Form of Life and Landscape

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Abstract
The reflection on modernity thinks from the place of human beings in the world or universe, and is prone to criticize the role of objective thinking or of objectification in representation and in the metaphysics of subjectivity. Life, being no less a ground than a connection of self-relation, cannot be absorbed in the forms of knowledge and power; it is a starting point for questioning. By adapting the concept of form-of-life proposed by Agamben, this paper links the problematic of landscape to the conditions of life. Not only is landscape now considered from a different perspective, but life finds its inseparable form in the existence of landscape. The rhythmic formation of landscape refers to a fundamental and powerful potentiality. Through the force of material imagination, the landscape extends its formal expression to reveal an inner transformation animated by the vital dynamism of the formation of the world. Life itself is tightly inscribed in this process, and so landscape can picture the existential condition of human beings. In this way the coexistence of human species with other species or other material beings will open the cosmic dimension of life itself.

Keywords
community, life, potentiality, rhythm, transformation, vital force
I. Introduction

Landscape is more a problem than a mere fact. Though we cannot deny that a landscape appears as a scene before our eyes, we must ask how this vision is constituted. As a problem, a landscape is far from being an ordinary aesthetic phenomenon, for it requires us to consider the situation of humanity in relation to its environment. The landscape is a medium between human forms of artistic expression and our physico-biological environment. It can be reduced neither to a subjective construction nor to an objective exteriority, for after all the way human beings live in a certain place or space, among or before certain objects, is a mystery. Our problematic orientation as we experience a landscape will lead us to reflect our mysterious interconnection with animals, plants, and other physical beings on earth.

In our capitalist age a landscape may easily be taken as a desirable possession, a “thing” that is worth a lot of money. To use a landscape in this way means one is seeing it from a purely economic perspective. But taken in this way as an “economic” (oikonomia) object means that now the landscape has become a form of mere praxis or practical activity, fully under human control or within the sphere of human engagement. Here then we may think of Heidegger’s Ge-stell or Foucault’s “apparatus” (dispositif), where this apparatus is precisely defined by Giorgio Agamben as “a set of practices, bodies of knowledge, measures, and institutions that aim to manage, govern, control, and orient . . . the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings” (Agamben, What Is an Apparatus? 12). To manage a landscape in any of the senses of “manage” implies, after all, that it is subject to the human apparatus, to human reason and human labor. Agamben also defines (a) human work as “a certain form of life,” “a knot between life and politics” (Agamben, La puissance de la pensée 419). Hence we come back to the question of the nature of (a) landscape in relation to life and form.

In the context of Agamben’s concept of form-of-life, a “landscape” seems to have no clear relation to biopolitics, to sovereignty and to the community, and perhaps also not to bare life, the sacred, and even the sign. Yet coming back to the “apparatus” and the separation brought about by the oikonomia, that is, coming back to the process of “humanization,” it may be possible to see a curious place for landscape in the division that “separates the living being from itself and from its immediate relationship with its environment” (Apparatus? 16). Can landscape then be seen as something between human beings and their environment? Inscribed as they are in a system of capitalist exchange, “landscapes” have on the one hand a potential that can be exploited, while on the other hand they also contain within
themselves a hint as to how human beings can live together with other species on earth—where human life itself seems to lie between these two poles.

II. Resistance: Life and Form

Form-of-life is far from being a self-evident concept. Once one mentions this term in an inter-cultural context, for example, in Chinese translation, it is easy to associate it with the force of life, or living force or principle of becoming, where one might think of Schopenhauer, the early Marx, Darwin and Nietzsche. However, in the Anglo-American logical-analytic philosophical context, as Agamben noted, Wittgenstein uses the concept of Lebensform (Form of life) to express the contextual correlation between a sentence (linguistic utterance) and its meaning. Departing from the Augustinian way of conceiving of meaning as a correspondence between language and thing, Wittgenstein in Philosophical Investigations points out that, besides the primitive language we use for communication (3), there are many phenomena that go beyond the “ostensive teaching of words” (4). Thus while when used in a mechanical apparatus a rod and lever have a specific function, outside this mechanism we could no longer even call these objects a “rod” and “lever.” In order to learn and use a language, then, it is necessary for us to consider things beyond the scope of mere things and their names. We have to consider actions and contexts, the wider domain of what Wittgenstein calls “language-games (Sprachspiele)” (5). After all, there are many different situations in which we use language. For example, when a construction worker utters the word “Slab!” another one understands it and hands him a slab without resorting to the definition of “slab.” One could also just say “Slab!” as a short form of “Bring me a slab” and here again no translation is necessary. Noting this, Wittgenstein describes language as a tool-box (7) and as an ancient city (8); he continually emphasizes our need to imagine the different situations in which we are using our language. Thus he speaks of the relation between imagination and form of life: “It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle.—Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable others.—And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (8).

“To Imagine a language game” is to enter into a language game, and thus to experience a different “form of life” in our imagination. This idea is also related to the earlier thought of Wittgenstein. According to David Kashik’s interpretation of Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, form is understood as “the possibility of structure” (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, §2.033; Kashik 11). As a proposition is articulated
(TLP, §3.141; Kashik 13), we have form as a structure. As for form of life, “Life is articulate; it has a form” (Kashik 12). Moreover, “a life that cannot be separated from its form, a life that is its reduction to a simple object, or a mere fact, would simply make no sense” (12). Life and form are in an isomorphic interrelationship; as there is no life separated from form, there will be no language that is not used in or put into a game. Not only does life have a structure or a form, but the form is inscribed in life.

