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# Taranto: a flickering landscape of illusory progress, vanished hope, and invisible beauty

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## ABSTRACT

The article investigates the difficult and controversial landscape of Taranto, a recently industrialised city of southern Italy, which in the last 70 years has undergone dramatic changes. We analyse what the landscape is in material, cultural, and symbolic terms, what it does, and what it means in and for Taranto. In particular, by analysing bibliographic, cartographic, and audiovisual sources, we trace the evolution of contemporary Taranto, indicating the main factors which enabled its material transformation during the second half of the twentieth century. Then, we reflect on how the landscape has been shaped in different times and at different scales through dominant narratives and counter-narratives. Finally, we identify specific elements of Taranto's landscape and their symbolic meaning. The study offers a paradigmatic case of a flickering landscape, modified by political forces and cultural constructs.

## KEYWORDS

Landscape representation; visual geography; ecocritical geopolitics; environmental discourses; collective imaginaries

## Introduction

For several years Italian media has paid particular attention to the city of Taranto and its industrial role in the national economy, according to a dual approach centred on the socioeconomic concerns for the employment crisis and the development of southern Italy (Greco & Di Fabbio, 2014) and, more recently, on environmental and health issues related to industrial pollution (Conte, 2013; De Monte, 2014; Marina, 2012). Although research highlighting the positive implications of Taranto's industrialisation is available (Pirro, 2011), media tends to focus on the environment-jobs dilemma that, in Taranto's case, is presented as a paradigmatic example of an unsustainable model of development (Bricco, 2016). The economic policies that led it to become a steel and petrochemical hub have been debated for at least a decade. Other topics discussed in the literature concern industrial reconversion and territorial redevelopment (Gianni & Migliaccio, 2016), spatial regeneration through participatory processes (Barca & Leonardi, 2017), national and local policies and their future consequences for the area (Lai, Panfilo, & Stacchezzini, 2019), frameworks to measure and respond to the criticalities of a fragile region with low resilience (Bellantuono, Lagrasta, Pontrandolfo, & Scozzi, 2021), and the attempt to

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return to a human scale, in part by redeveloping the old town (Curci & Geroldi, 2021; D'Ovidio, 2021; Macaione, Ippolito, Anello, & La Gioia, 2018).

Conversely, little attention has been given to Taranto in terms of landscape, especially through the specific discourses and collective imaginaries that the audiovisual materials examined convey. Landscape, a central concept in geography, is not universally objective, but depends on the way a society sees and represents itself (Berque, 2000). Following Domosh (2001), we analyse the material-cultural human modifications of nature in Taranto's landscape. We use an interpretive and inductive strategy to gauge the meaning of its cultural expressions. Therefore, by investigating the landscape, our study contributes to understanding a specific territory through visual geography.

The notion of landscape advanced by the European Landscape Convention—'an area, as perceived by people whose character is determined by the action and interaction of natural and human factors' (Council of Europe, 2020)—partially supports our perspective and arguments, yet we adopt a broader understanding of it as specified in what follows. The concept of landscape is complex, referring both to the thing itself and its description and representation; thus, the term recalls both a portion of territory as well as its image and imaginary (Farinelli, 1991; Minca, 2007; von Humboldt, 1871). Since the word expresses two different meanings, we reflect on both the material (portion of territory) and immaterial landscape (image and imaginary). First, as an object, the landscape is understood as a concrete reality and ecological system, composed of physical and quantifiable components (Bertrand, 1978); an entity defined by its site, position, and natural and cultural characteristics that can be either mapped or painted. In this understanding, the term recalls its historical definition, when painters and cartographers employed the words *landschaft* (German), *landschap* (Dutch), and *paese* (Italian) both in an aesthetic sense and a territorial, thus geographical one (Baker, 2003). The landscape is also the result of human activity and the cultural expression of people (Sauer, 1925); this 'what it is' perspective is examined in Section What it is: evolution of a material landscape. Second, the landscape is a way of seeing (Cosgrove, 1984) and a product of a given historical timespan which expresses ideals and faiths in symbolic forms (Cosgrove, 1989). In this sense, the landscape becomes a vehicle of power that can communicate political, economic, and environmental discourses. If the discourses are sufficiently productive, they can discipline subjects into certain ways of thinking and acting; human objects, relations, places, and scenes are produced through discourses (Foucault, 1972: 27). In this perspective, Section What it does: narratives of a cultural landscape develops the 'what it does' analysis. If the landscape can be considered as a system of signs, it can thus be interpreted through the meaning of its individual elements, as well as how said elements combine in space (dell'Agnesse, 2004). Consequently, social meanings attached to a landscape may acquire both positive and negative connotations in the 'what it means' perspective explored in Section What it means: visual elements of a symbolic landscape.

