

Design and Nature: *A Partnership*

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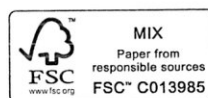
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Narrating the Impression

Having been a landscape designer in practice in the context of a large-scale transportation project in the Middle-East, I noticed the difficulty in retaining and communicating sensory features of my work. The continuous stressing on fast parametric modeling and image production steered me away from considering the sensory qualities of the environment and their relationships with my design, despite the fascinating desert context in which it is immersed. The sharp light on the dusty atmosphere surrounding the high-rise glass reflective façades, the bright glare that such light generates on the limestone built piazzas and the humid, dense air were not considered while designing the landscapes around the infrastructure. Later, when I ran into the “Design + Nature” call for contributions on design as a tool to tackle ecosystem deterioration, my mind went back to that work.

The assumption leading this essay is that the meaning of such ecosystem deterioration could expand beyond its necessary but limited materialist sense to include the flattening of the perceptive qualities of ecosystems. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the word ecosystem means “all the plants, animals, and people, living in an area considered together with their environment as a system of relationships” (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2018). The use of the word “environment” in the definition suggests that such relationships include the immaterial, perceptive ones. Here I refer to the concept of “*Umwelt*” defined in 1926 by Jakob von Uexküll, a German biologist who worked on animal behaviour and muscular physiology, and a founder of the biosemiotics field. *Umwelt* could be translated in English as “environment” or “nature”; however, it differs from the mere surroundings because of the active role of the subject in perceiving it, while being immersed in it. During an informal conversation on Uexküll’s work I had with Dr. Lidia Gasperoni, Lecturer in aesthetics and space theory at the TU Berlin, it was highlighted that

the original argument by Uexküll implied that the world of animals differs from the world of humans because of the human consciousness in grasping the subject position within the environment. However, advancement in research shows that we share this ability with animals (see for example McFarland, 1993). Therefore, I would argue for a more comprehensive concept of *Umwelt* that includes animals as active subjects. As a consequence, because the *Umwelt* is bounded into the physical form and materiality of the environment mediated by the subject's perception, its sensory qualities could enable what Immanuel Kant defined as the aesthetic experience (Kant, 1724[1900]), the subject's impression of the environment. The second assumption of this essay is that the aesthetic experience is an immaterial relationship linking the living inhabitants and the environment within the ecosystem. For this reason, while designing an environment, this aspect should be taken into account, together with more materialistic ecological strategies.

In my experience, the ability of grasping and imagining such impression was lost in the digital design process, probably due to the difficulty in measuring and parametrising such qualities in the binary language of design software. While designing environments, practitioners envision their products in 3D, 4D, 5D models, and visualise them through rendered images. Most of the time such representations focus on form and elements, and prevent them from retaining the complexity of information embedded in the *Umwelt*.

As a potential strategy to enrich the design of such environments, I propose the "landscape narration" method to vehicle such information, narrating and imagining the impression of the non-measurable qualities of both the existing and designed *Umwelt*. Hence, I rediscovered what I learned in professor John Stilgoe's class on "Adventure and Fantasy Simulation" at Harvard University on the immersion on what I am now calling *Umwelt*, and the narration as a way to communicate it, which has been a primary source of inspiration for this work. Let me clarify what I intend with narration, and why I have introduced the word "landscape".

Let's consider the user's aesthetic experience of the environment. I borrow the definition of aesthetic experience from Immanuel Kant, meaning the pleasure associated with the moment of judging something beautiful (Kant, 1790[1992]). In landscape design, to impress the user in this regard is one of the ultimate goals of a project, beyond its functional and standards-compliance requirements. This statement could be easier to understand if we consider that the English word "landscape" comes from the German "Landschaft", which means both a region (a territory) and a scene (an individual visual perception of someone standing in that

region).¹ This second definition underlines how the notion of landscape implies a mediation; there is no landscape without a subject experiencing it (and judging it). In the more specific case of a designed landscape, the mediation implies both the designer's interpretation and the user's experience of that landscape. Therefore, the attempt of situating the work "in nature", in the *Umwelt*, setting the ground for the aesthetic experience of the landscape, is a key challenge when approaching the drafting phase of the landscape design process.

How to bridge the gap?

