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The heritage value of an ordinary mountain landscape

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Introduction

In 2019, in the frame of an Interreg transboundary territorial cooperation project, we, as professors and researcher of the University of Padova, were invited to reflect on the revitalisation of the landscape of Vallesina, a small village in the Venetian Dolomite mountains (Northeast Italy). Aside from the material restoration of an abandoned path—which was at the core of the traditional economic activities—we were invited to analyse and interpret the landscape of the whole village, searching for the sense of place to disclose, to care for and to share with both the inhabitants and the potential visitors. Vallesina had a relevant role in the socio-economic life of the area up until World War II, but nowadays it is a place where depopulation and abandonment are the prevalent driving forces. In a constantly rushing and changing world, Vallesina is apparently immobile, stuck with population decline and activities delocalisation. Nevertheless, listening to the multivocality of the landscape and exploring its tangible and intangible dimensions, mobility emerged as a key category that has contributed to moulding it. As a set of past and current materialities, practices, and meanings, a constellation of mobilities (Cresswell, 2010) started to inform our gaze on the landscape of Vallesina, which began to disclose its heritage potential. Ancient streets and artefacts, human and nonhuman movements framing everyday past and present life, and collective and individual memories have intertwined in time, shaping a multifunctional landscape to nurture.

In this chapter we take mobility as a category able to question the heritage potential of everyday landscapes in an alpine environment. Starting from the case study of Vallesina, we put into play the relationship between immobility and mobility in the identification of and care for alpine heritages, with particular attention to the contrast with the outstanding Dolomites UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) near Vallesina. This case study guides us to look at the relationship between ordinary and extraordinary landscapes. With the mobility of Vallesina, we aim to “move” the debate on landscape as heritage in the Alps.

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Landscape, heritage, and mobility

Landscape and heritage are two widely explored concepts within a wide spectrum of disciplines. When explored together, many common points, or “parallel lines” (Harvey, 2013) emerge, such as the compresence of nature and culture, the tangible and the intangible, the constant state of becoming, the contingency of the value attributions, the collective dimension and political implications, and the open questions of authenticity, conservation and restoration (ibid). Considering landscape as heritage goes beyond the mere consideration of outstanding landscapes to be preserved, as often happens in the traditional institutional processes; the landscape-as-heritage perspective highlights the plurality of landscape values and the limits of a strict, detached definition of what is heritage and what is not. Both the Conventions proposed in 2000 and 2005 by the Council of Europe (European Landscape Convention and Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society) on the one hand underline the importance of not only outstanding settings, but also everyday and ordinary ones; on the other hand, they ask for the involvement of non-expert people in the definition of landscape and heritage and in the design of actions, due to the relevance of these entities for people’s well-being.

The landscape-mobility nexus has recently been observed from different points of view in the context of the mobility turn in social sciences and humanities (Sheller and Urry, 2006). The categories of materiality, representations, and practices that concern mobility studies in a political perspective (Cresswell, 2010) can be usefully applied in landscape studies, analysing how landscape features are impacted by or impact mobility in its different facets: “embodied movement plays an important role as the landscape continually changes depending on our movement through and experience with it” (Kokalis and Goetsch, 2018, p. 2). “How we encounter, apprehend, inhabit and move through landscapes” (Merriman et al., 2008, p. 191) are crucial topics of reflection, especially in a more-than-representational approach to landscape (Waterton, 2019). Mobility is viewed as “an important concept for exploring how landscapes are produced, lived, experienced and moved through in dynamic, embodied and highly politicised ways” (Merriman et al., 2008, p. 209).

