

Representing Tourist Destinations: Site Promotion, Literary Narration, and Cultural Memory

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Abstract

This proposal analyses to which extent the promotional image of a tourist destination is related to or, on the contrary, detached from the literary narrative of that place and, ultimately, from the cultural memory present in the same territory.

In this paper, starting from the complex **(I)** definition of *ecosystem* in order to set a literary perspective, a lexicon is established to provide a basis of concepts needed to understand the **(II)** function of the humanities in helping the design of sustainable narrative models for the tourist industry. A general outline of the research focuses will then be presented, to which will follow a discussion **(III)** on preliminary considerations and sources towards a specific case-study: **(III.a)** the Venetian lagoon and the city of Venice. This location will be analysed in particular through the lenses of Tiziano Scarpa and Paolo Barbaro's works, mostly in relation to the residential crisis in Venice historical city center.

The ultimate goal is to establish a dialogue between certain narratological elements and the tourism promotion strategies of the INEST territory, in order to promote positive and sustainable practices for tourist businesses.

Text

I) Introduction - Considerations around the Definition of 'Ecosystem' from an Interdisciplinary Perspective

“Gli scrittori non sono addetti alle soluzioni - o alle
risoluzioni. Loro si occupano solo delle domande”
(Belpoliti 2023,10)

The quotation above is a comment from author and scholar Marco Belpoliti on a short literary composition written by Italo Calvino in 1981, titled “Essere pietra”. In this piece, a stone speaks from ‘its’ own perspective, using first person narration, on what it means to be a mineral being:

Io sono una pietra. Lo ripeto: una pietra. So che non potete capirmi; dovrei
spiegarvi queste quattro parole una per una e a gruppi di due e di tre e poi tutte
insieme: cosa voglio dire io quando dico io, e quando dico essere, e pietra, e
cosa vuol dire essere pietra, e una, una pietra.
(Calvino 2005, 419).



The addressees of this fictional monologue are living beings, specifically us, *homo sapiens* - animated beings whose perception of natural and vegetal elements is misaligned due to our own limits both in how we perceive time (see Calvino 2005, 420), and our physical capacities- how we move and our bodily structure (see Mancuso-Viola 2015, 34-36). Calvino's piece serves Belpoliti as both an intratextual and literary reference for his introduction to Federico Luisetti's essay: *Essere pietra. Ecologia di un mondo minerale* – whose title recalls Calvino's work. Luisetti's major point emphasizes that many ways of living and inhabiting our planet have been and continue to be imperceptible to human understanding, including the mineral world. The major limit to this misunderstanding – or missed-understanding – is not only due to our incompatibility as organisms (Calvino, Mancuso), but also due to our own conception of personhood (Luisetti). According to Luisetti, we as modern people are tied to a specific juridical conception of 'persona' that has persisted since its formation during the Roman Empire. As a "virus" (Luisetti, 37), the category of *persona* sets us apart from all other species and natural elements. When reflecting on the work of Calvino, Belpoliti insists on the inaccessibility of the modern person to think of themselves as a part of a larger whole, for example, like a stone: "Una pietra [...] esiste come parte di un tutto, come 'qualcosa' che s'è staccato da una parte più grande, cosa che non le impedisce di possedere una propria singolarità" (Belpoliti 2023, 5).

Calvino's example of the stone examines a multifaceted concept of identity, with dimensions that include individuality without excluding a collectivity – a concept that can also be considered fundamental to the the notion of *ecosystem*: a word originally addressing the variety of species and organisms interacting in a physical environment in the study of ecology (see for example: [ECOSYSTEM | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary](#); [ECOSYSTEM Definition & Usage Examples | Dictionary.com](#) etc.). Though a more technically grounded concept for the relationship between living organisms and their environment, *ecosystem* might today also be considered synonymous for the term *landscape* (it. 'paesaggio'), traditionally used to describe the environment subjected to the human perspective.

As a synonym of *landscape*, *ecosystem* refers to those natural areas that also include anthropic elements and/or human interventions, connecting its original meaning with the definition of *landscape* given by Georg Simmel at the beginning of the 20th century (see Simmel 1913). As Paolo D'Angelo noted, the promotion and safeguard of attractive landscapes is very frequently mistaken as mere practice, without any knowledge of the theory and philosophy behind the concept of landscape itself (see D'Angelo 2014, 11-14). Today the term *landscape* may be too elusive and vague, its conventional sense failing to encompass phenomena that demonstrate that humans, along with other living organisms, are all subject to and yet makers of their environment, a concept in the field of evolutionary biology called *niche construction*. The theory has developed in evolutionary ecology to incorporate ideas of how organisms modify not only their physical, but also social and cultural environments, impacting their descendents (Laland, Matthews, & Feldman 2016), especially in the public and social discourse.



