

Landscapes

Domenico Quaranta

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Writing about the work of Gerhard Mantz is not an easy task. When I'm confronted with it, two different elements of our current visual landscape come to my mind: Caspar David Friedrich's paintings and my iMac's "nature" desktops and screensavers. Even if I used, for a long time, Friedrich's *Landschaft mit Regenbogen* (1810) as a desktop's background – for the first time ever in my experience with computers, the iMac's screen seems to be the right frame for a painting – I know that these two things are pretty different: before entering our media-driven, post-industrial, post-modern, capitalistic culture that turns everything into a gadget – and thus, a Nineteenth century painting into a desktop wallpaper – Friedrich's works were sublime visions conceived to make us think about the supernatural, and the divine that pervades everything around us.

On the other hand, a desktop's background is just a stereotypically beautiful image conceived to make us forget that we are sitting down, in an unnatural position, in front of a machine, and make us dream about the outer world – a world that we increasingly see only through the lens of that same machine.

Gerhard Mantz's landscapes seem to have something in common with them both. He looks back to the Nineteenth century tradition of landscape painting, but in doing this he is painfully aware of the destiny this kind of imagery encountered along

the Twentieth century, in a way that makes it impossible for me to use one of his landscapes as a desktop wallpaper. But this may deserve a better explanation.

Simulated paintings

Gerhard Mantz made his first landscapes in the late Nineties. Born in 1950, he started working in the Seventies, focusing on the creation of abstract, large scale sculptural objects that he describes as “visual sensations in space”. Made with industrial materials such as acrylic and MDF, these colorful sculptures are themselves a significant contribution to the art of their time, addressing, on the one hand, the Modernist tradition of “concrete art” and, on the other hand, displaying the interest in redesigning the space and its internal dynamics shared by other artists such as James Turrell and Anish Kapoor. As it often happens in Kapoor’s work, some of these pieces are able to deform the space without actually touching it, only by means of shape and color. In particular, Mantz subtly exploits the emotional potential of color in order to affect our perception of the white cube.

Both this long-time career as a sculptor and this interest in the space around the work are very important to understand Mantz’s later work, and his peculiar use of 3D imaging. When, in the late Nineties, he starts using the computer, he is a mid-career artist, with a well defined concept of art; he knows what he wants to do and what he’s looking for. Moreover, he embraces the new medium at a time when it isn’t that new anymore, but it’s not yet a widespread device.

So, when he addresses the virtual, he knows that the spaces he is designing in the “real” world are already virtual as well. With this background, he is able to escape the fascination for the medium that ruined the work of so many artists.

He starts working with 3D graphics because they help him developing the “archetypal spatial situations” he is looking for. His first works are abstract objects and spaces, but soon he realizes that his images need more sensuality, more of the

spontaneous adhesion that we often feel in front of a realistic, familiar image. That's why he starts "painting" landscapes.

"Painting" may seem the wrong word here. Mantz's landscapes are not "painted", but constructed through a 3D design program, on a computer screen; and later printed on large canvases and hung to the wall. When they are still in digital form, the author – or the viewer – may be able to navigate them, walk through his forests, fly through his clouds, climb his mountains: the forests, clouds and mountains that he "created", using 3D models and increasingly complex textures, without making reference to any "real" landscape. Yet, Mantz never released them as navigable 3D spaces. In between 2002 and 2009, he often turned his abstract 3D environments into video animations, but just in a few cases (in the series *Shifting*, 2009 and in the video *Das Gesetz der Schwere*, 2008) he did it with his natural landscapes.

Both the video animation and the print are means to document places that exist "somewhere else"; and they both are chosen for their ability to expand and deform the real space, rather than to give us a blink onto an outer space. Furthermore, the print on canvas is a mean to address the tradition of landscape painting. Thus, more than pictures of simulated landscapes, these works should be described as simulations of landscape paintings.

For Mantz, this reference is important to mark his distance from this tradition, rather than his proximity to it. As he said in an interview:

"The images distinguish themselves from the landscape painting of the nineteenth century through the absence of the idyll. There are no people who create a relation to all-powerful nature. No witness, not even anything, which would point to a civilization, to a present. Rather they are images, which represent a distant future or past. The paths leading into the image appear unapproachable. The horizon is barricaded by banks or undergrowth. Light from an unspecified point beyond directs the attention to central passages in

which nothing can be seen. At least nothing particular. Passages where something is lacking or not yet there.”

This “hostility” is probably one of the reasons that makes these paintings so inadequate as desktop wallpapers.

Not afraid of beauty

Anyway, we have to admit that they are really beautiful, in a way that finds little space in contemporary art. Saying that contemporary art has a problem with beauty is a commonplace, and I won't insist too much on it. Actually, aesthetic categories such as “beauty” and “sublime” didn't disappear completely, but were powerfully redefined by contemporary art. What disappeared, with a few exceptions (mainly in photography), in contemporary art, but just in order to reappear in mass culture, are the traditional, conventional concepts of beauty and sublime, the ones shared by those who think that an orchid is beautiful, and a storm on the ocean is sublime.

When contemporary art addressed these conventional concepts of beauty and sublime, it happened in an ambivalent way, mixing celebration and criticism: think, for example, to Andy Warhol's flowers, or to the whole work of Jeff Koons. On the contrary, if we compare Gerhard Mantz's landscapes with the popular imagery of the sublime (let's say, desktop wallpapers or the National Geographic reportages), we wouldn't find in them neither criticism nor celebration.

Rather than appropriating and criticizing popular imagery, he is competing with it. He tries to enable the observer to have the same “spontaneous and affective access” as to Pandora's wonderful environment while watching *Avatar* (2010). He does not only use the same tools James Cameron is using: he wants to produce the same feelings, even if in a different cultural context and for different purposes. The relationship between popular culture and high culture is definitely changing, and Mantz's work reflects this evolution.

Stereotypes and archetypes

At this point, we shouldn't be surprised to learn that Gerhard Mantz refers to his landscapes as "archetypal spaces". On his website, he even did a list of the archetypes he is exploring: "the end of the world", "the last part of the trail", "the cave", "the drowning", "the paradise", "the cities". An archetype is a stereotype before slipping into the banality of the commonplace. In other words, it is the beauty of the sky before becoming a desktop wallpaper. It is the end of the world before being translated into the last catastrophic blockbuster. It is a classical Venus before inspiring the last eau de toilette advertisement.

This is, in the end, what Gerhard Mantz is doing with his landscapes: turning stereotypes into archetypes, bringing them back to their origin and giving them back their original power. And this is the second reason that makes these paintings so inadequate as desktop wallpapers: they are not stereotypes anymore, and they haven't been banalized yet by entering the vicious circle of communication, as it happened to Friedrich.