

Landscape in Technological Image

The Complex Aesthetics Perspective

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In the Anthropocene, what contribution to landscape design and creation can the technological image, whose action, or agency, is global in scope?

Beyond being a functional backdrop for human action and an object of images provided by devices designed for control in virtual mappings and telematic geolocations, can the landscape also be the subject of technological images that are able to promote a new paradigm of reciprocity between man and cosmos?

In an attempt to answer such questions, this contribution is aimed at reconsidering in epistemological terms certain notions of the aesthetics of the technological image and, in particular, of the audiovisual image: immersivity, synesthesia and Stimmung.

In the perspective of the development of a complex aesthetics, it is hypothesized that the aesthetic experience of the artistic audiovisual image of the landscape can potentially promote a sensitive knowledge of the environment, capable of contributing to the development of an ecological sensitivity.

Keywords: complex aesthetics, audiovisual experience, sensitive knowledge, cosmocentrism

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From the very beginning, human beings have attempted to transform nature into art and this will undoubtedly continue to happen.

However, development understood in an exclusively techno-economic sense and its environmental and social consequences now require that humans also attempt to transform art into nature.

It is a matter of making the aesthetic experience an environmentally sensitive relationship.

Much can be done in this regard by intervening in one of the aesthetic experiences that, according to current statistics, is among the most practised in the world: the audiovisual experience¹.

During the audiovisual aesthetic experience, the mediated or medial aesthetic relationship established with the environment can contribute to the evolution of a sensitive knowledge and an ecological-aesthetic awareness.

In the perspective of developing an aesthetics based on the philosophy of complexity, the investigation of sensible knowledge or understanding as the emergence of aesthetic experience assumes epistemological relevance, especially for the ecological implications it entails.

Complexity aesthetics understands epistemic-sensible experience as the faculty of perceiving-feeling and the related understanding and interpretation and assumes it as a primary form of relationship that, in both an ontogenetic and phylogenetic sense, precedes and at the same time presides over the other types of relationship with the otherness of the cosmos².

¹ In 2023, 31% of online purchases consisted of audiovisual content; YouTube and TikTok emerged as the most widely used applications globally; YouTube is the second most utilized social platform internationally: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report>

² On the notion of the aesthetics of complexity: E. Morin, *Sur la définition de complexité*, in AA.VV., *Science et pratique de la complexité*, United Nation University - Institut de l'audiovisuel et des télécommunications en Europe - La Documentation Française, Paris 1986; F. Carmagnola, *La visibilità. Per un'estetica dei fenomeni complessi*, Guerini, Milano 1989; J. Casti, A. Karlqvist, *Art and Complexity*, JAI, Stamford 2003; R. Gibson, *Changescapes. Complexity, Mutability, Aesthetics*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth 2015; E. Morin, *Sur l'esthétique*, Laffont, Paris 2016; Id., *Le cinéma, un art de la complexité*, (M. Peyrière, C. Simonigh ed.), Nouveau Monde, Paris 2018; C. Simonigh, *Il sistema audiovisivo. Estetica e complessità*, Meltemi, Milano 2020; J. McCormack, C. Cruz Gambardella, *Complexity and aesthetics in generative and evolutionary Art*, in "Genetic Programming and Evolvable Machines", n. 23, April 2022, pp. 535-556.

This manifests itself emblematically when the audiovisual image is focused on the landscape and especially, as will be discussed below, when the aesthetic relationship with the cosmos is marked by phenomena such as immersivity, synaesthesia and Stimmung.

The landscape is the perceptible manifestation of the relationship between man and the Earth; a great open-air document in which to read the interweaving of human and natural history: the phases of conflict and harmony, the lines of tension and power relationships; the crises and regenerations are inscribed there as so many traces of a common and perennial metamorphosis.

The landscape constitutes the sensitive expression of the sharing of time and space between human beings and other beings of nature.

Starting with the Anthropocene, it bears the signs of the multiple ways in which man has thought about and related to himself and the cosmos, to the point of perhaps irreversibly affecting those processes that Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela have designated as the “autopoiesis” of the Earth-system³.

The landscape can therefore be considered as evidence of the state of health or suffering of the Earth-system, in the perspective of what Gregory Bateson has defined as “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»⁴.

By observing the landscape from an ecological perspective, the numerous difficulties encountered in spreading and rooting at a global level within scientific, humanistic, and media culture become evident.

These are the paradigms of knowledge that emerged in the second half of the 20th century, such as the “Gaia hypothesis” by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis and the reconfiguration by Bruno Latour or Philippe Descola of the historically arisen conceptions in the West around the notions of nature and culture⁵.

³ H.R. Maturana, F.J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition. The Realization of the Living*, Reidel Publishing, Dordrecht, 1980.

