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The Aesthetic Exploitation of Landscape

The aesthetic discovery of landscape in Europe is fairly recent and dates back to the 18th century when the threat of industrialisation became visible and tangible. To put it succinctly, landscape is the overall view an observer (immobile or in motion) has of his surroundings from a given angle. However the focus on the landscape in its varied forms, like the pleasure one derives from observing it, delineates a complex shift in sensibility and thinking from a historical and cultural viewpoint open to profound and metaphorical meanings bound up with being. The landscape thus can be seen as a concept concerning numerous disciplines. If we restrict our analysis to the area of aesthetics, to the taste for nature which developed during the Age of Reason, the scene which immediately unfolds before us presents the picturesque as a vision of nature.

Historically the concept of the picturesque has been interpreted as the reappraisal and view of nature from the point of view of an aesthetic reflection on beauty. Signs of this research on landscape and the environment can be traced even prior to its theorization in Great Britain at the end of the 18th century to Vasari when this term was used merely to indicate a technique in painting »alla pittoresca«. Even then these signs were highly particular ways of depicting life and objects in relation to the perceptual and psychological activity of the subject. During the 17th century and above all during the 18th century the picturesque progressively developed into a taste through a pressing visual strategy by virtue of what was »proper to painting and painters«. Thus in the complex transition from the classical to the romantic, we witness the aesthetic discovery of landscape parallel to the positive discovery of the natural sciences. Moreover, because of the reasons mentioned above, a fertile exchange between the eye which observes and contemplates (the natural eye) and the selective eye of painting (the pictorial eye) can be discerned in these pathways. This exchange is also extended to the relation between creation and utilization, between painter and observer. Since psychological processes are linked to the evolution of taste, seeing (I am referring to the historico-perceptual strategies of the picturesque) implies a view; whereas contemplating and representing are seen as

promoting a poetic broadening of perception, giving rise to an aesthetic emotion and an authentic vision.

In its search for effect and its taste for ruins the picturesque marks the passage from the baroque to romanticism as it distances itself from reason and from the rules of classicism relying on freedom of invention. It does not convey a profound authentic feeling, but a suggestive staging of curiosities and impressions from which unusual and powerful images of wild and spontaneous nature arise. During the 18th century in Great Britain the picturesque mingled with the sublime theorized by Burke, with the gothic and with the pastoral tradition of literature. It is a plural concept in which *beauty in painting* merges with *beauty in nature*. This can be seen in the visual arts, architecture, gardening, literature (visual descriptivism) and the taste for travel and faraway places.

In this investigation the picturesque is probably also the first important theory concerning the landscape. Outside Europe, in China for example, the aesthetic interest in the landscape flourished much earlier – about a millenium earlier – and led to the view of man and nature conjoined within a cosmic, spiritual design. Behind its evolution and its visual discovery seen as a framework of observation, composition and points of view (lights, panoramas, scenes) a description unfolds which in time selects, improves, orders, establishes criteria, sets up comparisons, and elaborates ideas. From the feeling of wonder experienced by John Dennis (1693), John Addison (1705), Anthony Shaftesbury (1709) and George Berkeley at the sight of overhanging rocks, roaring torrents, rugged cliffs and waterfalls, and shadowy forests to the research conducted by William Gilpin, Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight anticipating romantic, frenzy, an aesthetic theory emerges, halfway between our imagination and the pleasure of sight and of the senses. It is a reasoned sensibility founded on the value attributed to the irregularity, variety, intricacy and roughness of a wild and disorderly nature, an aesthetic pleasure which relies on spontaneity and caprice. Nature is a spectacle, a theater of the unusual, the stage of our imaginings, a point of departure and of return. The astonishment expressed by Goethe (1779) and Hegel (1795) before the view of the Bernese Alps can easily be read as a romantic passion emerging from a pleasure typical of picturesque taste. The traveller of the picturesque was guided towards solitary and uncommon landscapes, architectural ruins and tangled vegetation. The description of landscapes becomes a composition of selected images, a classification of events and impressions, conjoined judgements made explicit, an elaboration of general concepts and of practical interventions, a path of analogies and memories, a project of variable patterns, a focus on particular knowledge to attain a heightened sensibility. In the writ-