In her conception of the nature of art, Susanne Langer, influenced by Ernst Cassirer, disregards the approach of imitation (mimesis) or representation and emphasizes the artistic form as a structure or as “the non-discursive but articulate symbol of feeling” (Langer 50). The characteristic of form is to express feeling, but “what art expresses is not actual feeling, but ideas of feeling” (59). In keeping with the concept of symbolic form, Langer sees the transmission of ideas as having a symbolic function. A symbolic form is connected indirectly to feeling and thus has the force of a living signification. For “form” Langer uses the German term Gestalt, already familiar from the field of Gestalt psychology: “the congruence of the symbolic form and the form of some vital experience must be directly perceived by the force of Gestalt alone” (59). The artistic form is in fact “the Gestalt of the living experience” that cannot be abstracted from the totality. Langer later calls this the “living form” (63), using her conception of rhythm to further explicate the dynamic process of form. Far from being some abstract exterior pattern, then, form as Gestalt is rich in forces, powerful. While some might assume a conformity of form with content expressed in literary or artistic style, for Langer the form of a work of art contains a particular otherness (strangeness, separateness) (46, 50) just as life contains heterogeneous qualities, or an organism contains “a continuous change” and “permanent form” (66). The forces manifested by this living form are not homogeneous; its pattern is not a fixed monotonous unity but envelopes variations and changes.

Indeed, although Agamben is influenced by the biopolitics of Michel Foucault, the term “form-of-life” predates Foucault. The later Foucault wrote a preface to the English translation of Normal et pathologique by Georges Canguilhem, focusing on the concept of life as we find it in medicine and biology.1 In terms of his episteme or discours, Foucault is primarily concerned with “life” in this sense. To analyze the

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1 This preface appears in revised form in Revue de métaphysique et de morale (1985) as “Life: experience and science” (Foucault, Dits et écrits, tome 4, 763-76; Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Vol. 2, 469-78).
problem of form, now seen also within the Aristotelian framework of material, formal, efficient and final causes, Foucault turns to the problems of formation and transformation as we find these in Gaston Bachelard’s *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*. He also begins to look at the problem of “life” by taking as his foci the knowledge and discourse of life. In his *The Order of Things*, which deals among other things with the classifications established by natural history in the 18th century, “life does not exist: only living beings” (Foucault, *The Order of Things* 160). However, in the late 18th century “life assumes its autonomy in relation to the concepts of classification. It escapes from that critical relation which, in the 18th century, was constitutive of the knowledge of nature” (162). Insofar as life belongs to the knowledge of nature, when knowledge itself becomes an object of philosophical analysis (Hume, Kant), life becomes “answerable to all criticism in general” (162).

That is, life for Foucault becomes an object of knowledge and also a part of discourse. In *Archaeology of Knowledge* he describes systematically the discursive formations, including the formations of objects, of enunciative modalities, of concepts, and of strategies (Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* 34-39, 44-78), and here he focuses on the transformation of the various discourses. Guided by the archaeological method and thus according to “the rules of formation” (42), we find “several possible levels of events within the very density of discourse” (189), and to see how the elements in this system are transformed becomes the task of “the analysis of transformations” (190). Thus the later Foucault develops his study of the history of sexuality, in which he explores some new concepts of subjectivity, in the context of biopolitics. Here, however, in his model of caring for oneself or self-relation, Foucault does not really focus on the idea of life, but in a 1981 interview entitled “Friendship as a Way of Life” he talks frankly about homosexuality. Here he says that the problem of homosexuality lies not in the sexual behavior itself, but rather in a “way of life” (*mode de vie*). He asks whether, in escaping the homogeneity of social behavior by way of friendship, there will be “a diversification that would also be a form of relationship and would be a ‘way of life’” (Foucault, “Friendship” 137-38). His key point is that: “a way of life can be shared among individuals of different age, status, and social activity” (138). Thus Foucault extended the concept of “way of life” to a social level, for such a way is never just an individual affair.

In both Wittgenstein and Foucault, then, one can see the emergence of the concept of “form of life” in not so much a biological as a social or communitarian context, and Agamben explores in particular its bio-political significance by
extending and deepening Foucault’s concept of the “way of life.” In his work *Means without End* (*Mezzi senza fine* 1996), Agamben, being well aware of the later Wittgenstein, begins to use the term “form-of-life” (*forma-di-vita*). In this way he is building on the distinction he made between *zoē* and *bios* in *Homo Sacer* (1995), where he looks at political and juridical thinking about sovereignty, bare life, and exception. In the 1996 work he develops the idea of the communal commonness of a “form-of-life” where this term means literally “a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life” (Agamben, *Means without End* 3-4). Here we see that “form-of-life” is distinguished from the sovereign thought implied in bare or naked life. This politicization of bare life is now seen as being questionable, for the inseparability of life and form means their equalization, as also symbolized by the hyphen in “form-of-life” (*forma-vitae*).

That human life is defined by the form-of-life means further that “the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply facts but always and above all possibilities of life, always and above all power” (*Means* 4). Power and possibility are the same thing, i.e., *dunamis* (potentiality; we think of the English word “dynamic”), a concept that Aristotle contrasts with actuality (*energeia*). In Agamben’s form-of-life, there is neither the operation of political power nor any separation of bare life from other forms of life. Once this separation becomes impossible, there will be no more disposition and exploitation of the bare life. This possibility is that of bio-political resistance.

