

1. *Landscape and the primacy of the gaze*

Humans engage in a wide variety of spatial practices, each marked by its own history and aims. All spatial practice – for instance, labour migration, migration due to famine or war, pilgrimage, scientific expedition, or exile – carry an aesthetic dimension¹, insofar as every displacement is a bodily experience that engages our senses on multiple levels². Yet, in the West, it is only with the emergence of the modern concept of landscape that our sensuous experiences of space were thematized as such (Ritter, 1963). The emancipation of aesthetic experience, in line with Kant's claim that beauty entails «a purposiveness without an end» (Kant [1790], p. 111), gave rise to a new way of considering space: the aesthetic value of a portion of space is fully revealed only to an appreciating subject who has put into brackets any other interest and attribution of value to space itself. With the development of the modern concept of landscape, a new kind of spatial practice emerges: the bourgeois travel, increasingly framed in purely aesthetic terms, unlike the earlier aristocratic Grand Tour (Towner, 1985), where the contemplation of spatial beauty was pursued above all for educational purposes. Bourgeois travel, undertaken for the sake of aesthetic enjoyment, marks the first embryo of modern mass tourism.

These developments converge most clearly in the work of William Gilpin, particularly in his *Three Essays on the Picturesque* (Gilpin, 1792): one dedicated to the concept of picturesque, one devoted to the so-called «picturesque travel» and one to «sketching landscape». In the first essay, Gilpin stresses the distinction between beautiful and picturesque objects: whereas the former «please the eye in their natural state»; the latter «please from some quality, capable of being illustrated in paintings» (Gilpin, 1792, p. 3). In both cases, the role of the eye in assessing beauty prevails all the other senses: The author ties aesthetic value to pictorial models, assuming that the judgment of landscape beauty depends on compositional qualities comparable to those of landscape painting. In this sense, the rise of the picturesque taste marks a shift away from the 'Great Theory' of beauty (Tatarkiewicz, 1972), which conceived beauty as the reflection of cosmic and moral order, toward an aesthetic experience confined to visual satisfaction. Furthermore, the picturesque entails a representational mediation that many perspectives and theoretical approaches consider consubstantial with the very concept of landscape: from artialization (Roger, 1997) to critical geography (Cosgrove, 1998), from visual cultural studies (Berger, 1972) to cognitive

¹ Extensive research has been conducted on the issue. Concerning the aesthetics of migration, see de Oliveira, 2020 and Dakessian, 2023; regarding the aesthetics of exile, see Said, 2013; and on the aesthetics of pilgrimage, see Terreault, 2019 and Restuccia, 2025. Restuccia's insightful connection between practices of pilgrimage and the «prehistory of landscape» (Restuccia, 2025, p. 25) is particularly consistent, at least analytically, with the thesis I put forward in this article.

² 'Aesthetics' comes from the ancient Greek *aisthesis*, which means 'senses'. As a philosophical discipline, it extends its scope not only to the domains of art or taste judgements such as 'x is beautiful', but it refers to the whole field of sensuous experiences, of which it explores not only the affective dimension, but also the epistemological potential (Baumgarten [1750-1758], 2007).

environmental aesthetics (Carlson, 2009). Through representational mediation, the paradigm for appreciating real portions of space takes shape: a landscape painting that succeeds according to artistic and visual standards can shape our perception and appreciation of external environments and places. In this respect, there is a striking continuity between Gilpin's account of the picturesque and the contemporary category of 'Instagrammability', as Daniel Penny already suggested in 2017 (Penny, 2017). In fact, in both cases the aesthetic evaluation of a landscape relies on representational codes developed through the arts and media. Spatial phenomena are approached above all as objects of visual consumption, amplified by filters, lenses, and digital platforms.

