

Imagining Venetian Hydro-Peripatetics with Ciardi, Favretto, Lansyer, and Pasini

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Abstract This article proposes a sensory approach to physical and representational environments based on a pedestrian perspective. With a view to bringing arts-based considerations to bear on UN Sustainable Development Goal 6.6, concerned with the protection and restoration of water-related ecosystems, the analysis primarily revolves around Italian and French depictions of Venice in the 1880s-1890s that encompass stimuli for smell, sound, taste, and touch as much as sight. Close readings are undertaken to highlight hyperlocal elements that merit consideration when determining courses of action for the long-term good of the lagoonscape.

Keywords Art. Blue humanities. Nineteenth century. The senses. Walking.

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How can flooding extend dimensions of knowledge? The following ruminations are rooted in a walk from northern Cannaregio to southern Dorsoduro on the public holiday of 8 December 2020, when an instance of *acqua alta* reached 138 cm without the 78 tidal barriers of the Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico (MOSE) being able to respond in time. When moving through knee-high water in waders, a peculiar sensory mode arose to do with elements such as the sight of semi-submerged shops and homes, the sound of splashes echoing through practically deserted streets, the smell of lagoonal matter, the taste of saltiness in the air, and the touch of liquid lapping at shin level. On the basis of such a distinctively Venetian event, I propose to engage immersively with paintings of places off the hydropolis's beaten track that were produced during the nineteenth century's closing decades. My analysis here revolves around pieces of visual culture with Italian and French roots, not least two works from the International Gallery of Modern Art at Ca' Pesaro: 1. a photograph of December 8th in *Il Fatto Quotidiano*; 2. Guglielmo Ciardi's *Fondamenta di Venezia* (1890); 3. Giacomo Favretto's *Veduta di Venezia* (1884); 4. Alberto Pasini's *Canale di Venezia, effetto di alba* (1885); 5. Emmanuel Lansyer's *Venise, mur de couvent et vieilles maisons en briques au bord d'un canal, aux environs de l'église San Sebastian* (1892). My form of "critical hydrography" (Baucom 1999, 307) seeks to offer a volumetrically inclined exploration of paintings – inventively focusing on height, width, depth, and time inside them – with reference to United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 6.6, which revolves around

protect[ing] and restor[ing] water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes.

A particularly high degree of care is required in the case of the Venetian Lagoon, where islands make up barely a tenth of the surface area, primarily composed of salt marshes, mud flats, and open water. In this place, ecological losses have gone hand in hand with flows of hazardous chemicals and non-biodegradable waste since a relatively early stage in the colonisation of the aquatic environment by people fleeing mainland dangers.

In 2021, on Venice's 1600th anniversary, an unstable relation between water and land constitutes the foremost source of endangerment for the way of life implanted at the Adriatic Sea's northwesternmost reach. For Serenella Iovino in *Ecocriticism and Italy*, there is no overlooking the degree to which "Venice [...] breathes tides" (2016, 47). Given that a tide of 80 cm is enough to inundate the entrance of St Mark's Basilica, and more than half of the historic centre is engulfed when surges reach 140 cm, it is hardly surprising how many residents and workers in the six *sestieri* are given to measuring tides

against personal markers like a *palazzo*'s flight of stairs, or a window in a narrow *calle*. Even with MOSE as a decades-in-the-making technological stopgap, the current state of affairs is far from secure. As highlighted by the activism-oriented think-tank We Are Here Venice under the leadership of the environmental scientist Jane da Mos-to, plenty needs to be done to achieve "a more resilient, better-understood Venice" (2020, par. 7). My goal in this article is to outline a framework for better understanding the hydropolis from a pedestrian's perspective, not only because my familiarity with the districts in question largely derives from being there on foot, but also because walking is essential to accessing most areas at a remove from Venice's navigable waterways.

The significant flooding in December 2020 proved to be doubly headline-worthy due to thwarted expectations of a new kind of safety based on the success of MOSE two months beforehand. In the light of an all-too-familiar Venetian disaster iconography, the world had to process the fallibility of a longwinded and pricey strategy to engineer a dry city [fig. 1].



