

LANDSCAPE AND ECOLOGICAL PRACTICE WHEN THE FLOOD HAS DROWNED EVERYTHING. GIUSEPPE RIDOLFI

... Once there was a little bookcase
that traveled with Clizia, a receptacle
for Holy Fathers and questionable poets;
may it have the power to float
on the crest of the waves
when the flood has drowned everything
E. Montale, *Since Life Is Fleeing*

How landscape becomes a place.

Landscape practice and the figure of the landscape practitioner are recent concepts, although this profession comprehends a long heritage whose interpretation leaves

some room for ambiguity, since the term “landscape” is itself polysemic and, as such, is the object of diverse approaches. By the way, the very nature and history of the term “landscape” make it eligible for a multidisciplinary and multifaceted field of action. Put in provocative terms, landscape – as underlined by Michael Jakob¹ – can be anything as it is defined by its diverging aspects rather than by a distinct identity. It is no coincidence that it is made up of the words land and scape, namely the extensive view of an area, capable of embracing multiple aspects.

In Medieval English, landscape referred to a portion of land that is marked by the boundary of property; a negligible etymology for reasons of social justice². It was only in the following centuries that these boundaries were set within the scope of one's sight, of a gaze capable of towering above the extension of the territory. It was later used primarily to indicate a form of art, known as landschap: from German landschaft, a pictorial genre of Dutch tradition introduced in the 16th century depicting a natural scenery. Next to this aesthetic-contemplative interpretation, which found its apex with Romanticism and which is still felt today in more or less naïf versions, we find an epistemological interpretation.

During the Enlightenment, and still, in the artistic field, the landscape became the object of a representation that required study and knowledge of physical-natural phenomena that trigger a vision and, later, the subject matter of investigations of processes that distinguished the identity and character of a specific area. It is in this latter sense that we find the roots of the contemporary meaning. Landschaftsgeographie, which developed toward the end of the 19th century in Germany as a new orientation for geography, identified the study of agricultural lands³, although the subject matter was not the perception of territories but the product resulting from processes, the outcome of human action, the interaction between the physical world and mankind aimed at satisfying practical needs, which coincided with the lifestyle of the local population.

Here, we find a concept dear to architects, namely the concept of place which, as far as functional aspects are concerned, replaced the concept of space, of stadion, that is a unit of measure, an abstract entity, a surface to be occupied, to be colonised regardless of its qualities. A place is a phenomenological transposition in architecture, according to which the world is the dwelling of mankind, the stage where man carries out his action or, better, where man brings

⁴ J. Wylie, *Landscape*, Routledge, London & New York 2007, pp. 180–184.
⁵ M. Auge, *Un mondo mobile e illeggibile*, in M. Augé, *Tra i confini*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2007.

⁶ I. de Solà-Morales, *Terrain Vague*, in C. Davidson (edited by), *Anyplace*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1995, pgg. 118–123

⁷ A. Berger, *Drosscape*, in C. Waldheim (edited by), *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, Princeton Univ. Press, 2006, pp. 197–217.

⁸ G. Agamben, *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, Einaudi, Torino 2016 (I ed. 1995).

⁹ R. Naabarro, D. Richards, H. Chapman, *Foreword*, in *Wasteland: A Thames Television Report*, London, Thames Television, London 1980.

¹⁰ I. de Solà-Morales, *Terrain Vague*, cit., p. 121.

¹¹ R. Carson, *Silent Spring*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1994 (I ed. 1962).

about his subjectivity⁴. It is, therefore, an artefact which makes it possible for memory to exist; the sense of belonging to a community and the handing over of practices to future generations: a place is often the result of “constructions” that shape a local identity, which may either exclude or perpetuate specific privileges.

Non-places.

By recalling its origins, it is curious how the concept of landscape spread as a meme at the very moment when the number of inhabitants in cities became higher than in rural areas. From the ruins of post-war urban planning models, new landscape scenarios emerged, which corresponded to a fragmentation that it was impossible to govern by applying traditional functional classification schemes of activities and exploitation of the land; this became even more evident as migrations and fusions took place on a global level.

