

# AISTHESIS

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# LANDSCAPE: ART AND ECOLOGICAL THINKING

by Stefano Verri

ART HISTORIAN

Never more than at the present time, so fraught with difficulty, has the question of man's relationship with nature been so topical. A complex, dynamic relationship in which the progressive technical emancipation of man has accompanied a growing need for nature to be safeguarded, preserved and protected – the result of an inexorable inversion of roles which has seen man move from being the victim of uncontrollable forces to the principal destroyer of the earth which nourishes him, and of the ecosystem of which he is an integral part.

It is through his sensibility (and obvious partiality) that the artist – in the broadest sense of the word – has portrayed, and continues to portray, this gradual shift of perspective, this sea-change transforming man's perception of nature and thus of landscape. And it is landscape above all that lends itself to figurative representation, that perceptual dimension of nature which is acquired, as Raffaele Milani rightly notes, as something separate, distinct from the scientific concept of nature and the political concept of territory. Landscape is precisely that aspect of nature which affects us emotionally and which we submit to a subjective work of interpretation and imagination.

The great age of the Romantic landscape severs us once and for all from the reassuring, untroubled dimension of myth and the orderly dreamy spirit of the preceding centuries, to show us the extraordinary beauty of the sudden and unpredictable in which the divine manifests itself. Thus in *The Wreck of Hope*, the title at once ambiguous and emblematic of a work by Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) housed in the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, the great German artist depicts an enormous heap of jagged ice – the true subject of the painting – which has engulfed a ship, barely distinguishable and relegated to the middle distance on the right of the composition. It is a portrayal of the overwhelming power of Nature to which the artifices of man-the-intruder are destined ignominiously to succumb, and it gives breath and substance to that sense of the Sublime which Kant and Schopenhauer had theorized some years earlier.

The awareness of what, adopting Paul Crutzen's felicitous term, we now almost unanimously refer to as Anthropocene - to denote the epoch in which mankind has interfered with the environment on a global scale and for the worse - was to prove one of the driving forces behind artistic developments in the second part of the twentieth century which altered our very perception of the artist, transforming him from someone who portrays and feels amazement to someone who feels the need to intervene. It marks a new ecological consciousness, expressed from the 1960s onwards through Land Art (in which landscape serves as a stage but is also a component of the work itself) and Arte Povera (in which nature is a source to draw on for new artistic materials) and through the poetics of Joseph Beuys, perhaps one of the most cogent examples, whose work turns on the search for a new harmony between man and the environment (GILLO DORFLESS, FRANCESCO POLI).

The poetics that can be summed up in Land Art, in its various forms and meanings (Earth Works, Earth Art, Ecological Art), constitute the turning point in reflections on the relationship/"debate" between art and nature, and distance themselves sharply from the aesthetic and metaphysical sense of the Sublime in order to return to a human dimension which concerns itself with the environment, exploitation of resources and sustainability (LUCY-SMITH). Hence a new sort of attention which led to a number of ventures which have gained a place in art history: from Michael Heizer (b. 1944) who, in 1970, dug Double Negative, a 457-metre trench in Nevada (USA), gouged out with dynamite and bulldozers, to Robert Smithson (1938-1973) who, in the same year, brought his art to bear on the Great Salt Lake in Utah (USA). In a sense, Smithson vindicated a territory which had been exploited, compromised and then abandoned by man, choosing it as the location for his Spiral Jetty, made of basalt, algae and salt crystals, all natural elements available in situ which the artist reorganized aesthetically. If these two examples can be considered permanent – making allowance for the inevitable wear from being exposed to the forces of nature, a state integral to the works – other artists have chosen to operate less invasively. They have created artwork that can only be enjoyed for a limited period, like Christo (1935-2020) and Jeanne-Claude (1935-2009) whose Surrounded Islands project (1980-1983) swathed eleven islands in Biscayne Bay, Miami (SA) in a floating pink fabric for eleven days, covering parts of the beach and the surrounding sea, in a memorable artistic venture which enhanced the landscape without allowing the aesthetic magnificence to

impair the ethical soundness of the operation since a preliminary assessment of the environmental impact on the islands was an integral part of the project.

All are examples of direct intervention, whether permanent or ephemeral, motivated by the need to act directly and decisively on the landscape, altering its morphology in line with a predetermined aesthetic.

