



VERNON PRESS

CURATING AND INTERPRETING CULTURE

Captioned Landscapes

Intermedial Combinations Beyond the Human

VOLUME 1: PLACES

Edited by
Marco Maggi

*I flutter
under your eyes
while the sun is wrenching me*

Caterina Diotto
Università di Trieste

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Intermedial Combinations Beyond the Human

Volume 1: Places

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Marco Maggi

Università della Svizzera italiana

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At the end of January 2024, I received an email from Sonia Costa of Vernon Press. Somehow, through channels known only to publishing house editors, Sonia had learned about a panel entitled “Subtitled Gardens” that I had organised the previous summer at the Iawis/Aierti conference in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The message proposed publishing a book on the subject. I immediately activated my academic network, gathering many more contributions than I could have imagined. I returned to Sonia with a list of authors and titles that was clearly too long, but without batting an eyelid, she suggested publishing a two-volume work. I owe Sonia and Vernon Press a debt of gratitude for encouraging me to embark on this venture and for their unfailing support and impeccable collaboration throughout its realisation. The insightful comments of the anonymous reviewers also contributed significantly to the refinement of the work. Special thanks to Hannimari Heino for granting permission to publish the images appearing on the covers of the two volumes.

Over the months, the title of the Belo Horizonte panel was changed, but I owe my colleagues and friends at Iawis/Aierti and the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais for their initial acceptance of the panel. I am particularly grateful to Liliane Louvel and Márcia Arbex-Enrico, and with them the panel speakers Sophie Aymes and Divya Kumar-Dumas. The evolution of the project was made possible by the always intense and productive discussions with the authors and by the invitation to present its progress on multiple occasions: in Lausanne with Ute Heidmann and the members of CLE; as part of the Society of Emblem Studies’ *Road to Vienna* series; at the conference *Tesaurus e le arti* organised by Clara Gorla and Andrea Merlotti at Venaria Reale; in Palermo as part of the PhD programme in Visual Culture, with Michele Cometa, Roberta Coglitore, Valeria Cammarata, Alessandra Buccheri and all the members of the Doctoral College; at the Accademia di Architettura in Mendrisio as part of the series *Fable, Rebus, Emblem*; *Source, Material, Image* organised by Giuditta Cirmigliaro; at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome at the invitation of Leo Impett and Claudia Cieri Via; with Erik Erlanson and members of the “green cluster” of the Linnaeus University Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies; at the Division of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages of Stanford University at the invitation of Giacomo Berchi. An important intermediate stage of the project was the workshop *Paesaggi con didascalie*, which I organised in April 2025 in my

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Lugano-Stanford, Autumn 2025

Note on the Editor

Marco Maggi is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and Theory of Literature at the Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, Switzerland, where he is also Co-Director of the Master in Italian Language, Literature and Civilisation. He has held positions as visiting professor and visiting scholar at the Université de Genève, at the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa, at the Università di Palermo, and at Stanford University. He is the principal investigator of the project funded by the Swiss National Scientific Fund “Italian Studies of Literature and Arts. An Archival, Intermedial and Digital Approach” (2026-2030). He is a member of the scientific committee of numerous academic societies and international publishing series. His research focuses on the intermedial relations of literature from a historical, critical and theoretical perspective. His publications include the monographs *Walter Benjamin e Dante. Una costellazione nello spazio delle immagini* (2017), *Modernità visuale dei «Promessi Sposi». Romanzo e fantasmagoria da Manzoni a Bellocchio* (2019); *Forme intermedie. Percorsi di cultura visuale nell'opera di Guido Gozzano* (2025). He has edited texts, with a focus on the Baroque and early twentieth-century: *Aurore barocche. Concerto di arti sorelle* (2005), Emanuele Tesauro's *Vocabolario italiano* (2008) and *Anacronismi e didascalie. Prose varie (1903-1916)* by Guido Gozzano (2023). He also edited new Italian editions of classics of inter-artistic comparison: *Ut pictura poesis* by Rensselaer W. Lee (2011) and *Studi sul concettismo* by Mario Praz (2014). He has edited collections of essays and journal monographic issues: «*Selbstdenken*». *Atti della giornata di studi in ricordo di Lea Ritter Santini* (2020); “Fototestualità” (*Versants*, 2021, with S. Garau and V. Tescari); *Walter Benjamin e la cultura italiana* (2022); “Prometeo, mito e intermedialità” (*Arabeschi*, 2024, with M. Giovannelli); “Sull'orlo del visibile. Letterature comparate e visibilità” (*Colloquium Helveticum*, 2025).

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the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Gaillac (2018). She is currently a full member of UNESCO's Advisory Committee for Works of Art (ACWA), 2018-2022.

Silvia Lavanco Livreri is a PhD student in Visual Culture at the University of Palermo. Her research focuses on the intersection of Visual Culture and Environmental Humanities, particularly on the representation of environmental issues through contemporary art. In this field, her research focuses on artworks that raise awareness of the current environmental crisis and highlight the need for justice in the environmental, artistic and representational spheres, both through a conceptual and an ecomedial turn. Before attending the PhD, she took a Master's Degree at the University of Palermo in Comparative Literature, with a thesis entitled "Apocalypse and Anthropocene. Literature in the age of Climate Change," about climate fiction in the context of the Anthropocene, demonstrating interest in the field of ecocritical literature as well. She recently participated in the International Conference "Challenging the Visual: Distrust, Emergency, Uncertainty" at Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona, with a communication entitled "The Visuality of the Environmental Crisis" (13-15 March 2024).

Pedro Medina Reinón (Murcia, Spain, 1973) holds a PhD in Cultural Sciences (Scuola Internazionale di Alti Studi, Modena, 2001) and a degree in Philosophy (Universidad de Murcia, 1996). He has the academic qualification of Associate Professor in Arts and Humanities (ANECA, Spain, 2023). He is currently a lecturer at the Istituto Europeo di Design, at the Accademia di Belle Arti Santa Giulia, and at the UNIR (online). He was the Publishing Director of Editorial IED, the project manager of the IED Italy and IED Brazil E-learning Campus, Director of the academic innovation area IED Sapere (Italy, Spain and Brazil), Director of the Cultural Area at the Istituto Europeo di Design (Madrid), and researcher at the IUAV (Venice) and at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid). As an art curator and art critic he curated numerous exhibitions across multiple cities and institutions. He has also developed extensive editorial work as an author, editor and translator. His primary research areas include History of Aesthetic Ideas and Art Theory, with a focus on new languages in design, architecture, video-creation and digital media. His research is characterised by an empirical approach and a direct engagement with artistic practices and contemporary phenomena.

Vega Tescari is a writer and a lecturer at the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI), where she teaches courses in contemporary art, film studies, history and theory of photography and comparative literature. She is the author of critical studies (*En Suspens. Scenari di tempo. Marguerite Duras, Claudio Parmiggiani, Luigi Ghirri*, 2018) and literary texts (*Come*, 2018). A selection of her poems has been translated into French by Mathilde Vischer. She has been working, inter alia, on the literary and filmic oeuvre of Marguerite Duras, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Andrej Tarkovskij; on the poetic production of Charles Olson and Lalla Romano's photo-texts; on Chris Marker's oeuvre; and Chen Chieh-jen's video art. Her research primarily looks at the links between the visual and audiovisual arts, literature, and philosophy, particularly focusing on questions of time and space.

Editor's General Introduction

Historical overview

“Since at least the Romans,” writes an author of reference for both garden and landscape history and word and image studies, “inscriptions have played a variety of roles in landscape design and experience.”¹ In Pliny the Younger’s letters (v, 6, 35) we read that gardeners of antiquity delighted in writing their lord’s name, or their own, on boxwood hedges or in flower beds. The custom is reported by Leon Battista Alberti in *De re aedificatoria* (ix, 4) and modernised in the Roman humanist circles. The land acquired by Pomponio Leto near the Quirinale in 1474 to host the gatherings of the Accademia Romana was adorned with poetic inscriptions that, through the artifice of prosopopoeia, gave voice to the statues placed in the garden. The compositions in honour of St Anne by Johannes Goritz’s humanist friends, some of which were published in 1524 in a collection entitled *Coryciana*, were instead hung on the trees in his garden near the basilica of Maxentius and Constantine, modelled on the epigrams placed on Plato’s tomb in the garden of the Academy. The fountains were also decorated with poetic verses carved on cartouches, often dedicated to the sleeping nymph, as in the Nymphaeum of Villa Giulia.²

From Rome, the custom of placing inscriptions in natural environments spread to the rest of the peninsula, starting with Paolo Giovio’s villa in Como, built from 1537 onwards; as attested by a painting from the following century, made a few years before the site was demolished, the garden on the lakeshore was adorned with inscriptions.³ The Sacred Wood of Bomarzo, inaugurated in 1547, still partly preserves, carved on its fantastic architecture, the quotations

¹ John Dixon Hunt, *The Afterlife of Gardens* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 89.

² Cf. Denis Ribouillault, “Hortus academicus: les académies de la Renaissance et le jardin,” in *Des jardins & des livres. Catalogue d'exposition (Fondation Martin Bodmer, Coligny [Genève], 28 avril – 9 septembre 2018)*, ed. by Michael Jakob (MétisPresses, 2018), 28-30; Id., “Introduction: ‘Atque inter silvas Academi quaerere verum’ – Early Modern Gardens and the Academic Ideal,” in *Gardens and Academies in Early Modern Italy and Beyond*, ed. by Denis Ribouillault (Brill, 2025), 13-15. See also Claudia Lazzaro, *The Italian Renaissance Garden* (Yale University Press, 1990), ad vocem ‘Imprese in gardens’.

³ Cf. Eugenio Battisti, *Iconologia ed ecologia del giardino e del paesaggio*, edited by Giuseppa Saccaro Del Buffa (Olschki, 2004), 9-10 footnote 6.

of literary figures such as Dante, Francesco Petrarca and Ludovico Ariosto, among others.⁴ Outside Italy, in Königsberg, present-day Kaliningrad, in the 1630s, the composer Heinrich Albert founded the Kürbishütte, an academy named after the custom of engraving poetic compositions on the gourds (*Kürbis* in German) that grew in the founder's garden.⁵

With the advent of André Le Nôtre and the diffusion of the French garden model, the attribution of meaning to gardens is mainly accomplished, as Eric T. Haskell has written, through an "iconographical voicing," i.e. the elaboration of iconographic programmes that tend to banish the use of inscriptions.⁶ The latter return in the English gardens of the eighteenth-century, from that of Alexander Pope at Twickenham to that of the Marquis de Girardin at Ermenonville, studded with quotations from Rousseau, crossing the watershed between the "emblematic gardening" of the beginning of the century and the "expressive gardening" that characterises the decades after 1740.⁷

Once again excluded from Capability Brown's projects,⁸ nature inscriptions, a genre illustrated in the eighteenth-century by Mark Akenside, William Shenstone (creator of the Leasowes garden) and Thomas Wharton, are taken up

⁴ Cf. Horst Bredekamp, *Vicino Orsini e il Bosco Sacro di Bomarzo. Un principe artista ed anarchico*, original photographs by Wolfram Janzer (Edizioni dell'elefante, 1989); Anatole Tchikine, ed., "Bomarzo between history and myth," special issue, *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 41, no. 2 (2021).

⁵ Cf. Leonard Forster, "Meditation in a Garden," *German Life and Letters* 31 (1977): 27-29.

⁶ Cf. Eric T. Haskell, "Reading Eden's Riddles: Words in the Landscape, Texts in the Garden," in *Art and Science in Word and Image. Exploration and Discovery*, edited by Keith Williams *et al.* (Brill, 2019), 157.

