

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

‘What lived in Venice was still afloat’

Speculative Texts as Spatial Events in the Venetian Lagoon

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The Venetian lagoon, a site of ongoing negotiation between industrial activity, hydrogeological processes, local ecologies, and planetary transformations, embodies the socio-ecological relationships of the Anthropocene epoch (Baldacci et al. 2022; Iovino 2016; Omodeo and Trevisani 2022). As such, it occupies a place within the literary, cinematic, artistic, and policy-making imaginations connected to future climate catastrophes (Chiafele 2021) and apocalypticism (Von Koppenfels 1999). Often perceived as a laboratory for adaptation strategies (Alba, Klepp, and Bruns 2020; Rose 2020) and a space of catastrophic premonition, Venice shares this symbolic status with oceanic island nations: the quintessential sinking city. This characterization has been also perpetuated by literature and cinema, both internationally and within Italy, which have often depicted Venice as a drowning geography and a soon-to-be lost city.

Science fiction and speculative literature, due to their future-oriented nature, have been increasingly employed by artists and designers as speculative narrative tools, unlocking new functions for these genres. These practices can offer new insights on the literary-geographical dimension that emerges from analyzing and interpreting the represented spaces, both real and imagined, in a context that is not merely literary. However, what do these practices reveal of a

space that is both real and deeply embedded in the Western literary imagination such as Venice? This short text focuses on two artistic experiments in situated reading and writing: *How does the World End (for Others)?* (2019-ongoing) by German artists Beate Geissler and Oliver Sann, and *La parabola della montagna* (2023-2024) by Venetian artist Matteo Stocco. These projects demonstrate that collective, collaborative, and conversational experiences of reading and writing science fiction and speculative narratives can reveal the unconscious existential anxieties we associate with the spaces we inhabit daily.

Reading as a spatial experience

In 2023, Fondazione Prada hosted the climate justice-focused contemporary art exhibition *Everybody Talks About the Weather*, curated by Dieter Roelstraete in Ca' Corner della Regina, a baroque palace facing the Canal Grande in Venice, which hosts the Fondazione's venetian location. In this context, Beate Geissler and Oliver Sann's installation *How Does the World End (for Others)?* was one of the most striking works: an interdisciplinary project that presented a unique spatio-literary concept, especially when experienced from within the Venetian lagoon.¹ At the heart of the installation, there's a 'score', a text structured as two distinct timelines that juxtapose Earth's geo-history with imaginative futures drawn from a canon of literary and cinematic works. The narrative timeline, 'Fragments,' is a curated compilation of excerpts, summaries, and citations from 47 literary and cinematic works, mostly belonging to science fiction and cli-fi. These texts, spanning from Richard Fleischer's *Soylent Green* (1973) to Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014), were arranged in Ca' Corner as a horizontal timeline that visitors could read by walking along it. This act of read-walking through time and space had the purpose of immersing visitor-readers in a spectrum of future worlds, ranging from the year 2022 to the year 2393. The chronological ordering of these speculative futures created a sense of narrative progression and urgency, engaging the audience in a temporally-extended, spatially-situated contemplation of futurity. As also noted by Daniel A. Finch-Race in this issue, through Geissler and Sann's installation, Venice is evoked as a 'drowned' geography, a ghostly submerged ruin, as it appears in Jon Raymond's *Denial* (Raymond 2022) and Antonio Scurati's *La seconda mezzanotte* (Scurati 2012). The visitor-reader's spatial interaction with the artwork is a crucial aspect of the installation: by occupying a time-space that is simultaneously present and future, the visitor-reader walks along the timeline and is confronted with a chronology of unsettling future scenarios that exist in a state of proleptic anticipation.² These future-anterior narratives, which project the viewer into a post-apocalyptic world where Venice and human civilization have already succumbed or adapted to climatic disasters, reframe the significance of the present moment and the visitor-reader's relationship to the Venetian lagoonscape.³ The installation enacts a meta-literary operation as well: it reveals an apocalyptic unconscious, a collective imaginary where the spaces we inhabit are bound to radically transform through more-than-human time, being that caused by nuclear warfare, extraterrestrial violence, gamma ray radiation, climate collapse, or natural catastrophe. In other wor(l)ds, it reveals a collective geo-ontological dread: an anxiety about the precarious nature of our being-with-the-world and the horror of a future where hostile spaces dictate

human survival, reducing humanity to a bare life stripped of agency in the face of geo-physical forces - a haunting reversal of the Anthropocene thesis.

