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The negative sublime and our post-apocalyptic landscapes

Abstract: In this paper, I examine the aesthetic experience of contemporary landscapes through Günther Anders' concept of the Promethean Gap – the widening gap between humanity's technologically amplified capacity for action and our limited ability to imaginatively grasp, feel, or morally respond to its vast spatial and temporal consequences. Like Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, imaginative haunting can bridge temporal gaps between past, present, and future. Drawing on Arnold Berleant's notion of the negative sublime and Cheryl Foster's distinction between ambient and narrative modes of environmental appreciation, I argue that certain landscapes today appear post-apocalyptic not primarily through overt destruction but through imaginative narratives that overlay perceptual surfaces with absent realities: deep geological time, lost cultural worlds, failed modernist futures, and looming anthropogenic threats.

I argue that post-apocalyptic landscapes serve as both monuments to lost meaning and omens that may prompt renewed awareness of finitude and powerlessness in the face of a technological destiny. To this end, I explore how ruins, industrial decay, rural depopulation (e.g., in Portugal and Spain), and extractivism scars serve as indices of slow-burning Anthropocene catastrophes provided by cultural apocalypses, economic uprooting, and uncontrollable technological forces. While ambient engagement often normalizes these scenes through everyday familiarity or playful reappropriation, a hermeneutic-narrative stance can evoke the negative sublime: an overwhelming terror and vulnerability arising from the realization of humanity's unintended, excessive power over nature and society, exceeding both imagination and rational containment. Ultimately, such experiences—haunted by spectral pasts and futures—offer potential for existential transformation (*metanoia*), fostering humility, dread, and moral imagination capable of dealing with the Promethean gap of our era.

Introduction

Günther Anders' Promethean Gap is the concept by which the German author attempted to grasp the difference between the uncanny, destructive magnitude of the new human inventive powers unleashed through technology and our own inability to feel, represent and imagine their spatial-temporal consequences (Anders, 1983 [1961], p. 130). While the former becomes larger and spreads across multiple scales, our faculties of representation and imagination remain limited. We cannot grasp the range of our own actions when they are mediated by technologies. The Promethean Gap states how “the performance of our hearts – our inhibitions, our fears, our concerns, our remorse – develops in inverse proportion to the extent of our actions” (Anders, 2020, p. 262). Faced with this discrepancy between our faculties, human beings end up becoming smaller than themselves, as they are no longer able to cope with the pace of change that they themselves brought about: “utopians are not capable of producing what they envision in the future, we, the inverted utopians, are not capable of envisioning what we actually produce.” (2020, p. 258).

Aristotle had already noted how a young man could never be a *phronimos*, a good moral agent, given that *phronesis*, practical reason, is highly context-dependent and therefore requires character to be formed and accustomed to the harshest realities of life. Nothing prevents a young man, however, from becoming an excellent musician or geometer, given that *epistheme* or *techne* do not require the right volitional and emotional elements for their proper execution. As technol-

ogies become all the more present in our everyday lifeworld, they thrive without us realizing and feeling what we actually do with them. This anesthetic force (Muller, 2016, p. 12) creates an emotional distance made of absentmindedness and absent-heartedness that facilitates the functioning and relief function of machines and devices, but on the other hand, fosters a new blindness.

To bridge the Promethean Gap, Anders' proposal involves developing a capacity for moral imagination capable of revealing the harmful consequences of seemingly trivial actions. Only by enveloping the available information that reaches us about "what's going on in the world" and its looming threats with feelings and emotionally charged images can one be motivated to change one's behavior. The enlargement of imagination may expand the understanding of the scales of action mediated by technology, providing one with a useful fear (Anders 1983 [1961] p. 131):

Thus your task consists in bridging the gap that exists between your two faculties: your faculty of making things and your faculty of imagining things; to level off the incline that separates the two. [...] you have to violently widen the narrow capacity of your imagination until imagination and feeling become capable to grasp and to realize the enormity of your doings. In short, your task is to widen your moral fantasy.

Likewise, in Charles Dickens's novella "A Christmas Carol", the stingy Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by the three ghosts of past, present and future. Taking this novella as a guide, we can understand how these ghosts are narrative devices that work by stimulating Scrooge's imagination by actually taking him *personally and therefore aesthetically* to other locations in space and time. Scrooge is involuntarily removed from his current affairs and by getting acquainted with past actions and seeing how they are connected to the present and unfold into the future, actually learns to *feel* and *represent* all the consequences of his actions. The ghosts granted Scrooge a kind of imaginative ubiquity, a supernatural ability to represent, feel and sense his past and present actions and their consequences for the present and for the future. The result of this process is that at the end of the novella, Scrooge undergoes a *metanoia*, a complete personal overhaul that transforms his thrift and greedy ways and allows him a new opportunity to live in the present *by being acutely aware* of how his actions spread across different temporalities.