Historically, both in literature and design sectorial press, scholars and writers have discussed how to render the impression of the environment. Nineteenth-century Romantic writers used hand drawing and written "word-painting" (Landow, 1985; Flaxman, 1998) as a tool to investigate the perceptive qualities of nature. They aimed not only to observe but to see the world in relation to personal feelings, therefore accounting for the mediation I mentioned before. This consciousness has been the result of an international debate among members of the picturesque movement. Landscape historian John Dixon Hunt, in his lecture on the reception of the visuals,² argues that John Ruskin understood that the mind, emotions and the act of perceiving mediate the visual stimulation in the process of drawing after comparing his sketch of the Pass of Faido in the Alps with the one by his friend William Turner (Hunt & Morabito, 2012). This consideration propelled him in reconsidering sketching as a tool to understand the world, adding the verbal extension of seeing, the *ekphrasis* (description) to capture the spirit of things (Hunt & Morabito, 2012). Following Dixon Hunt's argument, we discover that Ruskin intended the *ekphrasis* as a complex activity requiring abilities that transcend writing, enabling the artist to reproduce the personal impression of an object, not just its mere form (Hunt & Morabito, 2012).

Later, several scholars and professionals reflected on narration as a tool to imaginatively investigate perceptive characteristics of landscapes. I'll mention only a few of them as an example. Günther Vogt, a Swiss landscape architect, in his work "Landscape as a Cabinet of Curiosities" states "reading is much better for my imagination. For me, a text is much more open than a picture, [...] and imagination is always much stronger than reality, at least for me" (Vogt, Bornhauser & Kissling, 2015). Another example is the work of John Stilgoe on the "magic of Pennsylvania travel narratives" (Stilgoe, 2015a) in his studies on the relationship between landscape and images.

I mention the work of Professor John Stilgoe with emphasis: it is through his teaching work that I started questioning the role of design

media in practice. In his class, after reading each week a science-fiction novel, and attending lectures on the evolution of science-fiction narration in relation to culture and fashion through the 20th and 21st centuries, the students discussed the role of imagination and perception in framing contemporary trends. The following is an example of what I call landscape narration from his work "What is Landscape?":

Landscape smells of the sea. Wading into the ocean on a summer day reveals the essence of landscape. Seaward lies deeper water, surf, riptides and undertow, ocean rollers, and an arc of horizon never still and mocking human control. Landward the beach glows in sunlight, interrupting the storms which sweep sand and dunes and smooth cobbles and boulders. Like the margin between the end of type on this page and the edge of the page itself, every beach is marginal, literally the marge, a limicole zone contested by wilderness and human order. With back to the sea, the wader sees sand and seawalls, as well as cottages and hotels and pathways that are beyond the reach of all but hurricanes and incremental sea level rise. (Stilgoe, 2015b)

I want to share with the reader that, being a student in a design school, it was an unfamiliar situation for me to debate about landscape without delivering any visuals, which are the most common media in our profession. However, in my opinion, the focus on imagined worlds narration provided me with a method to sense the environment and to complement my design method. This action allowed me to enrich the content of my work and to consider aspects of landscape design that are not easily conceivable when working on parametric deliverables on the flat screen interface of a computer.

The fact of acknowledging the sensory qualities of the environment and its relationship with the subject is therefore a reason to experiment with landscape narration. However, so far my argument has been limited to the human centric, traditional approach to landscape design, in which the only subject involved in the mediation is the human. As I mentioned before, lately research has shown that animals perceive themselves, and they could be considered active perceivers in the game I am describing. As a consequence, in my opinion the argument could be pushed forward, getting out from the human-centred point of view to embrace a wider imaginative practice, narrating the *Umwelt* from different points of view, the ones of animals, insects, etc., leading to a design practice that acknowledges it. Beyond the contemporary literature on post-human approach to design, I believe that this exercise could help designers in embracing alternative perspectives, and deliver innovative strategies for ecosystem design.



After working on the landscape narration for the adventure and fantasy simulation class, I have applied what I have learned in my 2011 Master's degree thesis at Harvard, exploring the alternative point of view of bees in shaping a planning strategy for visual camouflage and ecosystem enhancement of the metropolitan region of Milan.

In conclusion, because of my personal experience in infrastructure design practice, I have noticed that the introduction of digital technologies as BIM software could gradually change the workflow, marginalising designers' contribution regarding situating their work in "nature". This condition leads to an ecosystem deterioration phenomenon if we consider an ecosystem as a set of complex relationships between the living subjects and the environment. This essay argues that such relationships include immaterial, perceptual ones. Therefore, I propose landscape narration as a tool to support the design process and enrich current practices by including impressions of landscapes to foster the quality of life of both humans and animals, the inhabitants of the ecosystem.

NOTES

- 1 For a broader definition of landscape see Stilgoe, 2015b, "What is Landscape?".
- 2 Published in Italian in the volume edited by Valerio Morabito, "Sette Lezioni sul Paesaggio".

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(21 November 2016) It is icy rain here blowing on northern air. And so dark.