

The Experiences of Landscape Social Perception as a Remedy for Plunging into Virtual Reality

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A progressive exasperation affects the relation men/society/environment and puts at risk its very evolutionary potentialities. At the same time the increasing influence on natural world by the virtual globalized powers accents and exasperates their separation and their reciprocal communications. Hence a new way of learning is needed being able to re-constitute experiential modalities and encourage the reciprocal integration between these two conditions. A new idea of the life environment – virtual and natural - can be suggested for a concrete and socially practicable learning based on a multiplicity of landscaping research-action, being able to bring to light unexpected evolutionary learning contexts, where Landscape becomes the interconnection's hinge between territory/society Entities and virtual /experimental Minds. New procedures based on the relationships between social groups and Life environments can encourage effective research-actions on different contexts to harmonize social learning and landscape practices in a continuous virtual and real entwining and to prevent young people from plunging into virtual reality.

Povzetek: Prispevek se ukvarja z relacijo človek/združba/okolje in predlaga nove postopke v izogib ponoru v virtualno realnost.

1 Introduction

The contemporary world, with its life environments, is characterized by two (apparently opposite) phenomena: the first is related to the immaterial informational network, wrapped - like a *labyrinth-grid* - around the planet, the second affects the real life environments where nature and human activities interact, in a reciprocal, continuous transformation.

Both these phenomena suffer from their intrinsic and reciprocal contradictions towards the social learning processes: the *virtual* one because it tends to exasperate the learning processes (fast, quantitative, short, placeless), the *human/natural* one because it tends to isolate the natural places of the social learning processes (jeopardized places, isolated communities, subsistent level of economies and cultures).

The learning processes which occur in these two worlds are more and more separated and divergent, both at risk of implosion. At the same time, a lot of conflictual tensions are increasing between them. In this situation the *distortion of the perception* of the life environment and the creation of *new cognitive-cultural pre-conditions* referred to landscape experiences can be developed and

discussed within the new scientific discipline called Cognitonics [3, 4].

This paper aims at implementing these complex issues, on one hand, by means of going into this matter more thoroughly to discover the learning processes intrinsic to the living world and, on the other hand, by means of discussing these processes in relation to the digital dynamics of the virtual world.

2 The Idea of Using Social Learning Processes for Preventing the Plunging into Virtual Reality

The contradictions described above have been progressively accented in the recent years. Actually many people, especially the young contemporary generations, risk to lose the perceptive experiences towards their life environments together with their spontaneous social relationships. Hence, they tend to emphasize only the virtual - instantaneous superficial - interactions.

However, numerous observations accumulated in various countries have shown that plunging into the virtual life prevents people (especially young people)

from solving real life problems, from building social relations in the surrounding world and leads to breaking family ties and other social ties. The person is unsuccessful in solving the problems of real life, when some external circumstances force he/she to do it.

Therefore, the urgent, crucial question is now how to find the ways of using the social/life environment contexts for helping people (especially young people) to appreciate the real world around them and to not plunge into the virtual life. In other words, the urgent question is how to address the *social/life environment contexts* toward appropriate learning experiences ?

The traditional educational procedures can't cope with this unstoppable, frenzy problem. Nevertheless, we could think that some attracting landscape experience would be welcome even among these *absent* and *placeless groups*.

Same study-examples (already texted) can be helpful to understand the meaning and the *methodological effectiveness* towards the adult and child groups, the living contexts and institutions progressively involved. Different social groups and living contexts in North/Central Italy participated in such activities during the last twenty years. Their processes can be valued under multiple points of view (procedures, cyclical balances, evolutionary trends) referred to the re-conquered self consciousness by the groups through the re-discovery of their life environments.

These researches selected among a lot of case studies can be divided in two groups:

Group 1: Landscape art, friendly participation, social awareness, didactic experiences.

Group 2: Explorations among users and inhabitants of contemporary *virtual landscapes* and *real life environments*, encouraging their participative meetings.

It should be underlined that the experience obtained with these two groups goes beyond any traditional political-planning or project methods.

Specific narrative and figurative art languages,



Figure 1: A social Group at work, preparing a landscape Contract.

addressed to young, child and adult people, were used during these processing-experiences in order to improve reciprocal confidence and relationships among all participants. These procedures encouraged both aesthetic appreciation of life environment and further friendly relationships among all participants. These three experiences were tested between the 1990's and 2004 involving social and child groups [5, 6].

