

# Living, Narrating and Enhancing the Landscape Through the Ethics of Responsibility

**Vereno Brugiattelli**

PhD, University of Verona,  
Department of Philosophy, Italy

## Abstract

This study aims to provide some answers to the following problems regarding the landscape: 1. What does enhancing the landscape mean? 2. Upon which theoretical and operative bases is it possible to intervene in the landscape in order to enhance it? 3. How is it possible to build in a way which promotes good living while respecting the landscape and its environmental equilibrium? I intend to discuss these issues from the perspective of some considerations regarding the narrative of the landscape. Man has always provided accounts about his environment and territory thereby forming a complex idea of the landscape over time. The narrative of the landscape constitutes a sort of collective memory making the landscape a “quasi persona” that interacts with man's different actions. The basic thesis of this study is to demonstrate that each intervention in the landscape – with the intention of its enhancement and good living – should be inspired by the ethics of responsibility and, thereby, be guided by the narrative of the landscape which conveys its specific and characteristic traits.

**Keywords:** Landscape; Living; Responsibility; Well-being; Narrative

## Introduction

In this study I will put forward some reflections regarding the landscape to outline some theoretical and practical features which I consider necessary in order to enhance and improve the quality of living. To this end, once the concepts of landscape, territory and environment have been clarified, I will move on to the narratives of the territory and the ethical perspective of the principle of responsibility as fundamental prerequisites to shed light on all forms of intervention in the landscape and the way of living.

On this basis I will outline the theoretical and ethical aspects which should animate the different types of intervention in the landscape. Such aspects, which have been identified and conceived to enable the application of the universal principle of responsibility in the single and specific concrete cases, will be indicated in the

following: interpreting to understand the historical and typical cultural characteristics of a certain landscape starting from its narratives using our understanding of the landscape to realize ethical actions able to restore and reactivate the resources of the landscape which have been interrupted by short-sighted and irresponsible intrusions; restoring any of the landscape's cultural features of historical importance in order to contribute to the creation of a landscape that can offer the best living conditions, thereby creating psycho-physical well-being and healthy relationships; implementing initiatives which can materialise in constructions that protect the future generations from known or identifiable risks and dangers.

In the light of these traits I will try to promote the enhancement of the landscape not only from an aesthetic point of view but, more collectively, according to the ethical perspective of the good life, which can be defined as life with and for others in the context of an inhabitable landscape for us and for future generations.

### **Landscape, environment and territory**

What is meant by landscape? What is do we call landscape? In order answer these questions, it is necessary to clarify its meaning in relation to what we mean by environment and territory. These terms, despite being referred to reciprocally, have their own specific meaning. By "territory" we refer to the extention of the earth's surface with its geographical and morphological characteristics. To learn about the territory we refer to the Geography of the area which indicates the morphology of places and their transformation brought about by man's intervention.

The term "environment" essentially has both a biological and a historical-cultural meaning. In its biological sense, the environment refers to the conditions of life present in a certain place for living beings such as the geological soil conformation, the hydrography, climate, altitude above sea-level, precipitation, latitude and longitude. The latter meaning refers to the environment in the context of human presence and activities such as agriculture, live-stock farming, industry, urban centres with varying degrees of density and extension, cultural events, artistic records and traces of past and present populations. In both meanings the environment includes the territory, but the territory can do without the environment considered in both the biological and historical-cultural sense. Indeed, the environment moulds the territory.

The landscape, in turn, includes the territory and the environment to which can be added man's vision and considerations regarding the biological, historical and cultural environment of a certain territory.

The landscape is the work of man's transforming actions over time and the distinctive historical and cultural features of the populations that have shaped it are recognisable. The landscape is the result of long, and often, contradictory works of transformation of the territory and environment in response to necessity, needs,

desires, goals and projects, alongside economic, religious, political, artistic, aesthetic, scientific and ideological expectations.

The landscape can be considered a text which lends itself to different forms of interpretation and as a result of interpretations that have materialised over time into many types of transformations which have often turned out to be disastrous for both man and the environment. Bad or mistaken interpretations of the landscape, generated by the logic of power and domination of the territory and the environment, and/or by market and profit-making forces, have produced environmental disasters which will also affect future generations.

In view of this situation, in this study it is of fundamental importance to highlight the importance of elaborating interpretations, unspoilt by the above-mentioned reasoning, which lead to the emergence of the characteristic features of a particular landscape. My objective is also to suggest interventions aimed at enhancing and improving man's living-inhabiting according to an ethical perspective. On this basis I believe it is necessary to adopt the ethics of responsibility as the principle guideline in interpreting and intervening in the landscape. In particular, I will take into consideration H. Jonas' principle of responsibility formulated in the following terms: intervene in a way that the consequences of our actions are compatible with the permanence of authentic human life on earth (Jonas 1980).