Given these relevant debates on both the landscape-heritage and landscape-mobility associations, the heritage-mobility pair emerges as a key nexus and needs to be deepened, yet a comparable theoretical systematisation seems to be lacking. In the wide spectrum of perspectives that consider this pair, tourism is one of the main fields concerned, often including landscape issues and analysing topics like accessibility to heritage sites (considering both difficulties and excesses) and tourism traffic impacts (Scuttari, Orsi and Bassani, 2019), slow mobility for sustainable tourism (Maltese et al., 2017), cultural routes and pilgrimages (Moscarelli, Lopez, and Lois González, 2020), heritage authenticity in fragile communities affected by tourism mobility (Conway, 2014), mobility infrastructures (like old railways) acquiring heritage values becoming greenways

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(Rovelli et al., 2020), and mobile and digital heritage representations (Hernández-Lamaset al., 2021). Research approaches in this case also include and often intertwine the three categories of materiality, representations and practices.

Focussing on the Dolomites, and in general on the Alps, mobility in relation to the landscape and heritage is addressed in migration studies, where landscape changes are strongly connected with depopulation and abandonment, and with a consequent loss of heritage values (Varotto, 2020). The importance of routes and paths as structural components of landscapes in an historical perspective (Franzolin, 2012) as well as the debate on traffic impacts on natural heritage are other related topics (Scuttari, Orsi, and Bassani, 2019). At an overall glance, however, mountain landscapes are mostly considered static, never changing and immobile; precisely for this reason, they acquire official heritage value.

Immobility, mobility and the Dolomites heritage

Mount Antelao, overlooking the small village of Vallesina, belongs to one of the nine mountain groups included by UNESCO in 2009 in the WHS of the Dolomites, according to criteria VII and VIII (“exceptional natural beauty” and “outstanding examples of earth’s history”: UNESCO, 2009). The border of the nine groups of the site includes the upper parts of forested slopes and dolomite rock walls and peaks, but excludes the lower part of the slopes and the valley bottoms with the villages and the human-made landscape. The UNESCO inclusion in the “natural heritage” list risks producing a double effect: in the name of its preservation, the Nomination has highlighted the values of natural heritage “immobility”, overlooking the values of the relationships that linked the Alpine communities with their mountains (with many different forms of local mobilities), instead forging a closer relationship with tourist mobility. In this way, the Nomination implicitly emphasises trends already underway in the Alpine mountains, towards the “habitat’s extremization” (Bätzing, 2005) or, more generally, to a clear demarcation between spaces for nature and spaces for humans, between human mobility and natural (geological) immobility.

Conceiving of the landscape of the Dolomites only as a natural space concentrates the efforts of preservation and protection inside the “fence”. In opposition, beyond the perimeter of “protection areas” and “buffer zones” (and thus outside the UNESCO observation area), this indirectly risks stimulating the opposite effects of urbanization, tourist mobility, and anthropic impact as a function of valorization triggered by the same Nomination.

The UNESCO Nomination therefore risks also emphasising the dichotomy between mobility and immobility: on the one hand by favouring the paroxysmal, “hit and run” mobility of the tourists that increases anthropic stress on protected areas, on the other hand by further crushing the marginal areas around the “natural heritage” in a rhetoric of conservation and immobility. Moving the Dolomites, in this case, therefore means conceiving the same natural “good” in a dynamic and relational way, grasping the dialogue among

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other mobilities (of elements, animals, plants, and local population) that constitute the pivot of the Alpine cultural heritage, in the shadow of the Dolomites' recognition process. The boundaries of the nine areas are almost totally (96 per cent) drawn on those of the already existing protection rules (protected areas such as the Dolomiti Bellunesi National Park or Natura 2000 areas). The presence of these tools led to the inclusion of some areas and the exclusion of others lacking tools for protection from human action. Very narrow buffer zones “designed to support conservation” (UNESCO, 2009) do not help in grasping the value of medietas, the “middle” landscapes produced by a laborious and centuries-old work, the mediation between ecological–environmental and socio–economic needs, and the combination of immobility and mobility in the same space (Varotto, 2020).

