

Humboldt's compromise or, the forgotten geographies of landscape

Abstract: This paper is about the strategic forgetting of the Humboldtian 'compromise'. The analysis looks to the ways in which the concept of landscape entered geography as a device uniquely able to match the Romantic imaginary of the emergent European bourgeoisie and this latter's need for a scientific (and a-political) theory of knowledge. Humboldt's geographical idea of landscape was precisely the 'compromise' that would provide the bourgeoisie with a new spatial theory. What I claim in this paper, following Franco Farinelli's critical re-writing of the history of European geography, is that the nature of Humboldt's attempt has been essentially cancelled from canonical disciplinary accounts, for a number of historical-political reasons. This accounts for why, even today, despite the achievements of the new cultural geography and the influence of non-representational theories, landscapes all too often continue to be read either as texts or, worse still, as 'real' spaces and/or built environments.

Key words: Landscape, Alexander von Humboldt, History of Geography, Italian Geography

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...Zora, città che chi l'ha vista una volta non può più dimenticare [...] il suo segreto è il modo in cui la vista scorre su figure che si succedono come in una partitura musicale nella quale non si può cambiare o spostare nessuna nota¹.

Italo Calvino, 1973

I Introduction

Landscape is perhaps the only Modern concept that refers to both the thing itself – and to its description. In its popular usage, the term recalls both a portion of territory as well as its image and imaginary, its artistic *and* scientific representation. This renders landscape quite ‘slippery’; captivating, capable of evoking a universe of emotions and sensations, yet often subject to attempts at framing such emotions and sensations within a pre-determined logic – and an associated set of values (Berque, 1995).

According to Franco Farinelli (1981a, 1992, 2003), the introduction of landscape to geography is the fruit of Alexander von Humboldt's “great compromise”, the Humboldtian ‘bargain’ between ethics and politics, between knowledge and power, between scientific reason and the *raison d'état* of the (then emergent) German (and European) bourgeoisie. But it is a compromise that the nascent European academic geography will decide to cancel from memory, to remove from view. The reasons for the cancellation, for the forcible removal of the Humboldtian compromise – a compromise that could have made of Modern geography a genuinely critical form of knowledge – have yet to be sufficiently explored.

It is perhaps this forgetting that accounts for the fact that, still today, many geographers (particularly in the English speaking world) attribute the introduction of the concept of ('cultural') landscape to Carl Sauer (albeit recognising in part Sauer's Vidalian inspiration, as well as the influence of some of the protagonists of 19th and 20th century German geography, in particular Schlüter's work on cultural landscape – 1899, 1906). What is missing altogether from these reconstructions of disciplinary history, however, is a consideration of the so-to-say 'deep' reasons for the passing of landscape from the Humboldtian compromise to its objectification by German positivism (see Peschel, 1876; Schlüter, 1899; 1906), its subsequent (implicitly) cartographic interpretation by the French *Géographie Humaine* led by Vidal de la Blache (1903, 1913, 1922) and, finally, its definitive hypostatisation in the grand vision of the *Landschaftskunde*, inaugurated by Sigfried Passarge in 1919.

It is also this forgetting that can help explain why, still today, popular understandings of landscape (see, for example, the recent use made of the term by UNESCO, 2005) reflect an astounding confusion, and the conflation of landscape with other terms, often deployed in synonymous fashion: terms such as area, region, or even 'humanised' or 'natural' space. It is as though popular (but also popular-academic) ideas of the geographical landscape have remained essentially immune to the extraordinary body of critical reflection articulated already in the 1980s in the writings of Denis Cosgrove, Stephen Daniels, James Duncan², and other British cultural geographers; even as late as 2003, in a chapter entirely dedicated to the history of the geography of landscape, Alan Baker sustained the need to specify the term landscape "to be significantly different from 'environment' and 'region' with which it has been – and still is – often confused" (Baker, 2003: 109).

Landscape in Anglophone geography – *also* because of its complex (and confused) Sauerian heritage – is thus still a source of misunderstanding, ambiguity and often arbitrary interpretations (see, for instance, the comments in Cresswell, 2003) *despite*, I would argue, the success of the critiques articulated by the new cultural geography. But what else could we expect from a concept that came to geography to describe that which Farinelli (2003: 48) terms the “*bruma del mondo*” – the ‘haze’ of the world; a concept born to reconcile measure with cosmos (Humboldt, 1845); a concept that straddles the limits of the Modern?

This paper aims to recover some of the key passages in the history of the relationship between landscape and geography: a relationship whose critical Humboldtian impetus has been lost. Lost, I will argue, for a clear set of political reasons, but without which it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand some of the ties that still bind the use and interpretation of this so ambiguous and yet so powerful concept. In other words, I think it is important to begin to probe the profound effects of the Humboldtian compromise and thus begin to destabilise the regime of certainty that has allowed the concept of landscape to persist, until the present day, in a form still reflecting a geography implicitly dominated by the metaphysics of representation (T. Mitchell, 1988).

