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## Place and Image. The Role of Representation in the Aesthetic Experience of Places

**Abstract:** In my paper, I will discuss the role of the image in the determination of people's approaches and attitudes towards places. After a short introduction (§1), in the first part of the essay I will discuss the main points of criticism against the image in relation to the issue of environmental appreciation. In doing so, I will relate Allen Carlson's criticism towards the so-called 'landscape cult' in environmental aesthetics (§2) to the post-structuralist critique of the concept of landscape that has been carried out in the field of human geography (§3). In the fourth section, I will emphasize the structuring and performative character of representations, and will show how, in the present, the image remains one of the fundamental ways of regulating relations between subjects of experience and places (§4). The task of a theory of place-image, informed by knowledge acquired in the fields of visual and media studies, is to learn to read images as tools for understanding and defining the environment around us.

**Keywords:** image; place; landscape; environment; art; representation.

### Introduction

Criticism towards the oculo-centrism typical of Western culture, and the modern era in particular, has become commonplace, especially in studies of environmental aesthetics and landscape theory. The modern overemphasis on the role of sight in the arts and aesthetics is now countered with a rediscovery of the importance of other senses in the aesthetic experience of places and, in general, in regulating our interplay with the world around us.

Before discussing the strengths and weaknesses of this critique, it is important to note that the fields of landscape theory and environmental aesthetics do not coincide. According to Emily Brady and Jonathan Prior, the main issues of the contemporary debate on environmental aesthetics are: "(a) the distinction between art or object-focused aesthetics and environmental aesthetics; (b) the multisensory potential of environmental aesthetics compared to visual and scenic approaches and (c) 'cognitive' versus 'non-cognitive' environmental aesthetics"<sup>1</sup>. In the framework

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Brady and Jonathan Prior, "Environmental Aesthetics: A Synthetic Review," *People & Nature* 2 (June 2020), 256.

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defined by the intersection of these three questions, the concept of landscape seems to be out of tune: in fact, because of the peculiar mixture of nature and culture that characterizes it, the landscape resists the assumptions implicit in the Anglo-Saxon debate on environmental aesthetics, above all that of a clear ontological divide between nature and culture. As noted by Alberto Siani: “While natural beauty, as opposed to artistic beauty, is a traditional topic of philosophical aesthetics, this is less the case for landscapes, which have traditionally been neglected by it.”<sup>2</sup> More recently, Brady has turned her attention to environments “that emerge from various nature-culture interactions”<sup>3</sup>. However, also in this case the term ‘environment’ is preferred to ‘landscape’. This is intended to emphasize the materiality of the spatial area under consideration, in an argumentative context in which the term ‘landscape’ is often associated with figurative art as opposed to nature, or is conceived as a visual and scenic construct, opposed to an embodied, multi-sensory aesthetic.

Instead, the landscape theory is a complex transdisciplinary field, defined by the intersection of voices from disciplines accustomed to considering landscape as a mixed construct, referring simultaneously to an area in space and its perceptions and representations. The semantic ambiguity of landscape has been criticized, deconstructed or even rejected,<sup>4</sup> but also specifically claimed by some authors and schools in human geography and beyond.<sup>5</sup> What distinguishes these attitudes is the position taken by different authors and approaches on an eminently philosophical issue: what is the nature of the relationship between reality and image, given that the concept of landscape implies a relationship, however contradictory, between them?

It should be emphasized that hostility to oculo-centrism is present in environmental aesthetics debates as well as in human geography and other disciplines that deal with the landscape in a substantive sense of the word.<sup>6</sup> As we will see in the next section, both environmental aesthetics and non-representational human geography emphasize the multi-sensory nature of environment or landscape, the perceptual richness made possible by immersion in the environment, and the incorporation of visual landscape experience into a multiplicity of embodied socio-spatial practices. However, referring to the non-visual factors that characterize landscape and how we

<sup>2</sup> Alberto Siani, “Landscape Aesthetics,” *International Lexicon of Aesthetics*, Spring, 2022, <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2022/spring/LandscapeAesthetics.pdf>, acc. on March 7, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Emily Brady, Isis Broo and Jonathan Prior, *Between Nature and Culture: The Aesthetics of Modified Environments* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 2.

<sup>4</sup> In the history of geography, Richard Hartshorne has denounced the confusion induced by the use of the term ‘landscape’ in a scientific inquiry, because of its duplicitous reference to “the appearance of a land as we perceive it” on the one hand and “the section of the earth surface and sky that lies in our field of vision” on the other hand. Richard Hartshorne, *The Nature of Geography* (Ann Arbor: Edward Broder, 1939), 150.