If we accept landscape – that part of nature which above all can be represented figuratively – as a symbolic space, it is one that appears as an extraordinary repository of collective memories to which the artistic sensibility has been and remains a privileged witness. Such is the case of Mario Giacomelli (1925-2000) who throughout his long career recounts with extraordinary lyricism the work of the fields, rural life, the landscape, the land transfigured into abstract elements by those almost absolute whites and blacks which make his work so unique and fascinating. But as well as the artistic merit, the sheer brilliance and uniqueness of the shot and the sensitivity of the development, there is the documentary value of his work: his personal, fully conscious testimony to the morphological changes which “his” landscapes had undergone over time. Emblematic from this point of view is the small series of photographs which the economics historian, Sergio Anselmi (1924-2003), published with a commentary in 1978, to accompany his article *Paesaggio agrario e territorio: la distruzione di una collina in nove fotografie di Mario Giacomelli. 1955-1977* [Landscape and Territory: the destruction of a hill in nine photographs by Mario Giacomelli. 1955-1957] («Proposte e ricerche» n.2, 1978). Today these photographs are housed in the Museo di Storia della Mezzadria “Sergio Anselmi” [Museum of the History of Sharecropping] in Senigallia and bear witness to the changes which the hill was subjected to over the course of 22 years. “Here Mario Giacomelli’s photographs are a powerful reminder that land is a non-reproducible resource, and Giacomelli entrusted them to his friend Anselmi in the knowledge that through his art he, Giacomelli, had already distilled the argument that the historian would present; but he wants his photographs to act as the narrating voice, almost prompting the narrative itself.” (ADA ANTONIETTI)

As the new millennium gets underway, new generations of artists are following in the footsteps of these earlier masters in feeling a social duty to place nature, the environment,

and landscape at the centre of their work, focusing on the οἶκος, on their own habitat. Oikos is also family, home, the basic unit of a society, and it is around the oikos that the poetics of Giovanni Gaggia (b. 1977) revolve. His oikos is a farmhouse in the hills above Pergola. Since 2008 it has been a meeting point for artists, performers, critics, writers, or simply art lovers. But the house, "CasaSponge", is really an artistic meta-project, an amphibious collector of ideas: a house which is lived in, but at the same time opens itself up to the outdoors, hosting projects which are conceived, developed and carried through jointly, and designed to live in the memory and to make their mark on the house and the surrounding landscape. What is interesting is that this metaproject stems from a profound inner transformation on the part of the artist, since the 2008 performance which marked the opening of CasaSponge, How Saint Francis healed a Leper – an act of purification inspired by chapter XXV of The Little Flowers of Saint Francis, in which the artist, digging at the root of a tree, draws out a re-stitched heart, and washes it.

It is the landscape, the natural environment, that conjures the emotions which determine our deep attachment to our roots, to the places of our paternal grandparents. A physical bond with the land and with the landscape around the home.

# SEEING BEYOND SIGHT

by Maurizio Pasetti

AUTHOR AND SCREENWRITER

A person devoid of sight, or with a serious visual impairment, can use audiovisual language to communicate their relationship with the world and give poetic expression to their inner world, contributing – through their specific modes of perception – to a perspectival innovation in terms both of the structuring of audiovisual language and of the practical, operational aspects of the language itself.

This claim, which may seem paradoxical or even absurd, is based on a real experience, one undergone at first hand, lived through and processed over ten years with the association and production company to which I belong.

My training in the cinema began in 1989, as a sighted person, when I attended Ipotesi Cinema, Ermanno Olmi's film school in Bassano del Grappa. What made that workshop different from traditional cinema schools was basically the absolute attention to listening to reality in all its manifestations and the concrete practice of cinema, in the sense that cinema, as we were constantly told, is something you learn by living. Through the work of hundreds of participants from all over Italy, these practices have led to the formulation of a method called "Postazione per la Memoria" (PpM) ("Workspace for Memory"). In order to recount authentically and originally it is necessary to have the humility and intelligence to observe reality with all our senses and later to process it, but only after having understood it without prejudice or presumption.

"Workspace for Memory" (PpM) consists of a technique of film-making which eliminates pre-established semiological doctrines. The exploration of reality is attuned to the natural length of the gaze. It results from listening attentively to reality and from carefully examining the filmed material so as to extract from it sequences which are significant and emblematic. The awareness acquired through this observation enables close interaction with the observed world and is the prerequisite for the Shared Listening Technique (TAC – Tecnica dell'Ascolto Condiviso). It is by means of this technique that the observer enters into an avowed and searching relationship with existence, setting up a reciprocity of

intentions and emotions. This empathic approach ensures that the interaction between author and reality yields highly significant forms of narration.

My years at Ipotesi Cinema, thanks to the experimental philosophy underpinning it, taught me a number of skills concerning not only the language of cinema but also life on the set and the countless tasks which make it possible: from helping the stage technician or the electricians to the important job of assistant director.