3 The Experience with the First Group "Landscape- Art, Friendly Participation, Social Awareness, Didactic Experiences"

This first group includes three experiences developed on various territorial contexts with several different social groups (adults, children) invited and spontaneously disposed to these activities, *involved in several creative processes concerning social perception of landscape*. A variety of friendly meetings, spontaneous conversations, and promenades guided by people throughout their life spaces have been experienced. In general the knowledge and the perception have ranged from the widest landscapes to the smallest public spaces selected *in loco*.

Such activities have been developed as *process-experiences*, progressively and chorally implemented by experts and people (meeting, discussing and learning together) in a pleasant atmosphere, in a very 'friendly learning'. All of these experiences allowed experts and people to achieve a new appreciation of their own life environment, and some time they opened up also new opportunities of social creative participation in its transformations.

3.1 Case study 1 (Suvereto)

The birth of our methodological approach "Social Perception of the Landscape" is associated with the experience obtained in Suvereto Village, south Tuscany, Province of Livorno (1995-98)¹.

The promoters: University of Florence, National Research Council

The research aims: Relationships between the population and the territory, working through the Landscape in a participative planning perspective, from the landscape mosaics to Landscape holistic social perception and evaluation

The participants: scientific consultants, social, scholar and institutional groups, all directly involved to obtain answers to our questions.

The procedure we have followed:

¹ The coordinator of this research is Giorgio Pizziolo. Rita Micarelli and Paola Paradisi took part in the project experience as well, the first one for the social ecology and the latter for the psychosocial investigation.

- we involved every subject in the knowledge process; accepted as a very intriguing play by the participants.
- we focussed the discussions, on “landscape ambits”, with the explicit intent of recognise those ambits on the base of the differences among them, in terms of living experiences.
- then we asked a personal evaluation to the subjects that participated in the experiment, through different modalities (drawing and description for the elementary school children, proper and more specific questions for the junior high school students, and articulated questions for adults who had been provided with direct answers in “classroom meetings”).
- we examined the collected material, working out different hypothesis of interpretation.

Finally we have promoted a new meeting to discuss with the people who had been interviewed the results of our research and the validity or the lack of validity of the suggested hypothesis, and we accomplished a balance of the whole operation and its possible developments.

All the subjects knew perfectly well that the environment in which they spent their every day’s life, with different times and modalities, according to their age groups, was *their own Oikos*. Such an *Oikos* was intended as the whole, the everything – straight perceivable and checkable-, which could become such though the intensity of the relations established between the “inhabitants and the inhabited place”.

The quality of the perception and the valuations that everybody was showing out, and expressed by different languages:

- The **child** expressed their critical opinions or positive appreciations not by a formal answers a questionnaire but throughout integrated activities, surveys on the places, informal colloquies, sketches, coloured drawings, discussed and valued by the scholar groups together with the experts and their teachers, as a very didactic activity.
- The **eldest group** pointed out some marks in the landscape, invisible to others, of past relations, of frequentations, and activities they perceived as their own, yet socially shared. (the habitual frequentations on the territory, the “reconnaissance walking” in the woods the territory maintenance, the entertainment activities)
- The **young people**, even studying or working elsewhere, remained deeply rooted and strongly related to their original life environment, recognised as a sort of privilege, to respect and save jealously, as a firm point in their lives.

All of the participants (included the Major) shared the hypothesis of a territory considered as an *Oikos*, showing a significant social and cultural cohesion of this people.

The inhabitants themselves have considered this process to be so involving that they wanted to continue the activity, and they proposed to go towards a new hypothesis, moving from the “Social Perception of the Landscape” to the “Social Managing of the Landscape”, and therefore find a way to guarantee its use and active preservation through a participated maintenance.

3.2 Case study 2 (Vezzano)

Our second case study concerns the Vezzano’s participative landscape experiences: villages, agriculture, waters and... *enjoyed panoramas* ! (1998-2002, La Spezia Province, Liguria Region, North Italy).

Vezzano is a small village of the Liguria’s Rising Sun Coast, at the confluence of Vara and Magra Rivers, and overlooking the more distant Gulf of La Spezia, the Apennine roads, and the Apuane Alp passes, in ancient times exchange and sentinel crossroad for goods, abundantly rich in fruits, wines, oil, gardens, inhabited by noble families living in their palaces and by poor, yet not miserable, farmers. The village is a blaze of colors, blue, green, and grays among waters, stones and the sky. But nowadays Vezzano is risking to be choked with highway junctions, the container storage areas of La Spezia harbor, the dried areas of the polluted rivers, just like the outskirts of La Spezia, city that in the last thirty years has been piling up poisons, traffic jams, and pollution, without getting going toward the wonderful and great destinies of the Gulf.