Today, Instagram and similar platforms intensify this logic, generating a mass-mediated, yet highly personalized production of landscape images. Such processes have fuelled a global aestheticization of space, operating through standardizing both taste and the landscapes themselves. On the one hand, popularity metrics – likes, hashtags, iconographic clichés – converge into a «common landscape sense» (Tanca, 2019, p. 133) that determines what is considered attractive. On the other, the same algorithmic pressures can influence the very appearance of landscapes, as Marcello Tanca has argued, shaping the way places are staged for tourism. The spectacularization of historic centers, natural parks, and coastal areas makes this dynamic plain: real landscapes are often rearranged to conform to the expectations generated by digital images. Such aestheticization carries significant consequences. It privileges visibility over lived experience, representation over substance, homogenization over diversity. Above all, it risks obscuring the deeper ecological, temporal, and socio-political layers of landscapes, reducing them to consumable images. Against this backdrop, the need arises for a conception of landscape that resists aestheticization and affirms its substantive dimensions³. To meet this need, it is useful to rediscover the connections between the concept of landscape and other notions through which we refer to space in everyday language, such as place, territory, and environment. This is because each of these terms, even when we take into account their semantic transformations and multidisciplinary uses, embodies certain privileged ways of relating to space, each highlighting different essential meanings. Only by bringing these meanings into relation can we reconstruct the overall sense of the spatial phenomenon: a sense otherwise doomed to be lost or misunderstood within the framework of contemporary aestheticized spatial and media practices. Its beauty, then, will not be assessed solely on the level of immediate and subjective judgments of taste, but will emerge in connection with the processes intrinsic to the levels of place, territory, and environment – as an expression of its affective tones, the quality of its relationship with dwelling communities, and its environmental health (Moeller, 2011). In the following paragraphs, we will focus more specifically on

³ The meaning of the expression 'substantive' in this context will be clarified in the following paragraphs.

the relationship between the aesthetic concept of landscape and the ecological concept of environment.

2. The concept of environment between environmental history and environmental aesthetics

The reduction of aesthetic experience to visual enjoyment intersects with another fundamental process of modernity: the establishment of a clear divide between the domains of science and art, the former bound by objective facts and verifiable laws, the latter tied instead to creative freedom and subjective enjoyment⁴. The history of this separation, so deeply ingrained in common sense that it still underpins much of today's European school systems and beyond, is of course far too complex and multifaceted to be reconstructed in this essay. What we aim to emphasize here is that such a dualism between art and sciences leads to a splitting of the modern concept of nature: on the one hand, nature as the object of physical and biological science, which – through a trajectory reaching its fulfilment only in the second half of the nineteenth century – comes to be understood as 'environment'; on the other, nature as the object of aesthetic experience, which since the eighteenth century has been qualified as 'landscape'. Indeed, the conceptual distinction between environment and landscape corresponds only in part to the modern dualism of nature and culture (Ingold, 2000; Wylie, 2007). More precisely, it identifies two different ways of apprehending space. On the one hand, a scientific perspective, which in principle encompasses what the ecologist Eugene Odum defines as the «relations between organisms and their environment» (Odum, 1953, p. 3), including humans and built environments. On the other, a cultural, subjective, and representational perspective, in which the visual qualities of a portion of space (natural or built) are abstracted from the integrity of the spatial phenomenon and become the object of a specific experience: that of landscape as the aesthetic apprehension of space.

⁴ The history of this dualism is, of course, non-linear, and should be considered through its various stages across modernity. In this essay, however, we are deliberately evoking "modernity" without defining it rigorously in historiographical terms: our concern, rather, following authors such as Habermas (1985), Touraine (1992), and Latour (1993), to identify the underlying cultural tendencies that accompanied the centuries stretching from the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century to the great systematization of the sciences that took place between the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Among these tendencies, Latour argues, is dualistic reasoning, which distinguishes and opposes subject and object, culture and nature, art and science: «The modern divide between the natural world and the social world has the [...] constitutional character» (Latour, 1993, p. 13). However, as Touraine shows in the opening part of his critique of modernity, there is a marked difference between eighteenth-century modernity – Enlightenment though not yet rationalist – and nineteenth-century modernity, rather dominated by rationalist and positivist currents. Whereas in many examples from eighteenth century art and science worked together to achieve a comprehensive harmony of human existence, in the nineteenth century the relation between art and science more often took the form of a dramatic confrontation between, on the one hand, the 'objective' principles of positivist progress and, on the other, the 'subjective' and existential motives of the accursed or decadent artist.

