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ATMOSPHERIC LANDSCAPES: THEORIES, PROBLEMS, PERSPECTIVES

Much has been written about the landscape. Rivers of ink have been spilled to describe its nature, essence, origin, and history. Over the centuries, many different theories have been crafted. Even today, when reflection on landscape is at the center of public debate, playing a central role in many environmental policies and driving efforts to conserve and improve natural resource management, there is no agreement on its definition.

The growing number of multi- and trans-disciplinary studies on the topic – studies that frequently employ the term ‘landscape’ in vague and sometimes contradictory ways – further enhances the word’s already inherent semantic ambiguity. This extreme flexibility in the term’s application has both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it enriches the debate by introducing new viewpoints and encouraging a rethinking of the theoretical foundations of the concept. On the other hand, it hinders the formation of a precise outline, thereby negatively impacting both theoretical analysis and practical application.

In such an unspecified context, one might even ask whether, ultimately, the concept of landscape becomes unnecessary or could be replaced by other, related terms (environment, territory, panorama, view, nature...)¹, thus eliminating confusion or uncertainty but depriving the concept of landscape of its distinctiveness from other ‘natural configurations’. This is a tempting provocation, yet

¹ This provocative question was the focus of the first series of conferences that *Sensibilia* (<https://sensibiliacolloquium.com/>) dedicated to the theme of landscape. The aim of the *Colloquium* was to investigate the ambiguity underlying the concept of landscape by analyzing some of its definitions. The contributions gathered in this issue are the result of a thematic selection from the papers presented at the conferences over the past two years. The remaining reflections have been compiled into two monographic issues: «*Studi di estetica*», LI, IV, 26, *Sensibilia* 16: *Does the landscape really exist?*, 2/2023; and «*Studi di estetica*», LI, IV, 29, *Sensibilia* 17: *From landscape to landscapes*, 2/2024 (*forthcoming*).

not quite persuasive. Despite everything, landscape possesses its own distinctiveness – defined by more or less rigid criteria – that allows for broad reflection and discussion, beginning with its defining foundational elements.

The issue, for example, of whether landscape is a modern category is far from resolved. Although the first occurrences of the term in European languages date back to the 15th century², it has often been debated if landscape can be understood as an ‘aesthetic universal’ even before a term was coined or used to describe it or if it only ‘emerges’ at a certain point in cultural history, especially in the West. According to the last interpretation, the idea that landscape draws from the model of the so-called ‘landscape painting’, which emerged as a distinct genre in the late 1400s, raises problematic issues and is not neutral at all. Indeed, deriving the concept of landscape from its artistic form (a thesis supported by Gombrich, among others) has had, and still has, significant theoretical implications. On the one hand, it challenges the idea that a concept of landscape, even an implicit one, has always existed; on the other hand, it asserts the primacy of a gaze ‘trained’ to observe and understand environments (or parts of them) through an aesthetic sensibility gained through art.

The idea that this new sensitivity stems from a fictional-figurative mediation, however, does not explain how landscape painting could have arisen from nothing, yet did so in a full enough manner as to aesthetically shape the way we perceive and contemplate nature. Furthermore, supporting a sort of *creatio ex nihilo* of landscape painting implies considering the ‘real’ landscape as a projection of the artistic gaze (thus superior to any other form of seeing) onto a natural scene. In other words, landscape would not be nature as such; rather, only a trained artistic eye can render nature into a landscape. Though this thesis sounds very radical, it still finds proponents today.

More persuasive than the previous hypothesis, although partially related to it, is the theory of the ‘late genesis’ of landscape. This refers to its emergence as an autonomous aesthetic object

² The term first appeared in the Germanic languages, e.g., in Dutch *landschap* and English *landscape*. From the mid-16th century, it was also adopted into the Romance languages through the French *paysage*.

from the early modern period. Notably, Ritter's interpretation of the landscape as a means of counterbalancing the gradual loss of unity between humans and nature is particularly renowned in this context. Whether interpreted as a form of nostalgia (as in the Romantic and late Romantic period) or compensation (as in Ritter's school), the theories constructed around this idea consider the landscape as an antidote to the alienation and fragmentation that the modern individual experiences, while excluding – albeit with some controversy – the idea that a sense of landscape might have existed in ancient times or in societies where the separation from nature was less dramatic.

