Critical Landscapes: On the Mutation of a Territory and Its Literary Representations: The Case of Contemporary Veneto and the Example of Massimo Carlotto

"Landscape is never passive. People engage with it, rework it, appropriate and contest it. It is part of the way in which identities are created and disputed, whether as individual, group or nation-state" (Bender 410). Landscape constitutes the surface of a territory; it is the visible side of that complex structure that is the environment where people live. A combination of interplaying topographical, historical, and social elements, landscape eludes, by its very nature, any definition that glosses over its constant interchange with humankind.[1] The logical assumption to ensue from the principle of 'non-inertness' of landscape is that any transformation occurring in it can produce a modification in how people perceive themselves in the geographical context to which they belong. Reasonably, this would be even more true if structural alterations in the anatomy and functioning of a specific territory were to result into its landscape being profoundly modified over a relatively short period of time.

I will make these considerations the starting point of my discourse, as my aim with this article is to investigate the potential correlation between the emergence, in a defined geographical area, of a significantly mutated social and economic framework of which landscape represents the exterior outcome, and the variations in the literary representation of that specific territory. I will specifically explore the case of contemporary Veneto, by reason of the peculiar circumstances that characterized its economic development in the second half of the XX century and of the considerable presence of literary work dedicated to the analysis and depiction of the region's social and economic fabric. I will mainly focus on works by Massimo Carlotto, who can be considered one of the most representative cases of integration of the territorial element within the framework of socially committed writing.

An Idea of Territory, an Idea of Landscape

As a first step, I wish to draw attention to a rather evident fact and make it the starting point of my discourse: when one thinks about territory it is fairly natural to visualize it in terms of landscape. If we take a step backward to consider the terms 'territory' and 'landscape', we will see that the former is commonly defined as "an area of land under the jurisdiction of a ruler or state," whereas the latter is delineated as "all the visible features of an area of land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal."[2] Based on these rather essential definitions, it is possible to state that when we place ourselves in a specific territory and look around us, what we see is a landscape: if territory is land defined by specific features, and landscape is constituted by those ones among them which are visible, then we can define landscape as the visible side of territory as well as the most immediate perception that we have of it.

Focusing on the idea of territory, one should also note that, despite the fact that it mainly recalls a geographical frame, territory is a vast concept, which is indeed determined by geographical features, but is also the combination of a number of interlocking components that contribute to shape it and ultimately define its identity. From history to economy, to architecture, culture, and traditions, the items that compose the picture of territory are various in number and kind and geography can be seen as the bottom layer in which they are situated. Besides articulating into a complex structure, territory is also subject to evolution through time and therefore shaped into progressively developing patterns that result from the constant mutation of social, economic and historical circumstances. A fruitful way of considering the concept of territory can be to visualise it as a series of overlapping layers: if the geographical layer stands at the bottom, providing the physical environment, the foundation on which human civilizations can develop, a second layer could indeed be the anthropological one, comprised of human beings settling in a defined area of land, forming communities which in turn start producing, consuming and exchanging goods between themselves and with other communities, thereby bringing in a third layer, the economic. Given that all human interactions and activities as well as the natural environment are subject, with the passing of time, to a certain degree of evolution and

transformation, we could also identify the historical dimension as a fourth layer.

As previously introduced, landscape then constitutes the visible layer, that is the form taken by the combination of the interacting elements that compose and organize a territory as the combination of the different layers that constitute it at a precise moment in the course of history. As a consequence, if we take landscape to act as a "coat" for territory, which as we said evolves through time, it becomes quite clear that one of the characteristics that most essentially defines landscape is that of being a constantly modifying and adapting element. In short, given the solid interdependence between territory and landscape, one can conclude that thinking of territory without interlacing the concept with that of landscape is almost impossible.

Furthermore, far from being a defined and autonomously existent natural phenomenon, landscape also depends on people who perceive it and constitute it as such. Talking about landscape and its perception necessarily implies considering the complex relationship between human beings and the nature around them. Such discourse would require much wider and deeper reflections which lie outside the space and aim of my argument here; however, I will appropriate and refer to one crucial idea within this framework: that of the subjective character of landscape.

As the perception of landscape cannot happen without the mediation of the subject's gaze upon the world surrounding him or her, the idea of landscape is inextricably connected to the human element. Accepting this notion entails the need to regard landscape as "landscape consciousness," that is the experience of landscape as inner phenomenon rather than as natural object or empirical fact. Given that this experience of "real" landscape is also tightly bound to its artistic and literary representation,[3] landscape becomes a shared concept, which is elaborated over a period of time and is inevitably influenced by culture.

