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The pandemic landscape.
Experiences from the Italian fiction

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Abstract

This contribution focuses on the literary description of the pandemic landscape. The main theme is the way in which three Italian novels have described the reactions in 2020 to the "denied landscape" ie to limitations to the free movement of people and, therefore, to free, direct and natural interaction with the outside world. In our opinion, the analysis of the three novels – *Andrà tutto bene* (various authors), *Il veliero sul tetto* (Paolo Rumiz) and *Reality. Cosa è successo* (Giuseppe Genna) – enables to identify a number of shared attitudes after the enforcement of the restriction policy imposing in Italy the lockdown. Each of them, highlighting a specific human reaction, provides useful elements to outline an essential phenomenology of the "pandemic landscape". We thus obtain three descriptive categories: denied, coveted, and chased landscape. The first typology is represented by the typical pandemic landscape, something which was turned overnight in a deserted and uncanny, indifferent, and silent space. The second typology identifies a desired landscape, where the line between dream and reality, memories, and imagination, is blurred. Finally, the third typology describes the incapability to observe and share the world with the others and, so, the transformation of the landscape into a series of empty, immobile, and unresponsive elements: the non-landscape.

Keywords: Landscape, Literature, Lockdown, Pandemic, Italy

1. Introduction

The present paper originates from the experience of landscape subtraction occurred in the spring of 2020. Following the spread of the virus SARS-CoV-2 in Italy, the national government introduced a series of measures to curb the pandemic. These also included some limitations to the free movement of people from March 9 to May 9 (about 60 days). The lockdown – the English term was commonly used in Italy to describe the covid restriction policy – is defined here as a phenomenon that impedes a free, direct, and natural interaction

with the outside world. For nearly two months, people were only allowed to go out for work, necessity, or health circumstances. All citizens had to justify their outings with a self-certification; social interactions were reduced to a minimum and schools, universities, theatres, libraries, and museums were closed. The Covid restriction measures produced an unusual, alienating and estranged urban landscape made of half-empty offices, deserted parking lots, squares and streets, no passers-by, and closed shutters. Pictures, like those taken by photographer Maurizio Montagna, provide evidence of these difficult and exceptional time[1].

Based on this premise, two basic questions arise from the Italian pandemic scenario: what can we learn from this experience of a shared passivisation, i.e., the prohibition to interact with the landscape, and how did this impact on our landscape values? And: what has changed, if any-thing has changed, in our way to communicate, feel and teach the landscape? In order to try to answer these questions, we will define the so-called *non-landscape* as viewed from a peculiar perspective, centered around three novels published in Italy in 2020. It is well-known that since March 2020, a lot of fiction books have been published, that are either explicitly about, or engage with, the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences on society, territories, and daily life. Many of the pandemic-themed novels seek to capture the daily corrosive effect of isolation, the tedium and monotony of lockdowns and quarantines, the strain on relationships, the way the virus changed social interactions and the use of public and private spaces etc. (Alter, 2022).

The selected books, entitled respectively *Andrà tutto bene* (various authors), *Il veliero sul tetto. Appunti per una clausura* (Paolo Rumiz) and *Reality. Cosa è successo* (Giuseppe Genna) all deal with this unprecedented collective experience, although from different points of view. As we will explain by examining a few excerpts, the translation of which is exclusively provided for a better under-standing, these texts allow us to outline a basic classification of the

possible reactions to the COVID 19 home confinement. Indeed, three different nuances of the "pandemic landscape" emerge from this scenario: *a denied landscape* (the deprivation of the outside world leads the individual to withdraw into self); *a coveted landscape* (confinement fuels desire and rêverie); and, finally, *a chased landscape* (a space of escape, crossing and transgression). Behind the choice of these three novels (these and not others) there is therefore precisely a need to identify different narrative approaches – and nuances – to lockdown. In fact, it seems to us that the selected texts allow us to capture a sufficiently wide range of commons reactions, perspectives, and practices. In short, the hope is that this selection meets our need to fix on a minimal taxonomy, making meaning of the pandemic through the lens of literature.