In spite of his Aristotelian terminology, Agamben adopts a Heideggerian view. Understood as “power” in the sense of potency, “form-of-life” refers to pure potency, which is potency without actuality, potency not aiming at actuality. Like a life out of which no more bare life may be drawn, this pure potency does not assume any prior potency; it is “the” potency. Although the form-of-life is seen as “a life of power” (*Means* 9), this power is also powerless (impotent). Its potency paradoxically marks its “privation” (*sterēsis*) in terms of Aristotle’s metaphysics, and here we may think of Heidegger’s concealment (*letheia*) of Being. In *Potentialities*, Agamben deepens the sense of the proposition “sensibility is not actual but only potential” in order to explain “sensibility as a faculty of the soul” (Agamben, *Potentialities* 178). For Aristotle, the faculty of sensation, without the excitation of the object, does not exist in actuality but only in potentiality (*Aristotle, De anima* 417a2-9). In answering the question “what does it mean ‘to have a faculty,’ namely, to have power or to be in power?”, Agamben refers to the *hexis* (to have) as a manner of being by indicating the non-existence of sensation in a
living being (*La puissance de la pensée* 316) and taking privation as the essence of having. This privation (*sterēsis*) then means “not simply non-Being, simply privation, but rather the existence of non-Being, the presence of an absence” (*Potentialities* 179).

Due to the privation inherent in a faculty or a *hexis*, then, it is reasonable to distinguish two kinds of potentialities: the first is “a genetic potentiality,” implying a general status like “a child has the potential to know, or he or she can potentially become the head of State”; the second is the existing potentiality, in respect to a “having” (*hexis*), signifying more particularly that “the architect is potential in so far as he has the potential to not-build” (*Potentialities* 179). Thus a faculty as a mere potentiality is better qualified by its potentiality, and so Agamben emphasizes that the potentiality is “not simply the potential to do this or that thing but the potential to not-to-do, to not pass into actuality” (180). In not passing into actuality, potentiality remains purely potential, remains being as such and not being-for-the-other.

In fact, in Heidegger’s interpretation, faculty (*Vermögen*) is linked to possibility (*Möglichkeit*), and both are understood in the sense of “to want and to be able” (*mögen*), meant as to “let something essentially unfold (*wesen*) in its provenance, that is, let it be” (Heidegger, *Wegmarken* 316; qtd. in Agamben, *Potentialities* 199). Agamben notes that for Heidegger *mögen* is equal to Being; in letting-be such and such, a possibility conserves an original passivity. Following this interpretation, Agamben asserts that potency and impotence are closely linked (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1046a30-31), and that the essence of potency lies in its impotence (impotentiality), in being “in relation to one’s own incapacity” (*Potentialities* 182). Seeing potentiality as “incapacity to be” or “capacity not to be” (potentiality of not passing into actuality, *dunamis mē energein*) (*La puissance* 322), Agamben reverses the definition of actuality through a double negation. A first negation occurs with potentiality’s not-passing into actuality, and a second negation with the actuality of its negating the privation of potentiality; thus potentiality operates within actuality by “taking the form of a capacity to not-be not-being” (*prendre la forme d’un pouvoir ne pas-ne pas être*) (*La puissance* 327). Here we have the actuality of the impossibility of potentiality’s not-becoming actuality. In this way, potentiality does not vanish into actuality; on the contrary, it “preserves itself as such in actuality” (*Potentialities* 183).

Reflecting on the pure matter in the Aristotelian concept of soul, on how the thinking is acted upon (*De anima* 429b25), a question which the British empiricists call by the term *tabula rasa*, Agamben evokes the passivity as well as the
potentiality of the mind. In pondering “the potential or passive intellect” and the “actuality of the writing of thought” (Potentialities 215), he suggests that the tabula rasa of the mind “suffers its own receptivity and can therefore not not-write itself” (216). Likewise, in the chapter on “Form-of-Life” in Means without End, he defines thought as “the nexus that constitutes the forms of life in an inseparable context as form-of-life” (Means 9). A thought, then, is not simply affected by exterior things, but also “affected by one’s own receptiveness” (9). Thus, a thought experiences its own mode of thinking, that is to say—as Aristotle says of the Unmoved Mover, which is itself Nous (Divine Mind)—the intellect thinks itself.

In Potentialities, Agamben explains in divergent texts the relation between receptiveness and auto-affection. Citing a paragraph from Aristotle’s De anima 417b2-7, he asserts that the mind has another function which is not thinking but suffering or receiving (paschein). When it gains knowledge, i.e. moves from a state of potentially knowing to actually knowing, from potentiality to actuality, this potentiality preserves itself by way of suffering and of letting actuality be actuality; in this process, there is “the gift of the self to itself and to actuality [epidosis eis auto]” (Potentialities 184). The suffering comes not from the imposition of the actuality (a necessity), but from the capacity to make an effort in receiving (and giving) a gift. This interpretation reverses the traditional tendency to emphasize the movement toward actuality (entelecheia) and strength, as instead it emphasizes the movement “back” and “inward” toward passivity and suffering. Suffering in love, Agamben thinks, reveals the original mode of passion, the potentia passiva which is “the most radical experience of possibility at issue in Dasein: a capacity that is capable not only of potentiality (the modes of Being that are in fact possible) but also, and above all, of impotentiality” (Potentialities 201). It is in this sense that love extends the ethical significance of Dasein, by the gesture of moving even more radically “inward” toward passivity.

