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THE AUDIO-VISUAL LANDSCAPE

Aesthetics and Complexity

ABSTRACT: We can hypothesise that greater effectiveness in favouring the establishment of a cosmocentric paradigm is to be sought in at least a basic factor inherent in the aesthetic experience of the audio-visual image of the landscape: the “introjective” or “immersive” vision, which implies the symbolic overcoming of the threshold of representation by the spectator and their fusion with what is represented, a perception of the environment not as an external surrounding space, but as a place in which one is included and of which one is part.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics, Ecology, Landscape, Cinema, Immersive Vision, Cosmomorphism, Media Environment.

Landscape. Between aesthetics and ecology

Man and nature, the brick and the rock, the stream and the factory, the community and its territory offer themselves up to experience and reflection as landscape, that is to say, as a single whole made up of heterogenous elements in a state of becoming.

In the concreteness of its colours, its shapes, and its multiple components, landscape is the perceptible manifestation of the cohabitation of man and the Earth; a great open-air document which tells of the interaction between human and natural history: the periods of conflict and harmony, the lines of tension and power relations, the moments of crisis and regeneration, together with just as many traces of a common and perennial metamorphosis.¹

The landscape is the perceptible expression of the sharing of time and space by humans and the other beings of nature.

Since the Anthropocene, it has born the signs of the multiple ways in which man has thought and related to himself and the cosmos, to the point of influencing perhaps irreversibly those processes that Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela have described as the “autopoiesis” of the Earth system (Maturana, Varela 1980).

¹ These words have been taken in part from the opening sequence of the video *Paesaggio in metamorfosi. ILAB. Industrial Landscape Biella* which, together with this volume, was created thanks to the research project of the same name, carried out from 2017 to 2019 within the Departments of Philosophy and Education Sciences, Humanities, and Foreign Languages and Literature and Modern Cultures of the University of Turin.

The landscape can be considered, therefore, as evidence of the state of health (or suffering) of the Earth system, in the context of what Gregory Bateson has defined with the expression “healthy ecology”: “a single system of *environment combined with high human civilization* in which the flexibility of the civilization shall match that of the environment to create an ongoing complex system, open-ended for slow change of even basic (hard-programmed) characteristics” (Bateson 2000, 502).

By observing the landscape from an ecological point of view, we can clearly see the multiple difficulties encountered by those paradigms of knowledge that arose in the second half of the 20th century as they tried to spread and root themselves on a global level in scientific, humanistic and medial culture, paradigms that are still attempting to transform man’s concrete relationship with the environment. We can think, for example, of James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis’ Gaia hypothesis, or the conception of the Earth as a living organism, whose existence and evolution derive from the combination of the beings that make it up. We can also think of the contributions of anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers like Bruno Latour, or Philippe Descola, for example, who have attempted to reconfigure the conceptions which have historically arisen around the notions of nature and culture (Latour 2004; Descola 2005).

Since the last century, the complexity of the landscape has fostered an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge, within which, we believe, the field of *ecological aesthetics* constitutes one of the most fertile areas in which to tackle the challenges of the 21st century, thanks to its attitude of taking the landscape as the central question in which nature and history converge, and its tendency – either explicitly or implicitly – to predispose a bioanthropological paradigm, that is to say, a relationship of reciprocity between man and the cosmos (D’Angelo 2014; Carlson 2002; Budd 2002; Griffero 2007).

Even though it has made fundamental contributions to the establishment of a bioanthropological paradigm, the path of rational and objective knowledge, based on disjunctive (subject/object) and often anthropocentric logic, risks failing to overcome the Cartesian paradigm (“man as dominator and master of nature”), however, and providing a detached and instrumental conception of the cosmos as a human *habitat* as well as safeguarding the landscape as a tool above all for the survival of man; on the other hand, it runs the risk of promoting an ecological consciousness that is even “paternalistic” or based on a sense of duty, characterised implicitly by a sense of superiority or guilt, which render the protection of the Earth and its landscapes forced, and not profoundly rooted, and hence potentially fragile and ineffective (Fox 1990; Capra 1997).