Figure 1 Giuseppe Pietrobelli, "Il Mose non è attivo, Venezia finisce sott'acqua". 2020. Digital photograph. *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 8 December. www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/12/08/il-mose-non-e-attivo-venezia-finisce-sottacqua-lavori-non-ultimati-e-previsioni-sballate-ecco-perche-le-paratoie-non-sono-state-alzate/6030345. © LaPresse - Anteo Marinoni

This scene brings out Venice's aquatic character, on account of the positioning at water level, as well as the single-point perspective that leads from the raised walkway in the left foreground to Fabrizio Plessi's *Natale Digitale* between the columns at the lagoonal end of Piazzetta San Marco. There is a sense of a watery continuum stretching towards the *bacino* past the LCD-fashioned tree, sandwiched between the Doge's Palace and the Campanile. Thanks to the unconventionally low viewpoint, pride of place is afforded to the *hydro-* at least

as much as the *-polis*, even if water occupies barely a quarter of the image. Here, as conjectured by the architect Cecilia Chen in *Thinking with Water*, “waters are situated, lively [...]. Waters take place” (2013, 275). In the foreground, the figure girded in bright waders and a dark anorak is emblematic of a heavy-duty response to an extreme *taking-place* by lively waters, all suggesting worse to come for the beleaguered community. Counterparts to this benchmark of disaster are the figure in black to the right and the two figures to the left beneath the Basilica’s main portal, complete with its mosaic of the Last Judgement. Besides doom-laden visual cues, the photograph conjures up sensations of touching thigh-high water, hearing the splashing of passers-by, smelling wrack, and tasting a bitterness in the air. Such was my experience, mediated through gumboots, waterproof trousers, an anorak, and a surgical mask necessitated by COVID-19. What could transpire in terms of action and policymaking if it were possible to establish a collective sense of standing in a waterlogged site epitomising the human ambition to carve out a place in the world?

Venice’s plight is symptomatic of the Global North’s insufficiently rationalised landscaping choices over centuries. In the introduction to *Italy and the Environmental Humanities*, Serenella Iovino, Enrico Cesaretti, and Elena Past highlight that

the lack of a bond between cultural identity, social awareness, and environmental protection is indeed at the core of the ecological crisis. (2018, 8)

It is not just that the renowned locale of the Doge’s Palace is a paradigm of how the climate crisis is threatening heritage recognised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation; there is also the fact that the hydropolis’s identity is the product of human-led environmental alterations associated with a social preference for protecting a certain kind of stability – a highly unnatural concept. After all, the Venetian Lagoon has been experiencing *acqua alta* for one-and-a-half millennia, but preservation efforts have ratcheted up a notch in the light of particular notions of what is being imperilled:

there is [...] the worry that [...] on account of natural forces [...] Venice will disappear into the sea. (Hom 2010, 378)

Anxiety is growing about time running out for the prestigious site at graver and graver risk of being overwhelmed by more-than-human occurrences. Precious little of anything ‘natural’ defines the forces gathering steam across our planet, however.

A definitive submersion of Venice would be the outcome of an increased risk profile arising from social choices about matters such

as excavating deep channels in the mud flats for the sake of heavy freight and cruise ships. There is a strong case for thinking in terms of city-with-water as opposed to city-or-water:

Venice, just like its disaster risk personality, is much more of a social construct than a physical construct. [...] The aquapelago of Venice could take many forms, with the form currently chosen being socially constructed to accept water but not floods. [...] [N]on-structural approaches to flood risk management tend to have the best long-term successes in averting flood disasters, including in aquapelago cities. For Venice, implementing only non-structural approaches would increase the long-term potential of the city no longer being dry, making aquapelagality more water than land, rather than the structural approaches which make aquapelagality more land than water. [...] That is, flooding can define the aquapelago, at least for Venice, if this choice is specifically made. (Kelman 2021, 89)

To engage with Venice as more water than land is to open up the possibility of a multi-layered hydropolis not circumscribed by an inclination towards dry territory as an indicator of cultural longevity. Instead of handwringing over expensive yet fallible barriers or re-routing technologies, an enduring version of the lagoonscape ought to be rooted in an accommodation of wetness. Indeed, a less risky future would require a social reconstruction of the traits constituting *venezianità*, aligned with the intricacies of aquatic ecologies in their plenitude, without losing sight of the importance of tackling the climate crisis more broadly, so as to avoid non-viable conditions overall.

