



Citation: Valagussa, F. (2025). Painting the Landscape. The Landscape that Makes Us Think. *Aisthesis* 19(1): 13-23. doi: 10.7413/2035-8466039.

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Painting the Landscape. The Landscape that Makes Us Think

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Abstract. The article aims to show how landscape is not a natural datum but a typically modern cultural product, particularly linked to the importance that the subject's point of view has managed to gain over the last few centuries. Using examples taken from Dante, Vico, Cézanne, Simmel and Merleau-Ponty, the article shows how the construction of landscape depends on the presence of a mental image. Such an image, already previously acquired through arts such as painting or poetry, has the effect of gathering and collecting a series of elements, giving them that unity without which it is not possible to speak of landscape. After showing how important the cultural dimension is for the creation of landscape, the second part of the article shows how landscape can in turn become a model for art. From this reciprocal interaction between the two levels, it is possible to rethink the relationship between landscape and environment.

Keywords. Landscape, painting, Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne, climate change.

There is a connection between our vision and the facts, but it is often a strange connection. A man has rarely looked at a landscape, let us say, except to examine its possibilities for division into buildings lots, but he has seen a number of landscapes hanging in the parlor. And from them he has learned to think

of a landscape as a rosy sunset, or as a country road with a church steeple and a silver moon. One day he goes to the country and for hours he does not see a single landscape. Then the sun goes down looking rosy. At once he recognizes a landscape and exclaims that it is beautiful. But two days later, when he tries to recall what he saw, the odds are that he will remember chiefly some landscape in a parlor. (Lippmann [1921]: 88)

A page like this one by Gabriel Lippmann clearly shows how, in the words written by Michael Jakob, «a landscape cannot be realised where the paradigmatic guiding function of images, be it literary or artistic, is missing» (Jakob [2017]: 24).

1. *Mimetic effects*

The importance of this dialogue between the arts, from which emerge new ways of visualising what we commonly and superficially call “reality”, has already been pointed out by many authors. In one of his fragments, Nietzsche emphasised the importance of the mimetic relationship between art and reality, reversing the order in which it is commonly understood: «False concept of mimesis. The figures of art are more real than reality, reality is imitation of the figures of art. The world of awakening is perhaps an imitation of the world of the sleeping? It is certain that the world must exist as representation: whereas we are only the object represented» (Nietzsche [1999]: 323, fr. 9 [133]).

Trying to illustrate the problem through a series of examples in which the artistic dimension influences the way we see reality, we would like to cite an analysis found in an essay by Ezra Pound. He showed how in Canto XXIII of *Paradise* there is a passage in which Dante describes the effects of a play of light and shadow: «it is all the more remarkable in having been written centuries before the painters had taught men to note light and shade, and to watch for such effects in nature» (Pound [1910]: 156). Only centuries after Dante, in fact, painters will begin to use the so-called *chiaroscuro*. But, to stay with Dante and return to our theme, Edoardo Sanguineti wrote eloquent pages commenting on the descriptions of landscapes in *Malebolge* (see Sanguineti [1961]: 39-43).

Let us take a famous group of verses from Dante:

Io vidi per le coste e per lo fondo
 Piena la pietra livida di fori,
 d'un largo tutti e ciascun era tondo. (*Inf.*: XIX, 13-15)¹

1 «I saw that on its sloping sides and bottom / the livid-colored stone was full of holes, / all of one width, while each of them was round».

Commenting on these verses, Sanguineti shows very clearly how «the landscape first emerges in its technical condition» (Sanguineti [1961]: 40), with a whole series of very precise observations designed to explore the place – just think of terms such as “sloping sides”, “bottom”, “holes”, and then the chromatic relief, achieved through the indication of the “livid-colored stone”. Further on, we encounter additional significant descriptions:

Non mi parean men ampi né maggiori
 Che que' che son nel mio bel San Giovanni,
 fatti per luogo de' battezzatori. (Dante, *Inf.*: XIX, 16-18)²

Beginning with a statement rich in technical terms – as Sanguineti again observes – we find a similitude that shifts the description to a subjective register, «therefore in an area naturally destined to be enriched with more vivid emotional colouring» (Sanguineti [1961]: 40). Technical expressiveness is inevitably mixed with a personal element, which is then enriched with anecdotal references. The *Divine Comedy* abounds in landscape descriptions – in a period when landscape, even on a pictorial level, was by no means an acquired and accepted technique – characterised by this mixture of technique and subjective dimension.