⁷ Cf. John Dixon Hunt, *The Figure in the Landscape. Poetry, Painting, and Gardening during the Eighteenth Century* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979). On captioned landscapes in the seventeenth century cf. Monique Mosser, "La Réunion des arts est dans le jardin," in *Le Progrès des Arts réunis 1763-1815. Mythe culturel, des origines de la Révolution à la fin de l'Empire? Actes du Colloque international d'Histoire de l'Art, Bordeaux – Toulouse, 22-26 mai 1989*, edited by Daniel Rabreau and Bruno Tollon (Éditions William Blake & Co., 1992); Ead., "La littérature au miroir d'Hortésie au temps des Lumières," in Jakob, *Des jardins & des livres*; Jean-Louis Haquette, "Le texte dans le paysage. Réflexions sur la pratique de l'inscription dans le jardin paysager du XVIII^e siècle," *Interfaces – Image, texte, langage* 11-12 (1997), https://www.persee.fr/doc/inter_1164-6225_1997_num_11_1_1098; Michael Jakob, *Ermenonville* (Éditions de l'Imprimeur, 2002); Sophie Lefay, *L'Éloquence des pierres. Usages littéraires de l'inscription au XVIII^e siècle* (Classiques Garnier, 2015), 58-65.

⁸ Cf. Dixon Hunt, *The Figure in the Landscape*, 220.

by the Romantic poets: famous in this regard are William Wordsworth's *Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree*. In the hands of the Lake Poets, however, the naturalistic epigram evolves into an autonomous composition, detached from the *genius loci*.⁹ Another blow to the presence of inscriptions in natural settings comes from the privilege granted by modernism to media purity;¹⁰ so that we have to wait until the mid-twentieth-century for writing to resurface in gardens designed by Ian Hamilton Finlay, among others.¹¹

An equally ancient, but even more continuous story has the presence of writing in gardens in China, which, as Yolaine Escande writes, gives the natural environment "its soul, its meaning, its scope."¹² As proof of the cross-cultural significance of the phenomenon, literature in the Sinhala language, one of Sri Lanka's official idioms, originated with the inscriptions on the Mirror Wall, a mighty rock formation within the Sigirya site.¹³

Beginning with the *Roman de la Rose*,¹⁴ Western literature sometimes depict captioned landscapes (we will return to this designation later), even in illustrated form, as in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), which established the canon of Renaissance garden aesthetics. The episode of the loves of Angelica and Medoro in Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (1516) also propagates among painters, as Rensselaer W. Lee has reconstructed,¹⁵ the custom of carving the names of lovers on trees; Thanatos, rather than Eros, is referred to in the other *topos* of writing *en plein air*, the *Et in Arcadia Ego*. In the garden described by Erasmus of Rotterdam in *Convivium religiosum* (1522), the voice of plants is conveyed through inscriptions; like those, taken from the Bible, that appear on the walls of the caves described in Bernard Palissy's *Recepte véritable* (1563).¹⁶

⁹ Cf. Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry," in Id., *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays, 1958-1970* (Yale University Press, 1970).

¹⁰ Dixon Hunt, *The Afterlife of Gardens*, 89.

¹¹ Cf. Id., *Nature Over Again: The Garden Art of Ian Hamilton Finlay* (Reaktion Books, 2008).

¹² Yolaine Escande, "Jardin et écriture en Chine," in Jakob, *Des jardins & des livres*, 19 (unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine).

¹³ Cf. Divya Kumar-Dumas, "Reading Architecture in Landscape: Visitor Reflections at a Mirror Wall (Sigiriya, Sri Lanka)," in *Art, Architecture, and the Moving Viewer, c. 300-1500 CE: Unfolding Narratives*, ed. by Gillian B. Elliott and Anne Heath (Brill, 2022), 120-121.

¹⁴ Cf. Christopher Lucken, *Le Roman de la Rose*, in Jakob, *Des jardins & des livres*, 136.

¹⁵ Cf. Rensselaer W. Lee, *Names on Trees. Ariosto and the Arts* (Princeton University Press, 1977).

¹⁶ Cf. Koji Kuwakino, *L'Architetto sapiente. Giardino, teatro, città come schemi mnemonici tra il XVI e il XVII secolo* (Olschki, 2011), 123-126.

In the seventeenth-century, the space of the garden becomes the setting in which the Englishman Henry Peacham sets his collection of emblems (*Minerva Britannia, or, a Garden of Heroical Devises*, 1612); while the German Geuder, referring to the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, imagines that his *carmina figurata* are engraved on the trunks of the trees that surround the *locus amœnus* in which the idyll takes place.¹⁷

In the following century, the use of scattering inscriptions in nature is acclimatised to the sun and vegetation of the tropics in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788) (Flaubert parodied it in his description of the garden in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*).¹⁸ At the same time, in a dreamlike Orient but not dreamt of by the West, Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Room* (1792) details how poetic quotations placed in a Chinese garden are meticulously chosen.¹⁹

Literary representations of captioned landscapes reappear from the second half of the twentieth-century onwards, often in relation to real creations: this is the case, to cite only the example geographically closest to me, of Armand Schulthess' lost Encyclopaedic Garden²⁰ in Auressio, in Southern Switzerland, the subject of descriptions in the pages of writers such as S. Corinna Bille, Max Frisch and recently Judith Schalsansky.

From iconology to the ecomedial turn

Albeit briefly, the overview just presented allows us to measure the extent of the phenomenon of captioned landscapes and their representations, as well as the continuities and fractures that mark their history. For the latter, as mentioned, a fundamental role is played by the media purism of modernist descent which, as effectively summarised by John Dixon Hunt, has in principle ruled out the issue on the basis of the assumption that "landscape architecture being [...] visual, can have no truck with the verbal."²¹

Such an attitude can be found, for example, in Eugenio Battisti, one of the authors of reference for garden and landscape history studies, when, in the mid-1980s, he lamented that the progressive deciphering and identification of the Bomarzo inscriptions had evaporated the "Piranesian romanticism" of the

¹⁷ Giovanni Pozzi, *La parola dipinta*, 1981, second edition (Adelphi, 1996), 149.

¹⁸ Mario Praz, *Studi sul concettismo*, 1946, ed. by Marco Maggi (Abscondita, 2014), 218 footnote 1.

¹⁹ Escande, "Jardin et écriture en Chine," 21.

²⁰ Cf. Lucienne Peiry, *Le Jardin de la mémoire. Armand Schulthess* (Allia, 2021).

²¹ Dixon Hunt, *The Afterlife of Gardens*, 89.

place, not surprisingly also much appreciated by Salvador Dalí.²² The presence of verbal elements in the landscape is interpreted by Battisti as a nefarious effect of “modern tourism,” which “has triumphed over nature itself, reducing scenic regions to the dimensions of a dry Baedeker guidebook page, crammed with captions and parades of road signs.”²³ Battisti does not exclude the correlation between the visual element and the verbal element, indeed he promotes it, experimenting and advocating the application of the iconological method to the study of landscape. What is banished, in the name of the supposedly purely visual nature of the landscape, is the physical presence of alphabetical inscriptions. The party taken for the visual is so pre-eminent, in Battisti, that even his second fundamental methodological reference, ecology (*Iconologia ed ecologia del giardino e del paesaggio* is the title of his collection of essays on the subject), is interpreted as an “optical defence” of the territory.²⁴

The lifting of the excommunication against landscape inscriptions and the beginning of their revaluation as objects of study went hand in hand with the criticism of the iconological approach and the underlying question of meaning being replaced with that of reception. According to John Dixon Hunt, who has promoted this paradigm shift since the early 1970s, “there is a far more interesting question than ‘can garden mean?’ – which in fact should be construed more as a question of reception.”²⁵ The interest in the reception of gardens and landscapes – what Dixon Hunt called their “afterlife” – has directed attention towards the importance of inscriptions, real “triggers and prompts” offered to the visitor’s attention.²⁶ From Dixon Hunt’s point of view, they function as interfaces mediating between the known and the unknown, accompanying the reception of the natural space: captions “are a means of introducing people to unfamiliar, perhaps even uncongenial sites by getting them to view these locations in terms of familiar patterns of behaviour;” but they can also, especially in the context of hyper-simplification induced by contemporary media, fulfil the opposite function of “further delay[ing] the reception of [...] meanings for folk who generally expect the instant elucidation of advertisement or tv captions.”²⁷ Further functions have been emphasised,

²² Battisti, *Iconologia ed ecologia del giardino e del paesaggio*, 330.

²³ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁴ Giuseppa Saccaro Del Buffa, “Prefazione,” in Battisti, *Iconologia ed ecologia del giardino e del paesaggio*, IX.

²⁵ Dixon Hunt, *The Afterlife of Gardens*, 96.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 77-112.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 88, 110.

especially from eighteenth-century case studies. The inscriptions function as a scholarly supplement, making explicit the cultural references and literary allusions contained in the landscape.²⁸ Moreover, by virtue of the inherently intersubjective nature of language, they establish a threshold between the mythical space of the garden and the real space of the visitor, who is invited to occupy the place left empty by the personal pronouns in the discourse.²⁹ Finally, the writings disseminated in the landscape contribute, like the plaques placed next to works of art in museums, to the processes of idealisation and aestheticisation of nature.³⁰

The shift in focus from meaning to reception is at the origin of studies on the presence of inscriptions in natural environments, the main limitation of which lies in the approach that Richard Grusin has called “media correlationalism.”³¹ This approach consists on a conception of mediation as a mere neutral reproduction of meanings, involving a distinct subject and object, separate and refractory to any transformation. To the correlative aspect, Grusin opposes the creative aspect, for which “mediation operates [...] by actively transforming human and nonhuman actants, as well as their conceptual and affective states.”³² The creative conception of mediation presupposes what Michele Cometa has called the “ecomedial turn,” which consists in shifting attention beyond media interactions to the “relationship that media [...] maintain with the living (human and non-human) and the non-living, with ‘inert’ matter and, ultimately, with all the components of the planet.”³³ The ecomedial turn focuses on relationships within which human and non-human worlds do not remain unchanged, but are transformed by negotiation procedures that also radically redefine their respective roles. From a representationalist conception of mediation, in which the subject contemplates the object while keeping its distance, we move on to an immersive and transformative conception; from a still anthropocentric view of intermediality, which focuses on the interactions

²⁸ Mosser, “La littérature au miroir d’Hortésie au temps des Lumières,” 83.

²⁹ Michael Charlesworth, “Movement, Intersubjectivity, and Mercantile Morality at Stourhead,” in *Landscape Design and the Experience of Motion*, ed. by Michel Conan (Dumbarton Oaks, 2003).

³⁰ Lefay, *L’Éloquence des pierres*, 58.

³¹ Richard Grusin, “Radical Mediation,” *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (2015), 131.

³² *Ibid.*, 130. I will refrain in this context from the anti-speciesist positions underlying Grusin’s theory, the analysis of which would require a separate discussion.

³³ Michele Cometa, *La svolta ecomediale. La mediazione come forma di vita* (Meltemi, 2023), 20.

between media (*les mots dans la peinture*, to quote a famous title by Michel Butor), to an approach to mediation as a trans-specific phenomenon (*les mots dans la nature*).

The ecomedial approach just described has been metabolised in more recent studies of intermediality, which, however, with one significant exception, have not yet thematised the question of combinations between writing and natural environments. As things stand, therefore, the existing studies on captioned landscapes are vitiated by a correlationalist approach; while the studies of intermedial ecocriticism, although having overcome representationalism in the name of a creative conception of mediation, neglect these forms of combination, focusing rather on representations of the non-human world.³⁴

This is the case, for instance, with the concept of “eco-ekphrasis” proposed by Gabriele Rippl, elaborated against the backdrop of an approach defined as “descriptive ethics.” The author’s descriptive ethics fully assumes the ecomedial turn, as it is characterised as “an environmental ethics whose focus lies no longer exclusively on the human and its human other but is also interested in non-human nature.”³⁵ It focuses literary descriptions of natural environments and, in the specific mode that Rippl calls “eco-ekphrasis,” of ecological works of art. The object of such analyses are representations: ekphrasis is indeed the most common and widespread form of such intermedial processes. What is curious is that the example examined by Rippl, from Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood*, consists precisely of a captioned landscape, i.e. a work of art that inscribes writing in natural environments. The project, attributed to Amanda Payne’s character, is entitled “The Living Word” and consists of arranging organic residues in nature, forming monumental inscriptions on the ground; the artist’s latest work is made with bones of slaughtered cattle which, alluding to the possible apocalyptic outcomes of the ecological crisis, compose the inscription ‘kaputt’. The artist thus documents with photographs and videos the process of decay that these living words undergo, attacked by biological agents such as enzymes or insects. In her essay,

³⁴ I assume the distinction, established in intermediality studies, between combination (co-presence of different media, synchronic dimension) and representation (reference between different media, diachronic dimension). Cf. Jørgen Bruhn and Beate Schirrmacher, eds., *Intermedial Studies. An Introduction to Meaning Across Media* (Routledge, 2022).