So, literary texts can help us grapple with ours experiences during the pandemic (hopes, fears, expectations, perceptions of space and time, etc.). Novels are a snapshot of time and useful resources for aiding readers in processing what happened to us: an extensive bibliography, that cannot be mentioned in full in this context (see, among others: Lando, 1993 and 1996; Brosseau, 1996 and 2022; Cattedra and Madœuf, 2012; Papotti and Tomasi, 2014; Marengo, 2016; Peraldo, 2016; Ryan et al., 2016), praises how literary fiction can enrich our knowledge of the human experience of the world; the COVID 19 pandemic, in turn, is an issue which is already backed by an ample scientific literature, also including geographic studies exploring its spatial and territorial implications (for a first look into Italian geography, see for example: Bertazzoni et al., 2020; Bozzato, 2020; Dangermond et al., 2020; Murgante et al., 2020; Pesaresi, 2020; Turco, 2020 and 2021; Galluccio et al., 2021; Guadagno, 2021; Maggioli and Tanca, 2021; Pesaresi et al., 2021). If, on the one side, the educational use of fiction works for geographic purposes has no pretension of originality[2], on the other the present experiment

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[1] See https://www.mauriziomontagna.com/milano-17-21-03-2020.

[2] See also, on this regard, the interesting work written by Filippo Milani and Davide Papotti (2021): the authors address the issue of the "pedone trasgressore" or "pedestrian violator" – defined as an individual infringing the ban to walk freely during the *lockdown* – by analysing three literary texts (Moresco A., *Canto*

will help us examine different human reactions to home confinement. In this case, the literary representation of the "landscape subtraction" provides geographers with at least two interesting hints for reflection. Firstly, due to its massive impact and novelty, the *lockdown was a paradoxical or limit experience* that can be seen as a testing ground to test, as it were, the operational effectiveness and practical implications of our theories on landscape, with particular reference – and this leads us to the second reflection point – to the relationship between representational concepts and non-post- or more than – representational theories. The Covid 19 home confinement turned us into passive observers of the outside world while outdoor spaces became physically empty, and streets and squares looked entirely deserted; *hence*, the landscape was deprived of its sense and symbolic value, to the point that it morphed into a series of empty, silent, and unsolved spaces. It is thus easier to understand concepts like *mouvance* and *trajectivité* elaborated by Augustin Berque to indicate the mutual coimplication between us and the world (Berque, 1990, 1996, 2000), as well as the distinction made by Tim Ingold between *landscape* and *taskscape*, where the first sees us as *viewers* and the second as *participants* "in the very performance of our tasks" (Ingold, 1993, p. 159).

2. The denied landscape: *Andrà tutto bene*

The first book examined in the present study, *Andrà tutto bene. Gli scrittori al tempo della quarantena*, published by Garzanti (2020), includes 25 short stories written by as many writers. At a first glance, the accentuated heterogeneity may seem somewhat chaotic. However, at a closer look, it is clear that all the stories deal with the concept of a very specific geography describing a secluded life, where indoor household spaces play a crucial role. As a matter of fact, these tales accurately reflect life conditions of people who during the lockdown experienced the progressive erosion of their

degli alberi; Ming W., *Diario virale*; Rumiz P., *Il veliero sul tetto).*

lived-in space to the point that it merely coincided with the limited and well-defined area of their private house or apartment. "Here space is everything, for time ceases to quicken memory", as Gaston Bachelard wrote (1964, p. 9). Consequently, the landscape, seen as an active and ever-changing relationship with the world – implying the opportunity to change horizon and point of view, as well as to explore and modify things, etc. – is denied. The 25 short stories included in *Andrà tutto bene*, mainly set in private homes, are the mise en scène of this absence. The introduction states the following, general consideration:

> Oggi la paura ha un nome nuovo: Covid 19. Per sconfiggerlo, l'unica strada è rimanere a casa. Tra le quattro mura che ci hanno sempre protetto e che ora, però, sono diventate confini invalicabili (Introduzione, p. 1).

> [Today, fear has a new name, and its name is Covid 19. The only way to defeat the virus is to stay at home. The four walls that have always protected us are now impassable borders (Introduction, p. 1)].

