



Layers of landscape— transdisciplinarity of contemporary landscape photography

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In visual culture studies, the notion of *landscape* demarcates an important area of inquiry, one involving questions about the nature of perceived space and its cultural perception in particular. On the one hand, we consider what is looked at; we consider how we do it on the other. The issue of landscape also provokes questions concerned with the biological and/or cultural nature of perception. It is therefore a discussion which, to use the Fosterian distinction, explores the relationships between the sensorial (*vision*) and the cultural (*visuality*) perception of the world (Foster 1988), according to which the biological capacity of seeing is culturally processed into an image. However, in a broader approach, *landscape* is not merely about looking at nature, but above all involves the problem of human awareness of phenomena taking place in the natural world and the outcomes of our actions in the environment. Visual representations (be they landscapes by Lorraine, Poussin, Constable or photographs by Ansel Adams or Andreas Gursky) have always told a story of the relationship between humans and nature.

Cultural studies of landscape and the attitude of the human subject covers a vast area of academia—from classical philosophical aesthetics (the British empiricists, Goethe, the Lake Poets: Wordsworth and Coleridge, Ruskin), sociology (Simmel, Ingold, Edensor, Urry, Macnaghten), anthropology of the image (Belting), environmental aesthetics (Berleant) to researchers associated with contemporary, ethnographically and sociologically oriented visual studies (Pink, Pauwels, Klett)—to mention only a few names relating directly and indirectly to the issue addressed here (e.g. the links between the Lake Poets and photography are discussed by Batchen 1994). Relevant Polish literature is also abundant, with deliberations and analyses by Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz, Beata Frydryczak, or Krystyna Wilkoszewska, to cite only some of the foremost writers. This brief text, concerned with contemporary

photography, does not have the space to cite all outstanding studies. I will confine myself to introducing two contexts of contemporary artistic practice—the image as a representation of social and cultural environmental issues and the role of this likeness for the knowledge of environment. I will rely on three case studies, namely a series of photographs by Michał Woroniak who probably remains closest to the traditional landscape aesthetic, a research project by Tyrone Martinsson—which combines natural, historical and aesthetic investigation—and a virtual project by Robert Zhao Renhui and his collaborators.

Imagining nature

Let us note that at least since the latter half of the 20th century, the dominant current considering landscape as an image (Georg Simmel) began to be supplemented with dynamic concepts, whereby landscape is approached with the categories of corporeal experience involving memory and conceptual framework (Hans Belting). We observe how vision, characterized formerly as becoming distanced from objects of reference (one has to move away to see—M. Jay), turns into one of the traits of sensory experience enabling one to “be in the landscape”. At the same time, this shift echoes contemporary cultural reflection referring to the decline of the Anthropocene paradigm (Macnaghten and Urry 2005, 48) and the attempts to find more balanced forms of human existence in the natural world (plant and animal studies).

This direction of thought is pursued not only in Berleant’s philosophical aesthetics of the environment; it is even more palpable in the approach of social researchers who underline that landscape has always mirrored current views on the human-nature relationship. In *Contested Natures*, Macnaghten and Urry argue that “A major task for the social sciences will be to decipher the social implications of what has always been the case, namely, a nature elaborately entangled and fundamentally bound up with social practices and their characteristic modes of cultural representation” (Macnaghten and Urry 2005, 47).

It follows from the multiplicity of theoretical approaches mentioned here that reflection on landscape allows for the transcending of the confines of visual studies and making it a province of interdisciplinary studies. Indeed, we may go as far as to establish landscape studies as a transdiscipline, inspired by geographical, cultural, and social thought. In my opinion, studies into landscape could be compared to an analysis of geological strata: historical, artistic, natural, and political strata as well. Still, it should not be overlooked that the very figure of landscape serves the metaphor of contemporary cultural complexity, in which one captures the overlapping and interwoven phenomena of politics, economy, media, ideology and technology. As Appadurai notes, landscape in this sense is founded on the collective imagination of ordinary people which gives shape to their knowledge, views, and—by virtue of the choices they make—affects their lives (Appadurai 2005, 13-22; 55). In the context

of works described here, Appadurai's *imagined world* would also encompass the images of the natural world, ubiquitous in various media, which influence the thinking of persons and groups and determine their actions: from individual acts for the benefit of nature (such as waste sorting or choice of diet) to decisions of society-wide significance (drafting of laws and regulations) through subordinating the merely natural environment to one's own ends. Imagination is coupled with knowledge as well as with visual competency, a fact stressed in *How to See the World* by Nicolas Mirzoeff who, on the example of climate change, demonstrates how this abstract notion becomes observable only when meteorological, mathematical, geographical and historical data is considered (Mirzoeff 2016, 220).