In the text of the Nomination, there is no reference to local populations, prefiguring a mountain without mountaineers and the sole destiny of a “tourist machine” (De Fino and Morelli, 2009, p. 15). The risk is therefore to convert this heritage into an open-air museum to be made more usable and a winning model in conservation policies. Guidelines like these have already been put in place in other UNESCO WHSs with serious problems caused by the exponential growth of visitors (De Fino and Morelli, 2009, p. 26). The absence of local communities in the official documents clashes with the fact that the legal ownership of parts of the assets belongs to the inhabitants themselves through civic use institutes; the historical role of local communities conserving the asset through the agro–silvo–pastoral economy (Guichonnet, 1986) is likely to be decreasingly felt, since the local society itself has embraced models of development and tourist behaviours (Salsa, 2007). The renaturalization process that has been underway for decades – a consequence of depopulation and abandonment of previous activities – is even positively evaluated in the nomination file, responding to the requests of an urban population eager for pure wilderness without humans. This trend neglects the human presence and its traditional mobility being intimately linked to the whole Dolomite landscape, generating a “manicured landscape” (Vannini, Vannini and Valentin, 2020), the abandonment of which produces a loss of landscape variety and cultivated biodiversity, which is stigmatised in many Italian mountain areas.

In short, the image of the Dolomites area that comes from the UNESCO WHS's perimeter is that of an immense nature reserve with heritage features stuck in their immobility and encouraging outsiders' mobility. Nevertheless, the challenge today is mostly around the metaphorical “fence”, represented by the WHS border (Varotto, 2012), where, as in Vallesina, the relationships between natural and cultural heritage, the historical connections between areas inside and outside the perimeter, and the mobile dimension of a heritage that is only apparently immobile need to be re-signified.

This framework suggests that alternative heritage values emerge when looking at a local, everyday landscape of Vallesina – that is not officially considered “heritage” – through the key category of mobility, considering a wide spectrum of landscape elements and both human and nonhuman mobility, and the

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intertwining of materiality, representations, and practices. Looking at landscape “tensions” between nature and culture, materiality and immateriality, proximity and distance, and absence and presence generated by or generating movement helps in defining Vallesina’s meaningful identity, as “it’s precisely an intertwining, a simultaneous gathering and unfurling, through which versions of self and world emerge as such” (Wylie, 2007).

Vallesina: the (im)mobile village

Vallesina (divided into the hamlets of Vallesina di Sopra and Vallesina di Sotto) developed in what we can call a “mobile” context. The area, like many others in the Alps, was characterised by multi-scalar exchanges and movements linked to the availability of resources and to natural infrastructures. This area was the geographical linkage between the two sides of the Alps, the Mediterranean and the German worlds: along its routes and rivers, people, objects, and goods have travelled for centuries, and are still travelling every day. Moreover, during the territorial influence of the Republic of Venice (from 1420 until 1797), and up until the beginning of the twentieth century, these valleys were crucial for the timber industry and trade. Starting from the mobile and interconnected context in which the village was founded, we aim to explore some important mobilities that have shaped its landscape over the years, contributing to defining its past and present identity.

Before presenting the mobilities of Vallesina, a brief introduction to the research methodologies is needed. Field and desk research combined in a mixed method approach integrating embodiment and distancing, landscape observation and exploration, interviews, literature reading, and image interpretation. A crucial part of the research was conducted by interviewing almost all 16 inhabitants of Vallesina. Other interviews were conducted with local history and anthropology experts. The embodied research was conducted by visiting the area’s museums and walking through Vallesina and the surroundings at different times (in winter snow, in spring, and in summer). A constellation of mobilities (following Cresswell’s notion of constellation, the mobilities of Vallesina can be read as “historically and geographically specific formations of movements, narratives about mobility and mobile practices”, 2010, p. 17) emerged from the exploration and the research conducted on the landscape of the village, ranging from the material and nonhuman mobility of water, stones, fire, animals, and plants to the meaningful human practices of migration, trade, religious rituals, commuting, and tourism. The following part of the chapter is a descriptive account of some parts of this constellation.