It was also an opportunity to gain a thorough knowledge of editing with the classic moviola which, with the advent of digital, has now been consigned to the museum of industrial archeology, eliminating the need for manual dexterity and tactile sensitivity, so necessary for the task.

During this learning process, adopting the methods I have mentioned, I was given the chance to make fiction films and documentaries. I shall mention three that I am particularly fond of: "L'intero giorno sento rumore di acque" ("All day I hear the sound of water"), shot in Trieste in hangar 26 at Porto Vecchio which contained the household goods of the Istrian profugees, forced to leave their homes as a result of the controversial events of the Second World War; "Silvia" which deals with the difficult relations between mother and daughter in a mountainous region where work and the desire to get on cause tension and suffering in a context of impoverishment and depopulation; "Camuni", a documentary about two shepherds in the upper Valle Camonica who, on the threshold of the third millennium, still practise alpine pasturage according to the traditional customs and methods.

Audiovisual communication conducted according to the methods outlined above allows everybody, whether neurotypical or with special needs, to seek their own "voice", and enables people to achieve expression in relation to their specific perceptual condition. In the video connected to the following link, "Saper ascoltare" ("Knowing how to listen"), I explain how we went from the Ipotesi Cinema experience to the Workspace for Memory method and then the Shared Listening Technique, from which we developed Multisensory Video Literacy (Video Alfabetizzazione Multisensoriale) which I shall talk about later.

At the centre of everything is LISTENING

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P\\_uoLQdPIPU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_uoLQdPIPU)

After the seminal experience of Ipotesi Cinema, research into and experimentation with audiovisual film language proceeded through Kineo and Kinefilm with the Paduan director,



Rodolfo Bisatti, and in time with other very valuable colleagues. 2010 was the year in which our work took a decisive multi-sensory turn, with the making of Rodolfo Bisatti's film "Voci nel buio" ("Voices in the dark") for which I was co-screenwriter and assistant director. This film is a "war story": one war, in the former Yugoslavia, is evoked; the other is an inner struggle played out in the present-day in the reinforced concrete monolith of Rozzol Melara in Trieste. It is here that Angelo - a former university teacher and founder of an association in support of Yugoslav refugees at the time of the Balcan conflict - decided to abandon his job and his commitments when his son, Giovanni, then aged four, lost his sight after a serious illness. Giovanni is now an intelligent, enterprising adolescent, but suffers as a result of the continuing remorse of his father, who is unable to communicate with him.

Giovanni is played by a boy, Giuseppe Cocevare from Trieste, who really is blind. In our screenplay we had imagined that, in trying to communicate with his father (who works at night and sleeps during the day), Giovanni might make some sound recordings to tell him about his time at school, at the gym, the piano lesson, and his adventures with a female friend. But Giuseppe surprised us by saying that he would prefer to employ a video camera, given that he already used one. This insight set us thinking about the possibility of organizing some workshops in which the so-called disability might serve as a stimulus and provide a prospect of achieving real progress - significant and innovative - in audiovisual language.

These experiences proved important and stimulating, in terms both of group bonding and the practical results achieved. Subsequently we extended the application of Workspace for Memory (PpM) and the Shared Listening Technique by developing a third research path: Multisensory Video Literacy (Video Alfabetizzazione Multisensoriale - VAM).

As the title Multisensory Video Literacy indicates, it is by working through our available senses that we learn the basics of audiovisual and film language. The various codes which make up this language - the visual, the acoustic, sign language through mime and gesture, the linguistic, the rhythmic, the psychological - are studied, interpreted, processed through the modes of perception specific to each person. The sightless person will shape the codes which make up the film language by going beyond the loss of the visual code, and whoever has a sensory deficit (hearing, movement, or another) will act in the same way.

Above all, it is not new - quite the opposite; it is firmly anchored to the past.

We could say that it is a CODE. Code comes from “tree trunk” and we think that VAM is very close to this original meaning. Code like genetic code, the code of a language, machine code, and for us above all (to quote James Hillman) the code of the soul. A code is a shared channel connecting speaker and listener. For our code the crucial reference is the person and the complex, interconnected relations which he or she establishes in society. We are interested in the person in his or her wholeness.

