



Sardinian rebirth landscapes. An aesthetician's outlook

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Abstract

The following study, whose field of research is aesthetics, aims to analyze the *Sardinian Rebirth Landscapes*. Throughout this paper, we'll use this expression to describe the landscapes which derived from the crisis of the industrial sector in Sardinia. Their study will be exclusively performed in an analytical manner through the use of critical thinking, as is proper in the philosophical method. The end result is a reflection which uses categories and interpretative tools typical of the field of aesthetics, which is my sole field of competence. The essay stems from considerations inspired by a photograph. This photograph presented a chance to deeply scrutinize our reality as to bring forth its evident contradictions, and to consider how these very contradictions have undertaken the features of this recession. A recession which has claimed its spaces of visibility in what I've named the "Sardinian Rebirth Landscapes". The second part of paper focuses on the complexities involved in analyzing these landscapes.

Keywords: Cathedrals in the Desert, Industrial Landscapes, Rebirth Landscapes

1. A "means to take a closer look and further highlight relations"

The purpose of this paper is to put down in black and white my considerations for fourth edition of the Landscape Studies International Day's. In 2014, its leitmotif was *Landscape crisis, crisis landscapes*. I believed this was an important occasion to bring my own perspective as an aesthetics scholar to a convention organized by the University of Cagliari, Faculty of Humanities. As in previous editions, experts from various disciplines participated, making this opportunity even more interesting and stimulating. Aside from aestheticians, geographers, economists, and urbanists were also present. These scholars offered the audience a

different perspective on landscapes from mine, albeit not in contrast with it. I believe this multitude of points of view is always useful when analyzing landscape spaces, and it was essential in tackling the 2014 convention topic of discussion.

It seems to me a short premise on the topic is due, as my analysis of the subject matter at hand precisely follows my thought processes following this experience. In particular, it was there that I came across a photo shoot on run-down industrial landscapes and, more in general, landscapes originating from the recession.

For this very reason, I feel it's necessary to refer to Eugenio Turri's words as he points out

that photographic images can “depict landscapes as we see them” but they “highlight their components and connective elements” (Turri, 1994, p. 1). These words can be found in the pages of *Paesaggio e fotografia: il tempo e la storia*, a paper which contains his presentation from a seminar held at the Institute of Human Geography of Milan State University: *L'immagine fotografica nella ricerca antropogeografica (Photographic images in anthropological geography research)* on January 18th, 1994. This analysis resonates with the contents of a recent essay by Marcello Tanca, where he states that “photography [...] proves itself [...] capable of profoundly influencing our way of seeing things [...], allowing us to see the world ‘for the first time’” (Tanca, 2015, p. 109). Over time, I’ve made these considerations my own and I find that they are also perfectly summarized in Roberta Valtorta’s reflections when she writes that photography is a “means to take a closer look and further highlight relations” (Valtorta, 1995, p. 4).

I feel compelled to specify that it is indeed in virtue of this fact that my research on the subject started from a photograph and went on by following a narration through images.

However, taking into account that various geographers participated in the fourth annual Landscape Studies International Day, I’d like to stress that my use of images is very far from the visual research avenues pursued in the geographical field and whose contributions in the past decade have been extremely valuable. (Rossetto, 2006; Vecchio, 2009; Cassi and Meini, 2010; Bignante, 2011; Gemignani, 2013; Meini and Ciliberti, 2015; Tanca, 2015).

In fact, my analysis wants to be of an aesthetic nature. That’s why it is entirely centered on the critical exercise of reason. Hence, photographic images are *only used as a useful chance to reflect* and question reality. A chance to show its blatant contradictions and study how they have taken the shape of a crisis which conquered its spaces of visibility in what I’ve dubbed the *Sardinian Rebirth Landscapes* in the title of this essay.

With this expression, of course, I refer to those landscapes on the island which were a byproduct of the so called “Rebirth Plans” (Piani di Rinascita). The one from 1963 (bill 588: June

11, 1962) and the one from 1974 (bill 268: June 24, 1974). Both of these plans were chiefly centered on establishing heavy industry complexes on the island. However, because these industrial stimulus plans evidently disregarded the natural social and economic propensities of the territories they were implemented on, they proved to be a failure from their inception.