With respect to an embodied appreciation of Venice's watery identity across space and time, I wish to propose a method of hydro-peripatetics. This technique entails paying heed to water in all its forms while walking through a locale, whether in the physical world or as a psychogeographical extrapolation of a creative work, as will shortly be demonstrated with late nineteenth-century Venetian paintings. In essence, I am looking to highlight how the process of wandering around a place is historically and environmentally contingent, not unlike going through documentation from a bygone age. The environmental historians Roberta Biasillo and Claudio de Majo introduce a German-Italian collection of articles on "Storytelling and Environmental History" by emphasizing

the myriad of ways in which historical translation – even in our everyday actions – takes place, whether strolling the streets or trolling the historical archives. (2020, 6)

This comprehension of situatedness affords pride of place to translation, in an expanded gist of values "carrying beyond" (*trans-ferre*) one

milieu to another. Understanding a route from place to place, moving between contexts, setting out a path for others to follow – each of these deeds is integral to both walking and research, so it is fruitful to dwell on the degree to which a joined-up approach can be mutually enhancing. According to the urban architect Filipa Wunderlich in “Walking and Rhythmicity”,

walking is an elemental way of perceiving [...] places and develop[ing] feelings and thoughts for them. [...] The walking experience is multi-sensory. [...] Beside the aural, the olfactory, the visual, and touch, even taste is occasionally [...] contributing to the process of retaining a sense of place. (2008, 128)

The key sense involved in walking is touch, due to a push against a resistant surface that leads to motion, in addition to encounters with elements like air currents in the space through which a pedestrian moves. Vision and hearing tend to be the next most significant senses because their role in translating stimuli allows the computation of a route to a destination, with avoidance of obstacles where necessary. Smell and taste enrich a walker’s experience of a place in relation to activities and identities, especially organic ones. These factors can be felt in the aforementioned photograph in ways similar to the physical encounter with the flooding that I experienced at more or less the same time.

Vis-à-vis wetness, touch is the chief means of appreciation, since the other senses are less suited to gauging moisture:

wet names a time-bound condition or sensation keyed to [...] perceptual limits. (Yates 2015, 187; emphasis added)

Perceptions of water’s impact are fundamental to appreciating the Venetian Lagoon’s state at a given moment. Has due credit been given to how aquatic presences are diversely folded into life in the hydropolis, though? The image in *Il Fatto Quotidiano* privileges St Mark’s Square as a highly recognisable and poignant emblem of *high culture* on the verge of slipping beyond reach, but everyday *venezianità* is about many more qualities than the nub of the historic centre, right down to the hyperlocal concerns of Campo San Polo or Fondamenta della Misericordia. When concluding *Waterways and the Cultural Landscape*, the geographer Francesco Visentin is at pains to point out the extent to which

vast intangible cultural heritage [...] can emerge from the water-scapes populated by small lives, facts, stories and traditions still latent. (2018, 248)

In the coming pages, by setting aside the grandeur of the Campanile and the Doge's Palace for the sake of painted stories encapsulating the heritage of Venice's less recognised waterways, I shall endeavour to augment the palpability of things that are valuable owing to their seemingly small magnitude.

Ways of approaching the hydropolis are legion. In the words of the architect Sophia Psarra's *The Venice Variations*,

the casual visitor finds in Venice a fantastic array of alleys, canals and palaces. [...] For artists and writers, Venice reveals itself as a water-city of mirroring and inversions. [...] Turner came to Venice to paint [...] an atmospheric city of light effects reflected on water. Light, surface and atmosphere epitomised Henry James's Venetian visions. (2018, 12)

A considerable part of the joy of walking through Venice comes from stumbling across less frequented water- and byways, which might be just a few steps from a major route like Strada Nova. In tandem with the aquatic and lustrous fascinations experienced by visitors, the depths of Venetian life have long been the preserve of born-and-bred painters and authors. In the era of Google Maps and the aforementioned photograph, materials including paintings from the 1880s-1890s can be helpful for dipping beneath the surface of the locale that - akin to water - is at risk of being taken as shallower than it really is. Ultimately, I am intent on a hydro-*graphy* of Venice that translates the unique sense-scape of watery ecologies, on the basis of the idea of walking through a painting.