We believe that, though it is still not sufficiently influenced by science, the path of sensitive knowledge or understanding possesses a potential for change which is mostly unexpressed, as it implies a full unfolding of subjectivity in the aesthetic experience, being ontologically centred on a *transfert* between man and the beings of the cosmos, in which the latter are perceived analogically as subjects and not conceived of as objects by a detached and often instrumental rationality.

In principle, but *certainly not automatically or immediately*, the sensitive knowledge or understanding that arises from aesthetic experience could favour the establishment and the greater spread of the cosmocentric paradigm, starting precisely from a relationship of bioanthropological analogy and reciprocity, by virtue of which care for the Earth and its beings could be experienced not so much as an imposed or self-imposed obligation as something resulting from a sensitivity and an awareness, capable of placing one's own life and prosperity together with that of others.

Ecological-aesthetic experience can lead to a *transfert* between *homo* and *cosmos* and, through this, to an understanding of the human as an integral part of the Earth.

In this context, aesthetics is to be understood in its original sense of *aisthesis*, that is to say, as the faculty of perceiving-feeling-understanding, and it is to be brought back to its primary function of placing man in relation with the environment by means of experience and comprehension – from the Latin *cum-prehendere*, to take together, contain in itself, embrace, mentally accept, understand.

In the search for the factors of anthropocosmic reciprocity potentially inherent in aesthetic experience, we can take inspiration from the achievements of multiple disciplinary fields – from cultural anthropology to Gestalt psychology, sociology, history of art, and the theory of images – and, even before that, from the theories of empathy of Vischer or Wölfflin, which identified affectivity and its correlated imaginary as the principal agents of a perception of things and the world, analogous to that which is established between human beings (Wölfflin 2016; Straus 2005; Heinich 1993; Eugeni 2004).

In the process of the anthro-cosmo-morphic *transfert* that constitutes an original attitude of the human and that is the basis for aesthetic perception and thought – by means of the mimetic, metaphorical, and metamorphic artistic sign as a gesture of introjection and creative expression – the awareness of the interdependence and existential, equal, and metonymic interrelation between man and cosmos – *pars pro toto* and *totum pro parte* – becomes rooted, at least in potency.

The cosmos and its beings are perceived not as an inert, brute, material object, “a deaf and dumb thing”, placed at the disposal of human volition – used as a vector, among the other tools of the will for power, by the gaze – but as animated *subjects*, living organisms, with an autonomous individuality with respect to the sphere of human thought and action.

Gregory Bateson has admirably expressed the epistemic function inherent in the aesthetic experience: “The ‘beauty’ of the woods through which I walk is my recognition both of the individual trees and of the total ecology of the woods as *systems*. A similar aesthetic recognition is still more striking when I talk with another person” (Bateson 2000, 332).

In the *transfert* with the cosmos, man is not only he who fashions and creates the environment, but a being that is dependent on it, immersed and ontologically linked to it by virtue in the first place of his bodily and sensitive experience.

In the aesthetic anthropo-cosmo-morphic tendency with which the human being invests environments and inanimate objects, should we perhaps see the danger of a regression to phenomena which are proper to the primitive or even the psychopathological mentality? Should we fear the opening up of chasms of fetishism (of goods or things invested with eroticism, analysed by Marx and Freud), totemism and animism? Similar, apparently “pre-modern” attitudes, as is known, constitute in reality a structural and constitutive factor of human identity, which, throughout the modern and contemporary age, has developed and expressed itself aesthetically in the context of art and, more generally, visual culture (Morin 2005).

In these ambits, aesthetic thought analogically, symbolically, and mythologically unifies reality and its image, gives form and real life to the contents of representation, and installs them in a space/time that is confused and fused with the ordinary space/time.