I will attempt to consider here this missing passage in the histories of landscape, inspired by debates articulated within what is, without doubt, the most innovative branch of Italian geography today and, in particular, the critical re-writing of the history of geography proposed by Franco Farinelli (1992, 2003), a body of work that is the principal inspiration for the considerations presented in this paper. All references to landscape studies in Anglophone geography will thus deliberately be limited and selective. The choice of not intervening directly in English language debates but tracing, rather, an alternative,

‘parallel’, history of landscape is both a strategic and a political one. It is strategic because as an Italian geographer, I am certainly not in the ideal position to mark out such an important segment of Anglophone disciplinary history and also because there exists by now a large body of literature on landscape, extensively commented upon ‘from the inside’. But the choice is also a *political* one, for the re-reading of landscape that I propose here is based almost entirely on recent work in Italian geography that suggests an alternative disciplinary history – one that runs in part parallel to, but in part also questions Anglophone mappings of the idea of landscape in geography. I do not intend to compare here ‘canonical’ geography with some (implicitly peripheral) national variation – this would simply reduce the Farinellian enterprise to just one of many partial, ‘local’ histories.

I believe, indeed, that Farinelli’s considerations on the histories of landscape speak to a *fundamental political moment* in the genesis of European geography and are uniquely suited to helping us understand why landscape came to embody such a variety of slippery (and seemingly duplicitous) meanings. The body of reflection that I will cite here offers an alternative perspective on these debates, opening a space for what I hope could be a critical dialogue on landscape able to engage other geographical traditions, other disciplinary histories. Without wishing to predetermine the reception of this piece, I ask the reader, then, not to try to regiment my arguments within the Anglophone canon, and vis à vis a set of literatures which I purposefully do not cite. As I note above, this is not a paper written within that canon and its intention is rather that of opening a conversation *between* parallel histories, between parallel narratives whose points of contact have not been sufficiently explored.

II The forgotten geographies of landscape

Farinelli's reflections are part of a broader critical interest for landscape in Italian geography that emerged already in the nineteen-eighties and developed over the course of the following two decades – a body of literature from which, I believe, we can draw some interesting points of reflection (among others, we can note the work of Cusimano, 1999, 2003; de Spuches, 2002; Guarrasi, 2001, 2002a, 2002b; Quaini, 1994, 2002; Vecchio, 2002; Zerbi, 1993, 1998; and, in somewhat different vein, that of Andreotti, 1996, 1998; Turco, 2002; Turri, 1979, 1998).

Even well-known figures such as Giuseppe Dematteis, whose writings had previously focused on quite different topics, came to be part of the renewed interest in landscape (1989, but also 1999). In a widely read article that appeared on the *Rivista Geografica Italiana* in 1989, Dematteis commented on the newly formulated Italian 'landscape regulations' (*piani paesistici*), noting how despite the long persistence of an essentially positivist vision, landscape studies in Italian geography were now – finally – beginning to reclaim a 'subjective dimension', in part influenced by the seminal work of Denis Cosgrove (frequently present in Italian geographical circles in those years). Dematteis' approach to the "polysemy of landscape" (the term comes from Socco, 1998, 2000; see also Guarrasi, 2001, 2002a, 2002b) was articulated within a distinction between an arch-positivist approach that envisioned "landscape as model", where "the recognition of landscape [...] is the end point of a cognitive process", and a hermeneutic/post-marxist conception of "symbolic landscape" understood, rather, as a privileged point of *departure* for the formulation of knowledge claims about the Earth (Dematteis, 1989: 447). It is to this latter tradition that the great bulk of recent critical Anglophone landscape studies in

geography belongs. Writing over a decade later, Bruno Vecchio (2002) would insist, however, that *despite* the wide-reaching impacts of the subjectivist turn, the idea of landscape as a “*deposito di significati*” (roughly translatable into the English as a ‘store of meanings’) has not disappeared altogether and, in fact, *continues* to lie below the surface of even post-structuralist analyses. In other words, despite the widely acclaimed ‘return of the subject’ (in Italy as well as elsewhere), Vecchio suggested that the “objectivist approach” (in the ‘anti-Humboldtian’ sense assigned to this term by Italian geographers) had emerged largely unscathed by the critiques articulated within English-language (new) cultural geography. Franco Farinelli argued a similar line already in 1992, noting how the rediscovery of landscape by the new cultural geography

as symbolic landscape, that is, as a mode of seeing produced by the tension between subject and object, between the personal and the social, between the ‘cultural’ and the ‘natural’, [...] had kicked off a new fashion. [Rather than] a totality made up of [existing] tangible and calculable manifestations, we have returned [...] to looking at landscape [...] as a universe of subsistent things, that is, things that can neither be seen nor touched; once again, [...] landscape is no longer a collection of objects, of things, but a manner of seeing. The problem with such a partial ‘return to the origins’ lies with the fact that such an understanding *still* remains squarely within a metaphysics of the ‘certainty of representation’, to use Heidegger’s words. (Farinelli, 1992: 201-202).

Although Farinelli’s assessment was perhaps premature, I do believe that his critique can be applied to a large part of landscape studies in geography that have appeared over the past fifteen years. Indeed, according to Farinelli, ever since Passarge, regaining the intellectual dimension of landscape in geography has been a difficult and uncertain process. The attempts at its deconstruction by the new cultural geography have not been able to bring the task to completion, for they have only been able to rewrite a partial

history of landscape in geography. If we accept this assessment, it would perhaps be important to interrogate ourselves on the origins of – and reasons for – this partiality. What I will try to argue in the pages to follow is that the partial re-writing of the geographical nature of landscape is the fruit of a forgetting/marginalisation of *both* the cultural and political reasons motivating the Humboldtian ‘compromise’ and Humboldt’s decision to assign landscape to geography (and geography to landscape) – as well as a forgetting of the cultural and political reasons underpinning the subsequent ‘objectivist’ turn in conceptions of landscape in European geography. I will try to present, then, some of the ways in which Italian geographers, following the pioneering theorisations of Franco Farinelli, have attempted, in recent years, to overcome the distinction between ‘subjectivist’ and ‘objectivist’ understandings of landscape.