To better understand what we’re discussing, we have to point out that at first the “Rebirth Plan” for the Sardinian economy, suitably with the territory’s economic inclinations, involved a substantial refinancing of the agricultural sector which at the time was the island’s social and economic foundation. However, the booming expansion of the industrial sector in Northern Italy in the ‘50s prompted a shift in the Italian development plans. These, in turn, fully involved Sardinia.

The main financing tool used by the Italian government to favor this Rebirth was the CIS, *Credito Industriale Sardo (Sardinian Industrial Credit)*. This public institution was created in 1953 with the purpose of financing future industrial enterprises. Nevertheless, as noted by Paolo Piras, the presence of these new types of businesses, which had up to then been completely extraneous to Sardinia, had two immediate social and economic effects. “Farming and agriculture which had always been the main source of income for Sardinians and, at first, were the prime beneficiaries of financial aid, saw a progressive decline both in territories destined to these types of activities and in the workforce actively involved in them. Consequently, the migration trends towards the new job centers accelerated causing a spike in the depopulation phenomenon which continues to this day” (2012-2013).

The effort to implement such an extraneous economic model, which, mind you, was completely foreign to the whole island, not just part of it, quickly gave rise to a structural economic crisis. Hence, this recession has deep-seated roots and it originated well before the more recent one which we have been experiencing in recent years.

Ultimately, when we refer to these Rebirth Plans, we are referring to an economic model

which in Sardinia ended up manifesting severe contradictions. These contradictions spread across the island from North to South and became evident in its landscapes while mirroring the distribution of the planned industrial complexes. So what was the end result? The lack of awareness of Sardinia's social and economic reality, didn't lead to the island's highly proclaimed modernization process. Instead, it solely promoted an industrialization process without any real growth or development (Sabattini, 2012).

Nevertheless, I'd like to take a few steps back to the photo attached at the end of this paper since, as I mentioned before, this was my analysis' starting point. It is my duty to give authorship credit for this photo, as well as all the others which I will utilize in this essay. Except for two, the last two in the series. Their Author, by the name of Fabio Petretto, approached me last summer about writing a critique on an exhibition he was putting on display in Sassari in occasion of the MENOTRENTUNO Photography Festival¹.

Petretto is a landscape photojournalist and the landscapes immortalized by his lens all follow a unique thread: they depict degraded industrial landscapes where decline is most evident. Petretto's landscapes are dirty, polluted, and covered in rust.

The photo which inspired my essay, at first glance, doesn't quite fit the theme (Figure 1). In fact, contrary to the pictures described above, it doesn't depict an industrial landscape at all. Even so, this picture is still undeniably tied to the thread of industry and its recession in

Sardinia. Its main feature is a strong architectural sign, a tower, which dominates its center. It's the Aragonese tower of Porto Torres. This tower is an unmistakeable symbol for this city which happens to be home to one of the most important industrial complexes built as part of the Rebirth Plans.

A white cross appears in the foreground and, together with the ones that can be seen immediately behind it, it might lead the viewer to believe it depicts a cemetery. Nevertheless, if you, like me, have had a chance to visit Porto Torres and see this building in person, you will know that there is no cemetery there. Moreover, cemeteries in Sardinia are typically vertically built and consist of differently colored burial recesses. So what is the meaning of this alluding white cross? In order to understand this shot, we'll need to refer to this photo's temporal location. It was taken at a very specific time in the history of Sardinia's industrial crisis during the winter between 2009 and 2010.

Specifically, it was taken on November 23, 2009, the day which officially began the decline of Porto Torres' petrochemical industry. On this day, layoffs were announced for the workers of Vynils, a PVC raw materials manufacturing plant, as production officially came to a halt. Most workers were now on unemployment insurance.

From that moment on, the Vynils laid-off workers began a long and extenuating fight for their jobs. Protests flared into somewhat dramatic initiatives through which Sardinia's industrial recession gained prime national media coverage and brought its issues to the forefront of newspapers and news broadcasts the nation over.