The onset of post-modern thought but, above all, the impact of post-industrial changes left a landscape that could hardly be framed with analytical methods. The landscape has profoundly changed: the gaps and residue it has left behind have no identity and are doomed to a refusal as if they were the waste of development by-products. These are non-places, as Auge⁵ defined them, or terrain vague quoting Ignasi de Solà-Morales⁶ when referring to the residue deriving from a declining and/or changing urban development model. Consequently, landscape theories and practices changed: attention was paid to barely perceptible portions of territory, polluted, neglected, desolate and useless. In this regard, landscape analyses intertwined with political issues coping with the relations between minority groups and the hegemony of oligarchic systems. Alan Berger⁷ defined it drosscape: a gaze on a territory of waste, gaps that are left at the margin of city planning or that wait to be reincorporated into urban regeneration projects.

Much of the identity and destiny of these places depends on this ambivalence. On the one hand, the decision to nullify these sites, which can be paralleled to naked fields, according to the definition given by Agamben⁸, that are deprived of any right and that can therefore be purchased at low price. On the other hand, the recognition that these sites are however endowed with their own identity and character albeit not precisely determined, with creative potential, and that they can withstand standard classifications that would erase them given new exploitations based on market laws. As pointed out by Naabarro⁹, an utmost subjective classification of these sites may conceal an attempt of speculation, which would lead to further heterotopic subjugation: first, as the result of refusal and, then, as the result of new colonisation dynamics that are often implemented through violent transformations¹⁰.

Ecological environment.

This issue became even more complex at the end of the 1960s concurrently with the emergence of an ecological consciousness that pinpointed how silent natural agents¹¹ could contribute to the shaping of a landscape. If the construction of landscape as a place represented a reaction to a growing role of science and a quantitative assessment of the world, we must nonetheless underline that such a spirit once more confirmed that dualistic vision according to which humanity is a hierarchically privileged subject, while nature is an object

¹ M. Jakob, *Il paesaggio*, il Mulino, Bologna 2009.

² K. Olwig, *Landscape, Nature and the Body Politic*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2002.

³ R. Muir, *Approaches to Landscape*, MacMillian Press Ltd, London 1999.

¹² M. Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking* in M. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper Colophon Books, New York 1971 (orig. ed. 1957) [http://faculty.arch.utah.edu/miller/4270heidegger.pdf (9/2020)].

¹³ K. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham & London 2007.

¹⁴ R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press Inc, New York 2006 (I ed. 1976), and J. Lovelock, *Gaia – A New look at the Life on Earth*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000 (I ed. 1979).

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ T. Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016.

¹⁷ D. Meadows et alii, *The Limits to Growth*, Universe Book, New York 1972; A. Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989 (ed. orig. 1976); R. Carson, *Silent Spring*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1994 (I ed. 1962).

¹⁸ M. Serres, *Revisiting the Natural Contract*, talk at Simon Fraser University, 2006 [http://www.sfu.ca/humanities-institute-old/pdf/Naturalcontract.pdf (03/16)]

¹⁹ B. Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, Polity Press, Cambridge – Medford 2017 (orig. ed. 2015).

²⁰ T. Morton, *Come un'ombra dal futuro*, Aboca, Sansepolcro 2019 (orig. ed. 2010).

to contemplate, or a resource to exploit and whose identity features can be qualified only according to the distinctive and symbolic trace left by men and women. In short, quoting Heidegger¹², a place exists only when a bridge is stretched across its space.

The theory of agential realism drawing on quantum physics¹³ and the investigations on living systems and evolutionary microbiology¹⁴ paved the way to a review of the humanity-environment relationship and its transformation processes. The idea of anthropocentrism that had so far substantiated natural sciences gave way to a microcosm of bacteria, viruses, and genes, thus nullifying all hierarchies. The discovery of a microscopic dimension opened new horizons, whereby the homeostasis of the planet is the fruit of the entanglement of living and non-living organisms of whatever type and dimension that are mutually and non-hierarchically interconnected in symbiotic coevolution, following a mechanism in which they do not adapt to the environment but improve their environment for their survival¹⁵. Landscape identity and transformation features take on new meaning under this perspective, where the “environment” is no longer something surrounding us or in front of us (from the British etymology of the term, “that which surrounds”) but something that continuously “turns”, deriving from *veer*, the state of the continuous interaction of the waves and a boat¹⁶.

