

Captioned Landscapes

Intermedial Combinations Beyond the Human

Volume 1: Places

Edited by

Marco Maggi

Università della Svizzera italiana

Curating and Interpreting Culture



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At the end of January 2024, I received an email from Sonia Costa of Vernon Press. Somehow, through channels known only to publishing house editors, Sonia had learned about a panel entitled “Subtitled Gardens” that I had organised the previous summer at the Iawis/Aierti conference in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The message proposed publishing a book on the subject. I immediately activated my academic network, gathering many more contributions than I could have imagined. I returned to Sonia with a list of authors and titles that was clearly too long, but without batting an eyelid, she suggested publishing a two-volume work. I owe Sonia and Vernon Press a debt of gratitude for encouraging me to embark on this venture and for their unfailing support and impeccable collaboration throughout its realisation. The insightful comments of the anonymous reviewers also contributed significantly to the refinement of the work. Special thanks to Hannimari Heino for granting permission to publish the images appearing on the covers of the two volumes.

Over the months, the title of the Belo Horizonte panel was changed, but I owe my colleagues and friends at Iawis/Aierti and the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais for their initial acceptance of the panel. I am particularly grateful to Liliane Louvel and Márcia Arbex-Enrico, and with them the panel speakers Sophie Aymes and Divya Kumar-Dumas. The evolution of the project was made possible by the always intense and productive discussions with the authors and by the invitation to present its progress on multiple occasions: in Lausanne with Ute Heidmann and the members of CLE; as part of the Society of Emblem Studies’ *Road to Vienna* series; at the conference *Tesaurus e le arti* organised by Clara Gorla and Andrea Merlotti at Venaria Reale; in Palermo as part of the PhD programme in Visual Culture, with Michele Cometa, Roberta Coglitore, Valeria Cammarata, Alessandra Buccheri and all the members of the Doctoral College; at the Accademia di Architettura in Mendrisio as part of the series *Fable, Rebus, Emblem*; *Source, Material, Image* organised by Giuditta Cirmigliaro; at the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome at the invitation of Leo Impett and Claudia Cieri Via; with Erik Erlanson and members of the “green cluster” of the Linnaeus University Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies; at the Division of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages of Stanford University at the invitation of Giacomo Berchi. An important intermediate stage of the project was the workshop *Paesaggi con didascalie*, which I organised in April 2025 in my

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Lugano-Stanford, Autumn 2025

Note on the Editor

Marco Maggi is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and Theory of Literature at the Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, Switzerland, where he is also Co-Director of the Master in Italian Language, Literature and Civilisation. He has held positions as visiting professor and visiting scholar at the Université de Genève, at the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa, at the Università di Palermo, and at Stanford University. He is the principal investigator of the project funded by the Swiss National Scientific Fund “Italian Studies of Literature and Arts. An Archival, Intermedial and Digital Approach” (2026-2030). He is a member of the scientific committee of numerous academic societies and international publishing series. His research focuses on the intermedial relations of literature from a historical, critical and theoretical perspective. His publications include the monographs *Walter Benjamin e Dante. Una costellazione nello spazio delle immagini* (2017), *Modernità visuale dei «Promessi Sposi». Romanzo e fantasmagoria da Manzoni a Bellocchio* (2019); *Forme intermedie. Percorsi di cultura visuale nell'opera di Guido Gozzano* (2025). He has edited texts, with a focus on the Baroque and early twentieth-century: *Aurore barocche. Concerto di arti sorelle* (2005), Emanuele Tesauro's *Vocabolario italiano* (2008) and *Anacronismi e didascalie. Prose varie (1903-1916)* by Guido Gozzano (2023). He also edited new Italian editions of classics of inter-artistic comparison: *Ut pictura poesis* by Rensselaer W. Lee (2011) and *Studi sul concettismo* by Mario Praz (2014). He has edited collections of essays and journal monographic issues: «*Selbstdenken*». *Atti della giornata di studi in ricordo di Lea Ritter Santini* (2020); “Fototestualità” (*Versants*, 2021, with S. Garau and V. Tescari); *Walter Benjamin e la cultura italiana* (2022); “Prometeo, mito e intermedialità” (*Arabeschi*, 2024, with M. Giovannelli); “Sull'orlo del visibile. Letterature comparate e visualità” (*Colloquium Helveticum*, 2025).

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Pedro Medina Reinón (Murcia, Spain, 1973) holds a PhD in Cultural Sciences (Scuola Internazionale di Alti Studi, Modena, 2001) and a degree in Philosophy (Universidad de Murcia, 1996). He has the academic qualification of Associate Professor in Arts and Humanities (ANECA, Spain, 2023). He is currently a lecturer at the Istituto Europeo di Design, at the Accademia di Belle Arti Santa Giulia, and at the UNIR (online). He was the Publishing Director of Editorial IED, the project manager of the IED Italy and IED Brazil E-learning Campus, Director of the academic innovation area IED Sapere (Italy, Spain and Brazil), Director of the Cultural Area at the Istituto Europeo di Design (Madrid), and researcher at the IUAV (Venice) and at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid). As an art curator and art critic he curated numerous exhibitions across multiple cities and institutions. He has also developed extensive editorial work as an author, editor and translator. His primary research areas include History of Aesthetic Ideas and Art Theory, with a focus on new languages in design, architecture, video-creation and digital media. His research is characterised by an empirical approach and a direct engagement with artistic practices and contemporary phenomena.

