

# Landscape and the Environment

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## From the nature as nature to the nature as culture

Although we distinguish various kinds of landscape like, for instance, industrial landscape or urban landscape, in general human understanding landscape is, first of all, a natural landscape, a fragment of nature understood as free from any presence, interference or control on the part of the man. Thus, we have to do with the first conceptual opposition of what is human and what is non-human. The sphere of what is human comprises the man himself and all his products while within the non-human sphere we find inanimate matter, plants and animals. The objects produced by representatives of the nature, like birds' nests, animals' burrows or beavers' dams also belong to the non-human sphere.

Let us start, then, with the concept of the 'nature as nature'. In the recent years it has frequently been written that the nature as nature does not exist, it has never existed and that this concept has no counterpart as regards our everyday experience. What is more, it is also doubtful as regards any primary state placed in some remote past time. In other words, the concept of the nature as nature is totally a product of culture and occurs only as its opposite. Therefore, the concept of the nature as nature assumes the existence of culture. It can be said that the nature as nature is a product of the mind that is used to thinking in the categories of opposition.

So, the nature as nature exists rather in our minds, in our imagination, and it is usually highly appreciated. The concepts that are the closest to it include: wilderness, virginity, innocence, and purity emphasizing the state of being immaculate, uncultivated, untouched by the man. And although the word wilderness has originated from the word 'wild', which is associated with the uncomfortable sense of threat, in the modern days it is its positive aspect that is recognized first of all; the untouched virginity and innocence of the nature as nature is emphasized. Undoubtedly we need this concept since, having no counterpart in the actual world, it satisfies our vital need: the longing for something primal and intact. This need is so strong that the natural landscape is for us a part of the nature as nature, which we long for to such an extent that – eagerly accepting the illusion – we ignore the traces of human activity that are present in the landscape.

As has been said, we do not have to do with the nature as nature, and we have never had. We would seek it in vain in the landscape painting where the presented landscapes almost always include elements of human activity. I would like to illustrate this with a few pictures, starting with the painting "The Clouds" by John Constable [Fig.1]. This picture seems to represent the nature as

nature; the more so that it regards the part of the world that is hardly attainable for the man. Obviously, we have to do with a painter's work, and, as we know, even in mimetic art the artists have an unlimited potential of creating the shapes of the reality they represent. In this case, however, the historians of art who study the series of Constable's drawings of clouds almost univocally emphasize that in this painting the artist consciously restricted his invention, and his intention was not to create a subjective image but rather to represent a view of clouds. The word 'view' assumes here its fundamental meaning.

We can agree that in the image of the clouds itself we do not find human presence; nevertheless, it can be found beyond the picture: that of the viewer (both the artist and the recipient) without whom those clouds would not be a view and therefore they would not constitute a landscape either. The concept of a landscape includes the viewer, the landscape is not a self-contained entity, it is for the viewer. This regards both the painted landscapes and the actual ones. It is important to emphasize that the viewer constituting a condition of the landscape is never within it, he is always without, at some distance. The landscape is given for the eye and the eye belongs to the senses of distance. Thus, we view an actual landscape in a way similar to that in which we view a painted one.

The landscape is given to the eye. This is why even in the case of a cloudy sky, the presence of a viewer causes that we do not have to do here with the nature as nature. The human pervades the non-human; we are in the human world, in the anthroposphere in which there is no room for the opposition of the culture and the nature in the strong sense, and the nature as nature proves to be merely a projection of the ideal paradise as the primary state with an air of nostalgia.

If we agree that the nature as nature exists only as a notion, the landscapes that are called natural are, in fact, artifactual ones. We commonly encounter situations in which human artifacts produced for various reasons fill the world. So, now we shall replace the opposition human/non-human with another one: artificial/natural. The constant process of filling the world with artifacts and of introducing them in the sphere described as nature (that which has been given) assumes different dimensions: from simple addition of products, as it were, placing them in the surroundings, to the forms of advanced reshaping of that which is natural. Here I have in mind actions like marking out and maintenance of mountain paths and trails, labeling, construction of power lines and networks, cable-cars, and buildings; cutting down of trees or their branches, regulation of rivers, formation of gardens and parks and, finally, intended reshaping of whole landscapes. In the opposition the artificial/the natural, whatever is natural is still highly appreciated while the artificial, especially if it refers to the so-called ordinary artifacts produced to satisfy practical needs, is treated with much lesser fondness.

As regards landscape painting, there are numerous pictures in which artifactual elements and natural ones are intertwined and merged, constituting a complex whole. The relations between artifacts and nature in the landscape space are either specifically balanced or one of the factors dominates. In the picture *Mill at Gillingham in Dorset* we have to do with the balance. Moreover,

while Eiffel's viaduct [Fig.2] is perceived as a distinct intervention in the natural landscape, the old water mill that now belongs to the past assumes the value close to that which we ascribe to the nature itself and is treated with sentiment. In the case of Eiffel's work we sense the strong contrast between the nature and technology, in Constable's painting the water mill, powered by an element of nature remains in harmony with it [Fig.3]. On the other hand, in another painting of the English landscapist, *Mill at Dedham*, human artifacts present in the picture are clearly dominating, pushing the nature – water, grass and animals to the margin; it is only the two larger trees on the right hand side that attract the viewer's attention [Fig.4].

