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BETWEEN IMMERSION AND DETACHMENT DOES EVERY LANDSCAPE HAVE ITS OWN ATMOSPHERE?

1.

In recent years, landscape thinking has flourished in the fields of aesthetics, geography, urban planning and ecology. To a certain extent, it has taken up the torch of an atmospheric understanding of the environment. The idea of the expressive presence of the environment is perpetuated in contemporary conceptions of landscape. People are beings who, before firing theoretical arrows at their targets, smell the air around them. For them, apprehension sniffs out the world before contemplating or transforming it. Affect always precedes idea and project. And it is from this primordial tonality, what I call ambianciality, that representations and actions are elaborated. The modern attraction to landscape thus confirms the ambient culture of the atmospherical.

Our awareness of what surrounds us, and which we often fail to notice, hypnotized as we are by practical interests, bursts forth in our ability to open up to what Leo Spitzer calls the *Périékhon* (Spitzer 1942, 2), the *Encompassing*, to bring it together under a pleasant and moving view: the landscape. Isn't the latter the very example of an affective situation, of the sentimental effect of surroundings on subjects? Yet the experience of ambience, or atmosphere, does not seem to converge entirely with that of landscape. Phenomenologically speaking, it does not manifest itself in the same way. Indeed, it does not imply the same attitude on the part of the subject who experiences it. The person caught up in the atmosphere does not *objectify* it as a landscape to be contemplated and appreciated. Rather, he is absorbed in it, and undergoes its affective modulations. When I experience the joyful atmosphere of a party, I don't perceive the place, the guests, the laughter and the dancing as forming a landscape, however touching it may be. If this were the case, it would mean that I was no longer really taking part in the atmosphere, but simply

representing it in a neutral, distant way. I'd become a spectator of an atmosphere, not its subject. The absolute immanence implicit in atmosphere, which makes it so close and intimate, is precisely what is broken when the landscape appears. The attitude, aesthetic or ecological, that relates to landscape therefore requires the suspension of all primary atmospheric immersion.

It is by *neutralizing* the fundamental tonality of the situation, by extricating itself from its affective pressure, that it can bring something like a landscape into view. It is through this *step aside* that the latter is constituted. Every landscape is a kind of *asceticism*, a cessation of vital and practical immersion. Man can suspend his involvement in life and open himself up to contemplation of what surrounds him. By repressing his drives and needs, and refusing to follow his interests, he gains access to *theoria*, the spectacle of being. In a way, he unrealizes his own situation in order to see it *as such*. What all true contemplation delivers is precisely this *as such*, what is given as it is given. This is why landscape is so close to theoretical vision. In front of the landscape, I perceive a life in which I no longer participate directly, which I do not share in an affective, pragmatic way, but which I nevertheless enjoy seeing.

Without wishing to add a new contribution to landscape theory, we would nevertheless like to highlight what appear to us in regard of its most fundamental aspects: a) firstly, landscape implies a *detachment* from a larger totality, country or world, from which it is distinguished. Every landscape emerges as a visible section of the cosmos. It slices up the country and offers it to view. The frame, or window, as it has been often noted, helps this lateral detachment by facilitating the independent constitution of this visible portion. It circumscribes the field of the landscape, giving it a horizon that can certainly open onto the infinite, but always with the means of the finite. Without this 'boundary' (Simmel 2007, 21), there would be no landscape at all. The latter thus requires the unification/totalization that makes the part into the whole. But this real or figurative work of sectioning is not enough. A landscape cannot be reduced to a region, to an identifiable piece of country. To be a landscape, it needs something more; b) the landscape is not only *detached* from what surrounds it, but also and above all *from the person* who contemplates it directly. The second constitutive operation of landscape does not consist in

freeing it from the familiar environment, but in *distancing* it from the one for whom there can be landscape.

Distancing creates the space necessary for viewing the landscape as a spectacle. If *lateral detachment* separates the landscape from its neighbors, *deep detachment* removes it from what is close by. It is thanks to this detachment that the landscape appears before our eyes. Only when the subject extracts himself from the *here and now* can he imagine it anew in the form of a spectacle. When utility dominates and imposes its views, when strong ordinary atmospheres absorb individuals, landscape cannot yet appear. Thinking about the emergence of landscape therefore means taking into account the movement of the spectator who, stepping back, sees something new appear before him, of which he was previously unaware. Consequently, the viewer has to *step out of* the country to see it as a landscape (this step may be purely visual, a simple change of attitude). This second operation of stepping back is fundamental. It manifests resistance to affective-practical absorption, and opens up the possible space of representation.