Some other contemporary thinkers have also articulated the importance of passivity: for instance, Georges Bataille, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Martin Heidegger, and Michel Henry. But Agamben reminds us of the German idealist Schelling’s “immemorial” (unvordenklich) (Potentialities 391). To see God as the immemorial past means to see Him as primarily an existent that has priority over all other existent beings and thus could not be known in advance by any particular essence (cf. Jensen 142-45). Viewed in the light of this “immemorial” potentiality, the Nietzschean eternal return need not be seen as enclosed in the repetition of the Same. Nonetheless, Agamben follows this traditional (and Heideggerian) interpretation of Nietzsche rather than the Deleuzian...
view whereby it is the repetition of Difference, for this Same may be correlated with an auto-affection that also implies suffering and passivity (Agamben, *La puissance* 387). The recognition of the Same presents a self-image which “suffers from itself” and thus retreats. In contrast, Schelling’s positive philosophy ends in a philosophy of revelation (Schelling 86; Vetò 420), in which the thought of pure potency is meant to potentialize the immemorial, to make it a potency again—i.e., to give it an understandable essence so that world may continue to develop itself. Although Agamben is in the theologico-political tradition, what concerns him most is the political dimension. In fact, he uses the theological to resist the political, thereby revealing the predicament of modern politics.

With his emphasis on potentiality, passivity and suffering, and also in the context of biopolitics, and influenced by Nancy’s *The Inoperable Community*, Agamben in *La Potenza del pensiero* theorizes an alternative foundation of community by way of in-operation (the privation of work and of actuality). The “multiplicity of forms of community” (*La puissance* 425) suggests community as a (mere) possibility, and Agamben also ties “community” to “communicability” (*Means* 10). In *La Potenza del pensiero*, he follows Dante’s idea of monarchy as “the actualization of the *operatio humane universitatis*” (*La puissance* 426), so that the limits of the individual person or individual community are transgressed, and the multiplicity (multi-nation, multi-community) as a common potentiality is presupposed. Agamben speculates that given, again, the precondition of pure intellect—Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover as final cause of the universe, which directly influenced Aquinas’ medieval conception of the Christian God—the thought that assumes suffering as the basis of meaning allows the multiplicity to appear. The intellect in general is also generic: in “Form-of-Life” Agamben writes: “Intellectuality and thought are not a form of life among others . . ., but they are rather the unitary power that constitutes the multiple forms of life as form-of-life” (*Means* 11), and in *La Potenza del pensiero*: “The multitude is the form of generic existence of potentiality” (*La puissance* 428). These statements help to explain Agamben’s biopolitical project and to support his resistance to totalitarianism.

*Altissima povertà* (*The Highest Poverty*), the fourth volume of *Homo Sacer*, shows a shift from the concept of the equalization of life with monastic rules to that of the discovery of life. Here then we have the transition from the general “form of life” to the “form-of-life.” Since Franciscan practice abandons the right of property and affirms that of usage (Agamben, *The Highest Poverty* 130), Agamben sees in it a deviation from the idea that rights are imposed by the form-of-life. Taking Olivi’s examination of the relation between rights and signs, Agamben demonstrates that
“what is in question is the mode of existence and the proper efficacy of those beings (laws, commands, signs) on which the powers that regulate and rule human society are founded (including those special societies that the monastic orders are)” (134). In the so-called “mode of existence” the focus lies not on what the essence of existence is, but on how to exist. According to Francis of Assisi, to live is to follow the life of Jesus. The “form-of-life” (forma vitae) consists in the expression: “The form is not a norm imposed on life, but a living that in following the life of Christ gives itself and makes itself a form” (105). To live in the highest poverty is to heed the declaration of Francis that “the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel” (qtd. in Poverty 97). The kinship between altissima (altissima povertà, highest poverty) and Altissimus (Most High) reveals an eschatological dimension in this form-of-life which means living according to the life of Christ (143). The “end of times” implies the advent of Christ, another new beginning, and also hints at Messianism. “To renew the life of Christ” (143) is for Francis the abdication of one’s rights (abdicatio iuris) in or to the use of things (usus pauper) (141), which constitutes the renunciation of this right as “a form and as a way of life” (142). Such a life of humility and poverty means the highest form of resistance to the biopolitics of modern times.

Renunciation, incapacity, poverty, all these terms suggest the pure potentiality (impotency, privation, suffering) of the homo sacer, he/she who lives the “bare life.” In this mode of life, one preserves life as a pure potentiality. Life is neither something to profit other persons nor a property to be possessed. The “highest” poverty is not a radical negation of life, a reduction to nothingness, a total renunciation of mundane life, but rather the highest praise of life itself. Its pure potentiality conserves the incompressibility of life, refusing the subjection of bare life to the powers of the sovereign(s) and of the apparatus. This type of renunciation implies the highest affirmation, and Agamben takes profanation as “the counter-apparatus that restores to common use what sacrifice had separated and divided” (What Is an Apparatus? 19). A refusal to perform sacrifices confirms, from the theologico-political perspective, the sense of community in the restoration of common use.