⁴ G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1979), University Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2000, p. 502.

⁵ B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York-London 1993; Id., *Politics of Nature. How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass.-London 2004; Ph. Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Gallimard, Paris 2005; Id., *Diversités des natures, diversités des cultures*, Bayard, Paris 2021.

The complexity of the landscape has promoted an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge, with respect to which the field of ecological aesthetics can be considered one of the most fertile fields in which to face the challenges of the 21st century, due to its aptitude for taking the landscape as a central issue in which nature and history converge, and due to its tension to set up — albeit through different methodological approaches — a bioanthropological paradigm, i.e. a reciprocal relationship between man and cosmos⁶.

The path of rational and objective knowledge, while having provided fundamental contributions to establishing a bio-anthropological paradigm, remains largely based on a disjunctive logic (subject/object) that is often anthropocentric. This approach risks perpetuating the detached and instrumental conception of the cosmos as a human habitat, as expressed by René Descartes with the formula «l’homme maître et possesseur de la nature» (man master and possessor of nature).

From this perspective, the preservation of the landscape would be instrumental to the survival of the human species. This could lead to an ecological consciousness that is sometimes paternalistic or coercive, implicitly marked by anthropocentrism or an uninternalized categorical imperative, or even a sense of guilt. Such motivations would make the protection of the Earth and its landscapes coerced, not deeply rooted and genuinely felt, and therefore potentially fragile and ineffective⁷.

In the perspective of the development of a complex aesthetics, the path of sensitive understanding although still too little influenced by science, can contribute to the rooting and development of a felt ecological consciousness⁸.

Ecological sensibility can be the source of the unfolding of subjectivity that constitutes the core of aesthetic experience and is realised in the emotional and affective transference not only between human beings but also between human beings and other beings in the cosmos. By virtue of the aesthetic transference, other beings are perceived by analogy and mirroring as subjects endowed with a life and not as inert, detached objects instrumentally functional to their own needs.

⁶ P. D’Angelo, *Il paesaggio. Teorie, storie, luoghi*, Laterza, Bari-Roma 2021; N. Mirzoeff, *How to see the World*, Penguin, London 2015; Id., *Visualizing the Anthropocene*, in “Public Culture”, n. 2, 73, 2014, p. 221; D. Guastini, *Per una filosofia ecologica*, in *Dizionario del pensiero ecologico*, (R. Della Seta, D. Guastini ed.), Carocci, Roma 2007; A. Berelant, *Aesthetics and the Environment. Themes and Variations in Art and Culture*, Aldershot, Ashgate 2005; T. Griffero, *Paesaggi e atmosfere. Ontologia ed esperienza estetica della natura*, in “Rivista di Estetica”, n. 29, 2005, pp. 7-40; L. Bonesio, *Oltre il paesaggio. I luoghi tra estetica e geofilosofia*, Arianna Editrice, Casalecchio 2002; M. Budd, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature. Essays on the Aesthetics of Nature*, Clarendon, Oxford 2002; P. Matthews, *Scientific Knowledge and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, in “Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, 2002, 1, pp. 37-48; A. Berleant, *Living in the Landscape. New Essays in Environmental Aesthetics*, Kansas University Press, Lawrence 1997.

⁷ F. Capra, D. Diamond, *Theatre for Living. The Art and Science of Community-Based Dialogue*, Trafford Publishing, Bloomington 2008; W. Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*, Sambhala, Boston 1990.

⁸ For example, Carlson proposed the Natural Environment Model, a paradigm for attempting to combine the appreciation of the environment with natural science, which, however, leaves the subjectivity of aesthetic appreciation of the landscape in the background, as it equates it with arbitrariness. A. Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment. The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture*, Routledge, London-New York 2005.

In principle, *but certainly not automatically or immediately*, the sensitive knowledge or understanding that arises from aesthetic experience could foster an entrenchment 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 literally be experienced not so much as an imposed or self-imposed obligation, but as the outgrowth of a sensitivity and awareness of the similarity between living beings.

Already at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, Vischer's or Wölfflin's theories of empathy had identified affectivity and imagination as the main agents of a perception of things and the world, similar to that established between human beings.

In the anthropo-cosmo-morphic transfert process, which constitutes an original human attitude later developed in the artistic sphere, the cosmos and its beings are perceived not as inert objects, brute matter, "deaf and blind things", available to human volitions, but as animate subjects, living organisms, endowed with an autonomous individuality with respect to the sphere of human thought and action.

In the transfert with the cosmos, the human being not only sees himself as the one who shapes and constructs the environment, but also *feels* physically immersed and ontologically bound to the habitat.

Aesthetic thought analogically, symbolically and mythologically unifies reality and its image, reifies representation, gives body and real life to the contents of representation, installs them in a space/time that blends and merges with the ordinary one.