During a roundtable discussion ([Vajont 60 anni: terra e acqua tra natura e artificio | M9 Museum](#)) architect and curator Luca Molinari and scholar Mauro Varotto pointed out how currently, the idea of *landscape* has evolved beyond Simmel's definition, as the human subject is and has to be now included within the conceptual frame of landscape, being an active part of it, and not only as a prerogative condition for the existence of a 'landscape'. According to Simmel, an attempt to reduce a 'portion' of nature into a smaller component would be impossible, as "to talk of 'a piece of nature' is in fact a self-contradiction. Nature is not composed of pieces. It is the unity of a whole" (Simmel 2007, 21). In contrast, this understanding of unity is integrated into the term 'ecosystem', as this system of organisms and environment is understood in its relational terms. Thus, a shift in perspective has arisen where the landscape is no longer the external background to *homo sapien* actors, instead we are a part of and active agents in constructing our environment.

In recent years, technical terms borrowed from the field of ecology have been more heavily in use also in other disciplines. In particular, starting from the mid-1990s, the word *ecosystem* and other terms (*resilience*, for example) have been rebranded and used as loanwords in other technical languages to describe activities and processes within the economic sphere (Moore 1996; Galateanu-Avasilcai 2014; Walker-Cooper 2011). Luisetti, referring to the contemporary debate between the definition and use of the word 'Anthropocene' and other terminologies adopted by multi-species Ecology (Luisetti 2023, 22-23), highlights how the term *ecosystem* is often incorporated into a neoliberal context, which has redefined the traditional distinction between nature and society in an effort to form institutional consensus between economy and environment:

Il pensiero neoliberale ha smantellato la distinzione tra natura e società attraverso un'interpretazione perversa della storia evolutiva, che viene ridotta a pochi principi ed estesa senza alcuna giustificazione scientifica ad ogni campo: i mercati sono descritti come ecosistemi esposti alla pressione della selezione naturale e della competizione; l'adattamento è il principio guida delle organizzazioni industriali; la resilienza caratterizza sia il capitale naturale che la società. Questo vocabolario pseudo-ecologico è l'impalcatura del consenso neoliberale, un'atmosfera di pensiero in cui operano le istituzioni deputate alla globalizzazione economica e ambientale.

(Luisetti 2023, 25)

Even though Luisetti's critique is directed specifically to the exploitation of natural resources, it demonstrates how easy and accessible it can be to use the term 'ecosystem' with an increasing distance from its original meaning, and therefore distancing human beings from their inextricable relationship with other living beings and our environment. This is problematic, however, because it is reasonable to assume that since we are active agents in the construction of our environment, a changing environment is inevitable; indeed, there is no way to return to a simplified conception of nature in which humans had little to no impact on their environment. Instead, our initiatives, whether they be from individuals, businesses, or communities as a whole, must operate with the understanding that they are responsible agents of

change for themselves and others. As part of the environment and not just its designers, humans have an increased responsibility towards a more complex and active participation in our social ecosystems in particular, since there is evidence that certain ecological inheritance occurs both within our species, but also externally for all living elements in our environment (Odling-Smee and Laland 2012). That participation needs, in exchange, to bring change together with care and protection for every other element and species involved. Despite the greater value in the change of perspective from a *landscape* dimension to an *ecosystem* dimension for humans, there is an increased need for creative and innovative approaches to incorporate these concepts into workplaces and communities.

For this reason, in the context of the iNEST project, Calvino's fictional monologue is a key resource in suggesting that, at least on a primordial, imaginative level, a new dialogue between nature and humans is not only plausible, but desirable, and necessary. As the opening quotation remarked at the beginning of this introduction, if we cannot ask writers to provide the answers, we can still look to their literary works to assemble and articulate the right questions: how do we connect, interact, and cohabit our world with other living organisms? How can we be agents of change in an ecosystem without bringing about its destruction? It is from a fictional oddity – stones that teach us (and not the other way round) about their nature and features – that we should reimagine our intentions and undo the exploitation of natural resources in the direction of a sustainability that grants the existence of all species and elements with a double identity – individual and, at the same time, shared with all other beings.

