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Landscape: first of all—it exists

My answers to all the questions should be simple and short: *I do not know*. I feel justified in giving answers like that in view of the fact that I have been dealing with cultural landscapes for years and it was only at the beginning that (almost) everything appeared simple and obvious.

It was only at the beginning, for I was soon confronted not only with real terminological chaos—the multiplicity of definitions, their lack of precision—but also with the common conviction of authors that they are in possession of the one, perfect truth. It was equally important that when reading many texts concerning landscape, one could get the impression that their authors were trying to conceal their emotional relationship to landscape. That is why, even though I argued that in every instance when a concept was applied “it is necessary, at the outset, to define the scope of its meaning, which is applicable to a given statement” (Plit 2011, 74), I myself avoided providing definitions as much as possible. It is much easier to point out the shortcomings of other studies. Ultimately, under pressure, I undertook an attempt, one which was nevertheless preceded by several dozen pages of general considerations. So, I will repeat what cultural landscape is *within the perspective of my studies* (Plit 2016, 88-89), while at the same time being convinced of the lameness of this attempt. “Landscapes are real, material entities, existing not only on Earth. They exist irrespective of whether they are observed by us. They are synthetic; their elements are interconnected and form a new quality. [...] When in the course of analysis, we account for the characteristic—and, in the context of landscape, vital—elements, features, relations, both concerning the natural and the human-made environment (provided the latter intervenes), then we should use the term “landscape” without any further qualifications. [...] We distinguish cultural landscapes when we limit ourselves in our studies exclusively to the analysis of the broadly understood human-made (cultural) elements and relations, linking them with the surroundings. Landscapes possess a typological character [...] Even though landscapes are objectively existing material entities, their non-material qualities exist as well, and they are perceived in a decidedly inter-subjective, or even subjective, manner.” Landscapes are, of course, dynamic, changing, and the way in which they are perceived changes too. The reference units in the study of

cultural landscapes should be derived from the differentiation of culture. On the basis of material elements of cultural landscapes, we can assume (but merely assume, it seems) what their elements and non-material qualities are.

The above is a very awkward attempt at providing definitions within the perspective of my studies. At the same time, this is just a fraction of my attitude towards landscape, which luckily is not in opposition to other perspectives. The definitions provided here are not inconsistent with the perceptions of landscape entertained by most representatives of my discipline, although many of them consider this formulation to be “atypical”.

I am a geographer, and geography has investigated landscape since the 19th century. One of the pioneers in this domain in Poland was Joachim Lelewel. At the time, geography was so intensively engaged in the study of landscape that, at the beginning of the 20th century, Lucien Febvre accused geographers of not seeing anything but landscape. As the *Annales* emerged, this was, in fact, an important subject of academic discussion between historians and geographers.

Yet the question posed by the Editors is first of all essentially related to the humanities, while geography is most often classified in Poland among the natural sciences and not the humanities. Is this justified? Starting with Eratosthenes and Strabo, a dichotomy persists in geography. Today, one could say that the former represented the sciences (mathematical and natural), while the latter—humanities. Nowadays, in the same vein, some geographers declare themselves to be naturalists, while others claim to be humanists. This dichotomy is also sometimes conspicuous in landscape studies. The two geographical communities have remained in an almost perfect isolation. Polish physical geographers, supported by geo-botanists and some other representatives of the natural sciences, established the Polish Association of Landscape Ecology and since 1996 have published the journal *Problemy Ekologii Krajobrazu* [*Problems of Landscape Ecology*], in Polish and/or English. On the other hand, geographers-humanists have mainly dealt with the perception of landscape by various groups of people and its assessment or evaluation, searching for common ground with sociologists and historians. Soon afterwards, though, the Cultural Landscape Commission was established under the auspices of the Polish Geographical Society, which in 2002 began to publish (in Polish and/or English) *Prace Komisji Krajobrazu Kulturowego* [*Dissertations of Cultural Landscape Commission*]. Since I have never been a member of the board of this Commission, and my formal (not personal!) association with the editorial office of the journal published by the Commission is also quite loose, I may assume myself to be entitled to a fairly objective statement that these institutions constitute quite a singular phenomenon in Polish science. The Commission, formed spontaneously and without any subsidy from the outside, without grants etc., organizes conferences and publishes a journal which has gained a sufficiently high position to ensure adequate numbers of submitted papers, even though it is the authors themselves

who finance the publishing. Usually, several consecutive issues are ready at the same time, while the waste basket in the editorial office is also full. All of the organizational and editorial duties are performed on a voluntary basis—as is the normal practice in science, conforming to the Latin version of the doctoral oath and the old academic tradition. The Commission has deemed the conduct of interdisciplinary discussion to be the main objective of its activity. Although the establishment of the body was initiated by geographers of various specializations, the members and the authors of papers published in the journal are also architects, landscape architects, sociologists, historians, philosophers, theologians, artists, biologists...—in short, all those interested in landscape, those willing and able to speak and write logically (the requirements, including formal requirements, are systematically increasing.)