A complex aesthetic, in embracing the challenges of the Anthropocene, is grounded in the cosmocentric paradigm and is consistent, for example, with the "politics of nature" proposed by Bruno Latour in terms of a comparative anthropology of the relationships between human and non-human beings.

An aesthetic experience in the sign of complexity can root a profound awareness of the non-disjunctive and reciprocal relationship that exists between human beings and other beings in the cosmos, establishing, especially through the anthropo-cosmic transference promoted by the image, an "analogue of subjectivity".

This analogy of subjectivity can ground the awareness of the equal dignity of the existence of all terrestrials, not only and not so much as objects of functional preservation for the survival of the human species, but rather as subjects endowed with multiple forms of life and, consequently, autonomy, freedom and rights — as, moreover, envisaged by the most advanced constitutionalism and jurisprudence of the 21st century⁹.

According to Mitchell, in the technological image, the landscape runs the risk of becoming less and less an aesthetic subject and more and more the object of different forms of biopictures which, while on the one hand allow us to positively overcome a certain complacent and naive vision of the past, on the other hand also require a more conscious gaze capable of combining history and politics precisely with aesthetics, in order to prevent the image from becoming another instrument of man's hybris against the Earth and its landscapes¹⁰.

So what contribution to the conception and creation of the landscape, according to a cosmocentric paradigm, can the audiovisual image, whose action, or agency¹¹, has been global since its origins, provide?

Beyond being a functional backdrop for human action and an object of images provided and disseminated by devices designed for control in virtual mappings and telematic geolocations (via satellites, drones, cameras, and monitors), can the landscape also be the subject of technological images that go beyond the Panopticon paradigm or theatrical backdrop, and that, in the sign of an ecological aesthetics or geo-aesthetics, are able to promote a new paradigm of bio-anthropological reciprocity?

In the contemporary context, what use of the technological image as a medium between man and cosmos can be envisaged and what awareness of the gaze can be hypothesized, in the perspective of a complex aesthetics?

The answers to these questions can be based, in the first instance, on the epistemological and aesthetic reconsideration of some of the categories of opposites that have run through the history of theories of the image and the gaze, such as, for example, looking and knowing, appearance and reality, observer and observed.

Referring to these categories, recognising how there is a dialogical relationship between them — that is, one of mutual influence, complementary antagonism and generative — is useful from the point of view of complex aesthetics in order to identify the multiple implications and correlations that the image and the gaze inextricably entertain with the imaginary and the real.

⁹ B. Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, Polity, London 2017; O. Bayer, E. R. Zaffaroni, *La Pachamama y el humano*, Ediciones Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Buenos Aires 2012.

¹⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape", in W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.), *Landscape and Power*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1994.

¹¹ A. Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 1998.

It is also necessary to place in dialogue the idea of Georges Salles and Walter Benjamin, according to which «the human eye has always modelled the world according to the scheme of its cosmos»¹², with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conception according to which «Perception is not a sort of beginning science, an elementary exercise of intelligence; we must rediscover a commerce with the world and a presence to the world is older than intelligence»¹³.

A further epistemological and aesthetic reconsideration based on the dialogic should then be referred to polar pairs such as activity and passivity, “absorption” and “theatricality”¹⁴, which in the discourse on the image and the gaze have at times constituted as many insuperable dichotomies and which, if stiffened in simplistic terms, risk implicitly recalling that epistemological and aesthetic paradigm founded on a detached, perspective, projective and disembodied vision, as well as on the idea of a human subject who, by assigning a privilege to the sense of sight, epistemologically and aesthetically dominates the object-world.

For the development of complex aesthetics, it is therefore indispensable to bring aesthetics itself back to its original meaning of aisthesis — the faculty of perceiving-feeling-understanding — and to understand it as the origin and at the same time as the outcome, in both an ontogenetic and phylogenetic sense, of the primary sensory and epistemic relationship that both precedes and presides over the other types of relationship with the otherness of the world.

Aesthetics, in this perspective, expresses a sensitive and epistemic relationship and is at the same time embodied, historically situated and individually determined, starting from the inextricable nexus between the subjective, social and species dimensions.

By virtue of the centrality that physicality assumes in the relationship with the environment, the perspective of complex aesthetics is one that assumes the experience of the audiovisual image of the landscape as the experience of a subject endowed with a mobile, sensitive and animated body.

From this embodied experience promoted by the audiovisual image of the landscape, a new sensitive knowledge can potentially emerge, an unprecedented understanding of the relationship between human beings and the cosmos for the affirmation of a cosmocentric paradigm¹⁵.

¹² W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings, 1935-1938*, vol. 3, (H. Eiland, M.W. Jennings eds.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass.-London 2002, p. 123.

¹³ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-sense* (1948) Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1964, p. 52.