Against these macro- technological interventions and for proposing micro environmental new interventions, the itizens REACT, taking care of their beautiful life environment, starting a new landscaping action:

- The landscape is carefully maintained and properly used by scholar groups, citizens and local farmers, to promote friendly touristic reception and micro-economic activities.
- Ancient fountains, profoundly and affectionately linked to local memories, had been abandoned. A group of citizens re-discovered and restored all of them with a spontaneous project promoted by inhabitants.
- This attracting landscaping action began some years ago and is still successfully practised also in other places of local landscape

3.3 Case study 3 (Pescia)

Our third case study can be named as “Art, Sociality, and Science walk in a Mutual and Friendly Learning process” (Pescia, North Tuscany, a participative research-action).

This activity became an opportunity to experiment a new method of learning, through a cognitive and creative process focussed on the relationships among inhabitants and their life environment

The authentic friendly learning process has been progressively built up by progressive friendly meetings between experts and motivated groups of people to develop *new relations with their life environment*.

In this process each group expressed its own valuations, desires and options (social problems, urban renovations, a developing program, a political disagreement, a special need, etc.) and discussed about (new schedule, suggestions, proposals, further reflections, and theme choices for the creative participation to the transformation of one's own context) for a further developments for the process in cyclical verifications and creative shared perspectives.

In particular the relationships between School and Territory encouraged new participative landscape interactions.

These interaction have been experimented and developed through participative procedures, appropriate to the anthropological, social, and territorial condition of Pescia, a small town so much differentiated in its varied territorial and social “zones”. Such a procedure allowed us, to get to a program of **re-qualification of the life environment of relational kind**, by developing the great proposal qualities contained in the “**relational systems**”.

4 The Experience with the Second Group

As it was explained above, the Group 2 is formed by explorations among users and inhabitants of contemporary virtual landscapes and real life environments, encouraging their participative meetings.

This second group of experiences began only *recently* and at the present is in progress. We are trying to involve some group of young *web professional and users* of the informatics networks, often (even if latently) conscious of the intrinsic limits of such so potent instrument towards their personal concrete experiential potentialities.

The hypothesis is to create new concrete opportunities of reciprocal exchanges between *widespread virtual communications* and *cultural life environment phenomena*.

According to this initial hypothesis, we propose ‘*new contacts*’ modalities which affect at the same time individuals and groups, together with their landscape references (both in concrete life environment terms and in *virtual landscape* terms). All contacts must be focussed on *thematic meetings* and concrete *lasting process perspectives*. These meetings can produce different interesting results both towards *young and child people*, wide-ranging from didactic experiential level to real opportunities in terms of social knowledge and sustainable economies based on the initially characterized landscapes.

A perspective for the second group is given by the following procedural and methodological implementation hypotheses:

2a *The integrated economies of the Commons*

2b *The micro innovative or restored activities towards mountain economies*

2c *The creation of new social managements of urban life environments as cultural concrete*

opportunities to go beyond the social exasperate protests and legal claims

2d *The creation of a child unexpected Landscaping vision* (scholar experience on the water front of la Spezia Gulf, Portovenere, the U.F.O. land on the Park)



Figure 2: A Brownian, aimless promenade.

5 A proposal for an Epistemological Effective Discussion

Before dealing with the *social life environment* processes, we have to consider more in general the learning processes, as based on the relationships *individual/social/ life environment*, and referred to the fundamental evolutionary structure defined by Gregory Bateson as the *Ecology of the Mind and the Nature* [1, 2].

5.1 An approach of G. Bateson to ecology

This renewed idea of the Ecology constitutes an extraordinary epistemological suggestion that may be has not been adequately considered in its widest significance, just towards the individual and social behaviors, at the present more and more influenced by the “digital planetary powers”.

G. Bateson held in his books [1, 2] the idea that the mental processes could be influenced by a double behavior, digital and analogical at the same time. In particular he focused the working of the neuronal communication as a *double interaction* which ranges between quantitative and qualitative ways of communication. Actually, according to the suggestions arose from the *Criteria of the Mental Processes* defined by G. Bateson², the *response* to the *digital* stimulus (*yes or not*) and the *analogical response* to the *ostensive communications* are never completely separable and they remain both the intrinsic factors for all of the *living learning processes*.

² The IV chapter of *Mind and Nature* is dedicated to the six “Criteria of the Mental Processes”

This interactive co-existence remains still a crucial question for our contemporary life, where the digital ways are more and more pervading the social behaviors, especially towards the mental and material life environments, both progressively dominated by the *digital planetary processes*.