The significance of this man-nature reconciliation (merely desired or actually achieved?) depends on the meanings we ascribe to nature. These can impart a more 'secular' character to the relationship with humans (if nature is seen as a physical environment, as well as the more primordial and familiar 'habitulative dimension') or a more mythic-sacred tone (if nature is viewed in its symbolic-transcendent aspect, or as the 'worldly' reflection of cosmic and divine laws). In the latter case, recovering a lost dimension would aim not so much to reestablish a harmonious connection with individuals but, rather, to defend the 'ontological distance' that distinguishes nature from humans. This perspective views nature as something 'alien' to humanity, sometimes in the sense of being enigmatic, arcane, and uncanny (according to Rilke's interpretation).

Regardless of which meaning is considered, the strong connection with the natural sphere raises additional issues, primarily the nature-culture relationship. The question primarily concerns the role of cultural elements in the aesthetic appreciation of the landscape, in which the reference to 'culture' should be understood in at least two ways: 1) as the human contributions to shaping/creating the landscape; 2) as a set of knowledge, customs, habits, and clichés belonging to an individual or a specific social group. The first interpretation is directly related to the idea of the landscape as a cultural product whose aesthetic appreciation is historically and geographically conditioned. Despite objections – such as those from the 'North American school', which views *wilderness* as a primary and more authentic attribute of the landscape – the thesis that the landscape always involves a cultural component has continued

to gain support. The second meaning concerns the knowledge required to recognize and appreciate a landscape as such. In other words, how much cultural background should be assumed in the observer? Ideally, what types of knowledge should they possess?

Some 'culturalist' interpretations argue that the fullest aesthetic enjoyment is achieved only when supported by a framework of knowledge that enables a deeper understanding of the landscape beyond mere observation. In the most extreme version, these theories suggest that scientific knowledge should take precedence over intuition and that cognitive processing should take precedence over sensory perception, ultimately asserting that the landscape model is insufficient to fully account for our relationship with nature³.

Of course, there are many objections to this perspective, as it implies that full appreciation of a landscape is possible only if one understands the physical-biological characteristics of the observed elements. This thesis raises several concerns, particularly in aesthetics, for the following reasons: 1) it contradicts everyday experience (in which one can appreciate a mountainous landscape without knowledge of its morphological features, flora, fauna, pressure, temperature, etc.); 2) it does not specify which criteria should be used to evaluate the perceivers' observational skills or the accuracy of their knowledge; and, most importantly, 3) it challenges the fundamental role of emotional factors in landscape perception, effectively privileging a cognitive perspective.

Without compelling criteria to support the primacy of cognitive comprehension over intuition, the focus frequently moves to the emotional sphere, regarded as a key and essential element in many reflections on the topic. The connection between landscape and feeling is indeed a classic and extensively debated issue, closely

³ This position is exemplified, for instance, by Carlson's thesis. By emphasizing the centrality of the environmental paradigm, he argues that the landscape approach fails to provide a comprehensive experience of nature. However, Carlson's view becomes less of an objection if one considers – as is attempted here – the partial perspective of the landscape approach as a strength rather than a shortcoming. In fact, the landscape offers an *alternative way* of engaging with the environment, focusing on perceptual and emotional aspects without aiming to reveal and explain every aspect of nature. This is precisely what defines the landscape's specificity.

intertwined with the beginnings of philosophical thought on landscape. Georg Simmel was one of the first to delve into this connection, associating the perception of landscape with the concept of *Stimmung* and raising important questions, such as the relationship between the subjective-projected moods of the perceiver and the landscape's capacity to evoke certain emotional tones in the observer. Simmel's approach to this topic, which remained conciliatory and balanced, was explored by both aesthetics and phenomenology during the same period. Both disciplines occasionally tackled the landscape-emotion connection through the notion of empathy (*Einfühlung*). Contemporary aesthetics, both as a theory of art and as a theory of sensory perception, also addresses this issue. The most significant theoretical contributions in this regard have their roots in the philosophy of the second half of the twentieth century, when the need to explore the relationship with landscape and environment in terms of 'lived space' became increasingly insistent. In this context, Hermann Schmitz's New Phenomenology began to explore the emotional bond with environments, laying the foundations for a philosophy of atmospheres as early as the late 1960s.