Overall, we try to understand Taranto's landscape for what it is, what it does, and what it means (Mitchell, 2002). Through a mixed methodology based on the analysis of bibliographic, cartographic, and audiovisual sources outlined in the following section, we trace the evolution of modern Taranto, identifying the main factors that enabled its material transformation during the second half of the twentieth century. Then we reflect on how its landscape has been shaped in different periods and at different scales through dominant narratives and counter-narratives. Finally, we identify specific elements of Taranto's landscape and identify their symbolic meaning.

## Methodology

The aim of our work is to interpret the evolution of Taranto from the 1950s in terms of material, cultural, and symbolic landscape, using the mixed methodology described as follows.

First, we analysed bibliographic and cartographic sources (books, newspapers, scientific articles, and urban plans) from public archives, such as the State Archive of Taranto. Through a qualitative content analysis (Bryman, 2012, pp. 557–559, 714), we traced concrete changes in the city related to the establishment of the industrial area (Section What it is: evolution of a material landscape). The investigation of images and stories of the industrial world—from the power industry to manufacturing, mining, and construction—contributes to understanding the capitalist development that determined structural changes in landscapes.

Second, we collated audiovisual and photographic material found in public and private archives. In the wake of the visual shift in geography and social sciences (Bignante, 2011; Driver, 2003; Rose, 2003), we consider archives as extensive and relevant stocks of geographical data and spatial representations (Maggioli, 2011). We focussed on:

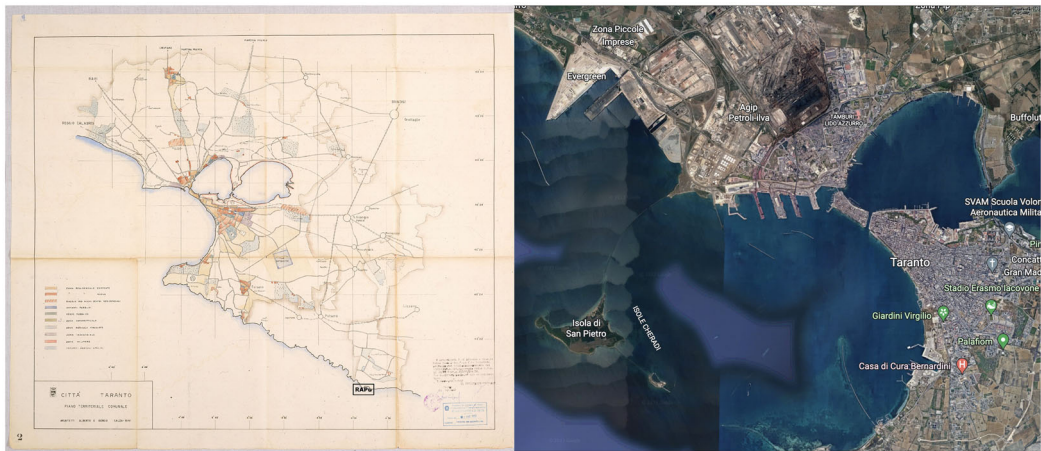
1. documentaries, tv programs, postcards, and landscape photos from the 1950s to 1970s produced by major national institutions (the Italian Navy, Ilva, etc.) or by national archives (Historical Archive Luce, Italian Touring Club, etc.);
2. video clips from tv programs (taken from the public archive Teche RAI<sup>1</sup>) from the 1980s to the end of the 1990s;
3. documentaries, music videos, and photographs of the last 20 years promoted by environmental associations, activists, and artists from private archives (for example, the photographer Vito Leone) and YouTube (for instance, Comitato Legamjonici channel).

Within the theoretical and methodological frame of ecocritical geopolitics (dell’Agnese, 2021), we relied on visual content investigation (Rose, 2012) to illustrate the representation of the landscape of Taranto. In particular, we followed the multimodal critical discourse analysis (Machin, 2013) to comprehend how images mediate the environment and what kind of discourses lie behind them. The objective is to comprehend which audiovisual narratives have been used to forge political, economic, and environmental discourses about Taranto, thus shaping the image of the city in the collective consciousness, at local, national, and international levels (Section What it does: narratives of a cultural landscape).

Then, we used the iconographic approach (Daniels & Cosgrove, 1988) to understand what the images represent, and to identify the most relevant elements. We counted the frequency of these elements in the scenes (Supplementary Appendix I), and we interpreted the symbolic meanings attributed to the images to strengthen dominant and counter-narratives (Section What it means: visual elements of a symbolic landscape).

