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MAIN SECTION

Aesthetics of the Anthropocene and Social Representations. A Case Study on Venice' Exceptional High Tides in November 2019

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the social representations of exceptional high tides occurred in Venice (Italy) between 12th and 18th November 2019 through the analysis of YouTube contents. Those events could be considered as a local manifestation of Anthropocene, and therefore could be linked to its representations. Moreover, after a summary of aesthetic literature on Anthropocene, this research aims at considering how aesthetics contribute to the definition of social representation of exceptional high tides. Twenty-nine YouTube videos were collected and analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The results show that there are several intersections between aesthetics of Anthropocene and social representations of the event analyzed, with particular concern for themes "sublime" and "*future as a threat*", and their relation to attribution of responsibility processes. These findings reflect an elaboration of the event based on aestheticization and trends of "deresponsibilization".

Introduction

Between the 12th and the 18th of November 2019, Venice was subjected to four exceptional high tides. Three of them exceeded the level of 150 cm AMSL, and the most intense reached the level of 187-189 cm AMSL during the night of the 12th of November, flooding 90% of the city. Since the time high tides were first measured, in 1872, this has been the first time that these events have occurred with this frequency. The tidal peak of the 12th of November is the second highest in history[1] and caused extensive damage to the city:[2] the wind uprooted newsstands, pushed boats along the canals and the alleys of the city and caused strong currents of water down the streets.[3] Usually, the high tide in Venice is a normal phenomenon and does not exceed the level of 110 asl. It is caused by astronomical and meteorological factors, and by the conformation of the Adriatic Sea and the Venice Lagoon. However, these increasingly frequent exceptional events reflect the impact of human activities on ecosystems at local and global level, with particular concern for sea-level rise, subsidence,[4] wind wave-induced erosion, and salt marshes reduction.[5]

These phenomena could be considered as local manifestations of the Anthropocene,[6] which is the scientific proposal considering the advent of a new geological epoch, which substitutes the Holocene. The Anthropocene is characterized by the central role of humankind, considered as a global geological force, which influences the balance of the ecosystems at a planetary level.[7]

Moreover, due to the international resonance they have reached, the exceptional high tides have shed a light on the importance of the representations and manifestations of the Anthropocene. This work aims at exploring social representations[8] (SR) of the exceptional high tides in Venice as a local manifestation of the Anthropocene, through the Social Representation Theory (SRT). Moreover, considering the relevance of aesthetics in the strategies of visualization and representation of the

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1   CPSM, ISPRA and CNR-ISMAR, *Novembre 2019 un mese di maree eccezionali. Dinamica e anomalia dell'evento del 12 novembre 2019. Dati, statistiche e analisi degli eventi*, (Venezia, CPSM, ISPRA and CNR-ISMAR, 2020): 6

2   Ibid., 10-12

3   Ibid., 9

4   Ibid., 6

5   Andrea D'Alpaos, Luca Carniello and Andrea Rinaldo, "Statistical Mechanics of Wind Wave-induced Erosion in Shallow Tidal Basins: Inferences from the Venice Lagoon", *Geophysical Research Letters*, 40, (2013): 3402

6   Marco Malvestio, *Raccontare la fine del mondo. Fantascienza e Antropocene*, (Milano: Nottetempo, 2021): 9-13

7   Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen and John McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives", *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A*, 369, (2011): 843

8   Serge Moscovici, "The Phenomenon of Social Representations", in *Social Representations*, ed. Robert M. Farr an Serge Moscovici, 3-69, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 17-21

Anthropocene by using certain aesthetic categories, such as the sublime,[9] the conquest of nature,[10] the plantation[11], or the catastrophe,[12] this paper wants to investigate their role in the construction of SR.

