



# Landscape and culture

Stanisław Pietraszko\*

Ecologists have proclaimed the death of landscape. In a sense, it has indeed ceased to exist, becoming a mere historical artefact in the eyes of science. A scholarly seminar dedicated to landscape, held in 1982 in Lyon, was justified with the somewhat sarcastic sentiment that “you discuss only the dead and finished.” (Dagognet 1982, 32).

## The concept of landscape

If one equates landscape with nature, then similar assessments of its condition seem warranted today—and this is an idea which has become established in the relevant natural sciences and can be widely found in textbooks. If landscape is considered a “naturally isolated” fragment of the natural world or the “entirety of nature in a naturally delimited expanse of land” (Szczęsny 1982, 107), one could hardly dispute that in the contemporary world landscape is dying. We must at least agree that a basic exemplification—what the relevant literature describes as “natural”—is dying. It has also observed that the natural is being ousted by the growing “cultural” landscape. This way of speaking tends to be explained by its more or less human aetiology, since landscape of that kind is “proper of the areas where intensive human undertaking takes place, effecting changes in the order of natural conditions and introducing spatial elements created by the human hand” (Ibidem, 108); that aspect of culture is at the same time seen as very capacious, as it is believed that landscape of this kind is a “synthesis of the activities of societies in their geographical environment” (Dobrowolska 1948, 156).

Given the above, what are the elegiac assertions of ecologists about? One might think they pertain only to the “natural” landscape, but this is not exactly the case. When discussing the “death of landscape” at the Lyon colloquium, the speakers did not address nature as “departed” but its lost appearance, its defunct images; they respected the distinction between “landscape” as an image and “country”—the land, the space, the complex of natural phenomena—as an item, or the object of such an image. At any rate, in the context of the mother tongue of the word

---

\* Stanisław Pietraszko (1928-2010) was a Polish specialist in cultural studies.

*paysage* the distinction was so obvious that—most likely with a sense of triviality of the act itself and its substance as well—the very basic definition was recalled: “Whereas land denotes a place, landscape (as an image) betokens the manner of its overall perception” (Dagognet 1982, 10).

In this context, *point de vue d'ensemble* is an expression which is difficult to translate. Regardless of whether its meaning is more akin to “seeing”, “view” “image” or “appearance”—it would nevertheless suggest the inalienable presence of the human subject. “Images”, “views” or “seeings” arise as someone’s, while “appearance” presupposes an observer. Thus, the expression implies an anthropogenic nature of landscape and situates it within the human world.

So the pronouncement made by ecologists refers in fact to the human world—as opposed to nature—its variant or stage of development. More precisely, it pertains to the relationship between human beings and their natural environment; the crisis does not so much affect nature as our “place” (Dagognet 1982, 50) in it. Furthermore, the diagnosis of a critical situation of landscape reveals a phenomenon of consciousness, a phenomenon of a particular kind, allowing us to perceive that consciousness as a synonym of culture.

This is obviously not the culture to which publications concerned with nature refer, a culture comprehended so broadly that its scope encompasses almost the entirety of the human world—a diverse human intervention into the natural environment, spanning social, economic and technological endeavour, along with its objective outcomes. Nor is it a culture construed colloquially, something that those writing about landscape often have in mind, reducing its cultural aspects to “aesthetic-scenic” properties.

Landscape understood as a *point de vue d'ensemble* seems to couple it with culture in the psychological sense—something nevertheless limited to the sphere of intersubjective phenomena. It is in this dimension where “images” are to be found. When we accepting it as a mental phenomenon, one which confines landscape to individual psychology, we necessarily leave some of its crucial characteristics unexplained, especially its capacity to exist and function in a human community, its identifiability and communicativeness within that community, the “generality” (*d'ensemble*) inherent in this notion appears to open doors for such an explanation. Still, it does not offer one itself, because it does not reveal those dependencies which cannot be reduced to psychological paradigms, to regularities of social structure and development, through which that mental phenomenon gains and retains intersubjective objectivity and its permanence and unique character in the human world.

