

MAIN SECTION

The Assemblage as Aesthetic Place. A Reading between Aesthetics and the Anthropocene of *The Mushroom at the End of the World.*

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ABSTRACT

The text proposes an interpretation of the category of assemblage starting from Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's reflection in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. The hypothesis we suggest is that through the theoretical figure of assemblage, as image, place, concept, space of livability, Tsing along the multi-voiced itinerary of her text deconstructs the linearity and compactness of certain landscape histories. In doing so, Tsing resorts both to a precise and pointed critique of the idea of progress - especially thanks to W. Benjamin - as well as the search for a modelling of the landscape that has above all in the indeterminate and in chance encounters the reasons for its being. In Tsing's text, the assemblage becomes both the concrete experience of a place and a way of observing that allows an aesthetic reading and a critique of Landscape and cultural heritage to be combined.

KEYWORDS

Assemblage, Landscape, Cities, Progress, History

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Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing with her already classic *The Mushroom at the End of the World* stands at the end of time, or rather, at the end of that time that we call modernity and that has shaped the existential and political expectations of every generation since the post-war period until a few years ago. Gone the possibility of reading life on Earth as a glorious march towards the emancipation of man from dependence on nature, here we are again faced with the indeterminate, the precarious, the ruins of a broken world: "What if, as I'm suggesting, precarity is the condition of our time or, to put it another way, what, if our time is ripe for sensing precarity? What if precarity, indeterminacy, and what we imagine as trivial are the centre of the systematicity we seek?"¹ If one accepts to walk through Tsing's text accompanied by this question, by the centrality of marginality, one actually accepts to open one's reflection in both a historical and aesthetic sense to precisely that particular condition that is the Anthropocene today.² A condition that, it is understood, will no longer be the sum of man's actions and representations that produce adverse effects on ecosystems, but rather a condition that aspires to place the history of relations between man and the Earth within a much broader framework that precedes and decides whatever decisions and perspectives man wants to undertake. That this also has an aesthetic significance, is what we want to demonstrate from some considerations of this text by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing.

Tsing's proposal can be defined as aesthetic because it is a way of observing the world that is inseparable from a critique of the idea of progress, which coincides with a critique of a representation dictated by this idea of historical time and individual affirmation: "Progress is a forward march, drawing other kinds of time into its rhythms. Without that driving beat, we might notice other temporal patterns."³ Ecology and economics have long since become fields for algorithms of expansion and progress where instead, Tsing argues, the world is primarily a selection not of forms or individuals, but of relationships. "Each living thing remakes the world through seasonal pulses of growth, lifetime reproductive patterns, and geographies of expansion"; the condition Tsing invites us to look at is quite different from the promises of happiness and emancipation that capitalism summed up in the idea of progress still in the early 20th century.

1 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalism Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 20.

2 On the Anthropocene as a condition see at least: Paolo Missiroli, *Teoria critica dell'Antropocene*, (Milan: Mimesis, 2022), 93-138. In particular, this page seems very precise: 'The human being [...] is, on the contrary, terrestrial to the core, inevitably in relation to the biological and abiotic forces that traverse the planet. Completely reversing the Promethean discourse on the Anthropocene, one could say that Homo sapiens is an intrinsically eco-logical animal, that is, imaginable only in a network of relationships with humans and non-humans', Missiroli, *Teoria critica*, 109. Tsing focuses his investigation from the ruins of late capitalism, accepting the idea that the historical and anthropological understanding of this phase is to be found in the study of relations and contaminations between humans and non-humans. Tsing's effort is thus internal to a perspective where the Anthropocene functions as a category that re-actualises the earthly aspect of humans, the inescapable belonging to the Earth System; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Human Condition in the Anthropocene* in "The Tanner Lectures in Human Values", (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

3 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 21.

Tsing's wager acquires a quality that is both political and aesthetic at the same time as her anthropologist's gaze moves on the trail of the matsutake seekers.