What the Promethean Gap and Charles Dickens's novella point out pertains to the contemporary difficulties in envisaging the consequences of our own past actions and their consequences for the future. We don't experience them in a lively, direct way: in a word, we are not *haunted* by their sheer importance. I contend that they also reappear in the aesthetic experience of landscapes. Landscapes are usually appreciated according to our present ambient context of the here and now, but sometimes also through imaginative narratives that encompass past and future (Foster, 1998, p. 128), by which, with varying force and depth, we learn to place ourselves in their projected shifting transformations and can ourselves be transformed. I want to argue that the experience of some landscapes today may be understood according to the attempts to bridge the Promethean Gap, that is, although landscapes may be experienced positively and according to what sensuously surrounds the subject, they often are experienced according to what is absent: whether the not there *anymore* or the not there *yet*. For hauntology (Fisher, 2021, p. 48), the spectral reality matters as it casts its shadow on the present.

What I'll be arguing along is that if knowledge has a bearing on our aesthetic appreciations, we may well experience landscapes not in a purely ambient, sensuous manner but according to various narratives. Like Cheryl Foster (1999, p. 129) states, our imagination builds on available and objective knowledge and overlaps the experience of such landscapes with likely narratives that tie together perceptual features and the invisible processes and events of its past, present and future. This may trigger the appearance of the negative sublime due to the sheer bleak force of such narratives being justifiable, turning the aesthetic experience into an experience of post-apocalyptic landscapes. The deep time of the past, the lost futures of progress and social utopias and the anthropogenic future fossils (Farrier, 2020) are evidently not-present and remain some-

what piecemeal and invisible, but they can nevertheless be gathered by imagination in stories that influence the perceptive surface of landscapes.

Today, for various reasons that encompass a plethora of geopolitical threats, societal upheavals, and overall rising living costs, the dread and hopelessness of post-apocalyptic imagination hangs over many lives in Western countries. As a cultural phenomenon, it therefore has a bearing on our experience of *some* landscapes as they present us with the scars of industrial decay, economic downturns and ruins that contribute to documenting an overall feeling of gloom. Provided that we are currently aware of several incoming demographic and social shifts and incoming environmental catastrophes, I argue that the negative sublime developed by Arnold Berleant (2009) is a key aesthetic category for understanding the role of collective human action today and allows us *somehow* to bridge the Promethean Gap. Through various natural and designed indexes that point to the destructive power of human forces in which we partake, actual landscapes overlap with the imagined, post-apocalyptic effects and may drive us in terror and fear to an intense realization of the dangers of human unintended action and the transformations they entail. Such experiences, like the ones Ebenezer Scrooge went through, are not only cognitive or abstract but can also become existential, entailing a transformation in how the present is lived and framed.

Territory, Environment and Landscape: a distinction

As for my starting point, I assume a conception of landscape that is distinct from the scientific and biophysical conception of the environment, common to the disciplines of environmental aesthetics and ethics. Allen Carlson (1979), for example, uses the term environment mainly to refer to this technical-scientific sense of an ecosystem or habitat, where appreciation of the environment means to subsume aesthetic experience under the appropriate categories of knowledge, just like in art, the objects of appreciation are to be acknowledged as intentional artifacts. Carlson seems to reduce aesthetics to the cognitive underpinnings of natural science and natural history, leaving it up to specialists to make political decisions about which places are objectively beautiful and should be conserved (Carlson, 2010). His conception of the environment is mainly focused on the intersection of scientism and heritage management, with the consequent disparaging of other aesthetic experiences in places that are environmentally poorer or even uninteresting.

The term ‘landscape’ used in this work is, however, more similar to the term ‘environment’ as used by Arnold Berleant and his aesthetics of engagement. For Berleant, ‘environment’ is mainly understood as *oikos*, meaning home, but it can also refer to everything that surrounds a subject, whether artificial or natural. This view allows culture and society to shape nature and aligns with an aesthetic category that does not belong to the realm of representations and images, but to the order of being, as Rosario Assunto would say. ‘Landscape,’ on the other hand, is “a place in the world where nature becomes the object of an integral aesthetic experience” (Serrão, 2013, p. 111). Assunto states that “landscape is the ‘form’ in which the a priori synthetic unity is expressed, the necessary unity that conditions its presentation in consciousness of matter (territory) and content-or-function (environment)” (Assunto, 2011, p. 128). According to Assunto, we never live in a territory framed solely by a biophysical environment, but always within a concrete landscape. Only by abstracting from our lifeworld—our disappointments, hopes, joys, and sadness—can we develop these notions. The concrete environment, the one we experience by being in it, is always the environment as the form of a territory, and that is what we call a landscape.