This new awareness, and on the spur of the movements fostering emancipation and equal rights, led environmental issues to be debated within the discipline of ecology¹⁷ and eventually to be regarded as a political matter up to receiving recognition as a juridical status: as pointed out by Serres in his famous speech delivered at the Simon Fraser University¹⁸, it is a subject deserving to be heard at round tables addressing environmental issues¹⁹.

But, how could one without a voice be heard?

This voice began emerging when, thanks to feedback mechanisms, humanity was seen as object-nature that suffers the effects of man’s actions and the environment was seen as nature-subject that takes shape through a system of strengths and effects. The feedback of unbridled wellbeing habits turns humanity into an object that succumbs and the environment into a looming subject. The voice is no longer needed because, in this entanglement, humanity has become the nervous system of a single and all-embracing macro-organism that prompts us to raise our gaze toward the world and beyond the boundaries of the place, which represents the principal impairment to the development of an environmentally friendly consciousness. As Timothy Morton tersely explained²⁰, “Heidegger’s environmentalism is a sad, fascist, stunted bonsai version, forced to grow in a tiny iron flowerpot by a cottage in the German Black Forest”. The concept of “place” supports a vision of the environment and, accordingly of “landscape”, of which “no self-respecting Tibetan peasant” would approve because environmentalism cannot be grounded on an archaic, localist and anthropocentric thought (or people-centred thought, according to a more orthodox phenomenological construction, where man is the measure for all things), but it must be grounded on a universal thought that embraces “n-thousand habitable worlds, filled with sentient beings”. Everyone is called on stage to play their part without causal privileges and distinctions.

²¹ D. Meadows et alii, *The Limits to Growth*, Universe Book, New York 1972.

²² G. Ridolfi, *La condizione contemporanea del progetto. Rapporto sul Matema Digitale*, in E. Mussinelli, M. Lauria, F. Tucci, *La PROduzione del PROgetto*, Maggioli Editore, Santarcangelo di Romagna 2019.

Looking around and new media.

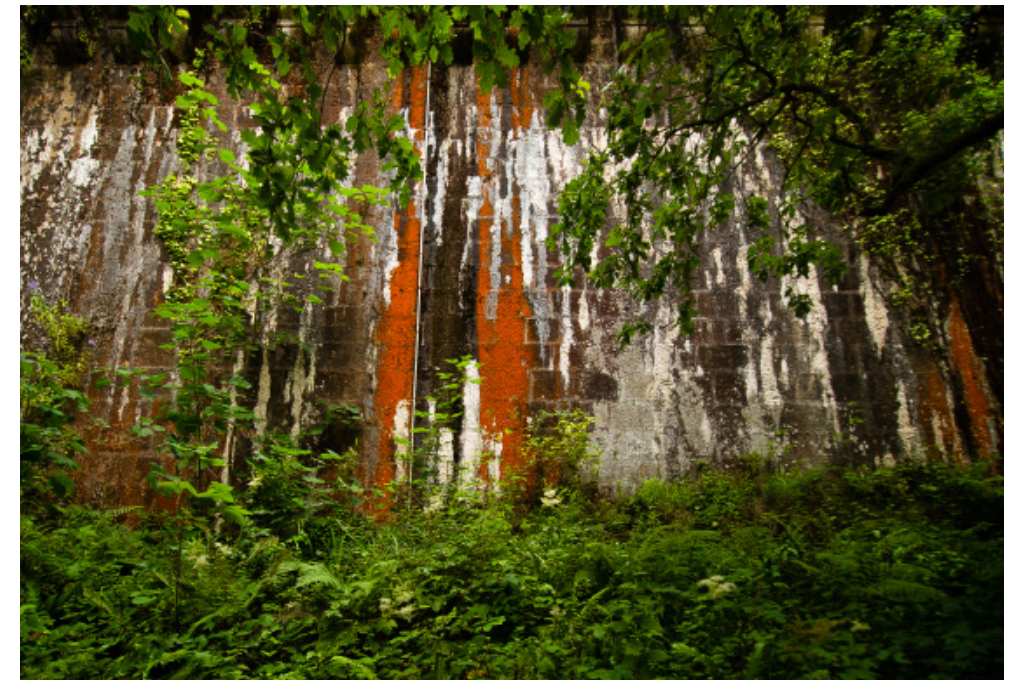
More than sixty years after the atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide were monitored at the Mauna Loa Observatory in the Hawaiian Islands²¹, humanity’s nervous system is now capable of returning a multifarious life to our planet. It is now endowed with an endless number of sentient devices. Dataloggers on the earth and in space probe reality beyond its forms and distinctive features stretching the gaze over “things” that could not otherwise be seen; they record dynamic and performance phenomena.