Anthropology always runs the risk of talking about itself while it intends to let the protagonists of its observations speak. Tsing interrogates matsutake seekers on the traces of a polyphony of voices, from white American war veterans to exiles from Laos or Cambodia, to Americans of Japanese and Chinese origin, shaping the modelling of the landscape: "within a given species, multiple planes of time composition are identified, in which organisms fit in and coordinate to shape landscapes".⁴ The theme of landscape represents in this contribution the line in which the legacy of a certain twentieth-century critical thought on the subject, Siegfried Kracauer above all, and Walter Benjamin's reflection on history converge, in the itinerary between the places where the different realities and communities of matsutake seekers coexist. From a theoretical point of view, the concept of assemblage gives us this possibility; assemblages based on landscapes offer the theoretical and practical possibility of dealing with the interaction between the activity of many organisms. It is not a question of offering an overview of the relationship between humans and animals, organisms should not show any equivalence, rather it is "if we are interested in livability, impermanence, and emergence, we should be watching the action of landscape assemblages"⁵ as they coalesce, change, and dissolve. It is therefore appropriate to closely explore Tsing's use of the term assemblage to understand its facets: Tsing develops a direct analogy between the concept of assemblage and the transformative practices that can be observed in communities of matsutake mushroom seekers; the often dubious, suffered when not the downright traumatic origin of the people who gather in these places shows how the emergence of assemblage as well as the appearance of matsutake mushrooms, is something that is difficult to explain with the formula of summary or subsumptive relation between hierarchies of values and concepts. Every concept born to explain the origin of an assemblage has the duty to place itself in a stable relationship with the indeterminate, the occasional, the fortuitous, the conflictual, the uncertain and the proximity to conflict as well as encounter.⁶

Assemblage is defined by Tsing on several temporal and spatial levels as the creation of a scene, an "open-ended gathering" full of indeterminacy,⁷ assemblages "scenes for considering livability - the possibility of ordinary life on a human-disturbed⁸ earth "that allows one to question the effects of common living without taking them for granted; an assemblage is a

4 Ibid., 21.

5 Ibid., 158.

6 Ibid., 66.

7 Ibid., 43.

8 Ibid., 23.

physical place in the forests of Oregon in this case in the form of transient communities born out of survival needs that are found for short or long periods around places intensively exploited by the timber industry. Assemblage is also a theoretical space that renders visible the encounter and manifestation of unstable categories⁹ that hold for short periods of transformation, a condition of livability for many marginalised subjects. Assemblages are thus also ephemeral translations of spaces into sociological, political and aesthetic categories with which to look beyond the dimension of progress in unexpected directions. In these assemblages, it is shown how in the emergence of matsutakes and in life in general, a “transformative mutualism” given by encounters is fundamental. It is not the form, genetic make-up or individual origin that are decisive for the assemblage as much as the capacity that this place possesses to accommodate different histories and make them collaborate in caring for themselves and the forest. There is no cultural coherence that defines the contours of the assemblage, rather a challenge:

The challenge for thinking with precarity is to understand the ways projects for making scalability have transformed landscape and society, while also seeing where scalability fails – and where nonscalable ecological and economic relations erupt.¹⁰

Tsing’s discourse becomes interesting when distinguishing itself from the dominant and scalable economies, represented par excellence by the food industry and the plantation model, the assemblage becomes something that makes history, not in the aesthetic and political recognisability of the model it imposes, but above all in the indeterminacy of the interweaving of formation times and biographies, for example through smell. The assemblage eludes representation if by this is meant the ability to determine the essence of a place or an event. The smell of the matsutake, often repulsive to Western people, Tsing writes, has transformed it in a physical way by pursuing both the natural stories of indeterminacy in mushroom picking and the cultural stories of the seekers; against the idea that life possesses one form and one form only, and that this includes old age and an end. The matsutake is there to demonstrate that in reality precariousness and indeterminacy contribute more to the definition of assemblages than established forms; smell assembles many ways of being potentially conflicting or collaborative, and creates interweavings given by the economic necessity of harvesting as well as by the nostalgia of memory; the smell in fact binds war veterans, groups of elderly people from South East Asia in search of their roots transfigured in forests thousands of kilometres away, it unites expectations and stories that come together precariously, generating history.