The examination of the structure of imagined worlds requires an analysis from numerous standpoints where many disciplines come into play; the latter, however, do not function "next" to one another (as in an interdisciplinary approach) but become merged and intertwined (Zeidler-Janiszewska 2006; Michałowska 2014, 67-94). In the field I am particularly focused on—i.e. studies of photography, film, and technical media—this transdisciplinarity of method is highly attractive. This is because I would distinguish at least three approaches to landscape: a symbolic, anthropological, as well as a social and an ecological approach. The first of these pays attention to the aesthetic and metaphorical values of cultural notions of nature—it may be a reflection of cultural symbols ("post-Friedrichian" photography), ideological narratives (T. O'Sullivan's American topographic photography, Jan Bułhak's "homeland photography"), or sensations of the artist (the concept of "equivalent" developed by E. Steichen and metaphysical landscapes by Stanisław J. Woś). In the social approach, emphasis is placed on narratives about people's lives (e.g. *Silesia* by Wojciech Wilczyk), while the ecological approach is concerned with transformations in the natural environment (post-industrial photographs by Edward Burtynsky, Serkan Taycan or Ilkka Halso.) In fact, however, none of these approaches is methodologically "pure", as is demonstrated in critical studies on landscape photography with a feminist or post-colonial bias, studies which expose links between the cultural concept of "landscape" and the social-political objectives that a given representation seeks to accomplish (Macnaghten and Urry 2005; Wells 2000) as well as cultural tradition (Clarke 1997; Bezencenet 2000, 56-61). Visual projects employing photography and film are a splendid manifestation of dilemmas akin to those in landscape studies. After all, one could ask whether photography captures objective states and actual natural phenomena, or whether it merely represents their creative interpretation. Is it a technology or a mode of philosophizing about the world? What is its connection with earlier pictorial traditions, such as painting or theatre? What would framing amount to? Much the same issues are encountered in landscape research: is its nature "cultural" (as representatives of the humanities would have it) or natural (as it is argued by the representatives of the natural sciences)? Is a "non-cultural" viewpoint feasible?

As noted previously, I believe that landscape studies should presuppose a trans-disciplinary rather than interdisciplinary approach. Only such hybrid and integrative methods reveal the perspective that landscape studies can offer: the possibility of combining natural and technical sciences, the humanities and the arts, leading to the aforementioned exploration of strata (or perhaps sediments), given that such investigation should cover the synchronic and diachronic dimensions. What might research like this be like? Without insisting on any methodological approach, I provide only three examples among the numerous art and research projects conducted today.

Fig. 1

Michał Woroniak, *Bountiful Yield*, 2017



Michał Woroniak, the first example, is a 2017 graduate from the University of Arts in Poznań. His images capture agricultural areas which include a subtly observed presence of technology. The colours are toned down thanks to the diffused light, a deliberate effect obtained by taking the pictures on a cloudy day or early in the morning. The turbine columns of a wind farm emerge out of the grey-green surface of cultivated land (fig. 1). There are red and orange lorries between them, and the arm of a crane rises above. The hues are subdued, displaying no eponymous abundance.

In another of Woroniak's photographs, the central part of the image is bisected by the line of the baulk on which willows had been planted (fig. 2). The landscape is almost an icon, easily recognizable, frequently recurring in Polish visual imagination, a motif from the repertoire of Bułhak's homeland photography or the compositions of Edward Hartwig.

Fig. 2



Yet another example comes from the series *Manufactured Landscapes* by Edward Burtynsky (fig. 3). Again, the scene is divided into two sections: the upper is filled by the grey sky, the lower by an interrupted embankment. The tires and the concrete wall in the background, almost covered by earth and partly overgrown, secure the pile of haylage heaped in a field. The organic and the technological world co-operate.