³⁵ Gabriele Rippl, “Sustainability, eco-ekphrasis and the ethics of literary description,” in *Cultural Sustainability. Perspectives from the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. by Torsten Meires and Gabriele Rippl (Routledge, 2019), 222.

Rippl analyses Atwood's portrayal of the combination of writing and natural elements in "The Living Word," but without going into the characteristics of this combination, and the transformative encounter between human and non-human that takes place in it.³⁶

The correlationalist approach is also surpassed in the *Intermédialités/Intermediality* journal's issue dedicated to "jardiner/gardening." As editor Denis Ribouillault writes, it is necessary to move "de la réunion des arts dans le jardin au jardin partagé." The first part of the sentence refers to the title of an aforementioned article by Monique Mosser that emblematically represents the Reception Studies approach; the second indicates the prospect of going beyond it by considering not only natural spaces as a place of social practices, but also and above all of renegotiating the relationship between human and non-human.³⁷ In the essays that make up the issue, however, the verbal element, rather than being materially involved in combinations with non-human worlds, only appears in a representational key, albeit with interesting projections outside of Western literatures.

An ecomedial perspective also characterises the volume *Multispecies Storytelling in Intermedial Practices*, edited by Ida Bencke and Jørgen Bruhn. The editors start from the twofold observation that "language is commonly thought of as what sets 'us' apart from the rest of the species;" but that, at the same time, "everyday experiences of multispecies cohabitation tell us that in practice, 'we' often manage to understand each other." Such experiences are studied in the volume with reference to representations, and in particular to that peculiar type of representations that are narratives: "how do we narrate and (re)present these encounters in ways that do not negate, annul, or overwrite the distinctive qualities and logics of a nonhuman semiotics?"³⁸ The question is taken up and developed in a volume by Bruhn himself in collaboration with Niklas Salmose dedicated to intermedial ecocriticism, understood "as a theory and method [that] aims to describe, analyse and

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 226-228.

³⁷ Cf. Denis Ribouillault, "Introduction. De la 'réunion des arts' dans le jardin au jardin partagé," *Intermedialités* 35 (2020), guest-edited by Denis Ribouillault (special issue: *Gardening/Jardiner*), <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/im/2020-n35-im05945/1076367ar/>.

³⁸ Ida Bencke, and Jørgen Bruhn, "Introduction," in *Multispecies Storytelling in Intermedial Practices*, ed. by Ida Bencke and Jørgen Bruhn (punctum books, 2022), 9-10.

compare very different examples of environmental communication.”³⁹ Although the authors show themselves to be aware that “not all meaning follows the regime of representation and that not all meaning stands in for something else in the banal sense the word representation” (the explicit reference is to Grusin’s notion of “radical mediation,” to which I have already referred), they focus their attention on “questions of communication and thus representation,”⁴⁰ analysing climate fiction novels and websites, reports of international organisations and graphic novels, television advertisements and film adaptations, without considering the question of the inscription of alphabetic signs in the non-human world.

An exception in this respect are some contributions contained in the proceedings of the XXXIII Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture, dedicated to the theme *Interlacing Words and Things: Bridging the Nature-Culture Opposition in Gardens and Landscapes*. With reference to reception studies, editor Stephen Bann points out that it is not only a question of enumerating the ways in which poetry and painting have both represented and influenced the creation and reception of gardens and landscapes, but above all of accounting for the “philosophical and anthropological stakes that are inevitably involved in such a process.”⁴¹ In the essays that make up the volume, the analysis of representations prevails, both verbal and visual, in the latter case with reference to underlying texts, with interesting cross-cultural projections. In the curator’s essay, dedicated to Ian Hamilton Finlay, and especially in that of Yves Abrioux, devoted to Land Art, the perspective we have called ecomedial is instead applied to the study of the intermedial combinations of writing in natural environments. In the examples analysed, Abrioux identifies the lineaments of “a poetics that recognises an ongoing imaginative process quite distinct from figuration understood as (visual) representation.”⁴² This process, which the scholar designates with the term ‘figural,’ is in fact hinged on the presence of writing in the landscape. Its outcome is neither postmodern demystification, which reduces the inclination to identify

³⁹ Jørgen Bruhn and Niklas Salmose, *Intermedial Ecocriticism. The Climate Crisis Through Art and Media* (Lexington Books, 2024), 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 167, 35.

⁴¹ Stephen Bann, “Introduction,” in *Interlacing Words and Things: Bridging the Nature-Culture Opposition in Gardens and Landscape*, ed. by Stephen Bann (Dumbarton Oaks, 2012), 1.

⁴² Yves Abrioux, “What Happens to Words in Gardens and Landscapes,” in Bann, *Interlacing Words and Things*, 18.

nature as a source of values to “cliché or wordplay,”⁴³ nor the romantic utopia of an absolute reconciliation: “Typically linguistic, this behaviour acts more to complexify the effects of which gardens and landscape are capable than to reinstate within them a postulated state of nature.”⁴⁴

Terminological clarifications

In the wake of the contributions mentioned last, in the chapters that make up this work, the topic of combinations of writing and natural environments is addressed from an ecomedial perspective, i.e. with priority attention to the negotiations between human and non-human worlds that take place within these processes. This justifies the adoption of the term ‘landscape,’ which, following W. J. T. Mitchell, I understand “not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed.” Landscape as an object of vision, Mitchell explains, interprets history as a “progressive movement towards purification of the visual field” and coincides with the “contemplative” approach characteristic of modernism; on the other side, typical of the “interpretative” approach of postmodernism, landscape is read as “an allegory of psychological or ideological themes.”⁴⁵ Rejecting the immobility (of the human subject and of nature) underlying both models, Mitchell invites us to consider landscape as a “dynamic medium,”⁴⁶ in which we move and is itself in motion, in particular as “a medium of exchange between the human and the natural.”⁴⁷ According to the author, this exchange is accomplished “by naturalising its conventions and conventionalizing its nature.”⁴⁸ On the one hand, the landscape “naturalises a cultural and social construction;” on the other, it gives nature an expressive potentiality analogous to that of conventional language, whereby the landscape presents itself as “a representation that ‘breaks through’ representation into the realm of the nonhuman.”⁴⁹ In both cases, landscape reveals its ideological nature, if by

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁵ W. J. T. Mitchell “Introduction,” in *Landscape and Power*, 1994, ed. by W. J. T. Mitchell, second edition (The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁷ Id., “Imperial Landscape,” in Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 5 (“Thesis 2”).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* (“Thesis 3”)

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2, 16-17.

ideology is meant the naturalisation of what is conventional and, conversely, the conventionalisation of what is natural.

The inscriptions disseminated in natural environments participate in and catalyse such ideological processes, hence their relevance to issues of politics; individual, collective and cultural memory; and personal transformation. In another way, however, thanks to the 'figural' dimension of writing, captioned landscapes are at the origin of another kind of processes, which make it possible, on the one hand, to rehabilitate the contemplative approach of modernism without incurring the illusion of restoring an edenic state; on the other hand, to recover the interpretative approach of postmodernism without falling into reductionism of any kind. In the words of Michele Cometa commenting on John Durham Peters, "natural elements are media because they express a meaning, but not necessarily a meaning that we can/should understand."⁵⁰ The study of captioned landscapes thus makes it possible to reopen the great question, with Hans Blumenberg, of the "legibility of the world," or, with Philippe Descola, of the "ontologies" that, from age to age and place to place, have articulated the relations between the human and the non-human.⁵¹ Lastly, the study of captioned landscapes is relevant, as Giovanni Pozzi observed with regard to the Sacred Wood of Bomarzo, for the analysis of the "influence that the aesthetic or moral ideal disseminated by literature can have on collective behaviour."⁵² A highly topical theme, given the contemporary phenomena of the migration of literature from the media that had traditionally conveyed it towards other, more pulpy forms of transmission.

In addition to the adoption of the term 'landscape,' it is necessary to justify the use of the adjective 'captioned' also present in the title of this work. As anticipated, the expression 'nature inscriptions' has been used in the studies, which has, however, the limitation of referring to an exclusively literary genre, whereas the perspective adopted here is entirely intermedial.⁵³ On the contrary, the formulas 'texted/textured gardens', proposed respectively by Haskell and Dixon Hunt,⁵⁴ are too unspecific with respect to the medium of

⁵⁰ Cometa, *La svolta ecomediale*, 107.

⁵¹ Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Suhrkamp, 1981), transl. *The Readability of the World* (Cornell University Press, 2022); Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture* (Gallimard, 2005), transl. *Beyond Nature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁵² Giovanni Pozzi, *Alternatim* (Adelphi, 1996), 456.

⁵³ Cf. Hartman, "Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry."

⁵⁴ Haskell, "Reading Eden's Riddles," 153; Dixon Hunt, *The Afterlife of Gardens*, 112.

writing, since, in accordance with a usage that has been in use since the structuralist season, the term 'text' is assumed to indiscriminately designate any signifying form and thus includes media contents of all kinds.

The expression 'jardins sous-titrés' proposed by Monique Mosser⁵⁵ has the advantage of bringing writing as a graphic sign back to the foreground, but at the same time it is burdened by a double limitation, phonocentric on the one hand and logocentric on the other. If, as is customary, one understands subtitles as translations of speech placed at the foot of moving images, natural signs are implicitly assimilated to *phoné*, to vocality. This is a metaphor with an illustrious tradition, ranging from Novalis' *Stimme der Natur* to Refik Anadol's more recent installation using artificial intelligence, entitled *Echoes of the Earth: Living Archive*.⁵⁶ It should be noted, however, that the reference to vocality mortgages the question of natural signs from the outset, which, as argued by authoritative scholars (Eduardo Kohn, for example, who rather recognises them as icons),⁵⁷ is not at all 'natural' for them to be assimilated to *phoné*. On the other hand, the reference to subtitles sins of logocentrism, insofar as it understands the operation of interpreting the signs of nature on the linguistic model of translation.

I therefore opted for the adjective 'captioned,' with reference to the inclusive semantics of 'caption.' Meanwhile, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term can designate the 'subtitle' in film and television. Moreover, it has the advantage that it does not determine *a priori* the nature (verbal, visual or other) of natural semiotics, since the term can mean both a verbal element that refers to an image ('caption' as "title below an illustration") and, especially in American English, a verbal element that refers to other writing ("the heading of a chapter, section, or newspaper article").

Nevertheless, it is a fact that, in some of its meanings, the word 'caption' suggests a subordination of the verbal to the visual: think, for example, of museum captions. The undesirable effect of logocentrism is thus reversed into its opposite. It is therefore worth pointing out that the term 'caption' is used here in the sense proposed by Arnaud Schmitt in relation to the act of

⁵⁵ Mosser, "La Réunion des arts est dans le jardin," 176-177; Ead., "La littérature au miroir d'Hortésie au temps des Lumières," 83-84.

⁵⁶ London, Serpentine North Gallery, 16 February - 7 April 2024.