The analogy between the gathering of matsutake and the lives suspended

9 Ibid., 29.

10 Ibid., 42.

over a landscape now dominated by the ruins of a post-capitalist society allows Tsing to explore the pre-capitalist roots of capitalism itself and to decipher the apparent compactness of the representation of the world trade in mushrooms through the encounter of cultic histories that are difficult to reduce to simple economic transactions. The assemblages in their ephemeral reality allow capitalism embodied in skilled buyers to decipher the cultural peculiarities of the gatherers and to weave from patches and discontinuous, non-reproducible assemblages, stories and profit. What Tsing calls “salvage accumulation”¹¹ is precisely the way in which the characteristics of the many stories that make up an assemblage acquire a form that satisfies the demands of international brands or corporations; “to understand capitalism (and not just its alternatives) then, we can’t stay inside the logics of capitalism; we need an ethnographic eye to see the economic diversity through which accumulation is possible”. The assemblage is not a culturally coherent and clear unit but resembles an interweaving of stories that need to be unravelled in order to understand their instances, values and proximities.

Now, wanting to approach the theme from an aesthetic point of view, it can be said that the concept of assemblage, as mentioned earlier, allows Tsing to explore a convergence of historical and natural times, and to do so through the polyphony of voices that make up these precarious places that cannot be fully represented within the definition of “ecological community”. A trace in this direction is represented by the interweaving that the site of an assemblage, in this specific case Open Ticket¹² in Oregon, generates between places and ghosts, the ghosts of the great felled trees, of the seekers who died prematurely, of people’s biographies. The ghosts belong to the landscape and the assemblages are precisely landscape modelling in a form that does not recall the conceptual construction often encountered in definitions of landscape. The assemblages possess a peculiarity as landscape constructions: the ambiguity of the images. Indeed, Tsing acknowledges, in a theoretical move that is by no means taken for granted, that capitalism itself “in collecting goods and people from around the world, capitalism itself has the characteristics of an assemblage. However, it seems to me that capitalism also has characteristics of a machine, a contraption limited to the sum of its parts. This machine is not a total institution, which we spend our lives inside; instead, it translates across living arrangements, turning worlds into assets”.¹³

The problem is that capitalism recognises this possibility, of becoming assemblage, only through alienation, that is, the dissolution of all ties with the territory, the loss of a geographicity¹⁴ and intimacy with the Earth. This

11 Ibid., 55-135.

12 Name used by the author to identify a place without necessarily revealing its details and precise geographical location in order to protect the inhabitants of this community.

13 Ibid., 133.

14 Augustin Berque, *Écoumène. Introduction à l'étude des milieux humains*, (Paris: Belin, 2000).

alienation must correspond to a kind of one-sidedness of representation and history that cancels out the cultural richness of stories and voices. The relationship that assemblages bear with the creation and modelling of landscape and history belongs to this theoretical framework where stories are both internal and external to the capitalist model; put another way, assemblages in order to be an alternative to the capitalist model must question their representativeness by expanding their capacity to the ambiguity and power of the image, which in this case does not testify to power, but to the recursiveness and capacity to accommodate a variety of voices. The landscape, the shaping of the landscape, is thus a bursting of stories within a framework dominated by the ruins of capitalism where living, human and non-human, reaffirm alternative and subterranean forms of life with respect to the order of the city.

The ambiguity of the images is shown precisely in the figures chosen by Tsing to describe the oppositions and affinities of the assemblages; if the dance offers a ritual to the communities of Japanese who emigrated to America, rediscovering in movement the memory of times gone by and the capacity to explore unknown places with naturalness,¹⁵ the city represents an alternative pole, the place of a consolidated and more rigid social order. Dance offers a relationship with memory and time that dialecticises present and past by putting them in resonance, which is only possible in the assemblage constructed as “a hodgepodge of escapes from the city”.¹⁶ *Open Ticket* “is far from the concentration of power; it is the opposite of a city”. That city and assemblage are opposites may not come as a surprise, although in Tsing’s research there is an evident attempt not to oppose the dimension of the metropolis to that of the forest, but rather to describe the ways in which an experience is constructed that is inseparable from the shaping of a landscape that originates in the disruption generated by capitalist economies in search of cheap raw materials. The image of the city in its ambiguity is not exclusively identified by Tsing in its functional and ordered aspects, but explicitly referred to when describing the networks that mycorrhizas create in the forest by aiding the growth of trees: “Mycorrhizas form an infrastructure of interspecies interconnection, carrying information across the forest”.¹⁷ A scientific gaze limited to reproduction understood almost exclusively as interspecies reproduction has prevented us from observing and thinking about the “extraordinary architecture of underground cities” that mycorrhizas create by helping mycetes to reproduce and defend the forest. That the theme of the city develops both as a critique of the disciplining and functionalist dimension, and as the construction of underground realities that decide on life and relations between humans, cannot but recall the Walter Benjamin of *The Passages of Paris*:

15 Ibid., 244.

16 Ibid., 76.

17 Ibid., 138.

Paris is built over a system of caverns from which the din of Métro and railroad mounts to the surface, and in which every passing omnibus or truck sets up a prolonged echo. And this great technological system of tunnels, thoroughfares interconnects with the ancient vaults, the limestone quarries, the grottoes and catacombs which since Middle Ages have time and again been reinterred and traversed.¹⁸

Benjamin's reflection shows a central affinity with Tsing's text in its search for figures and places of transit and passage. Benjamin's city is the place where the phenomenon of the border and the threshold can be grasped. We arrive at the underground city above all in the ability to observe the passages that our dreams make legible by connecting past and present. Tsing's concept of assemblage recalls this tension between the past and the urgency of the present. Benjamin writes again in a passage that could serve as a theoretical description of the role of assemblage in landscape modelling: "One knew a places in ancient Greece, where the places let down into the underworld. Our waking existence likewise is a land which, at certain hidden points leads down into the underworld, a land full of inconspicuous places from which dreams arise".¹⁹ In Tsing's pursuit of marginalised existences and inconspicuous places from the ruins of progress, it is possible to find ambiguity and dialectics of threshold images: the assemblage becomes the place where, thanks to the search for mushrooms, it is possible to explore a subterranean and magmatic reality. In Benjamin's passages, the individuals who undertake this journey to the "place of dreams" are stripped of their surface identity to become marshy creatures, vegetable elements, reinforcing the idea that the analogy between matsutake mushrooms and seekers, between places and stories, is the theoretical place that Tsing calls assemblage and that Benjamin locates in dialectical imagery. If in the passages the usual space-time distinction is abolished, this is because in these places one accesses a congealed and dense temporal dimension where the representation of the surface becomes a mirror image of the magmatic reality of dream and memory. Tsing's stories are also possibilities of indeterminate encounters that generate knowledge of the landscape made through the memory that resurfaces from the past bursting forth like "tiger's leap into the past".²⁰ The past condenses in the smell, in the encounters of the searchers and here, in this space born and 'built' on the ruins of capitalism, past and present meet as knowledge of the landscape. Mushrooms 'know' the landscape by modelling it in the encounter with other species and plants; men encounter in the smell and in the search for matsutake the memory of a past, redemption from the same, the possibility of another life.

18 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcade Project*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999) 85.

19 Ibid., 84.

20 Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, in *Selected Writing* (Cambridge: The Belknap, Press of Harvard University Press, 2003) 395.

The disturbances of history, the moments of great danger and maximum tension, are opportunities for the rejuvenation of forests; the daily efforts of farmers reacting to great changes show how the aesthetic theme of landscape has its own political and historical importance. Indeed, Tsing argues that in order to understand the interpenetration of history and history, of how “small perturbations swirl within currents of great perturbations”, it is necessary ‘to turn away from the nostalgia-driven reconstructions of Japanese advocates and volunteers, which lull us out of history by their aesthetic perfection’.²¹ Nostalgia is the aesthetic figure of ambiguity, an ambiguous and powerful image, becoming both an element of transformation and contamination that induces the rediscovery of practices, smells and places antithetical to the order of the city imposed by finance and world trade, and pure aesthetisation good for lulling some conservative into their memories, thus distancing the present condition, life and its possibilities among the ruins, as well as history.

In the first part of this contribution, an attempt was made to delineate the relationship between history and landscape through the concept of assemblage; the polyphonic co-presence of times and histories concurs to redefine a relationship between living beings, human and non-human, which proceeds by contamination through uncertain, ephemeral, yet decisive relationships. Tsing, with the concept of assemblage, organises the heterogeneity of materials and histories within a theoretical framework that goes as far as explaining the most detailed dynamics of world trade, but above all returns a stratified and ambiguous image of capitalism where international transactions are defined through the co-presence and translation of local practices and radically non-capitalist cultural histories. Tsing investigates the relationship, and this also appears as a deliberately benjaminian passage, between governmental apparatuses of governance and ecological processes. Forest ruins are the result of the replacement of ecological processes with public-private dreams. It is here that it becomes necessary to decipher the complexity of the images that crowd commercial networks as marginal places not to enhance a nostalgic and glossy aesthetic of ruins, but to understand how to survive beyond progress and its dreams, in a world of ruins. The final step of the contribution is to show how Tsing’s own idea of landscape, of shaping and constructing the landscape, can be juxtaposed with one of the most significant 20th century philosophical reflections on landscape in what seems more than an affinity or analogy.