Aesthetics of the Anthropocene

Because of its dimension and pervasiveness, the Anthropocene cannot be seen, "it can only be visualized".[13] Consequently, representations of the Anthropocene are crucial, also in light of the complexity of the debate surrounding it with regards to the heterogeneity of the disciplines involved and the definition of the concept itself.[14-15] In particular, understanding its representations means understanding what these representations "do",[16] that is, how communities interact with them by negotiating, resisting, innovating, and transforming.[17]

A critical issue in the conceptualization of the Anthropocene is related to the fact that the responsibility of its advent is attributed to mankind in its entirety, namely to the power relationship between human beings and nature, whereby the former holds power over the latter.[18] This perspective could, on the one hand, lead to neglect the connection between this relationship, capitalism, and economic globalization,[19] as well as the inequalities and violence related to them.[20] Despite these inequalities, however, both the populations of the Global South and the Global North are considered to have the same level of responsibility. On the other hand, this narrative could put the responsibility of an abstract and reified concept of mankind[21] - more precisely, a mankind guilty of its own demise[22] - back on the individual.

Within this framework, representations of the Anthropocene revolve around narratives of the end of the world and of mankind as the cause

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9   Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, "L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime", *Sublime, les tremblements du monde*, catalogue d'exposition (Paris: Centre Pompidou Metz, 2016): 1

10   Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene", *Public Culture*, 26.2, (2014): 213

11   Michele Bandiera, "Figure dell'Antropocene negli olivi di Puglia" in *Geografia e Antropocene. Uomo, ambiente, educazione*, ed. Cristiano Giorda (Roma: Carocci, 2019): 122-123

12   Malvestio, *Fine del mondo*, 97-98

13   Mirzoeff, "Visualizing Anthropocene", 213

14   Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chtulucene: Making Kin", *Environmental Humanities*, 6, (2015): 159

15   Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I: on the Nature and Origins of our Ecological Crisis", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44.3, (2017): 595

16   Caroline Howarth, "A Social Representation is not a Quiet Thing: Exploring the Critical Potential of Social Representation Theory", *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 45, (2006): 68-69

17   Ibid., 68-69

18   Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind", *Nature*, 415, (2002): 23

19   Moore, "Capitalocene", 595

20   Ibid., 596-597

21   Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene. The Earth, History and Us*, trans. David Fernbach, (London: Verso, 2016): 18 (epub version)

22   Malvestio, *Fine del mondo*, 18

of its own end,[23] through the visualization of the catastrophe: the devastating dimension of climate change is overrepresented through apocalyptic imagery of sudden rapid disasters and calamities.[24] By mystifying the consequences of the Anthropocene, this approach can risk undermining their realistic impact and comprehension.[25] A more effective approach of representation of the Anthropocene should be based on a description of the realistic (and just as serious) consequences that we are experiencing now and that we could experience in the near future. The Anthropocene also evokes the aesthetic category of the sublime.[26] Compared to its classical expressions, the sublime of the Anthropocene sees a reversal of the relationship between humankind and nature.[27] That is, in this case, the immensity and power of human domain on nature engenders the coexistence of terror of and attraction for the sublime.[28] Moreover, this power is such as to leave a geological footprint. The sublime and the catastrophe share a paradox: in aiming to help visualize the Anthropocene and its gravity, they also contribute to its appeal. This aestheticization relegates the aspects of the Anthropocene related to its sensory experiences to the background, and through this process it makes it an "anaesthetic" experience[29] Although the dynamics surrounding the aesthetics of the Anthropocene rely on allegorical constructions that tend to misrepresent the impact of the Anthropocene, they also underline the inability and the obstacles that the empirical realm itself encounters in representing and visualizing the Anthropocene.[30]

The possibility of having sensory experiences of the Anthropocene is a key point of this work. Indeed, the Anthropocene could be defined as a "hyperobject", which is an entity "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans".[31] Therefore, a hyperobject is complex and immense, and can be experienced only through its partial manifestations, localized in specific spaces and at a specific time.[32] Based on these assumptions, Morton stated that the perception of a hyperobject in its entirety is impossible, due to "a radical split between the object and its appearance-for some other entity".[33] It is within this split that the constructive processes of representation take place.

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23   Ibid, 18

24   Ibid., 91-93

25   Ibid., 91-93

26   Fressoz, "Esthetique sublime", 1

27   Ibid., 1

28   Ibid., 3

29   Mirzoeff, "Visualizing Anthropocene", 220-226

30   Carolyn Lesjak, "Difference Relates: Allegory, Ideology, and the Anthropocene", *Historical Materialism*, 29.1 (2021): 124-125

31   Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013): 1

32   Ibid., 1

33   Ibid., 3

Despite the important findings of aesthetic philosophy on these issues, there is paucity of research concerning the SR of the Anthropocene.[34] The aim of this research is to contribute to this debate by investigating the SR of the exceptional high tide of Venice, considered as a localized manifestation of the Anthropocene. Particular concern is attributed to the aesthetics involved in these SR.