In addition, as explained above, what people see and perceive as landscape is the result of the historical development of human activities on territory, indeed a rather tangible outcome of economic progress. What is interesting to note in this respect is that some landscape theory seems to endorse the concept that certain historical ages allow more than others the formation of such "landscape consciousness." In his

Letteratura e paesaggio, for instance, landscape theorist Mark Jakob introduces the idea that, as landscape is subject to transformation through time, certain periods of time in history allow more than others the formation of that "landscape consciousness." Alongside its representation and conceptualization, the historical presupposition that Jakob identifies as necessary for the formation of "landscape consciousness" is an element of crisis, a sense of detachment from nature and a loss of continuity between human beings and their natural environment. Tracing back the origins of such consciousness and the artistic representation of landscape to the period of transition from the Greek antiquity to Hellenism,[4] Jakob affirms that "la coscienza del paesaggio della modernità si accompagna sempre con epoche di crisi, di perdita di orientamenti filosofici, teologici, sociali" (15-16). The idea underpinning this process is that the existing distance between human beings and natural environment increases as the sense of disorientation and absence of stable cultural references in periods of crisis and transition fosters the questioning of what is perceived as alterity. This of course includes natural environment, and, as a result, it is during these periods that a "landscape consciousness" is more likely to take shape. With this premise, if we acknowledge the previously introduced notion that people appropriate landscape to the extent that it enters the process of identity formation, it is then fairly legitimate to assume that the modification of landscape, which is here to be intended as the visible exterior of deeper transformations entailed by historical transitions, plays a crucial role in the recognition of crisis and loss of cultural identity.

Based on these grounds, my aim with this article is to question whether the use of this framework—the of role of landscape in the recognition of and reflection upon the crisis of civilization—can be helpful in understanding the cultural effects of such transitions on a smaller scale, such as that of the transformation of territory in the Veneto during the 1970s and 1980s, and overall if and how such critical changes on a specific territory are reflected in its literary production. The case of contemporary Veneto is particularly significant by reason of the peculiar circumstances under which a rather precipitous economic development dramatically mutated an otherwise long unaltered landscape as well as radically affected the social and cultural environment of a region. In the above outlined framework,

such transformations could effectively be considered, on one side, as the element of crisis which accompanies an expanded "landscape consciousness"—indeed a fertile ground for literary reflections to grow—and, on the other side, as the condition which, by putting into question the relationship between a defined group of people and the mutated landscape of their territory, marked the redefinition (if only tentative) of a cultural identity.

In order to investigate how the interlocking concepts of landscape and territory interact with the cultural reality of a specific region, I will first give a brief overview of the recent economic development of the Veneto and then move on to consider the territorial metamorphosis it entailed and the effects of it on a social, political, and cultural level, in order to finally consider the work of Massimo Carlotto as one example of how some recent literary production from this region has made it its aim to investigate and give an account of the development of its territory.

"Il Giappone d'Italia"[5]

Since the beginning of the post-war period and until the late 1960s, the economy in the Veneto suffered a long delay compared to development in the northwest of the country, where in fact very consistent migratory flows originating from the northeast were directed. As late as 1967 the number of towns in the Veneto that were officially considered depressed amounted to 489 out of 583 (Jori 69): more than 80% of the territory was affected by an economic downturn that people fled in masses. This phase of otherwise general growth in the country was mainly due to the transition from rural activities to a different model of industrial development based on the presence of big industries with high capital investments in the northwest of the country, particularly in the so called "economic triangle" of Turin, Milan, and Genoa. The persistently rural character of the Veneto's economy prevented the region from fully entering the phase of post-war transformation, with the industrial hub of Porto Marghera as the only area housing a "large industry" model. It was in the 1970s, however, that the economic progress of the region saw a turning point in its trajectory: consequent to the 1973 oil crisis and to the necessity of finding new principles to spur economic progress, the region's

response was shaped around the reorganization of its economic assets in smaller activities and business, usually built on the core of individual initiative and the structure of the family, a model that shaped the region during the 1980s. It is during this period that the Veneto underwent a massive transformation that radically altered its territory, its socio-economic background and its traditional cultural references: between 1973 and 1995 the production of capital in the Veneto progressed to such an extent that it generated more than a tenth of the general growth of the whole country (Bonavoglia 8). New factories spread over the territory triggering a peculiar phenomenon that is often referred to as "diffused industrialization" or "urbanized countryside," an industrial base characterized by many factories of modest dimensions, sprawled over a vast area and integrated into the landscape rather than a few clear agglomerations of productive activities, boosting the economy and creating a state of diffused wealth that had never been known before.

A Political Matter

At this stage in the history of the Veneto, the major changes brought about by the shift to a new phase of economic development also run parallel to important transitions in the political life of the region. In his work, *Il male del Nord* (1996), Ilvo Diamanti reflects on the course taken by politics in the north of Italy after the Mani Pulite investigation caused the collapse of the Christian Democratic Party in the early 1990s. His considerations point to a few elements that are crucial to understand the impact of economic transformations on the culture of the Veneto. Traditionally considered one of the major strongholds of mass moderatism, after Mani Pulite the Veneto underwent a transition from "white" to "green"[6] as the vast majority of votes in the provinces of the Veneto were won by Northern League candidates in the 1996 elections. By observing the milieus of the widening consensus with the League, Diamanti notices that the party steadily became dominant "nelle zone caratterizzate da un elevatissimo sviluppo di piccola impresa, fra i ceti produttivi autonomi e operai; negli stessi contesti che un tempo costituivano il cuore della zona bianca, le roccaforti della DC" (*Il male* 21). The evidence of this fact is also enhanced by an effective visual support; comparing the maps

of the voting in Northern Italy in 1948 and in 1996, Diamanti shows how those areas where the DC was particularly strong in 1948 almost perfectly overlap with areas of strength of the League in 1996.