Denis Cosgrove (whose reflections have remained a fundamental reference point for landscape studies in Italy) was right in recognising this challenge already in 1984, arguing that geography had adopted the concept in a largely “unexamined way, implicitly accepting many of its ideological assumptions. Consequently it has not placed the landscape concept within an adequate form of historical or social explanation. To do so requires not so much a redefinition of landscape as an examination of geography’s own purposes in studying landscape” (1984: 15). And yet, years after Cosgrove’s affirmation, the idea of landscape remains contested and ambivalent in its usage: the new cultural geography has been challenged by Sauerians (see, for instance, Price and Lewis, 1993), as well as Marxists (most famously by D. Mitchell, 1995, 1996, 2000), while ‘progress reports’ published on the pages of this very journal continue to conflate (if only implicitly) the idea of landscape with that of ‘built environment’ or with that which Italian or French geographers would most likely term ‘territory’ (see, for instance, D. Mitchell, 2001, 2002,

2003). And despite the increasing influence of new anthropological perspectives (such as Ingold, 2000) and non-representational approaches (for example, Rose, 2002; Wylie, 2002) that have looked at landscape as lived-in, performed and practiced, the root of the problem raised by Cosgrove has remained, in my view, substantially untouched.

Geographers explicitly engaging with other European geographical traditions, such as Alan Baker, have admitted, indeed, that

the history of the word which gave rise to the concept of 'landscape' in different European languages has yet to be written (Besse, 2000: 40), but it is clear that the term *Landschaft* became part of modern geographical currency in Germany towards the end of the nineteenth century. It did not do so unambiguously, however, and this has had unfortunate consequences for the translation of the term into landscape in the English-speaking (and especially in the American) literature (Baker, 2003: 109)

As Baker notes, Carl Sauer (1925) (the geographer primarily responsible for bringing the concept of (cultural) landscape across the Atlantic) derived some of his own ideas from the classic French regional monographs, while also drawing inspiration from German understandings of 'primitive landscapes' and their transformation into cultural landscapes. Sauer was particularly influenced by Otto Schlüter's distinction between a natural landscape (*naturlandschaft*) and a cultural landscape (*kulturlandshaft*), a distinction which would gain extraordinary currency among positivist geographers in Europe and overseas (Baker, 2003: 131). It is to this controversial inheritance that the problematic nature of the landscape term in English-language geography can perhaps be traced (see Lando, 1995). We should ask ourselves, however, why is it that despite Denis Cosgrove's warnings (writing in 1984 in what would become *the* English-language text on landscape in geography) of confusing landscape with area or region, the problem in part still persists –

as does the dichotomy between ‘subjectivist’ and ‘objectivist’ interpretations of landscape (Morin, 2003)? In trying to recover the Humboldtian roots of the ‘geographical’ landscape – and in an attempt to demolish the fiction of its Sauerian origins (‘fictional’ origins that may be implicitly or explicitly recognised) – Franco Farinelli’s (1987, 1992, 2003) critical re-inscription of the geographical history of landscape can, to my mind, provide a unique contribution.

III *L’arguzia del paesaggio* or, the Humboldtian compromise

“*L’arguzia del paesaggio*” (Farinelli, 1992: 49) could be translated literally to mean the ‘wit’ or ‘witticism’, but also the ‘shrewdness’ of landscape. This is the attribute chosen by Farinelli to capture a concept that entered geography as a means for describing the “*nebulosa chiarezza*”, the ‘nebulous clearness’, the “*bruma*” (haze) that envelops things at a distance and that for Humboldt was the metaphor of every projectual intention: always on the horizon but never accomplished, indeterminate in its furthest contours. “In every landscape view (that is, every time we look at the world from a landscape perspective), [Humboldt] discerns a certain *bruma* [haze] on the horizon, a progressive loss of clearness and transparency as the distance increases. It is not, however, a simple atmospheric effect, linked to particular climatic conditions, as one might be tempted to think; it is, rather, a cultural and political effect” (Farinelli, 2003: 48).

For Humboldt, this *bruma*, this ‘haze’, is intentional, it is an explicit part of his project; it is the outcome of a calculated and coherent metaphor. In this sense, I believe, we could conceive of his idea of landscape as a *soglia della modernità*, a ‘threshold’ of Modernity,

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as a space of potential and possibility, the confine between that which exists, that which existed and that which might exist³. With Humboldt, landscape mutated from an aesthetic-literary model into a scientific model, as Farinelli (1992: 209) argues, “not in order to describe what exists, but to make possible what could be.” Indeed, the ‘wit’ of landscape embodied, in its Humboldtian understanding, “that which Arthur Koestler has termed ‘the logic of laughter’, based within the contemporaneous bi-association of an intellectual event with two, usually incompatible, matrices: in such a way that it provokes a simultaneous [mental] ‘vibration’ on two distinct wavelengths” (1992: 206). The Humboldtian landscape thus never corresponds to objects but is, rather, a way of knowing – an “*impression*” of Nature – that, within the Humboldtian *géognosie* (see Milanesi and Viansson, 1971: 11), is the first step in the path to scientific knowledge (Farinelli 2003: 42-43).