It is no coincidence that the term "landscape" is expressly mentioned only accidentally in two passages of the book, thus with a marginal and irrelevant role in the narration of the story. Indeed, the fearful characters have lost will and desire to establish a contact with the landscape. The first mention of the word "paesaggio" or "landscape" occurs in the story by Hans Tuzzi, *Eredità d'affetti*, where the author examines how painting addressed "il rito dell'addio", or the "ritual of goodbye" (p. 258) throughout history. The analysis has a special focus on the painting *Funeral in Ornans*, painted by Courbet in 1850: "with neither horizons nor landscapes, the painting, although depicting a countryside without a church, hints at a community gathering" (p. 260). The word "landscape" is also mentioned for a second and last time in the story written by Andrea Vitali *Tarli, fantasmi, due passi...un aliscafo,* describing the outcome of a "geographic" question accidentally overheard by the narrator during a walk along the lakeside in Bellano ("from here, he is heading to Lake Maggiore"). The landscape is expressly mentioned in the following sentence:

Un maresciallo calabrese, per esempio, con tanto di signora conterranea, disorientati e muti di fronte al crudo paesaggio invernale che li accoglie.

[A Calabrese marshal, for example, accompanied by a lady from the same area, both confused and silent facing the harsh winter landscape before them].

The only form of interaction with the landscape is a passive observation from the window or the balcony of an apartment. In this case, although not expressly mentioned, we're dealing with two distinct but not necessarily conflicting typologies of denied landscape. What brings them together is the *unsettling effect* produced on the observer; these "uncanny landscapes" undermine our certainties and expectations for they imply the disruption of the propagated sense of participatory engagement with the world (Mitchell and Petty, 2020).

The first typology is represented by the typical pandemic landscape, something which was turned overnight in a deserted space, alternating dreary silence with the deafening noise of ambulance sirens. A true *fearscape*, depicted in the story *Serendipità* written by Enrico Galiano:

Un lunedì mattina mi sveglio presto. Fuori un cielo tutto bianco di nuvole, aria fredda […] E io penso che ho paura. Non capita spesso di realizzarlo, di sentirlo forte e chiaro. […] La ragione c'entra poco, solo che stavolta è qualcosa di grande, davanti a me, e mi parla dal silenzio assurdo che c'è fuori, nessuna macchina, nessuna frenesia, solo a un certo punto il suono di un'ambulanza, poi un'altra (p. 180).

[The narrator wakes up early on a Monday morning. Outside, a whitish cloudy sky. It's cold. […] A sense of fear pervades him. It doesn't happen very often to realise and experience fear so loud and clear. […] It has little to do with rationality, but this time it's something big, right in front of him. Out there, a surreal silence. No cars, no frenzy. Just an ambulance siren, then another one (p. 180)].

Another example is provided by the short story written by Alessia Gazzola, *My sweet quarantine*. Here, the landscape is immobile, frozen in an eternal moment:

Esco per comprare il «Washington Post»; è martedì mattina, ma la gente per strada è diradata, le caffetterie sono aperte, ma l'affluenza è ridotta. Sembra quasi che la domenica pomeriggio si stia vendicando per essere stata sempre detestata da tutti, diventando eterna (p. 190).

[The narrator goes out to buy the «Washington Post»; it's Tuesday morning, but the streets are empty. Cafes are open, but with very few customers inside. It looks as if Sunday afternoon has become eternal, in vengeance for being universally despised for so long (p. 190)].

The second typology of denied landscape is bursting with life: it's a springtime landscape, and as such, given the circumstances, the observer perceives it as distant and surreal. On this regard, see, for example the story *Revolution Covid* by Elisabetta Gnone:

se guardo fuori, non sembra vero. Le vigne, allevate a Guyot, sono pronte a gemmare, è fiorito di rosa il pesco, i narcisi ondeggiano le loro cuffiette gialle, gli uccellini si inseguono in frenetici corteggiamenti e i caprioli vengono a dormire nel nostro prato […] È una primavera generosa che promette frutti abbondanti. Vorrei fare l'orto, ho preparato la terra senza girarla […] Ma non posso andare a comprare le patate da mettere nei solchi (p. 200).

[whenever the narrator looks out of the window, it doesn't seem real. The Guyot wine-yards are ready to sprout, the peach tree is blooming with pink flowers, yellow daffodils fluctuate in the wind, the birds are in a court-ship frenzy and roe deer sleep in the garden […] It's a bountiful spring season, promising an abundant harvest. She would like to do the vegetable garden and has also prepared the soil, without turning it […] Unfortunately, she is not allowed to go out to buy the potatoes she needs to plant in the furrows (p. 200)].