In studying the North-eastern area of Italy from a tourist perspective, the points of view of the Humanities and of Literature, in particular, must also be seen as essential to the iNEST research ecosystem not only in terms of hybridization with other fields of study: in this paper, literature, similarly to multi-species theory, will serve as a practice that questions our existence, in order to include and develop visions for implementing changes for our unforeseen future. With this premise in mind, the following section will outline the research's general outlook, with the purpose of presenting and briefly discussing the multiple features and elements that coexist within the iNEST's area of interest.

II) Research Outline – Literary Focuses and Areas of Investigation

As primarily research effort, two distinct, yet connected areas of research development have been first identified:

1. The North-East region of Italy, in general, both as a geographical district as well as the venue of several tourist attractions (such as UNESCO World Heritage sites and cities, or the 2026 Winter Olympic Games host cities), with particular attention to the Veneto region.
2. The city of Venice as a specific site, with its own distinctive features that make it a unique place to live or visit both at a national and an international level.



The particular historical and cultural contexts of the Northeast region of Italy has provided an overwhelming amount of documents since antiquity of primary sources in literature that would be analysable in the project's endeavour. Specifically, Venice (2) constitutes an interesting focal point given the high number of representations available due to its exceptional urban landscape: the abundance of artistic and literary portrayals of the city in the lagoon is unequalled within the iNEST's territory. Regarding the Northeast region of Italy (1), Veneto region has served as a laboratory from an economic and sociological point of view, as this area experienced a sudden, late economic boom compared to the rest of Italy, without any parallel development in terms of socio-cultural context (see Stella 1996; Davanzo 2012).

Given the financial crisis of 2008, Veneto began to re-envision itself, seeking a new synergy between entrepreneurship and the humanities, which, unfortunately, proved unsuccessful, and further devotion toward this interrelationship is still required. Moreover, the entrepreneurial fabric of the Veneto region, centered on family businesses with a leadership model rooted in the figure of the *master* [it. 'padrone'] (see Parise 1965 and 1973), is unique in comparison to the rest of the country. The cultural leitmotif that promotes a rigid work ethic as the only possible way behind success (Bizzotto-Pezzato 2017) has often poorly impacted the working class and family business tradition (Trevisan 2022). The history of the Veneto region in terms of its collective memory and cultural ingenuity, more specifically how that is interpreted in literature and the arts, is the primary material in which the project aims to reinvision into strong narratives for its businesses and its people.

Following the thread of the project's keyword *ecosystem* with research awareness, the North East area has further been divided into 5 distinct research focuses, or ecosystems, based on the natural/anthropic relevance of peculiar elements displayed within each type of territory. Again, the term *ecosystem* is here used from a literary perspective that aims to value narration and portrayal of landscapes with a visionary and creative approach, as pointed out earlier, in the introduction of this paper (I). We will refer then to the formula "literary ecosystem" in this context, in order to not confuse the definition with other disciplines (mainly Ecology and Economics). The 5 literary research ecosystems are the following:

- a. Water – Lagoon and the City of Venice
- b. Stone – Dolomites
- c. Industry – Porto Marghera and Food Valleys
- d. Wood – Rivers and Forests
- e. Artifacts – Cities, "Borghi", Arts and Institutions.

III) Research Development – Preliminary Investigations for the Lagoon's Ecosystem: Methodology and Reference Criteria

In the last sections of this paper, we will display preliminary considerations around the first out of five ecosystems mentioned above: a) Water – Lagoon and the City of Venice. From a methodological perspective, a literary ecosystem also represents a complex organization of interconnected forms: visual, narrative, digital. References

and sources taken into consideration are therefore various in terms of time, material support, destination, including sometimes examples from political regulations, or other initiatives developed by local communities (ex. “Progetto Poveglia”). For the promotion of a certain site/ecosystem from a tourist perspective, we have mainly considered official campaigns by regions and municipalities, together with some examples of advertising filed by tourist platforms (ex. Airbnb) or events by companies in the fashion industry (D&G, Armani).