This understanding of landscape cannot be reconciled with the concept operating in the literature of the natural sciences. It also invalidates the typology employed there—in particular the concept of “cultural” landscape. In one way or another, every landscape is “cultural”. It possesses this status not only because of its creative

aspect, as an image of sorts, but in view of the very autonomous properties of human awareness which make landscape a relatively independent—in relation to principles of nature—foundation of human behaviour and underlie the separateness of the human universe, or “culture”, from a standpoint from which the concept of “cultural” landscape was derived. This claim will fail to satisfy all those for whom culture is not synonymous with the notion of the human world, being too extensive and general, as well as those for whom identifying culture with awareness is a cause for ontological objections. Consequently, the question about the cultural aspects of landscape should be addressed yet again, this time employing involving the perspective of culture sciences.

## The existential nature of landscape

If Landscape is not a part of nature, then in the dichotomous division of reality it is situated in the human domain. Yet this is a borderline place, subject to external circumstances. Landscape as an “image” does not enjoy the same freedoms as an artistic, painterly representation.

Let us note that the numerous definitions of landscape refer repeatedly to the natural essence of “delimitation” or “isolation” of a space that landscape contains. One is reminded that the boundaries of landscape are not established at will by human subjects but are outlined by the lay of the land and the shape of the natural “subject matter” of landscape.

Although this aspect of landscape is highlighted mainly by naturalists, representatives of the humanities should not ignore it. Admittedly, the peaks of Giewont or Śnieżka may be viewed from various vantage points and distances, in the sun or in the fog, in a sad or joyous mood, but it will always be a “view of Giewont” or a “view of Śnieżka”. The subjectivity of the individual who watches a specific fragment of the surroundings within sight, endows each such “view” with a more or less individual character and causes a demarcation of the observed “stretch of land” which deviates from a “natural” one, producing idiosyncratic boundaries. Following a highly personal moral or aesthetic interpretation of the space, they may also emphasize or overlook certain elements of the object, making the appearance of the whole utterly unique. However, even in such instances, individual images of a given object retain some of its elements and traits which all of those images share: the parameters of that “view” and its intersubjectivity at the same time. The natural circumstances are the fundamental factor which determines that inventory of elements which recur in individual perceptions of the image. By highlighting some elements of space—imposing or singular enough to stand out—they ensure them the role of indispensable components of the landscape’s “sight”.

The landscape itself, on the other hand, belongs to another level. Assuming it is different in each case, that it never repeats, if only due to the idiosyncrasies of the

individual observer, then a separate landscape would be constituted with each individual act of perception directed at the “naturally demarcated” fragments of visible space. However, the full pictorial outcome of such an act can never be communicated in its entirety. It does not exist beyond the individual, “stem” consciousness of the observer. And yet, the images of such objects are to some extent communicable, perhaps to a substantial degree, since they admit of being relatively accurately identified and often retain their identity in the awareness of many. Together they make up that particular iconic community of human groups—and even contribute to its creation. These are the traits and properties with which landscape is often associated in the popular understanding. It is for those images, which may be communicated via an intersubjective repertoire of shared content, that the name of landscape can be reserved.

It is evident that landscapes in this sense transcend the dimension of human individuality. Without a doubt, their scope and reach are community-wide. At the same time, to some degree, they are subject to the rules of collective existence, to the principles of social structure and social development. Speaking of a collective, social subject of landscape would be only partially legitimate, especially if the subject were to be identified with a specific social community. Even a homogeneous and stable local community who live with a given landscape object permanently in sight does not constitute such a subject. The community would share the physical object itself because it is a part of the land and the environs, but not the *landscape*. Though *seen* by everyone, the object is not actually *viewed* or *observed* by everyone.

In fact, landscape creates its own subject thanks to which it exists. It forges that singular community both from the members of its “own” local community who share it and—in an overwhelming proportion—from those strangers, sometimes originating from very remote places, who even during a brief stay have become permanent “participants” in the landscape, members of the iconic community it established.