Everything suggests then that a landscape, even a vernacular one, is always a change of scenery. It presupposes an effort to withdraw, a deliberate uprooting from one's native environment, almost a wandering of the gaze. It is this separation from the near and neighboring that creates the vernacular in its own right. Here, the frame is not enough; the person must withdraw slightly from his previous position, if only to see it as a frame and contemplate what it frames. As early as the 18th century, many commentators pointed out that landscapes only exist for foreigners, for those who, not belonging to the region, perceive it as an original object of aesthetic pleasure or displeasure. Landscape is thus born of mobility; it is the vision of those who migrate. The native, always bent over his worries and absorbed in their emotional charge, does not discern landscapes around him. He's consumed by his work and his days, overwhelmed by the local atmospheres that carry him along. At no time does he see his surroundings as landscape. He feels it, curses it, exploits it, projects his expectations and worries onto it, but he doesn't contemplate it. It would never occur to him that the ground he walks on every day is a landscape. For others, perhaps, but certainly not for him, who lives, acts and suffers here. In any case, the other men, those who stay at home, are too tied to the land, entrenched in needs and

customs, to access the spatial and mental shift implied by travel. Patinir, for example, depicts not only people on the move, but also people quietly going about their business in the midst of villages and fields. In *Le Repos de la sainte famille*, a group of peasants harvest wheat with a sickle, while others plough a purple field. The contrast here between movement (scenes of war and pillage in the right background) and sedentary life further emphasizes the *gap*. Under these conditions, the viewer feels even less a part of these ordinary scenes, as they are seen from afar, barely identifiable, lost in the immensity of the world. The miniaturization of individuals, so characteristic of landscapes by Met de Bles, Altdorfer or Dürer, does not simply express, as is often written, the shift to the foreground of the cosmic spectacle; it also and above all signifies the viewer's detachment from this everyday life, which he now observes with a distant eye. It's because the viewer steps back from his original emotional and practical immersion in local situations, even to the point of flying high into the sky, that a bird's-eye view of the landscape reveals its full scope.

Landscape is always the result of a geographical sampling, a delimitation of the environment. Precisely because it relies first and foremost on the *distance* between the spectacle and the spectator, it prevents their tonal coincidence. From this point of view, ambient fusion – the *fusion* of first impressions that immediately melts us into the present – would eliminate its primary and fundamental condition. And this is why the landscape as such inhibits all absorption from the outset. In this respect, the senses of proximity (taste, smell, touch) cannot give rise to landscapes. Nothing of the kind – aesthetic or geographical – corresponds to them. Conversely, the prohibition of contact is the *sine qua non* of landscape. It's not just in front of a landscape-painting that it says 'do not touch', but in front of any landscape, artistic or natural. Yet it is not so much the landscape that cries *noli me tangere* as the viewer who, by withdrawing his hand, modifies his view in the process. Just as the landscape no longer touches the land from which it has really or visually detached itself, it no longer touches the people who live in it. Any direct contact with it is impossible, and it is in the gap created by *this distance* that the specific approach instituting a piece of land, however large, into a landscape is born.

A more precise definition of *recoil* would no doubt be required here, but the fact remains that the aesthetic attitude that gives rise to the landscape *usually suspends the atmospheric attitude*, which blossoms in fusional contact. It is the repression of tonal immersion in the situation that results in the constitution of the landscape. Where ambience plunges man into it, landscape deposits him in front of it. The intentional attitude that characterizes them is clearly distinguishable. In the first case, the subject is fully immersed in an affective situation that he never perceives as a landscape, because if he did, he would immediately change the ambience into a spectacle, and no longer experience it as such. In the second case, the same subject detaches himself from the lived situation that absorbs him, and begins to observe it under another aspect, that of a spectacle of objectivity whose own qualities he appreciates¹. The transition from one to the other can be quick and easy; all you have to do is place a kind of transparent glass in front of your eyes and collaborate with what you perceive in a *spectaculum* mode, like Petraque on Mont Ventoux. But if the glass falls away, affective and practical immersion take over again, drawing you back into a close, intimate and all-encompassing participation. In a word, if the landscape becomes too sensory, if its physical and emotional presence is too strong, it disappears as such under the guise of an ambience.