Like that man who notices the landscape only when it looks rosy at sunset, because everything depends on identifying images that are familiar to him, Dante too immediately links the holes he sees in the livid stone to those of his “bel San Giovanni”: how important is this term “beautiful” to give the description its full meaning! He remembers them because he is not simply talking about the baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence, but of “his beautiful” San Giovanni. It is “beautiful” because it is something that already “belongs” to him so to speak. It is beautiful because it depends on the image already sedimented in *his* soul. The presence of this image in his soul can transform the baptistery into a model to which those holes in the livid stone can be compared. Of course, all this is possible from the point of view that can make such a comparison, namely Dante’s point of view.

Taking all this into account, we should understand the mimetic dimension, in general, not on the level of the mere reduplication of reality, but rather as a moment in which a certain angle, a certain point of view, is disclosed. We are talking about that glimmer through which we take a certain perspective on reality for the first time. Things such as landscape do not even emerge to our gaze if we disregard the cultural and social coordinates that allow us to frame it, to recognise it, to distinguish it as such from the background of the reality that surrounds us.

2 «Nor less nor more wide did they seem to me, / than those which in my beautiful Saint John’s / are made as places for baptizing priests».

2. *A brief Aristotelian excursus*

Somehow Aristotle had already foreseen this theme in his *Poetics*:

We enjoy contemplating the most precise images of things whose actual sight is painful to us, such as the forms of the vilest animals and of corpses. The explanation of this too is that understanding gives great pleasure not only to philosophers but likewise to others too, though the latter have a smaller share in it. This is why people enjoy looking at images, because through contemplating them it comes about that they understand and infer what each element means, for instance that this person is so-and-so. For, if one happens not to have seen the subject before, the image will not give pleasure qua mimesis but because of its execution or colour, or for some other such reason. (*Poet.*: 1448 b 9-17)

By contemplating images rather than things, which only become something because they are seen in the light of certain images³, we understand and infer that each element takes on its own meaning within an overall context only through the image. In fact, Aristotle does not say that we understand that this person is so-and-so. He literally writes that we understand that “this is that” – which means that through the lens offered by the image we begin to recognise in this element, at first indistinct (this), something precise (that): we recognise it as an exemplification of a model we have in mind, thanks to the image provided by the artist.

Let us return to the landscape mentioned by Lippmann: it is only at sunset that the landscape is recognised as such, because the connection with the paintings hanging in a parlor is activated in the viewer’s mind. The image provided by the paintings serves as an authentic interpretative filter, apart from which that complex of elements – the country road, the slopes, the bell tower, and so on – does not in itself constitute a landscape. The landscape is seen as soon as it is seen as an exemplification of a certain model. It is very important to highlight that, after a few days, the man does not remember the real landscape he saw: all that remains in his mind is the model, of which the real landscape was merely an exemplification.

In this regard, we could quote the famous passage from the *Scienza nuova* in which Giambattista Vico shows how «the true war chief, for example, is the Godfrey that Torquato Tasso imagines; and all the chiefs who do not conform throughout to Godfrey are not true chiefs of war» (Vico [1744]: 66). Something similar happened to that man who recognises the landscape only when it looks rosy, just as we acknowledge someone as a captain only if he reminds us of Godfrey of Bouillon.

3 In fact, things are never something in themselves: things only become something in the light of representation, in the light of a certain vision already present and working in our minds.

3. Poetry, Painting and Landscape

In one of his famous essays, Maurice Merleau-Ponty speaks of Paul Cézanne's ability to suspend all the habits⁴ that make the world familiar to us, in order to reveal that «base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself» (Merleau-Ponty [1969]: 16). To do this, Merleau-Ponty sets up a comparison between painting and landscapes: we are not necessarily talking about Cézanne as a painter of landscapes – he argues – but rather about Cézanne's approach as a painter. Cézanne studied the geometry of planes and forms; he inquired into the geological structure of landscapes. He was interested in drawing and anatomy, incorporated in each stroke of his brush like the rules of the game in a tennis match (see Merleau-Ponty [1969]: 17). On the other hand – and it is here that the comparison with landscape begins to emerge – no rule, no use of colour or skill in drawing is enough in itself: all these gestures naturally contribute to the emergence of «the landscape in its full reality» (*ibidem*), which is what Cézanne called “motif”.