Landscape is then a unity of being and experience. This distinction, according to Adriana Veríssimo Serrão (2011, p. 112), solidifies the position of aesthetic philosophy against scientism, as aesthetics is of the order of the senses. An experience of the environment—as defined scientifically—as a global environment is incomprehensible, because the environment itself cannot be truly experienced, only conceived. Landscape is neither purely natural nor purely human, but instead their intersection. It is a plastic category, an undeniable synthesis that cannot be reduced to nature or the environment, unfolding into small units—singular places or totalities. Simultane-

ously, it is clear that aesthetic experience is connected with a vital feeling generated by the real qualities of each landscape encountered. Therefore, appreciation extends beyond the reflective and mental level. The specific details and their contexts evoke sensations of well-being or discomfort in individuals.

With these distinctions in mind, I hold that Cheryl Foster's distinctions on how we can appreciate natural environments in two ways map well and hold true to landscapes. Each aspect is interdependent on the other, and neither can fully articulate the experience of nature. One is the ambient dimension, which describes how we linger in its unexpected sensuous potential. In this non-cognitive dimension, the connection with place-making is favoured. While subsuming its elements in frames or structures of reference is suspended, the sensory perception of each element is developed. In the ambient way of experiencing landscapes, one is thrown into a plurality of forms, colours, sounds and surfaces that delight, without being concerned with establishing justifiable narratives, whether they are in fact based on a reliable knowledge of what things are or not. I believe this to be, in fact, the most common experience of post-apocalyptic landscapes. There is often an adjustment to what we deal with in an everyday setting, an integration into our daily lives and interests, and this framing of the post-apocalyptic landscape stops us from being aware of the forces that explain their beginning and what they tell us about the future. There is a tendency to accept the present status of landscapes as always existing towards the past and the future, a kind of ontological "shifting baseline syndrome" that pacifies crisis, upheavals and catastrophic processes. If one digs deeper, however, deeper patterns and greater temporal logics could be revealed. Landscapes can also be experienced through a hermeneutic stance (Foster, 1998, p. 131):

Whether we see nature as the place where pre-scientific human beings situated some forms of spiritual power, or as the legacy of long-abandoned agrarian communities, or as the location of fascinatingly complex and seasonal cellular changes, we do in each case read the surface of the environment as a kind of story. We filter the perceptual properties of nature's surface through a frame of reference that functions as narrative in character, one that contextualizes the objects before us as players in a partially invisible drama.

In this view, each element of the post-apocalyptic landscape functions as an index to which scientific knowledge, historical knowledge, or another narrative that transcends any particular individual can be attached and with which we can make judgments and uncover underground processes. These narratives can be grounded and unfolded by imagination to explore aspects, call forth events and facts that we haven't witnessed or lived through, but which we justifiably attach to landscapes, either because they are commonsensical, or because it is present in our memories, or even because they are expected to happen. This imaginative engagement allows a revelation and a reading, like a kind of unintentional story told by nature, society and technology. It is according to this model that we can understand, at the same time, the role of imagination in the experience of the negative sublime.

What are post-apocalyptic landscapes?

It is blatant how post-apocalyptic themes surface in our culture and nourish collective imagination through their presence in literary fiction, films, and video games that illustrate, in fact, a civilizational obsession with the topic of extinction, collapse, or an end-of-the-world catastrophe. Although these works can perhaps be prompted by an enduring unbalance between the unleashed forces of industrialization and forms of social life, there is something more at stake. The presence of post-apocalyptic themes in popular culture expresses a common point of convergence regarding possible futures and what they can teach us about our collective destiny.

It should be noted that it is also a Western practice to closely deal with eschatological thinking, renewing its vocabulary of decadence and salvation. We shouldn't underestimate how our certainty that we are today going through an apocalyptic time of convulsive transition also has a historical trajectory and is reflected in other ages when the end of the world seemed to be near.

Terms like apocalypse, crisis and catastrophe “imply a coherent ending point to history and thus help to make sense out of things, allowing us to impose some sense of order upon chaos.” (Rosner, 2019, xix). Like those beings who are “as in-between as possible” (Kermode, 1998, p. 33 and p. 51), we crave principles and ends. Lacking them, we are driven to adopt fictions, that is, personal and collective narratives that provide a sense of the world, even when it seems to be falling apart in our eyes.

I nevertheless want to suggest that Western civilization is currently going through a marked mutation, which nowadays translates into several slow-burning, but inexorable, catastrophes. What we are witnessing is an unfolding that, although at times unreadable, is an output of the early vocation of the West. According to Edmund Husserl, what characterizes European humanity, in contrast to other human cultures, is that it has been forever infected by the call of a universal vocation, given by the quest for knowledge in the search for the beautiful and the true (Husserl, 2008, p. 32). For Husserl, this amounts to the birth of an immanent teleology by which “the whole spiritual becoming” tends towards the infinite through the quests of philosophy and science. The conclusion of this absolute idea and its universal drive established a relation towards the liberating quality of knowledge, which ultimately became an equation between knowledge and power. At the root of today’s post-apocalyptic landscapes lies the ambiguous outcome of this ancient vocation of the West. By developing its logic to the extreme and spreading it across the entire planet, the inversion of such an equation between power and knowledge has been taken to its logical conclusion, and only now does it reveal its inverted essence: more power and knowledge – technology – implying ever more ignorance and powerlessness. Ignorance or powerlessness are not, however, quantities to be overcome by increasing knowledge and power. Rather, they are a condition to which mortals are necessarily doomed. The uncontrollability of the Anthropocene is the ultimate and inexorable destiny of the West.