Fig. 3



The visual connotations I have mentioned permit Woroniak's work to be situated in the long stylistic tradition of visual conventions known from the history of photography. However, the photographer uses those models somewhat perversely: by playing with the images inscribed in our optical unconscious, he speaks of contemporaneity. The photographs were taken in three localities in southern Greater Poland. As the author writes in a commentary to the images, Krobia, Poniec and Miejska Górka have been a part of the traditional "granary of Poland" (Woroniak 2017), a synonym

of fertile land. However, the title has a double meaning here: in 2014 authorizations were granted for the extraction of brown coal in the area, though construction of an opencast mine has not been conclusively decided yet. If it does happen, heavy mining machinery will irreversibly change the landscape and affect the lives of people, forcing them to change their sources of subsistence. Woroniak's work should be classified as belonging to the current wave of new topographics which gained popularity among Polish photographers of the post-1970 generation (other notable representatives being Nicolas Gropierre, Konrad Pustofa and the already mentioned Wojtek Wilczyk and Rafał Milach). The term—introduced in 1975 by curator William Jenkins at a New York exhibition entitled *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*—referred to representations of “altered environments of daily life” (Truscello 2012, 189). This *intensive landscaping*, employed by artists such as Stephen Shore, Lewis Baltz or Robert Adams was to be a commentary to the changes caused by the incursion of industry into nature, bringing about the disappearance of spaces “untouched” by human activity, which had been photographed by Anselm Adams or Edward Weston. The idealistic landscape of the latter was replaced with a social landscape. Woroniak follows that path, utilizing the characteristic, seemingly neutral manner of depiction. Space is shown without evident chiaroscuro effect and foreshortening, violent weather changes and “picturesque” hours of the day are also avoided¹. Thus, the image appears to verge on the boring. The photographer's individual expression also remains imperceptible. Topographic works by Burtynsky were criticized for aestheticizing space. Indeed, it seems that formalization, a characteristic of the visual idiom of “new topographics”, “distils” meanings, directing the viewer's attention to beauty². However, one can approach the matter differently and, concurring with Michael Truscello, conclude that by means of this device the viewer's attention is drawn to more universal, social meanings. A specific problem, represented by an image of a particular place, becomes a metaphor for a global process (Truscello 2012, 189). Moreover, capturing a topographic landscape enables the photographer to remain neutral in a sense with respect to the depicted issue. Woroniak does not pass a judgement on what would be better for the local community—the traditional agricultural pursuits on the one hand or new jobs on the other. The kind of melancholy that the photographs contain is due to the fact that a change is inevitable.

1 Nonetheless, a different association relating to the repertoire of landscape photography comes to mind, namely Emerson's piece of advice from the 1889 *Naturalistic Photography*, in which he contends that one should refrain from capturing *the sensational* and *prettiness* in nature (Emerson 1890: 256).

2 This old Benjaminian dilemma in landscape photography never ceases to recur.

Tyrone Martinsson, *Arctic Views. Passages in Time*, 2015

Contemporary landscape practices can also be exemplified by Tyrone Martinsson's photographic study at the juncture of ecological and historical research. In his work, Woroniak combined elements of aesthetics and social sciences; one could say that in general it belonged to the domain of the humanities. The Norwegian artist not only unites disciplines but entire branches of knowledge as well: the humanities with earth science. His study addresses two issues simultaneously: the history of research and human presence in northern Svalbard, analysing documents from the period beginning with the discovery of the region by Europeans some 500 years ago and the climatic changes which have taken place throughout that time. For that purpose, the researcher interprets drawings, sketches, photographs and takes advantage of modern techniques of re-photography (also known as repeat photography or repeat landscape). Martinsson's analysis sets out from archival images (included in the book) which he then collates with his own, contemporary panoramas. The re-photographs were made in much the same seasons of the year, so that the viewer could compare the present-day and historical landscape in that area. The comparison refutes any argument claiming that climate change is invisible. The photographs (whose scientific value is based on the authority of being a document) clearly show the extent of the glaciers then and their current disappearance.

Martinsson describes his studies as a "dialogue with time, history, and memory" and formulates the following objectives of the project: "In terms of variables such as global warming and climate effects photography can serve as a tool for comparative studies in which photographs showing clear evidence of change over time in combination with data from science can be used to address politicians, policy makers, and the public." (Martinsson 2015: 9). Here, the visual representation of natural space becomes the object of research, yet at the same time the very formula of landscape enables one to determine the transformations which the region has witnessed over the centuries. The project contributes much to the description of the past: the biographies of explorers and the biography of the archipelago itself. What is more, it propagates knowledge of the natural world by virtue of a singular study of "layers" of glacial history. It is thus a tool by means of which the afore-said imagination is built. The images created by Martinsson make one realize and appreciate the extent of climate change. The works are an example of a borderline attitude, in the sense that the photographer is an observer of changes but does not avoid expressing his involvement in the space. In numerous fragments, he conveys his experiences from the journey and confronts the views he sees with the knowledge and images from the archives. Consequently, a landscape is no longer a framed image, but becomes a part of "environment" the object of research, in which "nature and culture dissolve into one another" (Macnaghten and Urry 2005, 47). Spitzbergen has long since ceased to be a space devoid of human presence.