A symbolic and a mythology oriented towards an “analogic of subjectivity” and hence regenerated in the sense of non-disjunction can probably root in a more profound way an awareness of the reciprocal relationship of man and cosmos, of the equal dignity of existence of earthly beings, not only and not just as objects to be protected or saved but rather, and coherently, as subjects which have both multiple and changing forms of life and, consequently, independence, freedom, and rights – as was argued by Bruno Latour in his “politics of nature” and realised, among other things, in the more advanced constitutionalism and jurisprudence of the 21st century (Latour 2004; Bayer, Zaffaroni 2012; Capra, Mattei 2017).

What can the audio-visual image bring, therefore, to the concept and the creation of the landscape, according to a cosmocentric paradigm, given that its action, as is well known, has always been of a global reach?

The advances in sensitive knowledge and analogical, symbolic and mythological thought made in the fields of philosophy and anthropology in the 20th century invite us to understand image not simply as the point of contact between the real and the imaginary, but as the constitutive and radical *act* of the imaginary and the real. In this sense, we can say that the image is experienced and used at the same time as a sign, a symbol, a thing, and a tool that contributes to the creation of the world and of man himself.

Horst Bredekamp has pointed out how, according to an ancient tradition, images can be considered to be impregnated with an intrinsic force, defined in Greek by the terms *enargeia* and *dynamis*, and in Latin by *vis*, *virtus*, or *facultas*, referred to *imagines agentes* (Bredekamp 2018).

In order to give an account of the transformations and the previously unknown significance of this tradition in contemporary culture, W.J.T. Mitchell has coined the word *biopicture*, to indicate “the ‘biodigital picture’, the icon ‘animated’ – that is, given motion and the appearance of life by means of the techno-sciences of biology and information” (Mitchell 2011, 70).

In a contemporary context thus outlined, for Mitchell, therefore, the landscape risks becoming ever less an aesthetic subject and ever more the object of different forms of *biopicture*, which, while they allow us on one hand to positively overcome a certain complacent and naïve vision of the past, require on the other, however, a more aware vision, capable of joining history and politics with aesthetics, to prevent the image from becoming another tool of man's *hybris* against the Earth and its landscapes (Mitchell 1994, 34).

Besides being a background to man's action, the object of images provided and spread by devices that are constantly active and created to serve the dominion of knowledge and things in virtual maps and telematic geo-localisation by means of satellites, drones, video cameras, and monitors, can the landscape also be the subject of images which lie outside the paradigm of the Panopticon or the theatrical scene, and which, in the sense of an ecological aesthetics – or, if we like, a geo-aesthetics – tend towards a new paradigm of bioanthropological reciprocity?

In a contemporary context, how can we imagine that image can be used as a *medium* between man and the cosmos and what kind of awareness of the gaze can we hypothesise?

Among the many scientific fields in which the ecological perspective has imposed itself as a true epistemological turning point, leading to a re-thinking of traditional paradigms, full of implications for our reflection on the relationship with the image of the landscape, we can mention here the ecological approach to visual perception offered by J.J. Gibson, who believes that there is no dualism or dichotomy between the individual and the environment, but rather a relationship of continuity and reciprocity, which is also adaptive and synergic, in which vision carries out an important function, but as part of a broader perceptive system (Gibson 1986; Bryson 1986; Huhtamo 2013).

At the end of the 1970s Gibson introduced an ecological paradigm of vision, which distinguished itself from the static and instant, fixed and delimited *snapshot vision*, in an attempt to trace a dynamic *natural vision*, aimed at the whole of the environment in which it is immersed, as a means of exploration, whose effectiveness seems to us to be inherent in the reciprocity between man and cosmos of the epistemic relationship implied.

It is one of numerous and relevant examples of a paradigm shift, which does not yet constitute, however, the dominant tendency of culture and contemporary aesthetics.

The hypothesis put forward here is that it is increasingly necessary to effect an epistemic reconsideration of some of the categories of opposites that have traversed the history of reflection on the image and the gaze, such as looking and knowing, appearance and reality, observer and observed.