### **The landscape narratives**

If the cultural, historical and aesthetic dimensions together with geographical and environmental factors are considered in isolation, they both reveal and hide important aspects of the landscape. It is therefore necessary to try to consider the territory and landscape's multiple and varied distinctive features as a whole and in relation to one another. The human practice of narrating best fulfils this need. Through this form of narrative, man has always described his environment and territory thus configuring his idea of the landscape over time. In the narrative numerous elements and dimensions of the landscape are linked thereby constituting a sort of collective memory made up of aspects relating to geology, biology, the actions and endeavours of different inhabitants who have contributed over time to the generation of an environment and a landscape. From these narratives the landscape emerges as a "quasi-persona" that interacts with people by forming a context for the facts, events, actions and protagonists of a story. As stated by E. Turri, in the imaginary landscape the dynamic stories of life occur in the places which act as a "theatre" and in this sense it forms an integral part of the collective memory (Turri 1998).

There are also narratives relating to geographical and geological aspects together with different types of measurable and quantifiable physical events such as rainfall, flooding, earthquakes and avalanches etc. These narratives constitute a historical memory of a scientific nature which, alongside the humanistic accounts, contribute to the creation of what we mean by landscape. From this perspective, landscape can not be given without memory and memory can not be given without a narrative. In actual

fact, the narrative dynamically unites heterogeneous aspects and elements of varying periods of time, so, in this way the landscape acts as a “quasi persona”, or as a sort of protagonist and actor in the story.

## **Two different kinds of landscape narrative**

From the landscape narrative there emerge continuous interventions by man in the territory and environment. Man has contributed to creating his environment together with other physical and biological agents. The landscape narrative, therefore, also conveys the different kinds of wounds that have been afflicted upon the territory and environment over time. In relation to the two notions of landscape outlined above we can identify two sorts of narrative and memories which each responsible intervention in the landscape ought to take into consideration. Firstly, consideration of the landscape from a geo-morphological perspective. Such narrative emerging from this perspective is mainly founded on empirical data which is often illustrated on geographical maps regarding the territorial lay of the land, the type of vegetation, the presence of waterways, ancient and recent urban settlements. Empirical data is also present on geological maps and graphs showing climate variations and precipitation throughout the year etc. The narrative also communicates man's interventions, above all, those which have had a negative impact on the territory and the environment. In this type of narrative, the human settlements form the transitional feature connecting it with the other kind of narrative based on the consideration of the landscape according to a historical, cultural and therefore aesthetical perspective. This narrative encompasses human activities which have appeared, developed and disappeared over time; places inhabited by or “marked” by the actions of prominent figures; historical events and works of art with their symbolic significance etc.

Often political reasoning and the logic of profit do not take into consideration any form of narrative resulting in the construction of urban areas which may be vulnerable to natural disasters such as flooding, hydro-geological instability, landslides and avalanches etc. Furthermore, in many cases these elements of risk for living are accompanied by constructions and urban planning which also ignore the historical, cultural and artistic aspects represented in the narrative. When this happens a landscape of “non-places” is produced, in other words, a landscape comprising spaces which annihilate from the outset any possible form of activity in which man interacts with his peers, with the environment and the territory thereby leading to a devaluation of the landscape and a worsening of the quality of life.

## **Responsible interventions and good living**

Each intervention on the landscape must emerge from the different types of narrative and from a semi-narrative providing the possibility to position the different narratives in relation to and in communication with one another. As mentioned above, these narratives provide us with objective, physical, measurable and quantifiable elements. Besides, they also give us cultural and aesthetical aspects. We believe that any intervention should be enlightened by responsibility in consideration

of these narratives since they embody the integral and fundamental elements of a certain landscape expressed by man. Through them it is possible to understand what can be done to improve the landscape and the quality of life for future generations. Therefore, this does not mean that each type of intervention need be rejected from the outstart seeing it as a danger to the conservation of the landscape. Indeed, the landscape is not best conserved by eliminating all forms of intervention or construction. It involves modifying the landscape by attempting to exploit its hidden or partly-known potential in order to enhance the characteristic features emerging from its narrative.