Among Venetian artists of the second half of the nineteenth century, Guglielmo Ciardi (Venice, 1842-Venice, 1917) is a towering figure. His eye for local vividness comes to the fore when depicting spots like a pedestrian route between a waterway and a row of buildings, very much along the lines of the Impressionists or the Macchiaioli [fig. 2].

The setting calls to mind Castello *basso* or the Ghetto's surroundings, detached from the trappings of industrial modernity sprouting along the Giudecca Canal. According to Nico Stringa in *Otto-cento veneto*,

Ciardi [...] conferma anche nella fase matura della sua produzione la sua totale idiosincrasia per la modernità. (2004, 64)

The artist certainly provides an idiosyncratic composition that is two-thirds water, with land-based human figures relegated to the background. How might the moment have been experienced by those fleeting presences evoked through suggestive contours as opposed to sharp lines? The canal occupying the bulk of the fore- and midground - especially striking due to the sweeping strokes of col-



Figure 2 Guglielmo Ciardi, *Fondamenta di Venezia*. 1890. Oil on canvas, 22.3 × 34.8 cm. Ca' Pesaro, Venice.
© Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia – Archivio Fotografico

ours ranging from white to black – could well have echoed the hum of conversations, or carried scents and tastes of suspended matter at high tide. In the left midground, the boats might have been seen rocking on the rippled waters, heard dipping into the fluid surface, and smelt as moist wood. Regarding the built structures in the background, with masonry mottled in an array of brown and cream dabs, the facades would most probably have shimmered with reflected light, and been rough to the touch of someone leaning for a rest. Given the plentiful possibilities for sensory galvanisation arising from the painting's rich textures, it is little wonder that Ciardi's oeuvre is considered an evocative apex. In the words of Denys Sutton's contribution about "Il fascino di Venezia" in *Venezia nell'Ottocento*,

Ciardi [...] dipinse molte deliziose vedute che possono aver influenzato pittori stranieri più di quanto si possa credere. (1983, 262)

Such an abundance of experiential and technical knowledge is as compelling today as it was for the painter's peers and audiences spread across the world a century ago. This degree of thrall is indicative of the potential for nineteenth-century Venetian art to act as a

channel for public engagement with issues of water quality inherent in UN Sustainable Development Goal 6.6.

Questions of overcomplexity have bedevilled the fight against Venice's ecological endangerment (to say nothing of the rest of our planet). Without doubt, scientific knowledge provides important insights, but concepts and modes of expression are not always accessible for non-specialists. The efficacy of diverse forms of evidence about the climate crisis is addressed in a pilot study by the climatologists Safron O'Neill and Mike Hulme:

non-expert icons were [...] considerably better understood than the expert icons, and interest was higher in the non-expert icons than in the expert icons. Indeed, in some cases the expert icons may have actively disengaged individuals, because they invoked emotions such as helplessness or boredom; and [...] were too scientific and complex to understand. (2009, 408)

With "expert icons" including graphs and time-lapse projections, there is a risk of disengagement resulting from insufficient understanding or emotional stimulation. By contrast, a piece of art or a similar "non-expert icon" can appeal to emotion before logic in intricate respects, which paves the way for a deeper encounter.

The deep impact of the pictorial is made plain in the political economist Jacques Attali's *Bruits*, on the basis of the sixteenth-century compositional style of world-landscapes (*Weltlandschaften*):

l'art [...] ne donne pas seulement à voir, mais aussi et surtout à entendre le monde. (2001, 40)

It pays dividends to bear in mind how far a painting can resonate beyond the visual nature of oil on canvas, as we have seen with Ciardi's *Fondamenta di Venezia*. In fact, the polysemy of "entendre" suggests a manner of understanding the world through hearing, which can be expanded in the direction of *sounding* the depths of water. In the light of volumetrics, I am proposing that visual culture can be sounded sensorily, compositionally, historically... What is entailed in feeling through a piece's layers of associations, even the brushstrokes left by an artist at work in the world? Representations of Venice-as-hydropolis from the 1880s-1890s seem to abound in opportunities to take in the sort of phenomenon described by the physicist Jan Koenderink in an editorial for *Perception*:

the nature of [a] reflection, its extent and granularity, reveals the microstructure of [a] surface. It is one of the signs by which we easily distinguish apples from oranges, or the weathered skin of old sailors from that of babies. (2000, 133).