ings on the picturesque at the end of the 18th century and at the beginning of the 19th century a broad and systematic interpretation of the world around us and of vegetable, animal and human life began to take shape. What we find interesting today, despite the differences between the various authors and their cultural and temporal backgrounds, is the strategy adopted in the observation of nature, the measures to improve its arrangement and the pleasures that this arouses also in relation to spectacular outcomes, effect and feeling. It is a reordering that follows the laws of nature and the work of man, an illusion worth returning to in order to reformulate our attitudes. This illusion was to appear again in the observations of Schinkel and Constable and later expanded in a project for a new sensibility in philosophy.

Many things have changed since the end of the 18th century, but this profound feeling for nature has not died out, for we still seek an intimate contact with the landscape, seen and experienced as a whole by our minds and bodies. Between the world of nature and the world of art which reflects it, beauty, grace, the sublime, the picturesque and other aesthetic ideas continue to spread their seeds and suggest infinite forms to the imagination. To perceive the landscape undoubtedly brings into play an aesthetic act which forms our culture and history in general. In this connection the teachings of Rosario Assunto in Italy were decisive in pointing out how the landscape and its interpretation promote a high degree of civilization in the evolution of taste.

He reminded us that the landscape contains the traces of the identity of nature and of the spirit in proposing sensibilities illuminated in turn by various aesthetic categories. Contemplation, he asserted, is not pure fantasy, but an exercise in feeling. Certain morphologies of landscape can become traces of poetics, or ideal indications. Beneath these analyses and the sentiment of nature lies a criticism whereby material being is the result of a working process equal to aesthetic being. Landscape is an aesthetic institution by virtue of itself, of literary and travel testimonies, of visual arts and of the subject's imagination. This takes us back to the relation between nature and culture within which the ecological comparison falls. In Assunto's thought landscape is the form of culture and history, the form in which culture and history have been absorbed. As for the problem regarding the value of natural beauty, he opposes the views expressed by Croce (*Aesthetica in nuce*) who reiterated the traditional separation between natural and artistic beauty. Assunto (*Introduzione alla critica del paesaggio*, 1963) also proposes to establish whether it is possible to elaborate a »landscape criticism« comparable to art criticism. This would give rise to a landscape criticism centering on the feeling of nature involving philosophical reality, culture, and the vision of the world in a connection supported by the aesthetic ideal. This ideal

underlies the discovery of nature and transforms man into an artist. As the mediator between nature and history, man today must flee from the city of Prometheus founded on economism, technical rationalism and scientism and seek shelter in the city of Anfione who softened the rationality of building with music and song.

In recent years the attention has been focused not so much on the comparison between aesthetic sensibility and artistic production, on the aims of philosophy and the »objectivity« of natural beauty as on the fact that nature itself may be perceived as a work of art. As a result one needs to go beyond the perspective of a study of landscape in art, as Kenneth Clark did, or conversely, of art in landscape, as the theoreticians of the picturesque at the end of the 18th century proposed. Moreover, even the difference between gardens and the natural and cultural landscape, the latter being the result of the work of man who molded it, is for the most part interpreted today as an art of nature capable of encompassing garden and landscape. The landscape (natural or rural) of the entire world could be viewed as a garden, and all the gardens of the world, even the smallest ones, could be considered landscapes in relation to the world in its totality.

An aesthetics of landscape is thus delineated which, beyond the debate on the system of the arts, appears to be far removed from the principle of »aimless finalism«, of the »disinterested pleasure« of art elaborated by Kant. The broadened notion which is presented allows one to consider both theoretical and practical aspects ranging from the fields of philosophy to art, from psychology to anthropology, from agriculture and geography to biology and ecology: in short, aesthetic utopia becomes also an ethical project.

