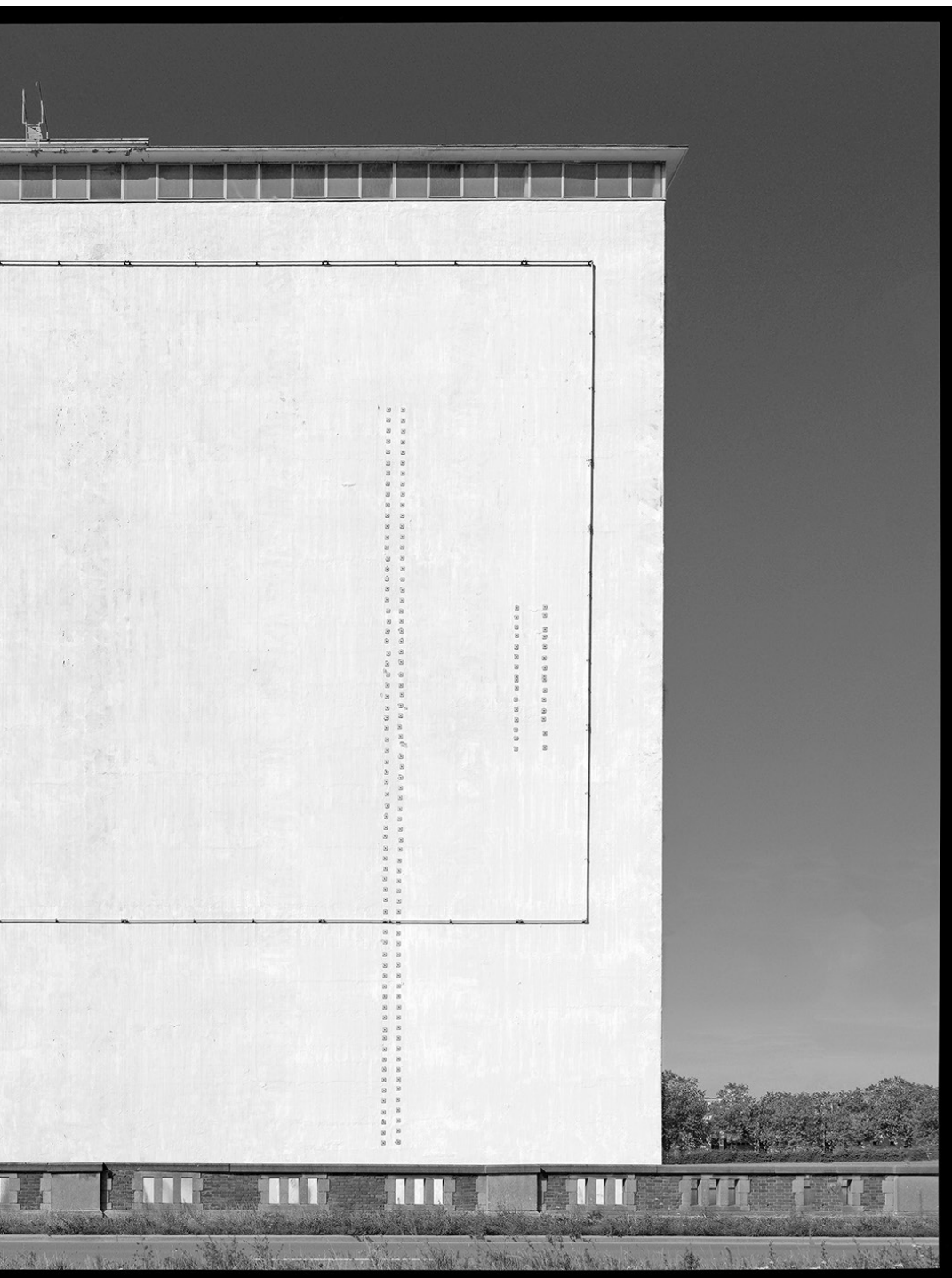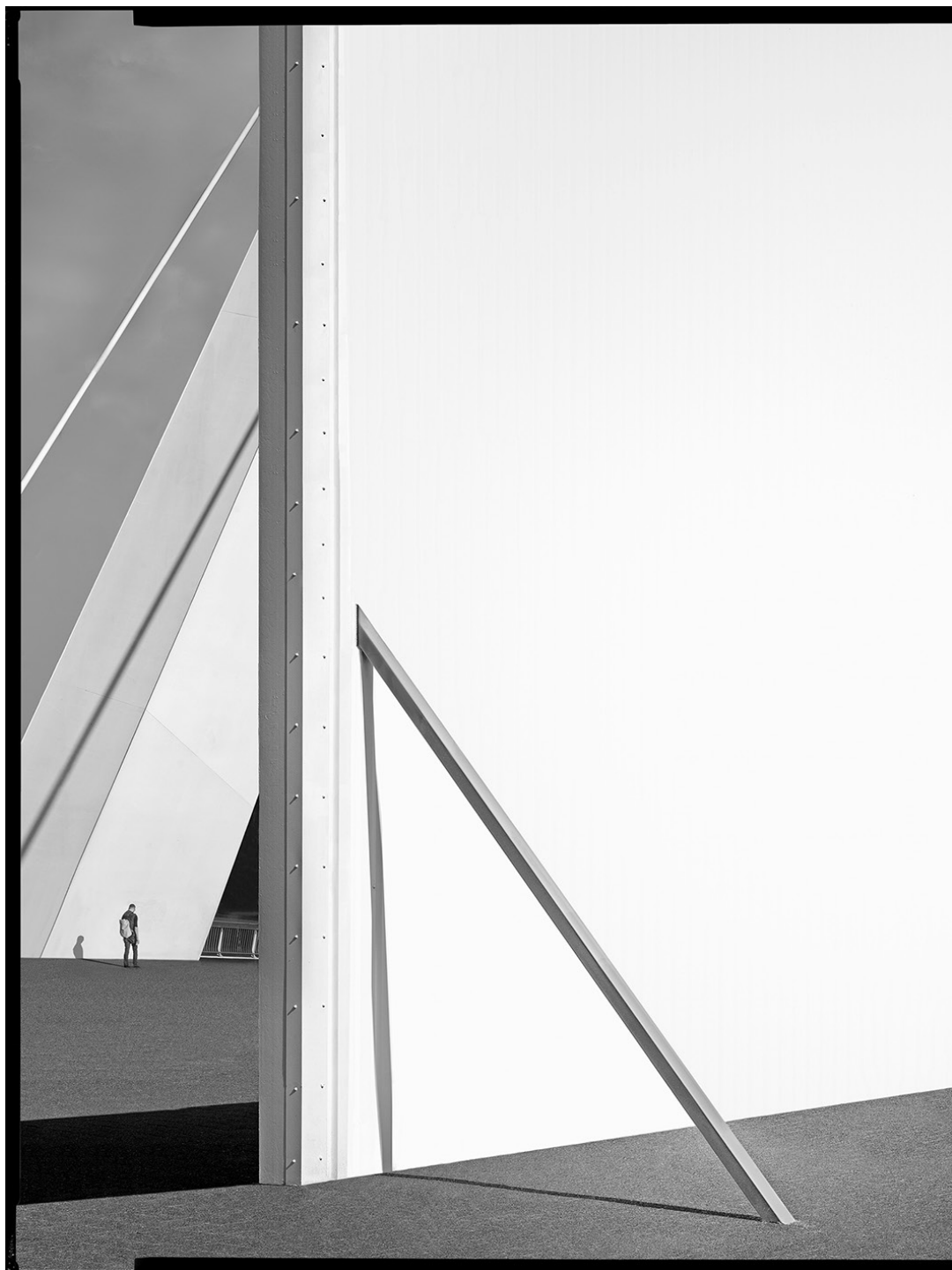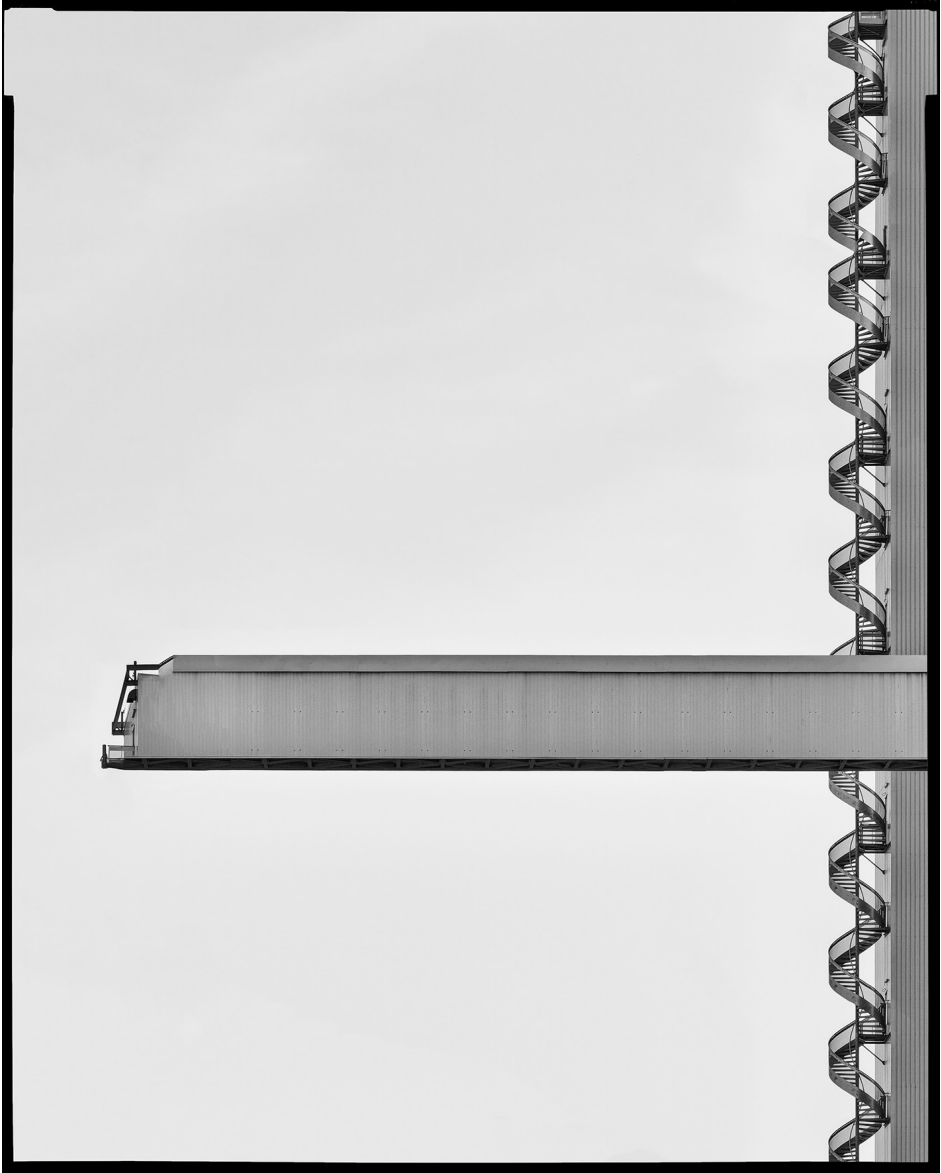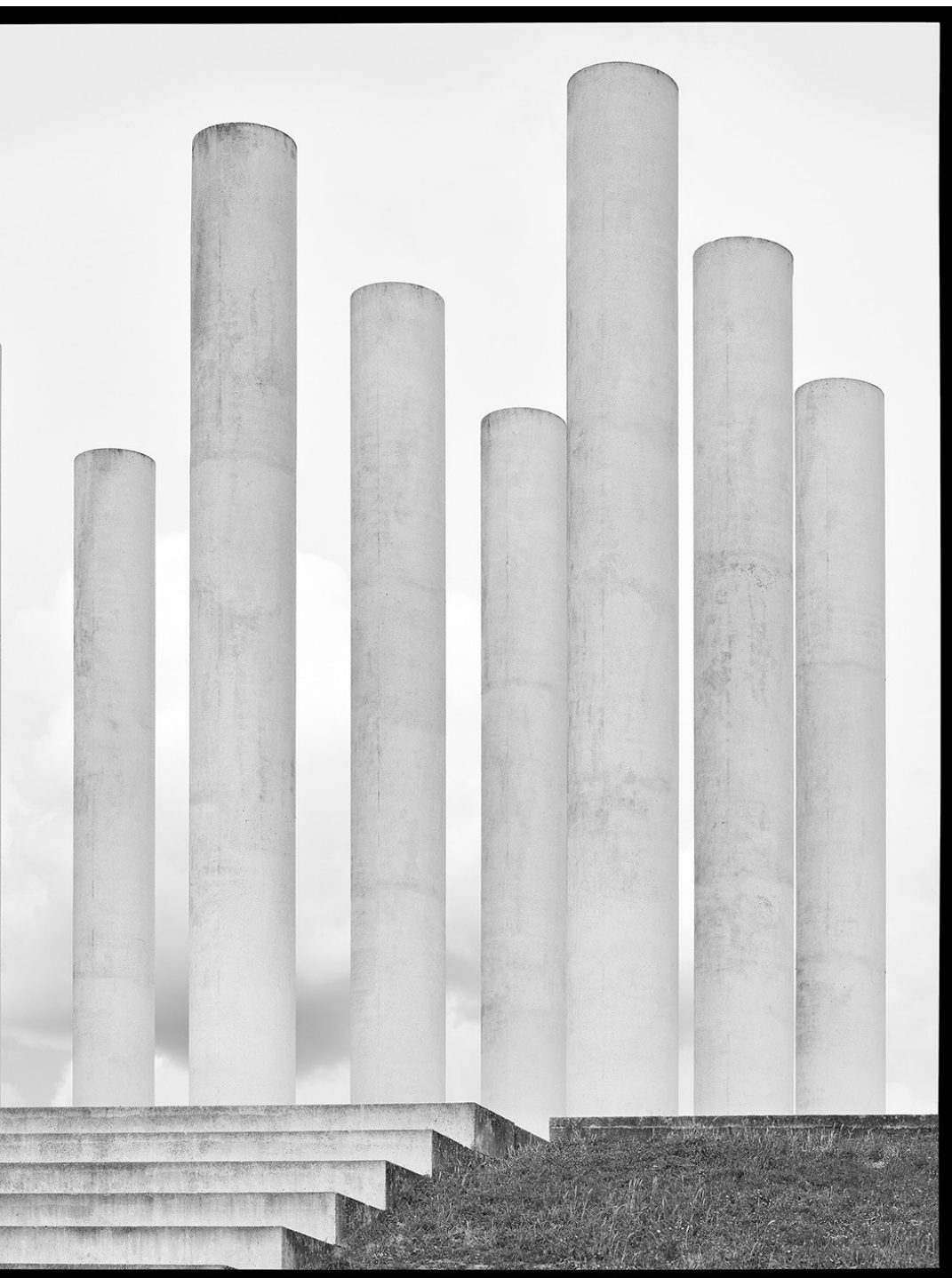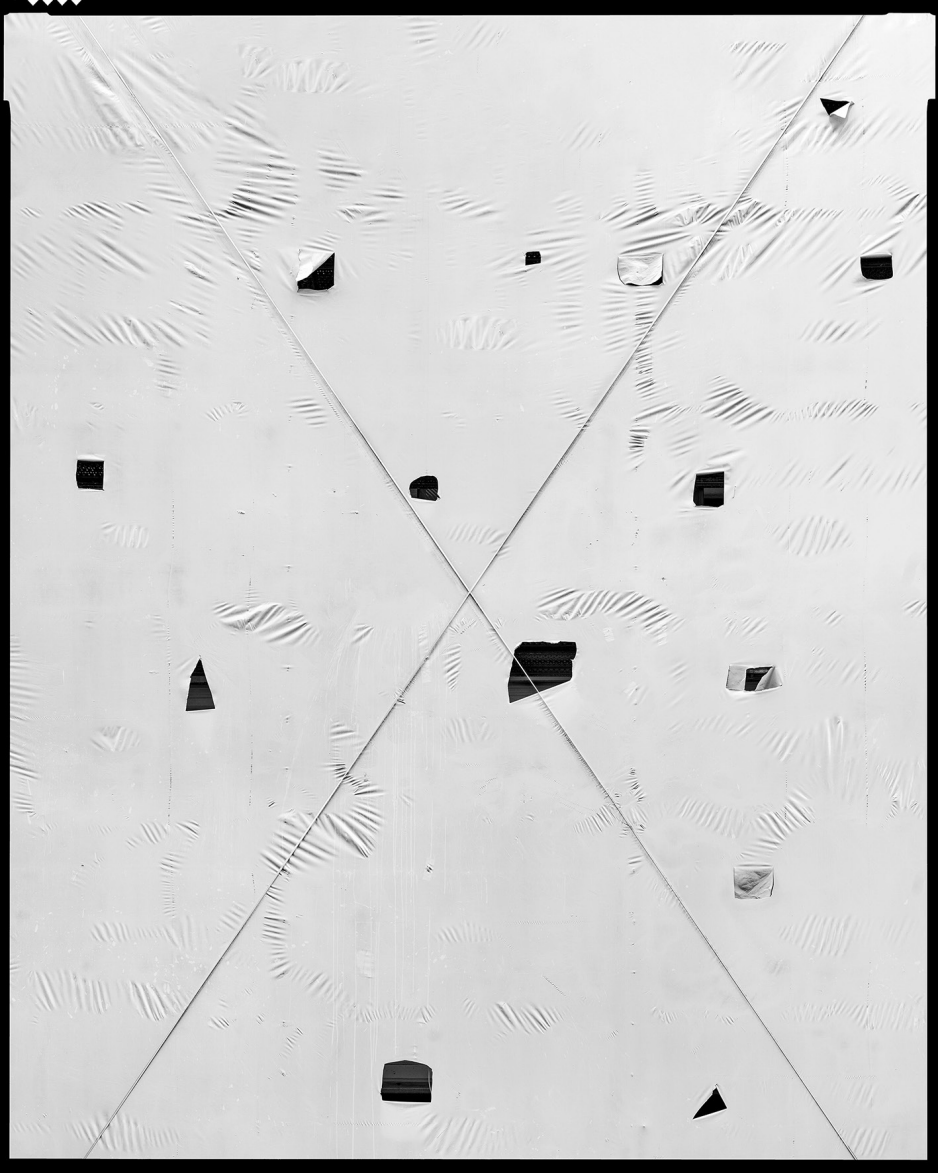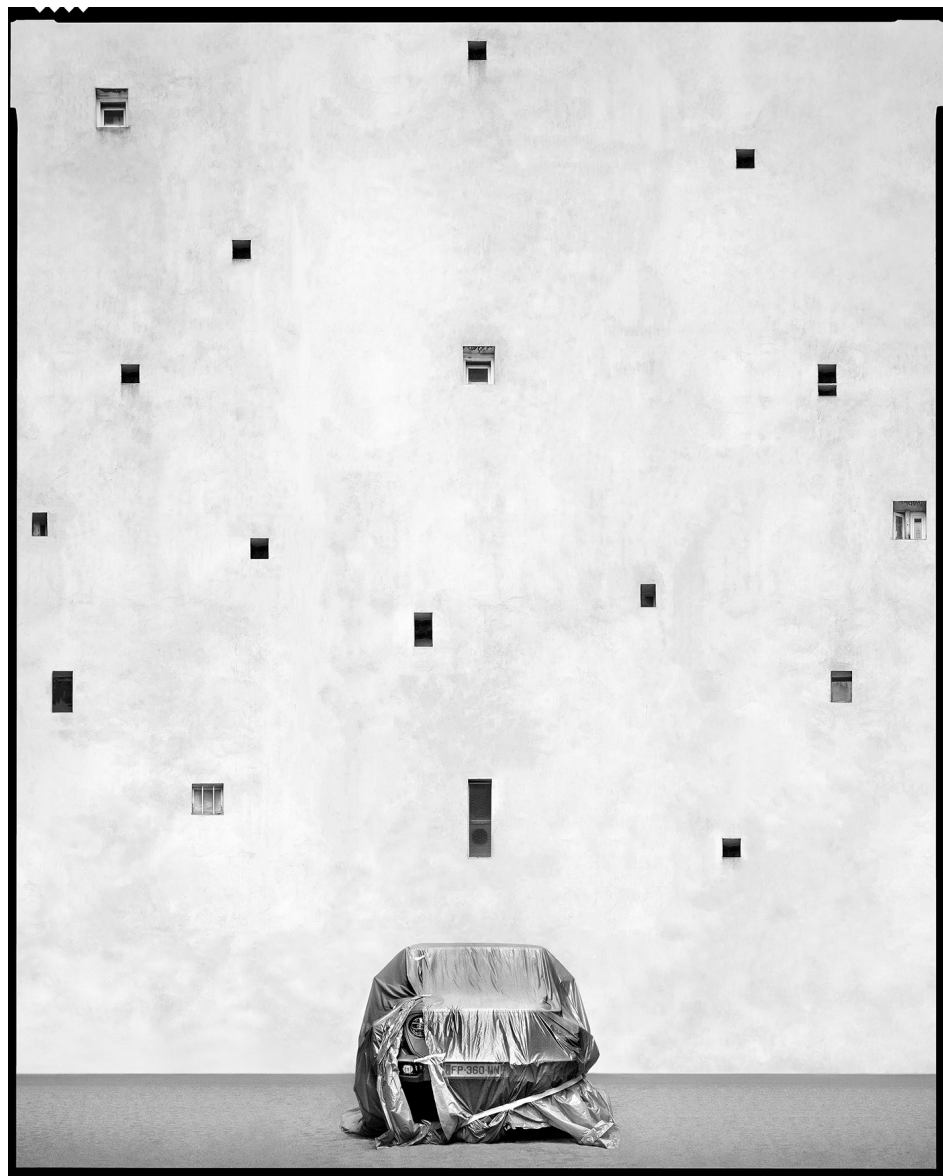
Pino Musi, nato nel 1958, é fotografo e artista visivo con base a Parigi. Ha iniziato la sua pratica all'età di 14 anni apprendendo, da autodidatta, la tecnica del bianco e nero. Il fascino per la camera oscura e la costante frequentazione del teatro d'avanguardia, almeno fino alla fine degli anni ottanta, hanno segnato la sua sperimentazione sia sul piano linguistico che su quello concettuale. Il suo lavoro ha intersecato molteplici aree d'interesse come I'antropologia, l'architettura, l'archeologia o, ancora, l'industria. La sua attuale ricerca sulla forma fa parte di un progetto coerente e trova il miglior mezzo espressivo attraverso l'arte del bookmaking, in particolare nella creazione di volumi d'artista. Sono stati pubblicati finora ventisette libri con sue opere. Dal 2011 al 2017 ha insegnato presso il Master di Alta Formazione sull'Immagine Contemporanea della Fondazione Fotografia di Modena. Le opere fotografiche di Pino Musi sono presenti in collezioni private e pubbliche, tra cui la Fondazione Rolla, la Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, la Fondazione Modena Arti Visive, la Fondazione di Sardegna, il Frac Bretagne, la Fondazione MAST di Bologna, la Art Vontobel di Zurigo, il Canadian Centre for Architecture di Montréal.

