

## **Towards a Holistic Concept of Landscape From Croce to Pareyson Paolo Furia**

### **Abstract**

This article outlines the evolution of the concept of landscape from an idealistic and dualistic framework to a more integrated and holistic approach in Italian philosophy of the twentieth century. I will single out Benedetto Croce's perspective on landscape and Luigi Pareyson's aesthetic theory as the two poles of such a course. On the one hand, Croce's name is associated with the first great Italian law devoted to the protection of landscape, but his conception of landscape still stems from a dualistic understanding of nature and culture, art and science. On the other hand, while Pareyson has never expressly addressed the issue of landscape, his philosophical aesthetics provides useful elements to radically rethink landscape in non-idealistic terms. In the present work I will discuss some of these elements, namely, Pareyson's conception of physical matter, the role played by wonder in the process of knowledge, and the contemplative dimension of aesthetic appreciation.

### **1. Introduction**

The notion of landscape has recently gained much attention in the international debate in and out of academia. It has been remarked that almost every theoretical inquiry on landscape, in philosophy, geography, and the social sciences, starts from the recognition of the undetermined and ambiguous nature of the concept (Tanca 2012). However, it is possible to recognise a general pattern in the evolution of the concept of landscape across disciplines during the twentieth century in both Europe and the US (Olwig 1996, Wylie 2007, Kühne 2008). At an earlier stage, while geography was establishing itself as a fully scientific, 'positive' discipline (Cresswell 2013), the landscape of geographers (Sauer 1925, Lehmann 1950), objective and naturalistic, tended to be sharply differentiated from the landscape of historians of art and philosophers (Simmel 1913, Ritter 1974), related more to the artistic, aesthetic, subjective gaze. In recent decades we are witnessing the emergence of more holistic approaches, which rather emphasise the interconnections and the interactions between the aesthetic/subjective and the environmental/objective sides of landscape (Berleant and Carlson 2007). Even those scholars who continue to highlight the aesthetic, cultural, and artistic relevance of landscape, in order to

differentiate it from cognate concepts such as the ‘environment’ (D’Angelo 2021) or ‘territory’ (Salvatori 2003), are not reaffirming an idealistic contraposition between the subjective element of appreciation and the objective assessment of landscape features. On the contrary, the specific character of landscape is acknowledged in the priority of the connections over the parts, and in its resistance to any dualism. The natural and the cultural, the objective and the subjective, the wild and the domesticated, the real and the representational, the material and the spiritual, life and gaze coalesce into landscape forms that are always singular and ever changing (Wylie 2007, Marano 2017, Furia 2021).

It is possible to single out an evolution in the conceptualisation of landscape from an idealistic and dualistic point of view to a more integrated and holistic one in the Italian philosophy of the twentieth century as well. My article will identify Benedetto Croce’s approach to landscape and Luigi Pareyson’s aesthetic theory as the two poles of such an evolution. On the one hand, Croce’s conception of landscape still depends on an idealistic framework which separates nature and culture, art and science, while, on the other hand, Pareyson’s aesthetics allows for a rejuvenation of the notion of landscape more in line with the contemporary sensibility. The main obstacle to our task is that if, on the one hand, Croce’s name is associated with the first Italian law devoted to the protection of landscape, on the other hand, Pareyson does not elaborate any explicit philosophical theory of landscape. A hermeneutic effort will therefore be required in order to find elements in Pareyson’s aesthetics and theory of interpretation that can open up the way towards a radical rethinking of landscape in non-idealistic terms. I have identified those elements in Pareyson’s conception of physical matter, in the role he attributes to wonder in the process of knowledge, and in the contemplative function he claims for aesthetic appreciation.

In general, the evolution from a dualistic to an integrated conception of landscape should not be considered only as a historical shift of emphasis. There are good philosophical reasons for it. As I will show in the following, a holistic conception of landscape has the advantage of reconnecting human territorialisation processes with ecological features and equilibriums in a portion of space. By emphasising the mutual influence of the cultural and the natural rather than their separation, not only will the impact of human action on the environment be underscored but so will be the constraints imposed by the environment on human action. That is particularly important if we consider landscape as the open result of differentiated acts of landscaping, in which agency finds itself distributed among a plurality of agents, both human and nonhuman. A landscape, understood in holistic terms, is not only the reflection of a specific human culture, but also the non-recursive and non-mechanical outcome of multiple interactions between a culture and natural constraints. A dualistic approach separating the natural and the cultural has often been at the basis of conceptions of space as homogeneous, isotropic and quantitative, according to which the sensible and qualitative features of a portion of space only depend on the human factor. Conceptions such as these

have been fraught with heavy practical and political consequences: many examples of irrational land use (Mazúr 1983, D'Angelo 2021) have been based on a misrecognition of both the idiographic, 'total' character of each landscape and the non-human formative powers operating within each landscape. Other ways to overcome a dualistic conception of landscape have been elaborated by authors such as François Jullien (2014), who affirms that landscape is not a matter of vision but rather one of living, and Giorgio Agamben (2014), who criticises those ideological misconceptions which overemphasise the active and operative side of human action on landscapes to the detriment of humans' passivity. In my article I will show that already the earlier work of Luigi Pareyson laid some foundations to surpass the dualistic conception of landscape in the direction of a more integrated and holistic one.

