

LIVING LANDSCAPE



*The European Landscape Convention
in research perspective*

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Conference Materials

Volume II
Short Communications

Bandecchi & Vivaldi
E D I T O R I

How has scientific research contributed to the implementation of the European Landscape Convention? And what are the main topics for the future of European landscapes?

The 10th anniversary of the European Landscape Convention is the occasion to discuss in depth all the scientific and cultural aspects related to landscape in order to develop an integrated and interdisciplinary approach to landscape research in a rapidly changing world.

Aim of the conference is to discuss cutting-edge research results at the crossroads of sciences and humanities, design and empiricism.

The conference is a joint initiative of UNISCAPE (European Network of Universities for the Implementation of the European Landscape Convention) and LANDSCAPE EUROPE (International Network of Expertise on Landscape).



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SOUND PERCEPTION AND LANDSCAPE IDENTITY

CONCEPTUAL OUTLINE AND APPLIED EXAMPLES FOLLOWING THE EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE CONVENTION

*Giuseppe Anzani*¹

(...) La tour de l'église, vestige d'une importante abbaye bénédictine édifiée au cœur du bocage, a été gravement endommagée par les Allemandes, en 1944. Durant des années, c'est donc la sirène (...) qui signale le midi aux agriculteurs de la commune. En 1958 le clocher est entièrement restauré(...) Les habitants des «villages» (...) exigent le maintien de la sirène de midi. La sonnerie des cloches, prétendent-ils, est difficilement perceptible aux travailleurs les plus éloignés de l'église. Le «gens du bourg» comme la majorité du conseil municipal, sont, en revanche, sensibles à la qualité esthétique des cloches (...) Les «gens de campagne» s'en prennent aux «gens du bourg», les gaullistes aux anciens pétainistes (...) De vieilles haines se réveillent. Les paysans descendent au bourg lancent des invectives, et aussi quelques pierres (...) Le maire, harcelé depuis des semaines et sans doute partagé, succombe à un infarctus (...)²

It's helpful to state beforehand that this research about the soundscape originates from experiences linked to a broader sense of landscape *tout court*. The study of every single landscape has to deal with two needs that necessarily have to coexist: on one hand considering all the different perspectives, to understand and show all its different aspects; on the other hand considering it in his unity, which unifies all the relations between its innumerable aspects in an unique whole which is ideally impossible to replicate.

The soundscape is here considered as a part of the landscape hypertext (not only the polisensorial one) i.e. that pluridimensional construction that starts from landscape perception in order to produce configuration and meaning for people's surroundings, as stated in the European Landscape Convention.

But what role does the sound have in this hypertext? And how can the study of sound structures contribute to landscape protection, management and planning?

The perception of acoustic stimuli is characterised by "obligatoriness", considered that we are perpetually immersed in a sound context which is almost impossible to avoid. This context, as theorized in the 70's by Murray Schafer, has drastically changed as the industrialisation expanded, spreading sounds of unheard-of level, continuity and intensity. Before we can consider the implications of this transformation, we start by observing how men has had to develop a sophisticated ability to select among the acoustic chaos only those signals in which they are actually interested in – considered the fundamental role of the acoustic universe, especially for verbal communication. This vital ability is not only based on 'quantitative' aspects of acoustic signals, i.e. their intensity, but also on the semantic ones, linked to the meaning they express in relation to codes in use or to their feature of being 'symptoms' of an event.

Unlike visual stimuli, acoustic ones are perceived and unconsciously considered also during the sleep, e.g. we continue sleeping if we hear a garbage truck but we are awoken by a baby crying; concerning this point, several attestations from psychoanalytic literature point out the awareness of the connotative and denotative meaning of some sound signals during the sleep, both in providing mere functional indications (e.g. the miller wakes up because the noise of the millstone stops) and in giving dream drifts on the associative axis (e.g. dreaming of a bell ringing louder and louder which turn to be an alarm clock, or dreaming of the pope's death because of the disturb caused by the noise of a bell) (Freud S. 1989, pp. 58, 35, 215).

Consistently to what has been considered above we can observe here that sound perception in our life context tends to select figures (sounds) out of a ground (from 'noise' to 'silence) by distinguish the meaning they express, and their physical quantities (level).

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² Episode happened in Lonlay-l'Abbaye (Normandie), from Corbin A. (1994) pp. 12-13

The above mentioned Schafer's studies, besides, show how the relations between sound and noise drastically changed in favour of the latter after the introduction of the internal combustion and electrical engines, so much that we learnt how to ignore noise in the "low-fidelity" soundscape in which we live (Schafer M. 1985, p. 14). That is, with the growing sound disturbance, which is maximum in urban areas, we sharpened our ability to discern noteworthy acoustic stimuli and signals.

Before the spreading of the industrial culture, only few human sounds could compete in level with natural ones in non-urban areas, (pitchmen shouting, sheep decoy sounds, or the noise of millstones or blacksmiths striking iron); among these, bell sound had a significant role, building actual landscape systems.