In Multisensory Video Literacy (VAM) the differences and diversities which emerge both within and among individuals are investigated and assessed in their uniqueness and specificity as rich sources of opportunity which a community needs to welcome, consider, learn to know and make the best use of, if it does not want to disintegrate once and for all. Much of the information provided so far is taken from “VAM videoalfabetizzazione multisensoriale istruzioni per l'uso” (“VAM – instructions for use”) by the Kineo team. VAM is a multimedia and multisensory workshop which can affect all available artistic techniques, from the audiovisual to the theatre, through events, poetry, painting, sound environments, writing, music, digital arts, photography.

If there is an unsighted person in the group when the VAM workshop is engaged in drafting a screenplay, their specific contribution will be extremely useful because their descriptions of space and gesture will take on a necessary and meaningful form.

Let us look at an example. During one of the workshops organized in Trieste, the participants were asked to remember the sensory details of some of their childhood experiences. Nicola, a young man blind from birth, made a valuable contribution by describing his classroom and desk in this way: “It was a room with very high walls and it smelt of moss, not of mould, which is why it wasn't so unpleasant. With my fingertips I could feel the well-worn grain of the desk above the wooden bench, I used to trace the marks which had been etched in the wood over a period of years with the tips of biro...”. While society often looks on specific perceptual conditions as anomalies that need treating, we look on them as precious resources, fundamental to the success of the formative, introspective and artistic process.

VAM is consistent with the spirit of the Charter of Communication Rights, unanimously adopted at the 31st session of the UNESCO General Conference in Paris, 2 November 2001. In the same year, to our great satisfaction, the VAM method was sponsored by UNESCO as one of the most advanced systems developing digital democracy.

The workshops conducted with unsighted or hearing-impaired people, autistic or illiterate children, have taught us the strategic importance of VAM's audiovisual mediation in the processes of social and linguistic interaction. In fact, the activities are designed jointly for people with and without disabilities. Included in the process of developing this method, progressively honed and enhanced in the course of the VAM workshop sessions, lies my own experience.

Starting in 2015 there was a rapid and unexpected deterioration in the myopia which I had always suffered from, until I was gradually brought to my present condition of low vision, with minimal visual residue. Initially it was obviously a time of depression, feeling that everything I had managed to build up, especially in the areas of teaching and film, had come crashing down. In fact, though, during this first really tough stage, all the interpersonal relations I had forged, all the activities I had engaged in since 2010, proved decisive for my comeback and, above all, essential in clarifying what, in concrete terms, my role and working relations could now be.

In essence, I needed to pass from a theoretical awareness (albeit sympathetic) of the blindness from which our workshop participants suffered, to direct, first-hand experience of what it means to be deprived of sight. Everything I had learnt during our VAM workshops from the information volunteered by course members, and especially the feedback from unsighted people, represented a precious resource of sensory and emotional data crucial to enabling me to continue my audiovisual work. And so I found myself in the role of teacher and pupil at the same time, establishing an empathic relationship and a sort of "perceptual complicity" with the blind participants. This experience has also proved valuable in conducting courses or seminars for teachers, social workers, and communication professionals without specific disabilities.

I expected my work as a screenwriter to be impoverished as a result of my visual deficit, but, in fact, the other senses, especially touch and hearing, have honed my descriptive abilities considerably. Gradually, in my writing, I have tried to render what I "saw" through what I touched and heard. The acoustic and tactile images constituted a new "viewpoint" for what I was recounting.

In my latest cinema venture, in 2018, working on Rodolfo Bisatti's film "Al Dio Ignoto" ("To the Unknown God"), my contribution as co-screenwriter drew directly upon my specific perceptual experiences. By way of example, I would like to mention one key scene in the film in which it was important for me to rummage around among my tactile memories from

childhood. At the beginning of the film, the main female character digs a hole in the garden in order to bury a cake with sixteen candles. What appears to be a pointless action is in fact related to a dramatic event which she had experienced years before. After lowering the cake into the hole, I suggested that it should be covered, not by using the spade to shovel the earth back in, but by picking up the clods and gently refilling the hole by hand. Many viewers later told us that they had experienced an almost physical sense of the smell of the grass and the dampness of the soil which smeared the character's hands. The other exceptionally important aspect of film language is the whole question of sound. It is one that interests me and to which I have devoted specific attention. After losing my sight, exploring the world of sound proved really decisive. It was while we were preparing "Al Dio Ignoto" that, thanks to a meeting with Angelo Farina, Professor of Physics and Applied Acoustics at Parma University, I had the opportunity to rediscover Ambisonics, a recording technique known since the 1970s but only recently re-attracting the attention of musicians, sound technicians and cinema people. Ambisonics uses equipment which records full-sphere surround sound at the source, reproducing the spatial properties of the sounds themselves faithfully and naturally.