As one can see, the dichotomy environment/landscape does not exactly correspond to the nature/culture dualism. This is evident in the field of environmental history, where nature and culture are understood as always mutually entangled. Environmental history takes as its premise an initial distinction between the environment *stricto sensu* – understood as the modelling of ecosystem dynamics – and the environment as we know it today, always already modified by human action. Today, the integration of relationships between social systems and natural ecosystems is widely accepted. Environmental historian Donald Hughes provides the following definition of environment:

Environment can be understood to include the Earth with its soil and mineral resources; with its water, both fresh and salt; with its atmosphere, climates, and weather; with its living things, animals and plants from the simplest to the most complex; and with energy received ultimately from the sun. It is important to understand these factors and their changes in order to do environmental history, but environmental history is not simply the history of environment. The human side of the relationship is always included (Hughes, 2016, pp. 4-5).

From the point of view of environmental history, the relationship between the human organism and its environment must be understood in the double direction: on the one hand «the influence of environmental factors on human history» and, on the other hand, «the environmental changes caused by human actions and the many ways in which the human-caused changes in the environment rebound and affect the course of change in human societies» (Hughes, 2016, pp. 5, 4). There is no room for a consideration of environment independently from its biunivocal relations to the humans we are: even «geology and palaeontology concern themselves with the study of the vast reaches of the chronology of Planet Earth before humans evolved, but environmental historians include these subjects as parts of their narratives only insofar as they affect human affairs» (Hughes, 2016, p. 5). In other words, a residual yet inevitable dimension of anthropocentrism underlies any environmental consideration: the scientific study of ecological balances and fluxes, of which humans are recognized as a part, necessarily enters the sphere of the lifeworld, supplying decision-makers, planners, and other actors and stakeholders with essential information and awareness. Yet the objective assessment of ecological fluxes and balances also belongs to the history of the very idea of environment itself, which, according to Donald Hughes, constitutes a third major issue for environmental history, alongside the evaluation of the impact of environmental factors on human societies and the evaluation of the impact of human action on the environment:

the study of human thought about natural environment and human attitudes towards it, including the study of nature, the science of ecology, and the ways in which systems of thought such as religions, philosophies, political ideologies, and popular culture have affected human treatment of various aspects nature (Hughes 2016, p. 8).

Environmental history examines not only how human cultures have conceived of the environment, but also how they have perceived and represented it. In this light, the modern landscape concept, understood as a cultural sensitivity to the aesthetic qualities of space, should be acknowledged as an integral part of environmental history. From this point of view, environmental aesthetics offers insights of great value, though not without some risk of misunderstanding.

One possible misinterpretation lies in an overly strict association of the environment concept with a specific object – that is, a specific kind of space rather than a specific aspect of the spatial phenomenon. Isis Brook, following the thesis advanced in a well-known 1966 article by Ronald Hepburn, the founding figure of American environmental aesthetics, argues that «models of art appreciation cannot be carried across to the natural world; that an aesthetics of nature has its own disciplines and expectations; and that it takes courage to resist stereotypical views, even to the point of experiencing ourselves in a new way» (Brook, 2010, p. 265). The author maintains that models of art appreciation cannot simply be carried across to the natural world, and that an aesthetics of nature must have its own disciplines and expectations. While this position rightly resists reducing natural beauty to artistic criteria, it nevertheless presupposes that nature and art are two distinct domains of objects, each requiring its own framework of appreciation. The environment is thus treated less as a relational process than as a separate object-class, set in opposition to works of art. As a result, this assumption risks reinforcing the very dualistic logic it aims to resist.