Figura 1. Zone di forza della Lega Nord alle elezioni politiche del 1996 (parte proporzionale).
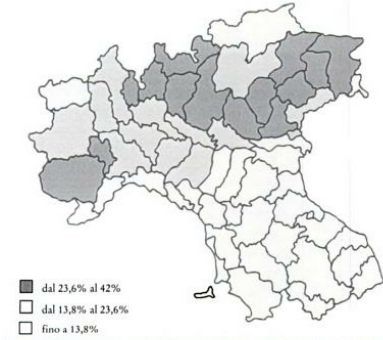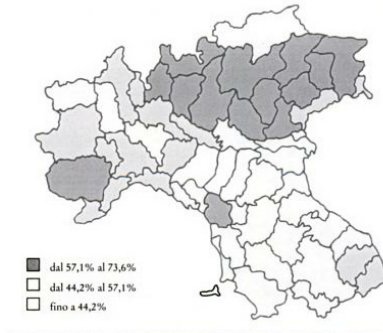
dal 23,6% al 42%
dal 13,8% al 23,6%
fino a 13,8%

Figura 2. Zone di forza della Dc alle elezioni politiche del 1948 (sono riportate le sole provincie dove era presente la Lega Nor alle elezioni politiche del 1996).

dal 57,1% al 73,6%
dal 44,2% al 57,1%
fino a 44,2%

The first map highlights the areas where the Northern League prevailed in 1996, the second highlights those where the DC prevailed in 1948. Both maps are taken from Ilvo Diamanti (24-25).

Despite the obvious differences between the two political forces, the geography of the vote for the League and for the DC coincide, and Diamanti identifies in "la coesistenza e la convergenza di uno specifico tipo di struttura economica e sociale con uno specifico tipo di rappresentanza politica" (24) the feature that the white area and green area have in common. When describing how a particular economic framework corresponds to a specific political representation, experts refer to the concept of "localismo," where the specificity of a local context constitutes the premise or the reference to identity and political claim.[7] Defining localism here is useful on two different levels: on the one hand the general notion constitutes a starting point to explain the case of the Northern League, whose identity claims are indeed founded on the concept of local specificity and lack of sufficient political representation. On the other, the persistence of a localist trend in politics emphasizes a social fabric where the primeval cultural and anthropological substratum hinges on family and local community. This same substratum acts as the backbone of the upturn of the 1970s, with the success of small businesses structured around the

family unit that is, according to Diamanti, the matrix of the Northern League's triumph. The sociologist notes, however, that the effects of the economic growth on Veneto society transitioned it into a phase of development that resulted in the loss of traditional cultural references and landed it in a ruinous identity crisis:

> La crescita economica accelera la complessità sociale, la secolarizzazione, indebolisce le basi dell'identità e dell'integrazione in ambito locale, accentuando i fattori di insicurezza e di degrado dell'ambiente. Il che provoca scollamento dai riferimenti tradizionali, incertezza, ricerca di nuove identità e forme di rappresentanza. (37)

The general state of disorientation caused by the sudden transformation of an environment that had remained unaltered for centuries produced a very fertile soil for identity myths to grow, and the ideology and language of the Northern League promptly responded to this new necessity of self-definition. In a space where traditional benchmarks had gone missing, confusion enhanced the need for strong, recognizable, and reassuring symbols. Paolo Rumiz, who also tackled the matter in his *La secessione leggera* (1998), points out how "nel nostro contesto di imbarbarimento culturale, lo 'spaesato' non chiede risposte razionali ma simboli. Ne ha bisogno per placare le sue paure e radicarsi a uno spazio vitale in cui non si riconosce più" (195). The feeling of being lost triggered the need for a lifebuoy and the League provided people with an easily reachable one: the myth of ethnicity. Hence the conclusion that both Diamanti and Rumiz seem to reach: the broad consensus gained by the League can be explained with its ability to offer a clear and simple response to the lack of solid identity grounds brought about by the sudden transition from a traditionally rural to a diffusedly urbanized and industrialized context that was no longer recognizable to people.

From the Plough to the Internet

This transitional phase in the economy started a complex process of mutation whose political consequences were probably

the most evident side, especially since the tones and language used by the League were often brought to the attention of the national media. However, the shift to a new economic era had much deeper effects, impacting the cultural substrata and innermost nature of the region, creating a short-circuit that quickly eroded the foundations of an old-age civilization. The adult generation that lived through the upturn got caught up in a cultural limbo, as its values and points of reference belonged to a bygone era. The incredibly fast pace of economic transformation did not allow society to adjust to the different dynamics. The reality was no longer founded on the farming culture, on its rhythms, and cycles. Gone also were the traditional social classes. Veneto went "from the plough to the internet in the space of one generation" (Rumiz 17), but that generation did not have sufficient time to bring about a parallel cultural revolution. It is indeed true, as Paolo Rumiz notes, that

> Fino agli anni Settanta il quadro era impressionante: contadini che non erano mai stati a Padova in vita loro. Di Venezia, neanche parlare: un altro pianeta. Padri-padroni, famiglie di nove, dieci fratelli; continue assenze da scuola per lavorare la campagna. Terre talvolta rosse o anarchiche; una povertà terribile, vissuta con rabbia. Un mondo del Quarto Stato, fatto di fame, bestemmie e fatica da spezzare la schiena, una carica eversiva sommersa e solitaria. (22)