These systems, which is still possible to appreciate in several rural areas, contribute even remarkably to the definition of identity features of landscape. Bell toll is a perfect example of figure on the acoustic ground, for two reasons:

- for the physical features of the acoustic signal, because it can be perceived from several kilometers, with rhythm pitch and timber different from other sounds that could overlap (these three parameters are differently articulated: rhythm is articulated with percussions which are differently close to each other, pitch with bells of different size, timber with percussion of external hammers or one internal clapper);
- for its semantic features, i.e. the ability of shaping sound figures which takes a specific meaning based on a generally shared code, e.g. sending messages related to the division of the day (the Angelus that marks the start and the end of the working day in the fields, as well as the break at midday), to the significant moments for the cult (different tolls for masses and main liturgical years events), to emergencies (sudden calamities, mostly signaled with the hammer).

Because of their features as a proper mass medium (Figure I), with a minimal content but extremely effective and persuasive, it is not surprising that bells have always been very present in collective imaginary, and they still are in several rural contexts.

If we refer to folk traditions – often fundamental to the understanding the landscape as "an area as perceived by people" – we find several evidences of bells seen as divine voice talking to the community (Anzani 2000). Anyway bells, which are used in many cultural contexts, are recognised as having an actual role beyond their materiality, i.e. a role as symbol which can even represent the universe (St. Jerome compares a bell to a roar of thunder, sacred sound coming from the dawn of time; in Indian tradition it bears the primordial vibration "Om"; for Jung it represents the celestial world...) (Chevalier J. Gheerbrant A. 1988).

It is very easy to find in literature and art several quotations about bells, which confirm this; we are therefore going to mention only a few particularly relevant occurrences. The bell tower is the centre of the village and it represents it in the landscape (Figure II), becoming reason for pride and competition with neighbour-



Figure I: Erice, Sicilia, view from church tower: bell with antennas for telecommunications.

Figure II: Telč, Moravia (author photo)

This poem opportunely prefaces here the case study of Monte Stella, in Campania, where the sound system built by the bells embodies the community and the landscape in which it recognises itself, pointing out the fundamental role of sound perception in the building of land identity. It is a mountain 1130mt high between river Alento and Tyrrhenian Sea, with a conical outline which is visible from a good part of Cilento. On the slope of the mountain there is a system of thirty small villages arranged in concentric altimetric arcs within a range of about six kilometers within a minimum distance from each other (not more than 1 or 2 km) (Figure III, IV).

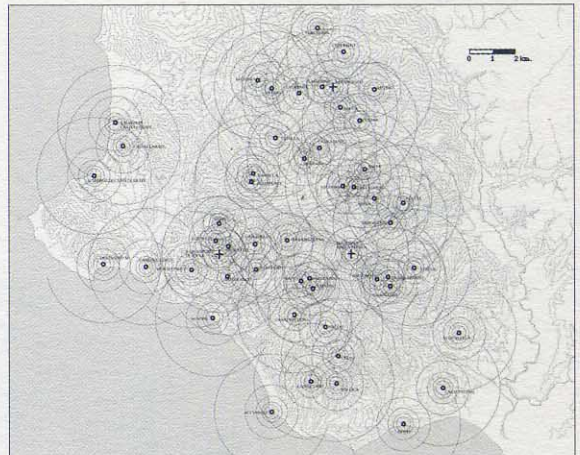
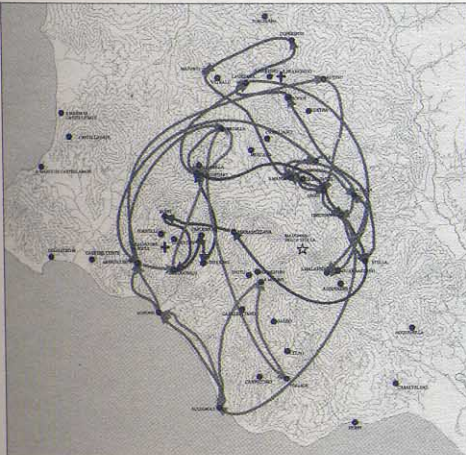
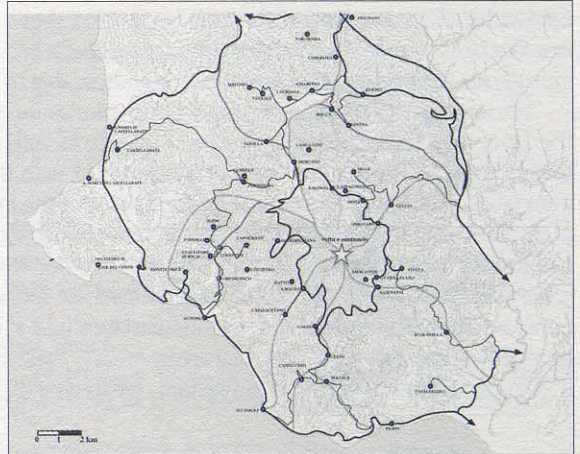
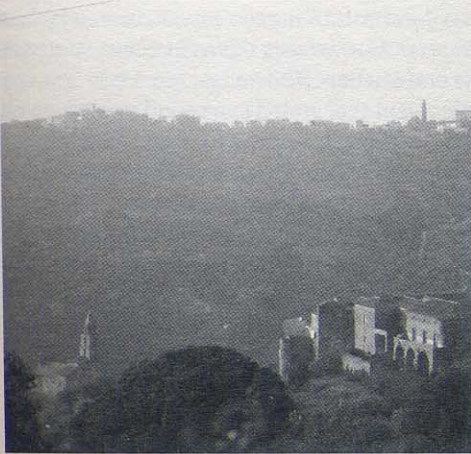


Figure III: Monte Stella, two villages (author photo).