2.

But isn't landscape more than just a representation? Doesn't the emotion of grasping the totality of the world, the passion of *becoming one* with what we see, also vibrate within it? If landscape is born from hindsight, it does not remain in this position for long. It also, and primarily, expresses the spectator's projection into the spectacle. In a sense, detachment makes the fusional impulse possible, only to disappear within it. The magnitude of the scenes of nature and life that unfold draws the eye; it literally absorbs it. Every landscape is an invitation to get lost.

¹ On this point, we refer to Joachim Ritter's fine analyses. Cf. Ritter (1974, 179): «The free contemplation of nature as a whole – which, since the Greeks and for centuries, has been the sole object of philosophy – finds in the mind's interest in nature as landscape a new structure and form».

Clearly, landscape is not a peaceful, objective contemplation of nature. The aesthetic pleasure of landscape belies withdrawal and involves the viewer in what he or she sees. This is only possible because landscape never presents itself as a self-contained unit, but, while valid as such, maintains an affective relationship with the One-All (*en kai pan*) from which it has detached itself. To believe that detachment and unification are enough to form a landscape is a mistake. The landscape *vibrates* as a landscape, insofar as it dialogues with the totality of the world from which it has cut itself off by claiming to be worthy of it. The landscape-wall of late medieval illuminations (Limbourg brothers, miniatures from the Turin/Milan Hours, *Très Belles Heures de Notre-Dame*) opens onto the landscape-horizon of Flemish painting (Patinir, Gérard David, Van Eyck). If only visually, it always contains an allusion to infinity. The formation of the landscape involves the secession of the part, then its reclamation as an autonomous totality, but it is only truly complete when the whole of the landscape resonates with the Unlimited. It is thanks to this relationship between the formed totality and the primordial whole from which it departs, while at the same time wishing to represent it, that the atmospheric breath of the landscape is born. All in all, the separate separates to better unite in another way.

It's easy to see how from a landscape can emanate an atmosphere. Since the landscape attracts the viewer, it envelops him, so to speak, in its breadth. A landscape is never simply a collection of things. We rarely focus on the details that make it up. What first moves us is the totality of what we see. Ambience itself possesses this holistic mode of manifestation; it is not the result of the sum of particular feelings, but imbues the entire situation with a particular affective tone. The very form of the landscape as a totality calls for ambience. It is because it is a non-aggregative totality that the landscape can immediately evoke an atmosphere. And this offered totality is not a simple georama, like Chardon's, but a touching sight that speaks first to the senses before instructing the mind. In other words, landscape, born of theoria, transcends it and imposes itself independently of any cognitive grasp. Rarely does the viewer of a natural or painted landscape persist in a state of serene, distanced observation. Instead, they are captivated, seduced, disturbed. He immediately abandons the search for truth and interest, and allows himself to be pleasantly drawn into a perceptive flutter. Without this atmospheric and

tonal resonance, the landscape as such would not manifest itself². But how can we understand the atmospheric dimension of landscape? Where should we look for the basis of this aesthetic and sentimental experience?

As Simmel puts it, the most important element in landscape is '*Stimmung*' (mood) (Simmel 2007, 26), the indefinable emotion that permeates the spectacle and makes it so touching. This atmospheric *Stimmung*, the sentimental haze that lightly covers the view and gives it its particular affective tonality, is the unifying factor of the landscape; it is this *Stimmung* that, in its diffuse quality, brings the details together and blends them into the overall impression. It colors all the parts with the same feeling.

But how are we to understand this affective dimension of landscape? Where should we look for the basis of this aesthetic and sentimental experience? Inspired by the theses of the German Romantics (Hölderlin, Carus, Fernow), Simmel reveals what, in his view, constitutes the basis of this 'peculiar mental process' (Simmel 2007, 20), that leads to the birth of landscape. After all, it all hinges on a change of attitude, a conversion of the gaze. Man stimulates his sensibility by giving it external life. The hidden sense of every landscape thus lies in the return of the beloved, namely *oneself*. It reveals the totalizing capacity of a heart that embraces the whole of nature, enjoying it as a new, independent entity. For, in revelling in the sight of breathtaking panoramas, the soul takes on an objective consistency, emerges from its cerebral gangue, inscribes itself in space and makes itself as big as it is.