Recalling the words of Cézanne's wife, Merleau-Ponty writes: «he would halt and look at everything with widened eyes, “germinating” with the countryside. The task before him was, first to forget all he had ever learned from science and, secondo, through these sciences to recapture the structure of the landscape as an emerging organism» (Merleau-Ponty [1969]: 17). In these lines, the landscape does not refer to the subject matter of the painting, but takes on a broader metaphorical value. That metaphorical value which Hans Blumenberg has taught us to appreciate insofar as it is able to both veiling and probing a moment of logical awkwardness, in the sense that – quoting a famous passage from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* – the metaphor launches a «the transportation of the reflection on one object of intuition to another, quite different concept, to which perhaps no intuition can ever directly correspond» (Blumenberg [1960]: 4 – see also Kant [1790]: 226). In this case the landscape is not a theme but a “motif”, in the sense that the overall effect of a landscape mimics the outcomes that Cézanne's painting seeks to produce.

Let us follow Merleau-Ponty's text, which refers in turn to formulations already present in Gérard Gasquet. The latter intends to “weld together” the partial views and particular viewpoints that our sight can only assume from time to time, side by side: instead, Cézanne aims to reunite what «the eye's versatility disperses», almost as if he wanted «to join the wandering hands of nature» (Merleau-Ponty [1969]: 17). Thus, attacking the painting from all sides he generates «a picture

4 It is difficult not to recognise in Merleau-Ponty's interest in this gesture by Cézanne a reference – again, in a mimetic sense – to the suspension of judgement, to that “epoché” that constitutes one of the best-known figures in Edmund Husserl's phenomenology.

which took on fullness and density; it grew in structure and balance; it came to maturity all at once. “The landscape thinks itself in me”» (Merleau-Ponty [1969]: 17).

We have seen how landscape is by no means something merely “natural”, since it only arises from an image, from a model that in some way anticipates the actual experience, making it possible⁵. The image – be it poetic or pictorial – becomes the fundamental support in the light of which to recognise the landscape, being able to say, in the words of Aristotle, “this is that”. The landscape depends on this “gesture of the mind” through which the inner image is reflected on the outside: in this very subtle reflexive bounce, a glimmer emerges which can see the landscape for the first time. Before we can see the landscape, in fact, we must “know” what it is: our eyes are full of knowing things, filters, devices, instruments with which art has endowed us and enriched us. These instruments seem to be very useful for “seeing” things not as they are “on a natural level”, but rather completely transfigured on a cultural level.

Yet, if the landscape emerges in the light of a pictorial or poetic image, it is no wonder that – as in Cézanne’s painting – a kind of counter-movement takes place, a sort of new rebound, almost a return. If previously the image disclosed the landscape, now it is the landscape – in its ability to weld planes together and reunite what the eyes had dispersed and divided – that becomes a model for painting. We are talking about a primordial painting: Cézanne himself tells us that he writes as a painter what has not yet been painted. And on this primitive dimension Merleau-Ponty would further insist:

the artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a shout, whether it can detach itself from the flow of individual life in which it originates and give the independent existence of an identifiable *meaning* either to the future of that same individual life or to the monads coexisting with it or to the open community of future monads. The meaning of what the artist is going to say does not exist anywhere – not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in this unformulated life. (Merleau-Ponty [1969]: 19)

4. *Far from the true: the appearance of landscape*

In an essay on the perception of landscape, Massimo Venturi Ferriolo dedicated a short paragraph to the binomial “landscape-painting”, recalling Plato’s condemnation of mimesis as being far from the truth. In this respect, «painting is the principal model of all forms of artistic imitation insofar as it distances

5 This shift in perspective actually coincides with what Kant calls his Copernican revolution. In other words, we no longer deal with the object itself, so to speak “in its natural dimension”. Rather, the relationship with the object is always mediated by our way of knowing, by the various images through which we literally try to figure out how reality might work.

truth from reality» (Venturi Ferriolo [2009]: 61). Here we need to clarify the terms of the question in Platonic language. In Plato's conception, as clarified in the last book of the *Republic*, we basically have three levels: the idea, the realm of the senses, and the image produced by the poet. The problem is not so much the mimetic dimension. For mimesis is ubiquitous: the sensible real is produced in imitation of the idea, and in the light of the realm of the senses the image is produced by the poet or the artist in general. The problem arises when the poet or artist generates his or her own image without regard to the real and the idea, that is, disregarding actual relations, the appropriate relations dictated by the idea and already respected by sensible things. From this point of view, Plato tells us about a painter – also a painter of speeches, like the orator, or the poet himself – who deceives the young by making them see images from afar (cf. Plato, *Soph.*: 234 b-d), and misleads them by showing that great things are small and difficult things are easy. In this sense, painting becomes an emblem of that possibility of falsifying reality, elaborating mere appearances, distant from the truth.