Figure IV: Monte Stella, map of villages and historic road network (property of the author).

Figure V: Monte Stella, overlap of 1989 Good Friday pilgrimages made by only five confraternities (less than 1 / 3 of those active) (property of the author)..

Figure VI: Monte Stella, belltowers sound relations map (property of the author).

As some studies have shown, this is a very unitary landscape which recombines in a wider identity the small communities of the villages, which count a few hundred inhabitants.

This landscape identity that goes beyond the borders of single villages, is found in several elements that together create a consistent structure: the peculiar geomorphology, the historic ring settlement system, the evolution of the settlement itself, some features of the local tradition.

One of these traditions is an exception among the rites of catholic confraternities: the ceremony in landscape scale where the confraternities of each village go on pilgrimage simultaneously to the other stages of the system on Good Friday, creating a tangle of ritual visits in which hundreds of people together (a significant demographic sample, considering that the inhabitants are only a few thousands) take part along the slopes of Monte Stella (Figure V).

Because of the proximity of the villages, this mountain has a high density of bell towers, among the highest ones (if not the highest) ever recorded in european rural areas (as in Corbin 1994, p.20). Considering that bell sound propagates in a circular area, which is prudentially restricted to 2 kilometers radius, and the orographic obstacles, the circular web of overlaps shows that great part of the territory is covered by four or more bells (Figure VI). For the inhabitants of the small villages of Monte Stella this redundancy of signals reproduces a sound environment which is comparable to the one of a big old town.

This sounds net has become subject of a valorisation experiment that ended in a sound installation on the 1st of May 1999. The form which was used to literally recall its choral features is a concert for thirty bell towers (sixty bells and more than forty operators), with the slopes of Monte Stella as an enormous auditorium (about 100 kmq). The regular performances of the individual bells have been used in the composition of a sound sequence, which has been written taking into account the orography and the proximity of the bell towers (Figure VII), and it is meant to be listened from specific points chosen as central in respect to some subsets. To explain this anomalous concert, we consider again Schafer's theory, who states that the fast transformation of industrial and post-industrial culture affected heavily on land sound perception, involving especially urban areas, but also rural areas. Among these historic transformations, in respect to material and non-material aspects of the sound systems created by the bells, we can state that:

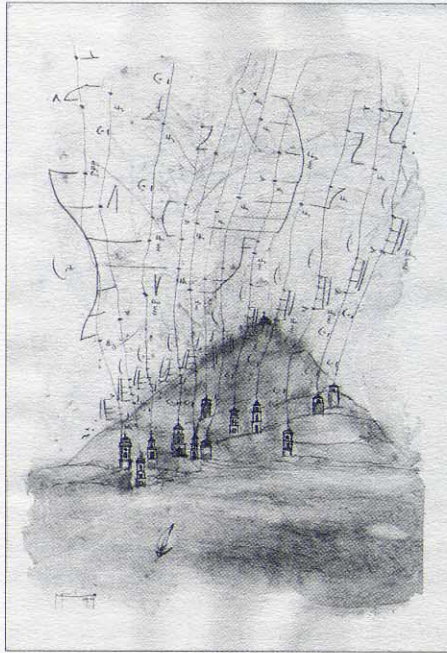


Figure VII: Drawing by Marcella Fusco with real musical score of the 1st may 1999 bells concert (property of the author).

- in reference to the first, the growing of sound disturbance tends to cover bell sound from the countryside especially in the furthes areas from the village, were still nowadays – in certain regions – the farmers orientate themselves in the daily work with the tolls of the angelus (and it happens sometimes, also today in Italy, that the bells are substituted by sirens, as in the above mentioned episode happened in Normandy)

- in reference to the latter, in contemporary culture which is used to very different kind of media, bell sound is considered less and less, especially aside from religion.

Therefore, as we can state about other historical landscape structures, also for sound structures it is necessary to intervene in order to stop the physical decay, and on the other hand to let them develop new meanings and uses which have sufficient appropriateness and vitality.

In conclusion, in analogy with what happens in the complex relations between ecologic systems, also in antropic landscape systems – with due distinction – tout se tient, and every structure with a certain complexity level refers back to the whole. In particular, a sound landscape system as complex as largely shared as the one we have examined, also because of its semantic pregnancy, can lead us to the heart of that perceptive relationship between man and territory that constitute the essence of the landscape, ““foundation of identity” of the population (ELC, art. 1 e 5)..

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