Surrealism and Walter Benjamin

Aisthesis

The Crisis of Painting: Benjamin, Aragon, and the Challenge of Photography[*]

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Abstract. This essay explores Walter Benjamin's engagement with Louis Aragon's intellectual activity throughout the 1930s, with a particular focus on his 1936 essay *Pariser Brief [II]. Malerei und Photographie*. It examines Benjamin's commentaries on Aragon's writings within the context of the aesthetic debates surrounding Socialist Realism after the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. The essay is structured in four sections. First, it discusses the decline in painting's social and political function and how Aragon and Benjamin interpreted Gisèle Freund's sociological analysis of the evolution of photography as an art form. The second section traces the development of collage, from Cubism to Dadaism and Surrealism, as discussed by Aragon. The third section focuses on Aragon and Benjamin's observations on John Heartfield's antifacist photomontages. Finally, the essay analyzes Benjamin's interest in Antoine Wiertz's views on painting and photography, the response of Argentine artist Antonio Berni to Aragon's survey *Où va la peinture?*, and the influence of photographic techniques on Latin American muralism, particularly in the work of Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros, who viewed painting as an instrument of revolutionary agitation and propaganda.

[*]   This essay was translated from Italian by Rafael Abuchedid and subsequently revised by the author.

The role of *Le paysan de Paris* (1926) in the genesis of the *Passagenarbeit* has been analyzed from various perspectives. Walter Benjamin's praise of a previous text by Louis Aragon, *Une vague de rêves* (1924), has also been considered, though to a lesser extent. Benjamin commented on this opuscule in *Traumkitsch* (1927), in some notes of *Pariser Passagen I* written between June 1927 and December 1929, and in *Zum gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers* (1934). However, despite their prominent role in some texts on modern art written during his years of Parisian exile, Benjamin's affinity with Aragon's aesthetic ideas after the latter's rupture with Surrealism and alignment with the Parti communiste français (PCF) has been rarely assessed to this day, even if mentioned in Benjamin studies.

The study of said intellectual affinity faces some unfortunately insurmountable obstacles. The documents that attest to a personal link between Benjamin and Aragon in Paris are, in fact, scarce. Their relationship precedes Benjamin's exile and could date back to his third visit to the French capital, between April and July 1927. During this stay, Benjamin met Aragon and first read *Le paysan de Paris*, of which he translated four fragments later published in the weekly "Die literarische Welt" in June 1928 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: Spl. I, 16-33; see Eiland, Jennings [2014]: 335). An allusion in Benjamin's *Pariser Tagebuch*, which appeared two years later in the same magazine, shows that they met during his stay in Paris from December 1929 to February 1930 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: IV, 568; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 1, 337-338). Furthermore, Aragon has a prominent place in the curriculum Benjamin presented around May 1938 when applying for French citizenship. Aragon topped the list of «personalities who supported» his request, followed by the names of André Gide; Jean-Richard Bloch, editor of the Communist daily *Ce Soir*; anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl; bookseller and writer Adrienne Monnier; Jean Paulhan, director of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*; Jules Romains; Paul Valéry; and other notable intellectuals Benjamin had met in France since 1933 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: IV, 25).

My purpose in the following pages is to explore Benjamin's engagement with Aragon's intellectual activity throughout the 1930s, focusing particularly on his *Pariser Brief [II]. Malerei und Photographie*, written in 1936, after the publication of the French version of *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* in the journal of the Institut für Sozialforschung in exile. The research begins with a study of Aragon's various publications – essays, articles, conferences, collections, surveys – commented on by Benjamin in the context of the aesthetic debates within the French Left after the adoption of the Socialist Realism doctrine at the First Congress of Soviet Writers, held in Moscow in August 1934. It is structured in four parts. First, I address the problem of paint-

ing's loss of function and discuss how Aragon and Benjamin interpreted Gisèle Freund's sociological analyses of the evolution of photography as an art form. Second, I briefly reconstruct the stages in the history of collage, from Cubism to Dadaism and Surrealism, as outlined in a previous text by Aragon mentioned by Benjamin. The third section is dedicated to their observations on John Heartfield's political photomontages. Finally, I examine Benjamin's interest in Antoine Wiertz's ideas about painting and photography, the response of Argentine painter Antonio Berni to Aragon's survey *Où va la peinture?*, organized by Aragon for the magazine "Commune" in 1935, and the influence of photographic techniques on Latin American muralism through Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros' theory of painting as an instrument of revolutionary agitation and propaganda.

Painting and its social function

In the spring of 1936, Benjamin was involved in several projects. During a visit to Bertolt Brecht in Skovsbostrand, Denmark, he had just completed *Pariser Brief [I]. André Gide und sein neuer Gegner*, which he defined as «an essay on the fascist theory of art» (Benjamin [1995-2000]: V, 507). He then planned to publish, in "Das Wort" – the literary journal of German exiles in Moscow, to which Brecht contributed –, a series of similar texts on the Parisian intellectual debates. Additionally, he intended to prepare a revised and expanded German version of *Das Kunstwerk*, of which he already had about «60-70 typed pages» (Benjamin [1995-2000]: V, 284; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 353-359)[1]. Benjamin began working on *Pariser Brief [II]* in San Remo, in September 1936, then continued in Paris throughout October and November, and, after returning to San Remo, sent the final version to Brecht before the end of the year, hoping for a swift publication (Benjamin [1995-2000]: V, 384, 387, 411, 444-445; see also Benjamin [2011]: 580). As Benjamin explained to Alfred Cohn, his intention was to «delve deeper into the current debate on the foundations of painting, developing the prognosis» he had formulated in his essay on the work of art «regarding the loss of usefulness of easel painting» (Benjamin [1995-2000]: V, 411). For apparently editorial reasons, none of the two writings was ever published.

In the first paragraphs of *Pariser Brief [II],* Benjamin examines the volume *L'art et la réalité. L'art et l'État*, published in 1935 by the International Institute

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1   *Pariser Brief [II]* appeared in "Das Wort" 5, November 1936, pp. 86-95 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 482-507; [2011]: 470-485). With certain deletions and changes, a French version of *Das Kunstwerk,* translated by Pierre Klossowski and supervised by Benjamin, had been published some months before in "Zeitschrift *für* Sozialforschung": *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée* 1, 1936, pp. 40-67 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: I, 709-739; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 164-206).

of Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations. This collection, which included contributions by numerous European artists, writers, historians, and art critics (André Lhote, Le Corbusier, Alexandre Cingria, Thomas Mann, Johnny Roosval, Hans Tietze, and Waldemar George, among others), was presented during the congress held in Venice from July 25 to 28, 1934. The event was organized by the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation and the Italian National Commission for Intellectual Cooperation, with the support of the International Art Biennale (VV.AA. [1935]: 7)[2]. Despite the overt fascist demonstrations of some exhibitors, the absence of German painters, and the lack of representation from the Soviet Union, Benjamin gave a relatively positive assessment of this meeting, «which, of course, was an international event», contrasting it with the two days of debates held by the Association des Peintres et Sculpteurs de la Maison de la Culture in Paris on May 16 and 31, 1936. These interventions – recounted in the collective volume *La querelle du réalisme*, which Benjamin cataloged as number 1584 in his list of read texts around the winter of 1936 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: VII, 472) –, concerned the French artistic scene: while the Venice conference, according to Benjamin, presented «considered, thoughtful reflections on the situation of art», not all participants in the debates at the Maison de la Culture «were able to keep the debate entirely free of stereotypes» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 496-497; Benjamin [2011]: 556; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 237)[3].

According to Benjamin, «the interest of the Venice debate lay in the contributions of those who uncompromisingly described the crisis of painting» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 498; Benjamin [2011]: 558-559); Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 238). One such figure was Lhote, a painter and art theorist, and a contributor to the "Nouvelle Revue Française"; another was the Austrian art historian Tietze, a representative of the *Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte*. In their speeches, one should seek «the Archimedean point of the debate» on the crisis, namely, the problem of painting's «usefulness» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: 498; Benjamin [2011]: 558; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 238). Strictly speaking, the issue did not concern the «usefulness [of the image] in relation to painting or the enjoyment of art», nor did it involve «the direct use a work might have through its subject» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 498; Benjamin [2011]: 558-559; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 238). History shows that, since primeval times, painting has fulfilled

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2   The translations of the French texts cited in this paper belong to the author.
3   André Derain, who had initially confirmed his presence at the Maison de la Culture, refused to assist at the last moment and sent a letter wherein he stated that he was «unwilling to discuss or participate, neither closely nor from afar, in such actions», which he considered «at once futile and ill-fated» (VV.AA. [1936]: 9). For the historical-political context of these debates, see Racine (2003: 113-131), as well as the German edition and the French reissue of these documents: Klein (2001) and VV.AA. (1987).

social roles, an extra-artistic function with indirect effects, either by contributing to the understanding of reality or by imposing conventions on visual perception, as was decisively the case in the Renaissance with the invention of perspective. Yet, even if the usefulness of such «achievements in painting» did not imply, as one might argue, an improvement in perception, but only a «more or less expressive reproduction» of reality, they have undoubtedly had an impact «through numerous channels – commercial drawings and advertising images, popular and scientific illustrations – which influence the standard of production and education within society itself» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 498; Benjamin [2011]: 559; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 239).

However, the effect of photography on the crisis of painting and, more generally, on the expansion of the image's social function was not addressed at the Venice congress. In contrast, Aragon compensated for this omission with the meetings at the Maison de la Culture, held at the *Le Matin* cinema in Paris, which included participants such as Jean Lurçat, Marcel Gromaire, Édouard Goerg, Edmond Küss, Fernand Léger, Jean Labasque, Jean Cassou, and André Malraux[4]. Also present were Lhote and Le Corbusier, who had already participated in the Venetian debates. During the first meeting, on May 16, 1936, just a few weeks after the victory of the Front Populaire in the French national elections, Aragon proposed a hypothesis with significant implications for the formulation of a revolutionary art policy: «to found ideas about the history of painting on the history of photography» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 499; Benjamin [2011]: 560; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 239). Indeed, in a passage from his speech reproduced in *La querelle du réalisme*, we read:

> I also thought that, to study what is happening in the field of painting, it would be necessary to consider the evolution of photography, so that we might shed some light on it. There is still too often a tendency to believe that painting issues can be explained by themselves, and by themselves only, that painting constitutes a closed world, incomprehensible even to those who are not painters. […] As for me, I cannot believe that painting can evolve in contradiction with the other creative activities of man, or that, for example, instead of contributing to the expansion of human knowledge, it can tend to regress toward forms of pure, simple magical enchantment. (VV.AA. [1936]: 57-58)

According to the chronicle published by Aragon in "Commune" – the official journal of the Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires (AEAR), of which he and Paul Nizan were editors-in-chief[5] –, many painters in attendance

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4   André Malraux did not provide for publication in *La querelle du réalisme* the speech he improvised during these journeys. See Aragon's explanation in his account of the meeting (Aragon [1936]: 21).