Moreover, the attempt to ground an environmental aesthetics independently of the cultural sensibilities and the medial and representational resources that shape aesthetic judgment in relation to art mirrors, in an equal and opposite way, the claim to reduce the aesthetic experience of space entirely to a cultural history of perceptions and representations. This latter approach inherits from Hegel the rejection of natural beauty in favor of an aesthetics fulfilled as a philosophy of art, since, within an idealist framework such as Hegel's, even the simple aesthetic appreciation of a landscape is a spiritual act through which a subject expresses a certain degree of culture and freedom:

What is higher about the spirit and its artistic beauty is not something merely relative in comparison with nature. On the contrary, spirit is alone the true, comprehending everything in itself, so that everything beautiful is truly beautiful only as sharing in this higher sphere and generated by it. In this sense the beauty of nature appears only as reflection of the beauty, that belongs to spirit, as an imperfect incomplete mode [of beauty] (Hegel, 1975, p. 2).

In this sense, the reduction of aesthetics to a philosophy of art is one of the central features of modernity and its dualistic logic (Vattimo, 2010), and landscape can be viewed as an artistic reconfiguration of space, irreducible, in itself, to the set of ecological factors that make it exist as a real portion of the Earth's surface. Contemporary environmental aesthetics, in its reaction against the re-

duction of nature to culture carried out by modern aesthetics understood as a philosophy of art, risks perpetuating the modern nature/culture dualism by asking how an aesthetic experience of the environment may be possible independently of the frames of landscape art (and thus of landscape as art).

Some authors have sought to remedy this risk by developing the category of ‘modified environments’: spaces that are neither fully natural nor fully cultural, but altered, such as agricultural landscapes, gardens, and hiking trails. By proposing this category, Emily Brady recognizes that «it is important to resist the collapse of nature into culture, and instead hold them in tension with one another» (Brady, 2018, p. 8). Yet the tension between the cultural and the natural cannot be resolved simply by positing a third class of objects, neither fully natural nor entirely cultural, that would require a distinct mode of appreciation, different from that applied to purely natural or artistic objects. The boundaries between these three categories of objects are in fact too porous, with the grey areas far more numerous than the clearly defined ones. On the one hand, the awareness of the extraordinary impact of human technical action on Earth’s ecosystems has rendered obsolete any attempt to identify a class of objects or environments that are entirely natural. On the other hand, the relative unpredictability of the Earth’s responses to human intervention (Stengers, 2015) testifies to the Earth’s otherness in relation to any claim to reduce it to a mere socio-cultural construct, to a wholly historical idea, or worse, to a mere cartographic or artistic representation.

To move beyond the one-sidedness of dualism, it is necessary to reconcile an awareness of the performativity of our actions on the environment, and of our representations of it, with a vivid sense of its substantive character⁵. Such reconciliation is possible only if the aesthetic experience of the environment is conceived as a primordial communication between environment and subject: a dialogue in which the subject, equipped with cultural pre-understandings and medial forms strong enough to shape even perceptual styles, nonetheless encounters an environment that, within aesthetic experience, *presents itself* in ways that may resist and challenge the subject’s own biases. Such a conception of aesthetic experience as communication, relation, and opening cannot be paired with a notion of landscape as a mere historical mode of visualizing environments, one that renders them available for immediate, unreflective aesthetic appreciation. Nor can it begin from analytical assumptions that, in principle, separate categories of objects (as if natural environments implied one kind of aesthetic experience, cultural environments another, and modified environments a subtle interweaving of the two). This is because aesthetic experience,

⁵ By «substantive character of landscape», borrowing an expression coined by the geographer Kenneth Olwig (1996) to refer to the political origin and meaning of the very term ‘Landschaft’ in early modern German usage, we mean that the aesthetics of landscape arises from the encounter between a perceiving subjectivity – individual or collective – equipped with particular visual styles and apparatuses, and the qualities that emerge directly from the shaped space. The forms through which space is articulated themselves arise from the historical interaction of natural and human morphologies.

understood in this way, is the *primum phaenomenologicum* from which any categorical distinction can arise. What comes into view instead is another conception of landscape: no longer the subjective/artistic/representational counterpart to the objective/scientific/ecological notion of environment, but rather the aesthetic skin of the environment itself, of which the human is the «perceptual activator» (Berleant, 1997, p. 12).