Among the initiatives taken by the laid-off workers, two are particularly worthy of mention. One was the occupation of the former maximum security Asinara penitentiary, which had been shut down about a decade earlier. While in the occupied penitentiary the workers used a website, *L'isola dei cassintegrati* (which roughly translates to Island of the Unemployment Insurance Collectors and was a reference to the Italian equivalent of the show "Survivor",

¹ MENOTRENTUNO is an international photography exhibit festival dedicated to young photography professionals which are strictly selected under 31 years of age. It's run by the non-profit cultural association *Su Palatu Fotografia* which was founded in Sardinia in 2011 in collaboration with the Soter publishing company. The festival is held bi-annually. The 2014 edition spread over 18 exhibits which involved Sardinian towns and cities and drew some sort of "photographic map" embracing the whole island. This edition was also enhanced by a series of off-circuit exhibitions titled *A. Banda*.

dubbed in Italian as “The Island of the Stars”)², to let the public know how they spent their days and to spread awareness³.

Before that, the workers had also occupied the Aragonese tower⁴. This initiative was highly emblematic because the tower, as mentioned above, was the iconic symbol of Porto Torres. It wasn't just a matter of occupying a building, but rather the act of claiming for their own a well known symbol with which the entire central and Northern Sardinian community strongly identified.

So, back to our picture. It was during this time of unrest that the workers gave life to a “protest within the protest” by installing a white cross cemetery in front of the tower. The reference was to burial rites was obvious, but what were these workers burying? Their jobs, plain and simple. With this metaphorical gesture, they chose to announce to the world the death of petrochemical occupation in Porto Torres. Furthermore, at that time, their gesture echoed far and wide as there were many other similar open disputes on the island which involved workers from companies such as Alcoa, Euroallumina, and Rockwell.

Generally speaking, we could say that during that historic phase of the Sardinian recession, it was quite easy to draw a veritable map of the industrial crisis on the island. In doing so, one would find that the recession spread from North to South and exactly mirrored the outlines traced by the two Rebirth Plans. In other words, Sardinia witnessed the extreme backlash caused

by an economic model which was never able to take off on the island.

Once again, we must return to the photo since it is our starting point and the origin of all my considerations. While it is true that this picture struck me at first glance, it is also true that its title was even more food for thought. Its Author titled it: *Le morti bianche: presenti, passate e future_Porto Torres* (in English: “White Deaths: present, past, and future_Porto Torres”)⁵.

The error in the title is quite evident. Sure, the workers were burying their jobs, but white deaths are an entirely different matter. So, what happened? Was there a mistake on the photographer's part? Or was it intentional? Well, it was obviously intentional. The photographer was hinting at another well known fact. The same jobs those workers were fighting tooth and nail for, were also the agent that caused more cancer-related deaths, proportionally, than those caused by the Ilva plant in Taranto, an infamous industrial complex in Southern Italy which rose to the public eye and is considered to be the prime example of the damage caused by heavy industry.

I realize such claims need to be backed with supporting data. For this reason, we must open a parenthesis to talk about the Nurra region located in northwest Sardinia. The area is west of the town of Porto Torres and sprawls over territories belonging to the Porto Torres, Sassari, and Stintino municipalities. To the north, it's bordered by the *Golfo dell'Asinara* coast, to the east by the *Rio Mannu* river, and to the west by the *Stagno di Pilo* pond.

During the sixties the area's natural beauty, both of the inland and marine landscapes, was such that a radically different economic development model could have been viable over the Rebirth Plan which was entirely based on the establishment of the chemical industry sector. The area is located inside the Gennano

² Here is the website's URL: <http://www.isola.deicassintegrati.com>.

³ Fiorella Infascelli shot a documentary film about the 2010 Asinara penitentiary occupation titled *Pugni Chiusi (Closed Fists)*. The film won the Controcampo Award at the 2011 Venice Film Festival.

⁴ Two fundamentals articles on the occupation of the tower can be found on the two main Sardinian newspapers, *L'Unione Sarda* and *La Nuova Sardegna*. The first “*Vynils, nuova mobilitazione: operai sulla Torre Aragonese*”, on “*L'Unione Sarda*”, January 7, 2010. The second: “*Porto Torres, i lavoratori della Vynils occupano la Torre aragonese*”, on “*La Nuova Sardegna*”, January 7, 2010.