## **2. The geographic and the aesthetic landscape: from opposition to integration**

The holistic and somehow ambiguous nature of landscape has often been neglected by the dualism between the geographical landscape,<sup>1</sup> which refers to the actual shape of a geographical area, and the aesthetic landscape, which is rather related to the artistic representations of usually excellent, beautiful, depiction-worthy landscapes in painting and photography.<sup>2</sup> The landscape of geographers and the landscape of historians of art rarely crossed paths. Things have started to change in the last few decades. The overcoming of the rigid divisions between the geographical and the aesthetic can be noted in the definition provided by the European Landscape Convention (signed in Florence, 2000).<sup>3</sup> There, landscape is defined as 'an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors' (p. 2). It is not only scenic panoramas, but all landscapes that are worthy of consideration, insofar as they are inhabited by and associated with emotional values and meanings. The change of perspective in the Convention's definition parallels an evolution in European aesthetics, including the Italian, which is progressively shifting its focus from the representational/scopic character of landscape to the aesthetic dimension of

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<sup>1</sup> Geographer Marc Antrop says: 'Once the study of landscape was a core topic of geography. It was seen as a unique synthesis between the natural and cultural characteristics of a region. This synthesis embraced geo-ecological relations, spatial patterns and aesthetical properties. To study landscape, information was gathered from field surveys, maps, literature, sketches and photographs' (2000, p. 9).

<sup>2</sup> Philosopher Ed Casey (2002) has investigated the differences and the connections between maps, considered as the main heuristic tools of geography, and landscape painting, understood as an artistic tradition dating back to seventeenth century Dutch painting. The author carefully deconstructs the commonsensical view that relates objectivity to maps and subjectivity to landscape painting, in order to reveal both the scientific-geographic-contemplative contents of landscape painting and the aesthetic-cultural-practical elements of maps.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treatynum=176>.

practices and performances through which landscape is continuously re-made and re-interpreted (D'Angelo 2014, 2021, Griffero 2016, 2021).

In the philosophical debate, as well as in social sciences, the concept of landscape has often been considered as reducible to allegedly more primitive concepts. Maybe because of its inherent visibility, which seems to confine it within the realm of the mere appearance, or maybe because of its troubled epistemological status, landscape has often been considered as either an aesthetic variation of 'absolute space', *in se* objective, homogeneous, and isotropic, or the surface part of 'idiographic place', essentially related to specific qualities, subjective feelings, and cultural and symbolic meanings.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes the objective and the subjective sides of landscape have been traced back to different cultural traditions, witnessed by the difference between the Anglo-Saxon lemmas *land-scape* / *Land-Schaft*, where the emphasis is put on the real shape taken by a portion of land, and the Italian and French lemmas *paesaggio/paysage*, which contain an explicit reference to the term *paese*, the living place of local communities (D'Angelo 2014, pp. 14–15). That makes of landscape a tensive concept, which assumes different connotations in different cultural, linguistic, and argumentative backgrounds, but which in principle combines heterogeneous and often contrasting factors, such as the natural and the cultural, the subjective and the objective, belonging and distantiation, art and science, form and meaning. The conceptual challenge consists in avoiding reductionism, that is, the logic of 'either objective or subjective'. Landscape, rather than being reduced either to absolute space or idiographic place, can be seen as the mediating term between the two, in the middle between the open of space and the closure of place, phenomenologically prior to the poles mediated by it (Furia 2021). In the actual experience, we do not see just space, but always varied and differentiated landscapes where natural and anthropic forms are combined in always specific ways; we do not see just places, but places inserted in broader contexts, endowed with spatial vanishing points and references to elsewhere. In other words, we have experiences of space made concrete in landscapes, and we have experiences of places as 'implaced' in landscapes.<sup>5</sup> It is no accident that many holistic approaches to landscape are grounded on a phenomenological basis (Tilley 1997, Wylie 2007), particularly effective at warding off idealism, objectivism, and reductionism in general. A phenomenological understanding of landscape recognises, on the one hand, the inherent dynamism of space and, on the other hand, the embedded and embodied nature of human cultures and actions. Agency is not an exclusive characteristic of culture, and physical matter is not understood as merely passive and shapeless.

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<sup>4</sup> About the opposition between abstract and homogeneous space, on the one hand, and qualitative and affective place, on the other, see at least Massey (1994), Casey (1997), Agnew (2011).

<sup>5</sup> The expression is drawn from Casey (1997).

Italian philosophy has not dealt with the issue of landscape very often,<sup>6</sup> but it is possible to recognise an evolution in the conception of space and places, that begins with a dualistic pattern, where space and matter are considered the mere backdrop for human initiative, and progresses towards a more holistic one, where space is recognised as an active and qualitatively differentiated dimension of human cultures and actions. The two poles of such an evolution are represented by the idealistic approach of Benedetto Croce and Luigi Pareyson's aesthetics of formativity.

### 3. The landscape preservation law no. 778/1922

In his philosophical essays, Benedetto Croce does not specifically deal with the issue of landscape, yet the philosopher's name is associated with the first Italian law devoted to the protection of both natural beauty and historic heritage, the law n. 778/1922.<sup>7</sup> Salvatore Settis has recently recalled how tortuous and laborious it was to get that law passed.<sup>8</sup> The challenge was to reconcile the processes of Italy's modernisation, urbanisation, and industrialisation with the necessity of preserving the traditional features and characteristics of the landscape, in which the spirit of the country was said to be reflected.