A stroll through physical or painted Venetian scenes is replete with water-produced tricks of the light that draw attention to the weathering of buildings, people, and much beyond the optical plane.

Besides having affective and phenomenological aspects, a painting can function as a potent archive of ecological data in terms of its subject and material form, just as water serves to archive biochemical presences. With reference to the geohistorical merits of portrayals of flooding in late nineteenth-century France,

tout paysage peint montre un temps qu'il fait. En y traquant des éléments atmosphériques, des comportements humains ou des états végétatifs, le spectateur décèle autant d'indices d'un type de temps comme figé sur la toile à un instant *t*. [...] [L]es artistes parvenaient à rendre compte de situations météorologiques fidèles à ce qui aurait pu être photographié. (Metzger, Desarthe 2017, 119)

Art with a measure of verisimilitude is in effect a precious index of climatological conditions, social habits like attire, and more-than-human presences. Such types of meaning are palpable well before the advent of albumen photographic prints and the apogee of naturalism, of which Ciardi was a prime exponent. In “Sixty-Cm Submersion of Venice Discovered Thanks to Canaletto’s Paintings”, the climatologists Dario Camuffo and Giovanni Sturaro substantiate the scientific and cultural worth of depictions from the mid-1700s:

paintings [...], in the particular case of Venice, [...] can be used as proxy data for a quantitative evaluation of the R[elative]S[ea] L[evel] rise. In a number of paintings, the brown-green front left by algae is [...] a precious biological indicator of the average high-tide level. (2003, 334)

It is in the spirit of this cultural and scientific crossover that I am exploring the complexities of art produced in Venice some 150 years after Canaletto’s reproductions of organic tide traces. In particular, the ecological markers inscribed by Ciardi and his contemporaries are a proxy for the hydropolis’s long-term evolution.

Half a decade prior to Ciardi’s *Fondamenta di Venezia*, a slightly younger Venetian artist was busy capturing similar views in a rather different style. Giacomo Favretto (Venice, 1849–Venice, 1887) provides a hint of the interplay of the lagoonscape’s human and more-than-human components from a perspective intimating Venice’s numerous bridges and scarce flora **[fig. 3]**.

The emphasis on verticality and depth here provides a contrast with Ciardi’s horizontally inclined depiction, which goes without the least trace of sky in favour of a relatively immediate watery and earthly plane. For Favretto, Venice appears as a somewhat slight strip



Figure 3 Giacomo Favretto, *Veduta di Venezia*. 1884. Oil on wood, 172.5 × 69.5 cm. Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Milan. © Comune di Milano – Umberto Armiraglio

of land sandwiched between water and air, in a fashion that signals a measure of transience in the society responsible for colonising the wetland. Indeed, the setting – reminiscent of the vicinity of Fondamenta Sant'Andrea or Campo San Giacomo – expresses the routine workings of an aquatic community, rather than dramatic buildings or people. Nico Stringa's contribution to *La pittura nel Veneto* on "Il paesaggio e la veduta" states that

Favretto [...] non esce neppure dal centro storico [...] per [...] motivi [...] assolutamente intrinseci alla sua poetica di pittore 'urbano'. (2003, 616)

This modestly sized canal twisting alongside a handful of buildings and foliage encompasses concerns away from the oft-trodden paths around the Rialto Bridge and the Arsenal. Sparse walkers – small in scale next to the moored boat or the tree in the midground – have the air of passing through the locale without paying great heed to the scent of moist earth at the water's edge on the right, to the rustling of the trees and the echoes of footsteps on the bridge's stones in the centre, or the play of sunshine and shade on the multistorey facades in the background at top right. According to Margaret Plant in *Venice*,

Favretto was [...] attending only to his city, its urbanity, its indigenous life. (2002, 193)

Undoubtedly, the artist is accomplished in documenting the exceptional in the everyday, which might seem to elude the figures peppering the snapshot of the mid-1880s, and is still an issue today. How much more rounded an approach to UN Sustainable Development Goal 6.6 might result from elevating hyperlocal quirks to the stature of the frescoes in St Mark's Basilica on the international agenda?