Mobilities of water

The foundation of Vallesina is closely linked to the mobility of water. As a proto-industrial site, the village was established close to the Vallesina stream, taking advantage of the power of water for economic development. In 1776,

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according to the Venetian civil registry, in the area (mainly in Vallesina) there were 27 wheat mills, one sawmill, five weaving mills and 22 grindstones. Nowadays, water mobility is no longer animating any economic activities, and only one restructured watermill producing hydropower for the nearby house in the upper part of the village is left. Despite the passing of time, the social and economic relationship with water mobility is embedded into the landscape: it can be read in the position and the shape of the houses and in the vestiges of the mills along the abandoned route to be restored. It can also be read in the many millstones spread along the streets and in the gardens: they stand converted into strange planters and ornamental objects, material evidence of a past mobility.

Landscape not only discloses a specific economic and social relationship with water mobility; traces of another liquid mobility can be read in the materiality as well as in the memories of the village's inhabitants: flooding. Vallesina experienced two major floods in 1966 and 1994. Both the floods resulted in severe damage (luckily without physical damages to people); the flood in 1966 caused the final blow to the economic system based on water as a motor power, a system already exhausted by emigration and economic changes. The landscape of flooding can be read in the coexistence of presence and absence. A recently built bridge, a river cement cliff aimed at containing the flow and the inhabitants' memories, interrelate with the empty space left by the houses and mills wiped out by the stream.

Proximity to water, the core reason for the village, resulted in a landscape made up of the entanglement of two water ontologies (Yates, Harris, and Wilson, 2017) produced by two different relationships with water mobility: water as a resource and water as a threat. The complex connection with the flow of water has produced, and still produces, a set of infrastructures, practices, and intangible traces.

Nonhuman mobilities: animals (and plants)

In Vallesina, as in many alpine contexts, human and (domestic and wild) animals' lives intersect daily. The history of the village reminds us how animals and humans have shared mobilities for a long time. Domestic animals were used in the past for facilitating human movements: in Vallesina, mules were typically used for transporting the cereals and flour in and out the village. Moreover, some of the inhabitants still remember the two horses that used to drag the snowplough during the 1960s and 1970s, allowing people to move along the streets during the snowy winters. Domestic animals' mobilities can be read into the landscape of the ancient streets: up until 1828, Vallesina was crossed by the "royal street", an important infrastructure probably built on the track of the ancient Roman route that connected the plain with the Tyrol region. The width of this street (much more narrow than contemporary streets) was related to the width of the wagon carrying people and goods and being pulled by animals (horses or oxen).

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Beyond the movements of domestic animals, nowadays the inhabitants of Vallesina must reckon with wild animals' mobility. From the second half of the twentieth century, with the population decline, people have ceased to hunt for food and have stopped cultivating wide spaces for sustenance: these changes in everyday spatialities have allowed animals to gain room and freedom of movement. The landscape of the wild can be read in the houses and their surroundings. A new relationship with what Ginn would call the "domestic wild" (Ginn, 2016, p. 2) has been set. A semi-domesticated fox returns every night to eat at the eldest inhabitant's doorstep; that becomes a stop-over along the fox's route. The air is moving, too: in spring, swallows return to their already-built nest under the roofs of the houses (both the uninhabited and the habited ones). Finally, routes of deer intertwine — and sometimes conflict — with human spaces. While exploring the area of the abandoned route to be restored, we came across three male deer at noon in wintertime. Such an unusual encounter made us reflect on the ongoing interconnection of human and animal spaces that can also be read in the enclosures of the vegetable gardens, built up to protect cultivations from deer's mobility and hunger.

As suggested above, mobility of wild animals and their daily interconnection with human spaces also depends upon the human relationship with space. After the abandonment of wide cultivations and mowing practices, the remaining inhabitants just cultivate small gardens close to the houses. This change in human spatiality fostered what we call the mobility of wild plants: the abandoned fields gave way to some plants, such as hazelnut trees and ashes, that are starting to become young woods: space for wild animals.