In his introductory remarks, *Per la tutela delle bellezze naturali e degli immobili di particolare interesse storico*, presented in the Italian Senate on September 24<sup>th</sup> 1920, Croce makes several points that are worthy of consideration. First of all, the philosopher makes explicit reference to natural beauty and conjoins it with cultural heritage, both of these constituting goods which are said to deserve specific protection from invasive planning and over-exploitation.<sup>9</sup> Considering the

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<sup>6</sup> During the second half of the twentieth century, it is rare to find an Italian philosopher dealing with the issue of landscape. A noteworthy exception is represented by the massive contribution of Rosario Assunto (1974, 2 vols.). More recently, a resurgence of philosophical interest in the issue of landscape can be seen not only in the already cited work of Paolo D'Angelo, but also in the development of the geo-philosophical approach of Luisa Bonesio (1997) and Caterina Resta (2012).

<sup>7</sup> The law n. 778/1922 represents one of the fundamental steps in the history of the juridical protection of landscape and heritage in Italy: 'The analysis of legislative action in Italy focused on the protection and enhancement of the landscape can be summarised in six key moments: the "Rosadi-Rava" law approved in 1909, the law promoted by the Minister Benedetto Croce in 1922, the "Bottai" laws in 1939, Article 9 of the Italian Constitution of 1948, the "Galasso" law n. 421/1985, the Code of architectural and landscape heritage, approved in 2004' (Forti 2017, p. 534). Croce was Minister when the law was proposed and exposed in September 1920, but was no longer in charge when the law was approved on May 11<sup>th</sup> 1922.

<sup>8</sup> Salvatore Settis has dealt with the genesis and the effects of Benedetto Croce's law in a talk given at the University Ca' Foscari in Venice on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2011. A written version of his talk is available online at [www.comitato-arca.it](http://www.comitato-arca.it).

<sup>9</sup> Croce declares that the aim of the law is 'to defend and to put in value, to the widest possible extent, the major beauties of Italy, the natural ones and the artistic ones' in order 'to put an end

wariness that idealistic approaches generally display towards the very possibility of natural beauty, the reference to it here may be slightly disorienting.<sup>10</sup> In one of the rare passages of his *Aesthetics as Science of Expression and General Linguistics* (1902) explicitly devoted to landscape, Croce's argument runs as follows:

It has been observed that, in order to enjoy natural objects aesthetically, we should withdraw them from their external and historical reality, and separate their simple appearance or origin from existence; that if we contemplate a landscape with our head between our legs, in such a way as to remove ourselves from our wonted relations with it, the landscape appears as an ideal spectacle; that nature is beautiful only for him who contemplates her with the eye of the artist; that zoologists and botanists do not recognise beautiful animals and flowers; that natural beauty is discovered (and examples of discovery are the points of view, pointed out by men of taste and imagination, and to which more or less aesthetic travellers and excursionists afterwards have recourse in pilgrimage, whence a more or less collective suggestion); that, without the aid of the imagination, no part of nature is beautiful, and that with such aid the same natural object or fact is now expressive, according to the disposition of the soul, now insignificant, now expressive of one definite thing, now of another, sad or glad, sublime or ridiculous, sweet or laughable; finally, that natural beauty, which an artist would not to some extent correct, does not exist. All these observations are most just, and confirm the fact that natural beauty is simply a stimulus to aesthetic reproduction, which presupposes previous production. Without preceding aesthetic intuitions of the imagination, nature cannot arouse any at all. (Croce 2017, p. 54)

In his *Breviary of Aesthetics* (1913), Croce reinforces the idea by evoking Henri Frédéric Amiel's famous line: 'every landscape is a state of the mind' (Croce 2007, p. 25).<sup>11</sup> However, on closer inspection, the introductory remarks to the law no. 778/1922 do not contradict the positions maintained in the philosophical essays.

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to the unjustified devastations perpetrated against the most known and loved characteristics of our soil' (my transl. of the introductory report pronounced by Croce in 1920).

<sup>10</sup> As is well known, Hegel delimits his aesthetics to a philosophy of art: 'by adopting this expression, we, at once, exclude the beauty of nature' (Hegel 1975, p. 1). He maintains that beauty is a proper artistic issue because of the superiority of art over nature: 'Now art and works of art, by springing from and being created by the spirit, are themselves of a spiritual kind, even if their presentation assumes an appearance of sensuousness and pervades the sensuous with the spirit. In this respect art already lies nearer to the spirit and its thinking than purely external spiritless nature does' (passim p. 12).

<sup>11</sup> Rosario Assunto will return to Amiel's quotation in the first volume of *Il paesaggio e l'estetica* (1974), where he seeks to provide a non-subjectivistic interpretation of it.

What really matters in the introductory remarks is the juxtaposition of natural beauty with cultural heritage. Natural beauty is itself a spiritual dimension infused into nature by the gaze of the country's inhabitants and it unfolds into the anthropic artefacts that have been built over the centuries. Croce also affirms that landscape is 'nothing else than the material and visible representation of the homeland': the evolution of landscape mirrors the evolution of the national soul.

In the law no. 778/1922, landscape is regarded as equivalent to a scenic view or panorama: there is no landscape without a gaze that frames the environment in *vedute* (Italian term for "views") worthy of aesthetic consideration and appreciation. Settis emphasises the juridical meaning of this assimilation of landscape to panorama, for, in this way, landscapes could finally receive the kind of protection which, in the Italian legislation of the epoch, was already accorded to paintings.<sup>12</sup> However that may be, the philosophically relevant point is that landscapes are considered worthy of protection thanks to the analogy with artworks. An analogy that has not gone unnoticed even among geographers overseas. In his 1925 text, *The Morphology of Landscape*, Carl Sauer, one of the fathers of modern American geography, distances himself from Croce by asserting that landscape is not only a matter of art, for it is endowed with a substantive character requiring also the contribution of the natural sciences in order to be understood.<sup>13</sup> While Croce was overall lined up with other aesthetic interpretations of landscape from his time, such as the one proposed by Simmel in his *Philosophy of Landscape* (1913), geographers already emphasised the scientific relevance of the notion of landscape,

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<sup>12</sup> l. 364/1909 (Legge Rosadi-Rava).