Venice and its lagoon constitute an excellent example of literary ecosystem within the INEST territory as both fictional representations and bio-ecological processes involve the coexistence of human and natural elements from multiple perspectives: geological, historical, and cultural. In the public discourse, referring to Venice as an ecosystem highlights the presence and mixture of stones, water, wood, peculiar flora and fauna, and of course human intervention that, over centuries, created a landscape unique from any other on Earth. The relevance of the natural environment of the Veneto lagoon – as its own ecosystem – will be investigated in this section only in reference to the literary and cultural representation of Venice. However, it is evident that also on a research level, the scientific/environmental and fictional dimensions of the lagoon city are linked with one another and often in dialogue, not only as subjected to the same type of fascination, but especially as complementary sides of a complex, multisensorial environment.

The permeance and alliance between scientific data and cultural debate around Venice's features can be proven by many hybrid forms of interactions and city practices, that involves artists, philosophers, scientists, performers and more (for one example see the programs conducted by the planetary center [Ocean Space](#)), or by the focus of some editorial projects where the natural/ecological investigation provides a space for imagination and positive speculation about the Venetian lagoon – for example, the essay *L'arcipelago delle api: Microcosmi lagunari nell'era della crisi climatica* by Chiara Spadaro (2022), who by investigating beekeeping practices in the lagoon places a new subject - the “apis mellifera” - as a privileged point of view for discussing climate change and biodiversity loss; or the recent *Venezia “Passenger”* volume by Iperborea (2023), where the purpose of a travelbook guide is reformulated through the exploration of complexities linked to a specific territory (in the case of Venice: residential care, overtourism, fishing traditions, immigrant communities etc.).

III.a) Case Study 1 | Water – Veneto Lagoon and the City of Venice

In his last book, *La verità e la biro*, the Venetian writer Tiziano Scarpa, while being himself on vacation abroad, reflects on the habits and expectations of foreign tourists towards a place:

I turisti sono pochissimi. E così abbiamo l'illusione di aver trovato un posto in disparte, più autentico, meno sdatato [sic] e anche meno sporto sulle nostre aspettative: ciò che viviamo in questa spiaggetta non è stato organizzato per compiacere noi turisti, offrendoci ciò che i greci pensano possa far piacere agli



stranieri, ma qualcosa che funziona così di per sé e casomai, se capita, può accogliere anche ciò che non c'entra, ciò che non era previsto: noi. I turisti sperano sempre di trovare qualcosa che non li prevedeva, un posto, una situazione *tourist free*, e di entrarci dentro, di viverla. Io posso toccare la verità solo se questa verità non era pronta per me, non era lì ad aspettarmi. Se invece era confezionata per me, era una bugia. E, dal punto di vista opposto, se mi prodigo per accogliere qualcuno facendolo sentire a suo agio, gli procuro un'esperienza fasulla. Dunque, lo tratto *peggio* se lo tratto con verità, ma in quanto gli do la verità lo tratto *meglio*. [*original italics*].
(Scarpa 2023, 86).

As tourists, our hopes and craving for authenticity become driving factors in choosing the type of locations we visit, foods we eat, and activities in which we are willing to take part. Scarpa articulates well the contradiction of wanting to feel included, pleased while away from home, and yet thinking that a level of discomfort or some unexpected event can benefit enormously a visitor's experience: this is especially true from a storytelling perspective – once we come back from time abroad, the stories we are more eager to share with friends, family or on social media, are often the unusual and peculiar ones, the ones with an element of *unexpectancy* - a plot twist, in other words. This attitude is especially encouraged in a city like Venice, where the maze-geometry of its canals and *calli*, the silent atmosphere at night, and many other common features are seen as exceptional elements by visitors.

This type of altered, conflicted fascination is visible for example in the overview of *experiences* run by Airbnb, where in order to be memorable and authentic, any activity package stresses on the *local* element (ex. see the slogan “Unforgettable activities hosted by locals” on the platform's website: <https://www.airbnb.com/s/Venice--Italy/experiences>): ‘hidden streets’, ‘secret gardens’, ‘small groups guided-tour only’, private fotoshooting sessions ‘like in the movies’, and authentic glass-making classes provide, nowadays, the most average and less aboveboard offer for visitors. How can both tourist communication and the proposed tourist experiences match a truthful visit of the lagoon city without falling into ordinary and predictable stereotypes? Literature, again, can maybe not help in finding solutions, but can definitely support the inquiry by starting from the formulation of this question with more efficiency, and through most impactful visions.