¹⁴ M. Fried, *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews*, University Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1998, specifically: pp. 148-172; Id., *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, University Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1980.

¹⁵ A. Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment, Theme and Variations on Art and Culture*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2005.

As anticipated, it is hypothesized here that the aesthetic-epistemic potential of the aesthetic experience of the audiovisual image of the landscape resides in at least three factors: the “immersive” vision, which implies the perception of the environment not as an external and surrounding space, but as a place in which one is physically included and of which one is an integral part; the synesthesia, which summons the senses and disposes them to an aesthetic embodiment of the cosmos and its entities; and the *Stimmung*, which relates to a trans-subjective empathetic understanding of the complex of landscape elements present in the audiovisual medium.

1. Immersiveness in the landscape and audiovisual kinetic contemplation

The audiovisual image have introduced a new spatial sensibility by virtue of an unprecedented kind of iconic aesthetic experience, capable of dynamically combining visual perception and proprioception relating to the position, movement and balance of the body in space.

In more than a century of history of kinetic and audiovisual images, an ever-widening range of techniques, first analogue and then digital, as well as expressive, representational and dramaturgical forms, has made recollection and slowness less and less indispensable to the audience’s immersive and contemplative experience of the environment.

Instead of a viewing space consciously elaborated by the viewer, a technically and stylistically elaborated space has taken its place, which the viewer has, since the origins of cinema, unconsciously perceived in dynamic terms.

Throughout the history of kinetic images, the dialogue between two only apparently opposing terms, such as immersive vision and the contemplative experience of the landscape and its entities, has been explored and re-proposed, in particular, by some great artists.

It is not surprising that this includes Akira Kurosawa, whose aesthetic research is largely characterised by cultural syncretism. The episode of *Dreams* (1990) dedicated to Van Gogh offers a conjugation of immersive vision and contemplative experience of the landscape that constitutes the outcome of an aesthetic journey from the pictorial to the cinematographic representation of the landscape and vice versa. The protagonist’s inadvertent transit from the museum, where he contemplates *The Langlois Bridge* (1888), to the riverbank below the bridge and then into a country landscape of intense summer colours, leads him to hear Van Gogh say, while painting en plein air, «If you concentrate and observe, everything in nature is beauty. And in that beauty I lose myself» — just as the protagonist will eventually lose himself, literally walking inside the material brushstrokes with which Van Gogh gave new pictorial meaning to the landscape.

In Kurosawa's dream, a combination of heterogeneous sensory stimuli — the chirping of cicadas and the chirping of birds interact with the dynamism of the iconic representation given by the camera movements and the movements of the actor's body among the natural elements — offers the spectator an impression of three-dimensionality so intense that it subsists even when the body is immersed in the landscape that is not only real but also painted.

The oneiric or poetic dimension of rêverie, in Kurosawa's work, expresses a type of aesthetic illusion that is correlated to the dialogical relationship between immersive vision and contemplative experience, and which calls into question a multidimensional complex of heterogeneous cofactors, including, in the perceptive dimension, the stereokinetic effect, in the sensorial dimension, coenesthesia and proprioception, in the mental dimension, the imaginary, memory and analogical thought.

The artifice of oneiricism or rêverie, in the audiovisual image of the landscape and its beings, may not, however, constitute the only representational convention at the origin of the aesthetic experience that combines immersive vision and kinetic contemplation.

This same aesthetic experience may relate to the exploration or "revelation of the world" that is characteristic of the modes of realism of the audiovisual image.

According to André Bazin's interpretation, in fact, one of the most historically relevant contributions of the medium of film, as well as one of the co-factors of the ontology of cinema, is given by its proposing itself to the spectator as a spectacle of reality, "revealing" the natural element. As cinema is by its essence a dramaturgy of nature, it replaces the universe not by constructing a set or architecture but by determining an aesthetic catalyst that will appear as "nature"¹⁶.

«The epic neo-realist landscape», celebrated in a lyric by Pier Paolo Pasolini — «with its cobblestones, pines, peeling walls»¹⁷ —, within which the characters move and with them the entire system of representation, could, according to this theory, be conceived as the main "aesthetic catalyst", the primary source of an aesthetic experience dominated by the "sensation of space", characteristic of Neorealist cinema.

Re-elaborating these instances later, the authors of the Nouvelle Vague intensified the immersive and contemplative aesthetic experience, soliciting the spectator's transfert with characters who constantly confront the context, including the landscape.

¹⁶ A. Bazin, *What is Cinema?* (1967), Vol. 1, University of California Press, Oakland 2005.

¹⁷ P.P. Pasolini, *The Religion of my Time*, in Id., *The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2014.