The aesthetics of landscape is based on the fact that we are the ones who have created the image of what surrounds us, both on the plane of feeling and of the representation of things, in history and through history. The very myth of the wilderness, fueled by the fathers of modern environmentalism, should be reconsidered in the light of our vision of nature, even the wildest landscape very often bears the signs of man and, in any case, the wilderness once again expresses the search of the imagination, the will of creative insight to discover the intimate genius of the world around us. Nature and human perception (undoubtedly oriented and heightened perception), like the relationship between object and subject, are not two distinct kingdoms and cannot be separated. A panorama is formed by the varieties of the given materials of which it is composed, but also by the memories which have built up and overlapped over the centuries in a process contemporaneous to writing. As Simon Shama asserts, it is our perception that creates the difference between raw material and landscape.

The landscape therefore is a product of man's work and mind. It is in this way that we may comprehend how the sight of nature arouses the imagination. The imagination, as we know, is strictly linked to perception in contemplating the landscape. The genius of a single artist is replaced by the genius of the earth and of our meeting with nature when, voluntarily or involuntarily, we are prompted to assign the value of art to it, bearing in mind that history and memory must never be seen as distinct from man's living experience. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty aptly put it, the landscape is situated between the gaze cast by the observer and the flesh of the world. It is the result of a synaesthetic act and is at one with us.

Psychological time, connected to the fruition of what surrounds us, expanding and suddenly contracting, is no doubt important from the viewpoint of aesthetic reception and artistic creation, but movement is also central because of the variation of the points of view it produces. With respect to the aesthetic perception of landscape, movement automatically involves other senses: besides sight, a fixed gaze and its particular vertigo of feeling, hearing, smell and taste as well.

Movement exerts an all-embracing grip on the world and involves the whole body. At a more careful examination what emerges is a continual interplay of viewpoints in time and space according to different speeds and means. Walking, dancing, swimming, riding, cycling, travelling by motorcycle, car, train or plane are, in our case, ways of experiencing the landscape aesthetically. As described by literature, painting and other arts and as we can directly experience ourselves, the landscape changes its appearance. We live in the wonder of feeling, ranging from a solitary stroll, reminiscent of Rousseau, to a journey by plane. The landscape alters its appearance thanks to our movements, but also thanks to other factors – atmospheric, climatic and seasonal variations of light, color, wind and temperature – to variations caused by natural phenomena (vulcanic eruptions, earthquakes and so on) or to contact with different materials such as sand, earth, water, grass, marble, etc.

The perception of movement, time and space is conditioned by the changing landscape. In this connection it must be pointed out that today man's interventions are not restricted to cultivated land and woodlands, but also comprise those of contemporary art such as land art, earth art, environmental art and ecological art. These events are the concern of environmental aesthetics which, on the one hand, observes and theorizes artistic processes linked to the environment, and, on the other, launches the idea of safeguarding nature in the same way as one does works of art. At any rate, environmental aesthetics and the aesthetics of landscape may be usefully integrated.

The evolution of taste for an aesthetic categorization of our surroundings in a perception of both distance and closeness must not be seen as focusing exclusively on the past or on purposes of conservation and restoration, but also on the future. Among the landscapes that this aesthetics comprises (natural, cultural, urban), those provided by space exploration must also be included. Within a few years human beings will colonize various points of our solar system, and it will no longer be a question of observing privileged landscapes; we will have the thrill of a new Grand Tour. How then will sensibility respond amid virtual reality, new media and adventures outside our planet? We will soon find out by undergoing rapid cultural changes. However we must take note of the fact that our sensibility expands between the universe of communication and space exploration as homogenization advances (the number of species is diminishing as well as the number of languages and cultural habits). The appraisal of nature can reach and is already reaching borders undreamed of even a few years ago.