Benvenuti a Ultra-Venezia is a fictional, dystopian essay authored again by Tiziano Scarpa; in this article that opens the Iperborea “Passenger” volume on Venice, the discussion around Venice starts right-away with the concern of over-tourism. A first-person narrator serves as guide for a group of important and rich guests around the lagoon, explaining the problems of the city, what it means to live in such a landscape, beginning from its social configuration:

Abbiamo raggiunto una soglia epocale: i visitatori quotidiani sono pari agli abitanti stabili. Ogni giorno qui passano cinquantamila turisti: lo stesso numero dei residenti veneziani. E che cosa sono, i turisti? La parte che guarda una città, la fotografa e la riflette come uno specchio.



C'è Venezia, gli abitanti; e c'è Meta-Venezia, i turisti. Due parti di un organismo simbiotico, in cui azione e immaginazione riflessa convivono. Considerate questo corpo demografico, fatto per metà di muscoli e ossa, e per l'altra metà di grappoli d'occhi e smartphone. Possiamo ancora chiamarlo corpo?

(Scarpa 2023 b, 10)

In this piece, where the purpose is still to prove the remarkable, dramatic uniqueness of Venice through its canals and island, the narrator proposes however an “exceptional guided tour” [it. “una guida d’eccezione”] (Scarpa 2023, 9) through a very unusual and well hidden *local* site: the Veritas dump centers, one at Sacca San Biagio, a part of Sacca Fisola (Giudecca, Venice), and one in Fusina (Marghera). “Ultra-Venezia” is the place where everything, especially tourist presence, is turned into a waste-land in a literal sense: a place that survives based on garbage.

Saltiamo il fosso, evolviamoci: la fabbrica dei forestieri deve diventare l'industria della produzione turistica di rifiuti. Venezia, e con lei l'Italia, non può immalinconirsi nella nostalgia del suo passato industriale. Noi siamo ancora una potenza che fabbrica, che produce! [...] Allevare turisti, come pesci attirati in laguna: vale a dire allevare produttori di rifiuti.

(Scarpa 2023 b, 25)

Whether tourists or citizens would like it or not, this fictional guided tour suggests that even from the complete transformation of Venice into what Scarpa defines “Meta-Venice”, an ecosystem unbalanced towards reflection rather than action, the productivity of the commercial aspect to Venice, the “business-city” [it. “città-azienda”] (Scarpa 2023 b, 10) will never decrease – it will only change its modes of production, investing in a very different (but still unique) product development: waste.

“Ultra-Venezia” is a vision that strongly differs from the images we are used to consuming on tourist promotion campaigns, or on social media. When it comes to Venice, in both the cases of pictures or videos, the privileged perspective is often an up-shot: see, for example the [Veneto - Too Good to Miss](#) official video campaign, from 2021, or the ‘Venezia è unica’ Instagram profile. Like in any great narration, such as a biblical or mythical epic, the omniscient vision takes up the first or most significant impressions of the whole city or region represented, leaving a very narrow space for the individual to contribute with their own imagination of a new, personal suggestion.

Together with this aspect, it is important to mention that the color-saturated, shiny images of the lagoon water is often matched with a *replicability* dimension that a city like Venice spontaneously offers to visitors: pictures with canals, on bridges, spritzes or food items are taken in all different places, around all different corners, and yet they all look alike. Even painters and artists who sell their work along the Riva degli Schiavoni devote themselves to recreating identical paintings of the sun setting across the Giudecca canal. Why? Because each replica is a purchasable momento of a shared vacation destination.

In general, it is possible to notice how a dreamy, color-filtered vision of the city is constantly reproduced, over and over, to the detriment of a whole way in living and



working in the historical center, which unfortunately does not provide in this sense a suitable *landscape* for likes, tags or activity promotion. A standard, stereotyped representation has been taking over both contents designed by official channels for tourist destination promotion as well as any other TGC – *traveler-generated content*, especially in digital form: there is no difference, for example, from any picture of the Island of Burano posted/shared on social media by visitors and the photogallery, including descriptions, of Burano on the official website 'Veneto – The Land of Venice', the latest promotional channel of the Veneto region (see [Burano Venezia Cosa fare e vedere nell'isola dai mille colori](#)).