<sup>5</sup> An example of this positive attitude towards the semantic ambiguity of landscape is the phenomenological approach of the cultural geographer John Wylie, according to whom “landscape is tension”. John Wylie, *Landscape* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 5.

<sup>6</sup> The use of the adjective ‘substantive’ to describe landscape has been claimed by the geographer Kenneth Olwig to vindicate the socio-political roots of the landscape idea, against an only aesthetic view of it. See Kenneth Olwig, “Recovering the Substantive Nature of Landscape”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86, 4 (1996): 630–53.

experience it cannot suffice to abandon the question of representing and representability of places. Today we live in a world dominated by images, both online and offline; owing to social media and online photo and video repositories, we are literally surrounded by images of places, regardless of their geographical distance. Nonetheless, the question of representation has to do with the possibility to recognize, investigate, and communicate places since before the emergence of contemporary visual tools and even the innovations in figurative arts of the modern era. Of course, landscape painting is a product of Western modernity, but that does not mean that topographical representations have popped up in history with the diffusion of landscape painting, just like they have not begun with the diffusion of Instagram.<sup>7</sup> There are, therefore, both structural and contingent reasons to reconsider the importance of images for places. Images are able to give shape to aesthetic tastes that affect the way we live, build, preserve, or transform places. This is why we must take into account the importance that image has in structuring our spatial experience and shaping place, understood as “a meaningful segment of space”.<sup>8</sup>

### **Environmental aesthetics and the landscape cult**

In environmental aesthetics debates, criticism towards oculo-centrism goes hand in hand with criticism of a modern aesthetics that is primarily concerned with art, and in particular figurative art. The rediscovery of nature as an object of aesthetic appreciation is thus related to an embodied and immersive aesthetics, which, by breaking out of the artificial and framed spaces of the art museums, allows for a rapprochement between humans and the natural environment. Ronald Hepburn, considered the first contemporary representative of environmental aesthetics, chooses as the guiding question of his investigation: “What can contemporary aesthetics do about the topic of natural beauty?”<sup>9</sup> He retrieves the question of natural beauty by recovering the original meaning of aesthetics as an investigation into the sensual relationships between the subject and the world; to this end, he diverted attention from the field of art, understood *à la Rousseau* as the sphere of the artificial, characterized by ‘frameworks and boundaries’<sup>10</sup>. In this approach, in continuity with American Transcendentalism, the aesthetic claim rests on ontological and phenomenological

<sup>7</sup> The geographer Ed Soja notes that much of what we can know of the first city in the world, the Neolithic city of Çatalhöyük in Anatolia, depends on the topographical representation found on the wall of one of the houses discovered in the archaeological excavations. The representation dates back to 6150 BC and its object is “a panorama seen from above of more than seventy houses: the first example of cityscape, at the same time real and imaginary”. Ed Soja, “Foreword. Cityscapes as Cityspaces,” in *Urban Spaces and Cityscapes*, ed. Cristoph Lindner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006). XVI.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Cresswell, “Place,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Human Geography*, ed. Roger Lee et al., (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2014), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Hepburn, “Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature”, *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 3, 3 (1963): 196.

<sup>10</sup> Serena Feloj, “Environmental Aesthetics”, in *International Lexicon of Aesthetics*, 2018. <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2018/autumn/EnvironmentalAesthetics.pdf>, accessed on March 7, 2024.

premises.<sup>11</sup> Nature, especially in modern society, characterized by the invasive presence of humans, must be thought of as an ontological reference point, not at the disposal of human projects and strategies, but, on the contrary, capable of enveloping humans in space and time; a specific phenomenology must correspond to this reality, in which the passive and receptive dimension of experience is highlighted, and a related aesthetics, in which aesthetic value does not derive from the cultural action of humans (for instance, artists, planners, observers), but depends on the expressive and performative character of nature as such. This leads to one of the most popular arguments in the contemporary debate: the ways of aesthetically appreciating nature are specific to nature, and it is a mistake to apply to nature the criteria of aesthetic evaluation and judgement that we adopt when we look at a work of art.