III. Form of Life and Vital Force in Landscape

If a landscape is a framework by means of which the common use may resist the capitalist apparatus (Besse 108), we must abandon the idea of the separation of living beings from their environments, which means enlarging the boundaries of life
within a landscape. One way to do this would be to integrate the human beings within the landscape with other living species. Assuming a common living-space for all species, the landscape will then be a common space for common use. The next step would be to focus on the relation between humanity and its natural environment (Jackson 135), a step which we will later discuss by modifying the concept of landscape.

1. Landscape as common space

If Agamben talks about Dante with regard to the idea of world monarchy, he enters a larger, trans-human domain of discourse by indirectly bringing Averroism into play. For we also have the commonality of human beings, other animals, plants and minerals, as these form a complex organism within a single landscape. Here the hierarchy extends beyond or above the human level, for if it is through their intellect that human beings are different from other beings, if the intellect is “the ultimate degree of potentiality of man” (*La puissance* 426), the human intellect is still inferior to that of the angel: the latter is “perpetually actual and without discontinuity” while the human intellect is “contingent and discontinuous” (427).

The inoperative (non-actual) status of man makes this multiplicity possible. Going in the other direction, the span of forms of life is not limited to the life-forms of human beings and animals but extends “downward” to vegetal and mineral lives. This then gives us a clearer, more complete picture of the whole landscape.

In *The Man without Content* (*L’uomo senza contenuto* 1994), under the influence of Heidegger, Agamben reflects on the principle of poetry as *poiēsis*. Heidegger interprets *poiēsis* as pro-duction (*hervorbringen*), bringing-out, and Agamben follows this interpretation by taking pro-duction as a principle for the production of both technics (*technē*) and nature (*physis*). The bringing-out of something means also the “installation” of it into a shape and an idea (*morphē kai ēidos*) (*Agamben, The Man* 60). Modern technology breaks up this commonality of nature-and-technology through the force of its constant re-production, thus deviating from the *originality* of primitive pro-duction. This critique of technology is further developed in Heidegger’s concept of the *Ge-stell*, which Agamben links with the apparatus of Foucault. Now Agamben uses the Aristotelian distinction of potentiality and actuality to distinguish the industrial work from the artwork: while the latter contains an inner *telos* or end so that in its very presence the artwork preserves its actual character, an industrial product preserves only its potential character and “exists simply in the mode of availability, of being useful for . . .”
In art, then, there remains a space for non-availability, a space opened up as the common space for man and world—where the latter may also remind us of Heidegger’s notion of the interplay of “earth” and “world” in the artwork and of his Fourfold of earth/sky/man/world.

Agamben’s reading of Hölderlin thus emphasizes the rhythm inherent in the structural originality of a poem as artwork. Rhythm (rhuthmos) originates from “flowing” (rheō) in Greek (The Man 99). We normally may think of this flow as a metaphor of time, “yet rhythm appears to introduce into this eternal flow a split and a stop” (99). Any form of artwork brings out an underlying and common rhythm: “when we are before a work of art or a landscape bathed in the light of its own presence, we perceive a stop in time, as though we were suddenly thrown into a more original time” (99). In this context, a landscape is already an artwork, and in it as in any artwork the temporal interruption creates a singularity. The presence in time is perceived as a rhythmic presence, and the rhythm also results in a particular spatialization which brings out a renunciation and an intermittence. This rhythmic space is then an ecstatic space: “We are as though held, arrested before something, but this being arrested is also a being-outside, an ek-stasis in a more original dimension” (99). To say “being held, arrested” does not mean a lack of power; it implies a phenomenological suspension (epochē) in the being-stopped, being-arrested. Rhythm turns out to be just such a suspension.

Agamben gives us more explications of the triple meaning of the rhythmic epochē: (a) to hold back, to suspend; (b) to hand over, to present, to offer; (c) to be there, to dominate, to hold (The Man 100). Here he cites a verse of Archilochus, “Learn what Rhythm holds men,” which expands our sense of rhythmic holding, for when a rhythm holds a man it interrupts his ordinary time and sends him into a more original time. Reading this verse, Agamben asserts that “Rhythm grants men both the ecstatic dwelling in a more original dimension and the fall into the flight of measurable time. It holds epochally the essence of man . . .” (100). This term “epochally” refers to the epochē created by rhythm, which reveals the essence of man as being originally rhythmic, and so here the poetic pro-duction introduces the original temporal and spatial dimensions opened by rhythm. For Agamben, since rhythm produces interruption, if there is an “original ecstasy that opens for man the space of his world” (100), this opening contains both freedom and alienation, being and nothingness, truth and error. The epochē thus provides a foundation for Hölderlin’s claim: “poetically dwells man (dichterisch wohnet der Mensch)” (Heidegger, Vorträge und Aufsätze 181). By dwelling in rhythm, as Agamben cites Hölderlin, “Everything is rhythm . . .” (The Man 94). Rhythm then opens a totally
different dimension for an artwork, one within which man “can take the original measure of his dwelling on earth” (101).

This rhythmic experience conveys an intermittence to the landscape which presents for human beings a mode of dwelling on earth. “When we are before a landscape,” we are caught by its rhythmic interruption. To dwell on a landscape is likened to dwelling on poetry, and in this sense a landscape contains a sense of unexpectedness and newness, as does our sense of being alive on the earth. Dwelling on a landscape is not a matter of production or control but a manifestation of the singularity of the place. Without landscape in this sense, we would lose our sense of topophilia; we would become homeless.