The perception of the subject matter of landscape alone does not suffice to bring such “participation” about, thereby leading to the social existence of landscape. The mental disposition of a human individual is not sufficient either. We can understand this from the history of landscape. *History*—because landscape is essentially historical, having emerged at a specific stage of human history.

## The history of landscape

It is most likely no accident that the historical origins of landscape coincide with early reflection on the separateness and fundamental distinctiveness of the human and the natural world. Previously, landscape as such was absent. People did see nature, but it was not looked at. Historically, landscape was preceded by selective

views of nature, and they were quite consistently one-sided in their fragmentariness: views of the land, flora and fauna, presenting their objects from the standpoint of their usefulness for human beings. At the time, nature was neither beautiful nor ugly, neither joyful nor cheerless. Land deserved attention when it was fit for cultivation, especially when it was fertile and promised an abundant crop. This bias of the then “proto-landscape” is reflected in the history of painting, the poetic descriptions of nature with their characteristic repertoire of adjectives.

Landscape began to be discovered only when the constantly developing human world and the world of nature drifted apart far enough to see the latter in terms of values rather than uses exclusively. It was at this time that culture revealed itself as a particular domain of the human world—the criteria by means of which it was distinguished were still vague, but it could no longer be identified with a world where a profoundly utilitarian view was to ensure protection against “wild” nature, to find tools of subjugation or apparatus facilitating adaptation to the natural necessities of existence. In its value-based status, culture was becoming a major factor in the transformation of our human approach to nature. It contributed to further human expansion, but this was an expansion of an altogether new kind. By discovering that nature and its objects—or more precisely its “views”—harboured the capacity to reify values, to be their physical correlates, culture turned them into cultural assets, offering opportunity for a singular appropriation of the natural world which expanded the human world immensely. These are the circumstances which accompanied the historical emergence of landscape.

## Landscape and culture

As landscape came to be universally ascribed value, it was included within the purview of aesthetics as an axiological discipline, which subsequently delved into the theoretical issues relating to landscape. However, its axiological scope is not limited to aesthetic values; in fact, it may be that it more often manifests values of an ethical kind. As in all value correlations, the connection with a particular type of value is generally “determined” by the model of culture, with its own spatial and temporal actualization.

As with every image, landscape is an entity made up of signs, signifying more than itself. Its object is not the same as the observed object of nature, the subject matter from which is began, being its interpretive representation, and thus engendering a new meaning. Watching a landscape’s subject consists in perceiving its elements and traits, a selective process of singling out and emphasizing some elements at the expense of others, as it were. In an individual act of viewing, the criteria of that selection are always to some extent subjective, but they are an expression—sometimes utterly so—of the intersubjective system of values which typifies the culture in which the viewing subject participates. The resulting new meaning of a given object

attaches a particular value to it, a value which is alien to its natural state. That conjunction makes landscape cultural. What is more, it renders landscape possible as such. Its historical predecessor, called above “proto-landscape”, does not combine its signality with values but with other qualities which had been objectivized in the human world and had become subject to evaluations in terms of usefulness or functionality with respect to the prerequisites of existence. It is only with the value viewpoint afforded by culture that the image of observed nature acquires that dimension of meaningfulness which characterizes landscape *sensu strictu*.

In contrast to discerning the “assets” of nature such as usefulness and serviceability, the assignation of values seems to necessitate a distance to nature. We have mentioned the difference of approach to a landscape subject or starting point whereby local people and outsiders are set apart in their relation to the natural object. Most inhabitants of the land, especially rural communities who depend on the natural circumstances to a much greater extent, are not capable of adopting the distance of a stranger, which would enable them to approach their landscape from a standpoint unencumbered by such dependencies.