Allen Carlson, as is well known, is the major proponent of such position.<sup>12</sup> In his cognitive approach to environmental aesthetics, the art/nature divide has as a corollary the opposition between an aesthetic of the gaze, doomed to remain superficial, and an informed and engaged aesthetic, in which knowledge plays a decisive role. In Carlson's proposal there is a choice to be made: on the one hand, the simplification and trivialization of taste favored by an overemphasis on the role of sight, separated from the other senses; on the other, body and mind reunited in a finally recomposed experience of nature, in which knowledge guides aesthetic appreciation as only science provides proper and sound information about what nature really is and how it must be experienced and appreciated. The junction between the question of Western oculo-centrism and the misleading application of the artistic criteria of nature appreciation is realized, in Carlson's argument, in the notion of 'landscape' or 'scenic cult'<sup>13</sup>. The overlap between the terms 'landscape' and 'scenic' is very telling in this regard. The concept of 'landscape' should not be admitted among the defining concepts of the environmental aesthetics for landscape does not simply mean environment, but environment as long as it is seen from a distance, in the same manner in which we stare at a landscape painting from a certain distance. Aesthetic appreciation in the figurative arts, Carlson argues, is often of a contemplative kind, and it does not involve other senses than the sight. This means that, when we appreciate the compositional and pictorial values of a certain natural environment, we are addressing it from the outside, reducing it to a bidimensional scene endowed with lines, shapes, and colors, like a painting or a picture.

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<sup>11</sup> On the relationships between Ronald Hepburn's work in environmental aesthetics and American transcendentalism, see D. Cooper, "Aesthetic Experience, Metaphysics and Subjectivity: Ronald W. Hepburn and 'Nature-Mysticism,'" *Journal of Scottish Thought* 10 (2018): 90–102.

<sup>12</sup> In what follows, I will not elaborate a complete and up-to-date critique of Carlson's argument. Therefore, I will not refer to the author's evolutions in thought, as evidenced by his latest publications, which I will not discuss. The need here is to isolate the argument that landscape is a disembodied artistic image, in order to relate it to the critical arguments raised in the framework of human geography against representation in the next section.

<sup>13</sup> Allen Carlson, "Formal Qualities in the Natural Environment," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 13, 3 (1979): 103; and Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 32–37.

In this framework, landscape is understood as a cultural image that implicitly misguides our aesthetic assessments directed to nature. According to Carlson, to properly appreciate nature means avoiding the distraction and misguide of images. As a consequence of such a net stance, the kind of appreciation that Carlson reserves to nature does not look much like aesthetic appreciation at all:<sup>14</sup> if, on the one hand, Carlson's effort to elaborate a sort of 'deep aesthetics' by retrieving its relevant (and often overlooked) connections to knowledge and cognition is shareable, on the other hand it must be acknowledged that also a 'deep' informed aesthetics must be a kind of aesthetics, to the extent that it concerns the sensuous interconnections between us and our surroundings. Furthermore, the junction between the art/nature dualism and the image/reality one hampers the understanding of the entanglements between, on the one hand, culture and nature in real places (ontological level) and, on the other hand, sight and other senses in embodied and mediated experiences of places (phenomenological level). The point is to establish whether the mediation of images is, per se, incompatible with proper appreciation of places or it can play a central part in mediating between the experiential subjects and places.

### Landscape as veil, landscape as gaze

Human geography has always been aware of the mutual impact of nature on culture and culture on nature. In this sense, as anticipated above, human geography's epistemological framework does not coincide with that of contemporary environmental aesthetics. One of the forefathers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century geography, Carl Sauer, has defined landscape as "an area made up of a distinct association of forms, both physical and cultural"<sup>15</sup>. Another important geographer of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vidal de la Blache, has defined geography as the 'science of places', where places are understood as spatial locations endowed with intrinsic morphological qualities and expressive potential suited to be represented. The very etymology of geography displays a nexus of invaluable philosophical relevance: the nexus of earth and drawing, *Gea* and *Graphēin*, reality and representation.<sup>16</sup> Human geography is rather inclined

<sup>14</sup> Let us recall, in addition to Emily Brady's well-known epistemological criticism of Carlson's position, Roger Paden's arguments aimed at redeeming a positive meaning of the picturesque, a typical 18th-century taste against which Carlson took sides, reducing it to a mere trivialization and artificialization of nature, at work precisely in landscape painting. According to Paden, in the picturesque, the painter's gaze intersects with the naturalist gaze: with landscape painting, a less idealized nature than the classical one began to enter art, despite the undeniable influence of taste elements dependent on the socio-cultural coordinates of the 18th century. In his essays, the author looks for a positive interplay between aesthetics and natural sciences, retrieving a tradition that has its roots in Goethe and Alexander von Humboldt, rather than the American Transcendentalism. See at least Roger Paden, "Picturesque Landscape Painting and Environmental Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 49, 2 (2015), 39–61.

