

## AN ISLAND AS A LANDSCAPE DESIGN SOFTWARE

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The perfect shape of the star, which characterized ideal city's urban planning during the Renaissance, has been chosen by Flavio de Marco for his island-that-does-not-exists, the non-place of all possible landscapes, without limits of space and time and without aesthetic hierarchies. The project was developed both from an artistic point of view, through a series of paintings using computer screen as diaphragm of the relationship between man and nature, and from a literary point of view, through a book that can be used as virtual tour guide and at the same time as declaration of poetics.<sup>1</sup> In this essay I will examine landscape's history backwards, starting from Isola di Stella [Island of Stella], and I will consider only those artists and artworks that de Marco has recognized as his ancestors and cases in which there is also a literary equivalent or parallel. In this journey great attention and great indifference towards landscape will alternate showing different cultural approaches to the problem of the relationship between man and nature.

Today we are witnessing the ascendant phase of a parabola began during the first decade of the twenty-first century and which had an important key point in 2008 at the European Landscape Convention. During this phase several essays on this topic have been published.<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning at least the incipit of Michael Jacob's *Il paesaggio*: "Today, landscape is ostentation and revelation: people discuss about, flatter, preserve, protect landscape, but also sell and resell it. After being popularized and democratized, landscape nowadays belongs to everyone, while in the past it had the role of social code and distinctive feature of an elite which willingly used to identify itself by sharing common emblematic places or topical representations".<sup>3</sup>

The term landscape reappeared in aesthetic reflection after decades of eclipse due to the spread of the notion of environment, which incorporated a new set of ecology guidelines, with the remarkable exception, in Italy, of the essay written by Rosario Assunto, to whom we owe one of the most fitting description of landscape as "nature to which the culture has imprinted its forms"<sup>4</sup>. Even in legal language the word "landscape" disappeared, as claimed by Paolo D'Angelo, "from the denomination of public institutions that were entrusted to defend it: in 1975 was established the Ministry for Cultural and Environmental Heritage (...). But perhaps the most striking example came from an association of private law, which was the Italian counterpart of the The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty of England, and that chose to call itself FAI, Fondo Ambiente Italiano [Italian Environmental Fund]"<sup>5</sup>. This lack of term and concept to define what landscape is, which lasted until the end of the twentieth century, had begun at the end of the Sixties, when, in visual arts, the landscape as a subject gave way to the direct intervention on environment. Take the case of Land Art but also of Arte Povera movement. The cycle titled *Alberi* [Trees] that Giuseppe Penone began in 1969, for example, researched on the processes of plant growth and had no representative intent. Painting was replaced by landscape photography, and a noteworthy example of it was the initiative promoted by Luigi Ghirri in 1984 titled *Viaggio in Italia* [An Italian Journey].<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Flavio de Marco, *Stella*, Danilo Montanari editore, Ravenna, 2013

<sup>2</sup> In Italian language the following books were published in one year's time: Michael Jacob, *Paesaggio e letteratura*, Olschki, Firenze, 2005; Id. *Il paesaggio*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2009; S. Settis, *Paesaggio, costituzione, cemento. La battaglia per l'ambiente contro il degrado civile*, Einaudi, Torino, 2010

<sup>3</sup> Jacob, *Il paesaggio*, cit. p. 7

<sup>4</sup> Rosario Assunto, *Il paesaggio e l'estetica*, Giannini, Napoli, 1973

<sup>5</sup> Paolo D'Angelo, *Introduzione* in Id. (edited by), *Estetica e paesaggio*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2009, p. 17

<sup>6</sup> Roberta Valtorta (edited by), *Racconti dal paesaggio 1984-2004. A vent'anni da Viaggio in Italia*, Lupetti editori di comunicazione, Milano, 2004