### **What it is: evolution of a material landscape**

After the unification of Italy (1861), Taranto was home to the most important maritime military arsenal in southern Italy, one of the most productive and specialised steel plants in Europe for the construction of armoured ships (Nistri, 2007). The Arsenal, despite having played a significant role in the past, was dismantled after the Second World War. Due to the presence of large flat plains by the sea, easy access to water supplies for industrial use, and low-cost labour (Gianni & Migliaccio, 2016, p. 157), the Institute for Industrial Reconstruction (IRI) selected Taranto in the 1950s to house the largest steel complex in Europe, commonly referred to as Ilva (from 1960 to 1989 the name of the company changed to Italsider, and since 2018, to Acciaierie d’Italia S.p.A.; for the sake of clarity we only use the name Ilva throughout the article). The state-run economy was the common thread that linked the Arsenal with Ilva. Without state intervention, it would have been impossible to solve the housing crisis, food shortages, and unemployment that the city was subject to after the Second World War. This resulted in an industrial imprint on the city’s image and identity.



**Figure 1.** Taranto, General Plan of the city in 1954 (left); Taranto, present-day satellite view (right). Sources: Google Maps (2022) and RAPU (1954).

According to historical records (Nistri, 2007; Romeo, 2019), since its launch in 1960 the relevance and imposing size of the steel complex altered Taranto's social and economic fabric. The complex occupies an area stretching along the south of the bay larger than the actual city (Figure 1). It provided employment and allowed lifestyle improvements but, at the same time, it was a controversial eyesore in the urban landscape.

During the 1960s and the early 1970s the effects of pollution caused by the plants in Taranto were first reported in a social medicine conference (Amministrazione Provinciale di Taranto, 1964), in local health officers reports from 1965 to 1967, and in the 1971 'Environmental pollution and public health' conference (Romeo, 2019). At that time, neither Ilva nor public authorities considered that data about health and environmental issues merited the introduction of corrective measures to counter pollution. In essence, back then and at least until the early 1990s, the alteration of the landscape as an ecological system was undisputed and voluntarily underestimated.

In the 1990s, expansion of the steel industry went into freefall, triggering a crisis that led to the privatisation of the steel complex (1995). Simultaneously, by the end of the decade, studies on the plant's pollution and the resultant health issues began to be taken seriously. Growing attention to unregulated urban planning and environmental issues began to worry public authorities.

As for numerous cases in past decades, like Antwerp, Gdansk, and Genoa, Taranto's redevelopment projects concern a heavily industrialised area. Nonetheless, this case has some peculiar features: currently, the city is facing a severe economic crisis, accompanied by high levels of pollution, an alarming unemployment rate, and a decline in population. The strong dependence on the industrial sector and uneven development make Taranto a very fragile city (D'Ovidio, 2021; Greco & Di Fabbio, 2014). D'Ovidio (2018) effectively points out the three main problems of the city: social immobility, the unsuccessful expansion of the urban plan, and the absence of cohesion and social participation in an immature and unprepared local civil society. In brief, decades of unquestioned top-down public policies based on the promotion of heavy industry and widespread new housing developments have produced a sprawling and unfinished city. In geographical terms, these exogenous circumstances plus inefficient resource management and unfulfilled potential have prevented the self-realisation of Taranto.

In light of this situation, tourism, through bottom-up governance rather than the failing top-down state-run model applied in the city for decades, has been increasingly seen as a potential driver for more sustainable development. The old Taranto, in desperate need of revitalisation, has become the heart of this culture-based and people-centred challenge (Nigro, 2017). Community-based projects meet local needs and provide positive social outcomes. Urban

regeneration prevents buildings from crumbling and counteracts social degradation. The process of place-making through bottom-up approaches in Taranto involves several stakeholders, such as the cultural association *Domus Armenorum*, the co-working space *Ulmo*, the design studio *Bordo*, the team of craft workers *Ammostro*, and the old wooden sailboats restoration firm *Officina Mare Mosso* (D'Ovidio, 2021).

### **What it does: narratives of a cultural landscape**

To analyse Taranto's cultural landscape, we widen our perspective from bibliographic sources to audiovisual ones to provide a broader, more comprehensive picture. While the Ilva steel complex was considered for decades by the media as fundamental for the modernisation of the entire country, it should be clarified how the official narrative evolved and when counter-narratives emerged. Thanks to the media representation of the whole metamorphic process of the city, we identify three main narratives as distinct evolutionary stages (see [Supplementary Appendix II](#)): progress, crisis, and beauty.

'Progress' is the industrial narrative based on the idea of the techno-scientific processes that embrace every human field, by which the subjection of politics and economics to technology becomes the hallmark of human civilisation. The 'crisis' narrative has emerged over the years in audiovisual sources and documents found in national public archives and mainstream media, and refers to how Taranto, as a modern city founded on steel and concrete, is showing symptoms of a drastic downturn (decreased urban mobility, degraded landscape and architecture, worsening environmental quality). Finally, 'beauty' is a narrative traceable in post-modern photography and graffiti as devices of protest, resurgence, and re-appropriation of urban spaces.

