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Landscape in the perspective of art history

Since the 1960s, the concept of landscape has changed its semantics and scope in academic art history, transcending and invalidating the limitations imposed by traditional historical-artistic interpretation. Landscape formerly essentially denoted a (painterly) image, as in the definition of the *Dictionary of Fine Arts Terminology*: “Landscape, paysage (landview or landsight in 19th-century Poland) in plastic arts, chiefly painting and graphic arts, a type of work encompassing representations of the views of nature; also a representation of such view (painting, engraving) [...]” (Kozakiewicz 1969, 194-195). Obviously, seen from the contemporary standpoint of studies into art phenomena the definition coined half a century ago, already anachronistic at the time, has long since lost its functionality and has proved highly insufficient—through a dramatic reduction of the scope of research it leaves out a whole plethora of issues in the domain of landscape understood today as *cultural* landscape, a sphere of various artistic strategies and practices, both historical and current, which operate within landscape (as a backdrop, context or material/medium) to generate unique imagery of its own (garden art, landscape architecture, land art, natural art, etc.). Current research approaches in landscape studies, seen from the perspective of history of art or, more broadly, inquiry into visual culture, are therefore determined by transformations in art and are coupled with the changes taking place in contemporary humanities, new art history included. So, the complexity inherent in the present-day understanding of landscape spans an interdisciplinary expanse of history, theory and philosophy/aesthetics, psychology and sociology of image—in short all that makes up the new science and anthropology of the image, seeking for ever novel interpretations of landscape (both with respect to its painterly dimension and landscape as that created in physical space) or delving into the social and political contexts in which landscape functions and is construed in terms of art as well as non-art practices. So, contemporary landscape studies require methodological pluralism by virtue of which they become a trans-discipline: a cognitively active field of study whose complexity is manifested in the transdisciplinary revival of history of art as an academic discipline, which naturally determines the premises and objectives of landscape education.

The fundamental issue here is the reorientation of the old, constrictive notion of landscape towards a notion applicable today in the humanities: that of a cultural or transformed landscape. As a wandering notion in contemporary humanities, its use does entail risk due to inexplicit, vague understanding. “Cultural landscape” is a relatively recent term in the humanities, dating back to the late 20th century, almost a century after the notion emerged in geographical sciences and their sub-disciplines. Seized on by the humanities, it was coupled chiefly with the concept of cultural memory (cultural memory of landscape, environment/place of memory), and it continues to circulate there, opening up new areas of cultural analyses beyond or, as some claim, completely separate from merely academic divisions (Burszta and Zeidler-Janiszewska 2012, 11-22). Researchers have drawn attention to the hybrid nature of the concept (and object) of cultural landscape, which is used profusely by varied disciplines of humanities. Yet it is interpreted differently than in geographical subdisciplines and exhibits varying scholarly power (Myga-Piątek 2005). In general, cultural landscape is understood as a visuality which constitutes an object and an outcome of paradigms (social, political, ethical, symbolic, aesthetic etc.). So, it is a “place” where actions in time—assuming specific forms of memory/trace/impression—become visible (or manifested). In other words, it is a “place” which “thinks” through culture. An art historian would add: just like images which also “think through culture”. Still, each discipline which takes advantage of the notion, applies it to other/different “places” (both physical and non-material, i.e. mental ones), therefore its semantic scope may happen to overlap with such notions as cultural circle, cultural sphere or configuration of culture, all of which mark an extent or limit for cultural elements to occur. All of those are related to the notion of historical substrate, introduced in Polish science by Ludwik Krzywicki (1888), and defined today as “the entirety of cultural output, which encompasses all areas of activity of past generations, including social life and, to a more or less distinct degree, have a bearing on the current behaviours of living generations or, alternatively, may exert a potential influence on those” (Dobrowolski 1967, 9-10). Given the perspective of anthropological-cultural studies, the cultural substrate is impacted by three categories of phenomena: (1) the geographical substrate, or the mode of utilization of the physiological bedrock and presence of its remnants in the landscape, (2) the demographic and biological substrate, (3) the cultural substrate, or geographical landscape taken together with the material and non-material products, “objectivized by social approval and satisfying particular needs, thus gaining social significance”; at the same time, all the components of the historical substrate can be qualified as: (1) still vital, (2) atrophying (declining status), and (3) persisting, though with a changed nature (Burszta 1987, 279-280).