This brought to light “things” that make it possible to co-act not by imitating forms and types, but by giving life to objective, mutant and co-agent “things”, which dialogue through the languages of Matema digitale²², so that “things” that do not belong to the classification of “dead” things or animist superstition, might emerge and interact.

New forms of intelligence are offered: IT intelligence can intersect living and non-living “things”, real and imaginary entities in a non-hierarchical way. New ontologies for the environment and landscape practice are tabled, including modernist reductionism, whose main focus is the “intricacy” of elements that can no longer be addressed as details of a higher system or as the rise of conflicts, but as distinctive features of a continuous system, where micro and macro are mutually engendered and where the richness of the various parts making up a system is greater than the whole.

Humanity and the environment find new meeting grounds, and, above all, new ways of tackling the preliminary and fundamental phase for any transformation action, that is the cognitive phase, are being offered. We are faced with new ways of questioning the area of intervention which, as occurred with the recovery

5. G. Ridolfi, *Third Nature*, Light Box, 2015



²³ G. Ridolfi, *Il Riuso dello “Spedale” di Siena: il ruolo della Committenza*, in *Ts –Tecnologie per la Sanità*, Class International, Brescia, vol. 2, pp. 71-74, 1998.

²⁴ G. Parak, *From “Topographic” to “Environmental” – A Look into the Past and the Presence of the New Topographics Movement*, in *Depth of Field*, vol. 7, n. 1, XII 2015. [https://depthoffield.universiteitleiden.nl/0701a01 (10/21)]

²⁵ R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, 1989 (orig. ed. 1972).

²⁶ B. Wallis et alii, *Ecotopia: The Second ICP Triennial of Photography and Video*, Steidl, Göttinga 2006.

²⁷ *Anthropocene*, Goose Lane Edition, Fredericton 2019.

²⁸ A.L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalism Ruins*, Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford 2015.

²⁹ J.F. Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Standford University Press, Standford 1994 (orig. ed. 1991).

project of the Spedale di Santa Maria del Fiore in Siena, is in the end far more crucial than the final result since it opens new horizons onto the regeneration culture of monumental sites²³.

In shaping an ecological consciousness, the legendary photographic exhibit *New Topographics – Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, curated by William Jenkins and held in 1975 at the George Eastman House in Roche²⁴, marked a milestone. It gave evidence that photographic means can become a powerful alternative instrument in exploration and cultural assessment; a new way of questioning and understanding the environment in the wake of the architectural experience titled *Learning from Las Vegas*²⁵.

As mentioned, from the 1970s to the present day, surveying and exploration opportunities broadened thanks to digital technology and multimedia.

Concomitantly, content also changed, marking the passage from a mere “topographic” survey to a broader ecological awareness, as highlighted at *Ecotopia*, the exhibition held in 2006 at the Triennial of Photography and Video of the International Center of Photography in New York City²⁶. More recently, the success of the Anthropocene Project²⁷ confirms that these changes are taking place – and have indeed already taken place – but, above all, gives evidence of the importance of “looking around” before “looking ahead” or, as underlined by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing²⁸, how indispensable it is to combine the quantitative modelling of the sciences with the “art of noticing’, that is the art of discerning and becoming aware.

Aesthetic landscapes and metaphorical devices.

The transformation of a shaped environment is also an aesthetic act, according to the original definition given by Baumgarten; the result of incomplete and vague knowledge of the senses, to the point of taking shape, as outlined by Lyotard in his latest essays²⁹, as the product where the primary choice is driven by aesthetics. Besides the quantitative “evidence” underpinning technical and economic design choices, the perception and the appearance of a given design are likewise noteworthy “facts’, which have grown in number thanks to data gathering. Aesthetic/sensory data, in their broader meaning, can become an empathic resource to share a feeling toward a specific landscape and even an apperception of a vital impetus.