Building on a reevaluation of lived experience, especially its affective-impressive aspect, Schmitz introduced the term 'atmosphere' into philosophical discourse in 1969, aiming to characterize his emotional phenomenology in an extra-psychic sense. By defining atmospheres as spatial feelings experienced in the felt-body, he made them a cornerstone of his New Phenomenology, thus contributing personally to the 'affective turn' that would progressively impact all the humanities. The core of the neophenomenological program is to account for *how we feel here and now*, focusing on the relationship between *subjectivity* and *situativity* (already highlighted by Heidegger) and making the environment the fundamental and regulatory principle of our emotions. Within this framework, the landscape can also play a significant role, serving as a 'litmus test' for assessing the affective influence of environments on humans. Schmitz himself, and especially the theoretical approaches inspired by New Phenomenology, such as Gernot Böhme's *aisthetics* and Tonino Griffero's atmospherological theory, has examined the notion of landscape, pointing out its potentials, issues, and practical consequences from an 'atmosphere-based' perspective.

This work fully aligns with this line of research, being the first collective issue to bring together contributions on the relationship between landscape and atmospheres⁴. The collection of papers proposed here is distinguished by its more or less 'orthodox' engagement with Schmitz's concept of atmosphere. However, in many cases, it is not Schmitz's definition – deemed too radical and inflexible for practical purposes – that serves as the model. Instead, attention often shifts to the enriched, revised, and expanded interpretations provided by scholars who have extensively studied this topic over recent decades.

Each contribution offers perspectives, theories, or interpretations of landscape from an atmospheric viewpoint. Despite the diverse expertise of the authors, the work as a whole essentially features a twofold approach. On the one hand, it has a clear aesthetic orientation, focusing on sensory perception; on the other hand, it adopts a predominantly 'phenomenological' stance, emphasizing a first-person perspective rather than a third-person perspective. The emphasis is placed on the emotional involvement that landscape experiences can generate or evoke, influencing different facets of human experience, from the bodily to the cognitive.

As noted earlier, embracing a philosophy of atmospheres does not mean accepting Schmitz's theses uncritically. In fact, some contributions actively challenge the effectiveness of the landscape atmosphere theory as presented by New Phenomenology. The primary critique focuses on the role of 'nature' within Schmitz's phenomenology of lived space. It is indeed curious that he intentionally avoided discussing the relationship between environment and nature and, by extension, between atmosphere and nature, as he considered the latter concept to be too imbued with metaphysical meanings or as a prerogative of the natural sciences. Questioning whether one can achieve an adequate understanding of landscape without including nature is, therefore, more than justified⁵. The limitations of Schmitz's perspective were already recognized

⁴ Marie Ulber's (2017) work entitled *Landschaft und Atmosphäre. Künstlerische Übersetzungen* shares a similar intent. However, as a monograph, it does not offer a broad overview of various viewpoints and perspectives on the subject.

⁵ A question that gives rise to Kira Meyer's critique of Hermann Schmitz's concept of landscape, discussed in *Landscape – More than a mode of perception: a critique of Hermann Schmitz's conception of landscape*.

decades ago by Böhme, who developed his theses within the framework of an ‘aesthetics of nature’ anchored in sensory perception. Böhme’s ‘immanent’ approach effectively avoids both the upward pull of metaphysics and the downward inclination of scientific reductionism.

Schmitz’s refusal to address the actual possibilities of a phenomenology of nature might have led some critics to accuse him of providing an overly ‘abstract’ definition of atmosphere, detached from its meteorological roots. More specifically, Schmitz’s emphasis on the emotional nature of atmospheres might lead one to believe that they are merely ‘feelings *in* the air’ rather than ‘feelings for the air’, i.e., extra-psychic emotions present in space without a real correspondence to the weather⁶. Actually, within his inventory of atmospheres, Schmitz distinguishes a specific typology that he calls ‘supra-personal atmospheres’, which he uses to refer to phenomena such as climate, weather, and landscape. Far from being a secondary category, this serves as the prime atmospheric model precisely because it is anchored in the world of weather and climate. This anchoring renders these atmospheres not-(yet)-subjective, as they can be defined in both physical and affective terms.