3. *The substantive conception of landscape*

While representationalist conceptions of landscape hold that the aesthetic qualities of the environment are produced by the cultural gaze, a substantive conception of landscape traces the origin of those qualities back to the environment itself: to the contours of the landforms, to the clouds that cover mountain peaks and are reflected in bodies of water, to the interplay between the color of the mountain and that of the buildings constructed from the same stone. Humans are the perceptual activators of all this, yet these aesthetic qualities of the environment also exert effects of their own on the behaviour of animal and plant species, even if each species processes them according to its own perceptual modalities and perspective⁶. For instance, ethological research by West and Laverty shows that bumblebees prefer bilaterally symmetrical flowers to asymmetrical ones, even when nectar rewards are identical (West & Laverty, 2020). Morphological symmetry thus serves as an aesthetic cue that elicits specific behaviors. Not only do individual organisms and their parts display aesthetic qualities that regulate behaviour and communication, but environmental affordances too can function aesthetically as well as functionally (Sánchez, 2022): the visual, acoustic, or olfactory character of a given environment can significantly influence the behaviour of animals and plants. These brief ethological considerations help to release the idea of landscape from the narrow – yet almost ubiquitous in the contemporary lifeworld-representationalist definition. By restoring to the environment its aesthetic qualities as an *in re* potential, this potential can be actualized in as many ways as there are possible aesthetic experiences of the environment, depending on the forms of mediation available to each living species within its evolutionary horizon. In other words, landscape is the perceptual skin of the environment, endowed with its own aesthetic potential, which nevertheless remains inappropriable as such: every perceptual actualization of the spatial phenomenon is a dynamic, embedded, embodied interpretation of it.

⁶ Anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro observes: «non-humans see things as ‘people’ do. But the things that they see are different: what to us is blood is manioc beer to the jaguar; what to us is a rotting corpse is to the souls of the dead a soaked manioc; what we see as a muddy waterhole the tapirs see as a great ceremonial house?» (Viveiros de Castro, 1998, p. 478). The functions assumed by a given object in the perspectives of humans and non-humans are species-dependent; yet the very possibility of developing a certain function or assuming a given meaning within a given perspective rests on the object’s inherent aesthetic qualities, which in turn contribute to shaping the aesthetic character of the environment itself. The perceptual activation of these aesthetic qualities is, therefore, an interpretive act.

Our belonging to the human species thus imposes unsurpassable constraints, perhaps aggravated by the fact that such belonging is not tied to any transcendental form of intentionality that would allow us to reconstruct once and for all the modes and forms of our species' aesthetic experience. In fact, the range of aesthetic experiences possible for our species depends as much on cultural, technological, and medial evolution as on natural evolution. This is why, although the substantive landscape is always already inherent in the environment itself, it can never be exhausted by any final representation. It is also why absolutist or palingenetic forms of landscape representation and planning – founded on the programmatic obscuring of the environmental conditions from which they arise and on the overemphasis of historical-artistic factors⁷ – nonetheless emerge within cultural perspectives that remain dynamically entangled with the very environmental conditions in which they are embedded. The hypothesis of the substantive landscape must therefore also contend with an inevitable humanistic residue: the environment shared by all is, for us, first and foremost the landscape perceived through the various perspectives opened by the natural and cultural evolution of our species. It is within this horizon that a substantive conception of landscape can be grounded: one that, while acknowledging the inevitability of perspective, discerns at the origin of the very idea of landscape an inalienable environmental core.

We can now outline two main features of the substantive character of landscape in relation to environment: holism and panperceptuality⁸. Taken in their mutual implications, these characteristics make it possible to move beyond the modern concept of landscape toward an anti-dualistic, anti-reductionistic, and transdisciplinary direction. Many philosophical investigations inspired by phenomenology (Ingold, 2000; Wylie, 2007), assemblage theory (Dewey, 2014), non-representational theory (Waterton, 2018), and pragmatism (Siani, 2024) are oriented in this direction. Such attempts are bound to encounter the theoretical proposals developed within the environmental and social sciences, where efforts are being made to integrate the concept of landscape – originally aesthetic and artistic in nature (D'Angelo, 2021) – into disciplinary frameworks aimed at