⁵ In Italian, *white deaths* refers to occupational fatalities. This is a very controversial topic as Italy has a particularly bad track record in this field. Italy is the European country with the highest number of work-related fatalities.

hydrographic basin benefited from a vantage position for the transportation of raw materials and finished goods. Hence the SIR, Sarda Industrie Resine, was born in Porto Torres over a surface of twenty-one million square meters. The “*Consorzio per il nucleo di sviluppo industriale di Sassari-Alghero-Porto Torres*” (Sassari-Alghero-Porto Torres Industrial core development consortium) was founded in September of 1962. Soon, a full-scale industrial harbor was developed on the Gennano pond area which was progressively covered in all kinds of waste and debris.

Over ten years, as highlighted by Alessandra Puggioni in her doctorate thesis, SIR took up an important role in the “*Piano chimico nazionale*”, (National chemical plan), since it directly treated 5.2 million tonnes of oil and produced 430 thousand tonnes of raw materials for the chemical sector.

“What still surprises me to this very day when studying the SIR plant in the Sardinian northwest” is the “absence of [...] any kind of preoccupation with its potential environmental risks. The dream of thousands of new jobs overruled the environmental preservation issues which would eventually develop into a full-blown emergency” (Puggioni, 2013, p. 13).

But let’s move on to more recent history. In 1982 the Porto Torres industrial pole was under the management of ENI, Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (National Hydrocarbons Authority).

“Currently, the Porto Torres industrial conglomerate sprawls over 2311 acres, 1280 of which are destined to industrial activity. Of these, about half are occupied by abandoned petrochemical plants that are no longer in use” (p. 18). But the most important fact is that with Law 179, dated July 31st, 2002, the area was declared a *Sito di Interesse Nazionale* (SIN, National Interest Site) because of the dangerous contamination levels and environmental risk factors. However, already in 1963 the local newspaper *La Nuova Sardegna* had published an article denouncing that “a little under two months ago the SIR petrochemical plant had begun its production cycle and chemical waste is being channeled into the sea killing fish of all species and sizes” (*Inquinano in mare le scorie degli stabilimenti petrolchimici*, 1 marzo 1963).

Title: “*Petrochemical plant waste pollutes the sea*”).

Nowadays, from the Cancer Registry of the Sassari Province we learn that in the short span between 1992 and 2001, in the area between Castelsardo, Porto Torres, Sennori, Sorso, and Stintino there was a 77% rise in tumor cases in men, and an 89% increase among women⁶.

The most recent data was published by the Italian Epidemiology Association (Associazione italiana di epidemiologia) in the periodical S.E.N.T.I.E.R.I. It can be found in the first supplement of number 38 which was published in March-April, 2014. Quoting from SENTIERI directly: “The SENTIERI Project represents the first comprehensive analysis of the health impact of residence in National Priority Contaminated Sites (NPCSS). For the first time, it considers three distinct health outcomes: mortality (2003-2010), cancer incidence (1996-2005) and hospital discharges (2005-2010). The Report includes a commentary explaining methodology and approach, as well as remarks on the causal association between environmental exposures and investigated health outcomes based on the a priori assessments of the epidemiological evidence [...]. The approach put forward by SENTIERI was among those sanctioned by the World Health Organization to conduct an initial description of the health status of residents of contaminated sites” (p. 126).

A part of this study is also dedicated to the *Industrial Areas of Porto Torres (SS)*. In regards to *Mortality*, it states: “In both men and women there is an above normal incidence from all causes, tumors, and respiratory diseases when compared to regional reference data” (p. 33). But that’s not all, further on the lung tumors and respiratory diseases in the Porto Torres SIN are clearly linked to the emissions from the petrochemical plants and refineries present in the area (p. 127).

⁶ See also the news article “*Mappa dei veleni, Porto Torres e Sassari peggio di Taranto*”, in “*La Nuova Sardegna*”, 2014, which denounces the severe air pollution in Sassari and Porto Torres.