Writing together future geographies

La parabola della montagna (*The Parable of the Mountain*) is a project by Venetian artist Matteo Stocco in collaboration with Panorama, an independent art space and curatorial platform, which uses science fiction narratives and collective writing as tools to reflect on the present state and the future of the city-lagoon continuum.⁴ Stocco and German film director Christopher Roth led the writing laboratory *Una piattaforma di scrittura per scenari salmastri* (*A Writing Platform for Brackish Scenarios*), where ten participants were asked to write short science fiction stories informed by a large archive (the Metagoon project also curated by Matteo Stocco, <https://metagoon.net/>) that includes scientific research, knowledge-from-below, and interviews with members of the communities of Venice. The participants were a mixed group of Venetian residents and outsiders, including researchers, artists, anthropologists, ecologists, writers.

The stories produced by the laboratory are set in different future Venices transformed by catastrophes, particularly flooding and toxic contamination – both phenomena already affecting present-day Venice. The cityscape is depicted as submerged and sparsely inhabited, with the lagoon drastically mutated. Several stories feature mutated or evolved organisms that emerged among the ruins and adapted to the new conditions, such as bioluminescent bacteria, invasive crabs, and salamander-human hybrid creatures. These organisms represent the persistence of life in a radically changed ecosystem, a co-mutation of space and forms of life, which, like flooding and toxicity, manifests already in the Venice of the present (Marchini et al. 2015). Science fiction as a set of time-space narrative devices, as a ‘method’, allows the participants to extend the relational nature of the Venetian lagoon to a planetary, more-than-human scale. Many stories explore the tension between Venice’s unique bio-system and the effects of industrial activity and human shortsightedness, which together contribute to Venice’s downfall through oil spills and exploitation. Water is a constant presence—rising seas submerge the city, polluted canals host new beings, and the lagoon becomes a stage for competing, altered forms of life. The watery essence that long defined and threatened Venice finally overwrites it.

From the imagination of the participants, who were together in Venice while writing these stories, the lagoon is reclaimed from its long history of touristic and exploitative aestheticization and becomes a narrative operator itself. The future setting allows the familiar hydrogeology of the lagoon to express itself through the centuries and the millennia, unleashing its geo-morphic agency. In some futures, it’s even the hydro-spatial logic of Venice that is extended to the rest of the planet. Through the situated experiences and conversations of the Venetians in this collective writing lab, a different spatial consciousness emerges—one that perceives the present-day lagoon as a deep-time agent, already showing symptoms of catastrophic transformation: actively gestating and birthing the worlds to come, both regenerative and dystopian, inhabited by new, mutated forms of life. The project *La parabola*

della montagna is based on Venetians' distinctive understanding of the mutating nature of their amphibian space. Their narratives reveal a geo-ontological perspective based on the embodied experience of inhabiting an endangered space that is still vital, and which is made of multiple relations, some deliberately engineered, others arising from natural processes.



Fig.1 An image from the exhibition *La parabola della montagna*, Panorama, Venice, January 2024.

If 'literary geography happens where the writing and reading of literary texts meets geology, topography, landscapes, distances, scales, locations and places' (Hones 2022: 138), projects such as *How does the World End (for Others)?* and *La parabola della montagna*, with their creative re-appropriation of speculative literature offer a unique exploration of this intersection. Adopting the collaborative, conversational act of reading and writing within the specific geographies and ecologies of the Venetian lagoon, these projects reveal an interpretation of texts as spatial events, which happen 'at the intersection of agents and situations scattered across time and space, both human and non-human, absent and present' (Hones 2008: 1301).

'Let them have what was under the water. What lived in Venice was still afloat'
(Robinson 1981: 110).

Notes

¹ Conversing with the artistic duo added layers of interpretation to the installation, see Guaraldo 2023.

- ² For the use of *prolepsis* in anthropocenic literature see Vermeulen 2017.
- ³ After experiencing the installation, visitors entered the next room, which featured a large window overlooking the Grand Canal and housed Giorgio Andreotta Calò's *Carotaggi*, an artwork composed of core samples from the subterranean spaces of the lagoon.
- ⁴ The project ran between December 2023 and January 2024 and will lead to the publication of a book containing all the stories produced during the workshop. In January 2024, Panorama hosted an exhibition on the project.

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