Referring to these categories and recognising that there is a complex dialogical relationship between them – that is, a reciprocal, antagonistic, complementary, and generative influence – may reveal itself to be useful for identifying the multiple implications and correlations that the image and the gaze inextricably have with the imaginary and the real.

We could, therefore, create a dialogue between the idea of Georges Salles and Walter Benjamin, who believed that “the human eye has always modelled the world according to the scheme of its cosmos”(Salles 1939, 123), and the concept of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, on the basis of which “Perception is not a sort of beginning science, an elementary exercise of the intelligence; we must rediscover a commerce with the world and a presence to the world which is older than intelligence” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 52).

An aesthetic reconsideration in a dialogical sense could also refer to opposite pairs like activity and passivity, “absorption” and “theatricality” (Fried 1980; 1998), which in the discourse on image and gaze have sometimes constituted just as irresolvable dichotomies, and that, if fixed in simplistic terms, risk referring implicitly to that epistemological and aesthetic paradigm based on a detached, perspectival, projective, and disembodied vision, and on the idea of a human subject who, by privileging the sense of sight, epistemologically and aesthetically dominates the object-world.

It is a paradigm that is one of the expressions of *hybris*, and which could be used to describe certain traditional representations of the landscape in the form of panorama, view, diorama, etc.

We will turn, therefore, to those ambits of aesthetics which do not present themselves primarily as a theory of art or as speculation on the status of the work of art or the categories historically connected to artistic creation and fruition; but to those that think of the perceptive, affective experience and the consequent understanding as a unitary act of the relationship with human and natural alterity, carried out by a subject which has a living, mobile, and sensitive body.

In these ambits of research, which have only partly been explored or investigated by environmental or ecological aesthetics, we can find points for reflection on the experience and the understanding of landscape and, more generally, on the ways in which man is a bodily and synaesthetic presence in the cosmos.

If we turn our attention to these ambits, we can hypothesise that greater effectiveness in favouring the establishment of a cosmocentric paradigm is to be sought in at least three factors inherent in the aesthetic experience of the image of the landscape: the “introjective” or “immersive” vision, which implies the symbolic overcoming of the threshold of representation by the spectator and their fusion with what is represented, a perception of the environment not as an external surrounding space, but as a place in which one is included and of which one is part; synaesthesia, which convenes the senses and prepares us for an aesthetic *embodiment* – mimetic, metaphorical, and metamorphic – of the cosmos and its beings; and the perception of *Stimmung*, which is correlated with an empathetic inter and trans subjective understanding of the set of elements represented.

Immersive experience of audio-visual image and exploration of the landscape

In the ambit of the audio-visual image, the development of multiple techniques of immersivity – from those of the illusion of three-dimensionality of the analogical theatre to digital 3D virtual environments – could ideally, but, let us repeat, certainly not automatically, favour an aesthetic experience of exploration of the landscape and the world.

Much depends in the first place, however, on the quality of the relationship with the cosmos that the author of the image possesses and intends to share with the spectator, through the use of technology, which, as is well known, can offer the best or the worst, depending on the level of awareness of those who use it.

Technology, geared in itself to immersivity, possesses a potential for exploring the world and nature that could be developed for an aesthetic experience of fusion and *transfert* with nature and its beings and for a sensible knowledge of them based on a cosmocentric paradigm.

The authentically aesthetic use of these technologies could become an invitation to enter a previously unknown dimension of sensibility and understanding of the world; an invitation that the great artists know how to make, as Patrick Chamoiseau believes, a writer who has reflected at length on art and anthropized nature:

The great artists, the great works, will always create an open door onto the horizon of the unthinkable. And it is this that I believe is important in the artistic gesture. Not the signification, this poverty that reassures us, but truly a door that opens, that will not close again, and that will unceasingly transmit to us the energies of the impossible-to-conceive. (Chamoiseau 2016)

Using the same metaphor, we could say that the immersive aesthetic experience calls into question the fundamental issue of the threshold, created by every image regarding the relationship between representation and reality.