In this sense, it seems once more very urgent to us, to re-consider and assume the epistemological *Criteria and Principles* as proposed by G. Bateson whenever we have to do with individual and social learning processes, just while the dominant powers tend to control *even* the roots of all these processes in the world.

At any level of such processes the role of the experiential factors (analogically consequent to ostensive communication) has been progressively reduced. In this way these processes risk losing their balanced equilibrium and their evolutionary attitudes.

The *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* achieved by G. Bateson lead us to a more complex epistemological level (as a new state of the knowledge) which goes beyond the exasperated conditions above mentioned, running toward new relationships between Mind and Context, meant as two homologous entities within which the learning processes happen. In this operating way the Contexts become a *Locus* and –similarly– the Mind consolidates its quintessence of *ambit of processes*. And at last a resonance can be established between *Locus* and *Mind*, throughout qualitative and quantitative stimulus from which homologous processes are generated.

5.2 How to develop the *learning dynamics* in coherence to the *Ecology of Mind* in our contemporary conditions?

To answer this crucial question, we have to explore in depth the modalities of the social learning related to the contemporary life environments.

We assume, on one hand, the *life environments* as different fields where human societies practice analogical experiences (social and individual) and, on the other hand, the widest *web environment* as the place where unlimited digital explorations are possible. These conditions are often perceived as two incommunicable realities- often separated – without reaching an adequate level of profitable reciprocal interaction. Within these opposite worlds individual and social pathologies are progressively manifesting and become more and more exasperate.

On one side we meet different micro realities, rich in complexity but firmly rooted and bound in their living contexts, that can ramify within the interstitial spaces and the marginal phenomena. Meanwhile, on the other side, we are faced with an infinite grid, rich in differences but bound in its rigid digital consumeristic dynamics. In these conditions neither the first nor the second world are able to become a very contemporary *Locus* where new evolutionary learning processes could be developed according to the principles suggested by the Bateson's *Ecology of Mind*.

The two sceneries seem still to be in a paradoxical situation that could be passed only through a new epistemological approach.

In this regard it would be possible to consider these two separated sceneries as two components of a *whole learning processes of the Mind*, as suggested by Bateson. These sceneries can be likened to the homologous phenomena that happen at any level of the living world, from the *micro biological systems* to the *widest spatial and social dimensions*. In this way it becomes possible to connect these two worlds throughout a new kind of *relational interaction* that, as it happens in nature, creates new tensions among the *digital* and *analogical* respective dynamics.

In this contemporary age in which the globalized *mono cultural* thought and the *one- model* modalities (economical, scientific, behavioral) are prevailing, how the micro living realities can resist?

They can do it only by using the well known technologies of the virtual communication as the recent Arabian, European and American protesting phenomena have been showing. Nevertheless such instruments can be profitable not only to help social protests but also for unexpected innovations propagable among social groups (young people in particular). In this sense these innovations could expand their interstitial ramifications and establish a profitable connection to selected websites. In this way the local interstitial structures could widely spread and, at the same time, a new virtual relational structure could come to light, as a new *context of the flowing communications*.

Thus two new kinds of *Locus* come to view: the *Locus of interstitial context experiences* and the wider *Locus of virtual/relational interactions*.

Each *Locus* is related to its community which take care of it by a different specific manner: the local community throughout a sustainable management, the virtual community by a continuous implementation of information's inter-exchanges.

5.3 The possibility of emergence of a new evolutionary complexity

In this sense, according to the mentioned extraordinary epistemological suggestions, we have *at first* experienced various modalities of this learning, developed in a relational sense between life environments and social contexts, and *later* we proposed new relational ways to connect the *virtual* and *real* life environments both referred to contemporary realities.

We have experienced many processes where the social, environmental expert and professional subjects worked in synergy to experience in concrete a reciprocal friendly learning. These early experiences allowed us to approach further participative dynamics within the virtual/real landscape contexts.

The following question can be put forward: how to experience the evolutionary meetings of virtual and real contexts? We mean here the contexts where such meetings could be promoted by a relational extended

idea of Common Good (from the classic territorial Commons to the Informatics' Networks as suggested by E. Ostrom). In this way reciprocal wider exchanges, not generically approached but focussed on *thematic terms* (informational, didactics, scholar experiences, professional collaborations, experiential procedures, comparability, mutual specific supports, autonomous economies), could become the new structure able to involve persons and groups coming from different conditions (cultures, lifestyles, economies, life environments) brought in contact by such integrated (virtual and concrete) holistic modalities.