Since there is no lack of scientific and cultural material to furnish understanding of the centuries-long path to the current state of affairs, the imperilment of the UNESCO World Heritage Site can feel all the more disconcerting to a person getting to know it on foot. The historian Piero Bevilacqua specifies in *Venezia e le acque* that

Venezia [...] ha sempre accompagnato i fenomeni del suo habitat lagunare facendone continuamente la storia, interrogando diuturnamente il passato per compararlo al presente, per scorgere i mutamenti nel frattempo intervenuti, e trarre auspici e consigli per l'avvenire. (1995, 3)

The stories and data arising from the hydropolis's vicissitudes provide a considerable bank of knowledge from which to draw conclusions about strategies that might be deemed successes or failures depending on a perceiver's position in- or outside a particular community/area. A multi-layered view of the Venetian Lagoon should permit a broad range of futures for the common good, though acting on 'omens' has rarely been straightforward due to interests ranging from the political to the commercial.

A big question now looks to be whether the collision of more-than-human forces and human desires is going to give rise to the latter being ousted, despite a glut of technological endeavours aimed at keep-

ing people strolling and boating between major sites. In the words of the hydrogeologist Andrea Rinaldo in *Sustainable Venice*,

it is impossible that the intertwined ecosystem that includes the city and its environment can survive as it is now, largely because it is the artificial byproduct of [a] coevolution of human interventions and natural tendencies [...] continuously reorganised throughout the centuries in order to adjust the requirements for Venice's life and prosperity. [...] Venice is disappearing rapidly, in the physical sense and socially. (2001, 82)

Each intensification of the artificial nature of the wetland – however well intentioned – triggers chain reactions that can pose risks to the wellbeing of the ecosystem and the populace. Indeed, a number of disappearances have perversely occurred over the long term due to efforts to maintain a certain type of *venezianità*, based on what was deemed most appropriate for the coherence of physical and social geographies at a certain juncture.

In the second half of the 1800s, during the youth of Ciardi and Favretto, notable parts of Venice underwent wholesale changes in quick succession. In line with a burgeoning industrial identity, swathes of Cannaregio, San Marco, and Santa Croce came to be re-configured in ways occasioning a new phase of navigability by land and water:

Strada Nova (1867-72), calle Larga XXII Marzo (1870-75) e bacino Orseolo (1869-70), il nuovo porto a Santa Marta (1883), gli edifici industriali alla Giudecca e in prossimità della stazione ferroviaria sono i segni eloquenti che caratterizzano [un] processo di profonda trasformazione dell'organismo urbano. (Favilla 2006, 170)

A walk through the historic centre is scarcely possible without being exposed to one of these locations, which have become fundamental waypoints over 150 years. Such quantum leaps in the urban fabric continue to be decisive for the identity of the tourist-inundated hydropolis, perhaps even more than in the time of Turner and James, because they get marshalled into arguments about the aspects of Venice needing to be preserved. It is nevertheless vital to recognise that those very constructions replaced buildings and ways of life with a value of their own, once people in high places had decided to afford prestige to one set of affairs ahead of another. The historian Maurizio Reberschak outlines the economic backdrop of the remodelling works:

nel primo quindicennio dopo l'unità, si nota con tutta evidenza il prevalere delle attività 'artistiche e marittime' di impostazione artigianale. (1997, 373)

The vigour of the artistic sector went together with an influx of creative practitioners set on capturing the essence of the lagoonscape freed from the strictures of the French and Austrian authorities who had set up camp in the wake of the 1100-year-old Republic falling to Napoleon Bonaparte in 1797.