### **Progress**

The relevance of Taranto as a strategic maritime city for national defence can be seen at different historical junctures: at the inauguration of the Arsenal in the presence of King Umberto I on 21 August 1889 (Marina Militare, 2022); by Benito Mussolini's speech on 7 September 1934 (La Voce, 1934); and by the heads of state visits after the Second World War (Istituto Luce, 1948, 1950). Although the Arsenal is no longer active in Taranto, it laid the foundations for the industrial identity of the city.

Indeed, the maritime industry's golden era provides the background for a first ruling narrative, ranging from the end of the Second World War to the 1960s. This period is audio-visually represented as a glorious time, dominated by undisputed faith in progress and marked by 'meridionalism', namely the set of studies and policies with the objective to bridge the social, cultural, and economic gap between northern and southern Italy. Corporate films (Massobrio, 1965; Orsini, 1964, 1965; Paolucci, 1962) and newsreels (Istituto Luce, 1964, 1967) offer several examples. The same approach can be found in broadcasts on RAI tv channels; *La Nostra Italia* ([Our Italy], 1968a), for instance, shows urban development and the Ilva steel plant, offering views of Taranto from an aerial perspective, juxtaposing the decaying old city with the modern neighbourhoods under construction.

The dominant vision in this period is also evidenced in the photography of *Ciro De Vincentis*, representing the early 1950s as the dawn of a 'widespread prosperity and a relatively more equitable distribution of wealth' (Nistri, 2007, p. 584). Only a few years earlier, though, his photographs focussed on olive harvesters, ploughmen, olive oil millers, and cattle, as elements belonging to an endangered landscape undergoing profound and rapid transformations. The romantic view of a wise and innocent peasantry, as well as the natural and cultural diversity of the region (Dunford, 2002), were seen as bound to irreversible change. At that time De Vincentis's intent was to preserve an ethnic-cultural heritage, a human landscape at risk of extinction. His

perspective changed when the Ilva steel plant was established in the area and he celebrated the role of industrial progress and validated the plant's presence in the urban landscape before the eyes of Taranto's citizens (Nistri, 2007, pp. 584, 598). This approach, all too common in southern Italy, was narrated as an intrinsic necessity where Taranto became a major enabler of national progress.

### **Crisis**

National policies targeted southern Italy by establishing heavy industries without adequate urban planning and disregarding their environmental and health impacts. This is reported in a counter-narrative by the environmentalism pioneer Antonio Cederna (1972), who defined Taranto's conditions as a '*geografia sconvolta*' [geographical upset] and argued that industrial plants (steel, cement, refineries) overloaded the urban settlement and would contribute to environmental degradation for years to come.

At the end of the 1960s, early signs of a counter-narrative of crisis that became dominant from the 2000s, can be found in two documentaries: Antonio Bertini's *Speciale Sud* ([Special South], 1968) and RAI's *Mentre l'Italia cambia—dai campi alla fabbrica* ([While Italy changes—from the fields to the factory], 1970). These documentaries explicitly question the choice of southern Italy as the region for large-scale industrial development, as the developments resulted in '*cattedrali nel deserto*' ([cathedrals in the desert], i.e. white elephants) disconnected from the local social and environmental practices and traditions. In the rapid transition from a rural to an industrial society, the inharmonious rupture was sudden enough to seem unrecoverable.

Another documentary, RAI's *Ritorno al Sud* ([Returning to the South], 1968b), celebrates a picture of prosperity brought by industry: a remarkably dynamic crowded shopping district with well-groomed people. Those were also years of the housing boom and income growth; in Taranto, motor vehicles increased by 200% and tobacco consumption by 50%. However, some interviewees show less enthusiasm and complain about female unemployment and lack of local diversification.

Occasionally during the 1970s, the parallel growth of the Ilva plant and the city as a whole was criticised and labelled as fake progress by two RAI documentaries. *Città e Territorio* ([City and Territory], 1974a) criticises the social changes triggered by heavy industry, while *L'insediamento urbano* ([The urban settlement], 1974b) discusses the urban sprawl of Taranto, showing that the Paolo VI neighbourhood, built to house Ilva workers, soon became a working-class ghetto where, paradoxically, only a small percentage of dwellers were actually employed at the plant.

The aforementioned audiovisual sources indicate early acknowledgement of industrial pollution as an urgent challenge. Fishing and mussel farming decline and land abandonment are also mentioned; all attest to the radical conversion of the maritime and rural socio-economic fabric to an industrial and urban landscape. The neglect of the old town was also a topic on the agenda as early as 1974. The same issues are still present today in Taranto's public agenda: pollution, infrastructural inadequacy, lack of schools and public parks, as well as the effects of overbuilding, including disordered and speculative housing development and distorted urban planning. Interviews with Ilva's engineers reveal they were already aware of the plant's environmental impact and that the inhabitants of the Tamburi neighbourhood complained repeatedly about the dust emitted by its chimneys (RAI, 1979).