It is easy to understand how, in such a context, the effects of an economic transformation so deep and drastic would create a sense of disorientation, forcing a whole generation to adapt to a new reality and a whole new range of social mechanisms without time for the mindset to evolve at the same speed. This jump into a new phase of economic development introduced elements of cultural and identity crisis to which the society was unprepared to respond, as it lacked the tools to understand the new reality surrounding it. This in turn prevented the formation of a new set of benchmarks, and the lack of adequate cultural guidance to shape and lead society through the transition resulted in the period of cultural blackout that dominated the years of the economic rise in Veneto. Later on, the sense of disorientation would

also transfer to younger generations as the absence of a consolidated set of values and a strong cultural tradition to support fathers would undoubtedly translate into their inability to transmit a firm background to their sons. Hence the stalemate reached when new generations fail to integrate into the socio-economic fabric, despite the importance of family to the emergence and consolidation of a successful economic model.

The incapacity to oversee the process of transformation of the region also made an impact on its territory: once lost the contact with traditional local values of the farming culture, Veneto society became "una sfruttatrice di se stessa, una cannibale-divoratrice del proprio territorio" (Rumiz 17). Large tracts of land were progressively swamped with concrete; factories, sheds and warehouses haphazardly started to appear in the countryside, swallowing up a landscape that had maintained its unaltered rural features over centuries. Industrialisation took over a whole region with no development plan or pre-designed project. The swift expansion of industrial areas reshaped Veneto in the almost furious attempt to bury any traces of a past of poverty, to erase memories of misery and a past as "terroni del Nord."

What Role for Literature?

In the space of a lifetime, the Veneto's landscape had become unrecognizable, due to uncurbed economic development whose consequences generated a split between the people and their environment. The fracture was so deep that someone born into a rural and agricultural-based community could find himself living in what then became probably the widest metropolitan area of the country, an endless expanse of concrete, an unceasing succession of built-up areas where discerning one village from the other was by then all but impossible. Returning to our initial premises, if the shaping of "landscape consciousness" is accompanied by periods of crisis, then the case of contemporary Veneto is a particularly good example. Such changes in the landscape certainly did not pass unnoticed, but in order to gain an idea of the extent to which the signs of a structural transformation have affected the cultural backbone of the region, reflecting on the role played by literature in this context can

be a useful tool. In this regard, quoting one of Gian Antonio Stella's considerations about the recent economic development in the Veneto allows us to approach the matter from multiple perspectives:

> La campagna descritta da Luigi Meneghello in *Libera Nos a Malo*, dove il Mino andava a confessarsi tirandosi dietro la Bisa, la vacca cicciona da cui non si staccava mai, non c'è più. Addio. Sono rimaste solo le soppresse e i cotechini e i bigoli delle trattorie finte rustiche che però servono il salame col Brunello di Montalcino. (87)

Stella refers both to a literary plane and to the actual territorial evolution of the region, and observes that the rural civilization that has been specific to the Veneto for hundreds of years has vanished, its few remains subject to some sort of pseudo-chic artificial rebranding. The world depicted in Meneghello's book does not exist anymore; its life and landscapes washed away in the space of a few decades. What is worth noting is that not only has that reality vanished, its representation has also undergone significant changes. Referring to Meneghello's work does not only identify a touchstone to measure the metamorphosis territory has undergone, it also raises questions of how the literary portrayal of that territory has evolved.

Since an exhaustive analysis of the works by Veneto writers from the second half of the twentieth century onwards would exceed the limits of this article, I will confine myself to making reference to a line of development that has emerged in the region's recent literary production. While avoiding any kind of generalization, and far from implying that the following is a feature that only pertains to Veneto literature, there is a form of continuity in the attention that authors from this region dedicate to the narration of their own land.[8] Where a major gap appears is in the mode of narration, especially since the 1990s. These are the debut years for those authors who were born after World War II and who are therefore too young to have directly or wholly experienced the rural civilization that used to define the Veneto up until the years of the economic miracle of the 1970s. Along with this younger generation of writers, the approach to portraying territory shifts from memory-based[9] narrative to a factually-based

account of topical issues embedded in a fictional frame. Although it would be misleading to define this phenomenon as a characteristic that only applies to authors from this region,[10] the different take of younger authors on the representation of Veneto territory is surely noticeable; besides, the investigation of regional contemporaneity does not interest all young Veneto authors, but those who are interested tend to favour intertwining fiction and non-fiction in hybrid forms of literature when tackling matters that concern the factual reality of their territory. I am here referring to authors like Massimo Carlotto, Gianfranco Bettin, Romolo Bugaro, Marco Franzoso, and Vitaliano Trevisan, who, despite their dissimilar literary voices, share to some extent an interest—in some cases an urge—to conduct almost inquiry-like investigations into the world surrounding them through their writing. Massimo Carlotto's work represents one of the most consistent examples of how this literary mode of visualizing the reality of contemporary Veneto is implemented; it will be helpful to refer to his work in order to gain a clearer idea of what constitutes the use of literary hybrids, what aims it serves and what it implies.