<sup>13</sup> In his essay, *The Morphology of Landscape*, Carl Sauer assigns to geography the task of 'the establishment of a critical system which embraces the phenomenology of landscape, in order to grasp in all of its meaning and colour the varied terrestrial scene'. What is fundamental here is the dialectic between the experiential ground of the geographer (the 'phenomenology of landscape' through which the geographer has an actual experience – also endowed with aesthetic value – of the chosen portion of land) and the development of geographical knowledge as a critical system. In Sauer's view, the experience of actual landscapes lies at the basis of a process of abstraction which leads to the identification of landscape types, or generic landscapes. Those types are more similar to the Weberian ideal-types than to platonic ideas, as tools that are useful to carry out comparisons, interpretations, classifications. This is why, Sauer continues: 'Croce's remark that "the geographer who is describing a landscape has the same task as a landscape painter" has therefore only limited validity. The geographer may describe the individual landscape as a type or possibly a variant of a type, but always he has in mind the generic, and proceeds by comparison' (Sauer 1996, p. 300). The level of discussion was therefore epistemological in the first instance: for Sauer, at stake there was the status of geography as a fully-fledged science. By making landscape an issue of scientific knowledge and not only a matter for the artistic gaze, Sauer meant also to defend geography's intermediate position between the natural and the cultural sciences. On the other hand, Croce was far less sensitive to the epistemological concern of Sauer: by making landscape a matter of art, the Italian philosopher meant to emphasise landscape's original connections to human imagination and values, charging it with ethical and political relevance.

understood as an actual interconnection between natural and anthropic forms that presents itself as a dynamic totality calling for scientific processing.<sup>14</sup>

Even if the historical importance of Croce's conceptualisation of landscape cannot be denied, nor can its dependence on the philosophical dualisms of modernity. It can be found in the overemphasis Croce places on human agency to the detriment of other kinds of agencies, like those investigated by the natural sciences: the atmospheric agents, the climate, the characteristics of the soil, the characteristics of the vegetation, highly regarded by the morphological tradition inaugurated by Alexander von Humboldt. There is also a 'romantic' side to Croce's landscape. As 'visible and material representation of the homeland', it takes on at the same time an aesthetic and an ethical value. The landscape, as the concrete manifestation of the soul of the nation, is the place that makes self and mutual recognition possible. The idea of landscape as home for the people is of course present also today, as one can see in the formulation of the European Convention of 2000. But, at the same time, by reducing landscape to the domestic dimension of national self-recognition, it ends up being deprived of its inherent otherness, its enigmatic qualities, which may elicit wonder and other unexpected feelings calling for further interrogation and interpretation. In that sense, space and nature themselves cannot be considered as worthy of protection by virtue of the inappropriability of the environment. On the contrary, landscapes should be protected precisely because they belong to the soul of the nation, and they must be protected from the alienating forces of the wild industrialisation which challenges the continuity of tradition. There is great wisdom in Croce's warning against the overexploitation of nature and irrational land use; yet, space finds itself deprived of its inner agency and formativity, nature assumes aesthetic and ethical value only as long as it offers a basis for spiritual development, and landscape owes its worth to the fact that it holds up a mirror to the soul of the nation.

#### 4. Pareyson's aesthetics and landscape

In Luigi Pareyson's departure from the idealistic premises of aesthetics there is the potential to rethink landscape in new terms.<sup>15</sup> At first sight it does not seem like that. The word 'landscape' does not appear either in the essays collected in *Existence, Interpretation, Freedom* (ed. Diego Bubbio, 2009) nor in those collected in the volume edited by Robert Valgenti, *Truth and Interpretation* (2013).

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<sup>14</sup> Alain Roger, in his *Court traité du paysage* (1997) has noted that Benedetto Croce, Georg Simmel and Charles Lalo claimed, more or less simultaneously, that landscapes are invented by the human gaze. These were the same years in which geographers such as Vidal de la Blache, Max Sorre, and Carl Sauer were laying the foundations of modern regional geography. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the dualism between aesthetic landscape and geographic landscape was particularly sharp.

<sup>15</sup> To find out more about the confrontation between Pareyson and Croce, see at least the essays of Umberto Eco and Paolo D'Angelo published in *Annuario Filosofico* 27 (2011).



Moreover, even though in Pareyson's *Estetica* (1954) there is a chapter devoted to natural beauty, the term 'landscape' is not mentioned. But even if Pareyson does not formulate explicit criticisms regarding landscape, it is possible that Pareyson's diffidence towards that concept depended on the primarily visual meaning it had in the aesthetic debates of the twentieth century. Pareyson's aesthetics instead pursues the retrieval of the material, tactile, embodied aspects of aesthetics and art: but this interpretation of the aesthetic field is consistent with a holistic conception of landscape, as I will try to show in the following paragraphs.