The *Kulturkritik* philosopher sees the *Stimmung* emanating from the landscape as the discrete result of a subjective projection. Reading the analyses in his *Philosophy of Landscape*, one realizes that there is always a subconscious transfer of the

² It should be noted that Erwin Straus, seeking to distinguish between *perceiving* and *feeling*, i.e. on the one hand the act of relating to the world in the mode of representation *at a distance*, and on the other the act of *merging into* it by a sensitive and affective participation, uses the example of landscape as characterizing the second relationship. In concrete terms, this means that, for Straus, the landscape escapes representation, integrating the viewer into the spectacle in the form of a sensation of immediate participation. In other words, «the space of feeling is to the space of perception as landscape is to geography» (Straus 1935, 335). If Straus doesn't properly use the term 'atmosphere' to describe the act of feeling, the way he understands it is very close to an atmospheric understanding.

psychic affective unit to the landscape itself. The perceptual unit only becomes a landscape when the perceiving subject experiences it affectively. Even if, in fact, in the aesthetic experience of landscape, we cannot distinguish, on the one hand, subjective feeling and, on the other, objective data, all of which are *intermingled* in the aesthetic experience itself, we must nevertheless continually presuppose at the origin of all this an underlying objectification of the 'unifying powers of the soul' (Simmel 2007, 28). While it's inappropriate to ask «whether our unitary perception of an object or the feeling arising together with it comes first or second» (Simmel 2007, 27), the landscape is nonetheless only alive thanks to 'our formative acts' (Simmel 2007, 28). It is, in truth, nothing more than the immediate production of that *Stimmung* of the soul that expresses itself outwardly in the landscape. This is the case when the affective unity of the *psyché* becomes objective, as in a poem where, as soon as words are seen, they immediately receive the warmth of the meaning circulating within them, even though they are only lifeless signs. As with any cultural formation, it's the 'mental process' that creates the landscape, bringing together scattered data, uniting them and immersing them in their own affective tonality. A cosmo-narcissistic form of self-reconciliation.

While Simmel is not unaware of the landscape's atmospheric value, he nevertheless makes the mistake, in our view, of interpreting it in the jective and connective mode. Basically, for him, landscape is the exclusive product of a dual psychic operation of transferring the mind to worldly exteriority, and immediately fusing this subjective state of mind with spiritualized objectivities: it is «the intertwining of something given with our creative capacities» (Simmel 2007, 28). Here again, the intermediarist schema governs. The mind projects its internal feeling into the perceptual totality and, blending entirely with it, experiences it as a landscape. It then pretends to discover its own production under a foreign aspect. In so doing, he indirectly enjoys himself, receiving his own action in the passive form of a feeling. He affects himself through objectification. The aesthetic subject finds in external nature what he himself has put there, but in a naive, fresh form: the emotion of the landscape. It's worth noting, however, that, while asserting a projective model, Simmel clearly notes that, in the experience of landscape, the subject does not perceive this spiritual production; on the contrary, he spontaneously

experiences the affective-perceptive unity of the landscape without being able to separate, within it, the psychic elements and the objective materials. This is why the lived phenomenon of landscape disavows any genetic explanation of the type that objectifies the subjective. Unfortunately, Simmel's analysis doesn't dwell long on this essential phenomenological observation; it immediately escapes into the philosophical realm of genesis, proposing a general theory of landscape *Stimmung* as «a distinct expression of these acts» (Simmel 2007, 26), but not experienced as such. For, although it is now independent of the subjective mood, the objectified *Stimmung* of landscape is nonetheless its product. It has simply detached itself from the psychic life that gave rise to it, and now exists as an autonomous aesthetic totality. But can the ambience of a landscape, that special aura that permeates and envelops us, be reduced to psychic mediation?