It is no wonder that the solutions adopted have driven the officers from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education to despair, as they had to ponder for quite a while how to classify the journal in the Polish system of scientific categories. The journal was finally included in the so-called List B of journals, with 13 points assigned to papers published in it.¹

Today, however, only few scholars would refer to themselves simply as “geographers”. They try to maintain their place within the boundary area of natural sciences and humanities, treating geography in a very broad sense. The main point of reference is constituted by the tradition of French geography from the early 20th century—which had been truly highly creative in that period. Spiteful comments speak of these scholars as cultivating a geography whose research domains stretch “from geology to theology”, this geography being the “science of relations of everything with everything” (let us add—of spatial relations). Geography thus delimited does not belong to the natural sciences nor to the humanities. It tries to achieve an ambitious objective: based on observations and empirical studies it attempts to answer questions concerning spatial order, the place of the human in the Cosmos, relations linking people with the rest of the material world (with the rest of the Creation)... In a sense, it has become similar to philosophy in terms of the scientific questions formulated, but it relies on entirely different methods of study. One should sadly acknowledge that the answers provided by geography are quite lame, partial, lacking broader momentum. Geographers know philosophy too poorly and take inspiration from philosophy much too little. On the other hand, the achievements of contemporary geography do not seem to inspire philosophers.

For those who refer to themselves simply as “geographers”, the study of landscape is of special importance. Subsequent studies constitute an attempt to grasp a whole, representing an outcome of holistic thinking (a terribly popular word), a result of

¹ The maximum number of points awarded to authors for publishing a paper in a journal from the Ministerial List B was 15 in 2017.

synthesis and, at the same time, a starting point to a wider synthesis, in an endless effort to express the whole. This endeavor is doomed from the beginning, “For we know in part and we prophesy in part” (1 Corinthians, 13:9) but it is fascinating nevertheless.

In the light of the above, I welcome the decision to establish the *Polish Journal of Landscape Studies*, not only with enthusiasm, but also with great hope. This may be a splendid triad: *Problems of Landscape Ecology*, *Dissertations of Cultural Landscape Commission*, and the *Polish Journal of Landscape Studies*. They would be complementary, covering the entire field of landscape studies, from those strictly related to nature to those steeped in the humanities. (In fact, I am not sure whether such a distinction, which would have perfectly described the situation in science in the mid-20th century, has not lost its meaning by now). Without scientific discussions, debates, and interdisciplinary studies (referring yet again to the time of *Annales* as a paradigm), we will not be able to understand landscape. I think that geography has a lot to say in this respect; in addition, a conclusion was reached quite some time ago that on its own geography cannot solve the scientific problems that constitute its challenge nowadays. However, I propose not to limit the cooperation to humanities. Naturalists do sometimes have something interesting to say as well. For instance, I recently listened to a series of lectures on the measurement of the degree of isolation of landscape islands. The studies were conducted by “mathematical naturalist” geographers, but the methods proposed (with some modifications) might readily be applied in the analysis of isolation and separateness of cultural landscapes (Pieńkowski and Podlasiński 2017a, 2017b).

Still, I would also like to offer a word of warning: it is not true that physicians and politicians are the most numerous professions in Poland. Actually, specialists in landscape are the most numerous. The subject is not only popular and fashionable, but also full of vagueness. I have encountered hundreds of texts (also pouring in in great numbers into the editorial office of *Dissertations of Cultural Landscape Commission*), whose sole content was a maximally detailed description of a definite object, frequently enriched with unsupported qualifications, such as beautiful, breath-taking, unique, inspiring, virgin, moving, touching, melancholic... Each entity is unique, and all of us have the right to emotionally respond to landscape (experience landscape). Descriptions of landscapes were used to set the mood by Charles Baudelaire (who also carried out theoretical studies), Paul Verlaine, Joseph Conrad, and many others. But do all of us have so much to say on landscape as they did—and must we necessarily do this in scientific journals?

I belong to a generation whose scientific work is drawing to a close, but I put myself in the place of those wedding guests who sit at the table and watch the young play without a trace of jealousy. I wish the Editors of *Polish Journal of Landscape Studies* all the best.

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