While Foucault does not mention landscape directly, we may consider some of his passages on heterotopia. In Agamben’s expansion of Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin, landscape is seen in the light of a heterotopia, of an original mode of living or of life in a different mode, a different sense. Thus for example, seen in this light a cemetery is not a place for preserving lives but one that preserves the trace of lives, of life itself or rather of “the loss of life.” In the heterotopia of a cemetery we have the interruption of ordinary time, a heterochronia or “quasi eternity” in which the individual “perpetually dissolves and fades away” (Foucault, “Different Spaces” 182). In contrast to the rhythm which produces interruptions and stops in the form of life, here (now) the stop of death dissolves only the body. It is a rupture of life in which a continuous silence is inserted and, in the end, the rhythm itself is nullified. The “landscape” of the cemetery would be a heterogeneous landscape, a place for the dead to “dwell on earth” or literally to “lie under the earth.” In this community, but not in the community of life, we have the “mineral” operation or transformation of a return to the earth. This part of our landscape called the cemetery gives death a different form; its singularity lies in the coexistence of the dead, not of living beings.

Foucault also mentions gardens. His example is the Persian, not the Chinese garden. The principle of heterotopia is “the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves” (“Different Spaces” 181), and the rectangular Persian garden represented the four parts of the world, “with a space even more sacred than the others which was like the umbilicus” (181). The distribution of the plants in the garden was according to the division of a microcosm (the carpet is a symbol of the garden, while the garden is the carpet of the world): “The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and the whole world at the same time” (182). The heterogeneous elements enveloped in the garden are in fact the constituents of the world. As there are different types of things in the world,
there will be different types of garden. Although the garden is based on design and cultivation, the lives of plants seem to be autonomous and each life can flourish and reproduce. If the heterogeneous elements are juxtaposed in this heterotopia, then the garden as a miniature world will incarnate all kinds of transplantations, juxtapositions, and coexistences.

From cemetery to garden, from the place of preservation of the dead to the expansion of vegetable and mineral life, we may see a landscape that does not possess territories. A common space is open to everyone, and to dwell in a place is not to possess it; rather, life is embraced by the place. The lifeless things in this landscape, such as rock, wind, cloud, rain, fog, volcano and wave, all have a rhythm, as do human life and human thinking. The natural elements in the landscape convey the rupture, the stop, the discontinuity of heterochrony and heterotopia, for landscape is composed by rhythms of life that every heterogeneous element carries with itself. In this sense, the landscape is a form of life. If human lives cause problems, landscape can also become problematic, and the death of landscape is no longer a metaphor.

2. Conceptual modification and the practical animation of landscape

We must consider further this question of the death of landscape. Beginning from the industrial revolution, the domination of technology has changed the surface of the earth, and ended or changed the lives of almost all the animals and plants on earth. Technology has greatly expanded our human capacities and produced many artifacts to replace natural things. Even if we do not consider this praxis of replacement, the power of technology increasingly oppresses natural beings and threatens their distribution and survival. With the praxis of cutting down virgin forests and planting artificial ones, we see how replacement follows upon destruction. The change of vegetation cover makes the forest quite different from what it was in earlier ages. This change in colors, florescence, density of vegetation also transforms to a degree our human sensibility, just as it controls and changes the form of the landscape. However, in our contemporary everyday life we cannot do without the same environmental conditions that influence and support the landscape. The formation of landscape is part of the same process of incarnation in which our bodies are involved, just as these bodily conditions accompany the technics of production and just as the formation of landscape and the form of life of human beings are mutually intertwined.

The death of landscape must not be understood as a mere loss of profit and
efficiency, for it forces one to think about when and how to stop the destruction of the landscape’s own potential, the removal of its potency. The deeper question of the meaning of landscape opens up when we are faced with this removal, this destruction. Returning to Agamben’s analysis of rhythm, we see how the temporal interruption of rhythm can open a space of/for dwelling in the world for the work of art. Also influenced, like Agamben, by the later Heidegger’s ontology, Henri Maldiney looks at rhythm’s effect of spatialization. The “in-between” of remoteness and proximity opens a profound rift in space, and from this landscape-space there emerges die Welt, the world. Maldiney sees this as “the Open” (l’Ouvert) (Maldiney, “Topos-Logos-Aisthesis” 21) in his interpretation of Heidegger’s ek-sistence (“standing-from” or “standing-out”). This rhythm, then, marks the emergence of the world in or from the landscape. Although the landscape as microcosm echoes the macrocosmic, this rhythm reveals the dynamism of the event in/as the world. The gap created by this rhythm exposes the different layers of temporality, and the temporal difference is based on the potentiality, the dunamis of the dynamic temporality that is vital to the appearance of the world (Maldiney, Regard, parole, espace 161). From this perspective, then, landscape is no artificial design but the vivid experience of the emergence of the world-space, although Maldiney limits his discussions to the aesthetic experience of paintings.

The experience of landscape, then, is not to be limited to the level of aesthetic representation (in paintings, photography, architecture or urban design). The notion of “form of life” extends the significance of “landscape” beyond the aesthetic dimension to include our human perception of space and time and of our own bodily existence, the relationship between ourselves and other living and non-living beings in the world, and more generally the relationship between all living and non-living beings and their world. The concept of landscape can then be modified on condition that (a) it surpasses the opposition between nature and culture; (b) it designates an existential relationship inscribed by spatial particularity and rhythmic dynamics, both of which imply a geographic concept of landscape. For this modification, Augustin Berque adopts Watsuji Tetsuro’s notions of the human milieu (fudo, climate) and the “structural moment of human existence” (fudosei, médiance, climaticity) (Berque, Écoumène 126), in order to assert the ontological status of one’s inhabitation of a place. An environment conditioned by the climate is not just a set of physical and biological factors but a mutual relationship between the animal body and the “medial body” (corps médial; Écoumène 128). Taking into account this relationship, one may abandon the rigid division between nature and culture: it is “harmful to distinguish categorically a domain of the human (the social,
the cultural) and a domain of the natural (the ecological and the biological)” (Berque, Médiance 81). To put it in a positive way, the natural must become the cultural and vice versa (reculturer la nature, renaturer la culture; Écoumène 13).