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Editor's General Introduction

Historical overview

“Since at least the Romans,” writes an author of reference for both garden and landscape history and word and image studies, “inscriptions have played a variety of roles in landscape design and experience.”¹ In Pliny the Younger’s letters (v, 6, 35) we read that gardeners of antiquity delighted in writing their lord’s name, or their own, on boxwood hedges or in flower beds. The custom is reported by Leon Battista Alberti in *De re aedificatoria* (ix, 4) and modernised in the Roman humanist circles. The land acquired by Pomponio Leto near the Quirinale in 1474 to host the gatherings of the Accademia Romana was adorned with poetic inscriptions that, through the artifice of prosopopoeia, gave voice to the statues placed in the garden. The compositions in honour of St Anne by Johannes Goritz’s humanist friends, some of which were published in 1524 in a collection entitled *Coryciana*, were instead hung on the trees in his garden near the basilica of Maxentius and Constantine, modelled on the epigrams placed on Plato’s tomb in the garden of the Academy. The fountains were also decorated with poetic verses carved on cartouches, often dedicated to the sleeping nymph, as in the Nymphaeum of Villa Giulia.²

From Rome, the custom of placing inscriptions in natural environments spread to the rest of the peninsula, starting with Paolo Giovio’s villa in Como, built from 1537 onwards; as attested by a painting from the following century, made a few years before the site was demolished, the garden on the lakeshore was adorned with inscriptions.³ The Sacred Wood of Bomarzo, inaugurated in 1547, still partly preserves, carved on its fantastic architecture, the quotations

¹ John Dixon Hunt, *The Afterlife of Gardens* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 89.

² Cf. Denis Ribouillault, “Hortus academicus: les académies de la Renaissance et le jardin,” in *Des jardins & des livres. Catalogue d'exposition (Fondation Martin Bodmer, Coligny [Genève], 28 avril – 9 septembre 2018)*, ed. by Michael Jakob (MétisPresses, 2018), 28-30; Id., “Introduction: ‘Atque inter silvas Academi quaerere verum’ – Early Modern Gardens and the Academic Ideal,” in *Gardens and Academies in Early Modern Italy and Beyond*, ed. by Denis Ribouillault (Brill, 2025), 13-15. See also Claudia Lazzaro, *The Italian Renaissance Garden* (Yale University Press, 1990), ad vocem ‘Imprese in gardens’.

³ Cf. Eugenio Battisti, *Iconologia ed ecologia del giardino e del paesaggio*, edited by Giuseppa Saccaro Del Buffa (Olschki, 2004), 9-10 footnote 6.

of literary figures such as Dante, Francesco Petrarca and Ludovico Ariosto, among others.⁴ Outside Italy, in Königsberg, present-day Kaliningrad, in the 1630s, the composer Heinrich Albert founded the Kürbishütte, an academy named after the custom of engraving poetic compositions on the gourds (*Kürbis* in German) that grew in the founder's garden.⁵

With the advent of André Le Nôtre and the diffusion of the French garden model, the attribution of meaning to gardens is mainly accomplished, as Eric T. Haskell has written, through an "iconographical voicing," i.e. the elaboration of iconographic programmes that tend to banish the use of inscriptions.⁶ The latter return in the English gardens of the eighteenth-century, from that of Alexander Pope at Twickenham to that of the Marquis de Girardin at Ermenonville, studded with quotations from Rousseau, crossing the watershed between the "emblematic gardening" of the beginning of the century and the "expressive gardening" that characterises the decades after 1740.⁷

Once again excluded from Capability Brown's projects,⁸ nature inscriptions, a genre illustrated in the eighteenth-century by Mark Akenside, William Shenstone (creator of the Leasowes garden) and Thomas Wharton, are taken up

⁴ Cf. Horst Bredekamp, *Vicino Orsini e il Bosco Sacro di Bomarzo. Un principe artista ed anarchico*, original photographs by Wolfram Janzer (Edizioni dell'elefante, 1989); Anatole Tchikine, ed., "Bomarzo between history and myth," special issue, *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 41, no. 2 (2021).

⁵ Cf. Leonard Forster, "Meditation in a Garden," *German Life and Letters* 31 (1977): 27-29.

⁶ Cf. Eric T. Haskell, "Reading Eden's Riddles: Words in the Landscape, Texts in the Garden," in *Art and Science in Word and Image. Exploration and Discovery*, edited by Keith Williams *et al.* (Brill, 2019), 157.

⁷ Cf. John Dixon Hunt, *The Figure in the Landscape. Poetry, Painting, and Gardening during the Eighteenth Century* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979). On captioned landscapes in the seventeenth century cf. Monique Mosser, "La Réunion des arts est dans le jardin," in *Le Progrès des Arts réunis 1763-1815. Mythe culturel, des origines de la Révolution à la fin de l'Empire? Actes du Colloque international d'Histoire de l'Art, Bordeaux – Toulouse, 22-26 mai 1989*, edited by Daniel Rabreau and Bruno Tollon (Éditions William Blake & Co., 1992); Ead., "La littérature au miroir d'Hortésie au temps des Lumières," in Jakob, *Des jardins & des livres*; Jean-Louis Haquette, "Le texte dans le paysage. Réflexions sur la pratique de l'inscription dans le jardin paysager du XVIII^e siècle," *Interfaces – Image, texte, langage* 11-12 (1997), https://www.persee.fr/doc/inter_1164-6225_1997_num_11_1_1098; Michael Jakob, *Ermenonville* (Éditions de l'Imprimeur, 2002); Sophie Lefay, *L'Éloquence des pierres. Usages littéraires de l'inscription au XVIII^e siècle* (Classiques Garnier, 2015), 58-65.

⁸ Cf. Dixon Hunt, *The Figure in the Landscape*, 220.

by the Romantic poets: famous in this regard are William Wordsworth's *Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree*. In the hands of the Lake Poets, however, the naturalistic epigram evolves into an autonomous composition, detached from the *genius loci*.⁹ Another blow to the presence of inscriptions in natural settings comes from the privilege granted by modernism to media purity;¹⁰ so that we have to wait until the mid-twentieth-century for writing to resurface in gardens designed by Ian Hamilton Finlay, among others.¹¹

An equally ancient, but even more continuous story has the presence of writing in gardens in China, which, as Yolaine Escande writes, gives the natural environment "its soul, its meaning, its scope."¹² As proof of the cross-cultural significance of the phenomenon, literature in the Sinhala language, one of Sri Lanka's official idioms, originated with the inscriptions on the Mirror Wall, a mighty rock formation within the Sigirya site.¹³

Beginning with the *Roman de la Rose*,¹⁴ Western literature sometimes depict captioned landscapes (we will return to this designation later), even in illustrated form, as in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), which established the canon of Renaissance garden aesthetics. The episode of the loves of Angelica and Medoro in Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (1516) also propagates among painters, as Rensselaer W. Lee has reconstructed,¹⁵ the custom of carving the names of lovers on trees; Thanatos, rather than Eros, is referred to in the other *topos* of writing *en plein air*, the *Et in Arcadia Ego*. In the garden described by Erasmus of Rotterdam in *Convivium religiosum* (1522), the voice of plants is conveyed through inscriptions; like those, taken from the Bible, that appear on the walls of the caves described in Bernard Palissy's *Recepte véritable* (1563).¹⁶

⁹ Cf. Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry," in Id., *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays, 1958-1970* (Yale University Press, 1970).