It happens, for instance, in the finale scene of *Les quatre cents coups* (1959), when there appears, first, a dynamic representation of Antoine's subjective point of view as he gazes for the first time in his life at the seascape, with its beach, boats and open horizon; and, later, a shot of the boy running through that same landscape, until he plunges his feet into the sea.

In this sequence, which combines the contemplative vision and the immersive experience of the seascape, the spectator's psychological processes of identification and projection invests the character and, through him, also nature and its entities, thanks to the sharing of Antoine's point of view, the duration of his observation of space and his movement within it — as well as the relevance of the sound of his feet in the puddles and, finally in the roaring waves of the sea.

By virtue of the psychological transfert with the character, the spectator shares his experience and also his relationship with the landscape, experiencing the “sensation of space” as well as the experience of coenesthetic, proprioceptive and tactile exploration of the environment, the sense of freedom.

In the anthropomorphism of the cosmos and in the cosmomorphism of man connected to the “revelation of nature”, it can glimpse the first announcement of a cosmocentric aesthetic. This aesthetic implicitly correlates with ecologism, which emerged during the historical period of the Nouvelle Vague, intertwining with various cultural currents of different origins.

Joshua Meyrowitz linked the profound social and cultural transformations occurring around the mid-20th century to the longstanding influence of media culture. From this interpretive perspective, it is plausible to hypothesize that the gradual transcendence of anthropocentrism and a shift in the “structure of feeling” and thinking are interconnected. This shift can be attributed to numerous cultural and social factors that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, including early signals of an ecological and cosmocentric aesthetic.

The audiovisual media, particularly since that era, has played a significant role in exploring and revealing the natural world through the conventions of realism. This exploration spans various genres, formats, registers, and styles within the global media system — from naturalistic documentaries to adventure films, reality shows set in wild nature, and narrative films focusing on the human/nature relationship. These media forms increasingly engage the viewer's senses in an immersive perception and dynamic contemplative experience.

A primary factor in this aesthetic experience of the natural landscape through audiovisual media is the movement of the camera in space. These movements are perceived as analogous to human movement due to the operator's actions on the camera, regardless of whether they simulate a character's subjective viewpoint. This perception roots in the *Gestalttheorie* perspective by Rudolf Arnheim and later reflections by Sobchack inspired by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology¹⁸. These interpretations view camera movement as a principal means of situating humans in the world, simulating the dynamic relationship of the body within a three-dimensional environment.

David Bordwell elaborates that the dynamism of the shot establishes a mimetic relationship not only with vision but also with all the viewer's bodily senses. This offers proprioceptive, tactile, and haptic perceptions that mimic the kinetic interaction with the environment and its entities. This is the anthropomorphic camera movements¹⁹.

For instance, in the opening scene of Andrej Tarkovsky's *Offret (Sacrifice)*, 1986), the expansive, flat landscape by the lake is traversed in breadth and depth by the camera over approximately ten minutes. This follows the slow and discontinuous movements of the characters, providing the viewer with a sense of the natural space's expanse and three-dimensionality. This effect is achieved through the gradual discovery of individual areas or the overall landscape, enabling the perception and cognition of the metonymic relationship between humans and natural elements.

These immersive and contemplative aesthetic experiences foster a deeper connection and understanding between humans and their environment, contributing to a shift towards a more ecologically conscious and cosmocentric perspective.

The movement of the visual field within space serves as the primary technical-expressive tool for mediating between humans and their environment, a mediation unique to the kinetic medium. This mediation is grounded in the action of mimetic thinking, mirror neurons, and more broadly, mirror systems, which Gallese and Guerra describe as promoting an "embodied simulation" of bodily movement²⁰.

¹⁸ V. Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992; Id., *Carnal Thoughts. Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2016; L. U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema Embodiment and the Senses*, Duke University Press, Durham 2000; Id., *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2002.

¹⁹ D. Bordwell, *Camera Movement and Cinematic Space*, in "Ciné-Tracts", n. 2, 1977, pp. 19-25; J.M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye. Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles- London 2009.

²⁰ V. Gallese, M. Guerra, *Lo schermo empatico. Cinema e neuroscienze*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2015.

Such an interaction with the environment, both imaginary and physical, forms the basis for immersive vision and the contemplative experience of the viewer in front of the kinetic image of the landscape. Interestingly, the very factors defining the condition of the aesthetic experience of the moving image — the actual separation between representation and viewer and the absence of real bodily cenesthesia in the latter — are essential for a more intense mental activation of processes related to movement mimesis.

The dialogic relationship between the carnal and mental dimensions, the real and the imaginary, inherent in the aesthetic relationship, is the *conditio sine qua non* for a situated and sensitive relationship with the cosmos and its entities. This dialogic interplay is also the primary source of metaphorical and symbolic thinking, as well as rational and empirical thought.