5   The editorial board included Henri Barbusse, André Gide, Romain Rolland, and Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier.

were affronted by the attempt to «found ideas about the history of painting on the history of photography». They particularly resented that the proposal should come from a writer deemed to have no right to speak about painting. «Imagine a physicist being offended because someone talks to him about chemistry»: thus translates Benjamin the analogy used by Aragon to evince both the proximity and the distance between the two art forms (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 500; Benjamin [2011]: 560; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 238; Aragon [1936]: 23).

The history of photography had begun to be written only a decade earlier. In this short period, several works had been published about its early days and first masters. Among these were the writings of Helmuth Theodor Bossert and Heinrich Guttman, Camille Recht, and Heinrich Schwarz, along with the works of pioneers such as André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri and Nadar, all of them very important for Benjamin and his *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie* (1931). However, it was only with his friend Gisèle Freund's recent doctoral thesis, *La photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle* (1936), that the history of photography was addressed «in conjunction with the history of painting» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 500; Benjamin [2011]: 560; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 239). Benjamin, who had supervised her thesis defense at the Sorbonne, recognized in this work the «highly original perspectives» that emerged from applying the method of «dialectical materialism» to this field of study (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 500; Benjamin [2011]: 560; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 239)[6].

In his first intervention in the Paris debates, Aragon states that Freund's book is «eventful in its contribution to the history of art» and acknowledges that he based his presentation «in more than one aspect» on her text (VV.AA. [1936]: 58-59). The circulation of ideas should be highlighted: Benjamin, who comments on Aragon's speech, is explicitly cited by Freund in a footnote to the third chapter of *La photographie en France*, dedicated to the first photographers (Freund [1936]: 48). Benjamin notes that Freund «describes the rise of photography in tandem with the rise of the bourgeoisie; the connection is exemplified in a particularly successful way by the history of the portrait» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 500-501; Benjamin [2011]: 560-561; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 239). «The book's method is based on dialectical materialism», he would write in the review published in 1938, in issue 7 of the "Zeitschrift

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6   Benjamin met Freund (and Klossowski) at Franz Hessel's house (Eiland, Jennings [2014]: 260). Freund had begun her doctoral thesis under the supervision of Karl Mannheim at the University of Frankfurt. During her exile in Paris, since 1933, Charles Lalo, professor of aesthetics at the Sorbonne, became her supervisor. In July 1941, after spending almost a year underground in Saint-Sozy, Dordogne, to avoid the Gestapo's lists, Freund emigrated to Buenos Aires, invited by the Argentine writer, translator, and patron Victoria Ocampo, director of "Sur" magazine. Her portraits of Benjamin and Aragon date from 1938-1939. For more details on her career as a photographer and her personal life, see Freund (1970) and (1977).

für Sozialforschung" (Benjamin [1972-1986]: III, 543; Benjamin [2011]: 794; Benjamin [1996-2003]: IV, 121). After describing the various procedures which, around 1780, sixty years before the invention of photography, accelerated its creation, making it cheaper and more widespread, Freund showed how through photography «technical development in art converged with the general technical standard of society» and the portrait became accessible to broader sectors of the bourgeoisie (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 501; Benjamin [2011]: 562; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 239).

Furthermore, Freund touches on the core of the mid-19th century dispute between painting and photography, when she argues that «photography's claim to be an art was contemporaneous with its emergence as a commodity» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 501; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 240). In the paragraph referenced by Benjamin, Freund quotes *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie* to argue that, at the beginning of its development, photography enjoyed an artistic recognition that became significantly diminished with its industrialization. Nevertheless, these early photographers had no artistic pretensions; they worked for themselves, and their works were known only within a small circle of friends: «This artistic claim was manifested by photography merchants, because as the quality of their work diminished and lost all artistic character, they hoped that, by labeling their goods as art, they could better attract the public» (Freund [1936]: 49). Benjamin, after translating this observation elliptically into German, comments:

> This circumstance is not without its dialectical irony: the very procedure which was later to call into question the concept of the artwork itself, by accentuating its commodity character through reproduction, claimed to be artistic. (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 501-502; Benjamin [2011]: 562; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 240)

The next phase in the history of photography, according to Benjamin, began with André Disdéri. He not only understood that photography was another commodity in capitalist society; he was also the first to use photographic techniques to circulate objects – primarily, works of art – that had previously remained relatively outside the market, securing a state monopoly on reproductions from the Louvre Museum. The subsequent evolution of photography, which exceeds the chronological framework in Freund's book, concerns the time when photography began its triumphant progress under the monarchy of Louis-Philippe: «It is the epoch of the *juste milieu*» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 502; Benjamin [2011]: 563; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 240). The artists of this school were towed along by photography, which came to realize their pictorial ideal. Their adversary was Gustave Courbet, creator of *La Vague* (1869), a painting in which the relationship between painter and photographer is temporarily reversed. This painting represented, in fact, a «photographic subject

discovered through painting». With this work, which anticipated «an expedition to explore a world of forms and structures which were not captured on the photographic plate until a decade later», Courbet distinguished himself as «the last who could attempt to surpass photography» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 503; Benjamin [2011]: 564; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241). Later painters, especially the Impressionists, avoided a direct confrontation with photography. The painted image emancipated itself from drawing, found refuge in color, and, in a way, managed to avoid competing with the camera, as evidenced by the fact that, at the turn of the century, even pictorial photography sought to imitate Impressionism.

However, the complete rejection of photography was far from being a solution for the post-Impressionist and Cubist painters, suggests Benjamin. He then translates some parts of Aragon's provocative reflection during the first Parisian meeting:

> Painters, confronted with photography, have adopted different attitudes. Initially, contempt, followed by imitation and then panic. They saw the camera as a competitor. They regarded it as 19th-century workers regarded machines. They blamed it for their perils. They tried not to do things the way it did. That was their great idea. But to refuse in this way to recognize an important achievement of mankind, a tool capable of expanding the field of knowledge, naturally pushed them toward the denial of knowledge, in other words, toward a reactionary behavior. Painters, even the most gifted of them, and in proportion to their talent, became true ignoramuses. They wanted their painting to represent, to signify less and less. They became lost in the ecstasy of technique, of matter. They drifted into abstraction. In their works, nothing human remained. They contented themselves with showcasing the technical problems of painting. They ceased to paint for men and painted for none other than painters. Moreover, and I am speaking here of the best, the financial means of the speculator granted the great masters of painting, in the times we had reached, a relatively comfortable living, driving them every day further in this direction. They lost sight of life because, like big children, they lived off their wealthy parents, the art dealers. (VV.AA. [1936]: 64; Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 503-504; Benjamin [2011]: 564-565; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241)

From Dadaist collage to political photomontage

Aragon, as Benjamin recalls in the final part of *Pariser Brief [II]*, first addressed the problem of the crisis of painting in 1930, in an essay entitled *La peinture au défi* (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 504; Benjamin [2011]: 565; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241). In his Paris speech, the French writer himself mentioned it as a text which, though not equally valid today in every aspect, is still very coherent overall with his thesis that «painting, at a certain time, was faced with a challenge: the challenge of photography» (VV.AA. [1936]: 57). From Aragon's perspective, this rivalry unfolded in three phases: modern painters proposed to

abandon «the path of imitating nature, the prime form of realism», invoking «the uselessness of competing with the camera», after photography had stimulated, at some point, «the realism of a Courbet, for example»; then came a period that went from Naturalism to Impressionism, in which painting sought to depict things even more realistically than photography, capturing what drawing and black-and-white images could not; finally, Cubist painters like Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso no longer desired to «imitate nature but to compete with it» (VV.AA. [1936]: 57).

La peinture au défi is Aragon's preface for the catalog of a March 1930 collage exhibition at the Goemans Gallery, which featured Braque, Picasso, Jean Arp, Salvador Dalí, André Derain, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, El Lissitzky, René Magritte, Man Ray, Francis Picabia, Alexander Rodchenko, Yves Tanguy, and Joan Miró. Aragon's essay, published as a brochure by the José Corti publishing house, opens with a meditation on the history of the marvelous as a proto-phenomenon of Surrealism. The marvelous arises not only «from the rejection of a reality» but also from the discovery and development of «a new reality set free by such rejection»: the relationship that stems from the rejection of reality in favor of the marvelous «is essentially ethical in nature, and the marvelous is always the materialization of a moral symbol violently opposed to the morality of the world in which it emerges» (Aragon [1993]: 32). The Greeks and Romans, who did not suffer the moral repression imposed by Christianity, knew the marvelous only in the form of the exceptional: incomparable beauty, unique strength, incest, metamorphoses, the apparition of monsters, chimeras, and other supernatural beings that animated life. When man's instincts were condemned to Hell by the Inquisition, everything that lost the right of self-expression became part of another world, the supernatural, a great enchanted forest inhabited by elves, fairies, witches, and giants: «The entire human imagination took refuge in that legendary land, inaccessible to anything that pertained to everyday life» (Ibid.: 33).

In the 20th century, «traversed by contradictory currents», there is a persistent battle for the liberation of fantasy: on one side, the heirs of Romanticism, who still dream of that «land of escape» with its cathedrals and legends; on the other, Surrealism, representing the «modern marvelous», born from the «great reaction after the French Revolution», whose highest expression is found «within the boundaries of an oeuvre and a life, in the Rimbaldian marvelous (Aragon [1934]: 34). Rimbaud's escape into something absolutely new «summarizes and negates what came before», echoing the voice of Sade, who «desired the triumph of crime (*It immortalizes me, it must be made to reign in the world*) and of the Devil (*a being more powerful than that wretch, God*)» (Aragon [1993]: 33, italics in the original)[7]. The true initiator was Lautréamont, who wrote in *Les chants*

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7   Aragon cites the edition by Guillaume Apollinaire (see Sade [1909]: 9, 164).

de Maldoror (1868): «Beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella» (Ibid.[8]. Since the modern marvelous, «that offensive return of the devil», is no longer «the privilege of a far-removed, fairy-tale world», but of this earthly one, it «animates what surrounds us, sits next to us in the bar, politely asking us to pass the sugar» (Ibid.: 34-35).

The modern marvelous, argues Aragon, is characterized less by surprise than by «an exceptional bewilderment», «an unexpected disorder», «a staggering disproportion» (Ibid.: 37). In this sense, it is the negation of the real, and once accepted, it is put forward as «the reconciliation of the real and the marvelous»: «The new relationship thus established is the surreal, a thousand times defined and always definable in different ways; that real line that connects all the virtual images surrounding us» (Ibid.). According to Aragon, the technique of *papier collé*, developed by the Cubist painters, by Braque and Picasso, was only the first phase in the evolution of collage, «which recalls more the operations of magic than those of painting» and challenges the notions of «personality», «talent», or «artistic property» (Ibid.). From those first collages, two very diverse categories of works emerged: «some in which the pasted element serves as form, or more precisely for the representation of the object, and others where it is incorporated as a material» (Ibid.: 40). These latter works are almost always pictorial, and what is at stake in them is «a problem of color», aiming at «an enrichment» or «a critique of the palette»; the former, on the other hand, anticipate photomontage: using pieces of wood, paper, sand, sandpaper, and mirror fragments as a plastic pretext, the painters who systematically applied this technique were unknowingly moving «from white magic to black magic» and getting in position to deny painting itself (Ibid.: 40-41).

The second phase begins with Dada, or more precisely, with its precursors: Duchamp signs a urinal (1917) or decorates the Mona Lisa with a mustache (1919); Picabia gives the title of *La Sainte Vierge* (1919) to an ink blot. These actions are «logical consequences of the initial gesture of collage» and push the painting process to the extreme of «negating technique» and the artist's personality: «A manufactured object can very well be incorporated into a painting or even constitute the painting itself» (Aragon [1993]: 43). Collage entails «an essential critique of painting from its invention to the present day»; indeed, painting has not always existed; it has gone through periods of splendor and decline, and, being historically determined, «it has an end just like any other concept» (Ibid.: 44). Although it would be too optimistic to believe that someday people will no longer paint, it is possible to hypothesize that painting, «with the whole set of superstitions it involves», such as originality, uniqueness, the treatment

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8   The source, in this case, is likely the edition of Isidore Ducasse's complete works by Philippe
     Soupault (Lautréamont [1927]: 306).

of eternal and universal themes, its functional autonomy, and its role in shaping good taste, «will soon be considered a boring pastime reserved for girls and old provincials, much like versification today and novel writing tomorrow» (Ibid.). This assertion is not a prophecy, but merely a reflection on the development of the arts. Poets «have understood that the word "literature"» can now only be used in a pejorative sense; painters, on the other hand, are not yet fully aware of this transformation, and despite their discoveries, they are still attached to this practice, ready to return to the «old religion» like Giorgio de Chirico, even if their works pictorially imitate «the effect of collages» or are «the reproduction of discoveries made with scissors and glue» (Ibid.: 45-46).

Aragon argues that Isidore Ducasse's dictum in *Poésies II* – «Poetry must be made by everyone. Not by one» – can also apply to painting. All that seemed a prank in avant-garde productions should be seen as «the prophetic expression of an upheaval», of which contemporary artists are the «blind workers»: «*Art has truly ceased to be individual*» (Ibid., italics in the original)[9]. Whether it was invented in Germany or Switzerland around 1914-1915, modern collage «restores the authentic meaning of the old painting process, preventing the painter from falling into narcissism, into art for art's sake, bringing them back to the magical practices that originate and justify plastic representations, defended by many religions» (Ibid.: 48). Bourgeois society has condemned painters to a state of servitude similar to that which they had been reduced to in 16th-century Venice, but with one difference: today's patrons no longer commission portraits or compositions that exalt their war exploits, but works that match their furniture, that decorate the walls of bourgeois apartments:

> Painting has long been leading a comfortable life; it flatters the cultured connoisseur who pays for it. It is a luxury article. The painting is a jewel. Still, artists can be seen emancipating themselves from domestication by money. Collage is poor. And its value will go unrecognized for a long time to come. It is considered to be reproducible at will. Everyone believes they can do it the same way. (Ibid.: 48-49)

When quoting this passage in *Pariser Brief [II]*, Benjamin omits the last two sentences, perhaps because they imply a notion of reproducibility that does not fully align with that of *Das Kunstwerk*. His focus was primarily on the «events that led painting, which hitherto had avoided a collision with photography, to confront it head on» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 504; Benjamin [2011]: 565-566; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241). Aragon's text explains how this occurred

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9   The source is presumably the afore mentioned edition Lautréamont (1927): 386. The handwritten booklets of *Poésies I* and *Poésies II*, transcribed by Breton from the copies kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, were first published in 1919 in the magazine "Littérature" 2-3, edited by Aragon, Breton and Soupault, pp. 1-13, 8-24.

in relation to the works of «his Surrealist friends» and outlines some of their procedures, particularly those used by Ernst: «the photographic element; the cut-out image incorporated into a painting or another image; the pure and simple composition of objects rendered incomprehensible by photography» (Aragon [1993]: 52-53)[10]. Benjamin paraphrases this without mentioning Ernst, who occupies a central place in Aragon's argument. Other methods, he adds on his own behalf, include cutting out reproductions, for example, «into the shape of something other than what they represent. (A locomotive can be cut out of a photograph of a rose)», and he argues that «Aragon saw this technique, which has a clear connection to Dadaism, as proof of the revolutionary energy of the new art» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 504; Benjamin [2011]; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241).