The mobilities of people

People have travelled along the streets of Vallesina and its surroundings for centuries. The village was crossed by the royal street: from the nearby villages as well as from Venice and Tirol, people, animals, and objects contributed to drawing the landscape. In 1828 a new street, called "Alemagna", was built uphill, replacing the former street and excluding Vallesina from everyday traffic. The Alemagna is now a route for trucks carrying goods from Austria to the plain and to eastern Europe, but it is also a route for many tourists going to Cortina d'Ampezzo and to the Dolomites UNESCO WHS.

People living in Vallesina unanimously claim the luck of staying downhill from Alemagna's traffic: the automobility of people and goods causes inconvenience to the inhabitants of the nearby villages crossed by the street. Most of the inhabitants of Vallesina chose to stay there for its peacefulness, and are willing to commute for work, even for long distances. The uncongested and "immobile" landscape, away from traffic, generates a new practice of daily mobility.

Vallesina went through another crucial phase of human mobility that can be found in the landscape and in the intangible value of individual and domestic memories: the mobility of emigration. As in many other valleys of the Alps,

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temporary and permanent emigration contributed to defining the identity of Vallesina (as well as of the entire province). The first important permanent migration from the village took place after a catastrophic fire in 1871 that left most of the people (117 is the number recorded in a coeval administrative document) homeless. This forced displacement corresponds to what is identified as the first period of the Italian great emigration (Audenino and Tirabassi, 2008). The destination was mainly South America (Brazil), but people also went to Austria and Switzerland. The other important emigration from Vallesina took place after World War II and had Peru and Argentina as the main destinations. Migration changed the face of Vallesina with regard to people's displacement, and the traces of this specific mobility can be partially read in terms of landscape absences: uninhabited houses and uncultivated fields depend in part on the small and great migrations of the last decades.

Conclusions

The mobilities presented, in terms of landscape materiality, past and present practices, and preserved meanings and memories, form what Cresswell (2010) suggests calling a constellation of mobilities. In the form of a constellation, the interrelation between past water uses, animal footsteps, old letters from Peru, commuters coming home, and so on, has heritage value: it produces the movable identity of Vallesina, its local distinctiveness. The diachronic and synchronic forces generating the constellation materialise in the everyday inhabited landscape, to be lived by the inhabitants, visited by tourists and studied by people interested in cultural heritage.

The value of the everyday landscape of Vallesina is different from the heritage values and management policies at the core of the Dolomites UNESCO recognition. With this chapter, our aim is to suggest an alternative way to think about and cope with heritage in mountain environments. We acknowledge the importance of rocks and peaks, the majesty of the Dolomites, their importance for the balance of a fragile ecosystem, as well as their key role in the construction of modern imaginaries and aesthetics; nevertheless, we propose building methodological and practical bridges overcoming the fence between nature and culture, the extraordinary and the ordinary, the uninhabited and the inhabited, and the (supposedly) immobile natural landscape and the mobile landscapes produced by centuries-old works at the crossroad of ecological–environmental and socio-economic needs. We claim the need to study and promote landscapes as heritage in contexts that are identified as marginal, but that have much to tell about the ongoing interrelation of past, present, and perhaps future times.

While interviewing the inhabitants of Vallesina, one of the final questions invited them to give a very short definition of the village (three words maximum). The definitions collected are all extremely positive: “happy island”, “my home”, “peace”, and “a need” are a sample of the inhabitants' thoughts. For them, Vallesina already has heritage value. The challenge is to make this

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value recognisable, with the aim of generating policies—and new imaginaries—able to materially value this place. The meaningful constellation of mobilities already speaks to the inhabitants, and hopefully will speak to visitors interested in slow cultural tourism (a quite new type of tourism in the area) based on knowledge and awareness, as stated in the objectives of the project at the base of the research in Vallesina.

Finally, in our research, mobility is a key category able to put into play different reflections on the relationship between landscape and heritage. It is simultaneously the topic and perspective, material evidence and methodology. It allows us to understand Vallesina and to imagine the heritage value of its landscape. In the frame of the need to deepen the heritage–mobility nexus, we propose using this insightful category (including its antonym) to “mobilise” the analysis and interpretation of other landscapes beyond the alpine context as ongoing combinations of materiality, meanings, and practices.

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