National and local tv news continued with sporadic reports of pollution (1980–1990), representing the threatening presence of heavy industry in Taranto (RAI, 1980). A few years later, the neighbouring municipality Grottaglie refused public funding for the industrial development to preserve local crafts. Locals aimed to preserve their old town and avoid the same industrialisation process that scarred Taranto (RAI, 1993).

It should be noted that, since its inception, RAI has always been an expression of political power, divided and controlled by the main parties in office and, to a lesser extent, by the opposition. This practice of *'spartizione'* [partition] made it possible to provide the audience with a wide range of points of view on the topics covered by state-run media. The audiovisual sources clearly testify to the metamorphosis from an official narrative to a counter-narrative. In the 1980s, especially, there appeared a sense of loss and defeat with respect to urban and industrial policies. Between 1992 and 2007, news programmes often defined the steel plant 'a killer' (RAI, 1994) and the landscape as 'stolen' (RAI, 1999a), thus explicitly linking industrial settlement and environmental damage.

## **Beauty**

Since their very foundation, industrial settlements as spatial entities in Taranto have been central in the media discourse. Over time, the city has been increasingly perceived as a polluted landscape, socially constructed as an unhealthy environment. The thorny environmental issues of Taranto are publicised nationwide, especially for the legal scandals and the health v. work dilemma. The latter boils down to whether it is more viable to close the steel complex and fire workers to protect the community's health and the environment or let it function at full capacity for the sake of jobs and the national economy. The question has also featured in documentaries (Bianchi & Leuti, 2019; I.I.S.S.A. Pacinotti, 2018; Manisi, 2018; Paolini, 2008; Pisanelli, 2014) and music. Particularly, local artists singing in dialect (Fido Guido, 2006, 2011; Kendan & GND, 2015) and also singers of national repute (Caparezza, 2011; LadyCatFree & Clementino, 2011) refer to poisoned air and red dioxin in the sky, as well as potentially fatal dust and clouds of smoke.

A counter-narrative has helped restore some aesthetic dignity to Taranto's disrupted landscape, as seen in media representations of Taranto as a tourist destination. In the last decade, especially since 2019, news channels have reported on events which could help reverse the city's image from industrial gloom to a thriving urban destination with nearby beaches. This location rebranding is achievable thanks to attractions, such as offshore dolphin watching tours (RAI, 2012), 'one-euro' house sell-offs for the renovation of abandoned properties in the old town (RAI, 2020a, 2020b), museums (RAI, 2020b), cruise ships (RAI, 2019, 2021a, 2021b), sailing races (RAI, 2021b, 2021d), cross-regional hiking trails for slow tourism (RAI, 2021e), and the forthcoming Mediterranean Games. Although environmental and development issues are also documented (RAI, 2017b, 2021c), emphasis is on the crystal-clear beaches along the Ionian coast a few kilometres from the city centre, which could draw the attention of summer vacationers (RAI, 2017a). In activists' spots (Legamjonici, 2014), promotional clips (Ecosistema Taranto, 2020; Made in Taranto, 2018; TRM h24, 2021), but also private videos (Matacchiera, 2018, 2021; Simonetti, 2019), the Taranto coastline has been highlighted as a potential tourist resource and as an alternative to industry. Recently, the first offshore wind farm in Italy, touted as a successful example of the energy transition, was completed in front of the Lido Azzurro beach and the port of Taranto.

A recent detailed representation of the city can be found in the photographs of Vito Leone (Capriglia, 2018; Leone, 2019). His images of buildings, working-class districts, and industrial areas provide a new focus on his hometown, emphasising the environmental and social conditions, the profound contrasts, and the discontinuity abruptly arising between the rural and urban landscape. As in the works of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (Gunti, 2020), the geometrical forms symbolise industrialisation and urbanisation spaces devoid of human presence.

## **What it means: visual elements of a symbolic landscape**

We will now turn our attention to the symbolism found in the different narratives that have shaped Taranto's recent history. In memory of the Magna Graecia, the dolphin has been the symbol of the city for 4000 years. Today, dolphins are scarce, and the name of the city rather evokes



smoking chimneys in the imagination of the populace (RAI, 2012). How did this radical change come about? We will use the geographical idea of landscape as a symbolic structure, identifying the most recurring elements in the audiovisual representations of Taranto (Supplementary Appendix I), interpreting their meanings and how they have been used to reinforce dominant discourses of power and knowledge.