Social Representation Theory

The SRT[35] investigates social and intersubjective construction processes of everyday knowledge. Within this theoretical framework, knowledge could be divided into two main categories: the reified universe, containing solid, abstract, and decontextualized ideas of society, and the consensual universe, represented by the continuous and visible transformation of society. In the reified universe we can find scientific and technical knowledge, while in the consensual universe we find everyday knowledge and SR.[36] In other words, SR are forms of practical and shared knowledge constructed by social exchange and interactions.[37] They take place through two generative processes: anchoring and objectification.[38] While the former consists in associating novel elements with predefined social categories, the latter is a simplifying and condensing process by which an abstract idea is transformed into a concrete object. An additional level of analysis is related to media contribution to the construction of SR.[39] This focus has been recently extended to the analysis of social media.[40]

Recent developments argue that SRT and aesthetics have a crucial role in the construction of social representations. Art works, for example, could be situated in the reified universe, as forms of knowledge that transcend social situations.[41] They are considered as the result of aestheticization processes, through which a phenomenon is decontextualized from the situation in which it was generated. However, the sensory relation between the individual and the objects represents a process of recontextualization, that is, the introduction of a reified concept in the consensual universe, transforming it thus in SR. A focus on Aesthetics, intended as both the

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34   Serena Eréndira Serrano Oswald and Clarilza Prado de Sousa, "Building a Sand String: Social Representations for the Anthropocene", in *Social Representations for the Anthropocene: Latin American Perspectives*, ed. Clarilza Prado de Sousa and Serena Eréndira Serrano Oswald (Cham: Springer, 2021): 4

35   Serge Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis: Its Image and Its Public*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008): 22

36   Moscovici, «Social Representations», 21

37   Denise Jodelet, *Les représentations sociales*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989): 36

38   Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis*, 54

39   Ibid., XIV

40   Brigitta Höijer, "Social Representations Theory. A New Theory for Media Research", *Nordicom Review*, 32.2 (2011): 14

41   Dany Boulanger, "Aesthetic Social Representations and Concrete Dialogue across Boundaries: Toward Intergenerational Characterization", *Culture & Psychology*, 26.4, (2020): 792

aestheticization process (meant as the decontextualization of a phenomenon from its context, in order to represent it and visualize it), and aesthesis (as the sensory relation between the individual and the phenomenon), may enhance the understanding of the transformation processes of knowledge in its transition between the reified and the consensual universe. Furthermore, the aesthetics of the representations have spread through social media, influencing the reproduction of aesthetic and social norms.[42] Within this perspective, Aesthetics has to be considered both as a process and as a product of SR.

The exceptional high tide events occurred between the 12th and the 18th of November in Venice have reached a wide international resonance. This resonance has been amplified by the large amount of material published on social media related to those events. The aim of the research is to identify the SR of exceptional high tides and their connection to the aforementioned aesthetics of the Anthropocene.

The paper takes into account videos published on YouTube referred to these events, and analyzes their textual narratives in order to answer the question: Which aesthetic imaginary constitutes the SR of the exceptional high tides that hit Venice?

Methodologies

1. Construction of the data set

Data collection was conducted during February 2022, focusing on YouTube, since it is considered one of the most popular video platforms.[43] The following keywords were employed: "Acqua alta Venezia",[44] "Venice high water", "Venice high tide" and "Venice flooding". The same keywords were then used adding a specific time period: "2019". Since YouTube does not show the total amount of items indexed through a certain keyword, it is not possible to quantify the related material present on the platform. A total of 251 videos were collected. These videos were subsequently filtered based on the following criteria: 1) Videos not effectively related to the time range between 12th and 18th November were excluded; 2) Only videos with references to anthropic influences on the object of analysis were included (particularly sea-level rise, global warming, climate change, subsidence, and other human impact on the Venice Lagoon); 3) Only videos aimed at an Italian public were included. Based on this selection, 29 videos were collected, for a total duration of 4h, 16', 07" (471,273 views,