¹⁰ Dixon Hunt, *The Afterlife of Gardens*, 89.

¹¹ Cf. Id., *Nature Over Again: The Garden Art of Ian Hamilton Finlay* (Reaktion Books, 2008).

¹² Yolaine Escande, "Jardin et écriture en Chine," in Jakob, *Des jardins & des livres*, 19 (unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine).

¹³ Cf. Divya Kumar-Dumas, "Reading Architecture in Landscape: Visitor Reflections at a Mirror Wall (Sigirya, Sri Lanka)," in *Art, Architecture, and the Moving Viewer, c. 300-1500 CE: Unfolding Narratives*, ed. by Gillian B. Elliott and Anne Heath (Brill, 2022), 120-121.

¹⁴ Cf. Christopher Lucken, *Le Roman de la Rose*, in Jakob, *Des jardins & des livres*, 136.

¹⁵ Cf. Rensselaer W. Lee, *Names on Trees. Ariosto and the Arts* (Princeton University Press, 1977).

¹⁶ Cf. Koji Kuwakino, *L'Architetto sapiente. Giardino, teatro, città come schemi mnemonici tra il XVI e il XVII secolo* (Olschki, 2011), 123-126.

In the seventeenth-century, the space of the garden becomes the setting in which the Englishman Henry Peacham sets his collection of emblems (*Minerva Britanna, or, a Garden of Heroical Devises*, 1612); while the German Geuder, referring to the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, imagines that his *carmina figurata* are engraved on the trunks of the trees that surround the *locus amœnus* in which the idyll takes place.¹⁷

In the following century, the use of scattering inscriptions in nature is acclimatised to the sun and vegetation of the tropics in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788) (Flaubert parodied it in his description of the garden in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*).¹⁸ At the same time, in a dreamlike Orient but not dreamt of by the West, Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Room* (1792) details how poetic quotations placed in a Chinese garden are meticulously chosen.¹⁹

Literary representations of captioned landscapes reappear from the second half of the twentieth-century onwards, often in relation to real creations: this is the case, to cite only the example geographically closest to me, of Armand Schulthess' lost Encyclopaedic Garden²⁰ in Auressio, in Southern Switzerland, the subject of descriptions in the pages of writers such as S. Corinna Bille, Max Frisch and recently Judith Schälansky.

From iconology to the ecomedial turn

Albeit briefly, the overview just presented allows us to measure the extent of the phenomenon of captioned landscapes and their representations, as well as the continuities and fractures that mark their history. For the latter, as mentioned, a fundamental role is played by the media purism of modernist descent which, as effectively summarised by John Dixon Hunt, has in principle ruled out the issue on the basis of the assumption that "landscape architecture being [...] visual, can have no truck with the verbal."²¹

Such an attitude can be found, for example, in Eugenio Battisti, one of the authors of reference for garden and landscape history studies, when, in the mid-1980s, he lamented that the progressive deciphering and identification of the Bomarzo inscriptions had evaporated the "Piranesian romanticism" of the

¹⁷ Giovanni Pozzi, *La parola dipinta*, 1981, second edition (Adelphi, 1996), 149.

¹⁸ Mario Praz, *Studi sul concettismo*, 1946, ed. by Marco Maggi (Abscondita, 2014), 218 footnote 1.

¹⁹ Escande, "Jardin et écriture en Chine," 21.

²⁰ Cf. Lucienne Peiry, *Le Jardin de la mémoire. Armand Schulthess* (Allia, 2021).

²¹ Dixon Hunt, *The Afterlife of Gardens*, 89.

place, not surprisingly also much appreciated by Salvador Dalí.²² The presence of verbal elements in the landscape is interpreted by Battisti as a nefarious effect of “modern tourism,” which “has triumphed over nature itself, reducing scenic regions to the dimensions of a dry Baedeker guidebook page, crammed with captions and parades of road signs.”²³ Battisti does not exclude the correlation between the visual element and the verbal element, indeed he promotes it, experimenting and advocating the application of the iconological method to the study of landscape. What is banished, in the name of the supposedly purely visual nature of the landscape, is the physical presence of alphabetical inscriptions. The party taken for the visual is so pre-eminent, in Battisti, that even his second fundamental methodological reference, ecology (*Iconologia ed ecologia del giardino e del paesaggio* is the title of his collection of essays on the subject), is interpreted as an “optical defence” of the territory.²⁴

The lifting of the excommunication against landscape inscriptions and the beginning of their revaluation as objects of study went hand in hand with the criticism of the iconological approach and the underlying question of meaning being replaced with that of reception. According to John Dixon Hunt, who has promoted this paradigm shift since the early 1970s, “there is a far more interesting question than ‘can garden mean?’ – which in fact should be construed more as a question of reception.”²⁵ The interest in the reception of gardens and landscapes – what Dixon Hunt called their “afterlife” – has directed attention towards the importance of inscriptions, real “triggers and prompts” offered to the visitor’s attention.²⁶ From Dixon Hunt’s point of view, they function as interfaces mediating between the known and the unknown, accompanying the reception of the natural space: captions “are a means of introducing people to unfamiliar, perhaps even uncongenial sites by getting them to view these locations in terms of familiar patterns of behaviour;” but they can also, especially in the context of hyper-simplification induced by contemporary media, fulfil the opposite function of “further delay[ing] the reception of [...] meanings for folk who generally expect the instant elucidation of advertisement or tv captions.”²⁷ Further functions have been emphasised,

²² Battisti, *Iconologia ed ecologia del giardino e del paesaggio*, 330.