The aesthetics of landscape is an organic rethinking of the sentiment of nature, a product of the outcomes of civilization and art. It is at the same time history, criticism, culture, conservation, education and work; it transforms man, capable of seeing, contemplating, respecting and promoting, so that he may be conducted from a plane of mere reception to one of active, profound participation, beyond the consumption of green space, beyond a logic linked to the use of leisure time, beyond simplistic solutions of environmental impact along a path originating in ancient Greece and leading to the present. Along this path we are invited to consider certain morphologies of landscape as traces of a poetics, as ideal suggestions, and to detach ourselves from a ravaged space-environment in order to relaunch an aesthetic and ecological project on a vast scale. Because a place is not only a set of physical and geographical features, but an irrepressible, symbolic, unconscious, individual and collective memory.

Besides the authors and ideas usually associated with the aesthetics of landscape, two further considerations must be added. The first one concerns the cathartic effect of a »beautiful view« in Arthur Schopenhauer, the second is the motif of illusion in Jurgis Baltrusaitis.

In Book III of the *Supplements* (1844) [*Ergänzungen: Vereinzelte Bemerkungen über Naturschönheit*] to *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer dwells on the observations regarding the beauty of nature and states that every modification, even the slightest, which an object undergoes due to its position, shortening, distance, illumination or linear and aerial perspective is infallibly given by its effect on the eye and taken into exact account; the Indian proverb »every grain of rice casts a shadow« is thus validated. In this

chapter the assertion »how aesthetic nature is« refers to the variety and spontaneity of nature and praises its wildness. However, what strikes one most about these pages is the consideration that thought pursues the method of nature after receiving its first impulse. He explicitly declares: »A beautiful view is therefore a cathartic of the mind, just as music according to Aristotle is of the feeling, and in its presence one will think most correctly« [*Eine schöne Aussicht ist daher ein Kathartikon des Geistes, wie die Musik, nach Aristoteles des Gemütes, und in ihrer Gegenwart wird man am richtigsten denken*]. These reflections are influenced by several passages in paragraph 39 of *The World as Will and Idea* where the sentiment of the sublime and of the variety of nature in the representation of our mind is discussed. Despite the difference between the motifs, the beautiful view as a 'cathartic of the mind' (*Supplements*) echoes a passage in *The World as Will and Idea* where consciousness is described as dissolving into nothingness, like a drop of water in an ocean: we are one with the world. Schopenhauer observes that many objects of our intuition arouse the sentiment of the sublime in us because, by virtue of their great extension and antiquity, in other words, of their duration, we feel reduced to nothingness in their presence, yet we are inebriated by the joy of contemplating them; high mountains, the Pyramids and the colossal ruins of ancient times belong to this category. It is in this sense that nature is the aesthetic manifesting itself as art. The cathartic effect and the principle of annulment are valuable in aiding our understanding of the very quality of feeling and contemplating.

Equally valuable in Baltrušaitis' view according to which the garden is a place of illusion (a term already employed together with reinvention), not only in the sense of a fantastic microcosm, but also as the sum of the most diverse forms of experience and knowledge, from plants to animals, from water to minerals, in an infinite broadening of horizons. Natural history, archeology, the history of civilizations and technologies take part in this evolution of the garden in the perspective of a new encyclopedia. As an image of the world, the landscape, like the garden is revealed to be a terrain of illusion, totality, eternity and beauty in a surge of nostalgia and melancholy. The landscape is a completed vision, endlessly entwined and fluctuating in the depths of spirituality and pervaded by the inexpressible: it is an internal vision which corresponds to an external vision in a mutual disappearance of nature and man. This vision can be understood as spiritual form and work of art (in a process) of styles capable of dissolving into an original, essential, oneiric nothingness. Baltrušaitis develops his theory of illusion through affective elements in a becoming of recognition of object and subject. Illusion is the basis of a philosophy of the earth, of thought regarding

our affective origin in nature in the light of hope and trust in the salvation of humanity. Let us instill the vision of an earth renewed, an eden regained, a dream about to be fulfilled. As illusion is not alien to our imagination, it is not, nor should it be alien to our doing.

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