In short, the Greeks were perfectly aware that there is a distance between reality and the image. Here by reality we mean first and foremost the idea, but in general that complex that holds together the idea and its sensible imitation, what we might call that sensible reality that we can read only in the light of the idea that illuminates it. In relation to this complex, the poetic and artistic image can generate radical alterations and modifications, imagining things that do not actually exist. The reaction that characterizes Greek metaphysics was to give more value to reality, considering the image as something that-if it does not conform to the existing relations between the things present in reality as supported by the authenticity, the truth of the idea-could also be false. In this case “false” is literally a way of configuring things on canvas, on paper, or through speech in a way which is different from how things are arranged in reality⁶. There is always a priority of being over the images that thought can make of it.

In this sense, Guido Calogero spoke of «desperate Greek objectivism» (Calogero [1927]: 63). The real ontological-epistemological problem of the image consists in the fact that the image could also refer to an entity that does not actually exist. If the image could be the image of something which does not exist, it is the image of a non-being. In this sense the image could be something false.

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel will show the complete reversal of this position with the culmination of Romantic art⁷, precisely on this point. Progres-

6 As if things could really be “a certain way” or “another way” regardless of the thought that configures them in a certain order. On the other hand, precisely because of this, Aristotle said that true and false are not in things, but in thought (see Aristotle, *Metaph.*: VI, 1027 b 29-31).

7 Following Hegel's approach, romantic art here is to be understood in a general sense as Christian art, but specifically then the pictorial outcomes produced by Flemish art and modern literature.

sively in Romantic art we cease to be interested in the object as such and subjective skill starts to emerge. What we might call the artist's subjective rendering of the object becomes decisive: the painter or poet try to evoke a particular theme, capturing not its essence, but rather the manner of its appearance.

Therefore it is not at all the painter's business, as may be supposed, to give us through his work of art an idea of the subject that he brings before us. Of grapes, flowers, stags, trees, sandhills, the sea, the sun, the sky, the finery and decoration of the furnishings of daily life, of horses, warriors, peasants, smoking, teeth-extraction, domestic scenes of the most varied kind, of all these we have the most complete vision in advance; the world provides us with plenty of things like this. What should enchant us is not the subject of the painting and its lifelikeness, but the pure appearance which is wholly without the sort of interest that the subject has. The one thing certain about beauty is, as it were, appearance for its own sake, and art is mastery in the portrayal of all the secrets of this ever profounder pure appearance of external realities. (Hegel [1835]: 598)

In other words, during the modern age, the gaze of subjectivity reclaims its own importance, because it becomes increasingly aware of how its own view is the glimmer, the opening through which the thing itself can be experienced. Indeed, it is the glimmer thanks to which the single object becomes for the first time possible, thinkable, and therefore experienceable. Priority is no longer given to the thing, and when, everything depends on how it appears, appearance has conquered the field.

5. *Wechselwirkung: the subject of the landscape*

The "glimmer of subjectivity", in our view, is the same one that allows us to distinguish between landscape and environment. As is well known, one of the fundamental essays that testifies to a renewed interest in the problems of natural beauty in the philosophical thought of the second half of the twentieth century is precisely *Appreciation and the Natural Environment*, written by Allen Carlson in 1979. It is very important to highlight, as Paolo D'Angelo has done, how in this text the author «never uses the term "landscape", but always speaks of "natural environment", indeed landscape is for him an equivocal concept, a mere pictorial projection on nature» (D'Angelo [2010]: 22)⁸.

This "glimmer" is certainly not reducible to a mere emotional nuance: we are not talking about a simple emotion or suggestion that suddenly captures the eyes and mind of an individual, tinging the landscape in front of him with a melanchol-

8 A broader vision, capable of including a deep and wide-ranging evaluation of aesthetic and cultural issues in general, related not only to the environment, but to the landscape, can be found in Assunto (1973).

ic or nostalgic shade. As George Simmel put it, we could speak of a *Stimmung*: as we saw at the beginning with Lippmann, a complex of things arranged in front of us is not necessarily configured in terms of a landscape. Landscape, to continue with Simmel's thesis, is a mental process. We would say that it is almost a "gesture of the mind": the eye and the gaze of the observer produce a real cut – in an almost photographic sense – within that continuum we are used to calling "nature".