So far, I have tried to show artifactual landscapes devoid of human figures. It is not easy to find such pictures among landscapes – artifacts are usually accompanied by people.

Humans are included in the landscape just like artifacts. They form its part – doing their jobs or relaxing. We can easily say that for them the landscape does not exist, they do not notice it since they are preoccupied with their activities [Fig.5]. A landscape, no matter whether is it painted or real, exists for the eyes of the viewer, for the observer who is beyond the landscape, being neither its participant nor its part.

The landscape – comprising elements of nature, artifacts and people busy with various forms of activity – is the landscape we have to do with in our experiences. It should be stated that many objects produced by men assume meanings that go far beyond their practical function. They assume symbolic, religious, historical, aesthetic or social dimensions, and the nature accompanying them, included in the new connotational field, is the 'nature as culture'. The landscape becomes a cultural landscape in which the opposition culture/nature becomes groundless.

I introduced the ideas of the natural landscape, the artifactual landscape and the cultural landscape emphasizing the different grades of human presence in each of them. I also tried to prove that the base for our understanding of the landscape is constituted by the conceptual oppositions like: human/non-human, artifactual/natural, culture/nature. However, landscapes occur rather in the space 'between' these oppositions [Fig.6, 7].

### **Landscape and senses**

I have already stated that the landscape is given for the eye. Dictionaries define landscape as an expanse of scenery that can be seen in a single view or an extensive area of land regarded as being visually distinct. This is why landscape painting has come into being; painting is the art for viewing and this is why we look at real landscapes in the way we have learnt while dealing with paintings. And although the landscape is sensually rich, the contribution of the remaining senses in perception is significantly diminished by the dominance of vision. The more so that the distance involved in the concept of visual perception grows enormously in the case of a landscape, for we have to do with an extensive view. Obviously, in this situation the so called contact senses requiring closeness cannot be fully used.

Activation of the contact senses requires participation. Yet, is it possible to participate in a landscape? We have seen people represented in the landscapes by John Constable, who undoubtedly receive a whole range of sense perceptions, particularly tactile ones, but, at the same time, their sight is limited to a very small area. They do not see the landscape. It seems that for the participant of a landscape, the landscape disappears being replaced by the environment. Here we can indicate swimming as an example of the man's utmost submergence into the environment. This example allows us to realize that the landscape of a river, a lake or a sea shore is given only to the person who is looking at it from afar. If he decides to take a plunge, that is, to destroy the distance, we can no longer speak of a landscape; rather, we have to do with entering the environmental relations based on closeness. It is as if our senses of distance and those of contact could not cooperate in harmony at their full capacity: when the eye dominates, the sense of touch gets highly limited, and when the touch takes over, the range of sight gets reduced to the touched area.

Is, therefore, the landscape totally a product of visual culture, and does it exist only when it is watched? It might seem that the doubts which have risen here will disappear when we use the urban landscape as an example. Obviously, we can watch a city from a distant hill or the highest floor of a skyscraper. But when we speak of the urban landscape we have in mind not its view from afar, but rather the network of interrelations characteristic inasmuch as they are different from the suburban or farmland networks. In the former case we really watch the landscape, remaining beyond it. In the latter case we are included in the network of urban interrelations. Should we, therefore, speak of a landscape or rather of a city environment? Both these words: landscape and environment have something in common – they signify people's surroundings. For this reason, fairly inconspicuously, they overlap and start being used interchangeably, as synonyms. This, however, causes that they lose their specific meaning. In the case of a landscape the surroundings are watched from a distance while in the case of the environment the surroundings include the man – they are so close that an interaction has to be started.

### **Aesthetic character of the landscape**

The aesthetic element seems to be essential for the landscape – we admire its beauty. Watching a landscape like a painting is fully placed in the modern aesthetics based on autonomy of the object and disinterestedness of the perception as the conditions of experiencing of beauty. When we pass from the concept of landscape to the concept of environment, from the viewer to the participant, the aesthetic quality – still important – assumes another meaning, closer to its etymology connected with *aisthesis*. In both cases the aesthetic quality means experiencing pleasure, but the focus is shifted. In the sense connected with the disinterested perception the pleasure comes from the contemplative (distanced) savoring of the object, while in the latter case the pleasure is generated by the interaction engaging all senses, inevitable in the situation of involvement in the environment. The metaphor of the eye fully reflects the former kind of aesthetic

quality, but to reflect the latter one it would be better to use the metaphor of touch, the only reciprocal sense: to touch means to be touched.

Here we should introduce the concept of experience in the broad sense, which it acquired in pragmatist aesthetics based on philosophy of John Dewey. He understood experience as fully sensual and somatic, as an interaction between an organism and its environment, and it was not by chance that he used the very notion "environment", which became a term, a concept in philosophy much later, thanks to ecology. In the experience understood in this way the aesthetic, as a quality of every experience, is not in opposition to the practical. We experience the environment in its various aspects that are mutually complementary.