²³ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁴ Giuseppa Saccaro Del Buffa, “Prefazione,” in Battisti, *Iconologia ed ecologia del giardino e del paesaggio*, ix.

²⁵ Dixon Hunt, *The Afterlife of Gardens*, 96.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 77-112.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 88, 110.

especially from eighteenth-century case studies. The inscriptions function as a scholarly supplement, making explicit the cultural references and literary allusions contained in the landscape.²⁸ Moreover, by virtue of the inherently intersubjective nature of language, they establish a threshold between the mythical space of the garden and the real space of the visitor, who is invited to occupy the place left empty by the personal pronouns in the discourse.²⁹ Finally, the writings disseminated in the landscape contribute, like the plaques placed next to works of art in museums, to the processes of idealisation and aestheticisation of nature.³⁰

The shift in focus from meaning to reception is at the origin of studies on the presence of inscriptions in natural environments, the main limitation of which lies in the approach that Richard Grusin has called “media correlationalism.”³¹ This approach consists on a conception of mediation as a mere neutral reproduction of meanings, involving a distinct subject and object, separate and refractory to any transformation. To the correlative aspect, Grusin opposes the creative aspect, for which “mediation operates [...] by actively transforming human and nonhuman actants, as well as their conceptual and affective states.”³² The creative conception of mediation presupposes what Michele Cometa has called the “ecomedial turn,” which consists in shifting attention beyond media interactions to the “relationship that media [...] maintain with the living (human and non-human) and the non-living, with ‘inert’ matter and, ultimately, with all the components of the planet.”³³ The ecomedial turn focuses on relationships within which human and non-human worlds do not remain unchanged, but are transformed by negotiation procedures that also radically redefine their respective roles. From a representationalist conception of mediation, in which the subject contemplates the object while keeping its distance, we move on to an immersive and transformative conception; from a still anthropocentric view of intermediality, which focuses on the interactions

²⁸ Mosser, “La littérature au miroir d’Hortésie au temps des Lumières,” 83.

²⁹ Michael Charlesworth, “Movement, Intersubjectivity, and Mercantile Morality at Stourhead,” in *Landscape Design and the Experience of Motion*, ed. by Michel Conan (Dumbarton Oaks, 2003).

³⁰ Lefay, *L’Éloquence des pierres*, 58.

³¹ Richard Grusin, “Radical Mediation,” *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (2015), 131.

³² *Ibid.*, 130. I will refrain in this context from the anti-speciesist positions underlying Grusin’s theory, the analysis of which would require a separate discussion.

³³ Michele Cometa, *La svolta ecomediale. La mediazione come forma di vita* (Meltemi, 2023), 20.

between media (*les mots dans la peinture*, to quote a famous title by Michel Butor), to an approach to mediation as a trans-specific phenomenon (*les mots dans la nature*).

The ecomedial approach just described has been metabolised in more recent studies of intermediality, which, however, with one significant exception, have not yet thematised the question of combinations between writing and natural environments. As things stand, therefore, the existing studies on captioned landscapes are vitiated by a correlationalist approach; while the studies of intermedial ecocriticism, although having overcome representationalism in the name of a creative conception of mediation, neglect these forms of combination, focusing rather on representations of the non-human world.³⁴

This is the case, for instance, with the concept of “eco-ekphrasis” proposed by Gabriele Rippl, elaborated against the backdrop of an approach defined as “descriptive ethics.” The author’s descriptive ethics fully assumes the ecomedial turn, as it is characterised as “an environmental ethics whose focus lies no longer exclusively on the human and its human other but is also interested in non-human nature.”³⁵ It focuses literary descriptions of natural environments and, in the specific mode that Rippl calls “eco-ekphrasis,” of ecological works of art. The object of such analyses are representations: ekphrasis is indeed the most common and widespread form of such intermedial processes. What is curious is that the example examined by Rippl, from Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood*, consists precisely of a captioned landscape, i.e. a work of art that inscribes writing in natural environments. The project, attributed to Amanda Payne’s character, is entitled “The Living Word” and consists of arranging organic residues in nature, forming monumental inscriptions on the ground; the artist’s latest work is made with bones of slaughtered cattle which, alluding to the possible apocalyptic outcomes of the ecological crisis, compose the inscription ‘kaputt’. The artist thus documents with photographs and videos the process of decay that these living words undergo, attacked by biological agents such as enzymes or insects. In her essay,

³⁴ I assume the distinction, established in intermediality studies, between combination (co-presence of different media, synchronic dimension) and representation (reference between different media, diachronic dimension). Cf. Jørgen Bruhn and Beate Schirrmacher, eds., *Intermedial Studies. An Introduction to Meaning Across Media* (Routledge, 2022).

³⁵ Gabriele Rippl, “Sustainability, eco-ekphrasis and the ethics of literary description,” in *Cultural Sustainability. Perspectives from the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. by Torsten Meires and Gabriele Rippl (Routledge, 2019), 222.

Rippl analyses Atwood's portrayal of the combination of writing and natural elements in "The Living Word," but without going into the characteristics of this combination, and the transformative encounter between human and non-human that takes place in it.³⁶

The correlationalist approach is also surpassed in the *Intermédialités/ Intermediality* journal's issue dedicated to "jardiner/gardening." As editor Denis Ribouillault writes, it is necessary to move "de la réunion des arts dans le jardin au jardin partagé." The first part of the sentence refers to the title of an aforementioned article by Monique Mosser that emblematically represents the Reception Studies approach; the second indicates the prospect of going beyond it by considering not only natural spaces as a place of social practices, but also and above all of renegotiating the relationship between human and non-human.³⁷ In the essays that make up the issue, however, the verbal element, rather than being materially involved in combinations with non-human worlds, only appears in a representational key, albeit with interesting projections outside of Western literatures.