There are some tangential points of intersection between Pareyson's philosophy and the issue of landscape that are worthy of further investigation: the first one involves the conception of matter formulated by Pareyson in relation to the formativity of artistic activity.<sup>16</sup> In his *Estetica*, Pareyson maintains that pure artistic formativity must adopt as its proper matter physical matter as such, 'blunt and genuine' (Pareyson 1974, p. 41),<sup>17</sup> with its qualities and resistances. If, on the one hand, matter is chosen by the artists according to their formative intention, on the other hand, matter is not chosen because of its malleability and pure passivity, but precisely because of its capacity to offer resistance to the artist's formative intention. The freedom of the formative intention is limited by the character of the chosen matter. Physical matter does not display its character only by limiting and resisting the formative intention. On the contrary, the character of the chosen matter orients and supports the formative intention by suggesting ways to realise the work of art. Now, the view of physical matter as endowed with an agency and life of its own is conceptually consistent with a conception of intense space, where qualities and variations interact with the human subject rephrased in terms of body rather than abstract consciousness. Such a conceptualisation of intense space lays at the basis of any understanding of landscape in terms of openness and otherness, that does not limit itself to the manifestation of the beholders' feelings, but represents for the beholder a fascinating challenge. Space is not just the empty container of things and it is not the mere backdrop for human action. Space is inherently animated by the determinations of matter, which, far from being reduced to mere passivity or indetermined *chora*, develops into a multiplicity of dynamic forms.

One could object that, in Pareyson's thought, this framework applies only to matter seen under the lens of art and aesthetics. In other fields, matter can actually be viewed as pure passivity, as happens with instrumental rationality, which sees in nature a reservoir of resources to be exploited so as to obtain benefits and economic value. But in Pareyson's thought, art, far from being reduced to an isolated practice, represents the opportunity to rethink the otherness of things, matter and nature as such. In order to operate with matter, artists must turn into

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<sup>16</sup> Pareyson's formativity theory represents a solid source of inspiration and a theoretical reference for contemporary Italian aestheticians such as Vercellone (2020) and Bertinetto (2021).

<sup>17</sup> Quotations from essays included in *Estetica. Teoria della formatività* and not translated in English are taken from the 1974 Italian edition and translated by the author of the present work.

interpreters: ‘must study and research and investigate it like only an effort of interpretation can do’. The artist, Pareyson says, ‘studies its matter amorously’, where ‘amorously’ means that the artist/interpreter recognises matter in its personality, so to speak. Matter must be interrogated, heard, and answered.

The issue has been dealt with in analogous terms by the philosopher and geographer Jean Marc Besse, in a recent book devoted to the necessity of landscape (2018). He maintains that landscape planners and architects should not impose their creations *ex nihilo* on the preformed landscape. Much urban and landscape planning has been realised in spite of and to the detriment of what we could call the ‘landscape personality’. Besse has called this attitude ‘acting on’ landscape:

The ‘acting-on’ attitude presupposes a sort of exteriority between the matter on which human action is exerted and that same action, or, more precisely, the intention or the idea animating that action from within and providing it with its purpose. ‘To act on’ means to produce, or to put oneself into the perspective of the production. Or, putting it another way, it means trying to produce objects by methodically applying an already elaborated mental pattern to a more or less resistant matter. (Besse 2020, p. 43)<sup>18</sup>

The author suggests replacing the ‘acting-on’ attitude with a different one, which he calls ‘acting-with landscape’ and that takes very seriously the metaphor of landscape as a living organism endowed with an everchanging but still quite defined personality:

In this case, human action is not exerted from the outside on matter understood as lifeless, but blends into the movements, the contours and the morphologies of a matter endowed with its own vital animation, with which human action interacts in responsive and dynamic ways. That sequence of interactions deals more with transformation than production. Whereas in the demiurgic paradigm of the technical action, which corresponds to the implementation of a plan previously elaborated, the technical action understood as transformation is rather defined through adjustments and corrections, which allow us to tailor our action to an evolving situation. (Besse 2020, p. 61)

Pareyson’s artist, who is at the same time a hermeneut and an explorer, looks much like Besse’s landscape architect in the ‘acting with’ attitude.

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<sup>18</sup> I am translating from the Italian edition of Besse’s book (2020)

## 5. Wonder and the aesthetic dimension of geographical knowledge

In his *Estetica*, Pareyson makes use of spatial metaphors to describe and explain the movements of interpretation in general, in his attempt to vindicate the aesthetic nature of knowledge<sup>19</sup>. Interpretation ‘goes slowly and cautiously’ or ‘advances quickly and urgently’, it ‘proceeds at random and without a guiding principle’ or it ‘concentrates intently on a single direction’, it ‘boldly and confidently follows a path’ or ‘it stops to try another’ (Pareyson 2009, p. 87).<sup>20</sup> The point that elicits the attention of the landscape theorist is that it is not only the intellectual or the artistic act of interpretation that can be explained through spatial metaphors, but that our presence in space, our spatial practices, can be seen as interpretative acts. When we boldly follow our paths, we are resting on certain interpretations of our spatial surroundings, that with the passage of time and as a result of their everyday use go without saying and are taken for granted. But when, for any reason, the being taken for granted of the everyday is interrupted and we are urged to change our paths, intense space demands unusual attention, it arouses dormant feelings, shakes our sense of familiarity, and requires further interpretation. In that interruption of our everyday relations with lived space the possibility is raised for landscape to be configured as an aesthetic object. And it is an object relevant to aesthetics not only because it establishes non-obvious affective relationships with the dweller/holder, but also because it calls for interpretation, understood as ‘a process of production that consists in configuring the images in which it defines the sense of things’ (Pareyson 2009, p. 87).