42   Irene Bronsvoort and Justus L. Uitermark, "Seeing the Street through Instagram. Digital Platforms and the Amplification of Gentrification", *Urban Studies*, 00.0, (2021): 9

43   Yusmarhaini Yusof, Sharifah Fatimah Syed-Ahmad, Azizah Mainal and Jamie Murphy, "A YouTube Analysis of Muslim Scholar Reactions to Trump's Electoral Outcome: Social Work Implications", *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 9.1, (2020): 6

44   Venice high water

18,431 likes, and 1,206 comments as of 29th March 2022).[45-46]

The data set was heterogeneous, including material made through different languages, such as journalistic, political, informative, and entertainment languages.

2. Procedures of analysis

Because of the attention on aesthetics, the analysis focused on the contents of the videos and not on the interactions among users. As was done in other recent studies, the analysis was conducted focusing in particular on the textual components of the videos.[47] The researcher downloaded the video transcriptions and corrected the errors.[48] Based on the theoretical framework, a Reflexive Thematic Analysis was conducted (RTA).[49] RTA consists in identifying significant themes in narratives. Themes are defined as configurations of shared meanings, grounded in a "central organizing concept."[50] The analysis is reflexive because the individuation of the themes is realized through an interpretative and recursive coding process, which implies the subjective involvement of the researcher. Therefore, "themes are creative and interpretative stories about data, produced at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skills, and the data themselves."[51] Procedures of analysis require six phases.[52] Firstly, the researcher familiarized with the data, noting down initial thoughts. Secondly, he generated initial codes systematizing quotations of interest. Subsequently, the initial codes were organized in order to identify potential themes. During the fourth phase, the researcher assessed if the identified themes worked in relation to the initial codes and to the entire data set, and generated the thematic "map" of the analysis. Lastly, the names of the themes, their relations and the story that the analysis tells, were refined. The sixth phase consists in reporting the results, which will be noted in the next paragraph.[53]

The RTA was conducted through "paper and pencil" procedure.

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45   Although the collected videos are public, the author decided to not reveal the identity of the users. For information about the data set, kindly contact the author.

46   It is possible to watch one of the video included in the analysis as an example at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JD49mWnUH98&list=PL4jats0oeFMiZAJMf1 qZ-AWKtSp84Y3wY&index=1&t=3s

47   Yusof, Syed-Ahmad, Mainal and Murphy, "YouTube Analysis", 7

48   Ibid., 7

49   Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis", *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11.4, (2019): 589

50   Ibid., 593

51   Ibid., 594

52   Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology", *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3.2, (2006): 87

53   The analysis was conducted by the author. He has had several experiences of qualitative analysis and received appropriate training during university courses and, after graduation, at workshops and a summer school on qualitative methods. However, the fact that the analysis was conducted by a single author constitutes a limitation.

Results

The RTA allowed for the identification of three themes - the *sublime*, *agency*, and *disclosure* - and four subthemes.

1. The sublime

According to the aforementioned literature, the sublime is an aesthetic category which implies the coexistence of terror, astonishment, and attraction in relation to disastrous events. This theme is used to describe narratives that exalt the grandeur of the exceptional high tide, emphasizing both its disastrous and its stunning characteristics. In reference to the analysis conducted on the data set, the sublime is composed of four subthemes: exalting the exceptionality; the transfiguration of Venice; awareness of human limits and the future as a threat.

1.1 Exalting the exceptionality

This subtheme refers to the representation of the gravity of the situation through emphasis on its exceptionality. This narrative refers to various aspects of the phenomenon, such as the recording of the measures of the high tide:

> "Hello to everyone, good evening from Venice. We couldn't miss this opportunity. The news just came in; in fact, the sirens just sounded. A peak of one meter and seventy is expected by 11 p.m. A meter and seventy! It's unheard of, a record, it's extraordinary. The problem is that a meter and fifty, a meter and sixty, is predicted for tomorrow as well."[54] [V 13]

Another aspect attributable to this narrative consists in highlighting the spectacular dimension of the exceptional high tide:

> "Elena is equipped with high boots too, but as you can see, the height [of the water][55] is really unsettling. Now the wind is calm, but until ten minutes ago the wind was really impressive, I have to admit it. I think that we'll wait until 11 p.m. to see the show". [V 13]

1.2 The Transfiguration of Venice

The Transfiguration of Venice is an argumentative form based on the contrast between the usual image of Venice, and the image of Venice during these events. Some content, for example, highlights the contrast between typical and stereotypical aspects of Venice and the destructivity of the flood:

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54   The quotes are mainly in Italian and have been translated by the author.