⁵⁷ Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think. Towards an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (University of California Press, 2013).

suturing.⁵⁸ Building on W. J. T. Mitchell, Schmitt interprets captions as sutures between discourse and representation. Rather than secondary trappings, they are read as decisive junctions in intermedial relations. In addition to that, the metaphor of suturing is particularly significant in relation to the negotiations between the human world and non-human worlds, in that, in suturing, the two edges of the wound are brought together, but at the same time, the mark of the stitching remains. Suturing, therefore, clearly represents both the similarities and differences at play in the relationships between writing and natural environments.

Places and representations

The chapters of this work are divided into two volumes, subtitled *Places* and *Representations*, respectively. Consistent with the notion of landscape as medium adopted here, the term 'place' is understood in the sense of Arne Naess' deep ecology, as the delimitation of "an ecological self, rich in *internal* relations to what is now-called environment."⁵⁹ In the specific case of the study of captioned landscapes, the focus is on the relations of writing with other media, human and non-human, present in the environments. The term 'representations' designates both the representations (verbal, visual, verbovisual or other media) of captioned landscapes, as well as the combinations of writing and representations of the landscape, such as in the co-presence of figures and ideograms in Oriental landscape painting.

It should be pointed out that the boundary between places and representations is porous, since, as Lionello Puppi has written, there is a "dialectical connection and reciprocal relationship" between experiential structures and their evocations in the literary or pictorial imagination.⁶⁰ Firstly, because the continual mutation and perishability of landscape contexts means that, often, their literary or visual representations constitute the only evidence

⁵⁸ Arnaud Schmitt, "Captions as Suturing in Hybrid Memoirs," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 38, no. 1 (2023).

⁵⁹ Arne Naess, *An example of a place: Tvergastein*, 1992, in *Selected Works of Arne Naess*, ed. by Alan Drengson and Harold Glasser, vol. X (Springer, 2005), 1. Naess' notion of 'place' coincides with Mitchell's notion of 'space' as "practiced place" (Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 9).

⁶⁰ Lionello Puppi, "Nelle derive crepuscolari del Barocco: il giardino dei supplizi," in *Il Giardino delle Muse. Arti e artigiani nel barocco europeo, Atti del IV Colloquio Internazionale Pietrasanta 8-10 settembre 1993*, ed. by Maria Adriana Giusti and Alessandro Tagliolini (Edifir, 1995), 149.

of their existence and appearance; a situation made even more precarious, as Pierre Grimal observed, by the iconoclastic or simply abstraction-oriented tendencies that periodically appear in the history of visual representations.⁶¹ Secondly, because, as Michael Jakob observed, historically it has often been literary or visual representations that have influenced the taste and aesthetics of landscape: "The natural landscape, the beauty of nature are [...] not merely an analogue of art, but their product. The literary texts of Petrarch or Albrecht von Haller and the paintings of Lorenzetti or Patinir are not secondary documents, but the forerunners, catalysts and initiators of a later awareness."⁶² The subdivision of the chapters in the two volumes of this work, therefore, assumes with due caution the distinction, relating to the object, between places and representations, supplementing it with another, relating to the subject, i.e. the different postures of the researchers.

In the first volume, this subjective condition is predominantly immersive, of involvement in interactions with the human and non-human media present in captioned landscapes. It is no coincidence that in a significant number of contributions (in particular the chapters by Silvia Lavanco Livreri, Clodagh Brook and Caterina Diotto), the authors adopt the narrative mode of the journey or path to express this involvement with captioned landscapes. In such cases, the relevant cognitive metaphors do not concern vision, which presupposes a distance, but rather resonance as the ability to adapt and respond to a changing environment.⁶³ From this point of view, the study of captioned landscapes confirms Denis Ribouillault's assertion of garden studies in an intermedial perspective as "a fantastic laboratory for thinking and

⁶¹ Pierre Grimal, *L'Art des jardins* (Paris, 1974), it. transl. *L'arte dei giardini. Una breve storia*, 2000, ed. by Marina Magi, presentation by Ippolito Pizzetti, second edition (Donzelli, 2005), 3.

⁶² Michael Jakob, *Paesaggio e letteratura* (Olschki, 2005), 10. The perishable nature of gardens and the influence of the visual arts on the aesthetics of the landscape are the reasons given by Jakob to advocate the study of the iconic language of garden books: Id., "Introduction," in *Jardins en images. Stratégies de représentation au fil des siècles*, ed. by Michael Jakob and Jacques Berchtold (MétisPresses, 2020); regarding the inscriptions, cf. in particular pp. 11-13.

⁶³ The concept of resonance is at the centre of the installation *Magic Queen (from the Artificial Ecologies series)* presented by MAIED Büro für Architektur und transmediale Kunst at the 2021 Venice Architecture Biennale: <https://www.labiennale.org/it/architettura/2021/among-diverse-beings/maeid-b%C3%BCro-f%C3%BCr-architektur-und-transmediale-kunst>.

rethinking intermediality.”⁶⁴ It is a matter, to borrow a formula of the geographer Matteo Meschiari, of “landscaping the theory,”⁶⁵ integrating within it not only the dynamism of the objects, but also that of the subjectivities of the authors. As Arne Naess has observed, in places, intended as stated, “scientific research *does* not at all detract from the immediate experience of togetherness, of identification and appreciation.”⁶⁶

In the second volume, the focus shifts from places to representations. In this case, the subjective posture induced by the objects of study is necessarily more detached, but does not exclude the forms of involvement from consideration. Here, the focus will be on the ways in which representations are able to remediate the embodiment experiences offered by captioned landscapes as places.

Taken together, the two volumes aim to provide a unique contribution to the study of writing as a mediation between the human world and non-human worlds, of interest to scholars of intermedial and visual studies, ecocriticism, garden and landscape history and design, comparative literature, art history, and to enthusiasts of cross-disciplinary dialogue. Outside academia, this work is aimed at museum curators, educators, and public historians interested in the interface between media and natural environments.

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⁶⁴ Denis Ribouillault, “Introduction. De la ‘réunion des arts’ dans le jardin au jardin partagé.”

⁶⁵ Matteo Meschiari, *Sistemi selvaggi. Antropologia del paesaggio scritto* (Sellerio, 2008), 12.

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Overview of Chapters in Volume 1

Volume 1 of *Captioned Landscapes. Intermedial Combinations Beyond the Human* is organised chronologically. It opens with a contribution by Yolaine Escande dedicated to Chinese civilisation, within which there is an uninterrupted tradition of captioned landscapes from the first centuries of the vernacular era to the present. Over the course of time, inscriptions placed in the landscape have progressively become spaces for the articulation of spheres as diverse as politics, religion and aesthetics. Originally, inscriptions fulfilled political functions of territorial control, emphasising that the legitimacy of power is connected to the maintenance of harmony between the population and the natural forces of the land. As the original connection to the sacred, writing is also the means of communication with deities and nature spirits. From the fifth century onwards, inscriptions therefore play a fundamental role in the aesthetics of *shanshui* (literally, ‘mountains and waters’), which intermedially crosses over into the arts and landscape design. As well as a synthesis of a millenary tradition, Escande’s contribution reveals the cross-cultural potential of the study of captioned landscapes.

The next chapter, signed by me, takes us back to the West, specifically to seventeenth-century Italy, with Emanuele Tesauro’s programme for the garden of Racconigi near Turin. Here again, the inscriptions constitute the pivot around which a complex articulation between the non-human world of the garden and the human world of morality and politics revolves. The linguistic device that makes these multiple connections possible is the metaphor, which Tesauro, one of the greatest Baroque theorists of literature, sees at work not only in poetry, but in nature itself. From this point of view, the study of captioned landscapes provides valuable indications for the analysis of “ontologies;” in this specific case, the programme for the garden of Racconigi provides an exemplary case of analogism, an ontology in which the physical and moral discontinuity between the two worlds is stitched together thanks to the analogical potential of metaphor.

The next two chapters are dedicated to nature parks. The first, by Silvia Lavanco Livreri, is developed as a “visual walk” in the Bosco della Ficuzza, Rocca Busambra, Bosco del Cappelliere and Gorgo del Drago Oriented nature reserve in Sicily. The author considers in particular the materiality of the inscriptions in the reserve, which are interpreted as an archive of the

interactions between human and non-human. The result is an “ecology of the remains,” whose characteristic temporality is not expressed in a continuous narrative, but in an anachronistic stratification.

The narrative and dramatic dimension of inscriptions within protected areas and the scientific literature on them is instead the focus of Erik Erlanson’s chapter on the Dalby Söderskog nature park in Sweden. The author interprets this inclination towards narrativity as a reflection of temporality as a fundamental mode of the park as a media product. Nature reserves, although ideal representations of nature, are also subject to its incessant change, which writing takes charge of representing through forms of epigraphic dynamisation.

The three following chapters are dedicated to artistic captioned landscapes. Vega Tescari analyses the garden of Prospect Cottage, the home of film director Derek Jarman, on the Kent coast in England. The poet John Donne’s verses placed on the outside of the building constitute a threshold and a hinge between inside and outside. The fact that the words are written in Jarman’s handwriting configures the space as an existential palimpsest, embodying Gilles Clément’s conception of the garden as an archive of the gestures performed within it. The fact that the letters that compose the verses change according to the perspective from which they are observed in turn encourages the visitor to performative actions, the memory of which will also remain inscribed in the garden.

Clodagh Brook’s chapter unfolds in turn as an itinerary through Italian Land Art. Analysing a still little-historicised object, the author highlights the fundamental role of inscriptions, especially in the form of “open signs” through which the limits of language are tested. The placement of writing in the landscape becomes an opportunity for a reflection on the border between legibility and illegibility, which, on the one hand, demands an immersive and dynamic involvement of the observer; on the other hand, it marks the territory with signs endowed with permanence and stability, proposed as an alternative to the evanescence and instability of contemporary communication flows.

The third case of artistic captioned landscape, born out of the curatorial experience of author Pedro Medina Reinón, analyses the presence of writing in the *en plein air* installations of Egyptian artist Ghada Amer. The analysis, which again reveals the intercultural potential of the study of captioned landscapes, highlights in particular how writing not only expands the expressive scope of the artist’s works, but also configures them as a laboratory for social activism. Drawing on the notion of “aesthetic of resistance” proposed by Susan Sontag, the author shows how Ghada Amer’s captioned landscapes induce a transformation

in viewers, who are invited to reconsider the systems and values that shape their lives, which can serve as a prelude for social transformation.

The transformative dimension of captioned landscapes is also the focus of the last chapter, dedicated to the *Via degli Dei*, the hiking trail connecting the Italian cities of Bologna and Florence through the Apennine mountains. The author, Caterina Diotto, emphasises how the inscriptions scattered along the trail, either literary quotations or devised by the travellers themselves, constitute the catalyst for transformative experiences, in which the immersive and embodied dimension plays a fundamental role. In this case, the role played not by permanence, but by the ephemeral character of the inscriptions, transfigured into a symbol of the uniqueness of the lived experience, is emphasised.

Across time and space, the case studies proposed in this volume aim to show the rich and diverse range of creative negotiations between writing and non-human media offered by the analysis of captioned landscapes.

These negotiations involve writing as a graphic fact at various levels. They range from ‘degree zero,’ represented by the metaphorical use of the word in the seventeenth-century case study I have examined, to the involvement of aspects of form (the handwriting in Derek Jarman’s garden studied by Tescari) and materials (the temporal stratifications deposited on the supports described by Lavanco Livreri). In turn, the materiality of writing can take on opposite meanings, sometimes as a sign of permanence, as in the Italian Land Art discussed in Brook’s chapter, sometimes as an ephemeral trace, such as those left on the *Cammino degli Dei* studied by Diotto. In the first case, captioned landscapes act as a place of resistance to the evanescence of digital communication signs; in the second, they tune in to nature, surrendering to its flow.

On a historical level, the comparison with Eastern cultures, made possible by Escande’s essay, highlights a clear differentiation between the millennial continuity of the relationship between writing and natural environments in China and their desultory and fragmented history in the European context. The still early stage of comparative research in this area does not allow us to draw conclusions in this regard, but it is conceivable that the difference between ideographic writing and phonetic alphabets plays a significant role.