From the beginning, the term “post-apocalyptic” seems to refer to the aftermath of a single, overwhelming event of destruction and unimaginable suffering. We usually associate a post-apocalyptic landscape with the remains of human settlements after a global destructive event, like a nuclear war or a worldwide pandemic that leads to widespread social collapse and ushers in a dystopian future. The photographs of Edward Burtynsky (Farrier, 2020, p. 52) of industrial landscapes and the ravaging and processing of natural resources vividly illustrate the underlying reality of our way of life, which often goes unnoticed. These are scenes of destruction linked to extractivism, heavy industry, strip mines, and landfills stretching as far as the eye can see. Such landscapes, on a different scale, embody the dramatic power and scope of the Promethean forces that underpin the environmental crisis and climate change.

Granted, catastrophes are something intrinsic to Modernity. They advance irreversibly and almost imperceptibly, spreading and becoming entrenched in everyday life while being framed as an exception due to ingrained assumptions of control and predictability. Due to the tendency of global capitalist processes to efficiently optimize their logistical operations, it is all the more expected that companies, industries, and investments worldwide will continue to be offshored to their most favourable location. Left behind are failed businesses, weakened communities, and ruins of factories or resource extractivism that display the footprint of a planetary process. In the context of late capitalism, post-apocalyptic landscapes are a privileged place to experience the failure of the modern project. The diversity of post-apocalyptic landscapes is, therefore, enormous. They are the *memento mori* of our times, unintentional monuments for a new age of convulsion. Philosophy and aesthetics should, from the outset, recognize that, notwithstanding its plurality, there is a common structure to this shared experience and that it has valuable teachings about who we are.

Nevertheless, one of the features of post-apocalyptic landscapes is that they are not necessarily obvious. However, we do not need to exclusively identify the apocalypse with a large-scale or single event that extends to all places and locations with the same force or depth. The apocalypse

can arrive in multiple and discreet ways, and it's mostly a radically disruptive process that expresses itself in various ways. The Anthropocene, as uncontrolled acceleration without a *telos*, awakens multiple factors that head toward a convergence of catastrophes (Nancy, 2014, p. 11): wars, environmental degradation, economic decay, social fracture, and climatic migration. Rather than a world-wide singular incident of unfathomable magnitude or sudden and abrupt events, the Anthropocene mostly unleashes slow-burning catastrophes with a variety of enduring social, demographic, economic, and environmental effects. Catastrophes often unfold steadily while easily being imperceptible, hiding beneath the foam of days, until a set of minute signs announces the broader phenomenon that allows one to grasp what stirs in the depths. Some landscapes reflect this gradual social collapse and the forces that loom under their surface, displaying ruin, abandonment and neglect. To an outsider, such landscapes may be inconspicuously simple, even beautiful, not presenting any obvious sign of their history or indicating how their future is in danger or already doomed.

In the face of the expansion of rationalization into all areas of life and the constant commitment to technological innovation, space ends up reliably reflecting the speed of economic, social, and demographic transformations unleashed by the acceleration of the exchange of goods, capital and labour. As markets are shaken or relocated to other geographies in the name of more efficiency, space proves to be too inflexible to hold the mobile form of capital and becomes a record of all the economy's cycles of expansion and contraction, detailing its fragilities, bankruptcies, and missteps (Edensor, 2005, p. 4). If the Angel of History represents the march of progress towards the future and, in its passage, leaves a trail of destruction, it is necessary to stress that the destruction that common images of apocalypse entail does not necessarily mean war or physical death, but rather an ongoing sense of unfathomable uprooting of everyday life.

In Portugal and Spain, for instance, this is the case with vast areas outside major urban centers and linked to a rural economy that has been slowly devastated with the adoption of the free market at the European Union level. When places, villages, and towns – once lively and teeming with people, communities, and traditions – started being drained due to labour demand, only the elderly were left behind. The horizon of meaning fades, and with this loss of assumptions, inhabitants fall into a deep “moral anomy, epistemological aporia and psychic trauma” (Rosner, 2019, xiii) in which the present becomes discontinuous with the past and the future. The vicious circle of a lack of people and ageing casts a general hopelessness and an unlivable world. The landscape of ruins created by Modernity in Portugal and Spain, as elsewhere, means that settlements grow ever thinner, until they are mostly vacant of activities and people. Economic downturn in rural areas and involuntary depopulation are two aspects of a silent collapse. In a word, this uprooting robs people of their own faculty to assign meaning to their experiences, rendering them as belonging to a greater, coherent whole. When the social context weakens, changes profoundly, or when communities shatter, the loss of skills, traditions, and references appears irreparable. Long before biological death, one witnesses the death of the cultural world in which one lived, the loss of intersubjectivity of values that make the world a human world. Following the work of the Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino on lived cultural apocalypses – *Weltuntergangserlebnis* – (1977, p. 100), one can see that experiences of the end of a world – the loss of a normal horizon of meaning composed of stories, signs, rituals, assumptions, beliefs, perceptions, habits, and expectations – do not necessarily hinge on a recognizable single event. A cultural apocalypse is the gravest and most enduring process of destruction precisely because it is the most inconspicuous.