Landscapes considered as aesthetic objects are still the same landscapes in which we dwell and where we carry out our everyday practices. But they are in some way refreshed by a renewed, rejuvenated, attentive gaze. They are recognised in their power to elicit aesthetic appreciation. Here again, Pareyson provides a powerful model with which to understand the nature of aesthetic appreciation that is perfectly suited to the landscape experience. In the essay, ‘Contemplation and Aesthetic Pleasure’, included in his *Estetica*, wonder is defined as ‘a multi-faceted feeling which gives rise to a mixed pleasure’ (*Estetica* 1974, p. 200). It is in fact

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<sup>19</sup> It has been claimed that ‘no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 20). This is especially true of spatial metaphors, those that have spatial movements, practices and locations as their source references and are used to explain *in se* nonspatial objects and phenomena. Lakoff and Johnson call this kind of metaphor ‘orientational’, but the expression ‘spatial metaphors’ is now predominant (Visioli 2012, Bongo 2014).

<sup>20</sup> The influential American geographer Ed Soja noted that the philosopher Paul Ricoeur ‘filled his approach to narrativity with subtly double-coded terms and concepts which, in French and English, resound with ambivalent spatial and temporal meanings: plot, emplotment, configuration, world, trope, trajectory, peripeteia, time-span, story-line’. Soja would like to ‘believe that Ricoeur was aware of the pronounced spatiality of time that rings in these terms and concepts’ (Soja 1996, p. 169). Something similar could be said about Pareyson: many concepts summoned up in his theory of interpretation resound with spatial meanings that warrant further investigation.

constituted by ‘a moment of surprise and a contemplative side’ (ibid.): as ‘perception of something new’ (ibid.), it elicits a feeling of bewilderment and awe; but since that awe is elicited by the self-presenting form of an object, wonder opens up the path to contemplation. The beholder is captivated by the features of the considered object and would like to know it better. This is why Pareyson affirms that wonder anticipates interpretation and contemplation: wonder really is the way to knowledge.

The motif of wonder resounds in the geographical tradition dating back to Alexander von Humboldt, who underlines how *das Zauber* lies at the basis of both our poetic and scientific relationships with nature (Rossi, 1988, p. 826). The earth, Humboldt says, is a system of correspondences, the knowledge of which is prepared for and anticipated in the sensible impression (*Eindruck*).<sup>21</sup> Nature, far from being reduced to a homogeneous entity, presents itself in various aspects, or forms, taken in the Goethean sense of dynamic, metamorphic and immersive entities with which human beings are in relation.<sup>22</sup> Those natural entities include and encompass human artifacts such as buildings, architectures, cities, artworks, monuments, gardens: physical matter, disposed and organised in forms, is the same matter of which buildings, cities and artworks are made. The anthropic forms are located within broader contexts which, when viewed from a certain distance, can be seen as landscapes. In Humboldt, it is possible to find a continuity between the most intense wonder elicited by geographical forms and the most detailed, erudite, and sometimes even pedantic scientific explanations.<sup>23</sup> That collaboration between aesthetics and the scientific enterprise can be grounded philosophically in the recognition of the aesthetic consistency of every process of interpretation, as shown by Pareyson in his essay on natural beauty. To really know things, Pareyson argues, means to see things ‘not as tools, but as forms’ (Pareyson 2009, p. 100). But to consider things as forms implies that things are not in the first instance accounted

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<sup>21</sup> Von Humboldt’s conception of the process of knowledge successfully integrates aesthetic motifs into the scientific endeavour. A positive collaboration between aesthetics and geography has been researched and enhanced by geographers, sometimes taking direct inspiration from Von Humboldt (Quaini 2002, Greppi 2021). Insightful research into Alexander von Humboldt’s theory of landscape from an aesthetic-philosophical vantage point has been elaborated in the Italian literature by Franzini Tibaldeo (2015) and D’Angelo in the second part of *Il paesaggio. Teorie, storie, luoghi* (2021).

<sup>22</sup> An updated overview of the Goethean concept of ‘form’ is provided by David Wellbery, author of the relevant entry in the *Goethe Lexicon of Philosophical Concepts* (2021: <https://goethelexicon.pitt.edu/GL/article/view/38>). In the Italian philosophical literature, morphology as the science of forms in the Goethean sense is the main object of the international volume, *Glossary of Morphology* (2021), edited by Federico Vercellone and Salvatore Tedesco.

<sup>23</sup> One of the aims stated by von Humboldt in his *Preface* to the first volume of *Kosmos* was ‘to show [...] that a certain degree of scientific completeness in the treatment of individual facts is not wholly incompatible with a picturesque animation of style’ (Von Humboldt 1858, p. IX). The literary quality of von Humboldt’s text can be considered as another element of the collaboration between aesthetic appreciation (‘enjoyment in the contemplation of nature’, (passim, p. 23) and scientific endeavour.

for by their sheer usability and functionality. The beauty of nature, Pareyson argues, is not just the beauty of its image, as if the image depended entirely on the representational codes of the beholder's gaze. The point is that the forms of nature have the power to present themselves to the gaze of the beholder, to such an extent that things are identified with their images:

The beauty of nature is a beauty of forms, and so it is evident for a gaze that is capable of seeing the form as a form, after having searched for it, inquired into it, surveyed it, interpreted it, to finally admire it and enjoy it. Therefore, the vision and the appreciation of the beauty of nature presuppose an effort of interpretation, an exercise of faithfulness, discipline of attention, a concentrated gaze, and the cultivation of a way of seeing to reach that deep and all-seeing view, which is, in one way, vision of forms, and in another, production of forms, since interpreted form and formed image must coincide in that conformation which is peculiar to contemplation. (Pareyson 2009, p. 101)

Landscape can be seen as a good example of what is known as a form in the Pareysonian sense. Landscape elicits wonder: it suffices to conjure up the sight of the mountains that crowd the horizon during a road trip, or the harmonious rolling countryside silhouetted against the sky. The kind of wonder elicited by landscapes really seems to work in the vein of Pareyson's conception of wonder. Firstly, the beholder / wanderer / driver is surprised by the novelty, intensity, and beauty of the forms standing over against him. Secondly, that surprise 'develops into interpretation and contemplation' (Pareyson 1974, p. 201) as long as it creates an impulse of curiosity and attention paid to the geographical forms themselves. Wonder elicited by the landscape image might awaken the interest of the beholder / wanderer / driver in learning more about its physical and cultural characteristics. Landscape invites him to dive into its secrets. A subtle thread connects the visible and the invisible. The beholder / wanderer / driver can feel the atmosphere of landscape but he would like to develop his impressions into judgements and positive knowledge. But the movement that runs from aesthetic appreciation to interpretation and knowledge does not suppress, delete or deconstruct the wonder of the first meeting. The aesthetic self-presentation of landscape is not reduced to the mere epiphenomenon of something allegedly more real and substantial lying behind the curtain.<sup>24</sup> Interpretation does not dismantle the appearance of the image, but elaborates the reasons why a landscape appears in this or that way. It is a reconstructive kind of knowledge that aims at enhancing the. In this sense,

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<sup>24</sup> A largely comprehensive overview of the critical approaches towards landscape, approaches in which landscape is understood as an ideological product concealing the real productive forces and movements governing socio-spatial processes, is provided by the third chapter of John Wylie's book, *Landscape* (2007).

Pareyson can maintain that, ‘the concept of natural beauty is already implicit in the very fact of sensitive knowledge as interpretation’ (ibid., p. 206).

Of course, the viability of this position depends on how beauty is defined. If beauty were defined in the abstract, as universal and objective, it would be nonsense to claim that sensitive knowledge as interpretation implies the discovery of natural beauty. In Pareyson’s aesthetic theory, natural beauty is ‘the possibility of contemplating those forms in which the process of interpretation is fulfilled: to really know things does not mean to sketch out blurred schemas of them [...] but to see things as forms, that is, to contemplate their beauty’ (ibid.). Two powerful ideas are implied in Pareyson’s way of conceiving natural beauty. In the first instance, beauty takes on a relational character which springs from the encounter between two agencies: the formative power of nature, that gives birth to expressive forms; and the interpretive intention of the human subject, stemming from wonder. This moves Pareyson’s conception of beauty away from the idealistic preconception according to which the only active force endowed with formative power would be the spirit, while nature would be devoid of agency and formativity. Secondly, beauty results in the successful match between a thing in its unicity and its image. In this sense, any thing has beauty as an inner possibility, or, putting it another way, any thing could be beautified according to its pre-given and pre-formed characteristics. When a thing is fully found in its image, when image captures and enhances the atmosphere of the thing, there is beauty. Beauty is always specific, local, idiographic. Pareyson’s concept of beauty potentially shifts the focus from the excellent landscapes and panoramas considered worthy of legal protection in the idealistic approach, to the ordinary living environments protected by the European Landscape Convention. There is a diffused aesthetics in ordinary landscapes, which nourishes everyday practices and is raised to the level of conscious awareness when our everyday spatial practices are interrupted. Of course, to say that every landscape can be beautiful in principle does not mean that every landscape is actually beautiful. But at this point, following the Pareysonian way, the benchmark by which the beauty of a landscape can be assessed is not given a priori through the definition of an abstract category of beauty. A greater role is assumed by the peculiarity of feelings elicited by a specific landscape. Wonder can also be mixed with feelings of bewilderment, uncanniness, and discomfort, as happens in the case of sublime landscapes (Bodei 2008, Tuan 2013). From a philosophical point of view, wonder is the encounter between affective surprise and intellectual curiosity. The beholder /wanderer/driver can also be surprised by ugly landscapes in which people have a hard life, land has been over-exploited and material relics of former factories and mills dot the area. He can also feel bewildered at the sight of the impeccable landscape of the enclaves (Saarinen 2019, Pastor, Torres 2020): beautiful for those who are included, but artificially disconnected from their surroundings, as if their picturesque beauty depended on the externalisation of every uncontrollable factor of metamorphosis and contamination. In all those cases, landscape has not lost its enigmatic dimension. It is still capable of arousing wonder, therefore, to call for

interpretation and contemplation. The process of interpretation and contemplation, in the case of ugly or exclusionary landscapes, seeks to understand their genesis and to single out different possibilities of adjustment and amendment. In that sense, beautification is still an act of interpretation, as it responds to the question: how to save places from standardisation, depletion, and ugliness. To know a thing implies learning how to make it flourish in order positively to reconnect with nature and humans.