Another experimental project which I am carrying forward with Kineo, using the Ambisonics technique, is the VAM-Camera AUscura project which we want to recommend to exhibitions, museums, art galleries and scientific and artistic high schools.

VAM-Camera AUscura offers a sensory-perceptive experience which triggers creative introspection through concentrated listening awakened by specifically devised sound compositions broadcast inside a technically modified camera obscura.

By way of winding up this brief overview, I would say that my experience of developing and applying research in the field of Multisensory Video Literacy (VAM) has enabled me not only to get over the grief at losing my sight, but to embark on a fruitful journey of exploration towards further horizons of audiovisual and film language suggested by my current perceptual condition.

# FROM ACCESSIBILITY TO PARTICIPATION – INCLUSIVOPERA AND BEYOND

by Elena Di Giovanni

COORDINATOR OF THE INCLUSIVOPERA PROJECT – MACERATA  
OPERA FESTIVAL

For nearly twenty years now, in my work as teacher and researcher, I have never ceased to believe that theory and practice need to go hand in hand in all spheres and contexts, and not lose sight of one another.

Experimentation aimed at improving accessibility to film and live performance for people with sensory disabilities has its roots, in my experience, in research: in 2007 I joined a European project designed to monitor and increase accessibility to European media, especially television. The project envisaged a series of experimental activities as well as interaction with colleagues and fellow professionals from various countries, and it was this that stimulated me to combine my newly acquired knowledge with what I had learnt from my previous experience, in particular with the Macerata Opera Festival. My determination to put theoretical and methodological considerations into practice resulted in the first two events at Macerata to be accessible to the blind and visually impaired: performances of *La Traviata* and *Madama Butterfly* with audio description. The Friends of the Macerata branch of the Italian Union for the Blind, actively involved as they were in this initial venture right from the earliest stages, sent an official note of thanks to the local press for having been able “to see the opera for the first time”.

From 2009 onwards we have continued to experiment without interruption: further performances and events have followed; the project has expanded with the involvement of blind people and their caregivers from all over Italy.

Since 2013, the live performances with audio description are preceded by free tactile itineraries for the blind and their carers, and since 2014 these programmes have been theme-based: music and musical instruments, the costume shop and stage costumes, the

stage and stage sets. 2014 also saw the start of a tourist itinerary for the blind and visually impaired, in association with the Museo Statale Tattile Omero di Ancona. For the past three years, the Macerata Opera Festival has also welcomed deaf people and their companions, with guided tours in Italian sign language, assisted listening aids, and surtitles.

One of the founding principles of this project, known officially as InclusivOpera since 2016, is that everyone should be involved, not just in making use of the itineraries, tours and accessible services, but in planning and creating them: artists and theatre technicians, front of house staff, accessibility staff, university students, but especially the people with visual or hearing disabilities who can act as valuable consultants, constant sources of information, audio description editors, and, in recent years, guides for the tours and itineraries which are now fully multisensory. Indeed, the multisensory nature of these ventures, and the participation of all concerned, has shifted the axis of the InclusivOpera project in an entirely natural way from accessibility to inclusion. And "inclusion" is the term we like to use today because it is untainted by the slight connotation of privation inherent in "accessibility" and it inclines positively in the direction of sharing. Inclusion is the crucial final goal of the InclusivOpera project: everybody can not only enjoy a performance but contribute to creating it through the variety of their own distinctive, valuable skills.

Inclusion is allied to another key concept: participation. For a cultural and artistic experience to be truly inclusive the participation of everybody is required. At the Macerata Opera Festival, everyone takes part in InclusivOpera: the box office personnel, the technicians, the musicians, the stage managers, the singers and chorus masters, all get involved, taking part in the inclusive programmes together with those with sensory disabilities. For their part, the people with disabilities play an active role by involving friends and family, many of whom might not have approached the world of opera otherwise. Participation has proved a winning formula; everyone feels fulfilled and the memories it leaves are always positive.

So we can sum up by saying that accessibility leads to inclusion, inclusion implies participation, and participation provides general access to knowledge and experience, to the benefit of all.

InclusivOpera has been responsible for three research projects at Macerata University (doctoral and post-doctoral) as well as numerous scientific publications and a further four inclusive projects in theatres in Italy and Europe. It has led to the training of young experts, now working as ambassadors to promote accessibility in Italy and the USA.

In 2019 InclusivOpera had over 300 participants, and this year, despite the Covid emergency, logistical difficulties and restricted places, a good 145. The hope for all of us is that opera, like art, can be more and more inclusive and beget positive experiences of sharing and participation.

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