Within this framework, ‘sky phenomena’ are considered a paradigm of the atmospheric and can emotionally define a landscape through their specific manifestations. Whether the somewhat limited focus on weather in Schmitz’s theory could be viewed as a limitation is an interesting point for debate. Nevertheless, this does not imply that he disregards meteorological and climatic phenomena; rather, they are frequently employed as examples of emotional engagement or as evidence of the external and extra-psychic nature of atmospheres.

Illustrating how such phenomena can influence our experience of the landscape is the central aim of two essays in this issue, which focus on the effects of specific manifestations, specifically snow⁷ and fog. These elements have the power to alter the usual view of the landscape, generating an ambiguous experience that is both

⁶ This objection is discussed in Tim Ingold’s essay *Landscape, atmosphere and the sky*.

⁷ Analysis included in the work by Sara Borriello entitled *Weather, climate, and atmospheres. An application to the landscape*.

distressing and awe-inspiring. Special attention is given to nebulous landscapes, presented as an archetype for exploring the principles of an 'aesthetic of indeterminacy'⁸. According to these interpretations, the landscape can primarily be defined by its climatic and meteorological characteristics, as atmospheric phenomena can alter the emotional physiognomy of the landscape. Moreover, because these phenomena are always spatially circumscribed, they can help determine *when* and *where* a landscape begins and ends and how it transforms 'in relation to the sky'.

The issue of defining the boundaries of a landscape has always been challenging, as it demands a precise conceptualization of its essential characteristics. The atmospheric perspective also deals with this topic, introducing new differentiating factors or reinterpreting 'classic' definitions in the context of the central role of the affective dimension.

In addition to the conventional categories of 'detachment' and 'distance', which are essential for differentiating landscape from other spatial configurations like environment and nature, attention to emotional engagement requires additional characteristics. In particular, the atmospheric perception of the landscape should include a type of contemplation that is also a being-grasped, resulting in an experience that constantly shifts between withdrawal and fusion⁹.

However, these are not the only characteristics required for something to be considered a landscape. Besides the classical notion of 'framing' – also present in Schmitz's works – one must consider physical, symbolic, mythical, religious, sociological, and political boundaries. Each of these borders can be directly or indirectly influenced by atmospheric configurations, which constantly mold and redefine the edges of a landscape, sometimes even sweeping away any form of delimitation¹⁰.

Determining precisely what constitutes the inside and outside of a landscape is, naturally, a challenging task. Despite this,

⁸ See Mădălina Diaconu's reflection specifically dedicated to *Nebulous landscape and the aesthetics of indeterminacy*.

⁹ This thesis is put forward by Bruce Bégout in the essay *Between immersion and detachment. Does every landscape have its own atmosphere?*.

¹⁰ As seen in the case of war atmospheres. Cf. Jürgen Hasse and Kateryna Demerza's paper, *On the atmosphere of landscape-borders*.

attempting to outline the foundational atmospheric criteria (albeit necessarily vague) is essential for making the atmosphere the key to understanding the landscape experience. The proposal of an 'atmospheric liminology'¹¹ grounded in the felt-bodily attachment to the landscape represents the most thorough attempt in this direction. Understanding the landscape in a truly atmospheric manner, in fact, requires a preliminary analysis of its boundaries and its place within the nature-culture framework. The prevailing hypothesis, even from an atmospheric viewpoint, is that the landscape is situated in an intermediate position within a 'third' dimension that defies simple dichotomies. In this space, the 'politics of nature' intersects with the 'politics of culture'¹². Accordingly, the boundaries of the landscape are intrinsically mutable, constantly evolving due to the interplay between the landscape, the atmosphere, and the living body.

It is precisely the grounding in the (felt-)bodily dimension that first anchors the atmospheric experience of the landscape to a specific moment and place, making it something that occurs *here and now*. In this regard, the landscape can be perceived as a 'presence'¹³ that is not only concrete and factual but also alive and animated, capable of providing the observer with continuously new atmospheric impressions. Within this framework, even the material components of the landscape, unified in a gestaltic form, can serve as genuine *affordances* that radiate their 'emotional essence' into the surrounding environment and shape the landscape's atmosphere.