Although landscape has the status of a cultural phenomenon, this alone does not account sufficiently for the peculiarity of its mode of existence. Intriguing issues here include the significantly intersubjective character and relative permanence which preclude landscape’s qualification as a matter of individual or even collective psychology. One may notice that in the literature originating from the fields of the natural sciences, authors who have consented to take the viewpoints of the humanities into consideration and, being ready to depart from identifying landscape solely with nature, modify definitions using terms that imply a different status, realize the grave ontological consequences. For instance, in one of the textbooks which quotes a compromise definition, namely “an extraneous manifestation of natural components, occurring in a naturally delimited area”, the author provides the following commentary: “This approach arouses reservations, given the uncertainty whether a landscape thus construed can be deemed an existing object?” (Szczyński 1982, 108). While it may be admitted that the ontic status of “extraneous manifestations” is not entirely clear, one can question the requirement that the defined object of cognition will always and necessarily be a “an object existing in reality”, because it is neither satisfied by the objective scope of the humanities nor—most likely—by the numerous objects of natural study.

As I advocate the distinction between landscape and its natural subject matter or natural object, while at the same time opposing its being classified as a mental phenomenon, I see some rationale for situating it on the plane of existence which is proper for the domain of culture. Landscape’s varied structural components can be traced back to consciousness and are subject to a singular objectification which renders them largely independent from the latter and grants them greater durability and autonomy, sometimes even agency with respect to the human world.

Similarly, landscape is a cultural structure whose origins, existence and functioning are governed by similar principles. The context of culture not only contributes to the “selection” of those elements of a landscape object which make up the relatively permanent and repeatable objective repertoire of a given landscape, but also forges its objectivity, an objectivity in a twofold sense: landscape is transformed into a peculiar object and simultaneously becomes objective, i.e. relatively independent from the subjective aspects of its provenance and the laws that govern mental phenomena.

This dual cultural objectivization is neither wholly nor in any of those aspects equivalent to social objectivization which, according to some sociological theories, is a prerequisite for a culture to exist, whereby a society accepts its achievements or rules. However, it does have a varied bearing on the social existence and functioning of landscape, which may prove an interesting fact for sociologists, or even economists. After all, in many countries of the contemporary world, that objectification of landscape turns it into item of commercial exchange, while “selling landscapes”—no more and no less than landscapes, understood as intersubjective “views” of specific fragments of nature, not their natural objects—has become a profitable branch of the economy (Cueco 1982, 10-12).

## **Cultural status as a persistence factor**

What then may we say about the verdict of the French ecologists who have pronounced landscape dead? Given the point of view adopted here, one should conclude that it indeed does not pertain to landscape as such. True, they did not equate landscape with nature, but by approaching landscape as a mental phenomenon, the constitutive traits of its identity and specificity were ignored. When taken to be in the domain of consciousness, subject to the rules of its volatility, landscape does indeed die along with its natural subject.

When landscape is approached in the dimension of culture, governed by the latter’s peculiar laws, the pronouncement of the death of landscape appears invalid. This dimension of culture ensures its durability, enhances its communicability with the advancements in technologies of iconic mass communication, disseminates its intersubjective aspect. One should concur that its fate will not remain unaffected as nature dies. However, are we able to state where—within our field of vision—nature ends, and the human world begins? Today, at least a trace of human intervention can be found in just about everything we refer to as “nature”. A forest of smoke-enveloped factory stacks may—in a value-based perspective—become an object of landscape, because human axio-semiotic activity knows no boundaries. In that respect there are also no significant differences between landscapes coupled with natural and artificial objects. No doubt, as the latter gradually replace the former, the price of everything that is natural rises. Yet landscape is not

natural. Therefore, it has the possibility of outliving natural objects and preserving their appearance in culture, as goods of exceptional worth.

**Bibliography:**

- Dobrowolska, Maria. 1948. "Dynamika krajobrazu kulturowego" ["The Dynamics of the Cultural Landscape"]. *Przełęcz Geograficzny XXI*: 151-202
- Dagognet, François, ed. 1982 *Mort du paysage? Philosophie et esthétique du paysage. Actes du colloque de Lyon*, Paris: Champ Vallons.
- Szczęsny, Tadeusz. 1982, *Ochrona przyrody i krajobrazu [Environmental and Landscape Protection]*, Warszawa: PWN.