What is striking here is the stark contrast between the indoor and outdoor dimension, between people and nature. Whilst the latter is unaffected ("a bountiful spring season"), human beings are only allowed to stare at a landscape which is devoid of their presence. A similar concept is also found in the short story *Un'ora dopo l'altra* written by Ritanna Armeni:

Esce sul balcone. Non è ancora buio. In gene-re in questo periodo ci sono tanti fiori, ma quest'anno non ha fatto in tempo a rinnovare le piante. Il silenzio è assoluto. La strada vuota. Una macchina della polizia staziona in fon-do al viale. Per fortuna – pensa – non ci sono più canti e musica per strada, com'era avvenuto fino a qualche giorno prima (pp. 16-17)

[The narrator goes out on the balcony. It's not dark yet. Usually, the balcony is full of flowers at this time of the year, but this year there was no time for it. The street is empty. Total silence. A police car is parked at the end of the alley. Luckily – she thinks – people no longer sing or play music on the streets like a few days before (pp. 16-17)].

The landscape is either indifferent or – just like the blooming cherry trees suggest in the already mentioned tale by Alessia Gazzola – distant and aloof, "oblivious of what is happening to mankind" (p. 191). The pandemic landscape is a denied landscape, and, as such, the denial of a landscape.

3. A coveted landscape: *Il veliero sul tetto. Appunti per una clausura*

The denial of the landscape can trigger different reactions. A first example is provided, as we have seen, by a sort of self-retreat into the privacy of our homes. The outside world is now an unattainable and almost mysterious object, somewhat distant, indifferent, aloof, and even uncanny. However, there are also other ways to relate to things, and *rêverie*, fueled by desire, is one of them.

A coveted, fantasized and even longed-for landscape exemplifies the attempt to mitigate the forced isolation from the world. This is the underlying attitude that characterises *Il veliero sul tetto. Appunti per una clausura*, written by Paolo Rumiz and published by Feltrinelli (2020). Here, the lockdown experience implies the impossibility to move and travel freely and ignites a desire to experience material and immaterial landscapes. Once familiar and beloved, the outside world is now elusive and out of reach, something that can only be recalled through memory and imagination. *Il veliero sul*

tetto is a novel-diary retracing the author's quarantine from the privileged point of view of his apartment overlooking the Gulf of Trieste. Rumiz thinks of the roof of his flat complex as the deck of a ship sailing across an epic journey, with the aim to recall the world from a cross-scalar perspective, with a gradual expansion of the elsewhere.

The first landscape to materialize in the book is the city of Trieste, a miniature world coldly observed from above:

È primavera. Trieste apre le finestre, stende la biancheria. Dalla terrazza sento voci di bambini e una polifonia di stoviglie filtrare dagli appartamenti. La vita chiama, imperiosamente, come chiamò Ungaretti in trincea con un compagno morto sul fronte del Carso (p. 33).

[It's springtime in Trieste. Residents open the windows and hang out the laundry. From the terrace, the narrator hears children voices and the noise of dishes being washed and put away coming from the nearby apartments. Life calls, imperiously, just like it called Ungaretti when he was in a trench beside a dead comrade, on the Karst front (p. 33)].

Then we have the hybrid and "mixed race space" of the Italian-Slovenian-Croatian border, threatened by past and present fears:

Prima del "tutti a casa" ero uscito in bici per l'ultima volta. Al mattino la pista che porta in Slovenia era ancora un lieto pellegrinaggio di gente in fuga. Cielo pulito, niente scie di aerei. Il mondo rallentava, era ora; eppure mi vergognavo un po' pensando a chi era costretto ad accelerare per consentire a noi privilegiati il lusso della lentezza […] Poi ho saputo che la Slovenia stava già chiudendo la frontiera. I suoi contadini piazzavano pietre anche sui confini minori contro di noi. Li capivo. Mi dispiaceva un po' che si illudessero di stoppare i microbi con una sbarra. Mi dispiaceva meno per i sovranisti di qui che fino a ieri volevano alzare muri con la Slovenia per via dei migranti. Ben gli stava. Ma che patetica doppia illusione. Squallida imitazione di una Cortina di ferro in cui non si capisce più chi blinda chi (pp. 13-14).