⁷ In fact, Hegel's very denial of the significance of natural beauty rests on a conception that ultimately negates the debt every artistic creation owes to nature's self-presentations: the more spirit is freed from natural necessity and from the constraints imposed by the environment, the freer and more beautiful its art will be. A few considerations drawn from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* help to clarify this aspect. Every people is seen to correspond to a «natural type of locality», which is also the «natural foundation of its history» (Hegel, 2011, p. 122). In those regions where environmental conditions are too extreme, there is no room for the achievement of the highest spiritual and artistic manifestations, for the environment suppresses the human and its potential flourishing. The condition for the realization of the human spirit is that humanity can separate itself from nature and adapt it to its own free ends. What is worth emphasizing here is the impact of this conception on modern common sense: it also helps to justify a certain appropriative and extractive attitude toward the Earth's space.

⁸ In other essays I have discussed additional aspects of this conception, such as its autonomy and its utopian-political horizon; in this case, also for reasons of space, I have to limit my analysis to the features that most clearly reveal the relationship between the aesthetic dimension of landscape and the notion environment.

assessing the impact of spatial planning, conservation and protection policies, and the active participation of citizens in local life.

1) Holism. The natural and human factors of a landscape are interconnected in such a way as to produce a unitary character that is immediately recognizable. This is the core of the definition of landscape provided by the European Convention of Landscape signed in Florence in 2000: «Landscape means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors»⁹. It is important to note that, in this framework, holism does not necessarily mean harmony: the character of a landscape emerges from the interaction of elements that are often in conflict with one another. Some of these conflicts have been mapped. A large dismissed industrial area in a desertified landscape, for example, may embody the tension between a spatial organization inherited from a territory's industrial past and the new needs arising from socio-economic transformations, as expressed by the living community of the present (Raffestin, 2005). Other conflicts occur at the ecological level. In recent years, for instance, the forest landscapes of northern Italy have been changing under the pressure of heat waves, progressive soil desertification, and the spread of invasive plant and animal species such as *Popillia japonica* or *Ailanthus altissima*. The proliferation of invasive species generates a number of conflicts – with other animal and plant species, with agricultural activities, and with territorial and landscape planning. In all cases, conflict remains a form of interconnection: the parties in conflict belong to the same landscape, and the unfolding of their conflicts is a determining factor in its dynamism. In general, the character of a landscape emerges from a network of tensions woven through the interactions of situated human and non-human actors. The aesthetic dimension of these conflicts is therefore evident already at the morphological level.

It is worth noticing that the English term ‘character’ is one of the possible translations of the German word *Stimmung*, used by Georg Simmel in his influential essay *Philosophy of Landscape* (1913):

We say that a landscape arises when a range of natural phenomena spread over the surface of the earth is comprehended by a particular kind of unity, one that is distinct from the way this same visual field is encompassed by the causally thinking scholar, the religious sentiments of a worshipper of nature, the teleologically oriented tiller of the soil, or a strategist of war. The most important carrier of this unity may well be the ‘mood’, as we call it, of a landscape. (Simmel, 2020, p. 224).

In this translation, *Stimmung* is rendered as ‘mood’ to emphasize its affective dimension. Adriana Veríssimo Serrão notes, however, that the original German term also evokes «atmospheric and musical tonalities» (Serrão, 2019, p. 32). In any case, what is at stake here is a relatively simple aesthetic quality that arises

⁹ *Council of Europe Landscape Convention* (ETS No. 176), <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treaty-num=176>>.

from the distinctive association of forms, elements, and processes occurring at the environmental level. Around the same years, one of the founders of North American human geography, Carl Sauer, defined landscape as «an area made up of a distinct association of forms, both physical and cultural» (Sauer, 1996, p. 300). Sauer conceives of landscape morphologically: there is no real separation between what we would today call the ecological notion of environment and landscape itself, except that landscape refers to what is visible and aesthetically appreciable within a given environment (Naveh, 2000). «The best geography», Sauer writes exactly one hundred years ago, «has never disregarded the aesthetic qualities of landscape», revealing «a symphonic quality in the contemplation of the areal scene» (Sauer, 1996, p. 311). This emphasis on the ‘character’, ‘mood’, ‘atmosphere’ of the landscape as the dynamic outcome of the organic interconnection of factors leads us to the second characteristic: the perceptual activation of the landscape’s aesthetic potential is not confined to vision alone but engages a rich, dense, and multisensory experience.