The heads of people from near and far were turned by the ambience of a locale seeming to vacillate on the threshold of modernity. Nico Stringa, contributing to *La pittura nel Veneto* about “Venezia dalla Esposizione Nazionale Artistica alle prime Biennali”, brings up how

Venezia, oltremodo pittoresca nei suoi luoghi e modi di vita, non poteva che essere vista e resa sotto il segno della continuità antimoderna; [...] lo sguardo al passato era parte integrante della visibilità stessa della città e del suo senso di esistere. (2002, 95)

The fascination of yesteryear-leaning places and lifestyles is evident among painters from regions and countries in proximity to the birthplace of Ciardi and Favretto, especially France and Germany in the age of Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Karl Heffner. Indeed, form became as powerful as content in expressing dissonance associated with things appearing out of time, whether down to a setting, a figure, a palette... For Giovanni Soccol in *Ottocento veneto*,

a Venezia il nero e il bianco sono [...] due colori fondamentali, al pari del giallo, del rosso e dell’azzurro: il primo prende forma nella gondola, il secondo nella pietra d’Istria. (2004, 82)

Constancy seems encoded in the hydropolis’s visual identity due to the black of gondolas and the white of Istrian stone during the nineteenth century and beyond, notwithstanding the ephemerality of such elements in relation to the wetland’s ecological dynamics. Many depictions of Venice seem to intersperse the tenacious and the transitory by way of water in diverse hues of blue, or buildings featuring tints of yellow and red that chime with the iconography of the Lion of St Mark, amplified in the sixteenth century by the likes of Vittore Carpaccio to mask the Republic’s precarious status.

In the year following Favretto’s *Veduta di Venezia*, Alberto Pasini (Busseto, 1826-Turin, 1899) produced a representation of a low-key setting that takes man-made forms as a structuring principle. With a nod to Venetian inflections of chiaroscuro, embodied by Tintoretto in the mid-1500s, the artist from Emilia-Romagna trains a wizened eye on one of the hydropolis’s narrows [fig. 4].¹

1 As for fig. 4, Ca’ Pesaro does not possess a full-colour facsimile of Pasini’s painting.



Figure 4 Alberto Pasini, *Canale di Venezia, effetto di alba*. 1885. Oil on canvas, 35.3 × 27.5 cm. Ca' Pesaro, Venice. © Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia – Archivio Fotografico

Two towering dark facades to the left and the right establish the prevalence of verticality in the rendering marked by the single-point perspective at dead centre, where the building with the bulky chimney crowds the horizon ahead of the *palazzo* at a distance. The scene is indicative of the environs of Campiello dei Meloni or Campo Sant'Anzolo at morning light, when a wander through a quiet *calle* can lead to marvellous glimpses of dilapidation mixed with grandeur. In a composition dominated by the human, the sliver of sky and the canal's concentrated surface point to more-than-human ecologies

constituting the broader lagoonscape. Due to the nigh seamless gradation between the edifices and the reflection-specked water in the foreground, there is a strong sense of “the seeping pressure of fluids on almost-solid structures” (Mentz 2017, 289). In a place where a man-made structure is only ever as solid as its pregnable foundation of timber piles driven into tidal mud, the destabilising impact of liquid motions is no small matter, whether in terms of flooding symbolised by 8 December 2020, or the slow ruin of saltwater eroding exposed wood. As observed in Rod Giblett’s account of the hydropolis as “a tropical marshland, steaming, monstrous, rank”,

it is impossible to make a mark in or on water, certainly a mark as hard and fixed as a city on something as soft and fluid as water. [...] The builders of Venice had to dredge the land from the water and drain the water from the land in order to make their mark on a dry horizontal surface by inscribing [...] monumental buildings on that surface [...] in vertical space. (2016, 86)

The painting’s low-contrast foreground invites engagement with these delicate circumstances through senses beyond sight, in line with a pedestrian’s experience of low light at the start of a day. In such a case, it comes down to hearing the dynamics of watery environs without a single human figure. Whereas a slightly off-putting smell/taste of *freschìn* might hang in the air, the constricted space does not appear fogged up with a break-of-day *caigo* that could be felt as moisture on the face or the hands.