This anthropological model also accommodates the notion of cultural landscape used in historical-artistic studies (in the history of art). Nonetheless, we should note that in this case it has a precise definition as a legal notion conceived after World

War II in connection with activities concerned with the protection of cultural heritage, enumerated in the UNESCO (2018) provisions on Cultural Landscape. The only applicable definition in Polish law is stipulated in the Act on the Protection and Guardianship of Monuments of July 23rd, 2003 (as amended), where cultural landscape is defined as “space historically shaped as a result of human activity, comprising products of civilization and natural elements” (Chapter 1, Art. 3 (14)). This understanding of cultural landscape determines the actions that, in compliance with the law, ensure protection to townscapes and landscapes.

So much for legal interpretation. After all, as regards in-depth reflection on what landscape actually is, or what determining factors affect its shape in the physical and social dimension, the applicability of that definition may be problematic, or at least insufficient. The contemporary viewpoint of bio- and post-humanities enables one to appreciate the latent potential of a concept which previously had not been considered at all.

The idea of cultural landscape in historical-artistic studies annexes the concept of monument. So, it is moulded by two approaches to a monument: the Italian—which makes use of vague categories of tradition and atmosphere (which gives preference to restoration of destroyed features as pseudo-historical mock-ups that would conform to a suitably formatted cultural landscape)—and the French, with its intellectual bias, deriving from the theory of modern urbanistic composition and landscape architecture—where features from the past are subordinated to contemporary spatial vision which complies with new forms/rituals and standards of civilizational progress. Both approaches display a high potential for conflict exposing their performativity. The very notion of monument, identified with age (and thus linked to memory) is a pure performative itself: a feature indicated as a monument is tasked with eliminating the distance between reality and fable, between “yesterday” and “today”, to foster the sense of identity in an individual or community by performing particular rituals. This in turn means that the attitude towards a monument, and thus towards cultural landscape, results from all active parties/audiences performing their imposed social roles and revealing the capacity to create imaginaries, which can consolidate or deconstruct or invalidate identity categories understood as a process of “creative discovery”. Cultural landscape is never stable, as it is the object of the constant interplay of history, culture and power. It is a construct and a “situationality” generated at the juncture of historical, political and cultural discourse. Sentimental predilections and longings for “history”, or rather its idealized representations which are supposed to imitate particular “landsights” (noting the markedly identity-connoting stem of Polish “*krajobraz*”/“*krajowidok*”) and create their semblances, situate the entire issue in the realm of ethics on the one hand (question of truth and falsehood at the service of particular historical policy) and psychology (of art) on the other.

This is the image of the centuries-old conflict between *orbis interior* and *orbis exterior*, between the familiar and the alien or Other. In this context, the fluidity of the notion of cultural landscape may be useful in playing the politics of cultural conflicts to one's political advantage. Here, we must not overlook the contemporary post-humanist perspective and Bruno Latour's concept of political ecology, which could translate into a harmonious collective/community forged via negotiation as a community of humans and non-humans (Latour 2009, 170), thus abolishing the erstwhile binary opposition Nature—Culture, and belief in one, transcendent Nature which prevails over culture and remains extrinsic to that collective. Bruno Latour asserts that laws of nature are merely a fabrication and representation of social-political organization, while the aim of political ecology is liberating social life from limitations of the external world (Nature), a transition from necessity to freedom which embraces the desired changes.

What is the use of this “metaphysics” in the case of cultural landscape? Here, it can be interpreted as one of the “speaking objects” that Latour discusses, pointing out that objects and non-humans have a capacity for “speech” and therefore possess a potential to negotiate their position in the polymorphous community—which abolishes the domination of Nature over Culture (and vice versa)—and where any emerging viewpoint is repeatedly negotiated and constructed anew, thereby bringing forth ever new cultural landscapes. However, it is quite evident that a non-anthropocentric concept is yet another regenerative utopia which might also trigger the very conflicts it was supposed to eliminate—in the name of negotiated equilibrium, leading to a cultural “war of images” and war *for* the image. In the aesthetic sense, the landscape-view-paysage would count as such an image as well. Despite these reservations, Latour's project offers a framework for critical reflection about cultural landscapes and their elusive structures and contexts—which today are so very sought after for anthropologically-oriented art history.

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