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GEOGRAPHICAL AESTHETICS

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It. *Estetica geografica*; Fr. *Esthétique géographique*; Germ. *Geographische Ästhetik*; Span. *Estética geográfica*. The idea of a geographical aesthetics belongs to the history of both aesthetics and geography, although it has rarely been made explicit. The geographers Straughan and Hawkins make specific use of the expression “geographical aesthetics” in a volume published in 2015. Geographical aesthetics explores the aesthetic dimension of the core concepts of human geography, namely landscape, place, space, territory, and map. It differs from environmental aesthetics in that the latter presents itself as the rejuvenation of former aesthetics of nature (Carlson 2008). As long as contemporary environmental aesthetics also directs attention toward the relationships between humans and built environments, there is a certain overlap between the two fields; however, geographical aesthetics is characterized by a stronger focus on the concepts of place and landscape, often overlooked in the framework of environmental aesthetics (D’Angelo 2021).

Geography is connected to aesthetics in three important ways. First, the history of landscape art is deeply intertwined with the history of cartography. Second, aesthetic appreciation of places is indicative of the quality of the relationships between individuals, communities, and their living environments. Aesthetic appreciation and artistic practices are ways through which our sense of geographical entities is formed. Third, aesthetic ideals have substantive impact on the ways people inhabit and build places and landscapes. Aesthetics and arts are not only components of the perception and knowledge of geographical entities, but they also play an important role in the constitution of the very objects of geography, namely places, spaces, and landscapes. The formative role of art in giving shape to places is emphasized by the performative turn in aesthetics, paralleled by a similar turn in geography with the birth of non-representational approaches, emphasizing the constitutive power of place-based practices in structuring the social world.

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CARTOGRAPHY AND LANDSCAPE ART

While geography is increasingly emphasizing the role of art and imagination in the perception and creation of spatial entities, a regain of interest among aestheticians about the spatial character of aesthetic experience can be also remarked. The original and indispensable task of geography, which is shown in the very etymology of the word, is to draw the earth. The act of drawing the earth's forms is *per se* connected to the artistic sphere and raises issues about the quality and the scale of representations as well as the used techniques and the material supports. The history of cartography shows how artistic discoveries and transformations have conditioned the process of mapmaking. A key part in this history has been played by the development of linear perspective in the context of European Renaissance. The use of linear perspective is linked with the birth of both landscape painting as a distinctive form of art (Milani 2017) and modern cartography, characterized by a new emphasis on realism, in order to cope with the enlargement of the world achieved by the geographic discoveries. Even if both have been interpreted as expressions of the "scopic regime of modernity" (Jay 2012), maps and landscape paintings have been sharply differentiated only with the affirmation of the modern idea that maps had to be objective and exact, whereas paintings had to reflect the artist's inwardness. The rigid association of maps with objectivity, on the one hand, and landscape painting with subjectivity, on the other hand, clearly sets aesthetics apart from geography and confines art into the realm of the merely subjective. Svetlana Alpers summarises this conception by affirming that "map is closer to science, landscape painting to art" (Alpers 1983: 124). The rigid division between aesthetics and cartography is still accepted today at least in the common-sense, but recent debates in geography, philosophy, visual and media studies bear witness of the efforts scholars have made to overcome this modernist heritage and to retrieve both the topographical meaning of landscape art and the artistic, narrative and imaginative traits of mapmaking. The philosopher Ed Casey has showed that maps answer to the practical need of orientation, are cultural in status, and use conventional and fictive symbols explained through a key (*legenda*), whereas landscape paintings may be topographical in character and possess the non-practical function of helping people appreciate landscapes in their inner expressivity and atmospheres (Casey 2002). In geographical debate, phenomenologists (Pickles 2004) and cultural geographers influenced by post-structuralism and postmodernism, both in U.S. and in Europe (Olsson 2007), have showed that mapmaking is heavily dependent on the established economic, military, and political interests of the commissioners, as well as the visual patterns of the beholders. More recently, in the framework of non-representational approaches in geography, mapping is considered as a performative and embodied practice (Perkins 2009). The recognition of the imaginative dimension of maps is of paramount importance to prevent the ideological exploitation of cartography and to acknowledge the situatedness and the embeddedness of the projecting gaze of the beholder.