[Before the order to "stay home", the author goes out and rides his bike one last time. In the morning, the track leading to Slovenia is still a happy pilgrimage of fugitives. The sky

is clear, no airplane contrails. The world is finally moving at a slower pace, and yet the narrator is ashamed at the thought of those who had to speed up so that other people could enjoy the privilege of slowness. […] Then he learns that Slovenia was closing its borders. Farmers were also placing rocks along secondary borders. Although understanding their reasons, the author pities them, because the spread of a virus cannot be stopped with walls. He is not as sorry for local souverainists who always wanted to build a wall along the Slovenian border, to prevent the inflow of migrants. What a pathetic, double delusion, a squalid imitation of the Iron Curtain, where no one knows any-more who is turning away who (pp. 13-14)].

The *rêverie*, or the evocation of familiar yet suddenly out of reach landscapes – from the Gulf of Trieste to the Friuli area, with the Eastern Alps stretching North across the horizon – is nurtured by sensations (e.g. scents brought by the wind) that soothe the lockdown anxiety:

Ma la bora porta odore di bosco, pulisce l'aria, spinge creste bianche al largo. Le Nereidi! Pensieri omerici e senso di riequilibrio della natura. Il mondo è sfebbrato, respira, dice le ragioni di Greta. Dalla terrazza lievitano le Alpi oltremare. Pare di essere in barca punto si naviga di bolina. Impossibile soffrire di claustrofobia (p. 24).

[The bora wind brings the scent of the woods, cleans the air, pushes white waves to the open sea. The Nereids! Homeric thoughts and a sense of natural balance. The world is healing and breathing again and states the rea-sons of the Earth. From the terrace, the Alps can be seen beyond the sea. Feels like being on a ship, sailing close-hauled. It's impossible to suffer from claustrophobia (p. 24)].

However, gazing out at the Adriatic Sea is an encouragement to go further and leave the region and the familiar Gulf of Trieste. A new desire for the diverse and known landscapes of the Mediterranean, with real and imaginary borders, emerges. Here, landscapes overflowing with visual, sounding, tactile and olfactory stimuli hint at spaces and times rich in history and geography:

Ripenso a te, mio capitano. A quella sera di Cnido quando attraccammo a un pontile ma-landato ai piedi di imponenti rovine greche, soli, accanto a una locanda e a una casermet-ta

della Marina turca. Tutto si teneva, le luci, lo sciabordio, la retsina, il gemito del fasciame, il fruscio degli olivastri. Accendemmo i lumi a petrolio e, mentre Venere sfolgorante tramon-tava in mare, tu ci narrasti della statua di Ve-nere di Prassitele che duemila anni prima aveva richiamato lì migliaia di pellegrini. Rac-contavi, e la città morta già brulicava di ombre di marinai, mercanti, maestri d'ascia, schiavi, nocchieri, puttane e briganti. A ovest, un tre-mendo faraglione separava l'Egeo dal Mar d'Oriente. Un confine autentico, dicesti, non un'invenzione degli umani. Fino a quel mo-mento ci avevi fatto zigzagare fra Grecia e Turchia, sulle rotte dei migranti, apposta per mostrare l'assurda divisione fra Europa e Asia che il mito sbugiardava (pp. 74-75).

[The narrator recalls when, one night in Cnidus, he and his captain moored their ship to a run-down pier, at the foot of imposing Greek ruins and next to an inn and a small barrack of the Turkish navy. Everything was there: the lights, the lapping of the waves in the background, the retsina, the moaning of the planking, the rustling of wild olive trees. As they lit the oil lamps and the dazzling Venus set over the sea, the captain began to tell the story of the Venus carved by Prassitele, and how it had attracted thousands of pilgrims 2000 years before. As the tale went on, the dead city was already swarming with shadows of sailors, merchants, shipwrights, slaves, helmsmen, whores, and bandits. To the West, a massive sea stack separated the Aegean Sea from the Eastern Sea. A real and natural border, not created by humans. Until that moment, the captain had deliberately taken them between Greece and Turkey, along migrants' routes, with the aim to expose the absurd separation between Europe and Asia, belied by the myth (pp. 74-75)].

The burden of a forced immobility and the resulting intolerance for horizontal and vertical confined spaces (namely the apartment and the flat block, from the basement to the roof terrace) induce Rumiz, both a writer and a traveler, to daydream of an escape, traveling across unknown and faraway lands, oceans, and landscapes. See, for example, the following passage:

È allora che mi è presa, per la prima volta, un'autentica voglia di partire, andare ovunque, pur di rompere le catene, per qualche terra

inesplorata, e di far perdere le tracce, lontano dalla rete e dai centomila satelliti che ci spiano. Via dall'inferno dei Social, senza Pin, senza Hub, senza App, e tutti quegli altri odiosi monosillabi. Via, via, anche di notte, anche col temporale, anche in mare aperto, come sognavo da adolescente leggendo Conrad o Melville. Dovevo uscire. I libri sembravano in-citarmi dagli scaffali, libri di viaggio che avevo sfinito a furia di immaginazione. E allora ho preso la porta, sono salito per le scale quasi di corsa fino al boccaporto del veliero nella tempesta, per uscire in coperta ridurre le vele (p. 124).