It may seem a rash attempt to endeavour to separate, into its different elements, the magic power exercised upon our minds by the physical world, since the character of the landscape and of every imposing scene of nature, depends so materially upon the mutual relations of the ideas and sentiments simultaneously exercised in the mind of the observer.

The powerful effect exercised by nature springs, as it were, from the connection and unity of the *impressions* and emotions produced; and we can only trace their different sources by analysing the individuality of objects and the diversity of forces (Humboldt, 1849: 5-6, italics added).

To better understand Humboldt’s gesture, however, we need to take a step back. It is widely accepted by now that Modernity was characterised by an apparent hegemony of the visual (Cosgrove, 2003). The perceived dominance of perspective and ocular truth was also part of a new theory of space – a new spatial order – whose emergence accompanied the progressive delegitimation, between the 18th and 19th centuries, of the *ancien regime* and

its epistemologies, giving birth to a new, scientific and 'neutral' vision of nature and the world (see Dematteis, 1985 for a description of this implicit revolution). The 'pure' geography of the 18th century, formulated under a pretence of scientificity and neutrality, would come increasingly into conflict with the so-called 'geography of the state' (Dematteis, 1985), based within an explicitly political spatial theory, and explicitly addressing the needs of aristocratic power (see Godlewska, 1999a and Livingstone, 1992). It was to be a bitter struggle that would last over a century, especially in France and Germany, reflecting a much broader tension between moral and political visions in European thought throughout the 1700s and a large part of the century that followed (Farinelli, 1992). With the affirmation of the bourgeoisie in two of the leading European states of the time, this tension would become inscribed within a unique compromise between power and knowledge. It was to be a compromise marked by all the ambiguities and contradictions characterising all Modern European epistemologies; ambiguities and contradictions that will persist all through the 1900s – and with which we are still, to a large extent, grappling today (see Mondada, Panese and Soderstrom, 1992; Quaini, 2002; Zanetto, 1989).

If we accept, following Heidegger, that the Modern is the moment at which the world becomes, once and for all, conceived as image (Farinelli, 1992, but also Guarrasi, 2001, 2002a and Quaini, 2002), we can locate the rise of *bourgeois geography* within a formidable tension: a tension between the Romantic imaginary that inspired the cognitive experiences of the emergent bourgeois subject – and this emergent subject's need for a new spatial theory, a new approach to knowledge able to camouflage and to render apparently innocuous and invisible the bourgeoisie's indirect capture of power (Koselleck, 1976 in Farinelli 1992, 115; see also Livingstone, 1992 and Livingstone and Withers, 1999). As we

all well know, every new theory of space makes possible a new social and political order (on this point, see Dematteis, 1985). Scientific knowledge driven by ‘cartographic reason’ (see Pickles, 2004) thus becomes an attempt at mediation in the struggle between an official geographical knowledge *of* and *for* the aristocratic state, and the needs of a newly emergent political body that will soon capture the European imagination thanks to its realisation of the myth of the national state. This tension between Romantic imaginaries and cartographic language is similarly evident in the voyages of many 18th and 19th century explorers. It is their endeavours, ensnared between two conceptions of space (and thus between two typologies of power, between two possible worlds) that allow for the production and legitimation of a new form of knowledge (Livingstone and Withers, 1999).

Humboldt, in this sense, is a man of his times, torn between Romanticism and Enlightenment ideals, between the influence of the *Naturphilosophie* of some of his German mentors and friends and a fascination for the scientific endeavour, as both Rupke (1999: 319-321) and Godlewska (1999b) note. Although his voyage is perhaps the last voyage of an individual – as Farinelli suggests – it already contains within it the seed of the transformations that will render the voyages of the nineteenth century a *political* gesture, part of the implicit project of the nascent bourgeois (nation)state (Helferich, 2004). Within Humboldt’s structuring of knowledge, Farinelli (1992) argues, it is impossible to permanently separate scientific observation from the direct and immediate experience of travel without fundamentally undermining the whole edifice. What is more,

Humboldt’s geognostical tactic consists *precisely* in the step-by-step specification of a continuous and dialectical relationship between the one and the other. This relationship, in fact, is still coalescent within the initial stage of the structuring of knowledge expressed by the concept of landscape which allowed at the same

time the translation of the (cognitive) tools of the old culture (that “half culture”, as Humboldt termed it) into the order of the new culture, still to be elaborated (Farinelli, 1992: 263).

The work of Alexander von Humboldt becomes, indeed, key in the introduction of the concept of landscape into geographical analysis. And it is exactly his use of landscape that will allow the German bourgeoisie to move beyond a contemplative attitude, now armed with a new form of understanding able to guarantee it the knowledge – and thus the dominion – of the world, so fulfilling its ‘historical destiny’ (Farinelli, 2003). Humboldt speaks to a public whose imaginary was founded upon pictorial depictions, upon the tableau – and his pioneering volume, published in Tübingen in 1808, shall indeed be entitled *Ansichten der Natur* (“Views of Nature” in the English translation, 1848; “Paintings/Framings of Nature” (*Quadri della natura*) in the Italian, 1998). It is this work that will attract the European bourgeoisie to the study of the physical world and it is at this point, as Farinelli (2003: 44) suggests, that the concept of landscape is transformed, for the first time, from an aesthetic into a scientific concept”; it is translated from artistic and poetic representations into geography, thus gaining new, revolutionary, meaning.