### **Revolving bridge**

The symbol of Taranto as Italy's maritime power is the Ponte Girevole [Revolving Bridge], an important element in visual representations of the city from the 1950s to the 1970s. The bridge of San Francesco di Paola, 'bold and elegant' (Istituto Luce, 1953), was built on the canal that joins the Mar Grande [Great Sea] and the Mar Piccolo [Small Sea] in 1887, linking the old and the new parts of the city. Consisting of a single arch, the bridge opens to allow the passage of military ships along the canal. Widely portrayed on postcards of the time (Figure 2), the bridge represents Taranto as a 'typical landscape of the seafaring city of the South' (Zavattini, 1970), an 'indispensable' Italian naval base, and is a source of 'pride' for the city itself and for the country (Marina Militare, 2022). Even when Taranto became dominated by industry, the bridge remained a nostalgic emblem of the 'old image of the large maritime centre' (RAI, 1980) and an icon of the Navy (Marina Militare, 2015). Indeed, in the words of Frascella (1954): 'For the umpteenth time in its long existence, the bridge slowly closes. It has seen all the wars of Independence, the most dramatic events in our history. Perhaps it is not far off the day when it will be put to rest. Dear old bridge'.

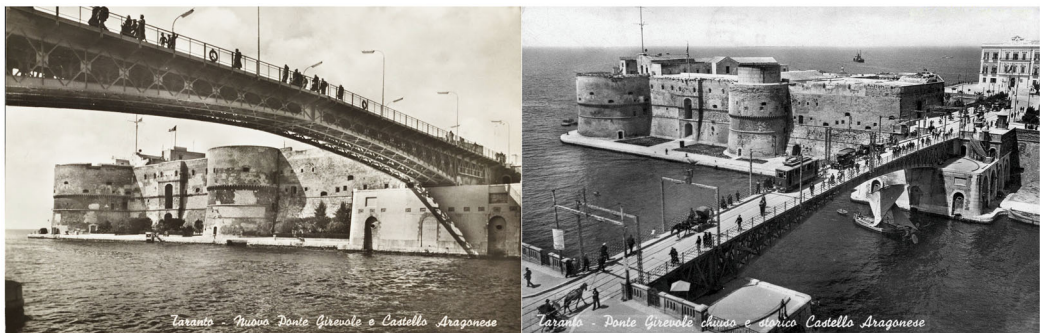


Figure 2. Closed revolving bridge and Aragonese Castle, Taranto (left) and revolving bridge and Aragonese Castle (Picture by Berengo Gardin) (right). Source: Archivio Touring Club Italiano (1960, 1966).

### **Uprooted olive tree**

Despite its previous maritime vocation, Taranto was pictured as a rural reality in the narratives of the 1960s. The olive tree, typical of Apulian agriculture, was often visually represented as an icon of poverty, sleepiness, abandonment, and resignation. The olive tree was sometimes portrayed uprooted (Figure 3), to embody the end of the rural 'sleepy world' (Paolucci, 1962) and the onrush of progress and well-being in the steel era. The description of inhabitants was in line with the lines of the visual representation: in Marsili (1962), workers 'came from the fields, from the pastures, from resignation', but 'today they already feel different, they finally feel alive and modern'.



Figure 3. Excavation July 1961 (left) and Excavation December 1961 (right). Source: Archivio di Stato di Taranto (1961a, 1961b).

### ***Big steel pipes***

And thus, in the age of modernisation, olive trees have been replaced by 'large steel trees planted on stone cubes' (Paolucci, 1962). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, steel represented the progress of the city of Taranto, the industrialisation of the South, and the driving factor of the whole Italian economy. Historical pictures (Archivio Storico Fondazione Fiera Milano, 1962a, 1962b, 1962c, 1975) and documentaries (Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa, n.d.-a, n.d.-b) show, from all possible angles, large-diameter welded tubes (Figure 4), the main product of Ilva. As underlined in Zavattini (1970) and MsDocumentari (n.d.), Ilva steel pipes were destined to conquer the main world markets, affirming Italy as a leading industrial power.