On top of what emerged thus far, we must add that there is alarming data concerning all areas affected by the *Rebirth Plans* in Sardinia. In total, there are eighteen areas which are considered at risk, amounting to seventy-three municipalities and for a combined population of about 850 thousand. Or in other words, a little over half the island's total population. These areas were subdivided into industrial, mining, and military areas and were analyzed in the "*Health status report on the population of areas affected by industrial, mining, and military activities in the Sardinia region*" which was published in the first 2006 supplement of *Epidemiologia & Prevenzione* (pp. 5-95) (*Epidemiology & Prevention*). This study was ordered by the Regional Public Health Department of Sardinia (*Assessorato alla Sanità della Regione Autonoma della Sardegna*) and was carried out by a team of doctors, statisticians, and epidemiologists coming from the Universities of Udine, Turin, and Florence under the supervision of Annibale Biggeri, an epidemiologist and medical statistician from the University of Florence.

However, what matters most to our broader scope is that what has emerged so far, when put into relation with the continuing job crisis in the *Rebirth Plan* areas and with its socioeconomic causes, traces the highly contradictory framework of Sardinia's industrial sector from its very inception.

It is in light of these contradictions that we must keep reflecting on the picture which was my analysis' starting point. The image and its title, in fact, still inspire further thought.

We've come face to face with a photograph that speaks to us about the fight for a fundamental right: the right to work. On the other hand, it is also about another fundamental right: the right to life. Hence, we have these two fundamental rights which, as we've seen, in the areas of the Sardinian Rebirth such as Porto Torres, are mutually exclusive. So, if in some areas of Sardinia these two rights, which by their very definition belong to all human beings, are mutually exclusive, reality itself is presenting us with a glaring contradiction.

On my part, I can claim that I'm not the least bit surprised that, in Sardinia, such a contra-

diction has undertaken the features of a violent crisis, which manifests itself in several guises: economic recession, unemployment, and social crisis.

I am not even surprised that the word crisis has somehow managed to reclaim its etymological meaning. In Greek, the word κρίσις comes from the verb κρίνω: "to separate." This verb originally referred to the threshing process, which is the final step in the harvesting of wheat and which entails the separation of its elements.

Nevertheless, just one level of abstraction above that, the word κρίσις was used as "choice", hence the act of choosing, as per Franco Montanari in his *Vocabolario della lingua greca* (Montanari, 2001). To choose, then, in our scenario, between two fundamental rights: the right to life, and the right to work.

In Sardinia, hence, this contradiction is materialized in the shape of a recession which stems directly from the implementation of the two Rebirth Plans. A recession which claimed its spaces of visibility in what I call Rebirth Landscapes, as mentioned briefly above.

2. Interpreting and reading Rebirth Landscapes

Interpreting, and reading, if you will, these landscapes is no easy task. To do so, in fact, we'll need to start from afar. The complexity lies on the conceptual level so we'll be forced to scrutinize the problematic idea of industrial landscapes, because such are our Rebirth Landscapes.

I am well aware that such a statement will have to be backed by sound reasoning. To better explain it, I will refer to article number 2 of the European Landscape Convention whereby tutelage is established not only for "exceptional landscapes", but also for "everyday life landscapes, and degraded landscapes" (European Landscape Convention, October 20, 2000, article 2).

The fact that degraded landscapes are explicitly mentioned, hence including the industrial Rebirth Landscapes which we are analyzing, is well worthy of note. This is

because the concept of landscape is considered independently of pre-established beauty and originality canons. In other words, there was a shift from a “narrow” definition of landscape, as in a beautiful landscape, to a much broader definition, one that maintains that *Everything is a Landscape*, to quote Lucien Kroll (1999).

I feel the need, however, to specify that everything is a landscape because everything became a landscape. Once again, we’ll need to take a step back to think, given that degraded industrial landscapes, as Paolo D’Angelo underlines in his book *Philosophy of Landscape*, are born of an age, the modern one, which is entirely based on the dominance of the artificial over nature (D’Angelo, 2010, p. 12). It’s an age that is strongly defined by industrialism and the idea of progress associated with it.