Landscape painting, though scarcely a more imitative art, has a more material basis, and a more earthly tendency. It requires from its development a greater amount of various and distinct *impressions*, which, when imbibed from external contemplation, *must be fertilized by the powers of the mind* in order to be presented to the senses of others as a creative work of art. The grander style of heroic landscape-painting is *the combined result of a profound appreciation of nature and of this inward process of the mind* (Humboldt, 1848: 346-47; italics added)

From the point of view of the history of ideas, the realisation of the Humboldtian project lies firmly within the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere, the emergence of

bourgeois civil society and “public opinion” (Habermas, 1989) opposed (certainly in the German context) to the aristocratic, feudal order (Farinelli 1992). According to Farinelli, Humboldt’s project was thus nothing short of a cultural revolution: a revolution based within the re-imagination of the function of landscape, from aesthetic concept into scientific tool. This re-imagination, however, could only begin with the artistic image – the only image of Nature with which the bourgeoisie of the times was familiar. It was a question of “leading the protagonist of public ‘culture’, the art connoisseur, towards a vision of the world that could be developed into a *scientific understanding* of the world; a vision that would move beyond mere contemplation. It was a question of transforming the aesthetic matrix of bourgeois culture: transforming its pictorial and poetic knowledge (to which such culture was limited) into a science of Nature, able to exert dominion, not simply represent. Landscape [...] would become, with Humboldt, the instrument of such a transformation” (Farinelli, 2003: 45).

For Humboldt, the affirmation of a realm of scientific knowledge signified, then, the total capture of the ‘reign of aesthetic appearance’ (Farinelli 1992).

Everywhere, in every separate portion of the earth, nature is indeed only a reflex of the whole. The forms of organization recur again and again in different combinations [...]

I have alluded to this, to recall the ancient bond which unites a knowledge of nature with poetry and a taste for art. For in landscape painting, as in every other branch of art, a distinction must be drawn between the elements generated by a limited field of contemplation and direct observation, and those which spring from the boundless depth of feeling, and from the force of idealising mental power (Humboldt, 1848: 347).

The concept of landscape, that the bourgeoisie was well-familiar with through its pictorial and artistic depictions (see also Dubbini, 1994), was seen as the ideal vehicle in such a

transition – the ideal vehicle for transforming the protagonists of the literary, artistic domain into the rulers of scientific knowledge (Farinelli, 1992: 203). Humboldt's strategy was quite clear: the “political use of a double-entendre with allusion, within which one word expresses two different meanings, where one of these meanings – the most common and frequent (that of the aesthetic and literary representation) is dominant, while the second (that of the material and concrete, ‘scientific’ reading) remains in the background” (Farinelli, 1992: 205). This is the essence of Humboldt's compromise. This is where the *arguzia del paesaggio*, the ‘wit’ of landscape, is made explicit as political strategy.

For Humboldt, landscape is a lens through which what is rendered visible is not only that which exists – but also *that which is about to become*; “a term able to show, depending on the context, either one face or the other, capturing the innate ambivalence of the world [...] The birth of the concept of the geographical landscape thus corresponds to the need for a cultural-political tool that could allow for the unexpected, that could promote change, even revolution” (see Farinelli, 1992: 45; but also Milanese and Visconti Viansson, 1975: 14-20; Quaini, 2002; Helferich, 2004).

According to Farinelli (2003: 42-43), the ontological roots of this choice lie within the theory of knowledge that rests at the heart of the Humboldtian project. Humboldt distinguishes, in fact, three stages of knowledge, three steps in the cognitive relation between Man (sic) and his environment. The first stage is that of *marvel*, a primeval manifestation flowing from deep within the human soul, in its wonder at the grandeur and beauty of Nature. Its cognitive expression is precisely that of landscape, conceived here as a vision of the world as a harmonious totality of aesthetic-sentimental models; models that are exempt from any rational analysis and thus regard only the spiritual-subjective faculties.

The contemplation of the individual characteristic of landscape, and of the conformation of the land in any definite region of the earth, gives rise to a different source of enjoyment, awakening impressions that are more vivid, better defined, and more congenial to certain phases of the mind [...] At one time the heart is stirred by a sense of grandeur of the face of nature [...]; at another time, softer emotions are exerted by the contemplation of rich harvests wrested by the hand of man from wild fertility of nature, or by the sight of human habitations raised beside some wild and foaming torrent. [...] Here I regard less the degree of intensity, than the difference existing in the various sensations that derive their charm and performance from the peculiar character of the scene (Humboldt, 1849: 3-4)

For Humboldt, marvel refers to the sensibility of the viewing subject: “his soul is a white sheet upon which the lines of landscape are impressed” (Farinelli, 2003: 42). At the same time, however, marvel allows the viewing subject to reduce the multiplicity of impressions and sentiments to one, in such a way as to reduce (if only in aesthetic terms) the cognitive sphere to a totality, to a single whole given to revealing the hidden (natural) order suggested by the phenomena observed. It is then the task of the subsequent stage of knowledge – that of *Einsicht* or ‘examination’ – to ‘unpack’, to disentangle such sentimental totality and to begin to translate it into scientific terms (Farinelli, 2003). As Humboldt would argue:

Nature considered rationally, that is to say, submitted to the process of thought, is a unity in diversity of phenomena; a harmony, blending together all created things, however dissimilar in forms and attributes; one great whole animated by the breath of life. The most important result of a rational unity and harmony of this stupendous mass of force and matter, is to determine with impartial justice what is due to the discoveries of the past and those of the present, and to analyse the individual parts without succumbing beneath the weight of the whole.