55   Noted by the author.

"The images I saw left me completely open-mouthed. They show canals completely out of the basins, streets completely flooded with water, and *vaporetti* [typical venetian steamers] run aground on the walking banks ["fondamenta"]; deaths - there have been two; rocks that cover what once... what until yesterday was the lagoon, because water has reached exorbitant levels, which haven't been reached in decades; trees completely uprooted; houses rendered completely uninhabitable, and people who lost everything they had within a few hours" [V 6]

Other excerpts use similes to describe how the landscape of St. Mark's Square has radically changed:

"I am almost at the center of St. Mark's Square. I am obviously equipped with high boots, high boots that go above the waist, and I have to say that if I didn't have them, I couldn't get all the way here. Water is really high, it's really impressive. It actually looks like a lake. St. Mark's Square looks like a lake." [V 13]

1.3 Awareness of human limits

This theme reflects a variation in a classical aspect of the sublime, according to which the power of nature allow us to be aware of our limits. The *awareness of human limits* could also be related to the inversion in the relationship between humankind and nature present in the configuration of the sublime of the Anthropocene.[56] This subtheme is related to the theme of *agency*, which will be reported later. The quotations considered evidence the need to limit human action to protect nature. In some cases, the limit is referred to the territorial dimension of the event:

"They're really focused on digging canals inside the Venice Lagoon, but by doing so the stream of water that enters and exits the Lagoon is deeply modified. This means that instead of having adequate canals for the Lagoon, and appropriate rivers, we end up having like water highways, where the sea enters with more and more strength and violence. And by the way, it's absolutely insane to continue digging canals in the Venice Lagoon to let the big ships pass" [V 18]

Other excerpts, instead, are more focused on the anthropic influence on ecosystems at a global level:

"I think there was something I wanted to talk about, because, from afar, I felt the weight of what happened. I am 300 km away from Venice... but the images, what I've seen, what my friends have told me, really got to me. And I think that there should be more awareness, not only on our part, having gone and still going through certain experiences, but also on the part of those in higher positions. Denying the evidence

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56   As reported in the second section of this paper "Aesthetics of the Anthropocene".

is absurd, you should be ashamed of yourselves, you ugly bastards. Venice now is basically the ghost of what Venice used to be hundreds of years ago. And that's how it's going to be if we don't figure out how to act" [V 6]

1.4 The future as a threat

Within this subtheme, the sublime is expressed through the use of images of the future which threaten crucial aspects of globalized society. In some extracts the focus is on the threat posed on cities with a high symbolic value:

> "The average sea level rises and cities like Venice, Amsterdam and Buenos Aires are submerged. Unfortunately, these are not scenes of an apocalyptic film, but fairly likely predictions." [V 1]

In other extracts, instead, this image is evoked in relation to the cultural heritage of Venice:

> "Cultural heritage, as well as treasures from the rich history of the Republic, are all at risk as Venice suffers floodings. And the rising sea levels threaten to cover all of it sooner or later, making Venice a second Atlantis." [V 8]

2. Disclosure

This theme is less frequent than the others (two quotations recorded). Nonetheless, according to the RTA methodology, in which the quantitative frequency of a code is not a crucial criterion to the definition of a theme, the author decided to consider these quotations as a theme, due to their relevance for the research questions.[57] In particular, *disclosure* consists of a first-person narrative that tries to evoke the subjective experience of the event. Indeed, if the sublime is fascinating because it is distant from the observer (in the case of this research, distance is represented by the platform of YouTube), *disclosure* tries to reduce the distance by focusing on the psychological experience of the event. Through the description of the emotional experience of a flood, this representation strategy constitutes a communication approach in which the subject is engaged in the phenomenon. This approach could be considered alternative to the use of aestheticization (the representation and the visualization of the phenomenon through the decontextualization from its context). In the case that follows, the author of the video "discloses" his own personal experience of a flood:

> "Do not underestimate the psychological effect of a flood. I witnessed one in first person some years ago. Fortunately, I was not directly involved. In addition to being with the evacuees through the *protezione*

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57   Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis", 82

civile,[58] I helped my neighbors and their friends and families during the early hours. Keep in mind, I was a little over twenty years old at the time and I had no skills, but that's not the point: I know people that, to this day, after a long time, still panic when it rains during the night, because they have seen houses and streets destroyed, they have suffered considerable damage etc. So, greatest respect and solidarity to the people hit. Sometimes one may think it's just water, but it absolutely isn't." [V 2]

3. Agency

Agency describes those narratives which express the possibility to act and change the existing conditions. It is a concept closely related to the Anthropocene, because if, on the one hand, the change in the geological epoch can be defined, under certain criteria (e.g. the golden spike), on the other hand, the identification of the *agent* of this change is more complex.[59] As was for the subtheme *awareness of human limits*, this theme is also related to the inversion in the relationship between humankind and nature representative of the sublime of the Anthropocene. However, in contrast with the sublime as it was identified in the data set, the discourses about agency, by suggesting how to solve the problem, also reveal the construction of the problem itself. In the example below, agency is expressed mainly through the attribution of responsibility, because as well as indicating what needs to be done, it also indicates *who* should do it. Most of these passages refer to political responsibility, which, in this specific case, is strongly linked to the problems related to the Mose:[60]

> "Can we talk about finishing this Mose? Mayor, sir, I don't want to get into controversy, but can I just say that this is shameful? I'll take full responsibility for saying this. Because it's been *many* years and it's still not finished! No controversies, no ifs or buts, we have to get over with this! As soon as possible! There's been talk about December 2021; I would gather lots and lots of workers and try to finish it earlier." [V 22]

This theme also refers to scientific and technical responsibilities. These are both considered through a positivistic perspective, of progress that leads to a better future:

> "Let's start from Venice, let's study climate change here! I proposed to Europe and to the UN to conduct an important study here. In these years, while we're building the Mose, let's study sea pollution, let's study the effects of climate change! Let's do it in Venice! Let's turn this

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58   Civil protection.

59   As reported in the second section of this paper: "Aesthetics of the Anthropocene".

60   Mose is a project of temporary isolation of the Venice Lagoon from the Adriatic Sea, to protect Venice (and the other cities of the Lagoon) from exceptional high tides. Mose is a highly controversial topic, both in relation to its environmental impact and to judicial matters. In November 2019 Mose was not functioning yet.

tragedy into a great opportunity to relauch our entire country. Let's not feel sorry for ourselves, let's fight, fight, fight, because we can make it!" [V 22]

And progress as a component of a more complex framework, aimed at protecting the territory:

"Well, how do we defend ourselves from these events? It's not as banal as it might seem. Creating a rigid barrier parallel to the coast, that defends the entire coast, is not an option because, of course, the environmental impact of such a structure... So, I mean... the creation of water parks and beaches is not even conceivable, it's unthinkable. There clearly is the possibility to intervene locally, but we have to consider that the situation is quite serious, in the sense that almost half of the Italian coasts are subjected to erosion. And this is a fact. Protection could be done locally, and indeed it ought to be." [V 14]

There is only one quotation in which the reference is to individual responsibility, both through the possibility of changing habits and the possibility of influencing socio-political levels:

"The thing we have to focus on, in my opinion, is the request of solutions to our administrators, obviously without ignoring the reduction of consumption to contain the rise of global average temperatures. As a tenant of the world, who rents this planet for less than a hundred years, I must leave things better than how I found them. In turn, however, those in charge must think about long-term solutions. I hope I was clear and to have offered you an alternative point of view on the debate on climate change." [V 1]

Discussion

The exceptional high tide in Venice engendered a relevant public debate, which represents the attempt to collectively elaborate the event. This could be considered as a socially shared sense-making process through which positionings are configured in order to address the issue at hand. In this research, contents of YouTube videos were analyzed, as media which significantly influences the construction of SR.[61] Results highlight that there is an interrelation between aesthetic imagery (the *sublime*) and the attribution of responsibilities ("agency"). More specifically, they both revolve around the "awareness of human limits", which on the one side reflects the inversion in the relationship between humankind and nature in the sublime of the Anthropocene[62], and on the other side reflects the need to identify and distribute responsibilities. Furthermore, with regard to the aestheticization processes of the event, an analogy with the aesthetics of the Anthropocene was identified.