It is no coincidence that, during the early Sixties, when landscape art was at its zenith, landscape was re-absorbed by the concept of environment (and by that of territory). The conference held by the German philosopher Joachim Ritter dates back to 1962. According to Ritter “a landscape is nature which is aesthetically perceived by those who observe it with participation and sensitivity”<sup>7</sup>. In his view, therefore, landscape only exists through aesthetics mediation. But what is most interesting in the text of Ritter, published a year after, is his reference to two literary precedents that are both examples of movement within landscape: Francesco Petrarca’s ascent of Mont Ventoux, as told by the poet to Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro in a famous letter in 1336, and Schiller’s poem *The Walk*, written in 1795. In both cases, the protagonist is the traveler, who leaves the city and wanders within the landscape surrounded by nature. In those years the problem of vision in motion was tackled, in more general terms, by Maurice Merleau Ponty who, in *Eye and Mind* (1960), wrote: “My mobile body makes a difference in the visible world, being a part of it; that is why I can steer it through the visible. Conversely it is just as true that vision is attached to movement. We see only what we look at. What would vision be without eye movement, and how could the movement of the eyes bring things together if the movement were blind? If it were only a reflex? If it did not have its antennae, its clairvoyance? If vision were not prefigured in it? All my changes of place figure on principle in a corner of my landscape; they are carried over onto the map of the visible. Everything I see is on principle within my reach, at least within reach of my sight, and is marked upon the map of the ‘I can’. Each of the two maps is complete. The visible world and the world of my motor projects are both total parts of the same Being”<sup>8</sup>. One of Giorgio Morandi’s last landscapes dates back to 1962. It can be considered as, perhaps, the best example of his sentence “there is nothing more abstract than reality”. After a lucky monochrome season, in those same years Mario Schifano was beginning to deal with landscape and chose to represent perception in motion through the window of a car. His “anemic” landscapes were similar to discolored slides or to those pictures on which were painted monuments and that used to flow into toy-tv sold by souvenirs street vendors. Schifano finally took pictures of artificial and fixed landscapes appearing on TV screens. Among the most famous landscapes of the Sixties, are to be counted the “blurred” ones by Gerhard Richter, in which the perception was made less and less direct by filters and mediations in the choice of colors, from photographic black and white to technicolor film.

Immediately after the Second World War, the great season of abstract and informal art relegated landscape to mere suggestions echoed by titles. During the first half of the century, however, landscape had counted less than still life and portraits. In the Thirties, the main novelty was probably aero-painting, the first real attempt to represent earth from above with flight angles. In previous decades futurists had preferred urban view too. Landscape, however, was also the testing ground of those painters who were making their language abstract, although there were important exceptions, such as the Fauves and, in particular, Henri Matisse, the artist who kept alive all pictorial genres.

On the other hand landscape, had triumphed during the entire Nineteenth century, until symbolist art reshaped it, probably reaching the summit of utopia with Giovanni Segantini’s triptych of nature, interrupted by the painter’s death. At the end of this season, which includes the latest works by Gustav Klimt, the philosopher Georg Simmel wrote in 1913: “We relate to a landscape, whether in nature or in art, as whole beings. The act that generates it for us is immediately one of perception and feeling, and it only gets split into these separated constituents through subsequent reflection. An artist is someone who

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<sup>7</sup> Cit. in D’Angelo p. 74

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Merleau Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, trans. Carleton Dallery, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, New York, 1964, p.17

carries out the formative act of contemplative perception and feeling in such a pure form and with such vigour, that the given material gets completely absorbed and then, seemingly out of its own, comes to be created anew. While the rest of us remain more tied to this material, and still tend to note only this or that separate part, only the artist really sees and creates 'landscape'".<sup>9</sup>

From *Isola di stella* [Island of Star] by Flavio de Marco the influence of Klimt can only be gathered while that of Georges Seurat is explicit. Today, any reflection on landscape as image can not, in fact, be done without considering the severity of Pointillism. On the other hand it may surprise that referring to Cezanne's revolution de Marco does not mention anything but the strange inversion of the relationship between the image we can see and the reflected image that can be perceived in the painting *Il fiume sulla Marna* [The bridge over the Marne], in which the water of the river reflects a landscape looking more clear in the water than the real one. "The original painter, the original writer proceeds on the lines adopted by oculists. The course of treatment they give us by their painting or by their prose is not always agreeable to us. When it is at an end the operator says to us: 'Now look!' And the world around us (which was not created once and for all, but is created afresh as often as an original artist is born) appears to us entirely different from the; old world, but perfectly clear. Women pass in the street, different from what they used to be, because they are Renoirs, those Renoir types which we persistently refused to see as women. The carriages, too, are Renoirs, and the water, and the sky: we feel tempted to go for a walk in the forest which reminds us of that other which when we first saw it looked like anything in the world except a forest".<sup>10</sup>

During Nineteenth century the invention of rail transport changed the landscape in two ways: on one side it directly involved the area with its infrastructure and, on the other side, it turned perception faster than ever before. Michael Jacob observes: "Until the advent of new technological means, the viewer is placed in front of nature (or in front of the representation of nature) to establish it, in some cases, such as landscape. Now, however, it is the 'image of nature that passes before his eyes, and is the technological point of view to set his perspective (it is the speed of the machine and no longer human movement, to dictate the structure and quality of the impressions visual)".<sup>11</sup>