The case of Chinese tradition in particular testifies to the relevance of the study of captioned landscapes in relation to the question of “ontologies”. As in the seventeenth-century case I studied, in Chinese culture analogism constitutes the principle of the legibility of the world; in contrast, Italian Land Art, the subject of Brook’s essay, explores the boundary between legibility and illegibility. Further

research on captioned landscapes will enable us to identify any specific features in terms of diachrony or synchrony, in the sense of the predominance of one ontology or another in relation to a specific period or place.

Another aspect of the relevance of the study of captioned landscapes concerns their transformative power. This can be expressed at the political level, as an affirmation of established power, as in the case of inscriptions in imperial China (Escande) and in the green spaces of Ancien Régime Europe (Maggi, Lavanco Livreri); but also, at the level of activism, as in the case of Ghada Amer studied by Medina Reinón, or at the level of individual transformation (Tescari, Diotto). Without claiming to identify a law of historical development, in this case, it is possible to outline a trend towards the expression of social or individual demands, to the detriment of those linked to political power.

Finally, captioned landscapes are a privileged object for the study of literature outside the book medium. Inscriptions in the landscape are a privileged genre of Chinese poetry (Escande); the passion for metamorphosis in the Baroque (Tesauro in my chapter) and Neo-Baroque (Donne quoted by Jarman in Tescari's chapter) intertwines poetry and plant compositions; Italian Land Art dialogues with visual poetry (Brook); verses by famous poets such as Ariosto coexist with anonymous aphorisms on the paths of contemporary walkers (Diotto). On the other hand, the presence of writing in natural environments raises the question of narrativity, sometimes promoting it, as in the case of the national parks studied by Erlanson, sometimes contesting it through forms of anachronistic montage (Lavanco Livreri). In an age "seduced by story," to borrow the title of a book by Peter Brooks, this should be another reason, and not a minor one, to devote ourselves to the study of captioned landscapes.

Chapter 8

Writing the Landscape. Literary Guidance on the Hiking Trail

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Abstract: The hiking trail represents a special form of human-nature relationship. Traced along trade, migration and pilgrimage routes, trails have accompanied the evolution of the human-made landscape from antiquity to the present day. Artistic practices such as sculptures, paintings, music and carvings on stones or trees have always contributed to the creation of intermedial narratives to guide travelers on their journey. A journey that is both exterior and interior, interweaving physical exertion with a path of self-reflection and spiritual transformation. This study will explore the literary practices that contribute to such narratives, analysing three examples from the Italian hiking trail Via degli Dei. Considering that literary references are more present in secular rather than pilgrimage trails, it will also suggest that literary imagery supersedes the role of religious imagery in the construction of narratives of self-criticism, liberation and courage.

Keywords: Landscape Aesthetics, Hiking Trail, Pilgrimage, Literary inscriptions, Italian Feminism, Ariosto, Montale, Seneca, Dante, Intermediality.

An altered look about the hills
A Tyrian light the village fills
A wider sunrise in the dawn
A deeper twilight on the lawn
Emily Dickinson (1859)

The hiking trail represents one of the many shapes took by the relationship between the human and what in the Western cultures has been called 'Nature' – and which I prefer to refer to as 'non-human' to avoid the implicit conceptualization outlined by Philippe Descola in *Beyond Nature and Culture*¹ – during the centuries. A relationship that can be inscribed in the concept, as inclusive as it is problematic, of 'landscape,' however considered with an 'aesthetic' approach that overcomes its anthropocentrism and focuses on experience.

This essay aims to contribute to the field of studies on intermediality in landscapes by focusing on an uncommon and still unexplored object, the hiking trail, and analysing the role played by literary inscriptions in it. Three examples present on Via degli Dei in Italy, a trail stretching across the Appennine mountains and linking the city of Bologna to Florence, will be examined as a case study.

Toward an aesthetic and dialogic approach to landscape

The definition of 'landscape' represents one of the liveliest debates of our time. Falling squarely within the large field of the Environmental Humanities, works on landscape have become so rich and varied that the field of Landscape Studies, and even a specific branch of aesthetics, Landscape Aesthetics,² emerged from it. The interest is motivated both by the new cultural drive to deepen the understanding of the relationship between human and non-human in conjunction with the increase in environmental and ecological awareness, and by formal necessity with respect to the demand for unambiguous terms to be included in policies for environmental conservation – this is the case of the World Heritage Convention and the Council of Europe's European Landscape Convention.

The aesthetic debate on landscape has wide and ancient roots that go back to the very concept of 'Nature' and 'natural beauty' in Western cultures. For the

¹ Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

² "The philosophical investigation of aspects of our relationship with and experience of the landscape that cannot be reduced to the purely sensory, scientific, or utilitarian, but that involve a feeling of satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the appreciation of the landscape's value, in the light of our imaginative, creative, emotional, projective skills as well as our culture, memory, and feeling of identification", *International Lexicon of Aesthetics*, "Landscape Aesthetics" (spring 2022): 10.7413/18258630126. The entry cites other two meaning of the field, however, I consider this third to be the main one, able to absorb the other two.

economy of this text, I will analyse the main approaches through the lens of the Italian debate.³

The heart of the discussion had seen an oscillation between an ‘analytical’ or ‘geographic’ approach that favours the material component of the landscape as opposed to the cultural value, and a ‘synthetic’ or ‘aesthetic’ approach that affirms the need to maintain an irreducible relationship between the two aspects. While Alexander von Humboldt in *Ansichten der Natur* (1808) described natural environments maintaining a clear continuity between the geographical aspect and the aesthetic appreciation, the Italian context of the twentieth century saw a strong tendency to separate the two aspects:

While in the German context, still in 1950, geographers called upon to debate the notion of landscape by the journal *Studium Generale* were anything but reluctant to take into consideration the perceptive dimension [...] in Italy the affirmation of a specific concept of geographical landscape took place in opposition to the aesthetic concept of landscape. [...] In 1947, the geographer Renato Biasutti laid at the root of his *Il paesaggio terrestre (The Terrestrial Landscape)* precisely the distinction between the perceptive and scientific aspects of the term. [...] While claiming the role of the human in the conformation of the landscape and introducing the term ‘anthropogeographical landscape,’ Aldo Sestini also sees the landscape as exclusively a physical entity, defining it as “the complex combination of objects and phenomena linked together by mutual functional relationships (as well as by position), so as to constitute an organic unity” and carefully distinguishing it from landscape in the aesthetic sense, considered as “a ‘panoramic’ view, i.e. the image we perceive of a stretch of the earth’s surface, as it can be embraced with our gaze.”⁴

The criticism of the aesthetic approach was the reflection and extension of a general worldview. A perspective that considered the principles of objectivity

³ For a more comprehensive overview of authors and perspectives, plus an excursus on the development of Italian landscape and conservation legislation, see chapter 3 of Paolo D’Angelo’s *Estetica della natura. Bellezza naturale, paesaggio, arte ambientale* (Laterza 2001, 2023) and Alberto Siani, “Landscape Aesthetics” in *International Lexicon of Aesthetics* (Mimesis, 2022).

⁴ D’Angelo, 119, 120. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of sources from Italian, German and French are mine.

and measurability to be the only ones capable of favouring the productive transformation of the territory by the forces of labour and industry in the name of progress, as opposed to a subjectivist and elitist abstraction of the landscape, perceived as a decadent bourgeois residue. Geographer Eugenio Turri expressed this position in his 1979's *Semiologia del paesaggio italiano* (*Semiology of the Italian Landscape*), stating that "the landscape – the Italian landscape – as it was once conceived is over: an aesthetic object, static, marked [...] by fixity as contemplativity."⁵

It is in the 1973's article *Paesaggio, ambiente, territorio: un tentativo di precisazione concettuale* (*Landscape, environment, territory: an attempt at conceptual clarification*) that Rosario Assunto gave an 'aesthetic turn' to the discussion. By defining the concept as the "'form' in which the a priori synthetic unity [...] of the 'matter (territory)' and the 'content-or-function (environment)'" is expressed,"⁶ Assunto torn away the landscape from the pure materialistic and utilitarian principle on the one hand, and from the subjectivist assessment of artistic value on the other, in order to reclaim it for the aesthetic sphere. Landscape is the form of the relationship between matter and content, between 'territory' and cultural value. In this perspective, it is already grafted the close proximity to the garden as a 'nature transformed into culture,' which becomes one of the central aspects of Massimo Venturi Ferriolo's interpretation.⁷

What is peculiar to the 'analytical' tendency of the Italian debate is that it develops in relation to a landscape that holds historicity as one of its fundamental characteristics. The contradiction is clear. How is it possible to construct a landscape theory based on the concept of 'naturalness,' in a context where the human hand has massively shaped the environment since (at least) the Roman Empire? Nonetheless, in Italy at both legislative and academic level the 'analytical' approach remains in the majority, tending towards ecology or falling into identifications between 'landscape' and 'environment' or 'panorama.'

Over the last decade, the minority current of the aesthetic approach has been slowly regaining space, at least in the field of Landscape Aesthetics. The authors

⁵ Eugenio Turri, *Semiologia del paesaggio italiano* (Longanesi 1979, 1990), 160, 163.

⁶ Rosario Assunto, "Paesaggio, ambiente, territorio: un tentativo di precisazione concettuale", *Rassegna di Architettura e Urbanistica* 47-48 (1980), 50.

⁷ Massimo Venturi Ferriolo, *Etiche del paesaggio. Il progetto del mondo* (Editori Riuniti, 2002).

who have contributed most to its development are Paolo D'Angelo, Luisa Bonesio and Alberto Siani.

Paolo D'Angelo, following the path of Alain Rogers, proposed to work with the concept of 'cultural landscapes,' instead of 'natural landscapes.'⁸ He also echoes the contribution of Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant, who highlighted the limits of the concept of landscape classically understood as founded on a subject-object relationship. Such concept alienates the observer from the world, gives absolute epistemological priority to the visual, and often falls into implicit overlap with the concepts of 'panorama' and 'veduta.'⁹

Revisiting the metaphor of the *genius loci*, D'Angelo defines the aesthetic identity of the landscape what makes that particular site 'a place,' identifying the colors, smells, forms, vegetation, climate – a composition of cultural and physical elements that generates an identity. A representation that, according to the author, holds its own form of objectivity because it is partially recognized even by those who do not live in the place and do not know its socio-cultural history.

As the philosopher writes in *Estetica della natura. Bellezza naturale, paesaggio, arte ambientale*, German and French geographers seem to have more decisively expressed positions that recognize the ineffectiveness of an approach that reduces the landscape to pure materiality and scientific objectification (Berque, Guerin). Some Italian geographers began to move in this direction in the '90s.¹⁰ Among others, Eugenio Turri partly revised his positions, affirming the "impossibility of reducing to the objective, geometric, measurable plane, any protection intervention that does not strictly concern the naturalistic component."¹¹ Therefore, he wrote, "today even geographers agree that it is necessary, beyond any scientific pretence, to bring back the landscape to its subjective meanings or in any case inherent to the domain of representation."¹²

⁸ D'Angelo, *Estetica della natura*, 123.

⁹ Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape. Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (University Press of Kansas, 1997); Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (Routledge, 2000).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 142, 143.

¹¹ Eugenio Turri, *Il paesaggio come teatro. Dal territorio vissuto al territorio rappresentato* (Marsilio 1998), 11, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 128.

Luisa Bonesio's theory of geo-philosophy develops the concept of landscape as the irreducible starting point of the human experience, intertwining it with the concepts of identity and community. Bonesio's focus is on governance policies to be developed in dialogue between "experts, administrators and citizens."¹³

However, the identity referred to by Bonesio, as in the theories developed by both Turri and D'Angelo, is fundamentally anthropocentric. While her perspective can shift from individual to collective identity, it is always developed from the human point of view and in order to pursue the good of the human. What is lacking is a perspective that follows the path of Arne Næss' *Ecosophy T*, particularly his concept of "place."¹⁴ Næss recognized a symbolic independence to the place, an intrinsic value beyond the principle of 'usefulness' for the human.

