

## **“Art and Social Engagement”**

### **IN DEFENCE OF NATURE**

*by*

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Daily experience shows us that the protection of nature cannot be ascribed to aesthetic reasons only but also to biological and environmental ones (for instance, at a first glance, an area subject to atomic radiation does not seem to be contaminated but instead unscathed and beautiful). Yet, at the same time, experience indicates that an environment that provides us with an aesthetic satisfaction also is a healthy and sound environment to live in. We may start from this contradiction to look at nature as the result of culture and history, namely as the natural and/or urban landscape. In this case, we view it from a phenomenological and relational aesthetic perspective, thus going beyond the limits of a merely objective or subjective definition of natural beauty - which is indeed so varied and diverse. This vantage point becomes even more effective when analysing the environmental change dynamics, in other words, when we realise that a natural landscape image – i.e. a landscape made up of "places" (the places that identify memory and cult) - is today mixed up with another type of landscape, which instead appears to be made up of "non-places". The phenomenological perspective proves to be helpful for the understanding of the intersection and transformation of places and non-places.

Since the world of globalisation is characterised by the predominance of economy and technology, it tends to be a world of transit and movement. Airports, hotel chains, highways, supermarkets, trade fair districts, etc. are to be regarded as "non-places" – as defined by Marc Augé. He states that their function is not related to a certain place, or to the aim of creating either unique identities, or symbolic relations –

which have, by the way, lost their value since the Middle Ages -, or common heritage; rather, it is intended to promote movement, flows, consumption, the use of various services in a world-wide network. These spaces are dominated by stereotypes, déjà vu, excessively full and identical features, which tend to be always the same, wherever they are, throughout the world; in a word, it is a world of redundancy. These waiting places are landscapes without nature, crowded with people, but devoid of humanity without any sign of symbols and time. Furthermore, "non-places" are temporary and rapidly replaceable entities. Yet, sudden stops, traffic jams or downtimes occur in communications (unforeseen disasters, accidents, strikes, etc.) in these spaces characterised by speed and instantaneousness. The idea and feeling of emptiness accompanies the expansion of cities, abandoned building yards or uncultivated fields, which will soon turn into objects of use and abuse.

The development of the contemporary context must be read and interpreted so as to take into account not just the transformation of places but the tragedy or agony that nature itself is confronted with, due to environmental disasters, or to hydro-geological damage provoked mainly by man. While the tragedy of nature occurs in certain places, at the same time, somewhere else, nature conservation projects are enacted. As a matter of fact, two opposite forces are at play: on one hand, destructive forces (wars, natural disasters) and, on the other hand, reshaping constructive forces (landscape architecture, restoration of cities, etc.). This may seem paradoxical but it is true: violence and aggressiveness on one hand, peace and harmony on the other hand. Yet, destruction today only leads to ruins and debris, being totally insensitive to memory and time. No ruins exist that can make us think of an illusion of eternity or be evocative of a melancholic or nostalgic aura, as might have been the case in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They simply are the remains of an outburst of violence to be eliminated and an empty space to be filled in. The point of contact between places and "non-places" is characterised by suffering and atrocity, a fit of destruction that derives from war, terrorism and speculation.

The aesthetic experience that we achieve in nature cannot be analyzed as a value in itself, needing as such of conservation, and the capacity to create the need of protection, but rather as a comprehensive vision referring to biology, ecology and politics. The idea underlying Ecological Aesthetics in Germany, but also Environmental

Aesthetics in England has moved from the necessity of “defending nature” to the search for aesthetic reasons for doing so. This greatly differs from the theories of natural beauty, characteristic of previous periods, because in these theories the necessity of conservation was not required. Works of Art need to be preserved and protected, while in the case of nature, there are many reasons, not only aesthetic, that prompt us to protect it (biological, moral, economic). As for art, the aesthetic value is the sole motive; however, this is not completely true (works of art are preserved also as ethnological and historical documents). The important issue is the symmetry thus created between the natural beauty and artistic beauty. The latter is assumed as a primary value, a value in itself, while natural beauty is assumed as a derived value. Natural beauty exists in our heart, not because we are prompted to consider worthy of conservation that which provides us with an aesthetic pleasure in nature, but because we find in aesthetic value ulterior support for a conviction we already possess: nature is to be respected.

Yet, where does the image of the natural landscape come from? When we talk about nature we refer to all those things that surround us and that are laden with human, cultural and historical values. As stated by Simmel (1913), the configuration of the world after the Middle Ages, upon the decline of symbolic thinking, for the first time disclosed to us the landscape of nature. It is no surprise, therefore, that in the Middle Ages or in ancient times it was not possible to seize the meaning of landscape, in the sense of the significance of details linked to one’s state of mind. As a matter of fact, it was not until the 15<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> centuries that the formal independence of the spiritual act of landscape translated into landscape painting. Simmel also added that only recently has aesthetic form succeeded in finding richness and reconciliation in the landscape, in relation to nature; whereas, the recent development of society, technology and morality, has caused a rupture in human culture. Landscape remains substantially linked to nature, to its unity and wholeness, in spite of its restrained focus on the individual perspective. When we observe and admire a landscape, we move towards an enhancement and purification of the process through which landscape is perceived as a work of art, beyond its relationship with painting. Just like artists would do, although to a more limited extent, observers act and cut out the immediately given, chaotic and boundless world to enhance all this as a self-standing meaningful unity, first by taking a distance