Thus, and thus alone, is it permitted to man [...] to comprehend nature, to lift the veil that shrouds her phenomena, and, as it were, submit the results of observation to the test of reason and of intellect (Humboldt, 1849: 2-3).

Following Farinelli's reconstruction, in this intermediate stage of 'scientific analysis', landscape is no more, either as sentiment or aesthetic 'impression', or its consequent totality. All that remains is the cold and calculating dissection of its individual components. But, Farinelli (2003: 43) insists, "this eclipse of totality is only *temporary* – it marks only this second stage of knowledge. It is, in fact, fully recaptured in the third and last stage, that which Humboldt terms *Zusammenhang* – the being-together in mutual interrelation of all the previously analysed elements". Here we come to the synthesis, to the end-point of the cognitive process. In Humboldt's words,

... in interrogating the history of the first glimmering perception of the same image of the Cosmos or harmoniously ordered whole, which, dimly shadowed forth to the human mind in the primitive ages of the world, is now fully revealed to the mature intellect of mankind as the result of long and laborious observation. Each of these epochs of contemplation of the external world [...] has its own source of enjoyment (Humboldt, 1849: 2).

Thanks to the mediation of this analytical exercise, the original totality is summoned again, though no longer in sentimental or aesthetic terms but, rather, in scientific ones. As Farinelli (2003: 43, emphasis added) argues, "for Humboldt, the elaboration of all knowledge is nothing else than the translation into scientific terms of an 'auroral' impression – here, that of landscape – an impression that is in no way scientific, *but without which all science would be impossible*".

This is how Farinelli explains the ontological roots of the incorporation of the concept of landscape into the human sciences. The structure of knowledge advanced by the Humboldtian project has been analysed also by many other authors (in geography, by

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David Livingstone (1992) and Anne Godlewska (1999a, 1999b) in particular), as has the importance of landscape in Humboldt's understandings of Nature. Recalling Bernard Smith's (1988) writings on the German geographer, Godlewska (1999b: 238) argues that "Humboldt sought a new unity – an ecological unity – which could reconcile the increasing development of an empirical science tending toward the disruption of unity and the holism of an artistic vision and expression. [...] it was artistry – and unity – derived from, and based on, an analytical and penetrating approach to the depiction of landforms and landscapes". In his work, Smith (1988) suggests, indeed, that Humboldt provided the 'typical landscape' (or a landscape designed to capture the look of an ecological system) then evolving among landscape artists such as Hodges and Webber, with a 'theoretical justification': "an attempt to combine the holism of the cosmos with modern empirical research without abandoning what was then geography's central methodology: description and particularly graphic description, or cartography" (Godlewska, 1999b: 239).

Although Godlewska's suggestions hint at some of the very same arguments developed by Farinelli, what I believe is unique in the Italian geographer's critique is his emphasis, on the one hand, on the political-cultural developments that paved the way for the introduction of the concept of landscape to geography – and on the other, on the consequences of the incorporation of landscape as a central cognitive tool of bourgeois geography of the early 1800s for the subsequent resiliency/persistence of this concept in our discipline, and, especially, for the role of the *subject of/in geography* (see also Quaini, 2002).

IV The triumph of the cartographic landscape

The *bruma* of the Humboldtian landscape as/at the threshold of bourgeois Modernity was soon to be dissolved, however, into the geometries of the emerging geography of the state that would become consolidated as *the* academic geography in the second half of the 19th century: a still-bourgeois geography, though stripped of its earlier revolutionary spirit, consigned to the dictatorship of the map (Dematteis, 1985). These were years in which, according to Demangeon (1932: 31 in Farinelli, 1992: 245) all European geographers listened to what came from Germany as *the* voice of science. These were the years in which, as Farinelli (1992: 245) suggests, the claims advanced by bourgeois German geography were not only seen as coterminous with the claims of all of the European bourgeoisie, but moreover, thanks to their ability in framing their particular interests as general concerns, seen as capturing the voices and aspirations of *all* of humanity. But once the process of the consolidation of the European nation-states was completed, those years were over.

Humboldt's initial illusion that the logic of knowledge and the logic of power could be made to coincide or that, indeed, knowledge could govern power (an illusion that, according to Farinelli, lies at the heart of the failure of the *Erdkunde* project) is soon dashed, and landscape thus becomes the concept within which Humboldt's project for the 'recognition' of the Earth seeks refuge. Landscape becomes the compromise which was to render credible the knowledge produced by the bourgeois revolutions. It becomes the privileged tool in the attempt to reconcile the extraordinary tension between the moral and the political, between knowledge and power, which accompanies the progressive substitution of the *ancien regime* by the new bourgeois state (Farinelli, 1992). Humboldt fails in his attempt, as we well know, but this does not mean that his was not a project of grandiose pretensions (see Godlewska, 1999a, 1999b), a project that strove no less than to

remake the spatial theory of bourgeois geography into a critical knowledge, a language able to capture the tension between observation and measurement, between the direct, unmediated experience of the voyage and scientific abstraction.