<sup>15</sup> Carl Sauer, *The Morphology of Landscape*, in *Land and Life. A Selection from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer*, ed. John Leighly (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 321.

<sup>16</sup> This issue is discussed at greater length in Paolo Furia, "Vers une interprétation herméneutique de la géographie," *Annuario filosofico* 38 (2023): 123–44.

to deal with hybrid and in-between entities, which escape the rigid dualisms of the analytical cognitive approach in environmental aesthetics.<sup>17</sup> The question of the image is clearly intrinsic to geography as such, given the hybrid and singular nature of its objects of study (places and landscapes) can be better grasped through the gesture of drawing, that is, through the image, rather than categorical knowledge. This explains why geographical thought, broadly speaking, is more inclined than other research fields to challenge the idea according to which pictures can distract, amuse, and confuse, but are not suited to pursue knowledge, and appearance does not tell the truth, but hides or distorts it.

However, in the last few decades, in a profound epistemological self-criticism not devoid of political significance, even human geography has taken a critical distance from images as ways to knowledge and has recognized their deep ideological implications. Two cornerstones of geographical representationalism have fallen under the lens of an increasingly demanding critique: the map and the concept of landscape. In this section we will only deal with the criticism and deconstruction of the concept of landscape, leaving aside the important issue of criticism of cartography: the two issues are certainly interconnected, but it is the image of the landscape that draws our attention here, precisely because of its both aesthetic and geographical significance and because of its mediating function between the domain of art and that of knowledge.

Both the structuralist epistemologies, of mainly Marxist inspiration, and the post-structuralist epistemologies, linked to the development of cultural studies and feminist and post-colonial geography and anthropology, have fed a critique and often a deconstruction of the main visual concepts with which geography operates. John Wylie remarks that in these frameworks landscape art is considered “a system for producing and transmitting meaning through visual symbols and representations”<sup>18</sup>. The complex semantic ambiguity of landscape, halfway between land and eye, is solved in favor of the eye: landscape turns into a ‘way of seeing’<sup>19</sup>. According to Denis Cosgrove, “the basic theory and technique of the landscape way of seeing is linear perspective”<sup>20</sup>, the historical and symbolic character of which has been appreciated since at least

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<sup>17</sup> The importance of the notion of milieu for human geography testifies to its inclination towards mundane, hybrid, entangled entities, which an analytic approach tends to dissect into its allegedly prior elements (such as nature and culture, or earth and image). According to Augustin Berque, the geographical term ‘milieu’ must be differentiated from the cognate term ‘environment’: in fact, this latter refers to an objective, natural entity which acts as the setting of human action, whereas the word ‘milieu’ refers to the always singular and ongoing outcome of the reciprocal co-constitution of humans and their environment. Berque claims that, technically, we co-produce our milieux, which does not contradict the fact that our milieux influence our behaviors, ways of thinking, and aesthetic tastes. From this point of view, the natural and the anthropic can be fully isolated only after an act of abstraction: to truly understand a milieu, it is necessary to understand how the natural and man-made elements combine to create, sustain, and modify it, in the knowledge that the milieu as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The issue is discussed in Augustin Berque, *Écoumène. Introduction à l'étude des milieux humains* (Paris: Belin Litterature et Revues, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Wylie, *Landscape*, 55.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>20</sup> Denis Cosgrove, “Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 10, 1 (1985), 45–62 and Olaf Kühne, *Landscape Aesthetics* (Cham: Springer, 2019), 51.



Erwin Panofsky,<sup>21</sup> inspired in turn by the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer.<sup>22</sup> Cosgrove elaborates a socio-political interpretation of the interconnection between landscape and linear perspective: since the linear perspective is historically connected not only to artistic developments, but also to specific ways to exploit space, arranging it according to a visual point of view that claims to be exclusive and dominant, landscape emerges as a way to force the multidimensionality of space into the visual framework of the beholders and make it available for gauging, surveying, and exploitation. Landscape as a way of seeing, therefore, results in “a composition and structuring of the world so that it may be appropriated by a detached individual spectator to whom an illusion of order and control is offered through the composition of space according to the certainties of geometry.”<sup>23</sup> From an aesthetic-phenomenological point of view, what matters the most is that a historical way of seeing is reified and imposed over the environment. In this conception, landscape results from the reduction of the geographical reality to the cultural and ideological codes of the gaze; the aesthetic qualities of the geographical reality, therefore, have a subjective origin, however reified, while space itself loses its autonomy and becomes a passive receptacle, waiting to receive forms from human demiurgic activity.