Human actions have an evident impact on the existence of the archipelago, even if that impact does not assume rural or urban forms known from densely populated parts of the world.

The Institute of Critical Zoologists

The third example selected for this text are the undertakings of the Institute of Critical Zoologists, conceived by and formed by a Singaporean visual artist Robert Zhao Renhui, in collaboration with a group of biologists, naturalists and ecological activists. According to the description of the project, the Institute aims to carry out interactive research to facilitate understanding of relationships between humans and animals. In fact, however, the authors of the project ask questions about the future of the natural world, which has been so extensively exploited and drained by humans. This is splendidly illustrated in the work entitled *Real World*, comprising five virtual simulations: *The Rainforest Dome*, *The Desert Dome*, *The Real Rooms*, *1,2,3*, *The Nature Trail*. The viewer (or rather the participant), equipped with VR goggles, enters a specially designed room with adjusted humidity levels and a floor which simulates the surface encountered in natural locations. In this way, the landscapes may be experienced via multiple senses; apart from visual input there are smells and ambient temperature to be felt, sounds to be heard, and creatures to interact with. Animals can also be trailed within the space of local parks. The website states the following: “In the rainforest, participants see genuinely huge trees and palms. There are numerous waterfalls and a fog that often engulfs the participants, adding to the mystery of the rainforest. Butterflies, birds, deer and large mammals interact with the participants as they would in real life” (http://www.critical-zoologists.org/projects/real_world/realworld_rainforest_01.html). Does this project constitute an instance of contemporary environmental aesthetics? Virtual technologies certainly enable the user to become thoroughly immersed in an environment. Analysing that contemporary current in the philosophy of landscape, Beata Frydryczak writes about its prerequisite “corporeal presence and full engagement of the senses [...] from the topography of the terrain, through emotional perception of its mood, to subconsciously registered stimuli” (Frydryczak 2013, 226). This kind of involvement necessitates bodily presence and action in a real landscape. The project devised by the Institute of Critical Zoologists casts the aesthetics of commitment in a particular light: the participant senses their tele-presence in simulated spaces, experiences it through vision, hearing, even touch, but they are not in it physically but in a mediated mode. They are no longer positioned *with respect to landscape*, as in the traditional aesthetic experience, nor are they completely in the landscape. Hence Zhao Renhui suggests (as Martinsson did) a reconstruction of nature’s past, becoming acquainted with its biography, but the truly crucial element is the creation of Appadurai’s imagined space which will quite soon vanish,

destroyed by human exploitation. The dimensions of the project span natural, artistic, as well as ecological aspects. The VR goggles and the digital environment provide for a multisensory experience of a tropical forest. And again, two interpretations are viable here: it may be a substitute, as we enter *The Rainforest Dome* to protect the actual rainforest from being excessively visited by tourists (just as they visit the simulation of the Lascaux Caves only). On the other hand, the project may be a warning: the physical tropical forest may soon be no more, and a virtual walk will be the only opportunity to get to know an environment which has been irreversibly destroyed.

Conclusions

Today, landscape imagination is becoming a necessary element in the survival of the human species on Earth. The issue is not only about seeing the landscape, but about combining thought oriented towards the natural world with being aware of the ramifications of human actions. Imagination, as Appadurai notes, is projective, enabling one to see the consequences and provide the driving force of action (Appadurai 2005, 16). In the era of information noise, the authority of science is waning. Since for many global warming is a myth while forests cease to be treated as heritage, only the laborious effort of nature-related education remains. The viewpoint on culture is changing too, as it is no longer considered in terms of being opposite to nature (Macnaghten and Urry 2005, 47) but construed as a unified paradigm of nature-culture (Latour, Haraway). A transdisciplinary approach to landscape embodies that twofold character: artistic undertakings are not expected to supplant the mission of science (the latter will always be formulated differently—as discovery of phenomena); however, art should make scientific problems visible to non-experts (Bakke 2010, 146). As an example, one could quote Burtynsky, who comments on his landscapes thus: “This type of work is interventionist, in other words, it intervened within the social order and was used as leverage to show people what was happening or what needed to be preserved” (Burtynsky 2008, 156). The examples of artistic-research works discussed here suggest the necessity of embarking on landscape studies, in which empirical impulse rooted in natural sciences is subjected to reflection originating with the humanities, a reflection on the aftermath of human action within the realm of natural world. For this end, one needs to study cultural representations as well as go beyond their framework towards inquiry into the nature of sensory experience of physical and virtual spaces.

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