The 'landscape experiment' thus consists of the attempt to bring to the heart of geography, for a period at least, a concern with the theory of knowledge, making this latter coterminous firmly within the needs of the consolidating secular bourgeois power (see Farinelli, 2003: 81). Within the Humboldtian vision, the subject gains an (albeit ephemeral) freedom of movement: he is the *traveller*, stopping only to interrogate himself on the question of knowledge. But "if we take 1848 as the year of the coming to power of the Prussian bourgeoisie, the year of the 'revolution', 1849 is the year of the 'reaction' [...]: *the end of the voyage*, and a return to an epistemological paralysis" (Farinelli, 2003: 81). The Humboldtian vision does not survive the pact between the old structures of power and the 'renewed bourgeoisie'. The new bourgeois state has no need for compromise, or for a critical geography (Dematteis, 1985; see also Godlewska, 1999a). Geography's loss of any critical function accompanies, indeed, a series of broader social transformations, including the transformation of a 'culturally critical public' into a public that is the 'consumer of culture' (see Habermas, 1989). In epistemological terms, this transition marks the return of the geographer to a practice that bourgeois geography had combated for over a century: the practice of geographical knowledge as simply the expression of the cartographic dictates of the State (Farinelli, 2003; Dematteis, 1985).

The nebulous dimension of landscape is not only no longer necessary, but represents a direct challenge, due to the implicitly critical dimension that it incorporates. The new geography of the State, reduced to an infinite reproduction of the cartographic modalities

of a national geographical space, conceived (again) as merely geometric space, does its best to excise and expel from its reflections any theory of knowledge, thus heralding the progressive erasure of the distinction between representation and the ‘thing’ itself. A State committed to reducing places into space requires, indeed, a geographical science able to execute its cartographic dictates and to single out and endlessly reproduce one essential, inviolable, fundamental ‘level’ of geographical analysis (Dematteis, 1985; Minca and Bialasiewicz, 2004). And so, under the joint influence of the positivist geography emerging in Germany during the last quarter of the 19th century, and that of Vidalian human geography in France at the beginning of the 20th, “the map becomes again what it was in aristocratic-feudal geography: a formidable ontological device, a tacit apparatus for the implicit (and thus unquestioned) definition of the things of this world” (Farinelli, 2003: 85). In Germany, it is Otto Schlüter (1906) who is the key figure in the definitive transformation of 19th century bourgeois geography into the new *Geographie*: as Farinelli (1992: 166) notes, Schlüter’s morphology of cultural landscapes is simply an extension of the morphological descriptions of the Earth put forward by Oscar Peschel (1876) several decades earlier. Peschel, in fact, would substitute the subjective dimension present in the work of the protagonists of the *Erdkunde* project with the pretence of the scientificity of geographical analysis: an analysis essentially based on cartographic description (see Farinelli, 2003; but also Capel, 1987). Schlüter, some time later (1899, 1906) would translate the lesson of his mentor into human geography, sanctioning its end “as discourse, as narrative, [and] reducing it rather (much like physical geography) to the simple analysis of forms visible on a map” (Farinelli, 2003: 126). In those very same years in France, the ‘invention’ of the *Géographie Humaine* by Paul Vidal de la Blache condemns geography to the description of the ‘real’, of the ‘concrete’ (see Vidal de la Blache, 1903, 1913, 1922; also comments in Buttimer, 1971; Berdoulay, 1981 and Claval, 1998), stripping it of any

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reflection on its own ontological status. In the French regional monographs, landscape becomes the visible expression of the *genre de vie*: a reflection free of ambiguities or shadows; an expression of the cartographic 'truth' of the territory, a truth without (and beyond) theory.

The process that will bring about the gradual disappearance of the subject of geography born with the Humboldtian bourgeois landscape, comes to its conclusion, paradoxically enough, with the definitive codification of that which all through the 1900s will be termed the 'geography of landscape' (Farinelli, 2003: 49) . A key passage in this respect is the elaboration of the geographical foundations of the *landschaftskunde* by Sigfried Passarge in 1919. With Passarge,

the poetic dimension, the invisible 'state of being' that marked all previous conceptions of landscape disappears; they are transformed, in geography and the other social sciences, into a thing, an object, into cartography: the sole interpretative key to the visible and existent. The Great War and the rise of nationalisms provide the perfect occasion for this profound and sudden ontological shift. Photography provides the tool par excellence: reducing into image, into instantaneously and 'objectively' produced data what previously was the end result of a subjective and conscious cognitive process, marked by a specific point of view; [so] hiding from view the always-negotiated and social nature of knowledge (Farinelli, 1992: 207-208).

After Passarge, the consciousness of the social and constructed nature of geographical knowledge suffers the very same fate as the *bruma*, the 'haze' that, with Humboldt, served as its metaphor: it disappears from view, and thus ceases to exist (Farinelli, 2003). From a subjective and partial conception of reality, a strategic reading of the world (as it was for Humboldt), with Passarge, landscape becomes a collection of objects, a series of elements. "From an aware mode of interpretation, landscape is transformed into a given, 'objective'

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set of forms, no longer dependent in the process of their constitution upon the creative mind of a subject; a subject marked by a specific psychology, a specific intentionality, a specific project” - as Farinelli (2003: 55) suggests, “it is the very existence of the subject, of the subject of geographical knowledge that is erased; that is abruptly and definitively abolished”.