Landscapes, ruins and melancholy

In Andrew Tarkovsky's movie *Stalker*, objects and ruins in the Zone area have lost their sense of belonging to any human world. They have seemingly become timeless, forgotten relics and treasures about to be discovered as if they were secret and precious wonders from a vanished

civilization that still reappears in the present. *Stalker* shows the desolation that surfaces when objects that once made-up lives become rubbish, disposable, useless, entrusted to oblivion.

According to Hanssen, paraphrasing Benjamin, the melancholic gaze and the hermeneutics that accompany it constitute the distinctive theory of knowledge of Modernity (1999, p. 1002). As material progress and permanent innovation strip the present of its coherence and dissolve what was once solid, more and more objects and images linked to past forms of life accumulate. The abundance of items, fragments, and relics devoid of familiarity fosters an interpretive culture of remembrance that attempts to build access to the past. Everyday life starts to be confused with a museum: as everything tends towards obsolescence, more and more objects, beliefs and rituals taken from their lifeworld are gathered together in the name of culture and as if they were a personal collection. At the same time, though, this narrative is felt to be a game, devoid of reality.

Modernity, according to Benjamin, tends to promote an archaeological look and a collector's attitude before a deluge of lost worlds. The passage of the Angel of History toward the future leaves the remains and spoils of culture in its wake, revealing how the march of technology, in its promise of liberation and secular redemption, engenders irreparable losses. Our culture finds itself as the creator of various futures, but at the cost of destroying the past: the wind of history blows everything away and what remains are distant artefacts, petrified relics and enigmatic and obscure cultural remains that clutter the present, fossils that deprive and alienate the modern subject (Barndt, 2009, p. 284). Our culture displays a Noah syndrome (Choay, 2010, p. 225) of attempting to consign everything to a gigantic, monstrous archive so that the boat of memory can withstand the flood of time. The hermeneutic and imaginative way of relating to the world becomes mainstream, an epistemic modality particularly dear to archaeologists and historians, which becomes widespread.

All surplus material creates an outdated sense of time, where the present, saturated with past records, is doomed to live among the dead, making mourning impossible. Life thus becomes filled with ruins and traces of past eras that raise questions one cannot answer. This estrangement appears when visiting a ruin and seeing how entire buildings and things stand naked without their previous lifeworld. Contemplation arises from recognizing that, by losing their everyday familiarity for humans, these things become anonymous and interpretable. To truly know them, it's not enough to describe their physical or chemical properties; one must delve into their world, much like an archaeologist handling discovered fragments, inferring and reconstructing the past lives of communities from remnants (Saito, 2019, p. 206).

But is it really like this?

Ruins do not necessarily have to induce a melancholic gaze. On the contrary, they can be new spaces of freedom that harbour the unexpected, the surprising, the mysterious. As derelict buildings become stripped of the codes and regulations that guided the previous behaviour of minds and bodies, this allows visitors to playfully discover new aesthetic values and uncover new possibilities of presence that escape the burden of historical framings. A ruin, more often than not, does not call for a hermeneutical gaze towards historical time, but frequently lures visitors to exercise a brief transgression through an appropriation of space using other codes and interests. Like Saito states (2019, p. 206), objects devoid of life world are now prone to a kind of awareness which "does not seek to make sense of them, to rationalize, contextualize or historicize them, but is rather itself a sensation rooted in an appreciation of their solitude, unfamiliarity and strangeness." The "loss of the original functionality makes them a kind of misfit in our organizational scheme". Ruins can be explored, squatted, used for musical concerts, raves, sexual encounters, or adapted to games like airsoft or skateboarding. As more and more peripheral areas are exploited and drained of economic activity, it is important to recognize how landscapes and their ruins enclose an ambiguity of not only being readable, but also being able to be valued in themselves and used for new social configurations. Ruins and their objects are not only documents of a vanished civilization or signs of a larger social and natural process that expands and

engulfs the future. Accordingly, they are not just places of waste or negativity, provisionally withdrawn from innovation or the logic of profit, but sites where meaning can be temporarily recreated and new beginnings detached from melancholia endorsed (Edensor, 2005, p. 7).

