Landscape

Unpacking the Cultural Concept

Dziuban, Z.

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LANDSCAPE: UNPACKING THE CULTURAL CONCEPT

The most common and also most traditional meaning of landscape, as employed in the disciplinary field of geography and in vernacular language, is that of physical surroundings. Its role as a carrier of a cultural concept can, however, be traced back development of Dutch landscape painting in the sixteenth century and its English successor in the subsequent two centuries. It was during this period, with the birth of linear perspective and the emergence of the genre of landscape painting, that ‘landscape’ gained cultural significance as a way of representing outer (mainly rural) reality. In art-historical research, landscape – referring simultaneously to the rural scene (a view to be depicted) and ‘rural scenery’ presented via the specific aesthetic means – came to denote a conceptual prism through which land and nature were perceived. It became a particular “framing convention”. It was considered a representational practice organized by realist representation, with three-dimensional geometric space captured through a two-dimensional medium, and, most importantly, by the location of the viewer and painter outside of the represented scene (outsider’s perspective). In this way, the aesthetics of landscape painting was constructed as a derivative of the emergent ways of perceiving both the human subject and its spatial and material surroundings, namely the bifurcations of the ‘natural’ (such as gardens) and the man-made (built environment). In Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels’ words, “landscape is a [historically and socially specific] cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings” – i.e. a conceptual way of organizing reality projected onto physical and represented spaces.


Entrance to the Museum Memorial Site at Bełżec. Photo by Zuzanna Dziuban.
It was only in the 1970s, however, that the process of “opening up and ‘unpacking’ the concept of landscape” began following the ‘discovery’ that landscape evinces neither a transparent mode of representing reality nor an innocent way of seeing. Rather, it was denounced as a thoroughly ideological concept called upon to represent and naturalize identifiable power relations. The analysis of the conditions behind the emergence of the idea of landscape in Western Europe (especially in 18th-century England) proposed by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* (1973), played a decisive role in initiating critical and politically informed reflection on the concept. Williams, who located the origins of the idea of landscape in shifts in attitudes towards nature that were motivated by changes in the broader socio-political and economic structural contexts, identified those conditions with the transformation of the politics of distribution, use, and control of the land introduced by capitalism. In his view, “the very idea of landscape implies separation and observation”. Based on the distinction between land and landscape, that is land as ‘productive’ and landscape as ‘aestheticized’ nature, landscape separates two ways of relating to it: agricultural production and aesthetic consumption. The latter, rarely enjoyed by those who work the land, has served predominantly as the privilege of estate owners, artists, entrepreneurs, industrialists, and visitors from the city. In this way, the concept of landscape came to implicate distance and aesthetic pleasure alike (associated also with the retreat from the city), and also visual as well as financial control over land. The ideological nature of the concept has, therefore, been intrinsically entwined with the fact that it represents and objectifies a particular class’s perspective to which, in the words of W.J.T. Mitchell, the “painted image [merely] gives cultural expression”.

The critical reading of landscape proposed by Williams inspired further multi- and interdisciplinary revisions of the concept. They have followed two main (spatial) directions oriented towards ‘lived’ and ‘representational’ landscapes. The first concept refers to landscape understood in terms of a lived relationship with space, of the experiences and meanings people ascribe to their physical and cultural surroundings; the second constructs landscape as a real, material space created by human labour, and its cultural representations. Adopted mainly in cultural geography and critical spatial theory, the perspective focusing on representational landscapes defines these as cultural products inevitably related to expressions of power and status. Cultural landscapes – built environments, architectural and urban structures, as well as their literal and visual representations – are the products of complex political, social, and cultural processes governed, and imposed, by those who have the power to define the ways in which social reality is shaped, and thus to determine the content and form of landscape representations. “Landscape represents the architecture of social class, gender, and race relations imposed by powerful institutions”, asserts Sharon Zukin. As a mix of built form and politically charged representation, landscape is, from this perspective, a spatial and, at the same time, a symbolic hegemonic production. In other words, the power to produce landscape is the power to define the meaning and stabilize the dynamics of spatial and social relations. In *Studying Cultural Landscapes*, Ian Black argues that (urban) architectural representations usually mirror dominant cultural formations – they embody particular ideologies and universalize dominant cultural experiences. It is in this sense that Zukin frames landscapes as “spatialities of the powerful”.

