

A methodology
for reading the
landscape(s)

The idea of LANDSCAPE is not easy to sketch or to narrow down.

- Lucio Gambi pointed out that «*il paesaggio è 'l'insieme della realtà visibile che riveste o compone uno spazio più o meno grande, intorno a noi: cioè una realtà materiale che si sostanzia in forme, in fattezze visibili, rivestite di colori, e non di rado si esprime anche in suoni e odori*»

- **The landscape is “the whole visible reality that covers or composes a larger or smaller area, around us: that is, a material reality embodied in forms, in visible features, coated with color, and often expresses in sounds and smells as well.**

- We can consider the landscape as the skin (epidermis) of the Earth, the visible part of the territory or, if you prefer, a morphology produced as a result of the gatering (the meeting) of the dynamics of nature and those of the society.

- Like an enormous palimpsest, the landscape is the result of writing the Earth, and the track of the historical modifications.
- Therefore it can be seen as a document that gives us informations about the society, the nature and its human changes and modifications.

- In the first half of the 20th century, geographers «with mud on their boots» (A. Frémont) made the field research their privileged approach.
- Sight became their favourite and main instrument
- Direct observation and examination was a «must»

- By doing so these «classical» geographers were able to put good questions about the genesis and the organization of the landscape, and to come up with relevant hypothesis and theories.

- Using a medical metaphor we can say that reading the landscape is like auscultating and examining by listening.
- So the landscape's scholar observes its anatomy, gathers a physiology, and eventually highlights a pathology.

- It was almost a «circumstantial geography» that chooses a method similar to the one used by William of Baskerville, the main character of the *Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco (or *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling).
- With perceptive and insightful observations, and by reading the tracks and signs left on the snow, William is capable to describe the peculiarities of the horse just ran away from the monastery's stable.



- From a scientific point of view we can describe this method as **INDUCTIVE**, an approach able to underline forms (structure) and morphologies, and, through those, the functions.

Four steps

1. Observe the reality
2. Describe and explain
3. Search for peculiarities,
details and specificity
4. Classify and categorize



Paris Street in Rainy Weather
(Gustave Caillebot, 1877)

Perceivable-emotional approach

- First of all a landscape arouses emotions and feelings.
- Our first perspective is therefore emotional and sensitive.
- Taking a literary promenade, drifting in the city, or walking around like a *flâneur* (stroller) are all interesting landscape's investigation methods.



- The individual perception of a person walking in a landscape inspires a reading of that landscape indeed. A reading not separated and disjointed from experience.

Descriptive approach

- Through a landscape view the observer is able to encompass a wide stretch of space.



*usually from a balcony,
a terrace,
or from an elevated
point of view*

Col Margherita (2.545 m), Passo San Pellegrino

- The observer carries out an observation by levels (perpendicular to the observer position)
- Looking from faraway helps synthesize, while looking from closer it allows to draw attention to the single elements.
- Changing the point of view allows to «cover» different ranges and angles, to integrate and cross the observations.

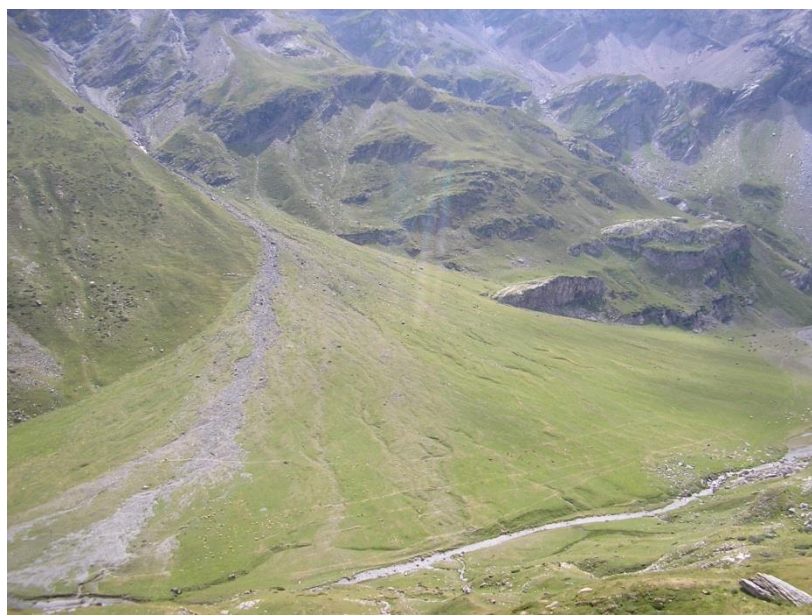
Steps of the descriptive approach

1. Point out the **structural and more important elements**: the landlines, the shores, the waterways (the organisational principle is the flowing of the waters toward the lower point), at-large the topography and the vertical organisation of the ecologic characteristics, and of the vegetation distribution.

Steps of the descriptive approach

2. Point out **single elements of the landscape**: an alluvial fan, an artificial basin, a small lake, different agricultural lots, terracings (e.g. Cinque Terre), electricity towers, the historic part of the village and its church, etc.





These basic elements of the perception are fundamental signs of the landscape (*iconemi* according to E. Turri).

They resume the «identity» of a landscape and they influence its vision.

Steps of the descriptive approach

3. Identify and describe **uniform (formal) areas**: the densely populated valley floor; the industrial area; the old city centre; the cultivated hill slope; the residential urban area, etc.

Steps of the descriptive approach

4. The **different elements are combined**: it is time to read the general landscape organisation.

Landscape as a palimpsest

- What we can observe does only represent the final pages of a story.
- The Landscape is an evolutionary and dynamic system, and it originates over time. Which times? What span? What duration?
- We can discover the genealogy of a landscape
- Find out, today, the signs of the past, the elements that gave it the first great traits and characteristics. Its **IMPRINTING**

Landscape as a palimpsest

- Sometime, thanks to some kind of stasis (inertia), contemporary landscapes keep tracks and elements of the past territorial evolution.
- In other cases, we can even realize and grasp the first elements of a future evolution.
- Landscape is then a palimpsest that we can read, choosing a regressive method, and that we can leaf through (browse) using the historian and archaeologist's tools.

Analyzing the single layers helps retrace the palimpsest

- We can obtain the knowledge of the landscapes using the graphic instrument: through the drawing or the picture. This way we'll be able to break into different parts (single morphological types) the landscape's forms.
 - Topography
 - Hydrography
 - Vegetation
 - Networks
- Settlements and Built

The analytic-documentary approach

- Field research is not enough!
- It has to be integrated with other instruments: topographical, geological and cadastral maps; land registers; iconic representations

The landscape “synthesis”

- These different approaches can be obviously combined to obtain a better comprehension of a landscape.
- You should make a backwards and forwards between field observations, hypothesis formalisation and trial, documents’ in-depth analysis, generalization.

The landscape “synthesis”

- Why should we read the landscape?
- First of all, reading the landscape allows to point out the peculiarity of a place, and it is also a starting point for any type of architectural modification of a site.
- At-large it allows to wonder about the landscape value of a place.

The landscape “synthesis”

- If this approach has dominated geography up till the first half of the 20th century it has many credits, but we can't forget its weaknesses.
- Reading the landscape represent a partial analysis, that sometimes can hides away what can't see.