In fact, as long as the abandonment of landscapes persists and ruins are not rehabilitated by the economy or the State, Benjamin's melancholic hermeneutic or Foster's narrative dimension seems to be the most uncommon approach. The delight provided by knowledge by acquaintance and the sensuality and enigma of ruins and landscapes is more immediate, easy, and available. The most common experience of landscapes and ruins is not hermeneutical or narrative, but rather a ready-to-hand approach, by which the ambient dimension, with its felt intimacy and wonder, thrives. We usually lack the ghosts that enabled Scrooge to weave past, present, and future, and while doing so, by abstaining from decoding the layered time scales of landscapes (Barndt, 2009, p. 273), we do not understand the perceptual surfaces that we experience as coming from a deep time that social and natural history reveal. This does not mean that the narrative dimension is dispensable. In fact, it is precisely because knowledge is necessary and memory is retrieved to access larger space-time scales without neglecting the ambient dimension that makes hermeneutics more unusual. But it is also through it that awe and terror can arise. It is only in this narrative dimension, however, that we can immerse ourselves, through imagination, in something greater than ourselves. Just as the Promethean Gap appeals to the imagination for moral reasons, there is also a duty of melancholy in scrutinising the obvious. Even familiar landscapes and ruins may, after all, harbour post-apocalyptic landscapes. Without questioning the past and the future, they remain merely recreational settings in a frozen present.

On the other hand, attempts to bridge the Promethean Gap are quite bothersome and pull one away from the direct felt sensuous encounter with landscapes, ruins, and objects. Employing appropriate narratives is not about exercising aesthetic control (Edensor, 2005, p. 13) but about expanding imagination to spatial and temporal scales beyond sense perception in order to link concepts and abstractions that frame the present and allow us to understand how the new uncontrolled power of human activity invalidates myths of progress. Industrial ruins, abandoned crop lands, and vegetation advancing where human activity once existed denounce the action of other underground forces that maintenance and labour once kept at bay. A suspicion lingers that the landscape as it is found is only a moment in a larger and invisible temporal process. One is asked to plunge into its depths and develop a hermeneutics that allows it to be read according to its past and likely future. The past, at the same time, resists questioning. It can be interpreted, to be sure, but it can also be falsified with irrelevant or ludicrous narratives.

These observations then establish that a landscape may be experienced as being post-apocalyptic, provided that its surface is read accordingly to a narrative that is not fictitious, but rather plausible and realistic, expanding it to its past and likely future. The brought about contrast between the sensuous surface and the grasped power and immensity of the intangible forces rouses astonishment and fear. Accordingly, post-apocalyptic landscapes do not need to display striking, recognizable features of overwhelming destruction that, by their magnitude or scale, immediately awaken terror. There is a sheer banality about them if what steers beneath them is grasped as more real and menacing. In the Anthropocene, the negative sublime must actually be felt beyond the evidence of disasters, catastrophes, and wreckage through an enlargement of imagination that reaches both past and future. By inquiring into some landscapes and seeing their spatial features as a function of an ongoing temporal process, impressions of a lingering end of the world can be sensed. The negative sublime ultimately develops out of the terror perceived by, for instance, the numerous cultural apocalypses displayed by landscapes, but such terror must be awakened through a hermeneutics that identifies and builds a narrative around the forces that are actively shaping it and goes beyond its sensuous, perceptive features. The negative sublime is thus found by imagination through a reading of the invisible Promethean forces that we no longer control.

From the technological to the negative sublime

According to David Nye (1994, p. 3), the technological sublime is an integral part of contemporary cultural awareness, particularly the American one. The shift from the experience of the sublime in nature towards technology reveals the desacralization of the former and the exaltation of humanity's Promethean powers, enabling all the same an experience of transcendence in a new locus. At the same time, as a social phenomenon, the technological sublime shows how the recognition of the sublimity depends on social categories and political systems and is thus subject to being triggered by new cultural objects that awaken awe, wonder, and terror. Such objects are not necessarily landscapes but may also include architectural forms and technological innovations capable of eliciting intense and powerful experiences. We can imagine how the emergence of the train or the radio aroused, at the time, powerful emotions. The Anthropocene era, as such, suggests that new configurations of the sublime are on the rise and may be linked to the current transformations. The technological advancements of war, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other events suggest that the sublime is prone to new definitions. There are, nevertheless, some differences.

If, in contemplating a natural landscape under a storm on a full moon, we somehow dive into a sublime feeling, reason will come into play when imagination becomes overwhelmed. On the other hand, the technological sublime extols the new pinnacles of human reason in manipulating matter, energy and information (Nye, 1994, p. 60). Technology continually blurs the line between what is considered impossible and feasible. The new Promethean powers are so overwhelming that not only natural wonders, but human reason itself awakens sublimity and comes to be venerated and celebrated. We can understand this shift of the technological sublime into its counterpart when we recognize how technology, due to its evolution, has become kinetic, a movement of transfiguration of all limits, aiming to remove the obstacles that hinder an allegedly human emancipation, such as the comeuppances of time, space, body, gender, pain, and aging. Technology has become a destiny of domination through which the Earth is made available to be mobilized, manipulated, and converted into a commodity, and, in this movement, absorbing the human being as a new optimizable resource. It is, therefore, justifiable that new cultural forms account for the ambiguity of the triumph of instrumental reason. The transformation of a benevolent force in the service of humanity has exceeded good measure and become the inhuman and uncontrolled process of planetary subjugation.