A Question of Genre

Massimo Carlotto's career as a writer began in 1995, when the account of his own vicissitudes as a fugitive in France and Mexico was published in his novel *Il fuggiasco*. In the same year, a second book, *La verità dell'alligatore*, marked the beginning of the Alligatore series[11] and his debut as a crime writer. Carlotto's strong belief in the necessity for writers to fill the void created because of the decline of investigative journalism in Italy[12] fed into his conception of writing as a means to engage with social, ethical, and political issues, a tool to portray contemporary Italian society by casting a light on matters that are related to a specific and localized territory, in order to raise public awareness. Due to its suitability for exploring the so-called "grey area" where the regular economic system meets illegality, crime writing was the natural choice for an author whose aim was to investigate contemporary reality. In Carlotto's own words:

Je crois que le rôle du roman policier n'est pas seulement de raconter la réalité qui nous entoure, mais aussi de créer une prise de conscience chez le lecteur. Prise de conscience qui se transforme ensuite en instruments d'analyzes pour comprendre le réel. Ce n'est d'ailleur pas par hasard si, en Italie, le polar a remplacé l'enquête journalistique d'autrefois. (Lombard n.p.)

And indeed, in a journalistic manner, all of Carlotto's works are preceded by a long phase of research, his plots always based on actual news items drawn from national and international papers; "il lavoro di preparazione per *Nordest*" for example, "è durato tre anni in cui Videtta e io abbiamo letto con pazienza le pagine economiche dei quotidiani del Nordest" (Melis n.p.). In other cases the narration even alternates with extracts from court proceedings, like for instance in *Nessuna cortesia all'uscita* where the author traces the history of the case of the so-called "Mafia del Brenta."[13]

By making a choice in favor of this genre, Carlotto consciously places himself into the context of the Italian *giallo* alongside authors like Carlo Lucarelli, Marcello Fois and Andrea Camilleri, while also reffering to a time-honoured tradition of social engagement. Since 1961, when Sciascia, in *Il giorno della civetta*, started molding the genre into an instrument to analyze and denounce the dysfunctions, corruption, and drifting of institutions and politics, crime fiction has progressively been used by Italian writers as a powerful and effective vehicle to lay bare the deep-seated contradictions of Italian society.

It should be remembered, when talking about *impegno*, that this tradition of socially committed crime literature, embracing the idea of writing as a tool to analyze society and decipher the contemporary world, is not underpinned by the belief in the existence of a univocal and irrefutable truth. The point is an important one to stress, as it also marks a twist in the evolution of the genre in terms of its international tradition. According to the traditional structure of the crime novel,[14] the solution of the crime would symbolize the reinstatement of rule in society, the existence of an established order founded on truth and justice guaranteed by the State being a necessary condition for the genre to flourish. In the twentieth century, the lack of faith in Reason and the concept of State as a controller of political and economic

power made this vision impossible to sustain. For crime writing, this meant that the sense of reassurance that would otherwise originate from the solving of the crime was irrevocably undermined. In the Italian panorama, Sciascia's paradox is representative of this situation: engaged in a constant search for truth and justice through his writing, Sciascia, strongly influenced by Pirandello, was also convinced that neither could actually be realized, and that the only source of reliable truth was the writer's art:

> Mi sono convinto che, se la verità ha per forza di cose molte facce, l'unica forma possibile di verità è quella dell'arte. Lo scrittore svela la verità decifrando la realtà e sollevandola alla superficie, in un certo senso semplificandola, anche rendendola più oscura…. C'è però una differenza tra quest'oscurità e quella dell'ignoranza: non si tratta più dell'oscurità dell'inespresso, dell'informe, ma al contrario dell'espresso e del formulato. Ecco perché utilizzo spesso il "discorso" del romanzo poliziesco, questa forma di resoconto che tende alla verità dei fatti e alla denuncia del colpevole, anche se non sempre il colpevole si riesce a trovarlo. (Sciascia *La Sicilia* 87-88)

Following Sciascia, most Italian crime writers—and Carlotto is no exception—analyze the incongruities of their society based on the assumption that irrefutable truth is impossible to establish, especially in a country where criminality often benefits from the connivance of justice and the political establishment.

As Alberto Casadei (1) points out, for contemporary Italian crime writers, "la vera spinta al noir è costituita dalla volontà di ricreare una forma di possibile giustizia proprio là dove la giustizia umana non viene più raggiunta nemmeno nel momento in cui il caso è risolto." However disillusioned about official justice they might be, however obscure and partial the reality they reconstruct, crime writers persevere in providing their public with investigations as accurate as possible on matters that concern their own current reality.

Returning to Carlotto, all that has been said undoubtedly applies to his work; in most of his books the dénouement does not coincide with the restoration of any social equilibrium and those

guilty are rarely subject to the official course of justice. The question of "whodunit?" often finds an answer halfway through the narrative, whereas the enquiry and depiction of the social context of the novel continue throughout. Moreover, even when a culprit is identified, the line that draws the distinction between good and bad is almost always blurred; no "right side" seems to exist, and no one is ever completely innocent.