from the world but then rejoining it. Simmel goes on to say that art derives from life, from the existing phenomena which gives form to things. In his view, a landscape should no longer be regarded as a sum of individual natural objects, but as a work of art at its inception. Given this concept and perspective, the act of vision blends itself with the act of feeling. The unity of the various elements revolves around the Stimmung principle of landscape. Stimmung, being a psychic process, is a property of landscape itself, which means that the landscape has already transformed itself into a spiritual form. The unitary representation of the object and the feeling that accompanies it blend together: **Landscape is nature that reveals itself aesthetically.**

Here is our point of view and idea of nature: nature is to be regarded as a natural and cultural landscape; as the result of man-made action, work and imagination; as a mental and psychological state. That is why destroying a landscape means seriously affecting the very heart of the historical and human community.

If a defence of nature and of the environment is to be seen as a social commitment, then "a project of the human world" emerges, as Massimo Venturi Ferriolo argued. The reasons are many:

- 1) Each landscape is an ethic reality, field of action, experience of common human life, and a reality of transformation and of decision. Its essence belongs to practical philosophy. According to Aristotle, without the contingent element the action of man would be impossible and useless. Every landscape illustrates this.
- 2) Man is able to modify the environment in different ways. This choice is linked to his existence. The manner in which man acts and lives creates a project of human intervention, which means imagining a different reality. Man is capable of organizing and planning because he thinks about acts that transform existing situations into desired results.
- 3) The project is aimed at transforming reality and is connected with the idea, more or less defined, of something that we intend to do or to undertake. This decision regards the choice of the methods by which the project may be realized. The world can be modified in the course of time by the intervention of man, therefore the reality in which we select and organize the elements can be changed. In this reality man's actions unfold.

- 4) All landscape belongs to man and man is its only true craftsman. As result, the landscape is a possible reality arising from the relationship between man and nature. The lesson of the Ancients is written in the varying kinds of beauty of every landscape and of every single garden. Landscapes and gardens are the irreversible results of transformation and effects of freedom. Landscapes are in fact the fruits of human freedom that gives form, that creates, modifies, builds and transforms through art and technique.
- 5) Landscape, realm of contemplation, is produced by freedom; moreover is the result of art and the effects of the work and of the imagination of man. Martin Schwind declared that every landscape is a work of art comparable to any human creation, but far more complex: while an artist paints, a poet writes, the whole population creates its own landscape which becomes a deep memory of its culture: "landscape leaves its imprint on the spirit of the people".
- 6) Landscape as an art creates a site with distinctive characteristics and imagined in many ways and through different theories. The interplay between art and nature, and between nature and culture moulds landscapes of varying forms.
- 7) The conscience of human freedom is ancient, it comes from the origins of the agricultural civilization. The farmer was the free man who, living inside the landscape, belonged completely to nature, as united with the cosmos. For example, Sophocles, in *Antigone*, exalts the work of the farmer. In his discussion of the necessary arts, in *De natura deorum*, Cicero mentions the work of man who, with his hands, creates cities, walls, houses and temples.
- 8) Agriculture makes tracks on the landscape. Working in the fields is a part of the "techne" that along with "tyche" constitutes the element of modification of nature. Ovid describes how the land was transformed by the figure of man. In general it can be said that every landscape is the revelation of the mythic world of the deities. Ovid, in *Metamorfosi*, talk about about Muses who transform chaos into the cosmos, thus giving the idea of a human world.
- 9) The aesthetic experience presume the inseparability of the contemplation of landscape from the life inside. To contemplate does not mean the refusal of doing. On the contrary, it prompts us to do and to do well, because we have seen and thought well. Landscape is nature modified by man, through the course of history.

Landscapes are human products and, in this respect, though the technique differs, they are similar to paintings, sculptures and buildings.

- 10) The landscape is an aesthetic value, like architecture. Therefore any morphological alteration of the landscape could produce an irreparable mutilation of the aesthetic object. This object is the unity of construction and of the environment. Places must be preserved and not transformed into "non places". The emotion that we feel for nature as it used to be, for what we viewed when we were children or until recently, must serve us to understand the relationship between past and future, in order to aim for a possible balance between man and nature, tradition and innovation.
- 11) As Marc Bloch wrote: " History is, more than anything, the science of mutation". Our contact with nature derives from a contemporary custom with roots in ancient times. From ancient to modern times, from the imagined to the real, man is responsible for the transformation of places. Landscape, as nature revealed aesthetically, contains modifications that show traces of human history. The landscape presupposes the significance of active contemplation and the proposal of ethics and politics. This proposal does not consists only of conservation and protection, but also questions history in its evolution. Hence landscape as a project of a human world. As Lenoble said, "Nature, in all its elements, is never separated from the destiny of man, because it represents an immense semiology". In this semiology man finds himself, his myths and his culture, with respect to his ancestors who were the custodians of the land.

Looking at our world today, however, I hope I will not be forced to say that "our fathers were the assassins of nature".

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