In *La peinture au défi*, Aragon states that collage finally found its true language with Surrealism and that, «despite the attempts of many rush-hour Dadaists, homage must be paid to Ernst, at least regarding the two forms of collage that differ the most from the principle of *papier collé*: photographic collage and illustration collage» (Aragon [1993]: 51). The DADA/Max Ernst Exposition, inaugurated in Paris in May 1921, promised «drawings, mechanoplastics, plasto-plastics, picto-pictures, ana-plastics, anatomicals, antizymics, aerographics, antiphonaries, irrigables, and republicans», which aspired to be projected «beyond painting» (Aragon, Breton, Soupault [1921]). It is said that no works by the German artist were sold during the month-long exhibition at the gallery of the publisher Au sans Pareil, but Ernst's collages garnered the unanimous admiration of the members of the magazine *Littérature*. Evoking the incomparable emotion, they experienced when, on the eve of the opening, they first saw Ernst's works recently brought from Cologne, André Breton would later say, in *Genèse et perspective artistiques du surréalisme* (1941), that Surrealism found in them its first objective realization in the field of plastic arts. The «purely virgin» visual organization of these paintings paralleled what Lautréamont and Arthur Rimbaud had sought in poetry: «The external object had detached itself from its common field, its constituent parts had become emancipated in such a way as to maintain completely new relationships with other elements, escaping the principle of reality but not thereby having any less consequence on the real plane» (Breton [1979]: 91).

Ernst's first exhibition in Paris raised awareness of «the resources and the thousand means of an entirely new art» (Aragon [1993]: 52). Painting as it had been known no longer seemed valid before a technique used by Cubists, Dadaists, and a proto-Surrealist like Jacques Vaché, who around 1916, in Nantes,

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10   Benjamin translates: «A piece of a photograph was glued into a painting or a drawing or
      something was drawn or painted on a photograph» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 504; Ben-
      jamin [2011]: 565; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241). In a footnote, Aragon marks: «Do not
      forget the written element» (Aragon [1993]: 53).

«made collages with pieces of fabric, on 12-unit postcards he sold for two francs each, depicting scenes of contemporary military life, with very elegant characters, very *Vie parisienne* women» (Ibid.: 47)[11]. Not only Ernst continued to use this technique until *La femme 100 Têtes* (1929) – most painters deemed as Surrealists did as well: Hans Arp, Man Ray, Yves Tanguy, Georges Malkine, André Masson, René Magritte, Picasso himself, Joan Miró, and Salvador Dalí. A paraphrase of Ducasse's previously cited aphorism «explains and determines», according to Aragon, this phenomenon: «The marvelous must be made by everyone, and not by one alone» (Ibid.: 61).

Revolutionary beauty

Benjamin believed that Aragon would have hardly supported this point of view in 1936. In fact, a few years after his first trip to the Soviet Union and the controversial publication of the poem *The Red Front* (1931), Aragon distanced himself from the Surrealist movement. He even disavowed *Le paysan de Paris*, describing it as a book written during a period of his life when he preferred «error to its opposite» (Aragon [1935a]: 807), and he joined the French section of the Communist International. Long past seems his praise of Surrealist collage, which he once described as «a means of expression of unknown force and scope» (Aragon [1993]: 48). The reasons for this change of opinion, however, are not purely political. In a few years, comments Benjamin, «the Surrealists' attempt to master photography by "artistic" means has failed» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 504; Benjamin [2011]: 566; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241).

In this sense, it is interesting to compare Aragon's remarks on Man Ray's work in *La peinture au défi* with his commentary during the first debate at the Maison de la Culture. «Man Ray is engaged in a rather unique challenge», Aragon said in 1930: «imitating photography with painting, and imitating painting with photography, thus going from *Vu* to Renoir» (Aragon [1993]: 59). Six years later, Aragon stated that, from Man Ray's work for the illustrated weekly magazine edited by Lucien Vogel[12] to his more recent photomontages, passing through the black and white rayographs of *Les champs délicieux* (1922) – obtained by directly printing on plates without the use of equipment[13] –, «his photography, with

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11 Aragon alludes to the cultural magazine "La Vie Parisienne", founded in Paris in 1863 by the illustrator and engraver Émile Planat, known under his pseudonym Marcelin.

12 *Vu* featured contributions from Man Ray, André Kertész, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Brassaï, Robert Capa, and Gaston Paris, among other emerging photographers, since 1928.

13 In June 1924, Benjamin translated into German Tristan Tzara's prologue for this photo album, *Man Ray, la photographie à l'envers*, "G-Zeitschrift zur elementare Gestaltung" 3 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: Spl. I, 8-11).

remarkable virtuosity, succeeds in reproducing the *manière* of modern painters», something that in Manet, Seurat, the pointillists, or Picasso «seemed meant, above anything, to challenge the lens, the camera» (Ibid.: 60). According to him, with Man Ray photography «thus becomes a kind of new critique of painting that spares nothing, not even Surrealism»; paradoxically, however, it suffers from the very sterility that had once affected painting: «It is an art» detached from life and «eminently static», «which perfectly captures the relative social equilibrium of the period when the Treaty of Versailles was not yet fully undermined, and where *prosperity* offered the experimenter a relative tranquility, as reflected in the beautiful, flawless female faces without a trace of misery» (Aragon [1936]: 60).

Aragon's reading of Man Ray's trajectory clarifies the paragraph in *Pariser Brief [II]* where Benjamin argues that the Surrealists' mistake was that of «industrial art photographers [*kunstgewerblichen Photographen*]», with their «petit-bourgeois creed», encapsulated in the title *Der Welt ist schön* (1928), the album by Albert Renger-Patzsch, a pioneer of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*: «They failed to recognize the social impact of photography, and therefore the importance of inscription – the fuse guiding the critical spark to the image mass (as is seen best in [John] Heartfield)» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 504-505; Benjamin [2011]: 566; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241). Benjamin had already referred to Renger-Patzsch in *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*, denouncing the sense of a photography that pretends to be artistic but submits to fashion and masks «the reification of human relations» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 384; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 526). To this «creative photography», Benjamin contrasts «constructive photography», of which the Surrealists themselves were precursors. In a subsequent phase, this line was developed by Soviet filmmakers, who produced their great films in a society where photography «sets out not to charm or persuade, but to experiment and instruct» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 384; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 526).

Benjamin observes that Aragon had recently discussed Heartfield's work, taking other opportunities to «point to the critical element in photography» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 505; Benjamin [2011]: 566; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 241-242). In a footnote, he references *John Heartfield et la beauté révolutionnaire*, a lecture given by Aragon during the opening of the Berlin artists' exhibition at the Maison de la Culture, which was published in the May issue of "Commune". This writing, also included in Aragon's book *Pour un réalisme socialiste* (1935) – cited by Benjamin under number 1571 in his list of texts read before his stay in Skovsbostrand, in the spring of 1936 (Benjamin [1972-1989]: VII, 471) –, repeats a phrase four times like a refrain: «John Heartfield *now knows how to greet beauty*» (Aragon [1935b]: 988, 990-991; Aragon [1935c]: 41, 45, 47, italics in the original). The expression comes from the conclusion of *Alchimie du verbe*, the second of the *Délires* in Arthur Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer* (1871): «Cela

s'est passé. Je sais aujourd'hui saluer la beauté (*That's over. Now I know how to greet beauty*)» (Rimbaud [1972]: 112). Applied to Heartfield's photomontages, this expression means that the artist no longer plays with appearances like the avant-garde artists who, «in their critique of painting», tended to use photography for «new poetic purposes», diverting it «from its imitative meaning for expressive uses» (Aragon [1935c]: 987, 990). Heartfield no longer disfigures beauty; «he knows how to create images that represent the very beauty of our time, because they are the cry of the masses […] His art is an art that follows Lenin, because it is a weapon in the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat» (Ibid.: 990).

The photomontages Aragon refers to are some of those created by Heartfield for "Die Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung" (AIZ) after Hitler's rise to power in 1933[14]. In *Der Autor als Produzent*, a lecture delivered by Benjamin at the Institut pour l'Étude du Fascisme (INFA) in Paris, on April 27, 1934, he referred to these works as a development of what he had already found in germ in Dada: «The revolutionary strength of Dadaism consisted in testing art for its authenticity. A still life might have been put together from tickets, spools of cotton, and cigarette butts, all of which were combined with painted elements. The whole thing was put in a frame. And thereby the public was shown» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 692; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 774).

In this way, the goal was to assert temporality, the historical sign, over eternity, material reality over artistic transfiguration: «the tiniest authentic fragment of daily life» is more eloquent than painting, just as «the bloody fingerprint of a murderer on the page of a book» is more revealing than the text itself: «Much of this revolutionary content has gone into photomontage. You need only think of the work of John Heartfield, whose technique made the book cover into a political instrument» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 692-693; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 774-775). The «revolutionary use value» that Heartfield gives to the captions on his photographs thus stands in stark contrast to the aestheticization inherent in the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, whose landscapes of factories, abandoned lands, railway tracks, and quarries turn «even abject poverty into an object of enjoyment», representing it in a refined, perfectly fashionable way (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 693; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 775).

In the concluding pages of *Der Autor als Produzent*, Benjamin praises two statements by Aragon, formulated in different contexts but both aimed at clarifying the commitment that artists and writers should take toward the proletariat's revolutionary struggle. In the penultimate paragraph, he extensively translates the gloss of René Maublanc's response to the inquiry *Pour qui écrivez-vous?*,

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14   Founded by Willi Münzenberg, the "AIZ" was published weekly in Berlin from 1921 to 1933, and subsequently in exile in Prague until 1938. For Heartfield's photomontages against National Socialism, see Willett (1997: 111-163).

published in "Commune" in January 1934. In this note, Aragon praises the attitude of Soviet writers «who came from the Russian bourgeoisie and nevertheless became pioneers in the building of socialism» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 700; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 780; VV.AA. [1934]: 581).

Complementarily, in the final paragraph, Benjamin paraphrases a reflection by Aragon on communist intellectuals, taken from the article *Le Surréalisme et le devenir révolutionnaire*, published in the magazine "Le Surréalisme au service de la revolution" in December 1931, before his break with Breton: «It is not that we deny our bourgeois origin, but the dialectical movement of our development has already placed us in opposition to this very origin. This is what properly constitutes the position of revolutionary writers, who, though bourgeois in origin, essentially present themselves as *traitors to their class of origin*» (Aragon [1931]: 6, italics in the original). Presumably citing from memory, Benjamin writes: «The revolutionary intellectual appears first and foremost as the betrayer of his class of origin» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 701; Benjamin [1996-2003]: II, 780).

The main objectives of the INFA, the venue for the lecture *Der Autor als Produzent*, were the organization of an archive and the development of research aimed at identifying, documenting, and analyzing both established and emerging forms of fascism. The institute was sponsored by prestigious European figures from the scientific, legal, literary, and artistic fields – among them Lévy-Brül, André Malraux, Victor Marguerite, Edgard Milhaud, Vincent de Moro-Giaffari, Jean Painlevé, Carlo Rosselli, Frans Masereel, and Paul Signac. Initially, it meant bringing together leftist intellectuals, both communists and non-communists (socialists, radicals, and even anarchists), in the spirit of the Front Commun contre le Fascisme (FC), founded in 1933 (see Kambas [1983]: 26). Benjamin seems to have established contacts with some INFA members during the first year of his exile in France, after reading, in the March 1934 issue of the magazine "Die Sammlung", a call in support of the institute's creation, written by another former Surrealist, Philippe Soupault. Among the supporters was Dr. Jean Dalsace, a member of the Parti Communiste Français and promoter of the international committee for the liberation of the German marxist leader Ernst Thälmann and other political prisoners of Hitlerism. Dalsace is known to have organized literary gatherings at his *Maison de Verre* – designed by Pierre Chareau – on Rue Saint-Guillaume, which were attended by Aragon, Paul Éluard, Jean Cocteau, Tanguy, Joan Miró, and Max Jacob (see Maria Gough [2002]: 55). Benjamin, in his correspondence with Gershom Scholem, Bertolt Brecht, and Gretel Adorno, refers to the preparation of a complete series of lectures in French, to be held at Dalsace's house, focused on the «German avant-garde» and including «the novel (Kafka)», «the essay (Bloch)», «the theater (Brecht)», and «journalism (Kraus)» (Benjamin [1995-2000]: 357, 362, 367).

Socialist Realism and Latin American Muralism

The volume *La querelle du réalisme*, which contained the debates held at the Maison de la Culture, included an appendix with a survey curated by Aragon in collaboration with Cassou and René Crével, who had just broken with André Breton and joined the AEAR. It was originally published in the May and June 1935 issues of "Commune", with the title *Où va la peinture?* (Aragon et al. [1935]: 937-960, 1118-1134; VV.AA. [1936]: 158-201). Included alongside a piece by Léon Moussinac, *Les peintres devant le "sujet"*, and excerpts from a lecture by Crevel, *Discours aux peintres* (delivered at the Maison de la Culture on May 9, 1935), the survey collected responses from renowned modern painters such as Amédée Ozenfant, Léger, Marie Laurencin, Ernst, Lhote, Tanguy, Robert Delaunay, and Alberto Giacometti (who sent a drawing), along with definitions by three old masters of 19th-century French Realism: Honoré Daumier, Horace Vernet, and Gustave Courbet. Benjamin refers to this appendix in a footnote, without specifying it; there he alludes to a «malicious assertion» by Derain: «The great danger for art is an excess of culture. The true artist is an uncultured person» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 504; Benjamin [2011]: 565; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 247; Aragon et al. [1935]: 21, 942; VV.AA. [1936]: 163). Identifying this source is important for yet another text, not mentioned by Benjamin, that traces a history of technical reproducibility from a Marxist perspective, and which acquires particular significance in relation to *Das Kunstwerk*. This text is the contribution of a young Argentine artist, Antonio Berni, still unknown in those years but destined to become a prominent figure in Latin American avant-garde circles[15].

Born in the city of Rosario in 1907, Berni had studied painting in Paris and joined Surrealism after attending Giorgio de Chirico's retrospective, inaugurated at the Galerie Surréaliste in February 1928, whose catalog included a *Préface-Pamphlet* by the author of *Le Paysan de Paris* (Aragon [1981]: 20-22). A friend of Henri Lefebvre, from whom he had acquired a humanist vision of Marxism, Berni had been affiliated with the Communist Party and, by the early 1930s, experienced a shift toward what he defined as a «New Realism» in line with the Socialist Realism promoted in France by Aragon, while maintaining an originality irreducible to it (see Berni [1999]: 74-95; Viñals [1976]: 49-50). In his contribution to the survey *Où va la peinture*?, Berni mentioned his participation in the mural project *Ejercicio plástico* (1933) by the Mexican David Alfaro

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15   We have pointed out the relevance of Berni's response for the first time in Ibarlucía (2020): 266-268. The compilation also featured texts by Christian Bérard, Jean-Louis Garcin, Jean Carlu, Jacques-Émile Blanche, André Marchand, Paul Signac, Frans Masereel, Jean-François Laglenne, Valentine Hugo, Jean Lurçat, Raoul Dufy, Georges-André Klein, Pierre Vérité, Édouard Goerg, René Mendès-France, and Marcel Gromaire.

Siqueiros (Aragon, et al. [1935]: 1132; VV.AA. [1936]: 198). The work was created in the basement of the Los Granados villa, owned by publishing magnate Natalio Botana and located on the outskirts of Buenos Aires[16]. Berni was part of the so-called *Executing Polygraphic Team* alongside Argentine painters Lino Enea Spilimbergo and Juan Carlos Castagnino, and the Uruguayan scenographer Enrique Lázaro (see Berni [1999]: 202-208). In this immersive large-scale fresco, as Berni himself explains in detail in his response, they sought to fully exploit the latest chemical discoveries and technical innovations: the use of mechanical brushes, the application of lacquers and sodium silicate, and the use of photographs and electric projectors (Aragon, et al. [1935]: 1132-1133; VV.AA. [1936]: 198-199).

   Berni's response to the survey *Où va la peinture?* was republished in French more than half a century after its first appearance (VV.AA. [1987]) and remains unpublished in Spanish. If Benjamin had read it, it is surely that Berni's reflections on the historical-social relations between art and technique in the field of graphic arts – presented in the first two paragraphs – would have caught his attention, given their affinity with the theme he would address only a few months later in *Das Kunstwerk*, his new work after *Paris, Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts*, which he started around October 1935 (see Benjamin [1935-1936]: 320-296). Berni writes:

> Every era and every class has had its own technical means of artistic expression in accordance with its feelings, concepts, and dominant ideology.
> In ancient Greece and Rome, painters preferred wax and tempera. In the Middle Ages, feudalism found in fresco painting a formidable means of religious propaganda for the masses. The Renaissance, with oil painting, discovered a new vehicle perfectly suited to the new demands of plastic expression, which became the technique par excellence of bourgeois society. Around the middle of the last century, coinciding with the final stages of the individualist technique of easel painting, a great revolution occurred that changed the landscape of the world of graphic arts. Photography, photoengraving, and the great development of the graphic arts significantly expanded the field of plastic expression. Since then, the traditional elements for aesthetic and documentary work have lost ground to new techniques. (Aragon, et al. [1935]: 1132; VV.AA. [1936]: 197)

   It is certainly plausible that Benjamin, a regular reader of "Commune", had access to Berni's text before its inclusion in the appendix of *La querelle du réalisme* toward the end of 1936. He may have read it directly in the pages of the magazine, where it was published in June 1935, in the next issue in which

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16   Restored by a team of Mexican and Argentine specialists from the National Institute of Fine Arts and the Tarea-Center of the current School of Art and Heritage at the National University of San Martín, the mural has been housed since December 2010 at the Museum of the Bicentennial of the Casa Rosada, Argentina. On the restoration work, see Barrio and Wechsler (2014).