At the base of the dominance of the artificial over nature, we find the Baconian category of dominion which is typical of modern science⁷. The Frankfurter thinkers Horkheimer and Adorno discussed this at length (1969) and much later, even Rosario Assunto would re-elaborate on the topic in his reflections on urban aesthetics (Assunto, 1983).

Concurrently, we can’t forget that the modern age also rejected all interest in landscapes. On the subject, Luigi Zoja, in his *Giustizia e Bellezza (Justice and Beauty)*, poignantly stated that in the course of the history of Western society, beauty started getting in the way of “efficiency, speed, and economic quantification” thus being branded as “anti-functional and anti-economic” (Zoja, 2007, pp. 22-23). In light of this, it is much easier to understand why an age that rejected their value spurred degraded landscapes. These are strongly characterized by the fact that they’re as far as they could be from the exceptional beauty described by Assunto in his essay *Landscape and Aesthetics* (Assunto, 1973). However, we could argue that Assunto, in spite of having sparked interest towards landscape matters in Italy and abroad, still

conceived landscapes according to a “narrow” definition, as we previously described it. We must also duly note that this definition of landscape was the leading thread which influenced Italian landscape legislation, starting from the first law of 1922, not surprisingly promoted by Benedetto Croce, all the way to the Galasso bill of 1985 (D’Angelo, 2010, pp. 133-152).

Here in lies the complexity of interpreting the Rebirth Landscapes as they relate to the concept of industrial landscapes. Only by taking into account this complexity and the difficulties that stem from it, we can attempt an interpretation of the landscapes in question.

Yet, we must once again trace back all the way to the Sardinian sixties and seventies when the industrial complexes outlined by the two plans began production. The operation was accompanied by intense propaganda bombardment which was spearheaded by the use of visual messaging: the use of documentary films and newsreels played a very important role. Needless to say, the propaganda proved extremely effective. This was not only due to the use of motion pictures, but mainly because there was a crafty consistency between the visual formulas employed and the underlying narrative rhetoric that accompanied them.

The plants were immediately dubbed as cathedrals in the desert, following a negative expression coined by Luigi Sturzo in 1958. But beyond its negative connotation, today we can say that this expression really hit mark. This is even more true in reference to movies such as Libero Bizzarri’s *Un’isola si industrializza* (1964) (*An Island becomes Industrialized*), Carlo Fuscagni’s *Un’altra Sardegna* (1967) (*Another Sardinia*), Romolo Marcellini’s *Sardegna industria e civiltà* (1969) (*Sardinia, industry, and civilization*), and Antonio Cara’s *L’industrializzazione: il futuro è già cominciato* (1972) (*Industrialization: the future has already begun*). All of these movies used a well-studied composition to contrast the desolate Sardinian great outdoors and futuristic industrial landscapes. The latter were modeled after Italian landscapes, particularly those of Northern Italy. They symbolized modernity and the concrete promise of continuous productivity, as opposed

⁷ Regarding the Baconian dominion category, see the utopian story by Bacon: Bacon, 2013. On the matter, please refer to: Rossi, 1952, pp. 14-17; Cioni, 1995, p. 10; Rossi Monti, 2006, p. 1009.

to the thankless nature which wasn't very productive at all. Hence, images in motion which reproduced landscapes that were also in motion. These landscapes gave the idea of production without end and, an important detail, which were floodlit long after sunset. Quoting Giulio Iacoli, we can say that within those landscapes electrical light represented the "supreme artifice [...] elevated to economic *ratio*" (Iacoli, 2008, p. 76). It was the result of never-ending production which would have brought steady jobs to Sardinia. Jobs no longer tied to the ebb and flow of seasons as the ones in agriculture and farming which were the island's main economic sectors before the *Rebirth Plans*.

The productivity in question, was that of heavy industry, the kind that never stops. It is common knowledge that the production cycle of petrol, just like that of aluminum, to name two, cannot be stopped without halting production as a whole. So now more than ever nature and its landscapes were presented as static and ungrateful, in opposition to the unrelenting activity of industrial landscapes.