The landscape's becoming over time as a result of human and non human forces, and the impossibility of completely predicting its changes, compels to frame the aesthetic experience of it in a regime of dialogic reciprocity between co-participating entities. If, on the one hand, the aesthetic approach to landscape has the advantage of recognizing and enhancing the inextricable interweaving between material and symbolic components, on the other hand, it has too often ended up focusing on humans as the sole subjectivities; whereas the analytical approach, although through the objective value of 'biology' or the 'ecosystem,' has always saved the autonomy of the non-human. An aesthetic approach that aims to fully embrace the relational value between human and non-human as the conceptual foundation of the landscape should, then, overcome such anthropocentric flaws.

This seems to be the case in Alberto Siani's *Landscape Aesthetics. Toward an engaged Ecology*, published in 2024. By recalling John Dewey's perspective in *Art as Experience*,¹⁵ the author suggests considering the landscape as art, and both of them as a peculiar kind of experience. He writes: "our relationship to the environment is not exterior and dualistic: the environment is part of us just as much as we are part of it. There is simply no 'us' without intimate

¹³ Luisa Bonesio, *Paesaggio, identità e comunità tra locale e globale* (Mimesis 2007), 9.

¹⁴ Arne Næss, *An Example of a Place: Tvergastein* (1992), in *Selected Works of Arne Næss*. Vol. X. *Deep Ecology of Wisdom* (Springer 2005), 337-360.

¹⁵ John Dewey, *Art as experience*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Southern Illinois University Press, 1987).

interactions with the environment.”¹⁶ Experience in its fullest meaning comes when such interactions grow to a “inner harmony:” a “balanced rhythm”¹⁷ between the elements that are exchanged. In that condition, humans attain an equilibrium which opens to a new relation to the environment.

The continuity of the exchange with the context we live in is composed by moments of heightened connection. In Dewey’s terms, these moments represents the “complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events.”¹⁸ Thus, Siani redefines the concept of landscape as follows:

Landscapes are, then, an emblematic shape of the human capacity not to “surrender to caprice and disorder,” and to institute “a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing.” [...] They are experienced, lived configurations of a rhythmic, always-developing order resulting from our active and alert commerce with the world [...] the experience of a wilderness as a landscape [...] has the same fundamental structure, although with an immaterial scaffolding: construction in time, transferring or projection of imagination and meanings onto a medium, prolonged interaction between self and objective conditions, and a resulting new order for both. [...] a performative experience that with the same move creates and experiences [the landscape.]¹⁹

Siani’s theoretical perspective on landscape suggests a radical approach based on interaction and process. The approach with which this essay intends to work will embrace such radicality.

It is, therefore, ‘synthetic’ or ‘aesthetic’ on the one hand, considering the relationships between the material and cultural components of landscape as irreducible, and dialogical on the other, embracing both the autonomy of the non-human and the temporal sameness of creating and experiencing the landscape.

The hiking trail

The hiking trail represents one of the borderline cases of landscape and, because of this, it can play the role of a Litmus test in the articulation of its concept.

¹⁶ Alberto Siani, *Landscape Aesthetics. Toward an engaged Ecology* (Columbia University Press, 2024), 42.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁸ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 25.

¹⁹ Siani, *Landscape Aesthetics*, 46-48.

First and foremost, it shows how an analytical approach would impose the loss of what makes a trail what it is, namely its cultural significance. Without considering its meaning, it would be impossible to describe the peculiar experience related to the hiking trail, as well as the pilgrimage route, and the intermedial elements that give shape to their narrative. The cultural peculiarity of them is indeed so significant that they generated, in most Western languages, their own specific words. 'Trails' or 'pilgrimages' are not 'roads,' nor simple 'routes' or 'ways.' If the latter are related to the day-by-day routine and the practicality of travelling from one place to another, the former exceed such definitions. As Rebecca Solnit wrote in her *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*,

the subject of walking is, in some sense, about how we invest universal acts with particular meanings. Like eating or breathing, it can be invested with wildly different cultural meanings, from the erotic to the spiritual, from the revolutionary to the artistic. [...] this history begins to become part of the history of the imagination and the culture, of what kind of pleasure, freedom, and meaning are pursued at different times by different kinds of walks and walkers.²⁰

There is nothing material, objective or ecological that distinguishes a trail from a road. It is, in both cases, a matter of getting from one point to another, and usually trails are traced along ancient trade or migration routes, roads whose primary purpose was to lead travellers to their destination. The meaning of the trail is entirely cultural. Recalling John Dixon Hunt classification of 'movements' in gardens and landscapes, the hiking trail and the pilgrimage route seem to fall under the definition of 'procession or ritual:'

both the movement itself and its reasons and objectives [are] encoded, [their] prescriptions laid down in some formal record such as social or religious convention or in written text (like the liturgy), the following of which implicit or explicit guidelines constitutes the performance of that ritual. It is likely to be undertaken collectively [...] However, a solitary version of procession or ritual in which one person consciously sets himself to follow a path established and even endorsed by long-term collective usage is also a possibility. This mode of movement, then, implies a specific route with designated paths and even activities, with socially constructed and endorsed purposes and with some higher

²⁰ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (Penguin Books, 2000), 3-4.

objective than the mere performance of the rite and with a wider reference that the site of the ritual itself.²¹

The main difference between the trail and the ‘ramble’ is that the latter implies to “wander aimlessly,”²² whereas the distinction with ‘stroll’ lies in the fact that its wandering is never defined in its length. As opposed to this, the length and the destination of hiking trails and pilgrimage routes are fundamental elements for their cultural significance.

The ‘aesthetic identity’ of both trails and pilgrimages, to borrow D’Angelo’s terms, has three main characters: continuity, immersion, and connection.

Its landscape unravels with the path, composes it, accompanies it. It can be subdivided into ‘views’ and ‘panoramas,’ but the core of the aesthetic experience of the traveller is that of continuous shifting – for example, from beech forest to pine forest, from rock face to glacier.

The perceptual experience is deeply immersive. Sounds, colours, smells, atmospheres,²³ temperatures, even the tactile sensation of air on the skin, are part of it. It is also an experience that strongly intertwines inside and outside: the experience of the surroundings is woven into the bodily experience of movement, fatigue, pain, relief, awe, joy.

Connection brings together several meanings and nuances. It represents first of all a connection with the non-human, through immersion in the environment with one’s own body. Surrendering to this relationship represents one of the oldest features of Christian pilgrimage: the ‘placing oneself in the hands of Providence.’ Abandoning, that is, the sphere of known places and people, of rules and routines inhabited in everyday life in a context usually dominated by the human, to embark on a journey dominated by the non-human. In secular terms, the efforts required stage by stage by the trail to be completed – the weather that radically influences the experience and can prevent the possibility to walk, the encounters with animals, the risks of getting lost or having an accident – impose a different approach to the

²¹ John Dixon Hunt, “‘Lordship of the Feet.’ Toward a Poetics of Movement in the Garden,” in *Landscape design and the Experience of Motion*, ed. Michael Conan (Dumbarton Oaks Trustees for Harvard University, 2002), 188.

²² *Ibid.*, 195.

²³ I am referring to the concept developed by Tonino Griffero in *Atmosferologia. Estetica degli spazi emozionali* (Laterza 2010).

relationship with the non-human: a consideration of it as an autonomous, albeit 'diffuse,' subject.

Precisely because such dialogic relationship places the traveller in a context of heightened risk and openness to the unexpected, it drives them to two other nuances of connection. The one with the community of hikers, who tread the same path, with whom one shares efforts and experiences, to whom one offers and asks for help. And the one with a transcendent horizon of meaning: the sacred.

It is the connection to a transcendent meaning that gives birth to the hiking trail's and the pilgrimage's intermedial nature. Inscriptions, sculptures, frescoes, statues, paintings, music, even artistic performances accompany the path, enriching it, reinforcing its aesthetic identity.

The 'secular' trail and the pilgrimage route

The cultural significance of the trail has so far been mainly studied in reference to pilgrimage, also due to the fact that the phenomenon of "secular" trekking is quite recent. It developed from the 1800s but became a mass phenomenon only from the 1970s onwards.²⁴

As James Harpur writes in *The Pilgrim Journey. A History of Pilgrimage in the Western World*, "outwardly it is often impossible nowadays to distinguish a pilgrim from a walker or tourist, and categories such as 'pilgrim' and 'traveler' are fluid. The membrane between the sacred and the secular is porous."²⁵ The cultural narrative of both is indeed the same: a state of exception from the daily life during which a traveller can expose themselves to a deep transformation of their inner world. Thus, the aforementioned character of 'connection,' here described as it follows:

What is essential is that the journey, by whatever means it is accomplished, gives the pilgrim enough time to expose himself or herself to the possibility of a sacred metamorphosis. If that is done, the

²⁴ Peter H. Hansen, "Albert Smith, the Alpine Club, and the Invention of Mountaineering in Mid-Victorian Britain." *Journal of British Studies* 34, no. 3 (1995): 300–324. <https://doi.org/10.1086/386080>; Chad Bryant, Arthur Burns, Paul Readman, eds., *Walking Histories, 1800-1914* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016); Silas Chamberlin, *On the Origin of Hiking Trails* (Yale University Press 2019).

²⁵ James Harpur, *The Pilgrim Journey. A History of Pilgrimage in the Western World* (Lion Hudson 2016), 8.

destination [...] will signify not the end of the journey, but the start: a gateway into a new way of being, of seeing life afresh with spiritually cleansed eyes. [...] For every pilgrim making a physical journey, the sore feet, enforced detours, and anxieties, as well as the companionship and acts of generous hospitality, represent in microcosm the woes and weals of life.²⁶

While it is true that there is a state of 'porosity' between the pilgrim and the walker, there are also fundamental differences. The first and most important is where the emphasis of the narrative lies. If, in fact, historically the pilgrimage focuses on the place of arrival, the secular walk focuses on the journey itself.

Pilgrimages originated from their destination. It was when places of worship such as Mecca, the Temple of Jerusalem or the Vatican became central to religion that the routes to reach them were formed. Over time, these roads became ritualised, acquiring a meaning of their own as a result of the large number of pilgrims who travelled along them. The focus, however, remains on the point of arrival as the epiphanic moment of a journey of spiritual transformation.

The difference is especially visible in the intermedial practices. The works of art that participate in the cultural narrative of the pilgrimage are generally found at the destination. The shrine is decorated with statues, columns, stained glass windows, bejewelled reliquaries, frescoes and paintings in churches and sanctuaries, prayer ceremonies, hymns, sacred representations, inscriptions and engravings inside and outside buildings. One example is the triumphant arrival of the Via Francigena in Rome, where pilgrims are welcomed by the double arch of Porta Angelica, followed by Bernini's colonnade, which accompanies them on the last few steps to St. Peter's Basilica, the destination of the pilgrimage. On the road, however, the only elements strictly linked to the narrative of the pilgrimage were trailsigns and badges, such as the shell of the Camino de Santiago – still in use – or the palm leaf of the Holy Land.

In contrast, it is on the road that the hiking route sees the greatest presence of intermedial practices. The destination loses its epiphanic role.

A second difference is the collective nature of the production of these practices and their relations with time. While in pilgrimages the narrative is created and controlled by religious authorities, that usually mark the

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7, 10.

pilgrimage with long-lasting elements that are also symbols of their status and power, the hiking trail sees a spontaneous collaboration between hikers, the inhabitants of the villages and towns that the path passes through, and the associations that manage the trail. Many travellers devote part of their preparation to planning creative ways to leave a trace along the route, thus contributing to the narrative of the trail. Signs or stones painted with quotations, markers for writing, stickers or ribbons, and, more rarely, an object (such as a small statue) to be placed at a specific point along the trail.