In the representation of the landscape, the question of the threshold of the image, understood as a border or a crossing, takes on a primary importance, as it can be understood as a sign revealing a relationship between man and cosmos of indifference or participation, separation or union, discrimination or convergence.

Faced with the huge quantity of research on the question of the threshold of the image carried out from the beginning of the 20th century by historians of the Vienna school such as Wölfflin and Riegl (Wölfflin 1932; Riegl 1985), what is of interest to us here are some of the aesthesiological implications inherent in that mode of aesthetic experience which, instead of keeping the observer in a position of superiority, showing him a whole to the point of dissolving its contents in abstraction, invites him on the other hand to come closer and immerse himself in the representation, offering the concreteness and the singularity of the elements that make it up to his haptic exploration and understanding.

If we go back to the origins of representation in images by turning to Pliny, we will remember how the myth of Narcissus provides the bases of the aesthetic experience of immersion in what is represented, which, as Ovid was to relate later, involves the dissolution of the subjectivity of the observer into that of what is represented, the fusion of one in the other. In the later interpretation of this myth by Leon Battista Alberti, immersion in the image is understood as the original phenomenon of mimesis, the aesthetic metaphor and metamorphosis linked to the icon:

I have taken the habit of saying, among friends, that the inventor of painting was, according to the opinion of the poets, that [famous] Narcissus who was transformed into a flower. As the painting is in fact the flower of all the arts, thus the whole tale of Narcissus perfectly adapts to the topic itself. To paint in fact is what else if not to catch with art that surface of the spring? (L. B. Alberti 2011)

Crossing the threshold of the image is an archetype that has enjoyed enormous success in both literary and visual culture, almost always correlated with the question of human subjectivity, in its multiple forms and in the different ways in which the themes of the double and alterity have been treated.²

The *topos* of crossing the border of the image has been prevalently associated with an immersive gaze understood as the expression of a human subjectivity moved by the intense pulsations of life and death, desire and fear, towards the self or towards another subjectivity.

Very rarely, especially in European culture, however, has this *topos* been connected to the relationship between man and the cosmos and its beings and, even less, has it implied an immersive vision linked to an experience of a contemplative type, that is, an observation which, if we like, is paradoxical and aporetic, which creates a dialogue between the act of approaching that which is observed and the absence of all forms of volitional pulsation towards the observed, if not that of sensible knowledge and understanding.

In this particular connection between immersive vision and contemplative experience, the landscape can be perceived, sensed, and consequently understood no longer as an external object, surrounding and foreign, but as a familiar universe in which we are inserted or as an inclusive dimension in which to carry out adaptive forms of behaviour.

We could state therefore that, in this union of vision and contemplative experience, both the traditional dichotomy between external and internal or mental images and the opposition between subject and object are called into question, albeit not annulled, just

² We can think of some famous literary examples such as Gogol's *The Portrait*, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Oval Portrait*, and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or cases that have marked the history of cinema from its origins, from Robert W. Paul's *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (1901) or Edwin S. Porter's *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902), to David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) or Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) and beyond.

as they are in meditative practices. Sergei M. Eisenstein had a great interest in these practices, in the context of his reflections on the composition of the cinematic form and the link between aesthetic and ecstatic experience (ecstasy, from the Latin *ex-stasis*: “outside itself”), both of which have in common the “going out of the self”, understood as a partial abandonment by the author and the spectacle of their own individuality and as an opening of oneself towards another dimension (Eisenstein 1997, 199).

The immersive vision and the contemplative experience that involve the observer in an almost-direct relationship of fusion with the landscape and its beings appears to be linked to an ancient Chinese legend, that of Wu Tao-tzu³ (680-740), one of the greatest painters of the T’ang dynasty, who was charged by the emperor Xuan Zong with creating a wall painting of a landscape. Here, as Walter Benjamin describes,

the picture showed a park and a narrow footpath that ran along a stream and through a grove of trees, culminating at the door of a little cottage in the background. When the painter’s friends, however, looked around for the painter, they saw that he had left them – that he was in the picture. There, he followed the little path that led to the door, paused before it quite still, turned, smiled, and disappeared through the narrow opening. (Benjamin 2002, 393)

The legend of Wu Tao-tzu has been taken as an *exemplum* of the aesthetic experience of crossing the boundary of the landscape image, both pictorial and cinematographic, in different studies dating to the 1920s and 30s, not only by Benjamin, but also by Ernst Bloch, Béla Balázs, and Siegfried Kracauer (Bloch 2006, 116-124).