New digital time-based, augmented and immersive representations further broadened the art of noticing, going so far as to embrace the invisible. They provide the observer with data that are likewise important and that amplify the vision, endowing the viewer with “tactile” access to knowledge, where the aesthetic sense is the ultimate authority for an assessment of possible transformations of the environment. Despite their imperfection and, at times, their erroneousness, aesthetic-sensorial data amplified by new listening and digital visualisation technology are more “accurate’, namely more consistent with daily experience and a rooted shared feeling. Contrary to the idea that a scientific approach and technologically processed data give the ultimate truth of reality, while a sensorial approach offers a mutable truth, we must consider that a “sensitive” truth persists beyond continuous improvement and, accordingly, beyond a change of scientific laws. This is also the reason why

³⁰ P. Dardot, *Senso comune e senso “del comune”*. *Le pratiche istituenti dell’Aisthesis*, 2016 [https://operavivamagazine.org/senso-comune-e-senso-del-comune/ (05/19)].
³¹ G. Harman, *Object Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, Pelican Books, London 2017.

the final assessment of a design project must go beyond physical determinism and cannot escape a confrontation with “common sense’, from the effects experienced by real people to the quantitative assessment of the efficaciousness and efficiency of the results achieved. Finally, an aesthetic-sensorial approach does not only stage the everyday obviousness of common sense, but it can be the interpreter of ethical necessity, as defined by Pierre Dardot³⁰, of the “common sense” of sharing the individuals’ experiences beyond the authoritarian imposition of sciences and experts, namely beyond the advice of landscape practitioners (environmental engineers and managers, on the one hand, and gardeners, landscapers, and naturalists, on the other), who proclaim themselves custodians of the planet in the light of their specific and unchallengeable truths, thus validating – although in different forms – the undisputed development of western thought.

In an aesthetic ambit, a powerful device to accede and interact with a reality that would otherwise be inaccessible and, therefore, useful for prefiguring future perspectives is represented by the metaphor, which differs substantially from the “fiction” of scientific design based on quantitative models. In fact, scientific simulation is based on reductive mechanisms of simplification, while metaphorical fiction is based on “growth” mechanisms that pave the way to new planning perspectives, even unimaginable ones. Quoting Harman³¹, we can differently say that the metaphor-based method, unlike an analytical design simulation, is the method of “building upward” rather than “digging downward”; the method of “coupling” rather than the “uncoupling” of analytical discretisation. The metaphorical emphasis deliberately surrenders to the knowledge of reality to replace it with fictions where objects and subjects are eclipsed in favour of a new factuality where singular entities blend in an indestructible way. These flow uninterruptedly into otherwise non-communicating entities and interpenetrate into each other beyond the fixedness of forms, of an ocular and topographic representation, and are presented in their changeable and uncontrollable osmotic balances.

Fluvial parks as dystopias of catastrophe.

A river is a paradigmatic landscape of osmotic change, a resilient element of the environment and the universe that overcomes any forecast stability and control. The cyclical alternation of flooding and dryness, its wealth of plant and animal species, its value as a water and building material resource, as a communication route and, lastly, as a dump, entailed endless changes of its profile and identity features. Often a place of drosscape, in particular in urban areas, the river and its banks are among the most difficult subjects to represent and revitalise for profitable exploitation. It stretches for more miles than can be caught in a glimpse, defined mostly by irregular forms that make it difficult for building and, in some cases, hazardous conditions that make any building activity completely worthless. Therefore, in the case of an unexploited river, its revitalisation into the urban system generally leads to the creation of fluvial parks for multi-purpose objectives: drainage and regulation of its flow, historical-cultural enhancement, recovery of green areas for recreational and tourism purposes (e.g., reactivation of navigability), the reinstatement of cultivation, the safety of the natural habitat and, indirectly, the creation of income for its location close to urban areas.

³² M. Foucault, *Spazi Altri*, Mimesis Edizioni, Milano 2011 (orig. ed. 1967).

³³ J.F. Lyotard, *Anima Minima. Sul bello e il sublime*. Pratiche Editrice, Parma 1995.

³⁴ J.F. Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1994 (orig. ed. 1991).