Geographer John Wylie traces the main argumentations of the critical approaches towards landscape in human geography by discussing two aesthetic metaphors: landscape as ‘veil’ and landscape as ‘gaze’.<sup>24</sup> Both have the same approach: landscape is a ‘frozen’ image that hides invisible processes, and the task of critical geography is to reveal the real processes concealed by the landscape image. However, the veil metaphor refers to the existence of structures behind the landscape appearance, whereas the gaze metaphor disperses the geographic reality in a potentially infinite intersection of different, conflicting views. This is why, Wylie notes, the first metaphor is more related to structuralism, whereas the second is rather tied to post-structuralism. To some extent, the veil metaphor adopts and deepens the same ontological divide assumed by Allen Carlson in the framework of environmental aesthetics. According to Raymond Williams: “A working country is hardly ever a landscape. The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation”<sup>25</sup>. In such separation there is room for idealization: landscape embodies aesthetic, painterly values for those who have the privilege to contemplate it from a distance. Differently from Carlson, however, the

<sup>21</sup> See Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher Wood (Princeton: Zone Books, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> See Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. Ralph Mannheim, 3 vols. (New Haven and London, 1955–1957).

<sup>23</sup> Cosgrove, “Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea,” 58.

<sup>24</sup> Also, Wylie discusses a third metaphor, quite important in the context of post-structuralism but less relevant for aesthetics: landscape as ‘text’ (Wylie, *Landscape*, 70–82). An aspect deserves to be recalled here, albeit very briefly: although the approach to the landscape concept implicit in the metaphor of the landscape as text is analogous to that of the metaphors of the landscape as a veil and as a gaze, the emphasis on the text, put in particular by the semiotics of the final decades of the twentieth century, takes away from the landscape image all autonomy and performativity, reducing it to the rigid result of a writing strategy in which the authors coincide with those who have the power (at the material and imaginary level) to manipulate geographical reality.

<sup>25</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1985), 68.

reality, according to Williams, is not nature scientifically understood, but the material conditions of spatial production.<sup>26</sup> These structural conditions can be detected and denounced through a critical analysis of the ways space presents itself to perception and in representations: in other words, a critical analysis of the landscape. According to the veil metaphor, the imagistic character of landscape is simply opposed to the geographical reality, which is in itself non-imagistic and, ultimately, non-aesthetic.

The gaze metaphor works differently. Instead of a veil imposed on geographical reality by a dominant class, the metaphor of the gaze suggests that the geographical reality itself is constituted by a multiplicity of competing looks. In this framework, the metaphor of the landscape as a veil is also the object of criticism and deconstruction. To break the spell of the landscape image, in fact, it is pointless to look for a full-fledged reality that lies under the aesthetic veil: there is really no geographical reality independent of the diverse gazes of the people who inhabit or pass through it. This means that, according to the metaphor of the gaze, any geographical entity is a landscape as long as there is an embodied subjectivity that perceives it and attaches affective meanings and significance to it. Putting the concept to extremes, we could say that, in this case, the geographical reality is itself image, where by image we mean a device through which everyone orients herself in space and time and gives meaning to the world around her. Among other things, from this metaphor follows a precise consequence: aestheticization of nature, and of geographical reality in general, is inevitable because the very nature and the same reality, to the extent that it makes sense to people, is given in the image. The critical task of human geography, in the post-structuralist attitude, does not consist in the refusal of the imagistic character of geographical reality, but in giving voices to gazes that are different than, or even subaltern to, the predominant ones. It is no coincidence that the metaphor of the gaze has been adopted in post-structuralist circles to give voice to other views, traditionally not considered by the humanities or philosophy: the gaze of women, the gaze of the suburbs and the margins, the gaze of those who live in places and do not limit themselves to contemplate them.<sup>27</sup> The relativism implied by the gaze metaphor, therefore, serves emancipatory purposes: instead of fighting against images in order to retrieve an allegedly authentic reality behind the veil, authors like Ed Soja,<sup>28</sup> Gillian Rose,<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The idea that space is actively produced by structural and material processes is widespread in the context of critical geography: see, at least, David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1973) and Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> See Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> See Ed Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996): in this book, the author maintains that the cityscape of Los Angeles cannot be reduced to the mere mechanical output of a strategic planning, as sometimes happens in some hasty reconstructions, often Eurocentric. Los Angeles must be understood as an engine of development and competition of different imaginaries: that of the white elites, of Hollywood and the sparkling actors' homes of the actors, but also the Mexican and Latin, that of the countless communities of migrants, that of musical subcultures and examples of public art. The dominant image that we have of Orange County, whose promotion has been fueled, among others, by Jean Baudrillard, is actually a simplification that does not take into account the structuring part played by minor or local imaginaries.