An ecomedial perspective also characterises the volume *Multispecies Storytelling in Intermedial Practices*, edited by Ida Bencke and Jørgen Bruhn. The editors start from the twofold observation that "language is commonly thought of as what sets 'us' apart from the rest of the species;" but that, at the same time, "everyday experiences of multispecies cohabitation tell us that in practice, 'we' often manage to understand each other." Such experiences are studied in the volume with reference to representations, and in particular to that peculiar type of representations that are narratives: "how do we narrate and (re)present these encounters in ways that do not negate, annul, or overwrite the distinctive qualities and logics of a nonhuman semiotics?"³⁸ The question is taken up and developed in a volume by Bruhn himself in collaboration with Niklas Salmose dedicated to intermedial ecocriticism, understood "as a theory and method [that] aims to describe, analyse and

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 226-228.

³⁷ Cf. Denis Ribouillault, "Introduction. De la 'réunion des arts' dans le jardin au jardin partagé," *Intermedialités* 35 (2020), guest-edited by Denis Ribouillault (special issue: *Gardening/Jardiner*), <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/im/2020-n35-im05945/1076367ar/>.

³⁸ Ida Bencke, and Jørgen Bruhn, "Introduction," in *Multispecies Storytelling in Intermedial Practices*, ed. by Ida Bencke and Jørgen Bruhn (punctum books, 2022), 9-10.

compare very different examples of environmental communication.”³⁹ Although the authors show themselves to be aware that “not all meaning follows the regime of representation and that not all meaning stands in for something else in the banal sense the word representation” (the explicit reference is to Grusin’s notion of “radical mediation,” to which I have already referred), they focus their attention on “questions of communication and thus representation,”⁴⁰ analysing climate fiction novels and websites, reports of international organisations and graphic novels, television advertisements and film adaptations, without considering the question of the inscription of alphabetic signs in the non-human world.

An exception in this respect are some contributions contained in the proceedings of the XXXIII Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture, dedicated to the theme *Interlacing Words and Things: Bridging the Nature-Culture Opposition in Gardens and Landscapes*. With reference to reception studies, editor Stephen Bann points out that it is not only a question of enumerating the ways in which poetry and painting have both represented and influenced the creation and reception of gardens and landscapes, but above all of accounting for the “philosophical and anthropological stakes that are inevitably involved in such a process.”⁴¹ In the essays that make up the volume, the analysis of representations prevails, both verbal and visual, in the latter case with reference to underlying texts, with interesting cross-cultural projections. In the curator’s essay, dedicated to Ian Hamilton Finlay, and especially in that of Yves Abrioux, devoted to Land Art, the perspective we have called ecomedial is instead applied to the study of the intermedial combinations of writing in natural environments. In the examples analysed, Abrioux identifies the lineaments of “a poetics that recognises an ongoing imaginative process quite distinct from figuration understood as (visual) representation.”⁴² This process, which the scholar designates with the term ‘figural,’ is in fact hinged on the presence of writing in the landscape. Its outcome is neither postmodern demystification, which reduces the inclination to identify

³⁹ Jørgen Bruhn and Niklas Salmose, *Intermedial Ecocriticism. The Climate Crisis Through Art and Media* (Lexington Books, 2024), 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 167, 35.

⁴¹ Stephen Bann, “Introduction,” in *Interlacing Words and Things: Bridging the Nature-Culture Opposition in Gardens and Landscape*, ed. by Stephen Bann (Dumbarton Oaks, 2012), 1.

⁴² Yves Abrioux, “What Happens to Words in Gardens and Landscapes,” in Bann, *Interlacing Words and Things*, 18.

nature as a source of values to “cliché or wordplay,”⁴³ nor the romantic utopia of an absolute reconciliation: “Typically linguistic, this behaviour acts more to complexify the effects of which gardens and landscape are capable than to reinstate within them a postulated state of nature.”⁴⁴

Terminological clarifications

In the wake of the contributions mentioned last, in the chapters that make up this work, the topic of combinations of writing and natural environments is addressed from an ecomedial perspective, i.e. with priority attention to the negotiations between human and non-human worlds that take place within these processes. This justifies the adoption of the term ‘landscape,’ which, following W. J. T. Mitchell, I understand “not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed.” Landscape as an object of vision, Mitchell explains, interprets history as a “progressive movement towards purification of the visual field” and coincides with the “contemplative” approach characteristic of modernism; on the other side, typical of the “interpretative” approach of postmodernism, landscape is read as “an allegory of psychological or ideological themes.”⁴⁵ Rejecting the immobility (of the human subject and of nature) underlying both models, Mitchell invites us to consider landscape as a “dynamic medium,”⁴⁶ in which we move and is itself in motion, in particular as “a medium of exchange between the human and the natural.”⁴⁷ According to the author, this exchange is accomplished “by naturalising its conventions and conventionalizing its nature.”⁴⁸ On the one hand, the landscape “naturalises a cultural and social construction;” on the other, it gives nature an expressive potentiality analogous to that of conventional language, whereby the landscape presents itself as “a representation that ‘breaks through’ representation into the realm of the nonhuman.”⁴⁹ In both cases, landscape reveals its ideological nature, if by

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁵ W. J. T. Mitchell “Introduction,” in *Landscape and Power*, 1994, ed. by W. J. T. Mitchell, second edition (The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁷ Id., “Imperial Landscape,” in Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 5 (“Thesis 2”).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* (“Thesis 3”).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2, 16-17.

ideology is meant the naturalisation of what is conventional and, conversely, the conventionalisation of what is natural.

The inscriptions disseminated in natural environments participate in and catalyse such ideological processes, hence their relevance to issues of politics; individual, collective and cultural memory; and personal transformation. In another way, however, thanks to the 'figural' dimension of writing, captioned landscapes are at the origin of another kind of processes, which make it possible, on the one hand, to rehabilitate the contemplative approach of modernism without incurring the illusion of restoring an edenic state; on the other hand, to recover the interpretative approach of postmodernism without falling into reductionism of any kind. In the words of Michele Cometa commenting on John Durham Peters, "natural elements are media because they express a meaning, but not necessarily a meaning that we can/should understand."⁵⁰ The study of captioned landscapes thus makes it possible to reopen the great question, with Hans Blumenberg, of the "legibility of the world," or, with Philippe Descola, of the "ontologies" that, from age to age and place to place, have articulated the relations between the human and the non-human.⁵¹ Lastly, the study of captioned landscapes is relevant, as Giovanni Pozzi observed with regard to the Sacred Wood of Bomarzo, for the analysis of the "influence that the aesthetic or moral ideal disseminated by literature can have on collective behaviour."⁵² A highly topical theme, given the contemporary phenomena of the migration of literature from the media that had traditionally conveyed it towards other, more pulpy forms of transmission.

