

Vision completed – narrating the image of the landscape

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Introduction - the explanatory powers of vision

In parts of the landscape discourse, it seems that vision is regarded as a fundamental reduction of the landscape concept (e.g. Williams 1973:120). In this presentation, I will argue that this stand appears as just another version of reductionism, ignoring the symbolic potential of the visual (Buck-Morss 1991, Bakhtin 1981, Fiskevold 2013,2016). The aim of the paper is to offer a conceptual as well as methodological approach which does not excuse the limitations of vision, but rather profits from the rich explanatory powers of the image. My main argument will be that landscapes are made visible through the presence of images, images which are made present by experience in an area as well as by analytical narratives of an area.

Conceptual resilience through selected vision and mobilised images

The landscape of Trysfjorden is currently being altered due to the planning of a new motorway which will cross the fjord. Last year, some members of the planning team and representatives of regional and national cultural heritage authorities inspected the area of the fjord in order to assess its potential values. In retrospect, I find this trip, very suitable to highlight some of the more general tendencies which could be subscribed to vision and image formation.

The investigating group is gathered in a boat, in the middle of a fjord, on the same time, looking in the same direction, simultaneously exposed by the same atmospheric and climatic phenomena. There are no differences in the shared sight. What differs, and differs fundamentally, is the topics of the conversation. The conversation shows that we never meet the surface as a neutral screen or as an indifferent piece of ground. On the contrary, everyone on board is performing a symbolic act of seeing which transforms this land into a landscape. Matter is paired with meaning as *symbolic images*, as the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (Cassirer 1949) would have put it. The cultural, or rather subcultural, field of action, the traditional knowledge and current motivation of the members highlight some parts of the land, while others are totally overseen and neglected.

The transformation of land into landscape is continuously carried out in the ongoing dialogue. When one of the team members is pointing at a piece of the ground, his gesture is accompanied by a small narrative. Without the words of the narrative we would have no visual image of the traces of settlement in what otherwise would have looked like a wooden hillside. He is not only pointing at a landscape, but *with* a landscape (Wylie 2007:215), almost imitating William Gilpin's pairing of picturesque beauty with the face of the country 250 years ago (Gilpin 2005). The gesture shows a much overlooked premise for analysing landscapes. In order to be shared, any landscape perception, any visual episode, has to be *revealed and conserved in language*. And this fundamental, but often overlooked, link between sensation and language, also demonstrates the resilience of the image. A change of area would not influence the *symbolic* way of seeing and the image every single individual consequently perceives.

The symbolic image, which enables the specific perception, is present ahead as well as after these small symbolic episodes have emerged into appearance. Even if we remove the influence of land totally, the verbal version of the landscape will still be commonly available

in media like text, illustrations and numbers. And for those who master the symbolic image of the landscape, the image of the landscape will still be present. No matter how far in time this re-emergence appears, seconds or years, it means a *mobilisation* of the image. As Hans Georg Gadamer explains, symbols let something absent become present (Gadamer 2010:140). In many ways, the resilience of the image depends on how the landscape analyst makes an image of an absent land present.

Vision offers an opportunity to mediate between the world of the organic sensations and that of the human ideals. The symbolic image serves as a narrative translator between a landscape of impressions and a landscape of language. Simultaneously, imagination might prove helpful to bridge the gap between subjective perceptions and collective traditions. Landscape analysis relies on the analyst's capacity to communicate conceptual statements through images exposed by words, photographs or maps. These images may be traced back to sensory experiences like smell and touch, as well as subjective memories and collectively shared stories attached to the land (Kemp 1996). We might say, that vision is completed when the image both comprises the analyst's ability to narrate the land and to prepare any reader of the analysis for a comp re-narration of the land.



The symbolic way of perceiving the land as landscape is prevalent even if the area is changed.

Conceptual resilience through application of defined theories

Given the immense amount of approaches, opinions, values and interests attached to any piece of land, narrating the image of the landscape must be limited to a defined framework. The resilience of imagination resides rather in a well-known, delimiting theory than in a borderless world of fantasy.

The word *theory* originates from a process of worshipping and literally conveys partaking in truth (Gadamer 2010:116). Choosing a theory means at the same time to choose a landscape to take part in. Without a theory, there will be no true characters to look for, no image to develop, no ideals to articulate. A theory is the vehicle of both sight and insight, weaving the ephemeral impressions and the standing ideals together into a coherent landscape narrative. Thus, narrating the image of the landscape means to investigate the imaginative consequences of a theoretical choice. Selecting a theory simultaneously implies a selection of which landscape awareness to raise, which contemporary tendencies to notice, and which characteristic differences to highlight.

When the task comprises scenic and aesthetic issues, the *pastoral tradition* provides an aesthetic theory that is both contingent to human struggles and dynamic in its visual versions. According to Leo Marx, "its capacity for adaption to new times, new places, new

social and political situations (Marx 1992:213)” is exactly one of the fundamental characteristics of the pastoral.