This dialogical relationship paves the way for the development of an ecological and cosmocentric aesthetic.

2. Synesthesia of the Audiovisual Landscape

In the opening scene of *Fata Morgana* (1971) by Werner Herzog, the slow and wide movements of the camera traverse the desert landscape's dunes, highlighting their irregular surfaces, cavities, and reliefs. This almost tactile engagement with the landscape gives the impression of "touching" the dunes with the viewer's fingers.

Similarly, in the finale scene of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) by Werner Herzog, the drone-mounted camera captures the variegated and polychromatic rock walls bordering a riverine landscape in 3D. The low-altitude flight of the drone emphasizes the rocks' tridimensionality, their changing colors, and shadows as it moves, dynamically presenting them for the viewer's eyes, hands, body, and mind.

According to the conception of Merleau-Ponty, revisited by the philosophy of embodiment at the start of the 21st century, aesthetic thought and sensory knowledge, as embodied activities, form a unity with the "flesh of the world". Experience and perception are thus an indivisible whole, both in their components and in relation to the cosmos.

The embodied experience in these films exemplifies the notion that the human sensory engagement with the world is not limited to isolated sensory inputs but is a holistic, unified experience. This approach aligns with the philosophy of embodiment, which emphasizes that thought and sensory perception are inherently connected to human bodily experience.

The use of technology, such as drones and advanced cameras, enhances this immersive sensory engagement by allowing viewers to experience landscapes in new, more integrated ways. By simulating the experience of moving through these environments, the films encourage an embodied and sensitive understanding of the landscape.

Already during the 20th century, the search for a common denominator between a physiological or scientific conception of seeing and a historical and cultural one culminated, especially in the French context, in the notion of “regard” – Roger Caillois, Georges Bataille, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, and indeed Merleau-Ponty – affirming its carnal rooting and expanding its semantic area to encompass the world of animals and inanimate objects, as well as inspiring, among others, authors like Elkins, Mitchell, Didi-Huberman, and Bredekamp in insisting on the transfer of the human gaze and the world and its entities, including the images themselves²¹.

For the purposes of this investigation, it is worth noting that there are two main lines characterizing this area of research.

On the one hand, the interest in separating the gaze from its seemingly essential connection with the eye — especially the human eye — has regenerated attention to the issue of animism, which has recently developed in the field of film theory, media studies, and contemporary art, also thanks to a rediscovery of the writings of Jean Epstein, Sergei M. Eisenstein, and Edgar Morin. In this field, Louis Abramson’s question about what landscapes in images want from their observers is of great interest for our study. The question takes its cue from Mitchell’s famous essay *What Do Pictures Want?* and at the same time recalls that original process of subjectivization of the landscape that, in the pictorial context, Paul Cézanne had expressed with the formula «The landscape reflects, humanizes itself, thinks in me», and which must be ascribed to the anthropo-cosmo-morphic transfer, that is, to that key process of aesthetic perception and thought — through mimetic, metaphorical, and metamorphic artistic sign as a gesture of introjection and creative expression — within which the awareness of existential, equal, and metonymic interdependence and interrelation – *pars pro toto* and *totum pro parte* – between man and the cosmos could potentially be rooted.

²¹ J. Elkins, *The Object Stares Back. On the Nature of Seeing*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1996; W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want?* Chicago University Press, Chicago 2006; H. Bredekamp, *Image Act: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2021; G. Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, Les Editions du Minuit, Paris 1999.

On the other hand, what Martin Jay has called the “denigration of vision” in relation to this area of research has given rise to a series of investigations into the carnality of the gaze and its relationship with the other senses, which Mitchell has indicated as fruitful for the development of visual culture studies, when he wrote that the most promising offering of visual culture lies in moving beyond the scopophilic wars towards a more productive critical space, where the intricate entanglement and nesting of the visual with the other senses would be studied.

Synesthesia could be defined as the manifold unity of sensory perception that summons the entire sensorium and the individual senses, defining the boundaries of human sensitivity and aesthetic experience. It is not conceivable as one of the contents of aesthetics, but rather as the context that determines them individually; in other words, it does not constitute one of its variants but rather the organizational form that makes them possible.

The “multiplex unitas” of synesthesia is a complex system that cannot be broken down or reduced to its isolated parts, and whose individual elements are placed in interrelationship with each other and with those of the audiovisual system.

It is characteristic of the aesthetic experience of the audiovisual to glimpse the organized whole of perceptions and simultaneously the reciprocal relationships that compose this whole. As clarified by Merleau-Ponty, reflecting on the cinematic experience, analytical perception, which offers the absolute value of isolated elements, thus corresponds to a late and exceptional attitude, that of the intellectual or philosopher who reflects.