In addition to the adoption of the term 'landscape,' it is necessary to justify the use of the adjective 'captioned' also present in the title of this work. As anticipated, the expression 'nature inscriptions' has been used in the studies, which has, however, the limitation of referring to an exclusively literary genre, whereas the perspective adopted here is entirely intermedial.⁵³ On the contrary, the formulas 'texted/textured gardens', proposed respectively by Haskell and Dixon Hunt,⁵⁴ are too unspecific with respect to the medium of

⁵⁰ Cometa, *La svolta ecomediale*, 107.

⁵¹ Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Suhrkamp, 1981), transl. *The Readability of the World* (Cornell University Press, 2022); Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture* (Gallimard, 2005), transl. *Beyond Nature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁵² Giovanni Pozzi, *Alternatim* (Adelphi, 1996), 456.

⁵³ Cf. Hartman, "Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry."

⁵⁴ Haskell, "Reading Eden's Riddles," 153; Dixon Hunt, *The Afterlife of Gardens*, 112.

writing, since, in accordance with a usage that has been in use since the structuralist season, the term 'text' is assumed to indiscriminately designate any signifying form and thus includes media contents of all kinds.

The expression 'jardins sous-titrés' proposed by Monique Mosser⁵⁵ has the advantage of bringing writing as a graphic sign back to the foreground, but at the same time it is burdened by a double limitation, phonocentric on the one hand and logocentric on the other. If, as is customary, one understands subtitles as translations of speech placed at the foot of moving images, natural signs are implicitly assimilated to *phoné*, to vocality. This is a metaphor with an illustrious tradition, ranging from Novalis' *Stimme der Natur* to Refik Anadol's more recent installation using artificial intelligence, entitled *Echoes of the Earth: Living Archive*.⁵⁶ It should be noted, however, that the reference to vocality mortgages the question of natural signs from the outset, which, as argued by authoritative scholars (Eduardo Kohn, for example, who rather recognises them as icons),⁵⁷ is not at all 'natural' for them to be assimilated to *phoné*. On the other hand, the reference to subtitles sins of logocentrism, insofar as it understands the operation of interpreting the signs of nature on the linguistic model of translation.

I therefore opted for the adjective 'captioned,' with reference to the inclusive semantics of 'caption.' Meanwhile, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term can designate the 'subtitle' in film and television. Moreover, it has the advantage that it does not determine *a priori* the nature (verbal, visual or other) of natural semiotics, since the term can mean both a verbal element that refers to an image ('caption' as "title below an illustration") and, especially in American English, a verbal element that refers to other writing ("the heading of a chapter, section, or newspaper article").

Nevertheless, it is a fact that, in some of its meanings, the word 'caption' suggests a subordination of the verbal to the visual: think, for example, of museum captions. The undesirable effect of logocentrism is thus reversed into its opposite. It is therefore worth pointing out that the term 'caption' is used here in the sense proposed by Arnaud Schmitt in relation to the act of

⁵⁵ Mosser, "La Réunion des arts est dans le jardin," 176-177; Ead., "La littérature au miroir d'Hortésie au temps des Lumières," 83-84.

⁵⁶ London, Serpentine North Gallery, 16 February - 7 April 2024.

⁵⁷ Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think. Towards an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (University of California Press, 2013).

suturing.⁵⁸ Building on W. J. T. Mitchell, Schmitt interprets captions as sutures between discourse and representation. Rather than secondary trappings, they are read as decisive junctions in intermedial relations. In addition to that, the metaphor of suturing is particularly significant in relation to the negotiations between the human world and non-human worlds, in that, in suturing, the two edges of the wound are brought together, but at the same time, the mark of the stitching remains. Suturing, therefore, clearly represents both the similarities and differences at play in the relationships between writing and natural environments.

Places and representations

The chapters of this work are divided into two volumes, subtitled *Places* and *Representations*, respectively. Consistent with the notion of landscape as medium adopted here, the term 'place' is understood in the sense of Arne Naess' deep ecology, as the delimitation of "an ecological self, rich in *internal* relations to what is now-called environment."⁵⁹ In the specific case of the study of captioned landscapes, the focus is on the relations of writing with other media, human and non-human, present in the environments. The term 'representations' designates both the representations (verbal, visual, verbovisual or other media) of captioned landscapes, as well as the combinations of writing and representations of the landscape, such as in the co-presence of figures and ideograms in Oriental landscape painting.

It should be pointed out that the boundary between places and representations is porous, since, as Lionello Puppi has written, there is a "dialectical connection and reciprocal relationship" between experiential structures and their evocations in the literary or pictorial imagination.⁶⁰ Firstly, because the continual mutation and perishability of landscape contexts means that, often, their literary or visual representations constitute the only evidence

⁵⁸ Arnaud Schmitt, "Captions as Suturing in Hybrid Memoirs," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 38, no. 1 (2023).

⁵⁹ Arne Naess, *An example of a place: Tvergastein*, 1992, in *Selected Works of Arne Naess*, ed. by Alan Drenghson and Harold Glasser, vol. X (Springer, 2005), 1. Naess' notion of 'place' coincides with Mitchell's notion of 'space' as "practiced place" (Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 9).

⁶⁰ Lionello Puppi, "Nelle derive crepuscolari del Barocco: il giardino dei supplizi," in *Il Giardino delle Muse. Arti e artifici nel barocco europeo, Atti del IV Colloquio Internazionale Pietrasanta 8-10 settembre 1993*, ed. by Maria Adriana Giusti and Alessandro Tagliolini (Edifir, 1995), 149.

of their existence and appearance; a situation made even more precarious, as Pierre Grimal observed, by the iconoclastic or simply abstraction-oriented tendencies that periodically appear in the history of visual representations.⁶¹ Secondly, because, as Michael Jakob observed, historically it has often been literary or visual representations that have influenced the taste and aesthetics of landscape: "The natural landscape, the beauty of nature are [...] not merely an analogue of art, but their product. The literary texts of Petrarch or Albrecht von Haller and the paintings of Lorenzetti or Patinir are not secondary documents, but the forerunners, catalysts and initiators of a later awareness."⁶² The subdivision of the chapters in the two volumes of this work, therefore, assumes with due caution the distinction, relating to the object, between places and representations, supplementing it with another, relating to the subject, i.e. the different postures of the researchers.