AESTHETIC APPRECIATION

Human geography's forefathers in both U.S. and Europe, Carl Sauer and Paul Vidal de la Blache, understood geography in qualitative and idiographic terms. Vidal considered human geography to be the science of places, whose aim is to single out the idiographic qualities that render each place and region

unique. Sauer takes the view that the proper object of human geography is landscape, understood as “an area made up of a distinct association of forms, both physical and cultural” (Sauer 1996: 300). The process of geographical knowledge constitutively includes fieldwork as a defining hallmark. According to Sauer, being afoot, sleeping out, sitting about camp in the evening, seeing the land in all its seasons are proper ways to understand landscape and develop impressions into judgement. The total reality of landscape calls for an immersive experience which is undoubtedly endowed with aesthetic value. Idiographic and qualitative geography has been afterward considered unable to meet the standards of scientific explanation by positivist geography. The positivist frame of geography has been hegemonic for decades after the 1950s, especially in American and British Geography (Harvey 1969). It put forward a neat separation between the aesthetic and experiential sphere of place-meanings, on the one hand, and the explanatory, objective dimension of geographical science, on the other hand. As a reaction, humanistic geographers, inspired by Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, asserted that space cannot be fully understood through mere objective analysis and cartographic rendering, and that places are always also a matter of sense, meaning and culture (Tuan 1977). The very concept of place has been thought in phenomenological terms through the artistic metaphor of the place-ballet (Seamon 1979): places are understood as the setting where the habitual bodily behaviors (body-ballets) are performed. Place-ballets generate a strong place-attachment as long as they embed social and symbolic meanings in living environments through everyday practices (Seamon 2021). The importance of aesthetic appreciation in order to understand human spatiality is highlighted in philosophical aesthetics too. Aesthetic appreciation, far from being reduced to a matter of merely personal and subjective taste, may be understood as a communicative construct that says a lot about the quality of the relation between people and their living surroundings (D’Angelo 2021). Even the notion of atmospheres, elaborated in the framework of neo-phenomenology (Griffero 2020), can be considered as a bridge between aesthetics and geography. In fact, if the aesthetic roots of the theory of atmospheres are commonly recognized, it must be added that the physiognomic approach to landscape, especially in German geography (Haase et al. 1991; Antrop, Van Eetvelde 2018), has for so long emphasized the atmospheric and expressive character of landscape (Marano 2017). As a consequence, the geographical notion of landscape cannot be radically separated from the aesthetic conception of landscape.

PLACES AND THE ARTS

If, on the one hand, phenomenological trends in human geography have pointed out that everyday place-based practices can be interpreted through artistic metaphors, on the other hand, site-specific arts have been claimed as peculiar kinds of practices committed to the restoration, the preservation, and the rejuvenation of the sense of place. In the contemporary debate, the elaboration of a non-representational paradigm in geography, in particular in the context of British and American geography (Thrift 2007; Boyd, Edwardes 2019), runs parallel to the rise of performative art research in aesthetics (Bertinetto 2021). Thanks to non-representational theory, notions of place and landscape are reinterpreted in terms of embodied and embedded entities affecting a fleshy and vulnerable subjectivity dethroned by the

privileged position that was assured in anthropocentric approaches. It follows that places and landscapes are not reduced to visual sceneries, but are recognized in their multisensorial and immersive nature. In this framework, geographical knowledge should be rethought in terms of a “visceral knowledge produced by intervening in the world through creative and material acts of making sense” (Boyd, Edwardes 2019: 3). As a consequence, also our ideals of spatial beauty cannot be established in the abstract and do not depend in the first instance on the formal characteristics of the art or architectural object. This goes hand to hand with the achievements of relational aesthetics, according to which beauty is a relational feature which is indicative of the quality of the interaction between the art object, or process, and the socio-spatial context (Berleant 1991; D’Angelo 2021). A relational conception of landscape beauty has been recently defended by the French geographer and philosopher Jean-Marc Besse (2020). A non-relational concept of beauty is imposed on places regardless of their inherent or historical features and implies that space is just the neutral backdrop for human action. Besse claims that much object-oriented urban and landscape planning still stems from this idea. He rather suggests to take on a relational approach to landscape beauty, based on the recognition of those attributes which make every place qualitatively unique: according to a relational view, landscape beauty results from a delicate balance between the preservation of the inherited sense of place and new interventions. Such a conception of landscape beauty clearly ties into the political issues of how to meet the needs of the living communities, how to protect the environment from overexploitation and irrational land use, and how to reduce socio-spatial injustices and prevarications (Olwig 1996).

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