Aragon's lecture on Heartfield, mentioned in *Pariser Passagen II*, was reproduced. In any case, the relevant point here is not to suggest a presumed dependency, but rather to highlight the convergence of both approaches, namely, the shared concerns about technical transformations in the field of visual arts in general. Following a Marxist historical framework akin to Berni's, Benjamin presents two complementary theses in *Das Kunstwerk*. The first, present both in the first provisional version of the essay (presumably from September 1935) and in its three subsequent drafts (including the French translation published in the "Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung" in 1936), contrasts the perfection of classical art with the «capacity for improvement [*Verbesserungsfähigkeit*]» of the «assembled artwork» to demonstrate that aesthetic value is based on the material conditions of production and the degree of technical development achieved in a given era: «*The state of their technology*», writes Benjamin, «*compelled the Greeks to produce eternal values in their art*» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: I, 446-447, 719 and VII, 361-362; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 31-32, 65-66, 111-112, 176; Benjamin [1996-2003]: 108-109)[17]. Since they «had only two ways of technologically reproducing works of art: casting and stamping», coins and terracotta figures were the only works that could be technically reproduced; all others had to be created as unique, unrepeatable pieces (Benjamin [1972-1989]: I, 446, 719 and VII, 361; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 31, 65, 111, 176; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 108).

On the other hand, in the first section, originally titled *Technische Reproduzierbarkeit*, the text of which is preserved with minor variations in the fifth and final draft of the essay, Benjamin argues that graphic art became reproducible in the Middle Ages, with the introduction of wood engraving. This technique was later complemented by copper engraving and etching. At the beginning of the 19th century, with the advent of lithography, the technical reproducibility of art reached «a fundamentally new stage» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: I, 436, 474, 709 and VII, 351; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 54, 97, 164, 209; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 102). Lithography allowed images to reach a mass market for the first time and, with the development of the illustrated newspaper, to keep pace with print. Yet, a few decades after its invention, lithography was surpassed by photography: «For the first time, photography freed the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial reproduction – tasks that now devolved upon the eye alone» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: I, 436, 474, 709 and VII, 351; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 54, 97, 164, 209; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 102). With the advent of cinematic art, entirely determined by technical reproducibility, aesthetic value stands in direct opposition to that consecrated by Greek art. Capacity

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17   This sentence is not underlined in the first version. The French translation published in May 1936 has a slightly different formulation.

for improvement, which in Antiquity would have been the least essential artistic quality, has now become decisive. Film, in fact, constitutes «*the artwork most capable of improvement*», and this capability is directly «*linked to its radical renunciation of eternal value*»; it is no coincidence that «the decline of sculpture», whose canonical creations are «all of a piece», seems inevitable in the era of the «assembled artwork» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: I, 436, 474, 709 and VII, 351; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 34, 66, 112, 176; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 109).

The comparison between Berni's response to the *Où va la peinture?* survey and this passage from *Das Kunstwerk* is not meant to suggest that Benjamin was inspired by the Argentine artist. What it seeks to show is that technical reproducibility was a significant concern among revolutionary artists of the time and, as a result, could only be a central theme in the debates promoted by Aragon through the pages of "Commune", the Maison de la Culture meetings, and other cultural spaces associated with the Front populaire. As we have noted, Aragon's thesis in *La querelle du réalisme* – the need to consider the history of photography as a basis to reflect on painting – piqued Benjamin's interest, as did the thesis on the evolution from Dadaist collage to photomontage and its political use by Heartfield. Aragon's perspective not only aligns with Benjamin's theory of art but is also explicitly based on Freund's study on the social history of portraiture in 19th-century France, which in turn cites Benjamin's *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*. Thus, materialist aesthetics forms a circle: Benjamin comments on Aragon, who is inspired by Freund, who in turn cites Benjamin.

Pariser Brief [II] concludes with two reflections on the political function that painting continues to fulfill. The first is in line with the role Berni attributes to photography in expanding the expressive field of painting. Benjamin translates, with some omissions, an article published by the Belgian painter Antoine Wiertz on the first major photography exhibition, held at the 1855 Paris Exposition, included in his *Oeuvres littéraires* (1870). In a prophetic tone, Wiertz states that daguerreotypy has not come to suppress painting, but to merge with it: «Before a century has passed, this machine will be the paintbrush, the palette, the paints, the skill, the experience, the patience, the keen eye, the touch, the paste, the glaze, the *thread*, the modeling, the finishing, the result» (Wiertz [1870]: 309, italics in the original; Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 505; Benjamin [2011], 567; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 242)[18]. Those familiar with Wiertz's grand paintings, Benjamin comments, know that, for him, the artistic genius is essentially «a political one» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 506; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 567; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 242). The same paragraph is fully translated in *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*, discussed in *Paris, Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts*, and cited in French in *Das Kunstwerk*, along with other excerpts

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18   When citing this passage here, Benjamin omits «the *thread*».

from the edition of Wiertz's writings (Benjamin [1972-1989]: II, 384 and V, 49, 824; Benjamin [1996-2005]: II: 526-527; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 6, 671). Benjamin highlights «the particular importance» of the long caption of the triptych *Pensées et visions d'une tête coupée* (1853) (Benjamin [1972-1989]: V, 1028; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 859; see also Wiertz [1870]: 492-495)and notes what an anonymous contemporary wrote about the tendency of Wiertz's pictorial work:

> If Wiertz had not been confined to the cold walls of an isolated studio but had access to the public monuments of modern civilization – railway stations, legislative chambers, university halls, markets, city halls (he even wanted to try with the theater) – who could say what new, living, dramatic, and picturesque world he would have depicted on the canvas? (Wiertz [1870]: 525-526; Benjamin [1972-1989]: V, 219; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 157)

If, by virtue of his large-format canvases, Wiertz was for Benjamin «the perfecter of the diorama» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: V, 1208; Benjamin [1927-1940]: 901), both from the perspective of exploring technical processes and materials, and from a social standpoint, one could say that his manifest political intentionality foreshadows the great achievements of Mexican muralism. It is uncertain whether Benjamin was familiar with the works of Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, and Diego Rivera, but it is unlikely that he knew, for example, Siqueiros's definitions in the lecture *Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva* given at The John Reed Club of Hollywood in the United States, in September 1932. According to Siqueiros, for the artists of the so-called Block of Mural Painters in Los Angeles, the camera and film, as well as other technical tools, represented «a reservoir of immense value for the very essence of plastic arts and the political painting of revolutionary agitation and propaganda» (Siqueiros [1932]: 1). In particular, «photogenic-borne painting, with precise and infinite reproducibility», was of great importance in achieving a «realistic objective», «pictorial-photographic», or «plastic-truthful» style of «reduced material proportions» and «mechanical execution, with greater circulatory capacity, that is, of the utmost multi-exemplarity» (Siqueiros [1932]: 5-6).

Concerning the European experience, Benjamin believes that the fusion prophesied by Wiertz did not come to pass. Some painters of Heartfield's generation became photographers owing to the political struggle, while others, like Georg Grosz or Otto Dix, demonstrated that painting «has not lost its function» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 506; Benjamin [2011]: 567; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 242). This function is eminently critical and cannot be reduced to what is usually understood as Socialist Realism, as Benjamin states in an earlier formulation of this passage from *Pariser Brief [II]*, preserved in one of the notes for the expanded version of *Das Kunstwerk*, which he had hoped to publish in "Das Wort": «In fact, Socialist *Realism* is not only a matter of subject. It also means, for painting, a realistic assessment of its social circumstance» (Benjamin [1972-

1989]: VII, 821; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 292; italic in the original). In the text finally sent to Moscow, Benjamin avoids explicitly referring to the official artistic doctrine of the Soviet Union and explains what, from his perspective, the role of painting should be in revolutionary struggles and the education of the masses. Painting might perhaps contribute to this task in Western democracies, where «works produced with sovereign freedom have a destructive, purifying effect», but not in fascist states, where social reality should instead provoke an opposite visual inspiration, «as is the case with the great caricaturists» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 506; Benjamin [2011]: 568; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 242).

In these latter countries, painting is alive insofar as it resists fascism. Not all painters are like the former Futurists, who joined the Royal Academy of Italy founded by Benito Mussolini, nor are they willing to collaborate freely with Hitlerism, as Raoul Dufy declared in the inquiry *Où va la peinture?* (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 507 and VII, 821; Benjamin [2011]: 568; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 292-293)[19]. In Germany, some painters (of whom nothing is said in the Venice and Paris debates), are forbidden from painting or exhibiting their works and frequently visited by the police, who come to check whether they have painted anything by night, with draped windows. «For them the temptation to paint "from nature" is slight. And the pallid landscapes of their paintings, populated by phantoms or monsters, are taken not from nature but from the class state» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 507; Benjamin [2011]: 568-569; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 243).These artists follow in the footsteps of Bosch, Hogarth, Goya, and Daumier. Their works present a world suffering from «corruption» and, in doing so, cast an accusation against those responsible; such is the case of so many masterpieces in the history of Western painting according to Crevel, in the lecture included in the appendix of *La querelle du réalisme*: «They know what is useful in the image today: every public or secret mark which demonstrates that within human beings fascism has come up against limits no less insuperable than those it has encountered across the globe» (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 506-507; Benjamin [2011]: 568-569; Benjamin [1996-2003]: III, 243)[20].

19   «If I were German and had to paint the triumph of Hitlerism, I would do it as others who have once handled religious themes without faith» (Aragon, et al. [1935]: 1124; VV.AA. [1936]: 187). Benjamin paraphrases the response in a footnote (Benjamin [1972-1989]: III, 507; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 568).
20   The passage from Crevel's lecture translated by Benjamin reads: «Among the most important works of painting […] have always been those which, merely by pointing to corruption, indicted those responsible. […] From Grünewald to Dalí, from the putrid Christ to the *Stinking Ass*, […] painting has always been able to discover new truths which were not truths of painting alone» (VV.AA. [1936]: 154). Crevel refers to the famous *Crucifixion* (1512-1516) by Mathias Grünewald and *L'Âne pourri* (1928), a Surrealist painting by Salvador Dalí.

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Aisthesis

Dreamlike Objects. Surrealistic Kitsch in Benjamin and Buñuel

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Abstract. Benjamin's reflection on kitsch fits with strong traits of originality into the more overall focus on this category developing in Germany in the first thirty years of the twentieth century. This survey will be summarily divided into three steps. Initially, an analysis of the essay *Traumkitsch* (Dream Kitsch), an inevitable starting point; an analysis that is not textual but aimed at emphasizing certain perspective points and taking into account the observations on kitsch contained in the *Passages*. This part will be followed by the consideration of a possible placement of Benjamin's kitsch within the debate of the time, and finally, the connection with Surrealism will be explored not by relating Benjamin's theses to Breton's canonical texts but rather to some of Buñuel's reflections on the psychology of the inanimate, a dimension that not coincidentally serves as a critical undercurrent in Benjamin's kitsch as well.

Keywords: Dreamlike kitsch, Walter Benjamin, Luis Buñuel, Surrealism, fetishism.

Benjamin's reflection on kitsch, which fits with strong traits of originality into the more overall focus on this category developing in Germany in the first thirty years of the twentieth century, proves being somewhat problematic for a reason that is fairly simple to identify. Benja-

min avoids including the phenomenon of kitsch in those taxonomies of bad taste and pseudo-art that had shaped the debate on this newly emerging category. Disentangling himself from the prevailing hermeneutic, Benjamin places kitsch in an opaque territory of ubiquity, in which he superimposes popular art, mass art, and the avant-garde (in this case, Surrealism). With this seemingly contradictory, if not chaotic operation, Benjamin does not attempt to offer any tout court definition of kitsch – although in the *Passages* we can find a fairly clear – cut one; on the contrary, he draws a process of dialectical assimilation of kitsch within twentieth-century culture and shows its less recognizable implications in that construction of a «critical modernism» (Desideri [2022]: LXI) that runs through his more strictly aesthetic thought.

This survey will be summarily divided into three steps. Initially, an analysis of the essay *Traumkitsch* (*Dream Kitsch*), an inevitable starting point; an analysis that is not textual but aimed at emphasizing certain perspective points and taking into account the observations on kitsch contained in the *Passages*. This part will be followed by the consideration of a possible placement of Benjamin's kitsch within the debate of the time, and finally, the connection with Surrealism will be explored not by relating Benjamin's theses to Breton's canonical texts but rather to some of Buñuel's reflections on the psychology of the inanimate, a dimension that not coincidentally serves as a critical undercurrent in Benjamin's kitsch as well.

Assuming kitsch dialectically – this is Benjamin's decisive move – that means codifying it through a precise comparison with the three expressions of modern artistic *techne*: mass art as technology (and here the proximity to Buñuel would be readable by recalling cinema as an exemplary form of the art-technology nexus); popular art or in an extensive sense an aesthetics of the everyday that permeates the experiences of subjects; the avant-gardes and specifically Surrealism in which the theme of oneiric morphology of psychoanalytic matrix emerges.

The triple relationship between kitsch, technology and mass art is a focus that engages Benjamin in the *Passages*[1]. And, oddly enough, we are offered fairly clear indications. In analyzing Haussmann's urbanistic work, Benjamin states «Haussmann's predilection for perspectives, for long open vistas, represents an attempt to dictate art forms to technology (the technology of city planning). This always results in kitsch» (Benjamin [1999]: 124). We have here an established interpretive leitmotif of kitsch: the art-technology nexus potentially has a problematic, not to say negative, characterization. A mimetic relationship is produced that is capable of originating a mismanaged aesthetics, a formal hybridization that spills over onto the very contents it is intended

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1   For a survey at once comprehensive and analytical of some of the points we are discussing see Montanelli (2022): 153-173.

to bring to expression. In a broad sense Benjamin aligns himself here with the aesthetics of German functionalism, which from the Deutscher Werkbund to the Bauhaus had conducted a bitter polemic precisely against that repeated intrusion of the artistic element into industrial production, an intrusion now identifiable with kitsch. The issue, often obsessive in the great protagonists of the functionalist season (from Muthesius to Behrens, from Loos to Gropius), was to reconsider the very ontology of modern *techne*, seeking to transcend the dichotomy that Western culture had produced between fine and applied arts. The design of an aesthetics of the everyday, of an aesthetics constantly implicated in the social processes of individual and collective life, a theme alluded to repeatedly by Benjamin himself in the *Passages* and which remains one of the decisive features of the modern at least since Baudelaire, is formulated by functionalism in the search for a balance, probably utopian and always to come, between the artistic side (form) and the technical side (function). The disconnection or non-communication of these two poles leads to the mixed and therefore modernly inauthentic poetics of kitsch.

Again, in the *Passages* Benjamin touches on another pivotal, and well-established, point in the polemic on kitsch: its being an expression of the commodification of aesthetic experience, i.e., that fate proper to industrial civilization – and thus a consequence of the art-technology relationship –that is the link between art and consumption. Significantly, the passage is embedded in a broader discussion on cinema, the mass art par excellence, and precisely on the political significance of cinema and is, just as significantly, introduced by a formula, «heart's ease», which enters into that sentimentalist dimension proper to kitsch which, besides being a caricatured drift of romantic sentiment, is also a strategy of immediate consensus, both aesthetic and commercial. The heart, or rather its tyranny – as Kundera would have said – symbolically assigning to it the anthropological genesis of all kinds of kitsch, is what makes art organic to consumption: kitsch in fact is «nothing more than an art with a 100 percent, absolute and instantaneous availability for consumption» (Benjamin [1999]: 395). Benjamin goes on to note the opposition, typically modernist, between kitsch and art. However, he does not neglect the proximity, if not the affinity of these two poles: in fact, both have an organicity to consumption and «something stirring, useful, ultimately heartening» (Benjamin [1999]: 395). Beyond the overlap, which is not only strategically rhetorical, between kitsch and happiness[2], it is worth noting the not obvious

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2   Abraham Moles interpreted kitsch from exactly this perspective: a happiness, that of kitsch, constitutively embedded in the processes of the capitalist consumer ethic. To the *frêle bonheur* of Rousseauian memory, the precarious natural configuration of the feeling of humanity that the modern discovers as the almost ontological root of his own subjectivity, the *art de bonheur*, the formulation of an everyday gratification generated by the consumption of late industrial civilization, responds: «If kitsch is not an art, it is at least the aesthetic mode of

kinship promoted by Benjamin, between kitsch and the avant-garde, a move that makes this pairing less oppositional than it would seem and allows Benjamin to bring the mass arts, cinema above all, into this unexpected convergence.