In his wide-ranging thought, Benjamin takes up the legend on more than one occasion, considering it an emblem of the immersive vision of a contemplative type, that is proper to traditional art and that, thanks also to the lengthening of time, involves the spectator in a voluntary crossing of the threshold of the image and in a consequent “tactile” experience of that which is represented. In the cinema, on the other hand, the crossing of the threshold of the image, Benjamin believes, is determined by a “distracted vision”, due for the most part to the process of editing, which, by making the mass of spectators “absorb the work of art into itself”, induces in them an unconscious tactility.⁴ Thus, in Benjamin’s interpretation, while in traditional aesthetic experience, immersivity is the fruit of volition, in cinematographic experience, it is created by the distracted participation of the spectator. A participation so distracted that it has to be urged to desire and to “take possession” of the objects of representation by bringing the gaze up

³ On the literary reception of the legend, we can mention at least: M. Yourcenar (1938), *Nouvelles orientales*, Gallimard, Paris 1978; S. Lindqvist (1967), *The Myth of Wu Tao-tzu*, Granta, London 2010; F. Cheng, *Vide et plein: le langage pictural chinois*, Seuil, Paris 1979.

⁴ “Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art.” Benjamin (1969, 239).

close to them and to a mode of immersive vision that, for Benjamin, coincides with the fading of the aura, especially when the gaze turns to natural objects:

The concept of “aura” which was proposed above with reference to historical objects may be usefully illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones. We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. (Benjamin 1969, 222-223)

The fading of the aura, therefore, can also be described in terms of a historical change in the relationship between man and the natural element and also its previously unknown image, which coincides with the disappearance of that type of aesthetic experience centred on the unrepeatable and unique nature of the relationship between observer and observed, spectator and landscape.

The historical transformation brought about by the cinematographic medium consists, therefore, for Benjamin, in the overcoming of an auratic and contemplative experience of nature and its image, which we could interpret as the correlative of the establishment of a anthropocentric paradigm contrasting man and the world, together with the phenomena of massive urbanisation and an artificial, abstract, predatory relationship with the cosmos and its beings, which is at the same time indifferent or “distracted”.

Benjamin’s interpretation outlines, in this way, two opposing relationships with the representation of the landscape, linked to just as many dimensions of tactility: a relationship of “attention” and one of “habit”. Crossing the boundary of the image is correlated in both cases with a bodily involvement of a cenesthetic type, which in distracted vision, however, Benjamin believes, compromises the fusion of the observer with the landscape represented and hence prevents the cinematographic spectator from participating in the aesthetic experience evocatively narrated in the myth of Wu Tao-tzu.

We could hypothesise, however, that in over a century of kinetic images, precisely because of that historicity of sense perception that Benjamin has identified as a constant in the history of optical devices and visual technology, cinematographic experience has probably been transformed from distracted to “multi-focal”, which, thanks to the habit or the addiction of the spectator to the perceptive percussion produced by editing, makes it possible to rapidly and successively cross the representative threshold, ideally configuring a unitary space between the aesthetic and real experience – or, in Francesco Casetti’s words, a “hypertopia” (Casetti 2016) – where landscapes of the *hic et nunc* and the iconic elsewhere are united, according to a discontinuous and dynamic perception of subjectivity.

In the age of kinetic images, we believe that the spectator is not only not prevented from having a contemplative experience, but – despite the increasing acceleration of the rhythms of editing – that this experience has not been completely overcome or

eliminated, in so far as it constitutes the result of an immersive vision consubstantiated to the movement of the representation.