The audiovisual medium engages the totality of the sensorium in a spatiotemporal composition of visual and auditory elements that, placed in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship, become meaning — we could therefore say, with Roland Barthes, that “meaning is produced sensually”.

Thought in the audiovisual realm emerges from the complex and dynamic spatiotemporal system of auditory and visual forms. In this emergence of sensitive thought and knowledge, a key function is exercised by the imaginary, memory, and related non-visual and non-auditory sensations, or “others”: tactile, olfactory, gustatory, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive.

According to this conception, the human being may not be so much the one who explains and constructs the world, but rather a being who is immersed in and connected to it through an inherent and natural bond.

It is understood that within the realm of cinematic representation of landscapes, synesthesia constitutes a key factor in predisposing the viewer to an aesthetic embodiment — mimetic, metaphorical, and metamorphic — of the cosmos and its beings.

Already in the context of silent cinema, Eisenstein had reflected on the “music of the landscape” and on the cinematic image of an emotional landscape, which acts in the film as a musical component and which is “non-indifferent nature”. According to this conception, for example, in silent cinema, it was the landscape that "resonated" most frequently.

This conception finds its manifestation in the sequence from *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), set at dawn in the port of Odessa, where the slow movement of leaden mists over the sparkling water creates a plastic symphony of chiaroscuro, through a dynamism of patches of shadows and sharp reflections, which gives rise to a sensation of silence and unease and composes, as a whole, a “music for the eyes”, inspired – as the author explained – by the study of Chinese landscape paintings, in which a musical composition of iconic elements dominates.

Diverse sensory stimuli converge in the coherent creation of meaning in this case, and the landscape is perceived as a dynamic subject, literally “animated”, to the extent that it becomes, in its own right, “non-indifferent nature” to humans and their sensitivity. Synesthetic composition appears, in this way, as an additional factor provoking the dynamic contemplative experience of the viewer towards the cinematic image of the landscape.

With the advent of audiovisual media, sound and image have become equivalent elements, organically fused in the composition of the film’s complex system.

Intradiegetic or extradiegetic noise and music have paved the way for a multisensory perception of space, in which the environmental character of hearing becomes crucial for the viewer’s immersion in the landscape. In this framework, the chromatic element can intervene, moreover, to integrate even more intimately, and almost symphonically, the viewer’s sight and hearing.

The concept of soundscape, introduced and popularized in the 1970s by Raymond Murray Schafer, has allowed us to reflect on the landscape as not only a visual but also a sonic element; not only pictorial but also audiovisual. It marked a cultural and aesthetic paradigm shift, which we referred to as a cosmocentric turn that emerged in the second half of the 20th century, coinciding with the spread of environmentalism²².

The entire sensorium is indeed involved, along with sight and hearing, in the experience of audiovisual media, following a principle of interdependence. As noted by Vivian Sobchack, the fingers, skin, nose, lips, tongue and every other part of human body understand the film. As kinesthetic subjects, the human beings possess an embodied intelligence that opens the eyes far beyond their discrete ability to see, and opens the film far beyond its visibility on the screen.

²² R.M. Schafer, *The Soundscape*, Destiny, Rochester 1993.

This is particularly evident in the iconic and sonic representation of the landscape, where natural elements like snow, ice, water, wind, and fire can activate synesthesia through imagination and memory. They can evoke feelings and thoughts, even in the absence of characters that typically provoke psychological processes of identification and projection. For example, the wind moving landscape elements is not only seen and heard but also felt on the skin and in the breath, and can convey various feelings, from freedom to fear.

In *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (2003) by Kim Ki-duk, each episode corresponds to a season of the year and of human life, and opens with the recurring image of a lake nestled among high mountains and trees emerging from the water, whose crowns change colors and shapes and are more or less delicately moved by the wind, whether it be the warm summer breath, the fresh spring breeze, or the icy winter gust. This synesthetic experience of the landscape, which recurs at the beginning of each episode, is intensified by the different sonic connotation that characterizes each season: the sound of the lake's waves in summer, the birdsong in spring, the silence of the crystallizing ice in winter.

It is understood how the complex system of audiovisual media corresponds to the much more complex realm of sensitivity and interpretation that are immersed in the anthropocosmic transfert.

The senses, collectively, enter into a kind of resonance through reciprocity, within which, reciprocally so to speak, meaning resonates: in the flow of these inter-retro-actions, the whole or its individual parts oscillate, almost "indifferently", now towards the percept, now towards the meaning, now towards the empirical, now towards the abstract.

In this bidirectional flow, alternating between the sensory and bodily dimension and the mnemonic, imaginative, emotional, and intellectual dimensions, the senses are unified for their embodied and secondarily intellectual significance. In the face of the audiovisual image of the landscape, the spectator is a complete human being, and the act that creates it is a mutually constitutive act of sensitivity and thought, which are only later separated by subsequent rational reflection.