Furthermore, most of these practices are temporary. They are not designed to withstand the passage of time and the elements, but to follow the natural evolution of the landscape. This denotes a dialogical and equal relationship with the non-human, which accepts the constant movement of natural elements and does not impose itself through practices intended to leave a lasting mark over time. An attitude reminiscent of what Arne Naess wrote about his relationship with Tvergastein.

A third, fundamental difference is the cultural reference from which the trail's narrative takes inspiration. The pilgrimage is, obviously, shaped by the meaning of the shrine in the religious context. The intermedial practices, therefore, will refer to the stories of prophets, saints and martyrs. The hiking trail, due to its secular nature, sees, on the contrary, a broader background of reference. Although religious elements can appear, it is mostly on behalf of their invite to inner reflection, while the vast majority of quotes and references comes from literature, philosophy, and songs. Moreover, the trail's narrative is constituted in a strict dialogue with the physical conformation of the landscape. Panoramas are essential component of the narrative's staging: inscriptions, altars, carvings and other artistic practices create a dialogue with the environment, creating a caption of the landscape's experience.

During my journeys on hiking trails, I have encountered many examples. 'Music trees' – as they are called by Italian hikers – are trees near the trail that have musical instruments bound to their branches, producing ethereal melodies when the wind comes through. Altars, usually placed in viewpoints, are a place to pause and consider the journey undertaken, to express one's state of mind and to leave advice for those to come. People write quotes or wishes on stones (or on the altar itself) and leave headbands, hats, wristbands, even shoes, as tokens. Some altars can show religious symbols, like a wooden cross or a Buddha, that manifest a practice of syncretism.

Fig. 8.1. Anonymous community, *The altar*, mixed materials, 300 x 200 x 150 cm. Bivigliano, Italy, Via degli Dei. © Caterina Diotto



Among the many different practices, inscriptions are the most common. Quotations (most frequent), questions or thoughts are written all along the trail, accompanying the experience of travellers and creating a dialogue with

the environment.²⁷ In this sense, the practice of inscriptions on trails recalls the tradition of the ‘humanist gardens’ described in Monique Mosser and Georges Teyssot seminal work, *The Architecture of Western Gardens. A Design History from the Renaissance to the Present Day*.²⁸ As Lionello Puppi writes, in the Italian garden of the sixteenth century the fashion of integrating literary, artistic and engineering elements into the garden was accentuated to the point of giving birth to a “third nature.”²⁹ Namely, a bridge between ‘nature’ and the artificial objects created by ‘culture.’ A merging of the two in a reciprocal connection that generates a living, open work of art.

In the ‘secular’ hiking trail a similar interweaving between the environment and the human take place, giving birth to the ‘third nature’ of captioned landscape, which very often finds the source of its imaginary in literature.

Three examples from Via degli Dei

Since many of the intermedial practices that take place on hiking trails are ephemeral, it is necessary to situate the examples presented here not only in space but also in time. The captions I will mention were present on the Via degli Dei (Way of the Gods) in the autumn of 2022. Likely enough, most of them have meanwhile disappeared.

Via degli Dei is a 130 km (80.8 miles) long hiking trail, connecting Piazza Maggiore in Bologna with Piazza della Signoria in Florence, crossing the Apennines. The path is traced along the ancient medieval trade routes that connected the two cities, covering also part of the Roman Via Flaminia (187 BCE) and the even more ancient Etruscan routes (900 BCE). The name derives from the toponyms: Mount Venus, Mount Adonis, Mount Luario (dedicated to the Roman goddess Lua). The path has been ‘retraced’ in the 1990s and is currently managed by CAI (Club Alpino Italiano). It is, therefore, to all intents and purposes, a ‘secular’ trail.

²⁷ Interestingly, such practices are not often re-mediated on social media. By searching through hiking trail’s pages and tags on the most popular social networks (instagram, facebook and tik tok), it is evident that the focus is mainly on the natural landscape or on travellers. As a walker myself, I can put forward the hypothesis that these practices, decontextualised from the landscape, lose most of their meaning. Therefore, posting them on social media seems belittling.

²⁸ Monique Mosser and Georges Teyssot, *The Architecture of Western Gardens. A Design History from the Renaissance to the Present Day* (MIT Press 1991), 25-108.

²⁹ Lionello Puppi, “Nature and Artifice in the Sixteenth-Century Italian Garden,” in *ibid.* 53.

On the first stage of the walk from Bologna to Florence, slightly past Parco Talon, on the left side of the path lies a collection of inscriptions created by hikers: I will refer to it as “Quotation Tree.”

Fig. 8.2. Anonymous, *Quotation Tree*, laminated inscriptions nailed to olm tree, 200 x 100 x 100 cm. Sasso Marconi, Italy, Via degli Dei. © Caterina Diotto



Six golden plastic-coated inscriptions are nailed to the low branches of an elm tree. They contain, handwritten in Italian, five aphorisms, one of which is anonymous, and one exhortation:

“La scienza del cuore non è ancora nata, ciascuno la inventa come vuole” Montale

“C’è un solo modo per evitare critiche: non fare nulla, non dire nulla, non essere nulla” Aristotele

“È l’anima che devi cambiare, non il cielo sotto cui vivi” Seneca

“Non è vero che gli opposti si attraggono, i simili attraggono i simili. I bugiardi coi bugiardi, gli ipocriti con gli ipocriti, i ladri con i ladri. Gli onesti, i leali, li vedi sempre camminare da soli.” [anonymous]

“Il declino della vita di una persona è anche quando inizia a pensare di non avere più nulla da imparare” [Luciano Meran Donatoni]

“La mi porti un bacione a Firenze” si è sempre detto. Ora nei tempi difficili portate codesti pensieri, che ce n’è di gran bisogno. E giunti al fin del cammino, davanti alla porta del paradiso, socchiusa per tutti, ripensare al percorso della vita come a quello appena fatto. Sarà un caso se i riflessi d’oro qua posti siano del colore di quella bellissima porta? Solo la luce scaccia l’oscurità, il buio nulla può contro la luce che viene dal dolce amore. “La gloria di colui che tutto move per l’universo penetra, e risplende in una parte più e meno altrove” (Dante [*Paradiso*, Canto I 1-3]). Il motore immobile muove come oggetto, è il pensiero che pensa sé stesso. Muove in quanto è oggetto d’amore la parte del cielo (Aristotele)³⁰

³⁰ “The science of the heart is not yet born, everyone invents it as they wish” [Eugenio] Montale/ “To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing and be nothing.” Aristotle/ “You must change your disposition, not your sky” [Lucius Annaeus] Seneca/ “It is not true that opposites attract, like attracts alike. Liars with liars, hypocrites with hypocrites, thieves with thieves. The honest, the loyal, you always see them walking alone” [Anonymous]/ “The decline of one’s life starts also when they think that they have nothing more to learn” [Luciano Meran Donatoni]/ “Please, bring a sweet kiss to Florence from me’ has always been said. Now, in difficult times, bring these thoughts with you instead, which are much needed. And at the end of the journey, in front of the door to paradise, ajar for all, think back on the journey of life as you have just made it. Is it by chance that the golden reflections here are the colour of that beautiful door? Only light drives out darkness, darkness can do nothing against the light that comes from sweet love [God]. ‘The glory of the One who moves all things / permeates the universe and glows / in one part more and in another less’ (Dante [*Paradise* 1.1-3]). The motionless motor moves as an object, it is

The collection of inscriptions creates what, recalling Walter Benjamin, one might call a “constellation.” In other words, a collection of fragments, that together give shape to a narrative. Interestingly, the connection between the fragments of the constellation is made explicit by the fact that all the sentences are nailed to different branches of the same tree.

The exhortation at the base of the tree acts as a frame. The anonymous author of the Quotation Tree weaves together verses and comments, inviting travellers to take these thoughts with them as inner guidance on their journey to Florence. The ‘porosity’ between pilgrimage and secular trail is clearly present in the metaphor of the trail as a reenactment of the soul’s journey toward salvation in Christianity. The end of the journey as the reaching of the ‘golden gate’ of Paradise is deployed through the reference to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (this too, a physical as well as spiritual journey) and to Scholasticism’s reinterpretation of Aristotle’s concept of ‘motionless motor’ as a pre-Christian anticipation of God. The choice of the *Divine Comedy* as the metaphorical setting for the spiritual journey on the Via degli Dei recalls also an obvious link with the history of Florence.

The ‘golden reflections’ refers to the colour of the plasticised inscriptions, creating a connection between the metaphor of the paradise’s door and the perceptive experience of the Quotation Tree. Just as the gold of the celestial door will be the visual perception that anticipates the entrance of the soul into Paradise, the gold of the plaques anticipates the entrance to a space of spiritual reflection that will accompany – this is the author’s wish – the entire physical journey to Florence.

The exhortation has a clear religious connotation, urging the Christian faith (‘sweet love’ is another religious/poetic expression to indicate the love that fills the heart as the human turns to the divine in Christianity)³¹ as a spiritual guide through the journey. However, the aphorisms chosen to ‘guide’ this path are secular. While the quotation from Aristotle can again be traced back to a Dantean reference to the sin of sloth, i.e. shunning any choice, with an obvious negative connotation, the ones from Montale, Seneca and Meran

thought that thinks itself. It moves as the object of love the part of heaven (Aristotle).” Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy. Paradise*, ed. by Allen Mandelbaum (University of California Press, 1980-1984), v. 1.1-3.

³¹ Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia. Paradiso*, canto XX 13. But the expression was also present, with a similar meaning, in other poets of the Dolce Stil Novo, such as in Guittone d’Arezzo (*Alla vergine Maria*, v. 13).

Donatoni (a contemporary Italian writer of aphorisms) remain laic. They represent pleas to develop one's own, personal 'science of the heart.' An inner moral guide that, while remaining open to dialogue with otherness (Meran Donatoni), allows one to walk the path alone, like 'the honest' and 'the loyal' of the fifth aphorism.

Lastly, the reference to the *Divine Comedy* builds another connection between the metaphysical/metaphorical plane and the concrete experience of the landscape. Since the Quotation Tree is located at the beginning of the Via degli Dei, immersed in the first forest one encounters outside Bologna, the reference to the "selva oscura" (shadowed forest)³² that marks the beginning of Dante's journey cannot but immediately come to mind. The aesthetic identity of the trail is thus mixed with Dante's narrative, collaborating in the immersive dimension of the unfolding of the landscape.

A second example of the intertwining of literature and walking in the landscape of the Via degli Dei can be found on the Bologna Apennines, near Madonna dei Fornelli.

Fig. 8.3. Anonymous, "In Volo," marker pen inscription on wood, 70 x 40 x 5 cm. Monzuno, Italy, Via degli Dei. © Caterina Diotto



In a clearing that flanks the path and opens up a view of the valley, a wooden sign has been placed on which a quote is handwritten:

³² Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy. Inferno*, v. 1.1.

“Da qui, messere, si domina la valle
ciò che si vede, è!
Ma se l’imago è scarno al vostro occhio
scendiamo a rimirarlo da più in basso
e planeremo in un galoppo alato
entro il cratere
ove gorgoglia il tempo!”

Brano musicale “In volo” del gruppo Banco del Mutuo Soccorso. Era l’anno 1972.³³

The inscription refers to the episode of Astolfo’s travel to the moon in Lodovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*. Astolfo, riding a hippogryph, flies over the world and, having unknowingly arrived at the top of the mount of Paradise, is commissioned by Saint John the Evangelist to recover the wit (‘senno’) of Orlando, who has gone mad on discovering Angelica’s love for Medoro.³⁴ Wit, like all things that are lost, can be found on the Moon. It is there that the knight heads, overcoming the ‘sphere of fire’ that separates it from the Earth according to the ptolemaic astronomy.