[Suddenly, for the first time, the narrator feels an unexpected urge to leave his apartment. He would go anywhere to break the chains. He dreams of exploring unknown lands, disappearing without a trace, faraway from the net and the thousand satellites spying on us. Away from the social network hell, with no PIN, Hub, App and all those other hideous monosyllables. He is determined to escape, even at night and in the middle of a storm, in the open sea, as he used to fantasize as a teenager when reading Conrad and Melville. On the shelves, the travel books he had read so avidly as a teenager seem to encourage him. So he opens the door and rapidly climbs up the stairs till he reaches the hatch and finally the deck of the ship sailing in the storm, to strike the sails (p. 124)].

In this novel, the landscape assumes the role of a *pipe, collecting all the things denied by the lockdown*: the possibility to move, travel, meet people and explore places to *fully experience the outer world*. The landscape described in *Il veliero sul tetto* is a longed-for landscape, where the line between dream and reality, memories, and imagination, "I" and "the world" is blurred.

4. A chased landscape: *Reality. Cosa è successo*

A third reaction to the lockdown experience is described in the novel *Reality. Cosa è successo* by Giuseppe Genna, published by Rizzoli (2020. Here, the author is neither concerned with houses and denied landscapes nor interested in recalling a faraway landscape through memories and imagination. By contrast to the previously mentioned examples, Genna is

no longer a "first person narrator" experiencing a passive or "suspended" world. On the contrary, like a new *flâneur,* the author is an eyewitness deliberately ignoring confinement rules to chronicle the impact that the spread of the virus had on our lives. The desire to reestablish a connection with the world, to actually see and understand the new reality is the trigger that causes him to go out in search of a lost landscape.

Accordingly, *Reality* describes a series of explorations paths winding through the city of Milan[3] and outlining a true κατάβασις, or "descent to hell". Genna wanders through an eroded, deserted, and suspended landscape. The innovative, vibrant, noisy, and frantic metropolis has been replaced by an *emptyscape*, or an empty, dark, and silent space.

> Milano...adesso è buia.
> Lo scrittore va e vede, lo scrittore sono io. Chino sul serbatoio della Vespa male in arnese, lungo la pista del viale a tre corsie dall'aeroporto civile punto al centro di quest'urbe indecente che non si illumina, io sono l'unico mezzo circolante, anche in direzione contraria non c'è nessuno, vado a penetrare le mura della città dal passaggio a sudest detto "I tre ponti", provenendo dallo scalo cittadino di Linate all'undicesima settimana dell'anno, al ventesimo giorno del contagio, ora che tutto è chiuso, ora che tutto è rivelato...
> Voglio vedere tutto. Vedo tutti: non c'è nessuno (pp. 10-11).

[It's dark in Milan. The writer states his role both as a narrator and eyewitness. Riding his old Vespa, he is the only one to venture along the three-lane alley of the civil airport, heading towards the city centre. No one around, not even coming from the opposite direction. The city is deserted and horribly dark. The narrator enters the city walls from the South-East passage known as "I tre ponti", coming from the Linate city airport. It's the 11th week of the year, 20 days after the infection. Now that everything is closed and revealed, the narrator wants to see everything and sees everybody – yet there is no one around (pp. 10-11)].

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[3] The author's reflections, however, aren't restricted to the events that took place in Italy.

Milan is suddenly morphed into a meta-physical city. One of its most iconic squares, Piazza della Scala, is now a motionless space, where time no longer goes by:

Ruoto solitario nella piazza della Scala, non c'è anima viva, non ci sono neanche le anime morte. È un capogiro, ruotare a trecentosessanta gradi nel vuoto smisurato, la piazza metafisica, De Chirico diventato reale, io come un manichino minato dalla bronchite acuta e dall'insufficienza morale: dove sono i miei concittadini? (p. 22).