The cliché of the absolute incommunicability between kitsch and the avant-garde, chargeable to the authoritative modernist orthodoxy of Clement Greenberg, which effectively defined the premises of any interpretation of kitsch at least until the postmodern clearances, hides a more opaque history. A few years earlier Curt Glaser (1920) had significantly and controversially assumed a criterion not of opposition but of contiguity. The perspective is totally the reverse of Benjamin's, but Glaser's operation of inserting the avant-garde into kitsch remains significant. The German art historian and critic opposes kitsch not to the avant-garde, but to art in general, where «quality» is made mimetic. The avant-garde in Glaser's conservative perspective is nothing more than a modern way of generating forms of non-quality. Thus, there are two formal ontologies of kitsch: «the sweet kitsch» (*süßer Kitsch*) and the «sour kitsch» (*saurer Kitsch*). In the first case we have all the gregarious art that in a manifest way exhibits its absence of artistic quality; in the second case, and this is the thornier one, the art produced by the avant-garde: the brutal staging of art that, consciously negative (ideologically and aesthetically), arrogates to itself the right to establish, in a radical way, what art is.

Glaser's scheme of a bipolar kitsch is, as mentioned, totally alien to Benjamin's approach, which investigates more the links that, problematically, overlap the categories in play (mass art, avant-garde, kitsch), seeking a synthesis in that uniquely modern expression that is cinema, able by virtue of its technological nature of accounting for all these declinations. Evoked in the final part of the passage on kitsch, cinema is both a process of dialectical assimilation of kitsch – as it is of the avant-garde if we keep in mind the thematization of it in the essay on the Work of Art – and its «providential site», a sort of *incunabulum*, morphological and ideological, of a «material», kitsch precisely, that remains «strange and perhaps formerly unknown» (Benjamin [1999]: 396).

Having attested to what we have defined as an unexpected convergence, we understand how the investigations of kitsch, which Benjamin had developed ten years earlier, had already made explicit the need for tools other than the already worn-out aesthetic-sociological analysis. Modernity cannot resolve itself solely in the iconoclasm of the avant-garde. Modernism, in order to be critical and non-ideological, must recover perspectives that make unexpected convergences unprecedented morphologies. Recourse to the category of the «dreamlike» is what allows Benjamin to draw a red thread between the avant-garde and mass

the everyday; it rejects transcendence and settles in the majority, in the average, in the most probable distribution. Kitsch, we say, is like Happiness, for everyday» (Moles [1971]: 231).

and/or popular art, and cinema. In its much-abused proximity to the dream, that category is the translation of these confluences: kitsch becomes «dreamlike», *Traumkitsch*.

Before addressing the essay *Dream Kitsch* (Benjamin [2008a]) however, it is worth noting how Benjamin interweaves kitsch, dream, and folk art. As a whole, folk art shows itself as a boundless psychology of the inanimate: a mapping, the one traced by Benjamin, a labyrinthine, showing a further identity of the modern, since, as it is stated in the 1929 fragment *Some Remarks on Folk Art*, «folk art and kitsch ought for once to be regarded as a single great movement» (Benjamin [2008b]: 254). The sphere of the dream flows unceasingly – this is the Benjamin's insight – in the evocation of childhood, in toys, in picture books, but also in furnishings, in the *intérieur*, where the seemingly insignificant becomes lived-in. Kitsch is the aesthetics of this uniquely modern staging and the dreamlike, the state in which the unconscious and inanimate meet. A process that Benjamin will see not only in Surrealism where it is explicitly stated, but especially in that unmanageable experience of the self, such as recollection, dreaming, and the perceptual lability of the world. This condition is peculiar to folk art and kitsch, which travel parallel paths to that of art, almost revealing different intensities and, probably, even functions that are not totally equivalent: «Art teaches us to see into things. Folk art and kitsch allow us to see outward from within things» (Benjamin [2008b]: 255). Here we see the character of the objective interiority of kitsch, the interior of objects, the psychology of the inanimate that refers us back to the celebrated Benjamin's formula of the «sex appeal of the inorganic» (Benjamin [1999]: 8). In the *Passages* Benjamin records the opacity into which the notion of kitsch enters and precisely by alluding to this vagueness documents its connection to a prehistory of the self and its projections. In the section of the *Passages* devoted to the *intérieur* Benjamin can only say that we «seek the totemic tree of objects within thicket of original history. The very last – the topmost – face on the totem pole is that of kitsch» (Benjamin [1999]: 212). And immediately afterwards an excerpt that is useful to quote in its entirety.

Hessel speaks of the "dreamy epoch of bad taste". Yes, this epoch was wholly adapted to the dream, was furnished in dreams. The alternation in styles – Gothic, Persian, Renaissance, and so on – signified: that over the interior of the middle-class dining room spreads a banquet room of Cesare Borgia's, or that out the boudoir of the mistress a Gothic chapel arises, or that the master's study, in its iridescence, is transformed into the chamber of a Persian prince. The photomontage that fixes such images for us corresponds to the most primitive perceptual tendency of these generations. Only gradually have the images among which they lived detached themselves and settled on signs, labels, posters as the figures of advertising. (Benjamin [1999]: 213).

There are some points that have to be emphasized in these decisive remarks. The "dreamlike style" is taken as a morphological paradigm of almost fractal alternating styles: the chaos, always programmatic, of nineteenth-century eclecticism's design. Without great philological problems one can tie Benjamin's insight to that unsurpassed formula that Baudelaire coined for Brussels architecture: "the toy style". At the very genesis of the modern, it is a formula that is already able of tracing the premises of its overcoming. Indeed, too great is the temptation to mirror descriptions of the Belgian capital with postmodern descriptions of Las Vegas to be dismissed merely as coincidence. What links Brussels of the mid-nineteenth century and the Las Vegas of a century later is precisely the kitsch caught in the two pivotal moments of its history: on the one hand, its own birth and, on the other, its postmodern legitimization. The dreamlike style is in fact the aestheticological focus of the toy style, a formulation in which decisive elements come into play for the configuration of an ontology of kitsch that is not hastily linked to bad taste, namely, the sphere of the unconscious (the dreamlike) and that of childhood (the toy).

Benjamin's excerpt must therefore be inserted into a larger story; it is the transition point – we repeat – between an embryonic modernity and a mature postmodernity. Between what Baudelaire wrote in his never-completed project for a book on Belgium – «A pot and a rider on a roof are the most prominent evidence of extravagant taste in architecture. A horse on a roof! A pot on a pediment! That refers to what I call the *toy* style» (Baudelaire [2019]: 157) – and what is stated in *Learning from Las Vegas* – «Miami Moroccan, International Jet Set Style; Arte Moderne Hollywood Orgasmic, Organic behind; Yamasaki Bernini cum Roman Orgiastic; Niemeyer Moorish; Moorish Tudor (Arabian Knights); Bauhaus Hawaiian Bauhaus» (Venturi, Scott Brown, Izenour [1977]: 80) –an alternative parable of modernism and to modernism in which kitsch is both form and content[3]. An immediate consequence, recorded by Benjamin, is the configuration of metropolitan space in the sign of a more or less forced, but also undoubtedly appealing, childhood regression, and of the domestic environment in the perspective of the "furnished man". And it is precisely in this direction that it is possible to trace a further aesthetic-anthropological geneaology of kitsch in which the paradigm of the dreamlike style is profiled[4].

In the formula "furnished man", that closes the essay *Dream Kitsch*, Benjamin traces in the kitsch that dimension, akin to the dream, that renders evanescent the boundaries between nineteenth-century *intérieur* and commodity: the proximity of things in consumption runs parallel to the dreamlike. The

3   Allow me to refer on these issues to Mecacci (2023).
4   This is what I tried to develop in an essay of mine linking Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Il'ič* to the Benjamin's dream kitsch: Mecacci [2020].

commodity, that is the infinite accessories that make up this dramatization of living space, represents the way in which the inorganic asserts itself over that which is vital. A sinister, funereal coupling that binds «the living body to the inorganic world. To the living it defends the rights of the corpse» (Benjamin [1999]: 8). The dream kitsch will be for Benjamin, on the contrary, the mode in which the commodity, the removed objects of the past, is rehabilitated by giving new life to the inanimate in that threshold dimension that is the dream: it is the Surrealism, the re-legitimization of what has been discarded by use, condemned by taste and ghettoized by the psychological experience of the subjects. The dreamlike style that connotes nineteenth century living, this historical time, which was «like no other century, was addicted to dwelling», conceived of living not as living in a house, but in a «shell», interpreted the home as a «receptacle» (Benjamin [1999]: 220). Hence the nineteenth-century obsession with coverings, linings, cases, a culture of the envelope to the bitter end in which all transparency is banished: in these dwellings, Benjamin seems to suggest, no light ever filters through.

A further note should be added. The *Passages* excerpt on kitsch concludes by alluding to a pervasive communicative dimension of this category, to its ability to make itself an iconic element of the bourgeois imagination, the future advertising process of mass culture. It is precisely the underlining of this specificity of kitsch that makes Benjamin's analysis close to certain typifications of kitsch already acquired by the early twentieth-century debate. Gustav Pazaurek, a member of the Deutscher Werkbund, in his 1912 text *Guter und schlechter Geschmack im Kunstgewerbe*, indicated five general frames in which kitsch took shape (Pazaurek [1912]: 348-365). Patriotic kitsch, religious kitsch, gift kitsch, advertising kitsch, and social kitsch. And it is obviously the penultimate point that is of interest here. This advertising kitsch, which heralds the media kitsch of contemporaneity, is the kitsch that is offered not so much in objects as in their symbolic-communicative projection: that which takes shape in theaters, in early films, in circuses, in the entertainment industry in general, but also and above all, as Benjamin will assert, in posters, signs, and packaging. But if in Pazaurek this process reveals nothing more than the enormous effort of the most calculating industry to convince that «muck costs as much as tasteful product» (Pazaurek [1912]: 353), in Benjamin the discourse seems to lead elsewhere. The images that are released in the unprecedented morphology of the contemporary – where communicative form and advertising figure coincide – are not so much the symptom of an affirmation of bad taste, as Pazaurek's functionalist diagnosis seems to attest, but the staging of a new horizon of meaning, in which the dreamlike looms as a new hermeneutic paradigm. A hypnotic, if not narcotic, forest of signs that recalls, perhaps not coincidentally, the noble father of the Surrealist movement, namely Rimbaud, who precisely in the Surrealists' fetish text, *Alchemy*

of the Word, captures the dreamlikeness of the modern urban landscape, a view marked by the continuous alternation of real and subconscious images, in which, as in Benjamin, it is popular art (childish, consumer, deliberately low) that is the center of gravity: «What I liked were absurd paintings, decorations over doorways, stage scenery, travelling fairs' backcloths, inn-signs, cheap coloured prints; literature gone out of fashion, church Latin, erotic books with bad spelling, novels our grandmothers used to read, fairy-tales, little books for children, old operas, meaningless refrains, crude rhythms» (Rimbaud [2001]: 235).

Kitschtraum condenses in itself all these themes, which will now be appropriate to understand verbatim[5]. The essay began as a study of three Surrealist productions that focus on the overall poetics of the movement at its inception: Breton's *Manifesto*, Aragon's text *A Wave of Dreams*, both from 1924, and Eluard's poetic collection *Repetitions*, illustrated by Ernst, from two years earlier. Benjamin's initial move is to focus on the theme of dreams, of course. Indeed, the incipit directly recalls one of the symbols of Romantic aesthetics, Novalis' Blue Flower. But pointing out the genetic filiation of Surrealism with Romanticism – and not coincidentally Hermann Broch will do the same with kitsch – by highlighting the theme of the dream and what the Romantic dreamlike implies, from the nocturnal space to the sphere of the unconscious, all this leads Benjamin down an alternative path. The intent, the first real thesis of the short paper, is to trace a history of the dream, but in a way that reverses precisely the Romantic perspective. If Romanticism had assumed the dream as the prerogative access to the unconditioned – just think of what Novalis wrote in 1798 in *Pollen*: «We seek the Unconditioned everywhere and only ever find things» (Novalis [1997]: 23)[6] – Benjamin can direct the discourse to the opposite level. Not the level of the unconditioned (*Unbedingte*), but the level of the conditioned (*Bedingt*), where the constraint to the everyday objectivity of things (*Dinge*) is shown in its full tangibility: dreams are now a shortcut to banality» (Benjamin [2008a]: 236). Benjamin perfectly understands the chiasmus that comes to pass in the modern: the exile from the absolute and the frustration of its access spill over into its own opposite. The dream, far from being the way to «a blue horizon», grasps on the contrary «objects at their most threadbare and timeworn point» and, in turn, the world of objects is projected into the dream giving rise to kitsch: «the side which things turn toward the dream is kitsch» (Benjamin [2008a]: 236).

Benjamin's kitsch, while respecting its Romantic lineage, is removed from the hermeneutic cage of bad taste and referred to a precise sphere, that of childhood. Kitsch is thus not the translation of adult sentimentality, but the dimension

5   For a textual analysis we will use Ibarlucía [2020]: 127-145, which updates and recontextualizes his earlier study expressly devoted to *Kitschtraum*, see Ibarlucía [1998].
6   The translation was changed in only one point, choosing to literally translate *Unbedingte* with *Unconditioned* rather than with the word *Absolute*.

proper to the childlike recreation of objects, and its connection to the mimetic freedom of Surrealism is therefore understandable: indeed, the child, Benjamin asserts, does not grasp a glass, but puts his hand in it. As the dream reformulates the ontology of the real, so childhood enables the object toward other uses that the logic of consumption, the exclusive prerogative of the adult world, censors. Similarly, dream kitsch is a kitsch that discovers itself beyond bad taste: children have no bad taste with which to judge the world around them. Banality and good – and here Benjamin unexpectedly seems to be following Rousseau – are marked, in childhood, by absolute adjacency. Childhood deposes its metaphorical status and becomes a paradigm, a reference. Just as the artist in Baudelaire discovers his own genius in a condition of estrangement from the real – what Baudelaire calls "rediscovered childhood" – activating a virgin attitude to the world, perceiving it as perpetually new, so the Benjamin's adult is referred back to a kind of prehistory of the self: «the repetition of childhood experience gives us pause» (Benjamin [2008a]: 236).

Adult feeling, as Schiller had already shown, feels the object uniquely in a condition of separation, just as does art that looks at things from the outside, the contemplative dimension in which Benjamin does not include popular art and kitsch. The criterion of difference, the motor of the subject making a judgment of taste and allowing the configuration of a negative judgment (bad taste and/or kitsch), is unknown to childhood. A naive age, in Schiller's sense, childhood makes experience and object coincide and it is the dream that allows this transfiguration, but one could also add that specific anthropological dimension preeminent in childhood (the broom that becomes a horse, the classic example that even Benjamin mentions in one of his essays on the toy) – that is the play. It is precisely the sphere of the naïve, which, as Schiller had always asserted, remains a perpetual enigma into itself, that is the irreducibly other condition with respect to modern (male) subjectivity: it is in fact the ancient, the feminine, the infantile and the inanimate.

According to Benjamin, the repressed of modern adult subjectivity had two processes of (re)discovery: psychoanalysis and Surrealism. However, shared by the dream process, psychoanalysis and Surrealism privileged different fields of action. If Freud investigated the soul, deconstructing the self, Breton reformulated things, undoing the logic of their function. He rehabilitated the banal – «previously disqualified objects *drawn at random*» (Breton [2002]: 27) – by contravening the imperatives of the ideology of taste and emancipating it from the sort of cultural expulsion perpetrated by the logics of the aesthetics of beauty and the functional-capitalist logic of use value and, consequently, exchange value. The «disqualified», tasteless and useless object is also the «drawn at random» chance object that elevates as its own criterion the symbolic value that is elaborated in the unconscious, definitively undermining the traditional distinction between beauty and utility.

Oscillating between an object of disinterested contemplation – dreaming inevitably makes kitsch an aesthetic experience – and an object of massified consumption, Benjamin's kitsch can be placed in the coeval debate and specifically, because of the dreamlike declension, to Hanns Sachs' essay *Kitsch* (1932). For Sachs, too, kitsch is an exclusively modern phenomenon and originates from the absence of specificity that modern aesthetic culture exhibits by becoming precisely the specific trait of this aesthetic culture. Cinema exemplifies this kitsch character of the modern in its techno-expressive aspects, that is, in form and content. Sachs links cinema, the quintessential mass art form, to psychoanalysis in its ability not so much to investigate the self but the mass. The condition of daydreaming – the dream/wake dialectic, a Benjamin's paradigm for understanding Surrealism – is transposed by Sachs to the mass enjoyment of cinema, which does nothing more than illustrate processes of gratification, individual and social, that the mass remains denied in real life. Hollywood cinema, the "dream factory", constructs kitsch not only as a mimetic device through the strategies of borrowing and imitation, but above all as a concealment of alienation in a *mise-en-scene* that turns out to be a mere process of sublimation. Cinematic kitsch masks – and here we understand psychoanalytic praxis – true spiritual instances with false aesthetic responses. Modernity, Sachs seems to suggest, must commit itself to deconstructing this mechanism of continuous simulation of one's identity that sees mass art as one of its main engines.