The meaning of these relations within the human milieu—the sense of milieu (médiance) or oecumene (écoumène)—is that of “the dwelling (oikos) of the being of the human” (Écoumène 14). A landscape indicates then how human beings dwell in a certain milieu. This is no longer a mere object of human management or observation: the thinking together with the body of the thinker is inscribed in this milieu in order to reflect his or her own manner of dwelling.

The genitive case “of” in the thinking of landscape extends from the objective genitive to the subjective genitive, for landscape affects the manner of thinking and sensing. Berque formulates this idea as “landscape thinking” (la pensée paysagère) which must replace “the thinking of landscape” (la pensée [au sujet] du paysage) (Berque, La pensée paysagère 9). The thinking subject is transformed by his or her own experience of landscape: “the subject himself becomes landscape” (Médiance 130). The land may “express” itself, that is, the landscape may allow the land to have a vision for itself (“le pays où le regard se voit”; 131).

The aesthetic experiences of reverse vision that Maurice Merleau-Ponty finds in Cézanne and Klee confirm this autofigurative presentation of a world (69). The landscape is the place for this happening; similar to the way Merleau-Ponty unveils the “experience of the reversibility of dimensions, of a global ‘locality’” (65), Berque refers to a metalocalism in which the self and the other may encounter each other (Médiance 131). The place of transmutation that landscape incarnates joins the concept of the Open that Maldiney and Agamben evoke. The Open characterized by the singularity of the place in a landscape offers, then, the possibility of a rhythmic dynamism.

The modification of the concept of landscape may be said to have two aspects. First, we need to reveal or make clear the vivid dynamism in a landscape that can help us to resist the modern capitalist mentality of control. The urban landscape, which may vary in scale and design from a small house or garden to a large planning, inevitably involves the real or artificial intention and even the imposition of economic and political order. Such a landscape sometimes reflects certain rational orders and sometimes reveals certain aesthetic preferences or tastes. Secondly, no matter what form a landscape takes, there is always a combination of geological or geographic shapes and materials, and even in the tiny, condensed or miniaturized landscape of a garden or bonsai the world order is exposed in a certain way—by distortion, fragmentation, or projection. The form of a landscape also corresponds to certain juxtapositions of materials such as mud, rock, and vegetation
set upon a geological base. Moreover, in this composition of heterogeneous elements there is a synthesis of heterogeneous sensible surfaces and rational orders. This synthesis does not necessarily constitute a unanimous unity: there could be all sorts of ruptures, and yet it is precisely in a break, rupture or “difference” that the Open emerges. This Open—which presents certain faces, usually concealed, of the world—signifies the moment of the cosmic becoming. A landscape manifests its singularity in this cosmic becoming.

Thus in his analysis of the artialisation of landscape, Alain Roger also seems to begin from a primarily “aesthetic” perspective and then quickly moves beyond the purely aesthetic domain by, once again, pointing out a significant duality or contrast. Thus when Cézanne paints Mt. Sainte-Victoire he gives a genius loci to the mountain, and yet this mountain is also indifferent inasmuch as the vehicles and their passengers won’t care how it possesses its landscape. Roger calls this latter case the “nullity of country” (nullité du pays), or a “place without genius” (lieu sans génie) (Roger 22). Wherever the place is nullified, the landscape loses its living spirit. The monotonization, homogenization, reproduction of a landscape cause it to lose its singularities. The preservation of a landscape depends on its ability to keep monotony and homogeneity to a minimum.

Here the “living spirit” may refer to Agamben’s conception of potentiality. The word dunamis (potential, potentiality, potency, power) implies the possibility of a force. The potentiality of “life” is itself paradoxical insofar as it opposes “form-of-life” and yet is also synonymous with it. The vital force of this potentiality-of-life may transform an ordinary place into a place of resistance. When a landscape is produced mechanically, its genius loci is diluted, such that the locus or place is reduced to a flat space without content. The distanciation central to a place, created by the play between remoteness and proximity, disappears in this dilution. Thus to recall the possibility of the landscape, the resistance of its singular cracks, its clefts and crevices must be maintained. The loss of the genius loci and death of the landscape necessitates the revitalization of the dynamism inscribed in men and places.

The principles of landscape painting in medieval China might be helpful for contemporary western thinking about landscape(s). In the tradition of Chinese aesthetics we have the principle of “Spirit Resonance as Vitality” (qi-yun-sheng-dong 氣韻生動) (Bush and Shih 40, elaborated by Xie He circa the 5th century A.D.). This principle was first used to explain the expression of spirit in a portrait. When landscape painting became popular, the principle was used in evaluating this form of art. Traditional terms such as Zong Bing’s (A.D. 375-443)
“rejoicing the spirit” (chang-shen 暢神, 38) and Wang Wei’s (A.D. 415-43) “What is founded in form is fused with the soul” (本乎形者融靈, 38), or even Yao Tsui’s (A.D. 535-602) “the mind is schooled by all creation” (心師造化, 43), can provide a ground for understanding the principle of “Spirit Resonance as Vitality” in landscape painting. “Spirit Resonance as Vitality” suggests a potentiality full of vital forces in landscapes and also in landscape paintings. To preserve the purest potentiality means to preserve forces that cannot be given a form or expressed as forms.