The resilience of the pastoral motive is even more evident in the theory by the German philosopher Joachim Ritter. Ritter (1974) argued that the aesthetic functionality of landscape in modernity actually is its ability to keep the aesthetic unity present between the individual and nature. When science, enterprises and bureaucracy transformed large parts of the human environment into a programmed world of intentions and ideas, a void was left for the more intimate, spontaneous and diverse connection between man and the organic world. Landscape accounted for those versions of knowledge which are exclusively provided by aesthetic engagement and experience.

Narrating the image of the landscape

Evaluating the natural phenomena of the theoretical scopey

According to Ritter, perceiving the land aesthetically as a landscape is to give attention to the free forces of nature in whichever shape they are present. The signs of natural phenomena could therefore be deduced from the theoretical scope as natural *cycles*, present *landform* and human *practice*. These signs make the scene appear as an image of the natural unity.

Taking a winter stand in Lysaker, the *cyclic* presence in the image could be identified in signs like the ephemeral variations of light and shade, seasons and climatic occurrences and how these forces act in vegetation, water, in short the visual appearance of the surface of earth.

The presence of the landform represents a more durable structure in the image and could be identified in both human and natural shapes, like here in Tunsbergdalen. Natural unity is recognised in the fluctuation and abruptions of the surface of the earth.

The presence of human participation could be traced back to the image’s dependency on how humans have valued their part-taking in the natural unity. The practice could of course be visible in the outdoor production of food or timber. But even the obligation to protection, as here in Skotta nature reserve, leaves the wood as a visible display of human identity formation based on imaginative engagement in the natural order.



Landscape phenomena of natural unity can be identified in signs like natural cycles (Lysaker), present landform (Tunsbergdalen) and human practice (Skotta).

Evaluating the human engagement with nature

According to Ritter, again, perceiving the land aesthetically as a landscape happens in a societal context and must be related to the visible outcome of human response or reflection shown in the imprint on the surface. Hanna Arendt's (1998) three modes of active man, *work*, *labor* and *action*, provide a framework to link a general type of human practice into a significant type of landscape. The visibility of human activity and its corresponding treatment of the land as landscape could therefore be distributed into conceptual signs like *wilderness*, *clearing* and *building*. They represent tendencies of land use and everyday activity, and link the images of natural unity to the present disposition of land. Additionally, they provide an area related reference which easily could be adapted to the scale of the investigation.

The visibility of *wilderness* is apparent in areas whose character is influenced by the work of natural cycles, e.g. Tiltvika, where the landform still bears sign of natural origins and where there are few visible signs of cultural practices.

The visibility of *clearing* is apparent in areas where humans have cultivated and laboured the cycles, adapted its activities to the landform and where there are visible signs of human practices, e.g. the downhill slope in Kolsås.

The visibility of *building* is apparent in areas where humans have totally adopted natural cycles into its practices, the landform is adapted to a human program, and where the visible signs of cultural practices are dominating the scene, e.g. the gardens at Vækerø.



Landscape types of natural unity can be identified in signs like wilderness (Tiltvika), clearing (Kolsås) and building (Vækerø).

Evaluating the landscape integrity of natural unity

Ritter says that perceiving the land aesthetically as a landscape should reveal the potential of life as an imagery of variations and creativity. The signs of natural integrity could therefore be articulated in terms like *continuity*, *contrast* and *concentration*. These signs also might be used to describe the dynamics of the image.

In the composed streets of Hamar we get glimpses of the surrounding countryside. In this way, the image is both offering a visual *continuity* of city and country, as well as a cultural continuity back to 1848 when the city was grounded.

In the rich agricultural areas of Stange, the image provided by the cycle of the year offers a diversity of *contrasts*. From the snow covered white fields in winter to the dark brown in autumn and spring, to the green and yellow surfaces of grain in summer.

The garden of Hovelsrud illustrates the imaginative concentration of the natural unity, assembling every type of landscape into a *concentrated* image, playing upon both cycle, landform and practice.



Landscape integrity of natural unity can be identified in signs like continuity (Hamar), contrast (Stange) and concentration (Hovelsrud).

Landscape awareness through shared image formation

The three methodological steps aim to raise landscape awareness by creating a symbolic image which is provided by the scope of the theory, the visible presence of human practices and the synthesising skills of the analyst. In this way, landscape analysis works as an intermediary and narrative image (Benjamin 1991:443), initiated by the analyst, and optionally perceived by the public. Any method should always be directed at the engaged subject and function like a visual guide. The analyst has the privilege to point out an area's potential as landscape, but the final commitment to the proposals is always left to the individual. Vision is completed in the subjective imagination whether this image is produced by the means of land or language. In this way, vision may function as a node of exchange between the traditional world of the analyst and the everyday world of anyone.

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