It then seems that a new aesthetic category must provide an experience of the new nature of anthropic action. The negative sublime seems especially appropriate today to account for such an ambiguity of technology and human ingenuity and the contemporary experience of terror, uncertainty, and distrust of the future. It concerns those experiences that fall under the heading of negative aesthetics, which are defined as "offence to sensibility" and a "sensory deprivation" that triggers "aesthetic pain" (Escobar, 2022, p. 85). Post-apocalyptic landscapes are thus not experienced according to the rules of classical aesthetics, i.e., from a distanced and contemplative point of view, but through their implications for the subject and his everyday lifeworld. Their experience exposes an engulfing danger, a silent threat that calls for heed and preventive measures.

Arnold Berleant, whose footsteps we follow here, shifted the excess of the object of the sublime from the faculty of reason to nature. The ontologisation of the sublime asserts the continuity of human beings with nature and with human constructions, questioning the artificial and objectifying distance between the aesthetic subject and object, pointing to how Kant's concept of the sublime is still shackled to the tradition of "convenient Western Cartesianism" (Berleant, 2005, p. 168). The sublime emphasizes the experience of the limitless and our connection to both nature and human works, but by stressing this unity, our fragility and vulnerability are also exposed. The negative sublime demonstrates our belonging to the greater whole of nature through the way our future is threatened by the multiplicity of unpredictable technological effects. Berleant asserts that the subject's vulnerability to danger, contrary to Kant, is not a condition of de-

aestheticisation of experience, but rather of aesthetic intensification that involves deepening the subject-object connection. This entails that all the landscapes displaying destruction and ruin, all the unpredictable effects that technology has engendered, all the consequences that will stain the future with the fossils of our civilization (Farrier, 2020, p. 30) are part of us, but they exceed our intentions to a large extent. To shift the sublime from nature to technology is to point out, like Anders states, how we don't know what we are doing (Anders, 2025, p. 90) and that technological progress reveals us as strangers to our own ourselves.

Berleant further develops the notion of the negative sublime by dividing it into two categories: the presentation of the unrepresentable and the imperceptible unrepresentable, which correspond to the Kantian division between the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime. The presentation of the unrepresentable arises when we are faced with the impossibility of imagination representing the incalculable magnitude, for example, of environmental disasters in terms of the loss of biodiversity and interference in the balance of ecosystems (2012, pp. 200-201). The imperceptible unrepresentable is rooted in the spatial-temporal indeterminacy of the power of the consequences of environmental catastrophes and cataclysms, such as the unimaginable power of the escalating consequences of global warming, an environmental disaster, or a nuclear war. As in Kant, in both cases, imagination is pushed to its limits, but the ability to conceive and rationalize the unrepresentable character of the negative sublime through the idea of infinity is not possible.

In Kant's experience of the sublime, on the one hand, the subject is faced with the powerlessness of imagination to find a sensible image corresponding to the manifestation of greatness (mathematical sublime) or the power of nature (dynamic sublime), on the other hand, he overcomes this feeling of displeasure by discovering, in reason, the idea of infinity, the intuition of the absolute, which elevates him as a moral being, in other words, to his pure rationality. The sublime is an analogue of moral respect.

Like the starry sky of Kant, what we can see is but a fragment of a whole that the power of the imagination cannot encompass. Kant thought that reason or the understanding could accommodate the sublime in a rational judgement, such as the idea of infinity. Without Kant's rationalistic and religious reassurances, we may try to give the negative sublime the guise of rationality by transforming the overwhelming power or the wide, indeterminate extent of the devastation into a pseudo-rationality of a numerical calculation, a mega-number. But it is necessary to question the possibility of conceptualizing the negative sublime using a visual or mathematical methodology for, in the human-made disasters in nature, even a satellite a photo is but a small representation of its extent, both below the surface of the water and in the larger ecosystem. And its effects must be multiplied endlessly as they ripple outward both in space and time. A photograph is but a synecdoche of an inconceivable and unimaginable whole. For such reasons, one can say that the negative sublime exceeds both imagination and reason.

The negative sublime differs from the Kantian sublime for various reasons. It is not reducible to the idea of infinity, and it does not reside in a subject separated from the object. Finally, it establishes a confrontation between human power and the invisible power of nature materialized in concrete force. The element that seems most relevant to the definition of the negative sublime is the fact that it is perceived as a distressing unpredictability for human beings, which is caused by their own actions. The negative sublime entails the perception of a nature profoundly modified by technology, whose infinite complexity and immensity escape human control.