2) Panperceptuality. The character of a landscape is sensibly communicated. Humans react to and culturally rework the stimuli they receive from landscapes, yet the origin of a landscape’s aesthetic qualities belong to the spatial phenomenon itself. In the spatial phenomenon understood as environment, as territory, as place, there are many aspects that remain imperceptible. Imperceptible, in general, are the continuous temporal processes that structure and transform the landscape. Perception and representation give us back a present experience – an experience destined to be overtaken by time. The static representation of a landscape allows us to discretize a concrete state of the landscape at a given moment, yet its ongoing evolution necessarily remains beyond the scope of the representation already in place. Nevertheless, perception and representation remain central even to a substantive conception of landscape, insofar as they enable the activation and actualization of its aesthetic potential. What perception offers us, at every moment, is the vivid present of the encounter with the spatial phenomenon; what representation returns is the actualization of a past state of the landscape, of an interpretation already lived.

Of course, perception is not a blank page on which the environment simply imprints its forms¹⁰. From a phenomenological point of view, perception can be understood as both a passive and an active moment. Its active component lies in its capacity to give form to at least some aspects of experience according to the expectations shaped over time by previous perceptions. This is what is meant when we refer to landscape as a matter of interpretation: our perception is always already oriented by the paths traced by earlier perceptions. The aesthetic experience of landscape is operative and constant, though not thematic, as long as our perceptual expectations correspond to the content of experience – just as when, every morning, looking out from my balcony, I find the same

¹⁰ For these considerations, I follow a phenomenological conception of perception inspired to Husserl’s lectures on ‘passive synthesis’ (Husserl, 2001) and reinterpreted in mediological terms by Emmanuel Alloa (2011).

landscape as the day before. Aesthetic experience becomes rich, dense, and thematic when some change – either on the side of the perceiving subject or on the side of the spatial phenomenon – interrupts the flow of expectations generated by the accumulation of fulfilled perceptions: as when, one morning, looking out from my balcony, my attention is caught by a new mark, a peculiar color of the atmosphere, a new sound in the background. It is precisely the *disorientation* (*spaesamento*) arising from such occasions that renders this experience explicitly and, indeed, properly aesthetic. What, in the unreflective flow of everyday life, serves as the background for our actions in the *lifeworld*, becomes worthy of attention and aesthetic consideration when the taken-for-granted character of spatial experience is suspended.

At this point, we unexpectedly encounter a new implication of the concept of *landscape* as it emerged in the modern context, in relation to the spread of leisure travel and the establishment of aesthetics as an autonomous philosophical discipline. The suspension of everyday interests, which, since Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and even earlier in Charles Batteux's definition of the 'fine arts', has been considered a defining feature of aesthetic experience in the proper sense – is in fact the very condition through which it becomes possible to identify the aesthetic potential of the spatial phenomenon as such. This identification does not necessarily entail separation, rupture, fragmentation, or the reduction of the spatial phenomenon, nor its subordination to the laws that govern individual taste. In this framework, however, the intensification of visual technologies characteristic of the so-called «scopic regime of modernity» (Jay 1988, p. 5)¹¹ has blurred these distinctions, reducing the emancipatory and cognitive potential of aesthetic experience of places to a reified, ready-to-consume commodity. Indeed, a media system that allows for the increasingly rapid traversal of planetary distances through visual and representational devices also entails the possibility of reducing places to the images that circulate of them in visual media. If such reduction takes place without the necessary precautions provided by a robust aesthetic education, it inevitably promotes *aestheticized* practices that have little to do with the richness and emancipatory potential of genuine aesthetic experience. A crucial component of this aesthetic education should precisely be the rediscovery of the *pan-perceptual* dimension of landscape. Although the picturesque exalted above all the visual dimension of landscape, the stimulation of other senses has never been foreign to it, as an abundant literature on *soundscape*, *smellscape*, and *tastescape* demonstrates.