<sup>29</sup> The author has continued to work on visual representation of geographical entities (cities, environments, landscapes...) up to now. In the edited book *Seeing the City Digitally* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University



Giuseppe Dematteis<sup>30</sup> work against hypostatized or reified images that claim to absorb the entire scope of reality.

The post-structuralist approach has certainly favored the reintegration of the gaze into the practical life of embodied subjectivities. However, this perspective results in a sort of human-centered culturalism in which aesthetic value and appreciation ultimately depend on the cultural codes that structure the involved bodies and gazes. In other words, such representationalist accounts in human geography emphasize the social and cultural structuration of people's attachment to places or imaginaries about places, without fully taking into consideration the morphological, topological and spatial constraints to cultural gazes. If, in the end, place-meaning is a mere cultural product, mediated by the cultural imaginaries of the involved subjectivities, the reality of place is reduced to a competition between images. It is against this kind of reductionism of reality to image that, in the last twenty years, in aesthetics as in geography, realist positions and approaches have started to emerge, aimed at redeeming the materiality, concreteness, and expressiveness of the geographical reality as such.<sup>31</sup> The negation of the reduction of the aesthetic experience of the nature to the scenic and the visual pursued by Carlson is part of this reaction as well. But is it really possible to remove the question of the representation to account for our aesthetic (but also ethic, socio-political, ecological) relationship with nature and geographical reality in general? And is it possible to address this question without falling into one of the two mentioned reductionisms, that of the image as a distortion of reality and that of the reality that evaporates in the image? We will sketch some possible answers in the next section.

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Press, 2022), she discusses the transformations of the gaze induced by digital technologies, whose representational character is revealed, in contrast with many enthusiastic interpretations of the digital tools as non-representational, fully immersive, and performative.

<sup>30</sup> Giuseppe Dematteis is one of the most important representatives of the postmodern strand in human geography. His famous research on the metaphors of the earth aims at revealing the ineliminable function of images and imaginaries for the determination of various spatial practices and the emergence of place meanings (See: Giuseppe Dematteis, *Le metafore della Terra. La geografia umana tra mito e scienza*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1985). The third edition of his co-edited book *Geografia umana. Un approccio visuale* (Milano: UTET, 2019) aims at overcoming the prejudice that visual learning necessarily accompanies a weakening in rational cognitive processes and that, therefore, images are alternatives to concepts.

<sup>31</sup> In this regard, it would be interesting to note the liaison points between the performative turn in the arts and aesthetics (see E. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2008) and the so-called non-representational turn in human geography and landscape theory (Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory. Space, Politics, Affect*. Abingdon: Routledge 2008). In both cases, we have to do with a shift of emphasis from representations to practices, where the materiality of the body-space relationship gets greater prominence than the imaginary ways in which they are framed by the cultural subjectivity. A focus on spatial practices rather than representations can also be found in the framework of everyday aesthetics. See, for instance, Lisa Giombini and Adrian Kvakacka, eds., *Applying Aesthetics to Everyday Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

## Representation between simplification and enhancement: The dialectic of place and image

The role played by environmental representations in structuring our aesthetic appraisals and judgements about places can hardly be denied, especially today. We live in an interconnected world where places are put into competition to attract economic investments, residents, and tourists. In such competition, it is not only a matter of what instrumental need can be satisfied by this or that place. Much of their greater or lesser success depends on the image they are able to deliver to various potential targets of interest. The position gained by a place in the global imaginary depends on its capacity to persuade, attire, seduce potential consumers, who are now basically social media users. In other words, territorial marketing functions as a competition between place-narratives, in which the visual component plays a pivotal part. We have to do with a sort of 'iconoclasm':<sup>32</sup> place-images display their performative power in inspiring people's preferences, motivating their choices, giving shape to the criteria we usually adopt to appraise places. At this point we are speaking of places, no matter if natural or anthropic, because the representational dynamic works the same way. Specific associations of natural and anthropic elements and forms on a portion of terrestrial space turn into places when they assume affective meaning for those who inhabit it, but also when they enter into the collective imagination. And they can do that if they manage to equip themselves with a place-image, which, by virtue of its immediacy, enters into direct communication with potential consumers and elicits appreciation from their part. In other words, if we stick to the definition of landscape as a portion of space insofar as it is perceived and represented,<sup>33</sup> we can argue that every place has a landscape, even more so in a visual-based global market of local identities; and that aesthetic appreciation of places, at least on a descriptive level, does not primarily depend on whether the considered environment is natural or cultural, but on its capacity to realize itself in an image that is effective and successful according to judgement criteria that are mostly visual.