The body of the audiovisual landscape echoes the body of the viewer or, in the terms of Merleau-Ponty, the "flesh of the world", which resonates with that of humans, sensitive and sentient.

Even in the audiovisual synesthetic experience that takes the landscape as its subject, the embodied character of understanding manifests itself, and it is in the body that the mutually constitutive relationship and the dialogical and reciprocal relationship between humans and the cosmos can be rooted.

3. Dynamic Stimmung and the subjectivity of the landscape

In the opening sequence of *Into the Wild* (2008) by Sean Penn, the protagonist appears as an integral part of the landscape: a small, barely visible moving point in the vast expanse of mountains, ice, and rocks; a dark spot camouflaged among the trees; a figure towering over a raised spur, reaching out towards the flying birds; an animal moving cautiously through the snow alongside a deer and a squirrel.

These are just a few of the audiovisual forms that the mimetic, metonymic, and metaphorical relationship between human and Earth can take, understood as an analogy of subjectivity.

The world, the environment, the landscape in audiovisual media are not just objective data, but simultaneously our relationship as human beings with this data. They represent an objective-subjective synthesis of a relationship that is not solely spatial, but of *transfert*, expressed aesthetically through modes of sensory perception, aesthetic experience, and understanding.

Therefore, every perceivable image refers to an inner image, according to that dual nature of objective and subjective, real and imaginary, which is human essence.

Every audiovisual image of the landscape can potentially contain and represent this *transfert*, which is intensely expressed as atmosphere and constitutes a cosmocentric perception or cognition of the world.

For this reason, the nature in cinema is never neutral, independent of subjectivity, even when it appears as a simple background or mere topography. It is a space inhabited by humans and, at the same time, it inhabits humans.

When the space represented in the audiovisual image is a landscape, it has the power to reveal to its viewer the relationship of the author, the character, and the viewer themselves with the world, and more broadly, between humans and the cosmos.

Therefore, what Nelson Goodman affirms about every type of landscape image applies much more deeply to the audiovisual image that the landscape falls within those types of representations that are organs of reality, in the sense that only through them does something become understandable and then real to the spectator. The image of the landscape is capable of making and remaking the world, territories, and cities — and also of remaking the way of making the world, territories, and cities²³.

²³ N. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Hackett, Indianapolis 1978.

In this sense, the audiovisual image of the landscape, to borrow from Georges Didi-Huberman, can “make us look at what concerns us” and mediate between objectivity and subjectivity, between exterior and interior, through what in much aesthetic reflection has been defined as *Stimmung* — a term whose semantic area could be rendered in Italian with expressions such as “emotional atmosphere”, “emotional tone”, or “situation”.

The experience of *Stimmung*, as clarified by Simmel, is the result of a synesthetic perception and a contemplation of feeling that unfolds as a fusion of different dimensions of humans and the environment. When, as in the case of the landscape, the unity of natural being seeks to insert us into its fabric, the division between an I that sees and an I that feels is doubly mistaken²⁴.

In the kinetic contemplation of the landscape through audiovisual representation, particularly, *Stimmung* is dynamic and emerges from the internal movement within the landscape itself and from the external movement produced by the image.

Motion is therefore what animates and subjectivizes the landscape in the image, while mobilizing the senses and intensifying the aesthetic experience also in an affective and emotional sense — from the Latin *e-motio* “movement out”.

Motion, in particular, is a factor that, due to the multiple dimensions involved in the experience, assigns to the dynamic *Stimmung*, characteristic of the audiovisual image, a unified character to the heterogeneity of the elements that compose the landscape. As Simmel recalled, the landscape is such precisely because it has no parts, it is the unity of a totality, it is the infinite connection of things, the uninterrupted birth and destruction of forms, it is the unitary totality.

Inserted into this manifold unity, the viewer of the audiovisual image of the landscape can come to experience empathy and a genuine fusion with the landscape, immersing and “transmigrating” into it, feeling and perceiving it with the entire sensorium, identifying and becoming one with it, and thus finally activating an empathetic inter- and trans-subjective understanding.

In these (rare) cases, there is an aesthetic and ecstatic participation in the landscape, a perceiving-feeling (*aisthesis*) that is at the same time a form of co-living and, in the terms of Hans Georg Gadamer, an “experience of truth” in which the reciprocity between humans and cosmos is realized. The Anthropocene needs audiovisual images capable of bringing the human to these modes of experience and understanding, and of moving us beyond the widespread attitude of an-aesthetic indifference towards the landscape, finally setting the conditions for the development of a cosmocentric consciousness and enabling us to poetically inhabit the Earth.

²⁴ G. Simmel, *The Philosophy of Landscape*, in “Theory Culture & Society”, n.24, December 2007, pp. 20-29.