The Alligatore series exemplifies this ambiguity, as an improvised trio of detectives led by ex-convict Marco Buratti conduct investigations in parallel and in the shadow of official justice. Unlike other figures of detectives in Italian crime writing, who usually belong to or cooperate with official justice, Buratti and his two *soci* live on the border of unlawfulness, one of them a fugitive,[15] the other previously associated with Milanese mafia, all unable to integrate into the world of "regular people" and all prone to use rather unorthodox investigation methods.[16] On the other hand, the culprits, besides never being brought to justice, have very little to do with the identification of wrong and illegality, but instead reveal how crime is rooted in society. Not only it is clear that a widespread and expanding unlawful network exists, this network leaves no sphere untouched; official justice, media, political figures, and the ruling class all demonstrate moral corruption. The real conflict then skips the distinctions between lawful and illicit or right and wrong, and rather opposes official and unofficial. Indeed, as the author himself admits, his real interest lies more in exploring the complexity of the background than in the mere sequence of events in the foreground: "pour ma part je préfère dévoiler les mécanismes qui se cachent derrière les affaires, car je pense que la vérité institutionelle est de toute façon toujours partielle, et partiale" (Lombard n.p.).

A Question of Territory

Carlotto's interest has always stretched beyond the boundaries of a specific genre, which has shaped his crime writing into an hybrid creation that straddles fiction and journalism. For him, a plot is a pretext for talking about something broader than the simple investigation of a particular crime:

> Da un punto di vista letterario la mia scelta è sempre stata molto netta. L'unico elemento che i miei romanzi noir e gli hard-boiled[17] hanno in comune è la formula narrativa: il racconto di una storia criminale in un luogo e in uno spazio precisi come pretesto per raccontare la realtà sociale, politica, economica e storica che circonda gli avvenimenti narrati. (Carlotto, *The Black Album* 26)

Now that the foundations of Carlotto's work have been delineated, this statement allows us to reconnect to our initial discourse; the "social, political, and economic reality surrounding the narration" takes the shape, in this author's novels, of the specific territorial contexts where the plots are set. Although Carlotto does not confine his interest solely to the Veneto,[18] the region is often the object of Carlotto's scrutiny, and indeed the background to his stories becomes an integral part of the narration on different levels. On the one hand Carlotto's readers are presented with direct reflections about the transformation that the territory and its landscape have been subject to during the years of the economic upturn in Veneto; on the other hand, it is difficult to overlook how, in Carlotto's novels, characters' behaviors and attitudes respond to cultural dynamics which are the result of the unregulated process of economic development described before.

Returning to Bender's idea of landscape as an element that plays a crucial role in defining both people's individual identity and their identity as a group, witnessing the transformation of the landscape of the Veneto must have contributed to creating that sense of disorientation that the population began to feel as the region's territory was mutating in such a radical way. In these conditions, the effects of the change to the landscape extend from the inability of people to recognize their traditional environment to an increased awareness of such an environment, precisely due to a growing sense of extraneousness, which takes shape in works like Carlotto's and expresses a need to understand a lost identity. In his novels, Carlotto does not provide proper landscape descriptions, but rather hints at the transformation the territory of the Veneto has undergone, outlining a setting made of warehouses, concrete, factories, and traffic, very different from traditional scenes of country roads, fields, and peasants. Carlotto's interest is indeed more focused on the social and cultural

facets of the matter, on exploring the mindset and functioning of a contradictory and corrupted society, yet landscape and territory play a decisive role in the definition of this society's identity.

A few examples here will help clarify what the integration of territory in the narration consists of in the author's work. Although this process concerns other novels where the Northeast acts as a protagonist (especially those in the Alligatore series and *Alla fine di un giorno noioso*), I will mainly refer to *Nordest,*[19] as it represents the pinnacle of the author's analysis of this territory.

Firstly then, explicit references to the issues that arose in the geographic and social fabric of the region during the economic miracle often enter the narration and even precede its start. A long initial digression lists a series of facts drawn from newspapers, each highlighting aspects of the region's day-to-day reality whose roots are interlaced with the peculiar circumstances of growth in Veneto:

> Era stato un mercoledì come tanti. Un mercoledì d'inverno del Nordest. Nel corso della giornata le strade si erano riempite di pendolari e Tir. …Altri quattro capannoni vuoti con la scritta affittasi, tradotta anche in cinese. Di capannoni aveva parlato nella mattina un docente di urbanistica della Facoltà di architettura di Venezia. Ai suoi studenti aveva spiegato che, a forza di costruire 2.500 capannoni l'anno, erano stati sottratti al paesaggio agrario ben 3.500 chilometri quadrati e che nella sola provincia di Treviso c'erano 279 aree industriali, una media di quattro per comune. (7-8)

Secondly, the characters' awareness of the transformation of their territory comes, on the one hand, from comments such as "Qui a parte le vigne, ci sono solo capannoni" (138) to describe the landscape surrounding the village, which combine with more articulate reflections like:

> Tutto era accaduto in fretta, nei pochi vertiginosi anni in cui il Nordest si era trasformato da terra di contadini ed emigranti nel polo industriale più ricco e produttivo d'Europa. Un libero mercato, un'edenlandia della produttività che nemmeno lo statalismo più retrivo e paludato era riuscito a ingabbiare. (66)

On the other hand, it may come in their having to face—or actively perpetrating actions related to—problems that are endemic to the territory, like the delocalization of factories to eastern European countries and the smuggling of toxic waste:

> La Fondazione Torrefranchi ha deciso di delocalizzare l'intero gruppo. Stiamo ultimando un'area industriale alle porte di Timişoara, in Romania. Qui resteranno solo alcune attività tipicamente locali e di prestigio, come la produzione vinicola. (100)

Through these examples, it is already possible to note that Carlotto identifies a distinct socio-economic environment, with features and issues so ingrained into the regional reality that the specific village where the novel takes place need not be named: Carlotto is not talking about one place, he is talking about the Northeast.[20] Yet, above all, the means through which territory really finds a voice are the characters themselves, their attitudes, and their mentality. The people who populate the village in *Nordest* behave and interact according to an unspoken set of values and shared habits that are firmly interwoven with the specific geographical, social and economic context they are part of, a context that developed out of the cultural eradication brought about by the economic upturn of the 1970s and 80s, which abruptly swept away an age-old rural civilization in favour of industrialization at a pace and on a scale never known before. Since the conditions for a gradual absorption of this new reality did not exist, the sense of confusion and loss of identity translated into the population failing to understand or face the many mutations their land was undergoing. The inability to control migration, for example, made society unprepared to face the huge influx of migrants coming in search for work, so that the accepted truth became that "'I foresti', 'quelli che non sono gente nostra', i negri, gli albanesi, i marocchini. Erano loro i responsabili che polizia e carabinieri non colpivano" (75). Furthermore, in an overly urbanized and metropolitan society, the community and the village would still loom over people's lives with their judgemental look: "Quello era il paese. Le grandi famiglie non davano mai spettacolo in pubblico" (23). In this context, the demand for the façade to remain undamaged, for appearance to retain its prominence over other aspects

of social life is one of the only values that has been passed on from one generation to the next. The possibility of communication between fathers and sons is irreparably broken as the cultural gap between the two generations is too wide: "I figli delle grandi famiglie erano dei rammolliti, incapaci di gestire le imprese messe in piedi con tanta fatica dai genitori" (24).

The examples given relate to a reality that is far from being only fictional. The same phenomena that Carlotto represents are investigated in economic and sociological studies such the aforementioned works of Ilvo Diamanti, Paolo Rumiz, and Gian Antonio Stella. In the light of his objective as a writer, it is evident that Carlotto's aim is to conduct an investigation into a society he feels the need to question and understand, as well as to denounce the dangerous spread of criminal behavior within the "regular" establishment. When looking at Carlotto's work from this perspective, the territory portrayed by the author acquires the features of a character in its own right. Far from remaining in the background in order to merely provide a setting for other characters, territory is integrated into the narrative tissue such that it becomes an integral part of the author's novels. In Mario Tropea's words:

> Non sono "scenari", questi, in cui calare l'azione, e neppure paesaggi nel senso descrittivo, pittorico, del termine, ma territorio, paese reale che viene fuori e si dispiega alla nostra conoscenza…. È il succedersi degli eventi che crea, di per sé, il contesto. (5)

In Carlotto's work, the reality of a specific territory comes forward, speaks and acts for itself through the words of the characters of a crime novel. By means of the portrayal of, and reflection on, people's demeanor and shared beliefs, territory becomes a defined entity with a legitimacy and a raison d'être which is equal to that of any other character in the novel. Hence the consideration that *Nordest* indeed "non è un romanzo su qualche singolo o qualche singolarità. È un romanzo su una società, una civiltà" (Camon), a society that grew out of the region's response to the peculiar circumstances that characterized its most recent phase of development.

Towards a Conclusion

The peculiar circumstances of the economic upturn in the Veneto during the 1970s and 80s demontrated a structural transformation in the territory of which the shift from a rural to a highly industrialized landscape was the most apparent consequence. However, the fact that such a fast-paced transition also affected the deep-rooted nature of territorial identity showed in the emergence of cultural traits that responded to a generalized sense of loss of identity and cultural disorientation, such as the quasi-impossible communication between different generations, a growing detachment from the long-established values of farming civilization, xenophobia, and the strengthening of political forces like the Northern League. Such processes and the consequent social issues that followed have since been the object of wide questioning, both through economic and sociologic analysis and through literary representation. With regard to the latter, recent works that investigate matters concerning the contemporary reality of the territory differ from their precedessors, as local authors who address the topic turn to hybrid forms of writing that combine fiction and factual reality as a tool to denunciate social problems, such as the spreading of criminal behavior within society and the connivance of the political and judicial institutions.

In conclusion, within the context of the critical economic and social transformation of a localized territory, the reshaping of landscape represents a significant factor on two different levels: firstly, it constitutes the visible and more tangible layer of a series of modifications that act on the deep-seated cultural pattern of the region, becoming the yardstick against which to measure and realize the transformation of society; secondly, landscape also influences the process of artistic representation of territory, as the transformations it undergoes, especially when involving profound structural mutations over a relatively short period of time, trigger the necessity for the cultural establishment to adapt their reflection tools in order to question the evolution of their own society, its nature, its gearings, and its contradictions.

Enrichetta L. Frezzato   UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

ENDNOTES

[1] Just to name a very few major works on the concept of landscape I will here mention Denis Cosgrove's *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*; John Brinckerhoff Jackson's *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*; and Barbara Bender's *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*.