Responsible and far-sighted interventions are those which know how to use and make the most of these characteristic features. Such interventions are therefore undertaken responsibly with regard to the past, the present and the future. Responsibility with regard to the past involves the awareness that the intervention should consider what the territory and the environment have presented on an objective and quantitative level for centuries including the geological conformation of land and subsoil, the hydrography and climate etc., but also the settlements and the cultural works and activities. Responsibility with regard to the present means that the intervention is undertaken following a close examination of the new and current needs of a cultural, environmental, economic and commercial nature which can not be accepted and translated into interventions in the light of what the old and new landscape narratives communicate and transmit. Responsibility with regard to future generations involves not promoting interventions which may compromise the characteristic traits of a certain landscape, but rather, exploiting and enhancing its potential to promote and improve the quality of life. Such dimensions of responsibility are linked to the recognition of the memories transmitted by the different kinds of narrative.

### **Living and enhancing the landscape**

The landscape is enhanced if accompanied by responsible transformations for future generations. From this viewpoint responsible enhancement involves improving the quality of living in close relation to the quality of the environment. But what do we mean by “enhancement of the landscape”? There is no unequivocal answer, if anything, it is provided by a set of different enhancements.

The aesthetic enhancement of the landscape, beyond its romantic and idealistic acceptance, originates from the enhancement of the environment and living. Enhancing the environment means adopting codes of behaviour together with respectful and pondered techniques regarding the management of resources, the transformation of raw materials, the production and transportation of goods, waste disposal and biodiversity. The enhancement of living means urbanisation and construction in a way which guarantees the safety of the inhabitants in the case of catastrophic events caused by atmospheric phenomena or events relating to the geomorphology of the land and sub-soil. In addition, it means building in order to create places which promote human interaction and numerous possibilities to interact with

the environment through activities like gardening, cultivation, walking for pleasure and sports. It also implies a diet composed of certified organic food etc. The overall enhancement of the landscape thus requires the enhancement of a whole series of components of the territory, the environment, the history and the culture. In light of this overall enhancement, whereby the different enhancements are brought together and interact with one another, living becomes an integral and fundamental part of the landscape making it a place where “dense human interaction” takes place on various levels including human relationships, the relationship between man and the different elements of the territory and environment, and man's relations with the various forms of cultural expression. All these relations become an integral part of the landscape narrative and its memory (Tarpino 2008).

### **Concluding considerations**

The landscape narrative constitutes its memory rendering what is absent to be present thus providing the technical and conceptual elements and coordinates for construction focused on reactivating the environmental and cultural potential which past interventions ignored. In order not to be undertaken randomly or simply financially motivated, each intervention in the landscape can not be implemented without referring to its narratives. The landscape narrative, with its temporal story made up of numerous material and intangible elements, makes it possible to build while focusing on the enhancement of the landscape and good living. One narrative encompassing all the narratives does not exist, but numerous landscape narratives do exist. It is up to the intuition, sensitivity, taste, competence and responsibility of whoever elaborates and plans the intervention to build this “semi-narrative”, made up of many narratives which can be drawn upon to construct in a responsible way.

### **References**

- [1] Bonesio, L. (2001). *Geofilosofia del paesaggio*, Mimesis: Milano.
- [2] Bonesio, L. (2002). *Oltre il paesaggio. I luoghi tra estetica e geofilosofia*, Arianna: Bologna.
- [3] Donadieu, P. (2006). *Campagne urbane*, Donzelli: Roma.
- [4] Jonas, H. (1980). *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, Insel Verlag: Frankfurt.
- [5] Lanzani, A. (2003). *I paesaggi italiani*, Meltemi: Roma.
- [6] Magnaghi, A. (1990). *Il progetto locale*, Bollati Boringhieri: Torino.
- [7] Magnaghi, A. (2001). *Le territoire des habitants: pour un projet local durable*, Fondation Jan Tanghe: Brugge.
- [8] Magnaghi, A. (2010). *Il progetto locale. Verso la coscienza di luogo*, Bollati Boringhieri: Torino.
- [9] Quaini, M. (2005). *L'ombra del paesaggio*, Diabasis: Modena.
- [10] Tarpino, A. (2008). *Geografia della memoria. Case, rovine, oggetti quotidiani*, Einaudi: Milano.
- [11] Tarpino, A. (2016). *Il paesaggio fragile*, Einaudi: Milano.

- [12] Turri, E. (1998). *Il paesaggio come teatro. Dal territorio vissuto al territorio rappresentato*, Marsilio: Venezia.
- [13] Turri, E. (2014 ). *Semiologia del paesaggio italiano*, Marsilio: Venezia.
- [14] Vigano, P. – Pellegrini, P. (2006). *Comment vivre ensemble*, Officina: Napoli.