If the dreamlike in Sachs represents that condition of artificial suspension that the subject, as spectator, goes through while daydreaming in front of a screen, in Buñuel it takes on the features of a "moral". Benjamin's connections between dreaming, cinema/folk art and Surrealism can be found, with the appropriate caveats and with declinations that cannot be totally united, in Buñuel as well, although the Spanish director never mentions kitsch as a possible *trait d'union*. Surrealism represents for Buñuel a kind of personal biographical unconscious: in Surrealism he recognizes conceptual and aesthetic ways already active in him. It is a language that offers him a structure, not a content. Buñuel has always insisted that surrealism is not only a poetics as much as an ethos: «a revolutionary, poetic and *moral* movement» (Buñuel [1987]: 109). In this ethical meaning rests the overall failure of the movement, punctuated by individual triumphs – the fame of its interpreters («just a small group of insolent intellectuals who argued interminably in cafés and published a journal», Buñuel [1987]: 123) – that can do nothing before the objectivity of the defeat of the movement's great purpose, the utopia inherited from the Marx-Rimbaud duo: «to change the world, and transform the life itself» (Buñuel [1987]: 123). The element that likens Buñuel, beyond personal idiosyncrasies, to Surrealism is the dream dimension, that is, the possibility of relating to reality through an extra-rational option. Cinema resolves this option, makes it manifest, and in accents very similar to Benja-

min's, Buñuel states: «this kind of cinematographic hypnosis is no doubt due to the darkness of the theatre and to the rapidly changing scenes, light, and camera movements, which weaken the spectator's critical intelligence and exercise over him a kind of fascination. Sometimes, watching a movie is a bit like being raped» (Buñuel [1987]: 69)[7].

Buñuel is surprisingly precise in indicating the principles that activate the articulation of this surrealist dreamlike morality that finds its own mimetic condition in cinematic art. There are three principles: chance, mystery and imagination. A tripartition that significantly departs by two-thirds from the modernist one of Ortega y Gasset for whom the subject is modulated through a dramatization of the self that unfolds in the relationship of three existential tensions: vocation (the ideal in which each person conceives his or her self), circumstance (the non-self that favors or hinders vocation), and chance (the irrational factor). Buñuel preserves only this last datum and it is precisely the chance principle that he will find in Surrealism and, notably, in Breton. Chance poses two related problems: on the one hand the aesthetic dimension, the theme of its representation, and on the other the historical-ethical significance. Civilization has done nothing but curb chance (or chaos, the formless), it has tried to institutionalize it (in culture, in form), a process of repression designed to make its anarchy manageable. The discovery of the unconscious is transformed in Buñuel, and in the avant-garde as a whole, into a passion for chaos, that is, the acceptance of the irrational, what the Spanish artist calls «mystery», from which derives atheism, a rejection of that ultimate answer to that mystery that is God. Mystery – «an essential element of every work of art» (Buñuel [2022]: 543) – turns out to be a close relative of the dreamlike in its opposition to the organizing devices of rationality, from religion to technology. Between chance and mystery lies the imagination, the space of freedom, the mimetic faculty par excellence that finds its expressive outlet in objects that disorient the ego's protagonism in two ways: by reifying the human and fetishizing its drives. Thus emerges, in all its complexity, the theme of the inanimate.

Subjectivity is first reified in the outrage of its physical integrity; mutilation becomes a bodily principle parallel to découpage, collage, and film montage. Subjected to a process of deconstruction, the rationality of the real is projected into a consequential process, its re–transduction into the irrationality of the superreal. As Buñuel states without equivocation in 1928: «the intuition of the film, the photogenic embryo, already palpitates in that operation called *découpage*. Segmentation. Creation. Splitting of one thing so that it may be transformed into another. What was not before, now is» (Buñuel [2022]: 416). The

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7   Note the lexical proximity of the perceptual effect the film causes in the viewer: rape in Buñuel, shock in Benjamin.

geneaological act of this process – in which material segments (the montage) and ideal segments (découpage) coexist – is the quintessentially cognitive amputation: the blinding, the cutting of the eye. There looms a struggle between blindness and vision that marks the West from Oedipus to the first frame of *Un chien andalou*, a development that also resolves the linear vision of the theatrical experience into the segmented, "edited" vision of cinema. The morphology of the dreamlike – Benjamin's dream/wake dialectic – looms as the access to that other gaze (the eye of the object) that needs the negation of the cognitive eye. If Buñuel's cinema can easily be taken as an «exercise in total voyeurism» (Fuentes [2017]: 99), it should never be overlooked that this is possible precisely because the act of viewing is an act close to blindness, to the darkness of the cinematographic room. Seeking a dreamlike blindness, which frees the imagination from the perceptual tyranny of assimilation of the real, the director has no problem recognizing himself in the primacy of the altered experience of aisthesis over the normativity of logos by stating: «I completely lack conceptual memory. For me there is only visual memory» (Fuentes [2017]: 99). The *mirada absente*, the blind gaze, is realized in the dreams of the repressed, in those dreamlike insertions that mark all Buñuel's cinematography – one thinks only of the celebrated daydreams of Séverine/Catherine Deneuve in – or in the insistence on the topos of blindness – one need only recall two characters in *Los Olvidados*, the blind street musician and the child Ojitos (ojos – eyes), abandoned by his father.

There is also another theme in common with Benjamin: wrestling the object from its commodified use and discovering its other nature. In Benjamin this operation coincides with kitsch, in Buñuel with fetishism[8], which configures the momentary exoneration of the object from the sphere of consumption, a fruition outside of economic voracity. Not only does the subject resolve himself in the inanimate, but he becomes its object, the roles are reversed: «the furniture, the parquet floor and the books in my room took pleasure in seeing me» (Buñuel [2022]: 201). The object, in its full logical chaoticity, is always caught in a perspective that seemingly material is always psychological. The object is no longer lyricized or made the subject of philosophical reflection: the object is psychologized. This is the insight that Buñuel expounds in a youthful essay, *Tragedias inadvertidas como temas de un teatro novísimo* (1923): «The sphere of the inanimate will undoubtedly cause us considerable problems. One thing is certain: many times, voice was given to lifeless objects, which, however, spoke like human beings or surpassed in lyricism the best of poets. There is lyrical or

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8   On fetishism in Benjamin see Desideri (2002: 105-132). «Benjamin senses with a Goethean eye the "original phenomenon" of Modernity as an age of fetishistic self-representation» (105).

philosophical expression, but not the psychological expression inherent in them: there is that tremendous and complex psychology yet to be studied» (Buñuel [2022]: 218). Freed from lyrical (feeling, taste) and conceptual (the subordinate universe of non-ego and *res extensa*) anthropomorphization, the object asserts itself as a subject other by bringing forth a new ontology. Imagination is the faculty deputed to operate this reversal of roles and, trite to say, not only in a process of formation, but also of deformation, entering that territory of the optical unconscious that Rosalind Krauss, borrowing from Benjamin, saw as the guiding principle of twentieth-century art.

Cinema, the point of convergence of Benjamin's and Buñuel's perspectives, fully accomplishes this process, since it is the artistic expression that «best imitates the functioning of the mind in a state of sleep» and configures, in a paradigmatic way, the dreamlike experience through a mimetic device: «the incursion through the night of the unconscious begins in the screen, and in man: images, as in the dream, appear and disappear amid fades and obscurations; time and space become flexible» (Buñuel [2022]: 544). Buñuel's insistence on the psycho-analytic character of the lens – complementary to Benjamin's already mentioned notion of the optical unconscious – cannot but target the metamorphosis of the nature of the banal object, the kitsch, elevating the insignificant to a construction of meaning, a dramatization of the repressed. In this project, however, an almost elegiac condition, of permanent loss of the subject, remains ever-present: the dream, which allows one to regain possession of what has vanished through the experience of that object, kitsch, banished from taste and use. This is the deep meaning of dream kitsch – does nothing more than transfer to objects what belongs to subjects. In this transition that makes paradoxical the acquired data of the real, whether perceptual or cultural, and in which, for example, it is legitimate to assert with all the iconoclasm of the case that «affectivity is a prerogative of the inanimate» (Buñuel [2022]: 222), kitsch becomes the possibility of intercepting not the periphery of the real world (the bad taste, the useless, the trivial), but the center of a psychic world (childhood, memory, dream) otherwise irretrievable: «it is the last mask of the banal, the one with which we adorn ourselves in dream and conversation, so as to take the energies of an outlived world of things» (Benjamin [2008a]: 238).

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Aisthesis

The Disenchantment of Urban Space. Some Remarks on the *Arcades Project*

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Abstract. In the *Arcades Project* many important pages are devoted by Walter Benjamin to the emergence of the labyrinthine exteriority of the modern metropolis, to its peculiar phantasmagorias and to the problem of the critical awakening or disenchantment of urban space itself. According to Benjamin's method of dialectical thought by «polarity», the metropolis is presented, at the same time, as hell and as a space, material and cognitive, of revolution. This article aims to explore the dialectical image of this specific awakening: the barricade. What is more, the intention is to delve into the connections between such an idea of disenchantment and the problem of art (which begins in this century to become reproducible and to confront itself with the laws of the capitalist market), between this dialectical image and the principle of montage, between political revolution and revolution of sensibility.

Keywords. Arcades project, metropolis, critical disenchantment, principle of montage, revolution of sensibility.

In the vast philosophical construction site on the nineteenth century – that is, in the *Arcades Project*, as a project that was supposed to analyse the *original configurations* of advanced capitalism – many important pages are devoted by Walter Benjamin to the emergence of the *lab-*

yrinthine exteriority of the modern metropolis, to its peculiar phantasmagorias and to the problem of the *critical awakening* or *disenchantment* of urban space itself. According to Benjamin's method of dialectical thought by «polarity» (Lindner [2011]): the metropolis is presented, at the same time, as hell and as a space, material and cognitive, of revolution (on this, more generally on the *Arcades Project*, see Montanelli [2022]; Buck-Morss [1989]). This article aims to explore the dialectical image of this specific awakening: the barricade. A historically determined dialectical image, but one that can once again become readable, actualisable in new critical constellations. What is more, the intention is to delve into the connections between such an idea of disenchantment and the problem of art (which begins in this century to become reproducible and to confront itself with the laws of the capitalist market), between this dialectical image and the principle of montage, between political revolution and revolution of sensibility.

1. *Paris, the capital of revolutions (and counter-revolutions)*

Among the notes of the *Arcades Project*, the barricade emerges as the dialectical countermelody of the *passage*, which is the *temple of commodity capital* (see Benjamin [1927-1940]: 37). The *passage* is the monad in which the *original phenomenon*, the matrix of the entire phantasmagorical production of this epoch is enclosed: the commodity as a *sensibly supersensible* fetish (Marx [1867]); the commodity that soon ages and expires together with this *peculiar intrauterine capsule* containing it, due to the greedy fury of capitalism, incapable of keeping up with the development of productive forces in the new century. In such an apparently timeless monad, commodities resemble «immemorial flora» testifying to how, with the advent of industrialisation, they have themselves become a category of the spirit imbuing desire, imagination and the forms of life of modern mass collectivity (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 540). Incidentally, we would like to recall the methodological novelty of Benjamin's project: the way he investigates capitalist relations of production and reproduction in nineteenth century society starting from the superstructure, showing, in his way of understanding the *expressive nexus* between structure and superstructure (see f.e. Ibid.: 392, 460), a prescient affinity with Louis Althusser's overdetermination, according to which the economic structure is «determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, […] by the various *levels* and *instances* of the social formation that it animates» (Althusser [1962]: 101). Similarly, Benjamin not only does not consider the superstructural aspects of a society to be mere *effects* of economic *causes*, but is convinced that the analysis of development trends in art, architecture, fashions, culture, social movements, politics, etc. can best illuminate the investigation of capitalist relations of production and, thus, the formulation of

revolutionary demands in the context of praxis (see also Benjamin [1936a]: 101-102). Undoubtedly, echoes of Georg Simmel's *Wechselwirkung* also resonate in the understanding of this type of relationship: networks of actions, reactions and feedbacks between economic, social, cultural, individual and supra-individual phenomena that constitute society itself (see at least Simmel [1908]).

We know that Paris is for Benjamin the metropolis *par excellence* of this epoch of renewed capitalist accumulation. The plan of Paris is itself a *palimpsest*, where history is erased, overwritten, interpolated. It is up to materialistic, stratigraphic philosophy to bring to light the interweaving of the heterogeneous historical times that make up modernity, against the naturalising process of capitalism. However, the nineteenth century is also the century of revolutions. Or rather, it is also a century of transition: from bourgeois revolutions to class struggles, Paris being the capital of these struggles. Benjamin quotes Engels: «[a]nd only France has a Paris, a city in which European civilization attains its fullest flowering (…) and from which arise, at regular intervals, those tremors which shake the terrestrial globe» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 704-705; see also Engels [1898-1899]: 512). Elsewhere, he also quotes Hofmannsthal: Paris is endowed with the «kind of beauty proper to (…) volcanic landscapes». Paris is like Vesuvius: «a menacing, hazardous (…) ever-active hotbed of revolution. But just as the slopes of Vesuvius, thanks to the layers of lava that cover them, have been transformed into paradisal orchards, so the lava of revolutions provides uniquely fertile ground for the blossoming of art, festivity, fashion» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 83). *Revolutions and counter-revolutions*: the latter consisting not only of repression, but of forms of appropriation, valorisation (more or less *aestheticised*, more or less depoliticised) of the innovations generated by insurrections.

The articulation of class struggles in the course of the nineteenth century – which bifurcate its beginning, *1789* – has a decisive influence on the transformations of urban space: from the wooden paving of Parisian streets under Louis Philippe, following the barricades of July 1830, and then of 1831 and 1832; to the revolutions of February and in particular those of June 1848, then Haussmann's radical project for the Second Empire; finally, the last great upheaval, the Commune in 1871 (on this, see also Löwy [2019]: 95-118). In his *exposé*, Benjamin follows the historical interpretation offered by Marx and Engels: if in 1830 the proletariat was still fighting alongside the bourgeoisie against the feudal regime and the monarchy, in 1848, it rejected the bourgeois republic and constituted itself as an autonomous political subject, becoming a class in the fight against domination, which in turn became «*terrorism*» of the bourgeoisie. *Fraternité*, the instrument of pacification able to guarantee the exploitation of one class by the other, exploded in the «civil war» between labour and capital (Marx [1850]: 69, 57; see also Benjamin [1927-1940]: 123). After the defeat of June 1848, the very fear of the mass pressure of the proletariat constituted as a

class and the division of the bourgeoisie between legitimists and Orleanists was behind the rise to power of the «pseudo-democratic» Louis Bonaparte, from December 1852 Emperor Napoleon III (Engels [1895]: 513; on this, see also Marx [1852]). So, *domestic peace* was obtained with external, colonial wars, monumental splendour, corruption, speculation, the *end of pauperism*[1], in the form of the *expulsion of poverty*.