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61   Höijer, "Social Representations Theory", 14

62   As reported in the second section of this paper: "Aesthetics of the Anthropocene".

These processes are represented by the spectacularization of the event ("exalting the exceptionality"), and the emphasis on future scenarios ("future as a threat"). "Agency", instead, mostly regards the attribution of responsibilities to technical and political spheres (almost always related to Mose), relieving thus the viewer of the video of feeling responsible for neglecting the individual level (only one quotation in this regard).

Interesting analogies and differences with the aesthetics of the Anthropocene concerning the "sublime" were also identified. As regards "exalting the exceptionality" and the "transfiguration of Venice", a classical expression of the sublime seems to emerge. According to this perspective, it is the violence of nature that devastates the harmony of human civilization. This could be related to the specific characteristics of the event, which could be categorized as a disaster. If in the works of Monet analyzed by Mirzoeff, the Anthropocene is expressed in its unfolding through ordinary life,[63] a disaster represents a break in it. The "awareness of human limits", instead, is a theme less focused on the representations of the event itself as it is on the representation of its implications. Human responsibilities are more evident here, and they are articulated mainly through political judgments.

Therefore, the identified themes underline the necessity to combine SRT and aesthetic philosophy in their theoretical and methodological aspects. Recently, contributions have been published which aim at developing this pathway.[64] This approach is at its initial stages and the results suggest continuing in this direction.

A critical aspect of this research lies in the fact that the object are the SR of a local manifestation of the hyperobject, the Anthropocene. A relevant aspect of the data set is that the word "Anthropocene" is never mentioned. This poses the problem of defining if the identified themes could be considered as the Anthropocene's SR or not. On the one side, this could point out a limit in the concept of Anthropocene itself. Indeed, unlike other issues,[65] this concept has not consistently permeated public opinion yet. Additionally, being a hyperobject could have less phenomenic salience than its local manifestations. On the other side, it is possible to identify a limit of the SRT: one of the conditions that engendered SR, as specified by Moscovici, is the focus on a particular object.[66] Due to the absence of an explicit reference to the Anthropocene in the data set, identifying its SR becomes problematic. The problem that emerges here is the dependence of SR on verbal language on a methodological level. However, in other contributions, Moscovici argues that SR are not always manifested

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63   Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene", 221-223

64   Boulanger, "Aesthetic Social Representations", 792-796

65   Valentina Rizzoli, Diego Romaioli and Alberta Contarello, "The Crisis Tsunami. Social Representations of the Economic Crisis in the Italian Press", *International Review of Social Psychology*, 30.1, (2017): 81

66   Augusto Palmonari and Francesca Emiliani, *Paradigmi delle rappresentazioni sociali. Sviluppi e prospettive teoriche*, (Bologna: il Mulino, 2009): 37-82

through language, they can also be expressed by art and images.[67] From this perspective, new ways to access SR could unfold, involving sensory experience in its complexity, rather than reducing it to the linguistic reference to the object. A development of SRT which takes aesthetics into account could contribute to a complex understanding of the way subjects feel and think about the world.[68] Consequently, a future perspective of this research could be a visual analysis of the images of the data set.

Conclusions

In summary, in reference to the question "What do social representations *do*?,"[69] the hypothesis proposed herein is that SR of exceptional high tide contribute to create a psychological detachment from the event, through aestheticization, "de-responsabilization," and by referring to an abstract humankind. The theme of *disclosure*, precisely due to the fact that it is less frequent compared to the others, highlights this general trend. Therefore, it could be useful to deepen the dialogical relation between this distance and the conceptualization of the Anthropocene as the "epoch of mankind." In particular, it would be desirable to explore how communities and social groups elaborate a form of protection from the idea of being considered responsible for the change we are facing.

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67   Serge Moscovici, "Attitudes and Opinions", *Annual Review of Psychology*, 14.1, (1963): 231-260

68   Serge Moscovici, "The Myth of the Lonely Paradigm: a Rejoinder", *Social Research*, 51.4, (1984): 946-947

69   Howarth, "Social Representation", 68-69

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