Faced with the negative sublime suggested by post-apocalyptic landscapes, we feel simultaneously innocent but guilty (Anders, 2014, p. 3), vulnerable and masters of unbridled power. At this point, it becomes clear how the attempts to bridge the Promethean Gap map well into the negative sublime. The imagination tries to bridge the gap, to represent the temporal and spatial effects of an ongoing process, but finds itself falling short of its task, given the magnitude and complexity of technology, whose effects and consequences cannot be fully described or even mentally encompassed. Imagination attempts to fill the void with narratives that tie together past

and future with the signifiers (Barndt, 2009, p. 272) displayed by post-apocalyptic landscapes that the subject experiences, while at the same time doubting their accuracy.

Conclusion

The experience of post-apocalyptic landscapes inscribes in the subject the impression of a deep time by unfolding the perceived. The negative sublime can be manifest when an attempt to represent other time scales uncovers a pattern of catastrophes or cultural apocalypses that arouse fear. Such an experience integrates the perceptual encounter with landscapes and the conceptual understanding of forces unfamiliar to human deliberation. The intuition of this deep time corresponds to the realization that the landscapes, buildings, and the economy are ultimately part of the larger cycles of life and death. This revelation of decay runs through the experience of the negative sublime and is not unrelated to the impression that ruins do not just manifest a passing breakdown, but have some truthfulness about them, exposing the borrowed ground on which civilization was built. The experience of deep time provides one with the impression of its power in consuming civilizations, peoples, buildings, and faiths, but also of the fleeting quality of all life (Serrão, 2023, p. 52). The post-apocalyptic landscape casts this twilight on daily life.

Additionally, the experience of post-apocalyptic landscapes requires the enlarging power of imagination. This process pushes the common experience away from perception, to the point that the ambient dimension may be compromised, and notwithstanding whether imagination is capable of illustrating all the serious, real causes and effects that predate and follow one's surroundings. If we consider all the magnitude of the destruction of nature brought about by technological ravaging, such as the loss of biodiversity or the losses that cultural apocalypses entail, as forsaken traditions, languages, and skills, imagination awakens fear and terror, but is unable to properly represent the scale and magnitude.

The negative sublime ends up overlapping with everyday life. Like a haunting ghost, it hijacks us to suggest to us all the narratives that describe a past that no longer exists and a future that will be no more. The post-apocalyptic landscapes are the spatialization of an emotional state in which the ghosts of past and future cast scepticism on the reality of the present. They are a monument to what was lost and must not be forgotten, and, at the same time, their iconic presence works as a bad omen. Such a psychological condition seems to be one of pre-traumatic stress, whereby there is no faith in the future whatsoever that any action to manage or diminish an announced catastrophe not only fails to remedy it, but may actually increase the danger. The feeling of helplessness and the inability to dispel fears about the future translate into widespread existential angst. This traumatic nature is reinforced precisely by the realisation that any action to manage or mitigate the impending catastrophe not only fails to remedy the situation, but actually increases the danger.

Contrary to Arnold Berleant¹ (2012, 201), I have suggested that the experience of the negative sublime about post-apocalyptic landscapes can often be experienced since it is not exclusively about singular, great global events, but about the unfolding of the Anthropocene in local contexts. By trying to represent an unimaginable looming danger, the terrified subject risks crushing his everyday life with an unbearable burden, but at the same time, such an experience can well expand the experience of the self beyond the confines of everyday life. Fear and terror, even if they surface not through something perceived, but through imagination, can be paralyzing by showing human vulnerability. On the other hand, by anticipating dangers and threats, such expe-

¹ "There are occasions when the negative sublime is difficult to approach perceptually because the consequences are so indeterminately extensive in time as well as in space as to be unimaginable. The awesome possibilities of a nuclear disaster have only been anticipated by the events at Chernobyl and in Japan. The consequences of a nuclear war for the human environment exceed our comprehension even more.

riences may well have a transformative function. To put it another way, to what extent can fear and terror, in the face of the negative excess of power that threatens our existence, save us?

Just as in the case of Ebenezer Scrooge, this can ultimately result in a heightened awareness and sense of humility through recognition of the scale and magnitude of technology that has been triggered by the dreams of reason. Not the humility before the grandeur of nature that Kant spoke of, but the inverse of the success with which human ingenuity was crowned by its inventions. It is a humility that recognizes how the negative sublime of technology is a threat to survival on Earth, deriving from humanity itself. Powerlessness can be accepted as the sign that we really don't have any control over the future. Post-apocalyptic landscapes offer extended meditations and comments on our vanity in being able to build and determine our future. Modernity, after all, was the project of human exceptionalism. The experience of the negative sublime can, however, tell us something about our finitude, about how we are part of a world that is always on the brink of collapsing.

While imagination cannot entirely bridge the Promethean gap, it nevertheless suggests an imperative to envision the dire and worst consequences of our actions to the point that we dread the present, feeling terror and powerlessness while faced with the range of human actions across the planet. Post-apocalyptic landscapes and their narratives may trigger us, like Scrooge, to undergo a *metanoia* that makes us question our ways and subdues our hopes of controlling the future and history by giving us a glimpse of our vulnerability.

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