2. *L'*artist démolisseur – *but the city is divided again*

Prefect Baron Haussmann achieved this political programme through urban planning. The true goal of this «*artist démolisseur*» was in fact to «make the erection of barricades in the streets of Paris impossible for all time» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 12). Entire working-class neighbourhoods were destroyed in the name of public health, though actually to prevent civil war. The clean, «better» air of Haussmann's transformation of the city was that of «armed force»: the large roads that cut through the working-class neighbourhoods allowed easy entry to the army, and direct connections to the barracks (Ibid.: 128)[2]. The old capital was gutted to develop a modern network able to enclose the *banlieue*, according to the *old imperial ideal of terrorist-revolutionary centralisation* (Ibid.: 133). It is a disorienting network, however, as it is rather the most recent form of metropolitan *labyrinth*: space is pierced everywhere by the same geometric, rectilinear streets, on whose sides, according to the continuous play of perspective, rows of houses stand one next to the other, all the same (Ibid.: 146, 136). The myth of eternal recurrence also shapes the new metropolis. The annexation of the suburbs goes hand in hand with the expulsion of the poor and working-class population, as they are dispersed to the provinces or ghettos in the suburbs. In other words, the earthquake that devastated and rebuilt the city coincided with a process of *new primitive accumulation* (Marx [1867]: Book One, Part VII, Ch. 24). It was the eternal recurrence of the primitive act of capitalism, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century (which also links Benjamin's book on Baroque to *The Arcades Project*): new enclosures, dispossessions, redefinition of hierarchical relations of exploitation; repression and, at the same time, population-government through narcotising distractions, debauchery and fraudulent concessions. Benjamin writes: «The mighty seek to secure their position with blood (police), with cunning (fashion), with magic (pomp)» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 133). Speculation was one of the pivots of

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1   In his attempt to present himself as a friend of the people, Louis Bonaparte among other things authored an essay entitled *Extinction du pauperisme* (1844).
2   This is a quotation from Georges Laronze's biography of Haussmann (*Le baron Haussmann*, F. Alcan, Paris 1932), from which Benjamin draws much material.

this renewed capitalist accumulation of land, property, finance. Another transition that took place in the nineteenth century, moreover, is that from the still partly feudal forms of gambling to stock exchange gambling. The Haussmannisation of Paris was a speculative venture that facilitated the growth of financial capital, the establishment of the market as the new *order* of the economy and of life, which became the *eternal law of nature* (see Ibid.: 12, 23-24; see also the convolutes on gambling and the one on stock exchange: 489-515, 779-785). Haussmann erased the city's past in order to *eternalise the present*. Benjamin copies the following passage from *Histoire de Paris* by Dubech and D'Espezel (1926): «The most striking feature of (…) [Haussmann's] projects is their scorn for historical experience…Haussmann lays out an artificial city, like something in Canada or the Far West…» (Ibid.: 132). The only relationship with the past is that defined by fashion: the past, that is, which is captured in the clamour of the latest novelty, which lasts the time of a shock, and is immediately suppressed and replaced by another *new* one. And so on indefinitely, according to the rhythm of perennial, unexpected change (eternal return of the same, indeed).

The gutting of working-class neighbourhoods was therefore aimed not only at preventing barricades, but also at erasing their history. The foundations of the monumental *culture* of the Second Empire are to be found in the bloody *barbarism* of June 1848 and in the process of planned removal of historical class memory, of interpolation of the manuscript of the republican-democratic tradition[3]. However, in the spring of 1871, with the Commune, «[t]he barricade is resurrected […]. It is stronger and better secured than ever» (Ibid.: 12, 24). Marx writes that the Commune «conspired against civilization [*Zivilisation*]» (Marx [1871]: 350), that is, it overturned the relationship between culture and barbarism, shed light on the violence behind the former and affirmed the *positive concept* of the latter, that of the *true constructors* (Benjamin [1933]: 732)[4], who aim to erase domination and exploitation and not the past, who rewrite history by giving back to the oppressed the voice that has been silenced. Marx also writes that the Commune used fire «strictly as a means of defence» against the massacre of the «Social Republic», of the democratic, federalist, internationalist «self-government of the producers» (Marx [1871]: 351, 330, 332). In the case of the Commune, it was not the «vandalism of triumph» (e.g. of Christians against pagans), nor was it the Haussmannian vandalism, the «razing historic Paris to make place for the Paris of the sightseer» (Ibid.: 351). With the Commune, the *spectre of communism* brutally crushed in 1848 was reincarnated in the real world with a *tiger's leap* (Benjamin [1940a]: 395).

3   For the culture-barbarism nexus, the reference is obviously to Benjamin (1940a): 391-392.
4   For the positive concept of barbarism in Benjamin, see at least Raulet (2004).

The apparently compact and shapeless mass, treated as «external population» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 141)[5], was dissolved and reorganised, taking on a new partisan form, making the city *divided* again[6].

3. *Awakening: open space for the city*

The barricade is for Benjamin the dialectical image of such a gnoseological and political disclosure. We know that the *Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit* is the time of the revolutionary *chance* and that the knowing subject of this "now" is not individual and abstract, but collective and partisan: in Benjamin's *Theses* it is «the struggling, oppressed class» (Benjamin [1940a]: 394). Moreover, from the very beginning of his work on the *Arcades*, Benjamin states that he intends to «show how the whole set of issues with which this project is concerned is illuminated in the process of the proletariat's becoming conscious of itself» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 863). What is at stake is an intimate connection between historical knowledge, class consciousness and political praxis – reference to Rosa Luxemburg is strong, indeed the Spartacus League is also referred to in the aforementioned thesis. As an emblem of nineteenth century revolutions, the barricade is therefore emblematic of the form in which the link between praxis and knowledge was then expressed.

The dialectical movement conceived by Benjamin – his *Dialektik im Stillstand* – consists in capturing an image in its «hesitant stillness [*immobilité hésitante*]», in the moment of maximum tension between opposites (Benjamin [1940b]: 149, where he quotes Henri Focillon's *Vie des formes*). It is the *Jetzt* of possible awakening. It is the veil of appearance, i.e. of dreams, of «opposing dream images» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 883) that becomes immobilised, rippling. In the specific case of the barricades, the *Traumbild* of a liberated society, one that is on the march towards progress, pacified and inter-classist, comes to a halt in the *dialektisches Bild* which brings to light the historical truth of exploitative social relations. The utopian pole of the dream image is for Benjamin as much to be criticised as the catastrophic one: golden age and hell are two sides of the same coin. «The true meaning of utopia: it is a precipitate of collective dreams» (Ibid.: 906). With the *Communist Manifesto*, the failure to elaborate the material and historical conditions of the possible general transformation of society is transfigured into the imagination of fantastic conditions (see Marx, Engels [1848]: 514-517). The importance of the Commune also derives from having critically set

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5   This is a quotation from G. Plechanov, *Über die Anfänge der Lehre vom Klassenkampf* (1903).
6   Allusion is made here to Loraux (1997).

utopia aside; Marx writes: «They [the communards] have no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation […], they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men» (Marx [1871]: 335).

Of course, the bloodshed and failure of the Commune also marks the end of the barricade-form, its ineffectiveness, given the disproportionate use of force by the state. What begins to take hold is the strike-form, which plays a pivotal role in the transition from the First to the Second International (and we know it attracted the attention of the young Benjamin, just consider the 1921 essay on the *Critique of Violence*)[7]. In any case, what matters here is that the barricades, in particular those of the Commune, exemplify *the expressive mode* of nineteenth century *awakening*. The barricade is emblematic of the knowledge that provides the way out of the labyrinth of capitalist *religion*. In Marx's words:

> The religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature, generally present themselves to him in a transparent and rational form. The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e. the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control. (Marx [1867]: 173)

The Commune grasped the way the social and the political are essentially co-extensive, it rethought the problem of power starting from the need to redistribute the wealth produced by social co-operation: once the process of production was understood, the expropriated aimed to *expropriate the expropriators*, to re-appropriate the means of production (and reproduction) in order to transform the «means of enslaving and exploiting labour» into «instruments of free and associated labour» (Marx [1871]: 335).

Thus, the spectral objectivity of commodities, the phantasmagoria of their absolutely arbitrary value, of their price tag, for Marx as for Benjamin, can dissolve. As with the Baroque allegory, subjectivity comes to the fore: that which materially produces value and which, abstracting from human labour, triggers the dynamic of fetishism, the eruption of the allegorical, with all its antinomies, which generates alienation and a form of relativism that seems to have no end (see Benjamin [1925]). The narcotic of eternity, of the natural quality of capitalist law is here revealed as such.

When revolt breaks out, «history is the judge» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 730)[8]. The aquatic, vegetal, timeless monad exemplified by the *passage* is shattered,

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7   On the ineffectiveness of the barricade, Benjamin quotes Engels' (1895) *Introduction* to Karl Marx's *The Class Struggles in France*, see Benjamin (1927-1940): 123.
8   It is a quotation from K. Marx, *Die Revolutionen von 1848 und das Proletariat* (1856).

and from it another monad emerges, that of the dialectical image that brings the qualitative character of time back to the foreground, rendering every single moment of the oppressed past citable, and thus redeemable in revolutionary action. Historical-materialist knowledge and revolution *disenchant time and also space*. Already in the essay on *Surrealism* Benjamin writes that «only revolt completely exposes […] [the] Surrealist face» of Paris: «deserted streets in which whistles and shots dictate the outcome» (Benjamin [1929a]: 211). In the *Arcades Project* Benjamin writes: «in the final analysis, only the revolution creates an open space for the city. Fresh air doctrine of revolutions. Revolution disenchants the city» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 422). The revolution clears the field, it empties the city before construction, sweeps away the phantasmagoria of the *intérieur*, of bourgeois individualism, of the false dichotomies between public and private, nature and technology, the monumentality and verticality of power, its hierarchies. It is once again the *barbaric attitude of poverty of experience*: to draw, one must clear the table (see Benjamin [1933]: 732). Desecrate, in a literal sense, the sacredness of the capitalist world in order to return objects to the sphere of use: having dispelled the aura that veils the creation of value, the enigma of commodities dissolves, they go back to being human products.

4. *Principle of montage: or the new sensibility*

Benjamin sees the principle of montage operating in the barricade – just as Charles Fourier spoke of the building of the barricades as «an example of "*travail non salarié mais passionné*"» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 141)[9]. A casual, creative, experimental way of re-using things, which are extrapolated from their usual contexts and given a new order. It is also the re-appropriation of the technique of citation, finally wrested from the «arena» of fashion where «the ruling class gives the commands» (Benjamin [1940a]: 395). Omnibuses, barrels, paving stones, sand, all sorts of furniture, baskets, wheels, ropes serve the artwork-barricade. *Artwork*, like the one built by the communard shoemaker Napoléon Gaillard in Place de la Concorde, two storeys high, with ramparts, stepped gables, pavilions, in front of which, as if to sign it, the author had his picture taken (on this, see also Ross [2015])[10].

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9   Unlike the English edition, we leave the expression in French here, as in the German edition, with reference to Fourier.

10   Benjamin (1927-1940): 138, quotes the caption of a plate dedicated to the *Barricade des fédérés construite par Gaillard père* from the volume *Les ruines de Paris. 100 photographies par A. Liébert*, éditées par la photographie américaine A. Liébert, Paris 1871.

Barricade des fédérés built by, among others, Louis Napoléon Gaillard (known as *Gaillard père*)
[second from the left], 1871. Artist: Hippolyte-Auguste Collard. Credit Line:
The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1959.
CC0 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Art, technique and craftsmanship, poetry and labour rediscover their harmonious collaboration – we recall that this is the century, with the birth of the applied arts industry, of the dispute between the *École Polytechnique* and the *École des Beaux-Art*, between «the builder of the new school and the artist of the old type» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 887). The revolution questions pure art and fetishculture as disinterested realms of creation and freedom. By eroding the sphere of the sacred, i.e. of worship, of ritual, i.e. of appearance, the *sphere of play* gains prominence, the centre of gravity of the synchronic polarity of all artistic activity shifts. What Benjamin has in mind, from an ontogenetic perspective, is children's play, i.e. actions that are both destructive and constructive, essentially desecrating, and gnoseological: when children play, they use and reuse, demolish and reassemble objects, materials, pieces of things, extracting them from their original context and inventing a new one each time. It is a *permanent alteration of any auratic fixation* (see Benjamin [1936a]; also, f.e. Benjamin [1929b]; on this, see also Montanelli [2017]: 61-102; Montanelli [2018]: 265-269; Leslie [2018]).

Referring to Donald Winnicott's (1971) transitional object, we may say that fetish is in this case an instrument of knowledge, which opens up the «potential space» through which self and the external world are constituted. Infants need destruction in order to understand «[t]he spirit from which these products emanate – the entire process of their production and not merely its result», to construct a «vital relationship» with them (Benjamin [1930]: 123), exactly the opposite of the alienation generated by commodity fetishism. In his *Morale du joujou*, Baudelaire describes the childish playful impulse in a similar manner, offering an illuminating analogy between this behaviour and revolt. His conclusions, however, are different:

> Quand ce désir s'est fiché dans la moelle cérébrale de l'enfant, il remplit ses doigts et ses ongles d'une agilité et d'une force singulières. L'enfant tourne, retourne son joujou, il le gratte, il le secoue, le cogne contre les murs, le jette par terre. De temps en temps il lui fait recommencer ses mouvements mécaniques, quelquefois en sens inverse […]. L'enfant, comme le peuple qui assiège les Tuileries, fait un suprême effort ; enfin il l'entrouvre, il est le plus fort. Mais *où est l'âme ?* C'est ici que commencent l'hébétement et la tristesse. (Baudelaire [1853] : 587)

«What exists he reduces to rubble-not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it» (Benjamin [1931]: 542). This, on the other hand, is what Benjamin writes of the *destructive character*, relevant to both the revolutionary and the childlike character – this is Benjamin's different conclusion to Baudelaire's. Destruction is followed by the activity of reassembling elements. It is a *Noch-einmal*, once again, which means always doing anew, *ein Immer-wieder-tun,* doing «over and over again» (Benjamin [1928]: 120) and which opens up the *space of action* (*Spiel-Raum*, literally, "scope for play") «allied» to what Benjamin calls the *second technology*: i.e., the «endlessly varied test procedures», aimed at perfecting, ameliorating nature, not dominating it. What is at stake is «an interplay [*ein Zusammenspiel*]» with nature – again, the reference is to Fourier's *jeu harmonien*; in other words, the dissolution of the false dualism between nature and technique (Benjamin [1936a]: 107; on the theme of perfective *mimesis* in Benjamin, see also Desideri [2019]).

Indigence and construction are thought of together. And, once the fundamental relations of capitalist production have been clarified, certain utopian motifs can also be extrapolated from their idyllic and naive context and be *reused* in the context of revolutionary praxis: this is the case of Fourier's aforementioned *travail passionné*; or of Paul Scheerbart's glass architecture (1914), which envisages horizontal structures capable of reactivating the *sensoriality* that pertains to the *surface* of things, as opposed to the confused depth of interiority, to the vertical axis of the concentrationist and totalitarian paradigm, which from the Tower of Babel onwards manifests itself in the

human will to dominate (see Benjamin [1919] and Benjamin [1939-1940]; Scheerbart [1913])[11].

The demolition of the Vendôme Column, during the Commune, which also involved Gustave Courbet, is a famous episode in history. It was an iconoclastic action, aimed at demolishing not only the celebratory symbol of Napoleon's military expeditions, but more generally the *enchantment of monumental art* – which in the twentieth century for Benjamin became synonymous with fascism (see Benjamin [1936b]) –, the mythologem of pure aestheticism, the «visual-phallic» regime that allows nothing to exist outside itself (Lefebvre [1973]). The barricades of the Commune have a special significance, because their *principle of montage* as a source of *playful innovation*, based on *reversibility*, not on violent hypostatisation, extended beyond the civil war and translated into a widespread experimentation that was able to hold together the re-appropriation of the public sphere, of the city, the deconstruction of social orders and roles, emancipation from exploited labour, *a revolution in the domain of sensibility*. It is also the re-appropriation of the dimension of the *threshold*: when the capitalist mode of production is no longer understood as an eternal law of nature, the historical idea of the transition to this mode of production resurfaces, together with the possibility of opposing it, and of transforming reality[12]. In just over two months this *potential space* was reactivated, giving rise to a new construction of the world and the self, singular and collective: this is what the Commune was. New environments, new ways of meeting and coming together took shape, for the first time art was thought of in relation to historical, technical, social changes – in its «functional» essence (Benjamin [1936b]: 479) –, thus becoming something perfectly integrated into everyday life, no longer the idle and elitist opposite of everyday life, or a superficial compensation for work (on this, see also Ross [2013]). Extending the aesthetic dimension into everyday life, something that was promoted first and foremost by the *Fédération des Artistes*, aimed not only at making art accessible to all, but above all at making art an integral part of «the creative *process* of making»: it was a new «sensuous relationship to the materials […] and to one' own process and labour […], to the steps taken in making itself and to the remaking, in turn, of one's own capacities» (Ross [2015]: 99; see also Fédération des Artistes [1871]) –

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11 On the importance of Scheerbart for Benjamin and, in particular, the fantasy novel *Lesabéndio*, from his youthful years and the unfinished project of a work on *Politik*, of which *Lesabéndio-Kritik* was to have been the third part, see Desideri (2014); Steiner (2000); Palma (2008): 163-189; Gentili (2016).

12 A famous passage from the *Arcades Project* on the threshold problem: «We have grown very poor in threshold experiences […]. A *Schwelle* <threshold> is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action are in the word *schwellen*, and etymology ought not to overlook these senses» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 494).

a harmonious interplay between manual and intellectual sphere, between nature and technology; communal growth and wealth, polytechnicity, with Marx, *multilaterality of the human being* (Marx [1844]: 298-301).

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