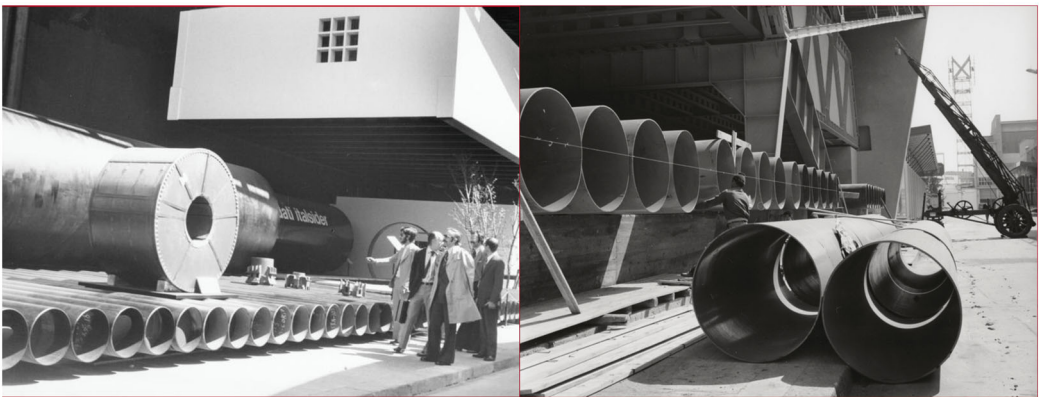


Figure 4. Italsider exhibition area at the *Fiera Campionaria* in Milan. Source: Archivio Storico Fondazione Fiera Milano (1962a, 1975).

### ***Smoking chimneys***

From the 1980s, environmental pollution transformed both the material and symbolic features of Taranto's landscape, and a new relationship between the landscape and society emerged. In particular, the steel plant's smokestacks, blue with red and white horizontal stripes, have turned

into powerful features in the environmental struggles. In tv news (RAI, 1980, 1986, 1999b), activists' videos (Legamjonici, 2013a, 2013b; Maticchiera, 2012), documentaries (Caminada, 2021; Ondeggia, 2010), and fictional movies (Abruzzese, 2011; Mingolla, 2019), smokestacks are often framed in the foreground or from afar, at day and night, but also as a background to interviews. Smokestacks become sounding trumpets (Figure 5), long noses of lying politicians (Figure 6), monsters to fight (Figure 7), and icons of protests (Figure 8). In sum, the smoking blue chimneys symbolise pollution and death in Taranto.



Figure 5. Frame from the music clip 'Pinuccio the workerman'. Source: Legamjonici and Anonimafolk (2014).



Figure 6. Frame from the short movie 'Fireworks', representing the wall painting by the Italian artists BLU for the Fame festival 2009 in Grottaglie (Taranto, Italy). Source: Abruzzese (2011).



Figure 7. Wall painting 'No pollution, no exploitation ... Free Taranto!!!'. Source: Marescotti (2010).



Figure 8. Sticker 'Ilva is a killer'. Source: D'Ovidio (2016).

### ***Sea of hope***

In the last 10 years, different counter-narratives have emerged with a new positive vision of the city, far from the negative imaginary linked to steelworks. The sea becomes a recurring element in these new representations. First of all, activists have changed their approach by proposing messages of hope for the future of the city: symbolic is the presence of a pregnant woman and a steel worker who strips off his uniform, both in front of the sea (Legamjonici, 2014). The sea (Figures 9 and 10) becomes a place of prayer (Mingolla, 2019) and revolution (Abruzzese, 2011) and it is the background of the songs of hope (Artisti uniti per Taranto, 2012; Kendan & GND, 2015; Salento All Stars, 2018).



Figure 9. Frame from the fiction 'Dalia'. Source: Mingolla (2019).



Figure 10. Frames from the music clips 'Made in Taranto' (right) and 'Qui non passa' (left). Sources: Kendan & GND (2015) and Salento All Stars (2018).

The video clip by Terraross (2016) is particularly emblematic: the song was originally conceptualised to underline the aural similarity of the letters making up the name Ilva with YMCA, the well-known 1978 hit by Village People. The name Ilva in this song has been converted into an acronym: *Istituzione Legale Vergogna Ambientale* [Legal Institution Environmental Shame]. The lyrics are a social condemnation of the sad reality of Taranto, but with a final positive message for the future of the city: 'it's an epochal moment with two seas of love, it's a story that makes you immortal'.

### Changing landscapes within changing narratives

The paradigmatic case of Taranto summarises and highlights the characteristics of, and suggests new generalisable insights into (Flyvbjerg, 2006), an industry-led model of development doomed to fail. Indeed, modern industrial Taranto was shaped long before the very idea of landscape governance (Görg, 2007) and the implementation of urban and environmental management in political processes. National policies have been driven exclusively by job creation and regional economic development until the city was declared a National Priority Contaminated Site and a Complex Industrial Crisis area (Bellantuono et al., 2021). The local government was reluctant to adhere to any form of urban planning and growth limitations (Porsia & Scionti, 1989) during the boom of the steelworks, so the process led to rapid and massive sprawl ending in a transformation of the material landscape attributable to different factors.

Building speculation was driven by the construction business at the expense of farmland. The steel plant intensified inbound migration and increased demand for housing (Nistri, 2007), for which a top-down industrial model was imposed. The steel industry was regarded as an employment opportunity after the decline of the military shipbuilding industry (Balconi, 1991; Barca & Trento, 1997; Romeo, 2019). As long-term resident families were a minority in Taranto, and most inhabitants moved in from other cities and regions, they remained ‘foreigners’ for several generations. This anomaly turned into a detachment between individuals, communities, and families (Romeo, 2019, p. 229). Finally, despite being a city whose foundation dates back to Magna Graecia, the sudden changes in post-war Taranto may have generated a loss of place identity in its dwellers. The transformation process can be usefully clarified through an insight into the changing cultural and symbolic landscape of contemporary Taranto depending on historical and cultural moments. We identified three main shifts.