It is not by chance that, several decades after Benjamin, the legend of the Chinese painter was taken up by Kracauer as a paradigmatic example of the mode of immersive vision that is proper to the cinematographic spectator, who, by virtue of the internal dynamism of the framing, “drifts toward and into the objects – much like the legendary Chinese painter who, longing for the peace of the landscape he had created, moved into it, walked toward the faraway mountains suggested by his brush strokes, and disappeared into them never to be seen again” (Kracauer 1997, 165).

In the interpretation of the myth of Wu Tao-tzu carried out by Balázs too, the exploration of the environment is considered precisely as the fruit of the aesthetic pleasure offered by the view of the landscape, as well as one of the factors of renewal introduced by the cinema in the representation of nature.

For instance, the Chinese of old regarded their art with a different eye and their attitude found expression in tales such as this: There was once a painter who one day painted a landscape. It was a beautiful valley with wonderful trees and with a winding path leading away towards the mountains. The artist was so delighted with his picture that he felt an irresistible urge to walk along the path winding away towards the distant mountains. He entered the picture and followed the path towards the mountains and was never seen again by any man [...] Such tales could never have been born in the minds of men brought up in the European ideas of art. The European spectator feels the internal space of a picture as inaccessible, guarded by its own self-sufficient composition.

But such strange stories as those Chinese tales could easily have been born in the brain of a Hollywood American. For the new forms of film art born in Hollywood show that in that part of the world, as in old China, the spectator does not regard the inner world of a picture as distant and inaccessible. Hollywood invented an art which disregards the principle of self-contained composition and not only does away with the distance between the spectator and the work of art but deliberately creates the illusion in the spectator that he is in the middle of the action reproduced in the fictional space of the film. (Balázs 1952, 50)⁵

With the advent of cinema, the representation of the cosmos is enriched with previously unknown conditions of perception, thanks in particular to the movement of the camera, which leads the gaze of the spectator step by step within the place of the image, where it can orient itself according to more or less fluid and continuous movements, and in this way sense the environment not as an external, surrounding space, but as a place in which it is included and of which it is part. Nature in this way becomes not only the stage proper to the cinema, but it is also enriched with dramatic nuances, turning it into a character.

Indeed, in the cinema, for Balázs,

⁵ Not only, according to Balázs, did nature become the “stage” of cinema, but it became “a new *dramatis personae*”, “enriched by certain dramatic features”, p. 25. On the relationship between Benjamin and Balázs cf. among others, Gurisatti 2011, 527-554.

The spectator no longer stands outside a hermetic world of art which is framed within an image or by the stage. Here the work of art is no insulated space, manifesting itself as a microcosm and metaphor and subsisting in a different space, to which there is no access. The camera takes my eye along with it. Into the very heart of the image. I see the world from within the filmic space. I am surrounded by the figures within the film and involved in the action, which I see from all sides. (Balázs 2010, 99)

For Balázs, therefore, the cinema opens up a new dimension of the visible and the aesthetic experience, previously unknown modes of perception, of sensibility, and understanding of the world, which allow us to perceive it as closer and more concrete.

What arises is a sort of spatialization of perception and sensibility, in particular from the illusion of movement given by the expressive means of cinema, especially those connected to the dynamism of representation, which often simulates the movements of the characters in the world, according to that connection between motor cognition and visual perception which was later analysed by Vivian Sobchack in phenomenological terms and by Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra from the point of view of the neurosciences (Sobchack 1992; Gallese, Guerra 2015).

Paraphrasing Georg Simmel, before the audio-visual image of the landscape we are whole men, and the act that creates it for us is a bi-univocal act of the sensibility and of thought, divided into these two separate parts only later, by subsequent reflection.

The body of the audio-visual landscape is echoed by the body of the spectator or, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, the flesh of the world resonates with that of man, sensitive and sentient.

The synaesthetic audio-visual experience, which takes the landscape as the subject, also manifests the incarnate character of understanding and the bi-univocal relationship and the dialogical and reciprocal relationship between man and cosmos can be rooted precisely in the body.

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