[The narrator is emotionally overwhelmed as a totally deserted Piazza della Scala welcomes him. It's like a 360 degrees endless vertigo. The square is now a metaphysical place, resembling a De Chirico painting. The narrator feels like he's a dummy, undermined by bronchitis and moral failure. But where are his fellow citizens? (p. 22)].

The exploration extends its perimeter, and its motion is a centrifugal one. Thanks to an impressionist-like style made of fragmented images, tiny details, fast movements observed from the Vespa – Genna crosses streets, fast lanes, gardens, out-skirts, orbital roads, ring roads, flyovers, airports etc., invariably running into the same geography of pain. *Everywhere*, the landscape is empty and motionless; encounters with other people are extremely rare:

Vedo: le chiese vuote.
…
Vedo: il blocco della polizia, con la paletta in mano mi fanno il gesto di accostare…
…
Vedo: le videocamere di sicurezza ai pali della luce o dei semafori hanno le spie led che pulsano nel giorno che acceca. Non c'è nessuno e pulsano. Inquadrano il luogo sempre uguale…riprendono il nulla…
Vedo: a notte i rider di colore, devoti ad altri culti di altre divinità, bui nel buio, pedalano lenti e circospetti…
…
Vedo: il silenzio. L'immenso silenzio delle casematte, dei caselli alle porte storiche, delle serrande ricoperte di polveri sottili, vedo che non ci sono suoni, ogni rumore zittito, i volti muti delle maschere funerarie in cera dei pochi padroni di cani. Ovunque è come ovunque. (pp. 16-18).

[Churches are empty. At a police roadblock, a policeman signals to him to pull over. Security cameras installed on light poles and traffic lights have led pulsing in the blinding daylight. There is no one around, yet they are pulsing all the same, recording footages of the same, empty spaces.
At night, coloured people working as riders, worshipping other cults and deities, ride their bicycle very slowly, with caution. Dark people, experiencing dark spaces.
Silence pervades pillboxes, toll booths at the historic city gates, shutters covered with dust. Every noise is turned silent. The few dog owners who venture out are mute and look as if they're wearing funeral masks made of wax. Everywhere is just like anywhere (pp. 16-18)].

This passage mentions bike riders working for food delivery companies, spotted while crossing the deserted city streets. But the author also has a close encounter with another group of people, the runners.

La circolazione è azzerata e migliaia di runner battono le piste evitando il contenimento…
Tutta la città è loro, la percorrono nelle radiali, penetrano nei parchi chiusi, le forze dell'ordine preposte al controllo e al blocco non riescono ad arginare il loro movimento ad atomi, a spin. Nessun veicolo in giro, soltanto runner in collant e traspiranti.
Ai semafori si fermano, è tutto svuotato e ubbidiscono al lampeggiante giallo e stanno sul posto correndo, non fermano il ritmo (pp. 188-189).

[The road traffic is non-existent, and thousands of runners show up on the streets, in some ways defying confinement rules …
The city belongs to them. They run across the streets, enter closed parks. The police can hardly contain their atom- and spin-like movements. No motor vehicle around, just runners wearing tights and breathable clothes.
They stop at yellow traffic lights, still running in place to not lose the rhythm (pp. 188-189)].

Everywhere is just like anywhere: not even the adoption of the azimuthal vision – implying a change in the observation point (with the abandonment of the odeporic perspective, where visual information is constantly mixed with tactile, olfactory, and acoustic elements) – produces significant alterations:

Come un drone vedo la città dall'alto, salendo sopra le ferrovie, nei pontili periferici, nelle piazze sospese sul livello strada, verso CityLife, verso la torre Unicredit, ascendendo oltre il quartiere dei giornalisti, oltre gli igloo in ce-mento bianco alla Maggiolina, una pista lanciata fino alla svolta del cavalcavia Monteceneri e lo stadio di San Siro come un monolite muto, nel vuoto, nel basso banco di nebbia mattutina: è aberrante (p. 123).

[Like a drone, the narrator sees the city from above, from railways, peripheral bridges, and squares suspended above the street level, towards CityLife, the Unicredit tower, beyond the Villaggio dei Giornalisti and the white concrete igloos in the Maggiolina area. A track that leads to the turn at the Monteceneri flyover. The San Siro stadium is a mute monolith, shrouded in the morning mist: it's aberrant (p. 123)].