As can be expected, this contra-position resounded deeply with the collective imagination. Its futuristic landscapes, depicted ever in movement, held a promise of industrial modernization with stable jobs and prosperity. In hindsight, to shed light on this contrast, we could have just as easily looked deeper into the meaning of the expression cathedrals in the desert. Dubbing the industrial plants in such a manner helps us understand their definition. For what does our intellect do when it defines? From the origin of the word, we can grasp that it outlines meaning, it confines it. It confines meaning into one meaning. So, by referring to them as cathedrals in the desert, we had already focused our attention on the contrast between man-made, scientific modernity and nature, while also making it very explicit in the process.

We must also notice how equating nature to a desert was not accidental. We can easily say that the desert is the quintessential representation of inhospitable nature. A place that man cannot render productive by giving into its whims. His only option, then, is to tame it through science and technology. The result of this domination are industrial landscapes. For these, Eric

Dardel's words sound truer than ever. In *L'Homme et la Terre. Nature de la réalité géographique*, he writes that landscapes are not, in essence, made to be looked at but they are "the way man makes its way in the world, they are the place of a struggle for life" (Dardel, 1986, p. 35). So the contrast between the world of technology and the dimension of nature evoked by the expression cathedrals in the desert has become a reality in many of the Sardinian Rebirth Landscapes.

One of the many examples is the Scala di Giocca cement factory (Figure 2) which can be seen on the road to Sassari, near Muros. I remember the utter feeling of loathing which grasped me the first time I saw it. This landscape hit me with its stark contrast between the degraded, man-made, lifeless landscape, and the lush natural one which framed and invaded it. The end result offended my senses and felt completely dis-harmonic⁸.

However, this is not always the case. What we see at Scala di Giocca is very different from what happens at the petrochemical plants. The petrochemical landscape of Vynils, immortalized in Petretto's photographs (Photos 3 and 4), is just one of the many examples in Sardinia. To study them, it could be useful to compare the images from a few of them: the ones from Porto Torres and Portovesme in Sardinia, and the ones in Milazzo or Piombino and many more like them.

What happens when we embark in a visual comparison of pictures depicting these landscapes? One thing, and one thing only. At first glance, we are unable to tell them apart. Why? Because these images depict highly standardized landscapes, where we can see the same identical chimney stacks, the same shapes of human planning.

As with all landscapes, even heavy industry landscapes are cultural ones. Hence, referring to Martin Schwind's analysis of cultural landscapes could prove useful to study them. In *Kulturlandschaft als geformter Geist*, the German

⁸ Here, I am referring to the first part of a very poignant book title: Rognini, 2008.

geographer states that every landscape is the sum of: forms created in the present, forms that were created in the past and are still alive today, forms which were created in the past but are no longer alive, and forms created in the past of which only traces remain (Schwind, 1964). Applying these analysis criteria to our image comparison, we realize that among the many reasons for which Porto Torres and Portovesme are indistinguishable is that these landscapes appear to live in an eternal present, given that they no longer present any trace of past stratification. Even in plants that have now fallen into disuse, the immediate past takes on the semblance of a present that erased all preexisting historical traces.

Furthermore, while in the case of Scala di Giocca we could see a rich contrast with the natural landscape, in petrochemical landscapes, we can observe how nature has become almost transparent. It slowly blends in the background to the point of fading away, as to leave room for the uncontested dominion of the artificial.

It is only in light of this that we can reclaim ownership over the negative connotation that distinguishes the expression cathedrals in the desert as it refers to the Rebirth industrial complexes. We will turn around and claim that those very factories created the desert, not only from a productivity standpoint⁹, but even from a mere visual one; the one most relevant to us as we're speaking about landscapes.