The case of the landscapes of the enclaves is important in that they display an unrelated kind of beauty, frozen in a stereotypical image (suffice it to think of the magnificent meadows and palms of the holiday resorts in Africa) reproduced without any change in different parts of the world. The landscape of the enclaves establishes an artificial boundary that sharply separates it from the connections with the ordinary landscapes of the surroundings. As we have maintained, landscapes are always singular and idiographic, but they owe their dynamicity and vitality to their interconnection with the totality they belong to. Again, Pareyson helps to re-elaborate the articulation between nature, seen as a totality, and its forms, interpreted as its idiographic parts, in a way that avoids both the reduction of the singularity of the form to a qualitatively indifferent particular subsumed by the universal and the reduction of the totality of nature to the mere sum of its geographical forms.

## **6. Landscapes and the unavailability of nature**

Pareyson argues that there could not be any natural beauty if nature were reducible to mere mechanism: 'if nature is frozen in laws which are different from those regulating the coherence of forms from the inside [...], the possibility decays of interpreting it and contemplating it in the vibrant and inexhaustible wealth of its forms' (Pareyson 1974, pp. 216-17). Nature should be seen as endowed with a 'formative power' (ibid., p. 217) that produces forms which call for interpretation and contemplation. There is a mutually enriching interplay between nature and things seen as forms. On the one hand, nature realises itself by unfolding into a variety of spatial forms endowed with a peculiar character and specific qualities. On the other hand, the interconnections between forms continuously hint at the totality of nature: they are all encompassed, preserved and transformed within it. Even if Pareyson does not use the term 'landscape' here, landscapes can ultimately be seen as those forms in which nature proceeds and realises itself. Through this conceptual move, in the wake of a Humboldtian interpretation of nature, the category of landscape is stripped of its primary visual and cultural meaning and draws nearer to the formative power of nature, of which the formative power of human beings is seen as a continuation. By this move I do not intend to deny the cultural consistency of landscapes and their being subjected to the formative intentions of societies and cultures. Nevertheless, human acts of 'landscaping' (Lorimer 2005) should be seen as encompassed by the broader formative process of nature, rather than as opposed

to it. This also implies the idea of nature as ‘self-organised and capable of organising’, which at the same time ‘encompasses and respects the forms it crafts thanks to its formative power’ (Pareyson 1974, p. 217).<sup>25</sup>

To consider human formative intentions and acts as encompassed by a more general formative power of nature seems to be in contradiction with the now largely accepted theory of the Anthropocene (Latour 2014, Wark 2015), which puts the emphasis on the major impact of man-made action on the terrestrial surface, the biosphere and the atmosphere. Nature and culture now overlap to such an extent that it is difficult even for a landscape theorist clearly to distinguish, in considering a specific landscape, which elements and processes depend on natural processes and which ones depend on the anthropic intervention. The peculiar character of a landscape results from a chain of events in which human interventions might, sooner or later, play an important role. The plants we find in one locale might have been transplanted from one hemisphere to the other during colonial expeditions, or could have been modified by cultivation techniques and genetic interventions. On the other hand, to recognise that we live in the epoch of the Anthropocene does not imply that humankind has reached (or can reach in the future) full control over nature. Whenever human activities are suspended, by reasons of force majeure, or freely chosen political action, nature seems to recover areas of activity that are not under the strict control of human planning: suffice it to recall the changes in the lagoon landscape of Venice when large portions of the accustomed activities of transportation were suspended during the lockdown relating to covid-19.<sup>26</sup> But even the manipulative actions carried out by humans in normal times find in physical matter every kind of resistance and reaction. We return to the Pareysonian idea that physical matter is endowed with a peculiar formativity with which human formative intentions have to deal. Although the issue of the relationships between nature and culture is likely undecidable from a metaphysical point of view, in the idea of nature as a totality encompassing human activities, a normative ideal can be glimpsed. By considering landscapes as the products of both human and nonhuman agencies that mutually overlap and superimpose themselves upon one another, it is possible to dethrone human formative intentions from a position of omnipotence and to recognise a remnant of unavailability and inappropriability in nature.<sup>27</sup> This brings us back to the main argument we can draw from Pareyson’s aesthetics in order to develop a holistic and

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<sup>25</sup> This is another idea that Pareyson shares with von Humboldt: ‘The principal impulse by which I was directed was the earnest endeavour to comprehend the phenomena of physical objects in their general connection, and to represent nature as one great whole, moved and animated by internal forces’ (von Humboldt 1858, p. VII).

<sup>26</sup> The transparency of the water markedly increased during the lockdown: <https://www.igg.cnr.it/ricerche/research-highlights/la-trasparenza-delle-acque-nella-laguna-di-venezia-rilevata-dai-satelliti-sentinel-2-della-missione-copernicus-durante-il-lockdown-covid-19>.

<sup>27</sup> According to Agamben, landscape, like language or body, is a figure of the ‘inappropriable’. See *L’uso dei corpi*.



ecologically informed notion of landscape: far from being reduced to the mere results of human production, landscapes must be seen as alterities where human agency finds itself always mingled with other agencies which do not mechanically follow the directions prescribed by human intentions. To recognise nature as endowed with a specific formative power, as Pareyson does in his aesthetic theory, implies that nature must be respected as a self-organising totality which encompasses humans and their formative intentions and acts.

In conclusion, I think that Pareyson's philosophy provides, better than Croce's, a powerful contribution to overcoming the common misconception according to which aesthetic landscape must involve subjective interpretations of nature, and geographical landscape an objective exploration and explanation. By inserting aesthetics into knowledge, art into science, human formativity into the cosmic formativity of nature, landscape may be left to its original alterity and considered worthy of respect as part of the greater whole of nature.

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