It is important to emphasize that this atmosphere does not always have a positive connotation; quite the opposite. The idea that an 'atmospheric landscape' equates to a pleasant (the so-called *locus amoenus*) or romantic scene is a stereotype that must be debunked. This improper association stems from both a reductive view of the landscape centered on the concept of beauty (a notion that has been surpassed since Rosenkranz) and a misunderstanding of the atmosphere as linked to a sense of well-being. In contrast,

¹¹ This theoretical proposal can be found in Tonino Griffero's contribution, titled *The landscape spreads as far as you can feel it. An atmospheric liminology*.

¹² This is the position supported by Dirk Michael Hennrich in *Dimensions of the third. On the entanglement between landscape, body and atmosphere*.

¹³ Gabor Csepregi follows this interpretive path in *Landscape as a presence*.

the atmospheric approach also encompasses an aesthetics of the ugly (as well as the dissonant and the unpleasant), exploring all the emotional states associated with the perception of the landscape and, thus, all the types of landscapes we experience in daily life. Identifying the characteristics and peculiarities of each type, as well as the ways in which individuals engage with landscapes, is a task that can be effectively addressed on a theoretical level by an aesthetics of atmospheres and on a practical level by empirical approaches such as aesthetic field research, artistic research, and, not least, Burckhardt's 'strollology'¹⁴.

Apart from specialized methodologies, art offers another potential approach to uncover the connections between landscape and atmosphere. Though not a novel method, it is certainly effective and intuitive. Figurative art, for example, due to its visual immediacy (after all, a bit of ocularcentrism is always inherent to the landscape...), can better illustrate certain aspects of the landscape or reveal its hidden facets, thereby providing us with a broad overview of the various 'landscape genres'. Yet, it is not solely art in the conventional sense that can clarify and enrich the phenomenology of landscape. For instance, literature produces atmospheres by offering a wide range of real or fictional landscapes and describing the various ways in which people experience landscapes. However, literary descriptions of landscapes have often been used reductively, serving merely as tools – at best – to support certain theses (such as the emotional charge of environments, the affective impact of atmospheric phenomena, emotional externalism, or subjective projection) or simply to aesthetically enhance the appeal of theoretical reflection. Very little attention has been given to how the concept of atmosphere could serve as a basis for developing a history or theory of literature. And not by chance. Various methodological challenges accompany such an attempt. Some of these include: 1) periodization (should we examine atmospheres of centuries, decades, or key literary periods?); 2) scope of analysis (should it be comprehensive or partial? Focusing on one or more atmospheres? On one or more genres?); 3) field of investigation (atmospheres *in* the literary text or *of* the literary text?); and 4) the thorny criterion

¹⁴ This topic is explored in Andreas Rauh's work on *Capturing landscape: phenomenological forays through art, atmospheres, and everyday life*.

of geographical specificity (classification by history, culture, origin, etc.?).

It is also important to consider the debate concerning the authenticity of so-called 'mediated' atmospheres. In literature, this may be influenced by the Schmitzian notion (or prejudice?) that language qualitatively reduces the synesthetic and quasi-objective world of atmospheres to a necessarily crystallized written form that is not accessible to all our senses. While some exploratory efforts have been undertaken in the literary domain, they remain quite modest compared to the extensive reflection found in other research areas. The contribution in this issue provides a preliminary reflection on the connections between landscape and literature, with a specific focus on Russian urban landscape and 'helplessness' as its prototypical *Stimmung*¹⁵.

If literature confirms that it is possible to describe, narrate, and create atmospheric landscapes, everyday experience shows that atmospheres, in turn, can create landscapes. This can happen either unconsciously or consciously, contributing in both cases to the subjective and social construction of the landscape itself¹⁶. Despite Schmitz's rejection of intentionally generated atmospheres as authentic, the field of atmospheric design is undoubtedly one of the most fertile in terms of interest, research, and publications. In this context, studies focus primarily on the most effective ways to produce atmospheres suitable for a specific type of landscape. Not all atmospheres are suitable for all places. Just as it would be ineffective to create – through various means such as urban planning, artistic installations, lighting techniques, building material choices, color usage, etc. – a cold, impersonal, and vaguely futuristic atmosphere typical of a big city in a rural environment, it is equally unreasonable to engage in atmosphere design without a comprehensive understanding of the local morphology, history, culture, and social dynamics.