The song does not quote a specific verse of Ariosto’s work,³⁵ but rather refers to the journey of Astolfo. The reference is quite easy to spot by the Italian walker thanks to the ‘winged gallop’ mentioned, which recalls the hippogriff. Flying over the world, reaching paradise and even the Moon – where he not only recovers Orlando’s wits but also drinks a few drops of his own, and sees the Moires spinning the destinies of mortals – Astolfo personify the traveller who develops the clear-eyed gaze of wisdom, separating truth from illusion and pursuing justice. The song is, in fact, composed of another stanza, which precedes the verses of the inscription:

³³ “From here, sir, you dominate the valley/ What you see, is! / But if the image is bare to your eye / Let us descend to gaze upon it from below / And glide in a winged gallop / within the crater / where time gurgles!” Musical track ‘In volo’ by the band Banco del Mutuo Soccorso. The year was 1972.

³⁴ For a wide analysis of the literary topos of the “word on trees,” and specifically on Angelica and Medoro’s episode, see Rensselaer W. Lee, *Name on Trees. Ariosto into Art* (Princeton University Press 1977).

³⁵ Banco di Mutuo Soccorso has recently returned to work on Ariosto’s opera: the concept album *Orlando: le forme dell’amore* was released in 2022.

Lascia lente le briglie del tuo ippogrifo, o Astolfo,
e sfrena il tuo volo dove più ferve l'opera dell'uomo.
Però non ingannarmi con false immagini
ma lascia che io veda la verità
e possa poi toccare
il giusto.³⁶

The choice to write only the second stanza finds its explanation in the dialogue with the landscape. From the point where the inscription is located, in fact, it is possible to catch a glimpse of the valley just before the path begins to descend. The reference to the view of the valley in the song stitches together the real experience of the walker with the literary reference and its metaphorical meaning. As in the case of the Quotation Tree, this inscription nourishes the narrative of the trail as a transformative experience. The hiker is once again encouraged to set out on a journey to get away from daily life and reflect on it almost in a state of temporal suspension. Their experience will bring them to know different places and people, to find their own 'senno' and even a hint of superior wisdom (the Moires) and return with them to the 'crater where time gurgles' – their everyday life.

Such inscriptions represent, therefore, an enhancement of the experience of "lived configurations of a rhythmic, always-developing order resulting from our active and alert commerce with the world," as Siani wrote. Experiences that, drawing from literature, create the third nature of the captioned landscape.

The last example is of a particularly ephemeral nature. It consists of some slogans dear to the Italian and international feminist movement, written with a felt-tip pen on guardrails, rocks and road signs.

³⁶ Let loose the reins of thy hippogriff, Astolfo, / and hurl thy flight where human's work is most fervent. / But do not deceive me with false images / let me see the truth / and may then touch / justice. Banco del Mutuo Soccorso, *In volo*, 1972.

Fig. 8.4. Anonymous woman, “L’intimo è politico,” marker pen on stone, 40 x 20 cm. Sasso Marconi, Italy, Via degli Dei. © Caterina Diotto



The first of these captions added “e delle Dee” (and of the Goddesses) to the signs ‘Via degli Dei,’ underlining the androcentric turn of the name. As a matter of fact, the majority of the toponyms are of goddesses (Venus and Lua), while Adonis is human. In the Italian language, it has been customary for a very long

time to identify the masculine plural with the universal plural, encompassing all genders. However, this case is particularly inexplicable given that there is no gender mix: all the divine entities are female. The overstretched masculine³⁷ is a practice that Italian feminism harshly criticised as an expression of the erasure of the feminine in language, and rejects since the 1980s.³⁸ Today, the use of the masculine as universal is increasingly falling into disuse, but is still found here and there, especially in environments that are perceived as “male dominated” – like trekkings. Adding ‘delle Dee’ therefore has the value of making visible this erasure and refusing the gender exclusion from the sport.

The other two inscriptions were:

L'intimo è politico!

Siamo le nipoti delle streghe che non siete riusciti a bruciare!³⁹

The first quotation, which appeared originally as “the personal is political” in 1977 but has been used in both forms since, is a slogan written by the feminist collective Rivolta Femminile in their political manifesto *Io dico Io* (I say I) “whose biting prose reveals the hand and the mind of Carla Lonzi.”⁴⁰ To the Italian Second Wave of Feminism, between the Seventies and the Nineties, the slogan summarised feminist thought. The emancipationist and equality demands of so-called First-Wave feminism were replaced by a deeper critical analysis directed both at women themselves and to family and sexual dynamics, as well as to power dynamics between men and women activists. The reason why Italian feminism in the 1970s took the path of separatism from the socialist and communist groups was precisely that within these political contexts, ‘personal’ patriarchal dynamics were repeated: men always played

³⁷ The linguistic practice of using the masculine plural form to include all genders in language, even when the feminine component is the majority. It was also used when there were no males, because it was perceived as “neutral.”

³⁸ Adriana Cavarero, Cristiana Fischer, Elvia Franco, Giannina Longobardi, Veronika Mariaux, Luisa Muraro, Anita Sanvitto, Betty Zamarchi, Chiara Zamboni, Gloria Zanardo, *Diotima. Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (La Tartaruga 1987). See also *Another Mother. Diotima and the symbolic order of Italian Feminism*, eds. Cesare Casarino and Andrea Righi (University of Minnesota Press 2018).

³⁹ “The intimate is political!” / “We are the granddaughters of the witches you failed to burn!”

⁴⁰ Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference. A Theory of Social.Symbolic Practices* (Indiana University Press, 1990), 87.

leadership roles, while women were reserved service ones, such as leafleting or preparing conference rooms.

This inscription, in the context of the trail, refers to two levels of meaning. The first, broader, is the reference to the tradition of Italian feminism and its radical choices in the name of the political struggle for women. The second, more specific, is the slogan's own meaning referring to the narrative of the trail: an inner transformation is always, also, a transformation that has a political implication. Acquiring a new point of view, a new perspective on things, also changes our interpretations of reality and the way we position ourselves in power relations.

Fig. 8.5. Anonymous woman, “Siamo le nipoti delle streghe che non siete riusciti a bruciare,” marker pen on guardrail, 150 x 15 cm. Badolo, Italy, Via degli Dei. © Caterina Diotto



The second slogan is paraphrased from Tish Thawer 2015's novel *The Witches of BlackBrook* – now a commonly seen slogan at feminist protests. It refers to witch hunts as one of the highest historical expressions of patriarchal misogyny, an interpretation supported by numerous critical studies – to name but a couple: Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology and the*

Scientific Revolution (1980) and Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch. Women, the Body, and the Primitive Accumulation* (2004). Considering oneself the granddaughters of witches refers to a female genealogy of resistance to the gender roles imposed by society. An aspect of these roles, unfortunately still very much present in Italian culture, wants women confined to known spaces, even better if private. Women who undertake hiking trails, perhaps on their own, are still frowned upon.

The presence of these inscriptions on the trail declines its narrative in a gendered key. If the general tone is that of a journey at once physical and interior, which by moving away from the places of everyday life stimulates a change of perspective, for a woman this transformation takes on a further meaning: a rebellion against social constraints and gender prejudices, and an affirmation of freedom.

As a woman, finding these slogans to accompany one's steps provides support and encouragement, creating a sense of historical and personal belonging to a symbolic genealogy and a sisterhood of women travellers.

Conclusion

This study sought to open a door to a phenomenon currently unexplored by scholars: the captioned landscapes on secular hiking trails.

Trails can rightly be included among the objects of Landscape Studies, however, they bear some peculiarity. The first is their continuity: the hiking trail's landscape constantly unfolds through small variations. The relationship with the observer is deeply immersive: the composition of the landscape is therefore the result of a co-constitutive dialogue between human and non-human. Its third characteristic, the connection to the community of walkers and to a transcendent cultural meaning, is what generates the intermedial practices on the path.

To embrace such peculiarities, it was necessary for this analysis to briefly review the Italian debate on the approach to the landscape, in order to slip away from the unproductive opposition between the 'geographical' or 'analytical' approach and the subjective 'aesthetic' or 'synthetic' one. The hiking trail shows how an integrated aesthetic approach is indispensable to grasp the complexity of its cultural component, in addition to the overcoming of the anthropocentric perspective that denies the living dialogue with the non-human – an aspect that in hiking trails is clearly visible in the ephemerality of the artistic practices.

The intermediality that composes the 'aesthetic identity' of the trail marks the fundamental difference between the hiking trail and the pilgrimage route. If the

symbolic meaning of the latter is aimed at the arrival, a sacred place rich in works of art and religious ritualities, the former finds the focus of its narrative on the journey itself, and thus sees its intermedial practices scattered all along the path. Furthermore, if in the case of the pilgrimage it is the religious context that nourishes the narrative of the transcendent, in the case of the trail it is literature that seems to play such role.

The last part of the essay explored some of the literary inscriptions present during the autumn of 2022 on Via degli Dei, in Italy. Quotations from Montale, Aristotle, Seneca, Dante, references to Astolfo's journey to the Moon and to some of the most significant slogans of the Italian feminist movement make up a constellation of captioned landscapes that accompany the hiker's experience. They provide inspiration and guidance through a journey that transforms one's interpretation of reality, ultimately enabling travellers to return to everyday life with a renewed, critical and wiser perspective.

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This exciting and timely collection of essays on 'captioned landscapes', i.e. inscriptions in natural environments, does what its title promises: through an ecomedial approach, it opens inspiring new ways of thinking intermedial networks beyond the human and across centuries and cultures. As the editor Marco Maggi in his illuminating introduction explains, captioned landscapes have the potential to trigger transformative encounters between the human and non-human world. The impressively wide range of articles analyze captioned landscapes from antiquity to the present day and from Europe to Eurasia, thus kindling a profound literary discussion of captioned landscapes as a specific, yet under-researched intermedial phenomenon. As a notable intervention in the vibrant scholarly debates of intermediality and ecomedia, the two volumes of this essay collection will no doubt enjoy a wide readership.

Prof. Dr. Gabriele Rippl
University of Bern, Switzerland

These two volumes explore historical and contemporary dimensions of textualized—or textualizing—"captioned" landscapes, ranging from gardens and nature parks to land art and other 'geographies'. Editor Marco Maggi's thoughtful Introduction provides an inspiring point of entry, and the contributing authors enrich contemporary intermedial studies while extending ecocritical and environmental thought in fresh directions. The proposed "ecomedia turn" clearly merits careful, creative elaboration and sustained critical engagement.

Prof. Dr. Jørgen Bruhn
Linnaeus University Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies,
Sweden

This very learned book is a treasure of high academic standard. Path breaking it offers a new take on ecocritical theory dedicated to gardens and landscapes, allying studies on the human and non-human intermedial studies, relying on strong references and former works by scholars specialising in intermediality and cross-disciplinary exchanges. It also pertains to comparative literature in its

broader sense as «captioning»—a well defined term—landscape is a fine example of associating and combining media. It is also wide-ranging in its cross-cultural approach as it includes various civilizations and practices such as the Chinese one, and includes the historical perspective of garden studies.

It is a far-reaching book which might appeal to museum curators, historians and garden students. One of its kind, it is so stimulating and far-reaching due to its intrinsic qualities by its earnestness and genuineness, offering a new way of renewing literary studies dedicated to ecocriticism and ecological mores.

Liliane Louvel

Emeritus Professor

University of Poitiers, France

"Captioned Landscapes. Intermedial Combinations Beyond the Human" brings together fascinating essays on the interlacing of words and things in landscapes and gardens from ancient China to the present day. With a useful introduction by editor Marco Maggi, this book makes a significant contribution to literature on intermediality as a theoretical tool for understanding the complexities of spaces that are simultaneously material and immaterial, whole and fragmented, and represented and experienced. Drawing on careful analysis of significant case studies and genuine theoretical ambition, this collection will appeal to readers and scholars from various disciplines who are interested in a multidisciplinary approach to gardens and landscapes.

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