The recognition of the performativity and effectiveness of place-images in fueling end even shaping our aesthetic appreciation of places and our spatial practices is not equivalent to justifying Western oculocentrism. On the contrary, realizing the power of the image in the context of contemporary communication about places is the first step to defend ourselves from stereotyping, trivialization and hyper-simplification that such 'scopic regime'<sup>34</sup> inevitably implements. The geographical, ecological,

<sup>32</sup> See Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Iconoclasm. Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> This is a sufficiently generic and neutral definition of landscape, which could be subscribed by both environmental aesthetics theorists who criticize landscape because of its visual character and those researchers who emphasize the aesthetic and imagistic character of landscape.

<sup>34</sup> The French film theorist Christian Metz coined the expression 'scopic regime' to differentiate cinema from theatre: "What defines the specifically cinematic scopic regime is not so much the distance maintained [...] as the absence of the object seen." Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 61. The American scholar

historical, and socio-cultural complexity of places can rarely be contained in a single image: in that sense, a scopic regime that relies entirely on the ability of place-images to anticipate and structure the aesthetic experiences of places often prove trivial and simplifying, despite the attempts to realize digital images as increasingly powerful and immersive. In some cases, the very experience of being in a place is sufficient to disarticulate the expectations of the visitor, which were based on disembodied visualizations. Yet, at least at the present stage of technological development, no technologically mediated experience of a place proves more effective and immersive than actually being there in flesh and blood. As the geographer Aharon Kellerman has recently claimed: “One can experience real space through body and mind using all senses [...]. Cyberspace, on the other hand, is a very sensitive and instantly changing way of presenting information, perceived through the senses by its users in rather circumscribed ways, usually at the visual or audio-visual level.”<sup>35</sup>

The omnipresence of images in our everyday experience continues to fuel research in the field of visual studies<sup>36</sup>, just when the digital mediation makes possible to simulate three-dimensional, audiovisual experiences of art objects and places, both real and imagined. There is no contradiction in this process: research in visual studies has long been aware of the mixed character of the new media. William Mitchell claims that: “‘Visual media’ is a colloquial expression used to designate things like TV, movies, photography, painting, and so on. But it is highly inexact and misleading. All the so-called visual media turn out, on closer inspection, to involve the other senses (especially touch and hearing). All media are, from the standpoint of sensory modality, ‘mixed media.’”<sup>37</sup> This is not to deny the power of the visual in the present age, but to reveal “the intricate braiding and nesting of the visual with the other senses”<sup>38</sup>. This intricacy becomes apparent when we make experience of places: not only because when we perceive, we situate the perceived objects in “a scene of which we form a part”<sup>39</sup> (and we call such scene, inherent to our perceptive acts, place), but also because, when speaking about places, perception evolves into representation, meaning, the perceived qualities of a place are shareable and communicable thanks to representations. Of course, from perception to representation there is a leap: the fixation of the perceived qualities on the material supports (digital supports included) implies a selection of the information considered worthy of being displayed. In this sense, image (both

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Martin Jay uses the term to indicate the way a culture organizes and implements visibility, according to the available technologies and media and to the social and political interests that are prevalent in a given historical context.

<sup>35</sup> Aharon Kellerman, *Geographic Interpretations of the Internet* (Cham: Springer, 2016), 10.

<sup>36</sup> “This focus on the visual was intensified in the 1980s and the 1990s by the explosion of visual images made possible by the proliferation of increasingly easy and affordable technical means of producing and remediating digital images.” Richard Grusin, “The Mediation Is the Message,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, 1 (2014): 55.