Hence, there is an inherent paradox in this desperate search. The pedestrian violates the rules but doesn't take any pleasure in doing so. Going out of home is a disastrous experiment because the landscape meant as an active, individual and collective creation is *absent*.
And this is what Genna actually reports: the landscape retreats and slips away as the author tries to reach it ("conoscere il niente" or "meet the void"). Going out doesn't reduce the distance from things. This leads to a desperate and bitter conclusion. The pandemic didn't bring about the incapability to observe the world (see also p. 297), but, rather, caused it to emerge evidently and officially. Such incapability pre-existed the lockdown and indicates a cultural and moral malaise which has been affecting Italy for quite a long time. As the author claims, "We have been a peripheral country for a long time now, far away from places where people imagine the future" (p. 149).

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the three novels with the aim to examine the human experience from a qualitative and personal perspective brings considerable advantages that can also be transposed to the educational level: literature is able to capture collective perceptions, values and feelings that would otherwise go unexpressed. In our case, the selected excerpts written by Italian authors and published in 2020 enable to identify a number of shared attitudes after the enforcement of the restriction policy imposing the lockdown. Each of them, highlighting a specific human reaction, provides useful elements to outline an essential case system of the "pandemic landscape". The confinement order induced some individuals to self-retreat at home, literally losing sight of a distant and sometimes even uncanny landscape (*Andrà tutto bene*), while others nurture desire by recalling personal landscapes that have become inaccessible (*Il veliero sul tetto*); finally, someone else, driven by the desire to see and tell others what is happening in the outside world, infringes rules and escapes the four walls in pursuit of the landscape, unfortunately in vain (*Reality. Cosa è successo*) (see Table 1).

This sequence provides us with the chance to make some remarks on our relationship with the landscape after the COVID outbreak. The examined books highlight the fundamental failure of the classic concept of the world experience, based on the distinction-separation between the subject (observer) and the object (observed), or their structural heterogeneity. When we talk about the landscape, it is clear how this is not simply a way to practice our visual skills and watch what is "out there" with a passive and viewer-like attitude. What is extremely interesting about these three novels is that they highlight how, once the direct bond of continuity with the world (other people and places) is dissolved, the landscape progressively loses its significance and is morphed into a series of empty, immobile, and unresponsive elements, or the non-landscape. Nobody would call this inert backdrop a landscape, unless one focused solely on the purely physical aspect (Berque, 2013, p. 48). However, clearly, *the pure physical aspect* alone in not enough.

Book (Title)	Author(s)	Typologies	Settings	Experiences
Andrà tutto bene. Gli scrittori al tempo del Covid (Garzanti, 2020)	*Various*	*Denied*	*Mostly domestic spaces*	*Absence, observation, physical elements*
Il veliero sul tetto. Appunti per una clausura (Feltrinelli, 2020)	*Paolo Rumiz*	Coveted	*Trieste, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Alps*	*Memory, imagination, rêverie*
Reality. Cosa è successo (Rizzoli, 2020)	*Giuseppe Genna*	*Chased*	Milan	*Exploration paths, emptyscape, world desire*

Table 1. Landscape typologies, setting and experiences in the analysed books.

Instead of in terms of a separation, it appears reasonable here to refer to the landscape by relying on the concept of *médiance* formulated by Augustin Berque in order to overcome this dualism typical to the modern age. In *Thinking through Landscape*, he states that the *profound meaning of the landscape is indeed the dynamic relation (mutual, constitutive and complementary) between the World and simultaneously ourselves*: "our common being – he claims – is largely the landscape" (see especially pp. 53-63). This idea is part of the so called non- post- or more than representational theories (Wylie, 2007; Waterton, 2013 and 2019), according to which the landscape is not so much a thing in itself, but rather a dynamic and interactive reality, the outcome of a constant co-evolutionary hybridisation process. In other words, the landscape is not pre-existent. On the contrary, it is strictly intertwined with our desires, performances, emotions, and in-context reactions (this is particularly evident in Genna's novel: his *search of lost landscape* turns out to be a failure – the more he approaches landscape, the more this moves away from him).

The apparent advantages of such concepts dovetail with the conclusions drawn after reading the examined novels: as long as we look at the outside world as if it were a postcard – i.e., a series of static and prefabricated and pre-existing meanings, yet only allowing a passive experience – we won't be able to explain how and why the deprivation of the same outside world has eroded our landscape experience. In this respect, there is clearly a lot of work to be done.

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