The landscape only arises within what we might call a "framing effect", whereby it is only profiled as an object by the ray of subjectivity: as Simmel points out, it is no coincidence that «in Antiquity and Middle Ages there was no awareness [*Gefühl*] of landscape» (Simmel [2007]: 22). In this perspective Dante is by no means an exception, but a confirmation: he inaugurates a season in which subjectivity was about to emerge in all its force. Schelling called the *Divine Comedy* the first bourgeois novel and Hans Urs von Balthasar defined it as "*ein Ich-Gedicht*" (Balthasar [1962]: 385)⁹.

In other words, landscape is nothing merely natural; it is a typical cultural product, historically shaped¹⁰, linked, for example, to a certain kind of development of the arts, particularly painting. If Calogero could speak, as we have already seen, of a «desperate Greek objectivism» (Calogero [1927]: 63), landscape can only arise through a total reversal of perspective that is typically modern. If for the Greeks there is the idea and sensible reality, while the image can also represent things that do not exist and thus can be the locus of falsehood, in the modern conception the object itself cannot be grasped except through the image we make of it. If we wanted to put it in idealistic language, there is no object in itself, regardless of the subject that posits it.

On the one hand, the landscape thus presents itself as a typical product of modernity, of that Copernican revolution, enacted by Kant, whereby I will never arrive at the object in itself, but only at that object already filtered through my way of knowing – that is, the images I can make of it. On the other hand, in contemporary times, the very landscape suffers from a further "leap" at the epistemological level, as has been explained: in the landscape it appears how trivial it is to think that there is a subject on one side and an object on the other side – in this case the object would be the landscape.

Precisely because it is itself a cultural product, the landscape is already affected by the work done by the subject. And conversely, the subject, immersed in the landscape is in turn affected by it. Therefore, we can say that the landscape thinks itself into me and I am its consciousness. Here we really see the rebound, the gesture of the mind that makes the landscape possible.

9 The English edition translates the passage as follows: «And yet the whole *Divine Comedy* is a poem written in the first person».

10 On this topic see Turri (1998).

Landscape is not something that simply surrounds me: landscape is constituted in the eye of the self, and conversely the self emerges – with its conceptions, with its visions – within a social, political, historical, cultural landscape. The landscape is not something that exists around us while remaining far away from us: if on the one hand subjectivity offers the glimmer through which a complex of things is filtered into the form of the landscape, on the other hand in a certain sense the landscape shapes us. In this way we can see in landscape a paradigmatic case of *Wechselwirkung* (reciprocal interaction) in the sense used by Simmel, and by Hegel before him (see Hegel [1812-1816], II: 457-459).

We have seen how the birth of the landscape depends on a somewhat artistic attitude of the gaze, which is able to isolate and frame, recombining in a different way that set of forces that intertwine in nature. In fact, we must recognise that

It is not that art had its starting-point in the completed work of art. It emerges out of Life, but only because and to the extent to which everyday life already contains these formative powers. What we call “art” is their purified, autonomous outcome which determines its own subject-matter. (Simmel [2007]: 25)

Here we are indeed faced with what we have called *Wechselwirkung*: without the artistic aptitude of the gaze there would be no landscape, but conversely it is clear how this same artistic aptitude is born in life, that is, within that continuum which is nature itself: already there – and where else? – we find at work those plastic forces that later became known as art.

These reciprocal interactions is intensified far beyond what we have shown: the importance of ruins on an aesthetic level – as Simmel has pointed out – is based precisely on the new aesthetic tonality that an artefact takes on when it suffers the returning violence of nature: «Nature has transformed the work of art into material for her own expression, as she had previously served a material for art» (Simmel [1958]: 381).

Indeed, if art with its framing generates landscape, we have seen how in Cézanne the “ability” of landscape to weld together different points of view, to reunite what the eye’s versatility had dispersed, becomes the new goal of painting. Art breaks and frames at first but then strives to integrate itself back into the continuum. From this perspective, themes such as green economy and climate change are directly connected to the nature-art relationship that is shown in landscape as a philosophical problem. The very preservation of a presumed integrity of nature, the care not to disrupt natural balances, can hardly be seen as a merely “environmental” requirement: it is well known how sensibility to these issues can differ greatly from person to person, from nation to nation, and can depend on various factors – social, economic and political.

Once again, the environment around us and the view we take to frame it influence each other. It could be very counterproductive to try to block this reciprocal

relationship between the two sides (nature-culture). Believing that nature can dictate a series of “objective tasks” regardless of cultural re-elaboration, or thinking, on the contrary, that the cultural dimension can flourish without listening to the context and environment in which it operates would be equivalent to reducing this process to a unidirectional dynamic, with detrimental outcomes in both cases.

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