A few years after the three paintings already discussed, Venice’s nooks and crannies enthralled an artist from France’s Vendée. The depiction of southwestern Dorsoduro by Emmanuel Lansyer (Bouin, 1835-Paris, 1893) might appear poles apart from the Italian works in question, on account of its luminescence and limpidity, but the content is very much in keeping with Favretto’s *Veduta di Venezia* – touches of greenery, a handful of boats and people, and prominent water in counterpoint to a practically cloudless sky [fig. 5].

Depth is the prevalent dimension here, largely due to the tapered gap between the buildings in shades of red, yellow, and off-white that frame the vanishing point at centre-left, in familiar fashion. An idiosyncratic mixture of bell- and cube-shaped chimneys means that verticality is also important in the multistorey setting resembling the view at the point of transition between Calle Lunga San Barnaba and Calle Avogaria. To a greater extent than the representations by Ciardi and Pasini, the air feels open in the fore- and midground, as when a walker chances upon a space with room to breathe in the dense historic centre. With the cyan reflection enhancing the captivating quality of the canal’s surface, the stretch all the way to the gondola beneath the bridge in the background is suggestive of “the



Figure 5 Emmanuel Lansyer, *Venise, mur de couvent et vieilles maisons en briques au bord d'un canal, aux environs de l'église San Sebastian*. 1892. Oil on canvas, 46 × 38 cm. Musée Lansyer, Loches. © Ville de Loches – François Laugnie

scalar fluidity and ineluctable materiality of water” (Winkiel 2019, 9). Akin to each aforementioned painting, this scene encapsulates both sensory immediacy and interpretive vectors extending towards an array of aquatic environments, all on the basis of the channelled liquid’s palpable qualities.

In conclusion, I wish to point up the value of hydro-peripatetics as a practice of attending to conditions in physical and representational environments that can inform the protection and restoration of water-related ecosystems, in accordance with UN Sustainable Development Goal 6.6. By engaging with the fluidity inherent in *venezianità* through the likes of a brackish smell or a touch of wetness from

a pedestrian's down-to-earth perspective, as above, it is possible to develop a keener understanding of what is at stake when conceptualising the most effective way of going about conserving Venice in one form or another. In "The MOSE Machine", the ethnologist Rita Vianello reckons that

today the importance of a new, 'soft', approach to [...] conservation works is evident. But [...] engineers and technicians have presented themselves as the bearers of a rigid technocentric environmental vision which neglects local knowledge. (2021, 112)

How great is the potential for non-technocentric decision-making based on stories and proxy ecological data encapsulated in paintings of the hydropolis, whether by visitors like Lansyer and Pasini, or born-and-bred individuals such as Ciardi and Favretto? To all intents and purposes, broader familiarity with the lagoonscape's "intensity of place" (Kelly 2019, 388) promises to yield more rounded ways of conceiving futures to the satisfaction of a plethora of stakeholders.

In working primarily from nineteenth-century visual culture to imagine smell/sound/taste/touch, I have sought to expand the horizons of art history through the Environmental Humanities, especially their 'blue' inflection, as well as suggesting an approach to questions of conservation, which tend to lack perspectives from the arts. Given the architectural and ecological alterations around the time of the four paintings in question, there is hardly anything new about strategising the lagoonscape for human ends, however much of a quantum leap might appear to be encapsulated by MOSE. Instead of continuing such efforts to keep the historic centre dry, at the cost of the health of the majority of the wetland, it would be beneficial to progress towards scenarios in which the more-than-human is given its due, as much as the aspects of human culture that attract international prestige. After all, the treasured adornments of St Mark's Basilica will continue to be regularly flooded regardless of the massive investment in tidal barriers, only raised when water is forecast to reach more than half a metre above the crypt lying at 65 cm. A sensorially inclined engagement with the hydropolis's more secluded corners from a pedestrian perspective could help with comprehending a greater range of elements when it comes to determining courses of action that will serve the common good in the long term. The cultural heritage expressed in paintings such as those by Ciardi, Favretto, Lansyer, and Pasini can be an important stepping-stone in this process, especially in terms of recognising continuities and disjunctures in hyperlocal values over 150 years.

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