[2] The quoted definitions of "territory" and "landscape" are taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

[3] See Michael Jakob's *Paesaggio e letteratura* (10-11):

> Soltanto le civiltà nelle quail il paesaggio rappresenta una effettiva realtà linguistica, letteraria e figurativa, sembrano permettere l'esperienza del paesaggio "reale", la quale a sua volta non è mai priva di influssi culturali. La cornice, l'orientamento e il carattere dell'esperienza del paesaggio vengono perciò in misura considerevole prestabiliti dall'arte e solo in un momento storico successive vi sarà una reale esperinza del paesaggio in grado di esercitare a sua volta sull'arte un influsso durevole e imponente. Tuttavia, poiché tale potenziale influsso retroattivosi tramuta a sua volta in arte, questa continua a mantenere il predominio, e paradossalmente è proprio l'immediata esperienza del paesaggio a dimostrarsi secondaria, imitativa e guidata dalla cultura.

[4] According to Jakob, the development of the polis civilization, which determined the distancing of people from nature during the Hellenistic period, is to be intended as the element of crisis that accompanied the first representations of landscape: "(s)olo nell'epigonale e tarda cultura dell'ellenismo si manifestano per la prima volta i segni di una nascente rappresentazione del pasesaggio" (15).

[5] The expression is taken from *La secessione leggera* by Paolo Rumiz, but is widely used to refer to the region's wealthiness. See for example Giovanni Valentini (n.p.).

[6] In terms of political parties colours, white is traditionally associated with the DC, whereas green is the colour of the Northern League.

[7] For a wider definition of the concept of 'localismo' a useful reference is Ilvo Diamanti ("Localismo").

[8] Meneghello has already been mentioned, but many authors like Mario Rigoni Stern, Ferdinando Camon, Guido Piovene, and Goffredo Parise as well as younger authors have been dedicating some attention to matters connected with the specific reality of the Veneto region.

[9] When thinking of works by authors like Meneghello, Camon, and Rigoni Stern, it is easy to note how memory plays a fundamental role in the definition of these writers' perspective on the depiction of their territory.

[10] This discourse should be included in the wider frame of a general re-emergence of elements of realism in contemporary Italian narrative. As Raffaele Donnarumma says in "Angosce di derealizzazione. *Fiction* e *non-fiction* nella narrativa italiana di oggi": "Nonostante scetticismi e polemiche un po' confuse, credo non si possano più nutrire dubbi sul fatto che, a partire dalla metà degli anni Novanta, la narrativa internazionale sia dominata da un recupero delle tradizioni realistiche" (23). This paper appeared in Hanna Serkowska, a volume that constitutes a fundamental reference with regard to

the debate on the topic, together with *Allegoria* 57 (2008).

[11] The Alligatore cycle is a series of six novels written between 1995 and 2009. All except one (*Il mistero di Mangiabarche*, for which the setting is instead Sardinia) are set in the provinces of the North-East where Marco Buratti is the protagonist and lead detective. The novels in the cycle are: *La verità dell'Alligatore* (1995), *Il mistero di Mangiabarche* (1997), *Nessuna cortesia all'uscita* (1999), *Il corriere colombiano* (2000), *Il maestro di nodi* (2002), and *L'amore del bandito* (2009), all published with e/o.

[12] In *The Black Album*, referring to the 1990s, Carlotto says:

> L'altro elemento teorico importante che viene sviluppato in quegli anni è la riflessione sulla morte del giornalismo investigativo, che in Italia non viene più praticato. Questo in un primo tempo ha determinato un forte senso di consapevolezza del proprio ruolo da parte degli scrittori di poliziesco e di noir, che decidono di raccontare l'Italia reale attraverso storie reali. (33)

[13] The criminal organization took control in the 1970s of the widest and more lucrative illicit activities in the Veneto. Carlotto reconstructs its story by weaving a plot around the figure of Tristano Castelli, a name concealing that of Felice Maniero, the actual boss of the Mafia del Brenta.

[14] The traditional structure of crime writing implies a partition in the three fundamental moments of crime, investigation, and solution.

[15] Although an fugitive at the beginning of the series, Max la Memoria, the analyst of the group, receives a pardon and, after relatively short period of time spent in prison, rejoins his *soci* as a free man at the beginning of *Il maestro di nodi*.

[16] Buratti's personal policy is never to carry weapons, but his associate Rossini very often does and most certainly does not avoid using them when his very strict underworld moral requires it, which often implies murder. Both characters use violence, torture, deception, and bribery to obtain what they need to continue their investigation.

[17] Carlotto makes a distinction between his hard-boiled novels (the serial ones) and his noir ones (all other novels). Although in both the traditional structure of crime writing is subverted, as no social order is re-established with the solution of the crime, in the former, characters can in some way considered as positive, in the latter instead the point of view is that of evil.

[18] One example of Carlotto's interest in other geographic contexts could be *Perdas de Fogu*, where the author, in cooperation with the collective of writers Mama Sabot, conducts an investigation on the war pollution and forms of leukemia caused by the presence of a military rifle range in Salto di Quirra, in Sardinia.

[19] Unless otherwise indicated all the following examples are taken from *Nordest*.

[20] Just like airports and shopping malls, Carlotto's Nordest to some extent resembles a postmodern "non-place": for further reference see Marc Augé. Another crucial reference for postmodern space is David Harvey.

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