Vitality is not limited to the gestures of the painter, but refers to a general dimension of aesthetics. Berque confirms that the landscape “reveals to our sense the quality of our mediance”—i.e. the quality of the structural moment of human existence (Écoumène 215)—for our sense has to respond to the calling of the milieu. Berque employs the Chinese term “vital force” or “vital breath” (qi) to suggest the proper mode of responding, which is “to sense and to express with justice the organic correspondence of the macrocosm with the microcosm, to act in accord with the dynamism of a general accomplishment” (Médiance 117-18). This vital force is fundamental to the experience of the human milieu because it is “a manifestation of the médiance inherent in the oecumene” (Écoumène 198). Both painting and appreciating a landscape mean releasing or manifesting its vitality, or at least not constraining the flow of its vital force. Berque also calls this circulation of vitality in a landscape or landscape painting “landscape motivation” (Médiance 120). There is a principle of becoming that establishes the totality of the vital universe (cosmos) in which the force circulates, so that a landscape is never an isolated fragment. Human inhabitants must be responsive to the landscape in order to understand the meaning of their own and the universe’s existence.

IV. Conclusion

As Agamben defines the form-of-life, the vital force as pure potentiality cannot be separated from the form. The potentialization of forces in the landscape is rather a moment of chiasm, one which allows the juxtaposed elements to intertwine with each other so that whenever a cleft is touched by the Open, there will emerge a vital force. Thus it would be an inversion if one started from the “form-of-life” as potentiality and arrived at the idea of vital dynamism. What matters is not the pure form but the force brought out by the form. In viewing a landscape, the spectator is not merely agitated by the shapes but also by the play of the shapes with the materials. A landscape arouses in the spectator a power to endorse its inner
movement. Thus for Gaston Bachelard (L’eau et le rêve 2) the formal imagination refers to the usual conception of “image” as something present before the eyes, i.e. a visual image such that the form leads the imagination to abide on the surface of things. On the other hand Bachelard’s material imagination is animated by the elements of water, air, earth, fire, as now the human mind is led to the depth of things. Being attentive to the vital forces released in all clefts or crevices in nature, one enters into a profound interaction with Nature itself. Within the landscape, then, the material imagination supplements the formal imagination insofar as the formative forces reveal the isomorphic relation between natural elements and bodily perception.

The poetic image of the landscape contains, then, not only beautiful forms but sublime scenes that are out of reach. This sublimity could invoke breathlessness, i.e. a rhythmic limit which may be close to the edge or limit of life itself, life’s edge or horizon. Indeed, for Erwin Strauss we have not just the geographic space that constitutes the landscape but the horizon that envelopes human beings within the landscape. As he puts it, landscape appears in relation to the dynamic horizon (Strauss 335) in accordance with a fundamental rhythm, and Maldiney (Regard 155), reflecting on the appearance or emergence of the image in an artwork, speaks of the transformative function of the form that is brought about through the rhythm. The artistic moment is in fact a moment of “change of form at the level of surprised existence,” and the crucial point here is “the form of existence, inseparable from its sense, which is transformed at this moment” (Regard 155).

The material imagination helps give the formal imagination its transformative force, and the rhythmic instant enriches the duration by revealing the essence of time as vibration (Bachelard, La dialectique de la durée 131). The immanence of form in landscape is after all due to both material potentiality and the dynamic imagination, and the tension released from potentiality is a characteristic of cosmic existence. Transformative duration, the instant of deformation, the appearance of the edge of the horizon, irruption in space—these are the temporal-spatial constituents of landscape, and landscape can manifest these vital forces in a powerful Gestalt.

The inseparability of life and form implied in the concept of “form-of-life” allows for the most divergent possibilities of living, and the minimal degree of expression in an artwork implies the least possible exploitation of human value. This same condition applies to landscape. That is to say, the dynamic variation that we find in landscape precludes any form of artificial manipulation or design. The variations in/of landscape may imply “the most radical experience of possibility”
(Agamben, *Potentialities* 201), just as the totality of all possible physical and biological landscapes could imply the coexistence of all living species. Human, plant and animal coexistence within landscapes would also mean, of course, a communitarian existence, and in this context Agamben adapts to Dante’s idea of “cosmic communicability.”

It may seem audacious to assert, over against the necessarily limited or restricted sphere of biopolitics, a cosmic dimension. However, landscape is neither a random projection of a subjective feeling nor an objectively pre-established environment, and in its potential and actualizing forces and energies it is radically Open—to both the outside and the inside. Landscapes may seem evanescent and vulnerable, but this is also their strength as they are impossible to fully possess, or to be framed, defined, contained by technology or other forces of control. If the fragility and vulnerability of landscape are also those of all forms of life, so are its potential and actual forces, its temporal and spatial rhythms. Of course, if it is possible to imagine a time where there will be no more human beings on earth, it is also possible to imagine a landscape where there is no trace of life of any sort, such as that of the sun of a galaxy.

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**About the Author**


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