In the first volume, this subjective condition is predominantly immersive, of involvement in interactions with the human and non-human media present in captioned landscapes. It is no coincidence that in a significant number of contributions (in particular the chapters by Silvia Lavanco Livreri, Clodagh Brook and Caterina Diotto), the authors adopt the narrative mode of the journey or path to express this involvement with captioned landscapes. In such cases, the relevant cognitive metaphors do not concern vision, which presupposes a distance, but rather resonance as the ability to adapt and respond to a changing environment.⁶³ From this point of view, the study of captioned landscapes confirms Denis Ribouillault's assertion of garden studies in an intermedial perspective as "a fantastic laboratory for thinking and

⁶¹ Pierre Grimal, *L'Art des jardins* (Paris, 1974), it. transl. *L'arte dei giardini. Una breve storia*, 2000, ed. by Marina Magi, presentation by Ippolito Pizzetti, second edition (Donzelli, 2005), 3.

⁶² Michael Jakob, *Paesaggio e letteratura* (Olschki, 2005), 10. The perishable nature of gardens and the influence of the visual arts on the aesthetics of the landscape are the reasons given by Jakob to advocate the study of the iconic language of garden books: Id., "Introduction," in *Jardins en images. Stratégies de représentation au fil des siècles*, ed. by Michael Jakob and Jacques Berchtold (MétisPresses, 2020); regarding the inscriptions, cf. in particular pp. 11-13.

⁶³ The concept of resonance is at the centre of the installation *Magic Queen (from the Artificial Ecologies series)* presented by MAIED Büro für Architektur und transmediale Kunst at the 2021 Venice Architecture Biennale: <https://www.labiennale.org/it/architettura/2021/among-diverse-beings/maeid-b%C3%BCro-f%C3%BCr-architektur-und-transmediale-kunst>.

rethinking intermediality.”⁶⁴ It is a matter, to borrow a formula of the geographer Matteo Meschiari, of “landscaping the theory,”⁶⁵ integrating within it not only the dynamism of the objects, but also that of the subjectivities of the authors. As Arne Naess has observed, in places, intended as stated, “scientific research *does* not at all detract from the immediate experience of togetherness, of identification and appreciation.”⁶⁶

In the second volume, the focus shifts from places to representations. In this case, the subjective posture induced by the objects of study is necessarily more detached, but does not exclude the forms of involvement from consideration. Here, the focus will be on the ways in which representations are able to remediate the embodiment experiences offered by captioned landscapes as places.

Taken together, the two volumes aim to provide a unique contribution to the study of writing as a mediation between the human world and non-human worlds, of interest to scholars of intermedial and visual studies, ecocriticism, garden and landscape history and design, comparative literature, art history, and to enthusiasts of cross-disciplinary dialogue. Outside academia, this work is aimed at museum curators, educators, and public historians interested in the interface between media and natural environments.

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Overview of Chapters in Volume 1

Volume 1 of *Captioned Landscapes. Intermedial Combinations Beyond the Human* is organised chronologically. It opens with a contribution by Yolaine Escande dedicated to Chinese civilisation, within which there is an uninterrupted tradition of captioned landscapes from the first centuries of the vernacular era to the present. Over the course of time, inscriptions placed in the landscape have progressively become spaces for the articulation of spheres as diverse as politics, religion and aesthetics. Originally, inscriptions fulfilled political functions of territorial control, emphasising that the legitimacy of power is connected to the maintenance of harmony between the population and the natural forces of the land. As the original connection to the sacred, writing is also the means of communication with deities and nature spirits. From the fifth century onwards, inscriptions therefore play a fundamental role in the aesthetics of *shanshui* (literally, ‘mountains and waters’), which intermedially crosses over into the arts and landscape design. As well as a synthesis of a millenary tradition, Escande’s contribution reveals the cross-cultural potential of the study of captioned landscapes.

The next chapter, signed by me, takes us back to the West, specifically to seventeenth-century Italy, with Emanuele Tesauro’s programme for the garden of Racconigi near Turin. Here again, the inscriptions constitute the pivot around which a complex articulation between the non-human world of the garden and the human world of morality and politics revolves. The linguistic device that makes these multiple connections possible is the metaphor, which Tesauro, one of the greatest Baroque theorists of literature, sees at work not only in poetry, but in nature itself. From this point of view, the study of captioned landscapes provides valuable indications for the analysis of “ontologies;” in this specific case, the programme for the garden of Racconigi provides an exemplary case of analogism, an ontology in which the physical and moral discontinuity between the two worlds is stitched together thanks to the analogical potential of metaphor.

The next two chapters are dedicated to nature parks. The first, by Silvia Lavanco Livreri, is developed as a “visual walk” in the Bosco della Ficuzza, Rocca Busambra, Bosco del Cappelliere and Gorgo del Drago Oriented nature reserve in Sicily. The author considers in particular the materiality of the inscriptions in the reserve, which are interpreted as an archive of the

interactions between human and non-human. The result is an “ecology of the remains,” whose characteristic temporality is not expressed in a continuous narrative, but in an anachronistic stratification.

The narrative and dramatic dimension of inscriptions within protected areas and the scientific literature on them is instead the focus of Erik Erlanson’s chapter on the Dalby Söderskog nature park in Sweden. The author interprets this inclination towards narrativity as a reflection of temporality as a fundamental mode of the park as a media product. Nature reserves, although ideal representations of nature, are also subject to its incessant change, which writing takes charge of representing through forms of epigraphic dynamisation.