Arnold Berleant distinguished three models of experience: contemplative, characteristic for the modern aesthetics, active (Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, Bollnow), engaging the subject, and participative, based on an interaction between the subject incarnate and the environment.<sup>1)</sup> Participative experience became the principal concept of environmental aesthetics developed by Berleant, better adjusted for our time than the traditional aesthetics developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

For us it is important that Berleant tries to expand participative experience to include experience of the landscape as well. He admits that in landscape painting "the observer is removed from the scene and contemplates it from a distance", and that: "Such paintings illustrate the usual definition of landscape as 'a picture representing a section of natural, inland scenery' that reflects the conception of landscape as 'an expanse of natural scenery seen by the eye in one view'".<sup>2)</sup> Still, he finds it possible to revise this conception of landscape through re-interpretation of landscape painting executed in the spirit of participative experience. He gives several arguments indicating that numerous works of this genre of painting "draw viewer into the space as an invitation to visit", "incorporate the perceiver into their space, compelling involvement", "serve as an invitation, leading the viewer to enter the pictorial space", "through the effective use of pictorial qualities a painting creates the total sensory field of experience".<sup>3)</sup>

This is just a fragment of, admittedly, fairly convincing argument. Nevertheless, I think that attributing a power turning a recipient into a participant to the painting is possible only in the language of metaphor. Invitation to take part is not participation. Pictorial means of expression may evoke the impression of somatic and multi-sensual participation in a viewer only through mediation<sup>4)</sup> which we do not encounter in the participative experience of the environment. Berleant does not introduce a terminological difference between the landscape and the environment.<sup>5)</sup> I believe, however, that it is worthwhile to keep this difference.

I am aware that my position may seem outdated and, maybe, too straightforward as compared with the – two decades old – advanced and sophisticated reflection over the landscape. It is, as it were, a step backwards. For much has been done to change our attitudes towards the landscape as a view watched as if it was a painting, passively and disinterestedly, from a remote, static observation point. But if we endow the landscape with the features that have been worked out by ecology, eco-philosophy and environmental aesthetics in reference to the environment, the features

like interactivity, reciprocity, somatic and multi- sensual involvement, what will remain as the difference between the landscape and the environment? And if we treat these two concepts as synonyms, what will happen to the whole semantic load of the landscape, developed within modern aesthetics? It would be neither easy nor useful to get rid of it. The two meanings of the landscape, the older one – as a view perceived by sight, and the new one – as an engaging interaction, cannot be united, harmonized and synthesized. If it was possible, the synthesis could constitute the essential difference between the category of landscape and that of environment. It is not the case – the new meaning abolishes the old one, replacing it.

It is better to preserve the concept of landscape in its, maybe historical, semantic shape and the new meaning, ascribed to it – in my opinion – at a push, should be left where it emerged, that is, in reference to the environment. We need both these concepts in their clear semantic distinction. I think so, but I would prefer to leave this issue open. This is why I will conclude my considerations with a few questions.

### **Twilight of the landscape?**

It seems that the categories of landscape and environment are neither synonymous nor even complementary. Will the potential of the landscape run out with the twilight of the visual culture? The issue is not the fact that people will cease to admire views, but the theoretical capacity of the category of landscape. In the present aesthetics executing its radical transformation, primary importance is assumed by categories like interaction – instead of contemplation, participation – instead of observation, involvement instead of passivity, multi-sensory character emphasizing touch – instead of visibility, immediateness (immersion) in place of distance. Will these new categories allow us to preserve the concept of landscape? Will they emphasize those properties of the landscape that have been unnoticed so far? Will attributing of features characteristic of environment to the landscape not turn it into a redundant category?

#### **Notes**

- 1) In my opinion, Dewey's conception of experience fully characterizes Berleant's participative model, for the description of which Deweyan terms like interaction, energy field, organism, environment, etc. were applied.
- 2) A. Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment*. Ashgate 2005 p.5
- 3) This conception appeared in the early works of A. Berleant, particularly in *Art and Engagement*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1991, in Chapter 3 "The Viewer in the Landscape". I refer here to the later considerations included in *Aesthetics and Environment*, op.cit. pp. 10/11
- 4) M. Seel, writing on the aesthetic perception with reference to the history of aesthetics from Baumgarten to Adorno, claims that the aesthetic perception consists in synesthesia, it differs from other forms of perception in the special connection of all senses, there are not aesthetic experiences limited to only one sense. Seel admits, however, that when we, for example, see an object, the sensations of other senses

accompany or penetrate a sight as the projects of imagination (Vorstellungen). M. Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens*. Carl Hanser Verlag, München Wien 2000

- 5) Like many other representatives of environmental aesthetics, J.D. Porteous perceives the need to distinguish 'urban' and 'nonurban' areas, landscapes and townscapes. Claiming that: "Environment is the stage on which human activity is set", he uses the concept of environment interchangeably with the two kinds of 'scapes'. However, in my opinion, man's relation to the landscape on the one hand and to the environment on the other hand are fundamentally different. See: J.D. Porteous, *Environmental Aesthetics*. Routledge, London 1996, p. 192 and others.