In a recent interview for the multimedia journal "Lucy", the journalist and independent scholar of urban policies Lucia Tozzi discussed her work on the city of Milan in relation to the dichotomy between 'attractiveness' and 'hospitality' of an urban space ([Perché le città sono diventate invivibili? - Lucy](#)): her main argument consists of the fact that "an attractive city is the exact opposite of a welcoming city" [it. "una città attrattiva sia il contrario esatto di una città accogliente"] (Tozzi 2023, min. 1:19) as, at some point, after the shift from a economy based on production towards an urban policy devolved to attract worldwide recognition (ex. the Expo, the Olympic games, etc.), the resident population slowly makes its way out in favour of "a more dynamic, so called short-term population, that consists of digital nomads, students, expats, financial and law experts, etc." (Tozzi 2023, min. 6:55). Tozzi highlights how this type of short-term population is easier to please than those who lived in the urban space for generations: there is no sense of affection for the city, and no interest in local administration policies as short-term residents will move soon enough to a different part of the world. Sustainability and inclusivity become therefore delusional, empty adjectives when local policies do not protect the working class of an urban ecosystem – of *any* ecosystem.

It is possible to spot significant similarities with Tozzi's lecture about Milan and the housing crisis happening in the historical center of Venice. The observatory "Ocio Venezia" has registered progressively the increasing number of tourist lodgings up to December 2023, when the number of residential lodgings matched (if not exceeded) the number of tourist accommodations: roughly 50.000 each (<https://ocio-venezia.it/report/il-calendario-de-la-vendo>). The process of depopulation in Venice has not begun with the invention of short-stay rental platforms, but before, in the first half of the 20th century according to Zanardi, who uses the formula "bonifica urbana" (Zanardi 2023, 29) referring to the politics that promoted the exodus of residents outside the historical city center of Venice. Over the years, few consistent actions have been taken to prevent this social gap from increasing further, while at same the time practices such as Armani's 2023 "One Night Only" fashion show ([One Night Only Venezia | Giorgio Armani](#)) in the Venetian Arsenal, or the Dolce and Gabbana's 2021 show in Saint Mark Square, are indirectly encouraging an idea of the city meant to be dream space, with events designed for upper class members and international celebrities: the shared, symbolic spaces of the city, starting from its one and only "square" (S. Mark), are becoming more and more frequently closed and inaccessible to both its citizens and regular, low-income tourists.



Now that Venice and “Meta-Venice” (Scarpa 2023 b) have reached the same weight in terms of human capacity, how should we rethink, in a visionary way, this spatial fracture, including in the process and without demonizing the thousands of visitors that enter every day into the lagoon city? An interesting experiment was conducted by Costanza Jesurum, Jungian psychologist and analyst, who authored an essay titled *Il giaguaro nel canale. Venezia nei sogni dei visitatori* (2023). The book represents a ‘dream collection’ [it. “raccolta onirica”] (Jesurum 2023, 21), as the author herself has defined it, in which dreams become the content and object of investigation to describe the multiple symbolic and archetypal values of the lagoon city: “in questo progetto si inverte la gerarchia dei fini: non si usano più gli oggetti nei sogni per dire qualcosa dei soggetti, ma si usano i soggetti per capire qualcosa degli oggetti presenti nei loro sogni” (Jesurum 2023, 21).

For this work, the author collected nearly one hundred accounts of dreams about Venice from patients and volunteers willing to share their own images and representations related, in some ways, to the lagoon city as part of the project. It emerged, without any astonishment by Jesurum, that it is not at all necessary to have been to or to have lived in Venice to dream about Venice and/or the lagoon. On the contrary, in the first pages of the book, Jesurum explains precisely how the imagery of the “City on the water” has culturally penetrated what is called, in Jungian terms, *collective unconscious*, and which in studies of social psychology has been redefined as the *cultural unconscious*: the place where, in short, *mythologems* are located. Thus, the unconscious projections of Venice by subjects who never set foot in the lagoon proved to be dream-material of particular relevance and value. On the contrary, the dreams of Venetians are the only ones to have been excluded *ex ante* from the collection: Jesurum justified her refusal to include any testimonies of Venetian dreamers, or those who spent their childhood period in Venice, as these dreams would have altered the investigation on the symbolic skill of Venice: “avrebbero avuto meno da dire sulla capacità simbolizzante della città lagunare, perché legati ad un elemento semantico più potente, ovvero la terra natia e l’arredo urbano che accoglie i primi rapporti significativi” (Jesurum 2023, 22-23).