In any case, the term park implies the intention to create a revitalised area and, in addition to securing the site, it often includes the creation of oases safeguarded as natural reserves, places where someone can isolate oneself at safe distances: the metaphor of the many de-localisations that have been consumed in the name of protecting nature. It is an “other place”, which defines itself as a nostalgic simulacrum of originality and whose otherness is an artificial intensification of precluded experiences. It is defined as a “natural reserve” but, more realistically, it is a ghetto sheltered from the catastrophe, where death has already been decreed. Its pre-existing vitality, classified as violent, is replaced by an unreal condition of control, order, and security, where each fragment is organised by experts to structure and to expropriate visitors’ experiences, creating the most classic of heterotopias: utopias aimed at “immunising” the catastrophe which looms outside the perimeter of its borders but, at the same time, sacred places where victims are sacrificed without guilt for the killers for the sake of an equally utopian purification.

In this sense, the only usefulness attributable to these places is that of the dystonic mirror of hotel rooms, as stated by Foucault³², where the pleasure deriving from the experience of a perfect order shall turn into malaise due to our ordinary disorder. Artificial paradises that, more than the warning signals launched by science for an imminent catastrophe, should make us “feel” that the catastrophe has already taken place. What allows us the ease of walking barefoot in a well-groomed lawn has already produced irreversible or reversible effects in arcs of time that transcend humanity. In the sacredness of such places, something is perceived that exceeds the immediate, unmentionable sensitivity, but that we can “learn” through an aesthetic sensation of “perturbation” which is not the one producing a romantic sublime, since every vestige of God has disappeared from the causes³³.

These places are, therefore, heterotopias to be lived as aesthetic acts in their blossoming nature to raise questions rather than offer solutions; useful places to understand, without fears and false hopes, that humanity is naturally tangled in the wrecks of the post-environmental condition where all privileges have disappeared for tourists, spectators or holders of knowledge. Faced with this condition, the aesthetic perception of the environmental catastrophe is the first necessary act since it is capable of activating a Kantian experience of self-awareness of thought and, according to Lyotard’s elaboration³⁴, the pre-a priori of thought that predisposes every possible presentation.

Experimenting with catastrophe.

The alternative to these solutions of regeneration within society and environmental protection projects undertaken with the implementation of capitals and technology, in which the “muscular” strength of Western modernity is perpetuated, could instead be found in an extension and intensification of prior exploration and surveying phases through open-ended forms of knowledge, replications of ecological processes.

We refer to critical and inter-disciplinary investigation, such as the RIVA Project has implemented for some years. Forms of temporary experimentation on completely dead ruins, drawing on the experience with matsutake: a mushroom that cannot be cultivated, but was the first living form that reappeared in the

³⁵ A.L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalism Ruins*, Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford 2015.

³⁶ P. Montani, *L’immaginazione intermediale. Perlustrare, rifigurare, testimoniare il mondo visibile*, Edizioni Laterza, Bari 2010.

³⁷ G. Ridolfi, *Traumnovelle, Isolation and Reconnection. Ten Bridges at La Maddalena*, DidaPress, Firenze 2020.

³⁸ G. Zampa, *Eugenio Montale. Tutte le poesie*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano 1990 (I ed. 1984), pp. 719–720.

post-nuclear soils of Hiroshima, which grows spontaneously on areas burned by lava³⁵. Participatory practices to environmental disasters show that there is no longer any “other” place where someone can isolate oneself at safe distances, nor peaks higher than others from which to dominate the landscape or distant orbits that authorise harmonious holistic visions where even inequalities and conflicts emerge peacefully. The Burkian sublime ecstasy of the catastrophe no longer exists because everyone is “thrown into the world” and exposed to the materiality of the air we breathe, of the food we eat, of the diseases that strike us. Certainties should be replaced by the aware perturbation that all transcendence and privilege have dissolved, that the *interesse* (the interest) should be replaced by the *inter-esse* (the intra-being) as the expression of the intricate relationship between singularities, because the urgency of the catastrophe and its aesthesis offer new hermeneutics and new possibilities to face the world driven by a sense of survival³⁶.

Singularities without identifiable identities that fray in what they like to be and reconnect themselves for the aesthetic sensation that determines them by taking over language again.

An apocalyptic language in its archaic forms that is not premonition of the end or eschatological hope, or of idyllic delirious desires to bounce back, but a way to disrupt unveiling because in the past humanity has experienced the fallibility of the sciences, the disasters of interest in ends. A language that is also contradictory, metaphorical and that, despite disasters and floods, puts itself, beyond mere survival, at the service of life³⁷.

A language that, quoting Montale, unveils “...the virtue of floating on the crest of the waves when the flood has drowned everything ...”³⁸.