Pre-industrial landscape was the culmination of Paul Gauguin, who created the iconography of exotic evasion as well as Courbet had created a popular image of landscape, according to Kenneth Clark's famous analysis: "Courbet chose subjects with an immediate appeal and dwelt on them with relish; the grass is very green- greener than it has ever been in good painting before or since- the sunset skies are very pink, the sea is very blue. And there is a peculiar relation of tone between sea, sky and rock which anticipates in an incomprehensible way the coloured post-card (and at this point I must admit that the colorful landscape postcards often cause me a pleasure that I could call aesthetic)"<sup>12</sup>. On the Island of Stella Courbet's waves and Constable's clouds coexist. However, it would not be accurate to define de Marco's work just as a quotation exercise, but rather a way to turn contemporary the "historicized" eye of Western man, who looks at the nature through art's framing turned into stereotypes.

Some times the image-filter is not pictorial but literary, or it can be one image mirroring one another, as in this landscape description taken from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Notebooks which looks like a comment on a painting by Constable: "We passed the first great promontory, and what a scene! Where I stand on the shore is a triangular bay, taking

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<sup>9</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Landscape, Theory, Culture & Society* December 2007, n. 24, pp. 20-29

<sup>10</sup> Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1949, p. 51

<sup>11</sup> Jacob, *Il paesaggio*, cit. p. 112

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art*, John Murray Publishers Ltd, London, 1949, p. 112

in the whole of the water view. On the other shore is a straight deep wall of mist and one third of the bare mountains stands out from behind it, the top of the wall only in the sun, the rest black. Now it is all one deep wall of white vapour, save that black streaks shaped like strange creatures seem to move in it and down it, in opposite direction to the motion of the great body! Over the fork of the cliff behind, in shape so like a cloud, the sun sent, cutting it, his thousand silky hairs of amber and green light. I step two paces and have lost the glory, but the edge has exactly the soft richness of the silver edge of a cloud behind which the sun is traveling".<sup>13</sup>

Picturesque landscape – rejected with equal vigor by both Coleridge and Constable was an invention of the Eighteenth century, when the highest expression of nature's adaptation to painting was reached by English landscape garden. This landscape, which is only apparently natural, opposed itself to French garden's architectural tradition and, before that, to Italian garden and has, in fact, remote antecedents. Just think about continuously modified gardens, both by hills leveling and rivers change of course, as they are described in the masterpiece of medieval Japanese literature, *The Tale of Genji*, the Shining Prince. The artificial island can be considered the culmination of simulation achieved by topiary art, before parks would turn into Luna Parks. It is no by coincidence that de Marco has conceived his project a few years after the birth of that group of islands known as Dubai's Palm Island. On the Island of Stella there is no place for that ideal landscape that the Seventeenth-century classicism drew from Roman countryside. Instead, on de Marco's island can be seen references to the Italian Renaissance garden, where the place dedicated to landscape's contemplation was precisely called *Belvedere*. And from here the architect directs the gaze towards those views considered as the most important or ideal ones which the garden adapts to. During the Renaissance landscape was also painted "behind" protagonists of portraits and sacred conversations. Although, to our eyes today, they look like simple backgrounds, contemporaries perceived them as real. The writer Pietro Aretino described, in a letter to Titian, the impression he had gained by looking at the Venetian lagoon from a window: "Oh with what beautiful strokes did nature's brush push back the atmosphere, clearing it away from the palaces, just as Titian does in painting landscapes".<sup>14</sup> It is not entirely certain that Titian has been the first to use the term "landscape" but his biographer Aretino has undoubtedly been the first to provide a "pictorial" interpretation of it. Landscape thus began to be considered beautiful for seeming artificial. Landscape-background par excellence, however, is that of Leonardo as Rainer Maria Rilke grasped: "No one has painted a landscape which is so entirely landscape and yet so much confession and the painter's own voice as is the depth of background behind the *Madonna Lisa*. It is as if all that is human were present in her infinitely quiet portrait but as if everything else, all in front of man and beyond him, were in this mysterious complex of hills, trees, bridges, sky, and water. This landscape is not the picture of an impression, not a man's view of quiescent things; it is Nature which came into existence, a world which grew and was as foreign to man as the untrodden forest of an undiscovered island".<sup>15</sup> Landscape considered as an unexplored island is exactly the opposite of Stella, the island-software, the non-place of every possible landscape.

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<sup>13</sup> Jacob, *Il paesaggio*, cit. p. 103

<sup>14</sup> Theodore Rabb, *Renaissance Lives: Portraits of an Age*, Basic Books, New York, 2000, p. 39

<sup>15</sup> Lorne Leslie; Neal Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1992, p. 64