To answer such a question, we must first distinguish the level of phenomenal experience from that of theoretical explanation. In his *Nine Letters on Landscape Painting*, Carl Gustav Carus sets out to grasp the landscape as a sensitive expression that emerges before any theoretical considerations. The German painter certainly does not reject the spiritual aspect of landscape, its «true poetic mood (*Stimmung*)» (Carus 2002, 82). On the contrary, like all good Romantics, he sees it as a vivid opportunity for meditation on man and nature, for the verbal release of universal feelings. Above all, he seeks to grasp the 'two ways' (Carus 2002, 86) of art, that of the content represented and that of the way it is represented. In the case of landscape, this concerns the nature that is contemplated and the way it is rendered in a painting. This double effect, while always referring to an act of «the creation of the human mind» (Carus 2002, 86), resonates at a level that precedes theory. It takes place between sensation itself and representation, i.e., between the direct experience of the infinite and the individualization of a content in a finite form. While representation testifies to man's ability to create a finite image of his surroundings in order to master them, sensation plunges him into «a greater, indeed infinite whole» (Carus 2002, 92). Contemplating a natural or artistic landscape brings this relationship into play. It's a finite representation that's only alive because it provokes an infinite sensation. Conversely, but complementarily, sensation is what animates the representation, providing it with its dynamic, open unity.

Carus calls this general animation of representation an affective tonality or an ambience (*Stimmung*). This affective tonality is itself an expression of life. First and foremost, the pulsating life of the content represented, namely nature. Every landscape has a tonality, a sensitive, emotional atmosphere that makes it more than just a representation, because it expresses the stages of natural life: development, completion, deterioration and destruction. However, the landscape does not simply vibrate with this external life unfolding in these four modalities. To the series of natural tonalities corresponds the series of affective tonalities of the soul:

What of the mind itself and its successive moods? Clearly, as with the rise and decline of individual life-forms in nature, individual manifestations of mental life will have their own growth and decay within the eternal life of the soul. Here, the feeling of aspiration, reassurance, and evolution; the feeling of true inner clarity and calm; the feeling of blight and despondency; and the absence of feeling in apathy represent the four phases that are fundamental to the life of the mind in all its infinite variety. (Carus 2002, 93).

What's remarkable here is that the particular tonality of the landscape consists in the alliance of the expressive states of life with the affective states of the heart. There is a higher harmonic that associates the tonality of nature with that of the soul. The heart can thus confer its mood on the landscape, just as the landscape in turn modifies the heart. Landscape art is therefore «the representation of a certain mood of mental life (meaning) through reproduction of a corresponding mood of natural life (truth)» (Carus 2002, 91).

But it's always a *synthesis*, matching states of natural life with emotional experiences. On the face of it, this theory maintains the jective model, since it posits the landscape as the fused result of paths of influence between natural forces and feelings. In any landscape, what would be experienced aesthetically is this miraculous correspondence, in the sense of rare and inexplicable, between a spectacle and a *Stimmung*. The harmony felt in the landscape, which Carus repeatedly emphasizes and which forms the nerve of this experience, would testify to this immediate agreement in sensation between subject and object.

On closer examination, however, Carus's thinking on landscape opens up a different path beneath the theory of correspondence.

The synthesis doesn't so much combine two heterogeneous elements – states of mind and natural expressions – as rediscover at its heart their profound belonging. Carus's *enteism*, which sees the unity of soul and nature as two emanations of the deeper unity of God, leads him to contradict projection and blending in favor of an original community.

When contemplating a landscape, the individual neither objectifies his feelings in nature, nor unifies them with himself, but abandons this intentional structure and discovers, beneath it, the common being that cuts through duality and makes everything vibrate with the same tonality. It is thanks to this sudden, involuntary suspension of intentionality that a deeper sense of belonging to the totality emerges in the aesthetic feeling of the landscape. The work of synthesis is no longer necessary here; it gives way to the recognition of a sensitive community that outstrips all division:

Climb to the topmost mountain peak, gaze out across long chains of hills, and observe the rivers in their courses and all the magnificence that offers itself to your eye - what feeling takes hold of you? There is a silent reverence within you; you lose yourself in infinite space; silently, your whole being is purified and cleansed; your ego disappears. *You are nothing; God is all.* (Carus 2002, 87)

In his writings, Carus often insists on the spectator's abandonment of the landscape that overwhelms him. When the viewer is moved, he immerses himself in the spectacle, becoming one with it. The identification that takes place here can certainly be interpreted as a synthesis; but we can also see in it, far from the associative schema, the little-known experience of an interpenetration between the seer and the visible. The rhetoric of correspondence often masks this positive experience of abandonment. It prevents us from fully appreciating this loss of intentional awareness in a sense of belonging to the world that precedes it. Yet Carus, particularly in his account of his trip to the island of Rügen, often highlights the atmospheric vibration of the landscape, which thwarts the bipartition of soul and nature. It is through this that 'man's affinity with the spirit of the world' is revealed.