The three following chapters are dedicated to artistic captioned landscapes. Vega Tescari analyses the garden of Prospect Cottage, the home of film director Derek Jarman, on the Kent coast in England. The poet John Donne’s verses placed on the outside of the building constitute a threshold and a hinge between inside and outside. The fact that the words are written in Jarman’s handwriting configures the space as an existential palimpsest, embodying Gilles Clément’s conception of the garden as an archive of the gestures performed within it. The fact that the letters that compose the verses change according to the perspective from which they are observed in turn encourages the visitor to performative actions, the memory of which will also remain inscribed in the garden.

Clodagh Brook’s chapter unfolds in turn as an itinerary through Italian Land Art. Analysing a still little-historicised object, the author highlights the fundamental role of inscriptions, especially in the form of “open signs” through which the limits of language are tested. The placement of writing in the landscape becomes an opportunity for a reflection on the border between legibility and illegibility, which, on the one hand, demands an immersive and dynamic involvement of the observer; on the other hand, it marks the territory with signs endowed with permanence and stability, proposed as an alternative to the evanescence and instability of contemporary communication flows.

The third case of artistic captioned landscape, born out of the curatorial experience of author Pedro Medina Reinón, analyses the presence of writing in the *en plein air* installations of Egyptian artist Ghada Amer. The analysis, which again reveals the intercultural potential of the study of captioned landscapes, highlights in particular how writing not only expands the expressive scope of the artist’s works, but also configures them as a laboratory for social activism. Drawing on the notion of “aesthetic of resistance” proposed by Susan Sontag, the author shows how Ghada Amer’s captioned landscapes induce a transformation

in viewers, who are invited to reconsider the systems and values that shape their lives, which can serve as a prelude for social transformation.

The transformative dimension of captioned landscapes is also the focus of the last chapter, dedicated to the *Via degli Dei*, the hiking trail connecting the Italian cities of Bologna and Florence through the Apennine mountains. The author, Caterina Diotto, emphasises how the inscriptions scattered along the trail, either literary quotations or devised by the travellers themselves, constitute the catalyst for transformative experiences, in which the immersive and embodied dimension plays a fundamental role. In this case, the role played not by permanence, but by the ephemeral character of the inscriptions, transfigured into a symbol of the uniqueness of the lived experience, is emphasised.

Across time and space, the case studies proposed in this volume aim to show the rich and diverse range of creative negotiations between writing and non-human media offered by the analysis of captioned landscapes.

These negotiations involve writing as a graphic fact at various levels. They range from ‘degree zero,’ represented by the metaphorical use of the word in the seventeenth-century case study I have examined, to the involvement of aspects of form (the handwriting in Derek Jarman’s garden studied by Tescari) and materials (the temporal stratifications deposited on the supports described by Lavanco Livreri). In turn, the materiality of writing can take on opposite meanings, sometimes as a sign of permanence, as in the Italian Land Art discussed in Brook’s chapter, sometimes as an ephemeral trace, such as those left on the *Cammino degli Dei* studied by Diotto. In the first case, captioned landscapes act as a place of resistance to the evanescence of digital communication signs; in the second, they tune in to nature, surrendering to its flow.

On a historical level, the comparison with Eastern cultures, made possible by Escande’s essay, highlights a clear differentiation between the millennial continuity of the relationship between writing and natural environments in China and their desultory and fragmented history in the European context. The still early stage of comparative research in this area does not allow us to draw conclusions in this regard, but it is conceivable that the difference between ideographic writing and phonetic alphabets plays a significant role.

The case of Chinese tradition in particular testifies to the relevance of the study of captioned landscapes in relation to the question of “ontologies”. As in the seventeenth-century case I studied, in Chinese culture analogism constitutes the principle of the legibility of the world; in contrast, Italian Land Art, the subject of Brook’s essay, explores the boundary between legibility and illegibility. Further

research on captioned landscapes will enable us to identify any specific features in terms of diachrony or synchrony, in the sense of the predominance of one ontology or another in relation to a specific period or place.

Another aspect of the relevance of the study of captioned landscapes concerns their transformative power. This can be expressed at the political level, as an affirmation of established power, as in the case of inscriptions in imperial China (Escande) and in the green spaces of Ancien Régime Europe (Maggi, Lavanco Livreri); but also, at the level of activism, as in the case of Ghada Amer studied by Medina Reinón, or at the level of individual transformation (Tescari, Diotto). Without claiming to identify a law of historical development, in this case, it is possible to outline a trend towards the expression of social or individual demands, to the detriment of those linked to political power.

Finally, captioned landscapes are a privileged object for the study of literature outside the book medium. Inscriptions in the landscape are a privileged genre of Chinese poetry (Escande); the passion for metamorphosis in the Baroque (Tesauo in my chapter) and Neo-Baroque (Donne quoted by Jarman in Tescari's chapter) intertwines poetry and plant compositions; Italian Land Art dialogues with visual poetry (Brook); verses by famous poets such as Ariosto coexist with anonymous aphorisms on the paths of contemporary walkers (Diotto). On the other hand, the presence of writing in natural environments raises the question of narrativity, sometimes promoting it, as in the case of the national parks studied by Erlanson, sometimes contesting it through forms of anachronistic montage (Lavanco Livreri). In an age "seduced by story," to borrow the title of a book by Peter Brooks, this should be another reason, and not a minor one, to devote ourselves to the study of captioned landscapes.

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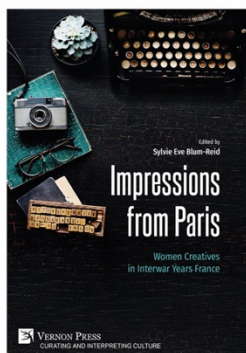
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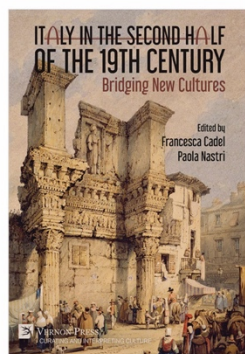
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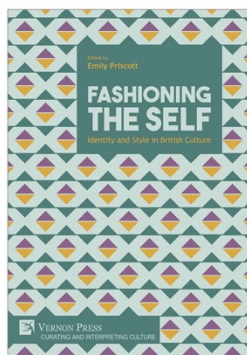
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