<sup>37</sup> William Mitchell, “There Are No Visual Media,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 4, 2 (2005): 257.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>39</sup> Ed Casey, *How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena*, in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 17.

cartographic and figurative, both conventional and topographical) always results from a first-hand experience abstraction.<sup>40</sup>

It would be a naïf move to simply oppose the embodied experience of being there and the disembodied anticipation of experience made possible by representations. The analysis given so far rather leads to the conclusion that between place and image there is a dialectical interplay, according to which the geographical reality of places is modified by images and images are affected by places themselves. From the epistemic point of view, the place-image realizes or puts into light some aspects of the place in question, while obscuring or removing others from the sight.<sup>41</sup> To borrow a term from Gottfried Boehm, there is an 'iconic difference'<sup>42</sup> between the image and the ontological referent, not in the sense that the reality the image refers to is already accomplished in itself while the image is a mere copy, but in the sense that a certain image emphasizes, actualizes, and enhances a certain aspect of such reality, without being able to saturate it, to fully express all its virtualities. The entanglement between multi-sensuous, embodied experience and representation is clearly evident today, with the availability of customized social media which allow us to spread in the internet pictures of places that we visited and experienced, or to orient our choices in tourist destinations. Nevertheless, on closer inspection, the practices by which places are recognized, built, maintained, and projected into the collective imagination have always included the representational. Place-images are performative not only at the phenomenological level of how people make experience of places, but also at the ontological level of place-making. In fact, not only aesthetic preferences are influenced by place-images, but also urban planning, landscape architecture, natural heritage preservation choices and actions. There are cases in which image comes prior to the geographical reality,<sup>43</sup> but also in cases of representations that claim to be mimetic (like, say, photographic ones) there lies a surplus of meaning that settles down into the very fabric of the place in question. At the same time, the materiality of a place, that is, its morphology, its topology, its architectural elements, but also its geographical

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<sup>40</sup> This is what Vilém Flusser maintains about images in general, while, from photography onwards, new technical images must be accounted as abstractions of the third order, which, despite their impression of immediacy, are realized by using sophisticated technological apparatus based on scientific knowledge. See Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983).

<sup>41</sup> Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery have distinguished two kinds of dialectics: the dialectics-as-epistemology, which "refers to a method of reasoning by which one searches for understanding through the clash of opposing arguments"; and the dialectics-as-ontology, which "refers to a view of reality as the dynamic interplay of opposing forces." Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery, *Relating. Dialogues and Dialectics* (New York: Guilford Press, 2016), 18, 19. The relationship between places and image is an example of dialectics-as-ontology. The two opposing forces are, on the one hand, geographical places, and, on the other hand, their representations. This opposition is, at a closer look, a reciprocal action: images affect the reality of places, and places affect how a reality is represented.

<sup>42</sup> Gottfried Boehm, *Wie Bilder Sinn erzeugen* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2007), 19.

<sup>43</sup> Between the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, with the decisive help of photography and cinema, urbanism becomes more dependent on the 'design' image. Images become, in modern urban planning, "the footprints or traces of real urban spaces." Gillian Rose, *Seeing the City Digitally* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 14.

position, exerts a significant influence in shaping place-images. The geographical reality and the geographical imaginary are dialectically entangled: it would be pointless to reduce one to the other, or to reify one to the detriment of the other.

At the end of this essay, I conclude by suggesting that the processual, transitional, dynamic character of space depends on the dialectic interplay between places and images. The issue of the aesthetic appreciation of places offers possible ideas to address the philosophical question of the relationship between reality and representation, bypassing the double reductionism of images to reality and of reality to image. Ed Casey concludes similarly in his seminal book devoted to landscape painting and maps, addressed together in relation to the question of the nature of representation:<sup>44</sup>

Places [...] are bound up with representation, just as representation in turn calls for places as the bounded particulars of any given landscape domain. The truth is that representation is not a contingent matter, something merely secondary; it is integral to the perception of landscape itself – indeed, part of its being and essential to its manifestation [...]. To be a landscape at all, to be an integral part of a sensuously qualified place-world, is already to have entered the encompassing embrace of the representational enterprise.<sup>45</sup>

In such view, a critical stance is still required, not to eliminate representations as they are ideological and deceitful, but to learn to read and interpret them as ineliminable tools to access geographical reality, inherently endowed with shapes, lines, and colors. The representational enterprise, to borrow Casey's expression, is based on prior self-presentation of places: between reality and images there is a substantive continuity endowed with both phenomenological and ontological significance.

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<sup>44</sup> In my essay I have limited myself to address, in a necessarily synthetic way, the performative character of place-images in the contemporary era, characterized by digital technologies of visualization and communication. Casey's account of landscape paintings and maps broadens the range of the media under consideration, which is necessary in order to address the question of the relationship between reality and image in fully philosophical terms.

<sup>45</sup> Ed Casey, *Representing Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), XV.

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