There is thus an «eternal, supreme and infinite unity» that «underlies everything we feel and think»³. It doesn't matter whether we call this unity God. What is essential here is that the aesthetic feeling of landscape reveals this primordial tonal community. The subject learns to feel that which no longer opposes him to the object, but plunges into a shared matter. Should we conceive of this original affinity as a synthesis? Or, on the other hand, could we extend Kant's intuitions by positing affinity as the homogeneity of the subjective and the objective, which pre-exists their distinction? The «name itself *landscape* begins to appear trivial and inadequate», admits Carus (Carus 2002, 119). For what's at stake here is the mysterious *affinity* that the spectator discovers in the show, and which makes it something other than a performance, namely an atmosphere in which he lets himself be engulfed. For «such surrender [*Untergehen*] is no loss, it's pure gain» (Carus 2002, 90). This is a point that is often emphasized in the history of landscape art: the visual aspiration provoked by landscapes, *the sudden feeling of tipping over into infinity*, enhanced by plunges and vanishing points, leads to a veritable ecstasy of the gaze. Cézanne confessed as much to Joachim Gasquet. To silence ideas, to silence preconceptions, and to amalgamate in order to last, to merge with that which is not oneself. Once again, it's through the sensation of 'everything together' that representation fades and forms, in this disappearance of distance, the fullness of landscape. What «I'm trying to translate for you», says Cézanne, «is more mysterious, entangled in the very roots of being»⁴. It is this pre-dualistic milieu that we must restore and make felt.

3.

It's indisputable that every landscape has its own ambience, that every landscape invites us to let ourselves be enveloped by everything around us and to melt into it. Every aesthetic experience of landscape is therefore atmospheric insofar as it

³ «To tell the truth, you have to visit Rügen alone. Silencing all ulterior motives, one must humbly abandon oneself to this monotonous nature, going alone to the edge of the sonorous creeks» (Carus 1974, 34).

⁴ Cf. Gasquet (2012, 153). Similarly: «There's a minute in the world that goes by. To paint it in its reality! And forget everything for that. Become itself. To be the sensitive plate. To give the image of what we see, forgetting everything that came before us» (Gasquet 2012, 156).

embraces the viewer with its own particular air. Does this mean that landscape and ambience are one and the same? It's easy to see that aesthetic loss in the landscape is only possible through the perceptual singularization that separates it from the world. Attraction flows from extraction. For we need to bear in mind that landscape initially suspends the individual's affective and practical relations with his environment, only to elevate him to a higher form of participation: union with the cosmos. The uprooting from the land is therefore not definitive, but a way of blending into nature. Landscape thus reconciles the individual and the world, putting an end for a time – the time of the aesthetic experience itself – to their theoretical-practical split by associating them in a higher unity. Only this constitutive withdrawal of representation enables emotional projection and aesthetic participation. The spectator steps back in order to leap forward. He disassociates himself from the ambient to surrender to the atmosphere. Thus, thanks to this analysis of abstraction and empathy, the ambiguous particularity of the landscape appears: aesthetic distance is constituted with and against geographical roots. Every landscape is an attempt to reconcile the world and the frame, to repair the separation of the world by the frame through the absorption of the world into the frame. But absorption here cannot be total, it always remains in a partial and relative position. Because the aesthetic absorption induced by the landscape is neither the original one in the world of life nor the final one in an irreversible immersion. It is therefore marked by incompleteness, namely by the impossibility of merging landscape and atmosphere together, however close they may be. In short, if the landscape suggests atmospheres and manages to give rise to them, the atmosphere is never given as a landscape because if, that were the case, it would no longer really be an atmosphere, but simple perception, representation, objectification.

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