The idea that there are forest restoration projects all over the world and that local effects and dynamics make them radically different from each other, moves Tsing towards a consideration: human activities are certainly part of the contribution to forest regeneration, but non-human activities as well: humans, pines, matsutake and other species contribute

21 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 187.

together to the definition of the landscape. In Tsing's research, the landscape becomes not the outcome of an intentional design that deliberately generates matsutake, but it is precisely the impossibility of cultivating these precious mushrooms that have made it clear that in reality "pine, matsutake, and humans all cultivate each other unintentionally".²² Tsing adds that:

This idiom has allowed me to consider how landscape more generally are products of *unintentional design*, that is, the overlapping world-making activities of many agents, human and not human. The design is clear in the landscape's ecosystem. But none of the agents has planned these effects. Humans join others in making landscapes dramas of unintentional design.²³

Humans and other species come together to create landscapes from unintentional projects where what can be observed is the overlapping of intentionality and non-intentionality. Similarly, in 1931, Siegfried Kracauer distinguished two images of cities:

One can distinguish between two types of cityscapes: those that are consciously formed and those that arise unintentionally. The former arises from an artistic will, which is realised in squares, vistas, groups of buildings and perspective effects, which the Baedeker generally illuminates with an asterisk. These, on the other hand, come into being without having been planned beforehand. They are not compositions that, like the Pariser Platz or the Concorde, owe their existence to a uniform sense of building, but creatures of chance that cannot be called to account. Wherever masses of stone and streets come together, the elements of which are the result of very different interests, such a cityscape comes into being that has never itself been the object of any interest. It is as little shaped as nature and resembles a landscape in that it asserts itself unconsciously. Unconcerned about its face, it dawns through time.²⁴

Kracauer's intention, not far from Benjamin's for that matter, is to recognise the city as an image of the network of streets that is interpenetrated with dreams. The network of lines and entanglements that mycetes constructs in the underground clearly recalls Benjamin's considerations of underground Paris and Kracauer's considerations of the relationship between landscape and unintentionally, showing us how a reflection that starts from the present condition, the Anthropocene, can draw on images and categories that throughout the philosophical twentieth century have offered tools to grasp the relationship between project and chance, surface and underground, memory and present in the city. Knowledge and

22 Ibid., 152.

23 Ibid., 152.

24 Siegfried Kracauer, *Berliner Landschaft*, in *Werke Band 5.3* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011) 700-702. The translation is our responsibility.

landscape modelling are inseparable in Tsing's thinking; she shows us that the network of encounters and conflicts that generates the emergence of matsutake is the way in which the mushroom knows the forest, just as the matsutake seeker creates, together with many other living things, an assemblage that constructs landscape in the form of the relationship between chance and planning, conflict and encounter, rejection of the city and discovery of the underground city of mycetes.

Tsing helps us to understand that knowledge today is the understanding of the role we play from the ruins, that is, from the condition of the Anthropocene as a place of our thinking, but she also leads us to reflect on the aesthetic dimension of this condition by working on the ambiguity of images, their power over us and the need to construct landscapes beyond the anthropocentric and aestheticising dimension of the 'project'. The need for an aesthetic understanding of landscape stems precisely from Tsing's effort to interrogate the condition of the Anthropocene by showing us how essential it is today to deconstruct the representation of landscape by including not only historical stratification but the totality of randomness, encounters, and opportunities to make history beyond progress and design modelling. Put another way, Tsing does not seem interested in the past of the landscape 'just as it really was', rather, said Benjamin, in retaining an image of the past as it imposes itself unexpectedly in the moment of danger. The images Tsing offers are largely dialectical and dreamlike because they take in the subterranean and unintentional dimension of the landscape and help us to read it aesthetically. Assemblage is a possible form of the dialectical image translated into the experience of matsutake research today.

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