The European Landscape Convention remains a basic reference for all these new activities and for the promotion of a new way to deal with the life environment for the involved populations.

Hence, no more classic methods, no more models to apply, but rather different criteria and wider approaches, sensitive and participated observation of the phenomena, informational network's interexchange, could be helpful to constitute unusual **real and non hierarchic virtual groups**- experts, citizens and users who work together in a new, **extended life environment**.

In such environment experiments and researches could be constantly and mutually compared, in an open cyclic progression. In this perspective the virtual and the living contexts (with their users and inhabitants) could be widely referable to the relational principles suggested by G. Bateson in *Mind and Nature*. This *context* could become a new, unexpected **Landscape**, where the Nature, the Mind and the non hierarchic Informational Network equally interact.

We can ask how is it possible to *GRASP* such opportunities and what does it really mean the word *GRASP*? We can read this word **GRASP** as following: **Groups of Research Action for Solidarity and Participation**. Consequently we can describe more in detail, *who, what, where, when, why* these groups come to light and work.

Who can participate in the *GRASP* activities: all of the persons, professional, cultural and scientific institutions, associations, local communities, with their competences, experiences, desires, aimed to develop Researches and Actions dedicated to the construction of new ways to improve the social quality of life.

What are the activities of these groups: promotion of social action towards local and territorial economies (micro industry, agriculture, culture) to encourage multiple relationships, free circulation and integrate sympathetic interexchange.

Where such activities can be developed: in every place within which a new relation between living context and inhabitants comes to light (rural environments, urban and metropolitan peripheries, abandoned areas, obsolete infrastructures monumental landscapes and places).

When all of these activities manifest: whenever the crises or significant transformations emerge (at economical, social and cultural levels).

Why it is necessary to assume this relational /informational dimension: because the complex contemporary situation requires appropriate places to

open out its positive potentialities, like new real/virtual *LOCI*.

The five points above listed can lead us to appreciate the difference between the *GRASP* and the myriad of network, spontaneous local groups, already existing and working.

The *GRASP* are not a mere multidisciplinary aggregation of competent subjects or groups. On the contrary they assume the feature of a new *complex whole organism*, able to *conceive* and *produce steady equilibrium and dynamic transformations* both towards themselves and the external environments. In this way they are *going beyond* the multiplicity of exasperate motions of the network already existent (which evoke the Brownian aimless motions) and the local self bounded experiences.

Then the *GRASP* feature themselves as connecting structures endowed with an intrinsic complex relationality.

In this sense the *GRASP* can play a key role of promoters of new experimental interexchange and solidarity activities, becoming a fundamental interface between the informational network and the level of the micro local working subjects.

In this way a new kind of dynamical and participative connection between the informational and real worlds can originate a new complex social learning, which, by a fluent motion, can freely circulate among the (macro) virtual and (micro) natural conditions of this contemporary age.³

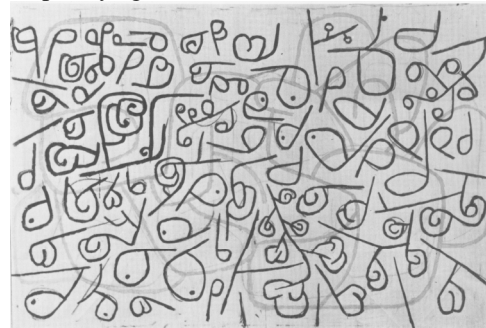


Figure 3: Paul Klee, Without title, 1940.

6 Conclusion

The contraposition between virtual and experiential life which affects the contemporary societies can be concretely approached going beyond their current separate condition, toward a wider challenge based on participative processes, equally referred to the contemporary *local contexts* (as landscapes/life environments) and to the *virtual* environments. In this sense the landscapes become the living contexts where the local communities can experience specific *analogical* learning processes (social perception, consciousness,

³ At the present the promotion of the *GRASP* is in progress in Italy, among social spontaneous aggregations already working both on informational and on real places.

creativity) while the virtual environments become the places where different experiential processes meet by an *equal digital interchange*.

A new *relational environment* can come to light as these two modalities of interchange move together and interact to originate more and more *complex learning processes*.

The researches we have practiced until now demonstrate that a *new evolutionary coexistence* between contemporary societies and life environments is possible and can be realized in the course of learning processes, *digital and analogical, virtual and material* at the same time. Due to these procedures, new relational life environments can come to light as the contemporary *Loci* for the *Ecology of Mind and Nature*.

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