The idea of landscape, from that moment on, will serve as a shorthand to indicate all ‘geographical facts’ deserving consideration; facts that no longer need specification since they become self-evident (Zerbi, 1993: 37). This objectivist translation of the geographical landscape seems definitely accomplished, according to Vecchio (2002: 12), when Hettner, probably the last heir to the *Erdkunde* tradition, provides his critical reading of Passarge’s monumental “Landscape Science” in 1923. Hettner (1923: 49) will try to seek out a definition of landscape in Passarge’s work and will argue, indeed, that Passarge with his *Landschaftskunde* project intends to give birth to a new scientific discipline; but what this discipline – and its related concept of landscape – are supposed to be, is never clearly expressed in any part of the book (Vecchio, 2002: 12). As Farinelli (2003: 56) forcibly argues, “there is no such definition, for with the beginning of the 1900s, geography abandons its ontological doubts – and thus the relative epistemological responses”.

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The forms of the Earth, which up until now had been considered by ‘critical’ bourgeois geography as simply empty silhouettes, to be granted meaning by the geographer, now become the only existent things, paying tribute to the first rule of positivism: that there is no distinction between essence and appearance (Farinelli, 2003: 56). Passarge’s work can then be assumed as the clearest expression of the positivist conception of the geographical landscape. In his vision, landscape not only consists merely in ‘what can be seen’, but there

is no real separation between the moment of theoretical elaboration - and the moment of direct observation (Vecchio, 2002). Geography thus becomes a simple inventory of Earth forms, while the concept of landscape is conflated with the very object it had been born to describe. As Farinelli (2003: 56) observes, “that which at the outset was a cognitive process becomes the thing to be known, is rendered material [*si cosifica*]”.

The bourgeois nation-state (and the structure of knowledge that sustains it) relies, indeed, on the ‘materialisation’ of landscape and the translation of its 19th century ‘wit’ into a subtle duplicity: conceiving it as both an object of aesthetic appreciation (often adopted to embody the beauty, riches and fortitude of the nation) and an object of scientific analysis, a container of territorial forms. While the first task is assigned to the arts and humanities (and later, the tourist gaze), the second is afforded to geography and geographers. In this way what disappears, however, is not only the subject of geography, but also *all memory of the Humboldtian ‘gesture’*. What remains is a (strategic) confusion regarding the meaning of landscape: a confusion that, as I noted at the outset of this article, persists to this day. The ‘immobilised’ subject (and the consequent assignation of ‘poetic’ meaning to such immobility) is one of the monsters of Modernity, one of the ghastly offspring of the bourgeois nation-state project (Minca and Bialasiewicz, 2004).

The consequences of such a shift are staggering. The watching-subject is now frozen in front of a scientifically determined, ‘photographic’ landscape, a fixed spatio-temporal tableau, *but robbed of the awareness of the cognitive apparatus that grants it meaning*. Such a divide between subject and object will prove, indeed, difficult to transcend. And so the concept of landscape that becomes consolidated in geography between the 1920s and the 1950s as largely a synonym of space and/or territory is simply an effect – and not the

cause – of an uncritical adoption of a cartographic metric (Farinelli 2003). Landscape, brought to geography as a counter to measurement, now becomes *simply* measurement; simply a container of ‘geographical things’.

It is these continental European influences (essentially, those of Vidal de la Blache and the German positivist geographers of the late 1800s and early 1900s) that mark the ‘cultural landscape’ that Carl Sauer brings across the Atlantic – and that will characterize the concept within Anglophone geography more broadly. As Franco Farinelli (1981b) has argued in his well-known work on the history of settlement geography, the conceptualisations being developed in German geography at that precise historical moment would have an enormous impact on *all* other geographies. It is perhaps to that moment that we should look, then, for the reasons because of which, still today, the concept of geographical landscape is sometimes confused and conflated with other concepts such as ‘region’ or ‘area’ (see the critique in Livingstone, 1992). And we should not be surprised at Richard Hartshorne’s (1939) well-known invective against landscape, suggesting that geographers abandon the concept, for it defied any clear definition; was too open to arbitrary interpretations. Yet what else could we expect from a concept originally brought to geography to describe the *bruma*, the ‘haze’ of the world, to give spatial form and imagination to a projectual horizon, to a new social and political order – but that was progressively transformed into an ‘objective’ container of geographical ‘objects’?

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The fact that, still today, landscape is often read as a ‘text’, as the expression of something else that lies ‘beyond’, or seen as ‘something’ to interpret, to be lived, practiced, experienced – or, even worse, taken as synonymous with territory or inhabited space – suggests that the certainty of representation that has allowed for the separation of subject

and object in Modern geography is still with us – and merits further reflection. The *bruma*, the ‘haze’ of the Humboldtian landscape – and the deeper meaning of his lesson – remains substantially unexplored and essentially forgotten. If we accept, following Farinelli, that landscape came to geography as/at the threshold of nascent European bourgeois Modernity, then the history of the strategic forgetting of this threshold in Anglophone geography, from Sauer to our days, still remains to be written.

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Notes

¹ ...Zora, a city that no one, having seen it can forget.[...] Zora's secret lies in the way your gaze runs over patterns following one another as in a musical score where not a note can be altered or displaced (Calvino, 1974: 15).

² See especially Cosgrove (1984, 1985, 1998, 2003), Cosgrove and Daniels (1988), Daniels (1989, 1993), Duncan (1990) and Duncan and Duncan (1988).

³ In Italian, the concept of threshold is translated into the term *soglia*; a term which, at the same time, signifies limit, confine, line of passage/transition, but also gate/door, 'entry (point)'.

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