First, at the end of the 1950s, Taranto went from being represented as a naval city to a rural area, eventually replaced by being identified as an industrial hub. The imposition of the industrial model led by national development policies (Raffestin, 2006) guided not only the material transformation but also the dominant narrative of the period and was conveyed mainly by national networks heralding an industrialist discourse. In support of this dominant narrative, the centrality of the revolving bridge, which previously helped create, maintain, and circulate myths of a united national identity (Burden, 2006), was replaced by uprooted olive trees and big steel pipes. On one hand, the description of Taranto as a rural landscape with olive trees became a strategy to emphasise some territorial characteristics and, consequently, the people who inhabited it (Santos & Piñeiro-Antelo, 2020), highlighting a history of destitution. On the other hand, the governing class expressed the industrial discourse, underlined by the symbolic values associated with the big steel pipes, especially reflecting its economic interests (Lai, Hsu, & Nepal, 2013). In the local and national collective imagination, therefore, Taranto represented progress for the South and the whole country’s economy, which, however, had proved to be illusory.

The industrial discourse was slowly replaced by an environmental discourse from the 1980s by some powerful counter-narratives. Initially, the pollution issue, related especially to the dioxins from Ilva, circulated only at the local level. After the 2000s the question assumed national relevance due to legal scandals, work deaths, and the Catch-22 between health and work. National news outlets, important documentaries, and songs imbued Taranto’s image with negative connotations, replacing the previous positive dominant narrative. Visual representations again focussed on pollution using the symbol of smoking chimneys, portraying ‘the threatening and the disgusting’ (Cosgrove, 1984). However, the narrative concentrating on Ilva was so dominant that two other glaring truths could not emerge: one was that some workers did not perceive Taranto negatively, but rather as the steel city offering jobs; a second was that other polluting industrial plants (such as a major refinery and a cement plant) were almost completely ignored. Thus, the collective imagery of death and loss of hope in Taranto centres solely on Ilva.

Taranto, in the minds of the wider populace, remains entwined to its previous negative image related to unemployment, workplace deaths, and pollution. However, this has generated a bottom-up reaction from residents trying to elicit a new portrayal of the city. The landscape represents an important element of a community’s identity; it is the element most immediately visible to the eye, and it lends itself well to aesthetically characterising a culture rooted in a territory (Ruffato & De Marchi, 2009). Moreover, it is more-than-representational and expresses the aesthetic and emotional relational dimension between the human being and their context (Lorimer, 2005; Waterton, 2013). Indeed, new counter-narratives represent a marine landscape and underline different invisible attractions of the city. The sea is at the centre of the scene, no longer associated with the Navy, but rather with the hope of a brighter future for the city and its inhabitants. In addition, from a visual perspective, the official narrative in favour of the wind farm mentioned above considers renewables as a viable option for a more sustainable future. Despite being an eye-catching structure shaping a new coastal landscape, it is not currently

contested; on the contrary, it is perceived as an element of urban and environmental regeneration. In this sense, on one hand, the push towards renewables appears to be a return to the initial narrative of progress, for which the infrastructure is deemed as necessary; on the other hand, it is not expected to contribute to national development, but mostly to local protection of the environment. It represents a paradigm shift which embraces eco-friendly standards, one that no longer sees progress as mere material growth, but as sustainable development.

## Conclusion

The aim of our research was to interpret the evolution of Taranto's landscape from the 1950s to today: our 70-year journey shows unequivocally that the city's landscape is not only material, involving physical elements of territory, but also—and probably mostly—cultural and symbolic. This cultural and symbolic landscape has, indeed, been key to interpreting spatial transformations driven by political and economic power (Zukin, 1991). The meaning of landscape has been modified by its social and historical construction and by the manipulation and control by elites, making Taranto a paradigmatic case of a 'flickering' (Daniels & Cosgrove, 1988, pp. 7–8) landscape in constant change. Further research can help shed light on the transformation of Taranto, highlighting initiatives carried out by public and private agents to diversify the city's socio-economic fabric and to reverse the still gloomy collective imaginaries portrayed by the media. For instance, audiovisual production from below promisingly shows the emergence of a new spatial awareness and of an unprecedented mindset among younger generations capable to enable participatory governance processes to co-create a future for both the local community and the landscape.

## Note

1. RAI (*Radiotelevisione Italiana*) is the Italian national public broadcasting company.

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