¹⁵ Cf. the contribution by Eleonora Gironi Carnevale titled *The Russian urban text: city and atmospheres in My by E. Zamyatin*.

¹⁶ As highlighted by Rainer Kazig in *Sensory encounters with landscapes – atmospheres and the social construction of landscapes*.

This applies to both landscapes with evocative-symbolic value¹⁷ and those related to the dimension of everyday life. Designing atmospheres, for example, is crucial for any practice of dwelling, as it allows individuals to experience space with specific emotional attitudes, tints, or nuances. Dwelling, in fact, is never affectively neutral or merely psychological; it always involves the lived-body and carries significant existential meaning. These principles are relevant to all forms of dwelling, which can be classified into at least three categories:

- *Concrete dwelling*, which encompasses all forms of 'inhabitation' built around a structural element (the house) and the surrounding environment (territory, landscape, garden). An atmospheric approach should recognize that living practices are not static but, rather, evolve to accommodate the oscillations of our existence in the world. Designing atmospheres, in this sense, involves adapting to our 'sense of place' or creating new ones¹⁸.
- *Metaphorical dwelling*, which refers to a more figurative rather than naturalistic conception of landscape while remaining very powerful in shaping our experiences. Among all forms of expression, dance is particularly privileged for its grounding in a *leiblich* dimension, which succeeds in integrating the body with space and emerging atmospheres. Certain trends in contemporary dance, for example, are particularly focused on an explorative, participative, and pathic interaction with the landscape¹⁹. Here, the landscape becomes an expressive space that is ever-changing: an encounter between a non-subjective feeling and a non-objective reality.
- *Pathological un-dwelling*, which pertains to existential conditions in which the perception of lived space is distorted, either by excessive compression or by an equally extreme expansion. In these 'anomalous' cases, the act of dwelling disintegrates

¹⁷ Like the 'landscapes of memory' explored by Jacky Bowring in *Sensuous atmospheres of landscape and memory*.

¹⁸ See the thesis that Federico De Matteis discusses in *Landscape and the oscillations of dwelling: two houses, two gardens*.

¹⁹ In *Dancing with the landscape. Anna Halprin 'explorative' dance as the encounter with nature's and architecture's atmospheric affordances*, Serena Massimo explores this theme through the lens of Anna Halprin's 'explorative dance'.

from within, questioning the mutual interaction with the place, the familiarity with the surroundings, and the feeling of being at home. The deformation of the landscape can be viewed as an outcome of a disruption in the affective and felt-bodily resonance with spaces, which therapeutic atmospheres – if carefully and skillfully designed – can help restore²⁰.

This issue brings together a variety of perspectives, with different approaches to the question of the landscape. Some are critical, others exploratory, and still others comparative. Some experiment with new ways of approaching the topic. The specific intent was to showcase the theoretical and practical contribution of the atmospheric perspective to the landscape, thereby providing an overview of the experiences we can have *in*, *of*, and *with* it. Moreover, the issue aimed to present a snapshot of the current state of research, highlighting the potential for future exploration in this field in both academic settings and public discourse.

Integrating scientific, ecological, and political perspectives with the atmospheric paradigm would undoubtedly enhance the overall understanding of the issue, highlighting aspects often overlooked or ignored. The major strength of this work lies in the fact that it provides valuable examples of how one can transition from an abstract, generalized, and quantitative perspective to a more subjective (but not solipsistic) approach. Indeed, only by rejecting reductionism can we move away from the traditional model of control and dominance over environments and embrace one that values the atmospheric qualities that landscapes produce (whether naturally or ‘artificially’). Considering the atmosphere as a fundamental component of the landscape rather than as a mere additional feature is the first significant and decisive step in this direction. After all, the only authentic way to fully understand a landscape is to engage with the atmospheres it radiates, ‘letting oneself go’ to them.

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²⁰ The approach that Enara García suggests in *Therapeutic atmospheres. The aesthetics of therapeutic spaces* moves in this direction.