3. What are the possible outcomes for the Sardinian Rebirth landscapes?

So what are the possible outcomes for the Sardinian Rebirth landscapes? The European Landscape Convention has already outlined some solutions in its planning works which should concern landscapes that were degraded by industry. In most cases, these projects will have to be preceded by major environmental remediation work, especially in the case of petrochemical plants which exhibit all the signs of unchecked pollution. On the matter, we

cannot fail to mention the November 10, 2014, Italian bill 162 which followed the approval of the so-called "decreto Sblocca-Italia". To all effects, this bill decrees that in all territories under Italian jurisdiction there will be no environmental remediation work. Without remediation, there cannot be any further planning.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that Sardinian public opinion has become very aware of environmental and landscape matters. Case in point, thirty Sardinian mayors, expressing the sentiment of their communities, appealed against the "Sblocca-Italia" at the Corte Costituzionale (Constitutional Court).

To this, we can add some examples of virtuous environmental protection battles carried out by associations and committees. In Sardinia, one of the many cases involves the *No al Progetto Eleonora Civic Committee* (*No to project Eleonora*) which was born to oppose the Saras s.p.a. plans to perform drilling surveys to look for oil and natural gas in the Arborea territory.

As stated on their blog, since its foundation in October 2011 the committee's only purpose has been to "prevent project Eleonora from being carried out. Its plan involves drilling for liquid and gaseous hydrocarbons in our territory". The area affected by project Eleonora sprawls over 44,300 acres within the Oristano Province, particularly in the Arborea municipality, a town with a population of about four thousand. On December 18th, 2009, the *Regione Autonoma della Sardegna* (Autonomous Region of Sardinia) signed a concession for the search of liquid and gaseous hydrocarbons in the area. In order to start the process of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), in June 2011, the company Saras s.p.a. presented an environmental study titled "Sargas Project" to the office of the "servizio della sostenibilità ambientale, valutazione impatti e sistemi informativi ambientali (SAVI)" (environmental sustainability, impact assessment, and environmental information systems service, known as SAVI) at the Autonomous Region of Sardinia Department of Environmental Protection.

⁹ See Paolo Carboni's film: *Cattedrali di sabbia* (2010) (Sand Cathedrals).

But what exactly did the Project Eleonora entail? It included plans for a 2850 meter deep exploratory drill site to look for natural gas and its construction site infrastructure. The drill site would have been located 187 meters from the S'Ena Arrubia pond, a wetland area with a high concentration of wildlife protected by the International Ramsar Convention. This is an area of outstanding natural beauty and is also under tutelage as an SIC, ZPS, and IBA. But that's not all, because 400 meters south of the planned dig site there are houses and some farming businesses. To the west, there's a town camping ground. The committee created to oppose the Saras s.p.a. project was composed of students, blue-collar workers, researchers, farmers, and white-collar workers. "We're simple citizens who have been asking themselves a simple question since finding out about Saras' plan to create an exploratory dig site within our municipality: is it compatible with our territory?"

We've done research and we've discussed at length with experts, we've examined similar cases and we've come to a conclusion: this project is incompatible with our territory. It's incompatible with the territory of Arborea and all of Sardinia" (*No to Project Eleonora* blog).

It is very clear to everyone involved that the committee, which by the way won its legal battle, was initially founded to protect the community's economy which is chiefly based on intensive farming. On top of that, we have to add that this administrative body also fought for its environment and that, in due course, it also began to put in place measures to safeguard its landscapes. Examples such as this deserve our undivided attention.



Figure 1. F. Petretto, *Le morti bianche: presenti, passate, future* (Porto Torres).



Figure 2. F. Petretto, *Cementeria Scala di Giocca* (Muros).



Figure 3. F. Petretto, *Vinyls* (Porto Torres).



Figure 4. F. Petretto, *Vinyls* (Porto Torres).



Figure 5. P. Saracino, *Milazzo_7293*.

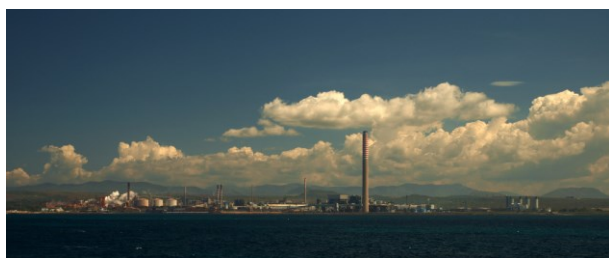


Figure 6. A. Cani, *Portovesme*.

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