Above all, the rediscovery of the pan-perceptual dimension of landscape is a logical consequence of its *substantive* character: as the 'skin' of a given environment, the landscape does not simply stand before us as a representation, but

¹¹ The American scholar Martin Jay (1988) uses the expression «scopic regime» to describe the way a culture organizes and practices visibility, according to the technologies and media it possesses, and the social and political interests that prevail in a given historical context. Modernity constitutes a scopic regime in the fullest sense, as it is a medial order that most strongly privileges and valorizes vision within the technological and media developments of the past two centuries.

rather embraces us, gathers us, surrounds us – assigning us, as it were, to our places and paths. Before composing the landscape as representation, we ourselves, as human beings, inhabit a certain portion of terrestrial space which, insofar as it is perceived, assumes for the perceiver the character of landscape. Every external sense contributes to defining this primary meaning of *proprioception*: the perception of ourselves as embodied and situated subjects who, at every moment, depend on the elements, qualities, and processes that sustain the environments we inhabit and traverse. In other words, the disinterested aesthetic experience of landscape – by suspending the self-evidence that ordinarily arises in our everyday relation to space – may offer an opportunity to bring into focus the *onto-phenomenological dependence* of the subject on the environment, an aspect otherwise obscured by the commodified and sterilized forms of enjoyment promoted by a purely visual aesthetics.

The point, then, is not to deny the visual and representational dimension of landscape, but, as Merleau-Ponty suggested in *Eye and Mind* (1964), to reintegrate vision into the body, and the body into the environment. The benefits of an aesthetic education oriented toward this goal would far exceed the theoretical dimension of the problem. To frame aesthetic experience in terms of an original, multisensory, and potentially disorienting openness to the Earth means, ultimately, to rethink our very being-in-the-world in terms of *humility*.

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ABSTRACT

Environment and landscape are often set in dualistic opposition: the environment is taken to denote the substantive processes involving the flows and energies of ecosystems, while the landscape is understood as a cultural mode of representing and perceiving framed portions of the environment. Drawing on a phenomenological conception of landscape, this article challenges a dualistic interpretation of its relationship with the environment, while preserving the aesthetic significance of landscape experience without reducing it to mere cultural taste or artistic representation. The dualistic framework is overcome by returning the aesthetic qualities of landscape to the environment itself, in the form of aesthetic potentials rooted in environmental affordances that can be perceptually activated from different perspectives. This move anchors the emergence of landscapes to the substantive processes that shape environments. In conclusion, holism and pan-perceptuality are singled out as two defining features of a substantive understanding of landscape.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics; Gaze; Holism; Landscape; Perception

SOMMARIO

Le sostanze del paesaggio. Ambiente e paesaggio sono spesso presentati in opposizione dualistica: l'ambiente viene inteso come l'insieme dei processi sostantivi che coinvolgono i flussi e le energie degli ecosistemi, mentre il paesaggio è concepito come una modalità culturale di rappresentazione e percezione di porzioni incorniciate dell'ambiente. Basandosi su una concezione fenomenologica del paesaggio, questo articolo mette in discussione l'interpretazione dualistica del suo rapporto con l'ambiente, pur preservando il significato estetico dell'esperienza paesaggistica, senza ridurla a semplice gusto culturale o rappresentazione artistica. Il quadro dualistico viene superato restituendo le qualità estetiche del paesaggio all'ambiente stesso, sotto forma di potenzialità estetiche radicate nelle *affordance* ambientali che possono essere attivate percettivamente da prospettive diverse. Questo passaggio ancora l'emergere dei paesaggi ai processi sostanziali che plasmano gli ambienti. In conclusione, l'olismo e la pan-percettualità vengono individuati come due caratteristiche distintive di una comprensione sostanziale del paesaggio.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Estetica; Sguardo; Olismo; Paesaggio; Percezione