Venice, the capital of the most dramatic effects of the Anthropocene, such as the rising-sea level, or the toxic practices related to mass-tourism – including above all the disappearance of its residential texture – can maybe return to provide a safe, shared cultural space where both local communities and visitors can help one another to investigate critical aspects of its urban crisis through innovative allegories: from the queen of Anthropocene disasters, Venice can be portrayed as the center of a wider, cultural unconscious, to which everyone can contribute with relevancy and more authentic, actual oniric activity.

In opposition to Jesurum’s visionary outlook, there is indeed no record in tourist-site promotion and communication that reconnects Venice to a realistic (therefore complex) oniric experience, made of suggestive images but also of unsettling dynamics, as any storytelling practice advises: when the element of conflict is removed, or limited to a general message on the background of a shiny representation, the individual has no tools to connect with the urgency of the message: for example, within the



#EnjoyRespectVenezia campaign, a series of celebrities from sports, movies etc., have provided testimonials to send a positive message about Venice to users and potential visitors ([Testimonial | Comune di Venezia](#)). The general tone of these testimonies can be summarised with the assumption that Venice, being unique or in some way related to their life experience, deserves respect and care. Not only is there no element of conflict, but again, there is no portrayal of the real issues the city faces, as these celebrities do not experience any genuine connection to the lifestyle of residents: they are 'short-term' testimonials, one could say, re-using Tozzi's definition for non-permanent populations.

Paolo Barbaro, Venetian writer and engineer, displays a very different type of character in his short story collection *Ultime isole* (1992 Marsilio; 2022 Wetlands). In these tales we find characters attempting to change their own fates, and those of the lagoon space, through technical-engineering work. Even pioneering projects were at times considered pure science-fiction madness, as was the attempt to raise the island of Poveglia, in the narration "Isola delle Polveri", with a vertical countermovement of the ground from below. Tiziano Scarpa, in the rich essay entitled "La città sospesa", which serves as introduction to Barbaro's collection, talks about this technological utopia in reference to the experimental uplift realised at Poveglia, and writes:

Era propagandistica, era aziendalistica, era fantascientifica questa fiducia di Paolo Barbaro nella possibilità di preservare Venezia dalle acque alte con una spinta geotecnica infera? Forse. Ma non bisogna dimenticare una cosa: Barbaro ha sempre guardato Venezia da sotto in su; ha dedicato (a Venezia e alla vita) un'attenzione quasi ossessiva per ciò che sta sotto la superficie: il sottosuolo e gli ambienti sottomarini; anzi, sottolagunari. [...] Alla superficiale Venezia, alle sue acque poco profonde, Barbaro ha restituito ciò che più di tutto le manca: l'abisso, l'inconscio, le grotte archetipiche, i substrati che pochi riuscivano a vedere.
(Scarpa 2022, 8).

Venice still needs, maybe now more than ever, an overview that privileges the upside-down perspective: a city that can still survive thanks to its dust, waste, darkness and smell, and not because of wonderful *palazzi* and churches, as the narrator voice in "Isola delle polveri" notices:

Una luce riflessa, un faro lontano: case e case, una accanto all'altra, compaiono finalmente nel buio non più buio, a un soffio dalla terrazza, dalla finestra, dal balconcino. Muri disastriati, tetti a onde, finestroni sbilenchi. Ma nonostante tutto, case: roba abitata, con fischi e sospiri. Pietre marce, acqua in agguato, turbini di polvere; però sta in piedi, sta in piedi. Dev'essere questa, Venezia.
(Barbaro 2022, 79).

In this sense, it is necessary for the abysses, the mud foundations of the city on the water to once again be highlighted, recounted and dissected in all the possible curves and snags, in order to restore the estrangement that connects it with us – as a species



in the age of the threat of extinction – with a propulsive, intellectually useful attitude, and not an immobilising feeling. In this perspective, the city of Venice and its lagoon, with its problems but also with its virtuous initiatives – as the collective initiative run by residents on the real Poveglia Island can demonstrate (see Mantegoli 2023) – has not yet exhausted ways to communicate to our cultural unconscious. In this upside-down dimension, where the most conflictual and problematic aspects of Venice are buried, maybe it will be possible to find new solutions, as well as new stories. As the Engineer Pino, a character from Barbaro's tale, says to the narrator: "Chissà – mi batte sulla spalla – se Venezia sprofonda sul serio: il marcio, caro mio, non sprofonda mai" (Barbaro 2022, 80).

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