Landscape of Ruins. Decay and Wonder in the Southern United States by William Eggleston and Cormac McCarthy

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Following the transformations undergone by the western landscape in the capitalist and post-capitalist eras during the second half of the 20th century, the increasingly evident emergence of a "landscape of ruins", dotted with the debris of a broken civilisation, came to light. In fact, degradation now dominates the harmonious and natural forms that once defined these lands. Such territories, which are endless and seemingly all the same, can be found throughout the capitalist West in different forms but with similar characteristics. They reflect the same sense of disorganisation and indifference. Yet these empty, fixed, unusable spaces, which cannot properly be classified as "countryside", "city" or "suburbs", are also landscapes, just like a mountain view or a city skyline. Instead of rolling hills and imposing monuments, we find ourselves immersed in spaces resembling landfills, devoid of any plan, where abandonment and indifference reign supreme. Here, "waste" becomes the contemporary ruin, "what remains" of human action and presence. Rather than asking what kind of landscapes they are, which would only perpetuate the problematic typological classification of spaces, we should be asking ourselves a different question, that is more closely related to the aesthetic approach to landscape: is it still necessary or possible to find some form of beauty in these spaces? And, above all, can we still establish an emotional relationship with these places, or are we destined to inevitable alienation from the "new" spaces we inhabit?

These questions form the basis of the research. To develop an answer, it was first necessary to select contemporary landscapes with common characteristics. The area selected for analysis is the region stretching from the Smoky Mountains to the Mississippi Delta, passing through cotton plantations and the suburbs of cities in the southern United States, which has its own unique space-time coordinates. The mixture of fascination and terror that the "Deep South" immediately evokes is the complex result of a layering of narratives that, over time, have fuelled a particular perception of these places (Bone 2005; Hinrichsen 2015). Authors such as Mark Twain, Langston Hughes, James Agee and, above all, William Faulkner have played an instrumental role in developing a true poetics of the South. Their works range from novels and poetry to more journalistic stories, but they all share an

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extraordinary ability to evoke images of the landscapes they traverse and narrate. The intrinsic tendency to *depict*, which is characteristic of certain authors, allows for an interesting and still little-explored parallel with photography.

James Agee's collaboration with Walker Evans on his seminal work, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), was no coincidence. In the introduction to the volume, Agee immediately clarified that the photographs were not intended to illustrate or accompany the text. On the contrary, the photographs were to be considered equal and independent, to be read in continuity with the writing. This work enables us to explore the landscapes of research, almost as if it were a precursor to contemporary landscapes, and to identify the methodological approach adopted. Two authors have contributed decisively to shaping the contemporary geographical and symbolic imagination of the southern United States (from the 1970s to the present day), with a particular focus on the landscape: photographer William Eggleston (Memphis, 1939) and writer Cormac McCarthy (Rhode Island, 1933 – Santa Fe, 2023). They draw on the photographic and literary heritage of these regions to create a complex cartography of the "new" South, which critics have termed the "post-South" (Bone 2005; Child 2011).

Eggleston and McCarthy are key figures in the study of the landscape of ruins for two reasons in particular. Firstly, based on the authors' statements and the extensive secondary literature, it emerges that Eggleston suggests his photographic series should be read as a novel (Ferris 2013). Secondly, McCarthy's style has repeatedly been defined as 'eidetic' (Petrelli 2020), emphasising his evident tendency to depict and 'read' the world (Luce 2009). In the interplay of narrative and image—the two expressive media of photography and literature—the two cannot be considered independently of each other. Through fiction, the photographic series and the novel create possible worlds in which the opposition between true and false is suspended. These imaginary worlds are so rooted in the real landscape that they cannot be separated. The landscape is thus considered an area of indistinguishability between reality and imagination, visibility and invisibility, actuality and virtuality. It is not "something" to be observed, but rather an emotional tone that conveys the potential for a relationship with a fractured and dilapidated territory, inhabited by spectres and ghosts (Simmel 1913; Jackson 1980; Raffestin 2005; Jakob 2009; Gordon 2008; Yablon 2009).

What emerges, therefore, from Eggleston's photographs and McCarthy's novels, is the common condition of the *inhabitants* of that territory at a specific moment in history. The authors' work goes beyond documenting the landscape's transformations; they construct intertwining, non-linear stories that provide a comprehensive *vision* of reality—the *aesthetic experience* derived from their relationship with the landscape. They achieve this through epistemological and archaeological research: in their hands, photography and narration are tools for understanding reality and digging through the abandoned debris of Western society to bring it to light and question it.

The research is structured as a journey through the darkest and most hidden corners of the Southern States. It should be understood as a kind of *flânerie* through the vast, humid landscapes of Mississippi and Louisiana; the dirty, malodorous places of urban and mountainous Tennessee; and the areas of Georgia and Alabama where the ghosts of history continue to haunt the present. As it is a form of *flânerie*—a clandestine state shared by Eggleston and McCarthy's "characters", the inhabitants of these lands—here is no real beginning or end to the journey. Rather, it is an intimate and desperate attempt to find traces of life and wonder amidst the contemporary landscape of ruins.

The thesis is structured around two intertwining lines of enquiry. The first, developed in chapters one and three, focuses on the analysis of photographic and literary works. The second, corresponding to chapters two and four, offers

a theoretical reflection on key concepts and categories of landscape and ruin aesthetics. Alternating between an in-depth analysis of specific works and a broader examination of issues arising from photographs and texts, the thesis reinforces the idea that, while inspired by certain authors, the research necessarily takes the discourse to a broader horizon. Within this framework, photography and novels are exercises in envisioning a disappearing world on the brink of collapse. Through the creation of new visual and narrative alphabets, these two forms of expression establish themselves as methods of deduction, capable of bringing to life that which one would like to see lost, abandoned or invisible. The shared archaeological process of "excavating" words and images results in a kind of metaphysics of ultimate things, which calls into question the conditions that make a relationship with a landscape populated by spectres and ghosts possible. In this landscape, every distinction between the real and the imaginary, the visible and the invisible, is suspended.

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