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4 Hirsh, Landscape, 23
7 Mitchell, Imperial Landscape, 8.
12 Zukin, Landscapes of Power, 19.
The concept of lived landscape pertains, in turn, to the ways in which a sense of belonging and a sense of place are created and sustained by ‘ordinary’ users of landscapes. It encompasses “the creative and imaginative ways in which people place themselves within their environments”, how they experience, interpret and, frequently, contest them. Lived landscapes are humanized spaces, filled with meaning, constituted around and structured by spatial and cultural practices. As it informs research carried out in the field of cultural anthropology, human and cultural geography, and cultural studies, the concept of lived landscape therefore captures the complex dynamics through which spaces come to incorporate cultural values and identities, and become invested with collective and individual memories. In this way, the reconstructions and interpretations of more or less unreflexive, everyday experiences of space - through fieldwork and ethnographic description - draw attention and give voice to bottom-up and vernacular constructions of landscape created by ‘insiders’. Based on an assertion of their ability and right to produce space, this perspective reclaims ‘landscape’ for those who, according to the conceptualization proposed by Williams, have not previously been entitled to it.

The need to bring these two perspectives together in order to foreground the spatial dimension of landscape – thus far constructed mainly in terms of sights, texts, static representations or mere carriers of meaning – and to shift the focus from the question of what landscape means to “what it does”, was most powerfully voiced by the art historian W.J.T. Mitchell. His postulation, which brings to the fore the role of space as both a site of inscription of experiential, cultural and political representations and as a productive force in itself, was taken on and further developed by representatives of new cultural geography. Conceiving space not simply as a ‘container’, cultural product and/or vehicle for meaning-making, but also as an ‘agent’ actively partaking in the processes that shape and maintain social realities and specific configurations of power, opened up new conceptualizations of landscape. The idea that landscape is not only “a work” but that it also “works on the people who make it” – influences and shapes their actions and perceptions – established landscape as a process or activity: an ongoing exchange between social practices, spaces, and representations. In this way, landscape regained its three-dimensionality as a site and not merely a sight or a text. In the words of cultural geographer Don Mitchell, “landscape, in this sense, provides a context, a stage, within and upon which humans continue to work, and it provides boundaries (…) within which people remake themselves.” To put it bluntly, if the social reproduction of power guaranteed by representational landscapes is to be sustained, the dominant meanings encoded in them have to be continuously actualized by social-spatial practices: in order “to work”, landscape has to be lived, acted upon, and experienced.

Recently, this processual and generative perspective on landscape has also gained importance in scholarly reflection on entanglements between space and political violence. This refers, first and foremost, to the ways in which landscapes come to serve not only as locations but also as a means of terror, control or annihilation. In their 2014 publication, Estela Schindel and Pamela Colombo observe that “the utilization of space as an instrument in the deployment of state violence finds its supreme expression in creation of spaces of exception and, particularly, of concentration and extermination camps”. From this perspective, the camp constitutes the most powerful and the most disturbing epitome of the ‘productive’ dimension of both violence and space, and their role in producing and undoing political

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15 See Mitchell, Imperial Landscape.
16 Mitchell, Cultural Geography, 102.
17 Ibid.
subjects. In a similar vein, conceptualizations of the former camps – expressed in the terms of terroscopes\textsuperscript{19} and, as is the case in iC-ACCESS, campscapes – bring to the fore the importance of the camps’ spatial organization for the perpetuation of violence and inflicting dehumanization. Captured through the suffix -scape, the spatiality of the camps (as landscapes) becomes analytically inseparable from their functioning as juridical-political structures.

This pertains also to the afterlives of the camps in their still lingering material presence in the aftermath of war, genocide, and political violence. When transformed into sites of memory, museums and memorial landscapes, campscapes retain their processual dimensions and productive roles in such cases as environments for and tools of memory work. As cultural products established through processes of spatial and visual framing, organized according to specific compositions and spatial and visual orders, they serve as screens or sites of inscription of various hegemonic constructions of the past (and present). But as they stabilize and naturalize top-down narratives about the past they also become media of spatial organization aimed at mobilizing particular forms of memory work. Campscapes design and configure spatial practices and bodily movements while limiting the scope of potential uses and actions that can be undertaken or performed within their realm. Yet, in this case, there is always some scope for the visitors to decide whether the meanings encoded in the landscape will be relived, internalized and reproduced, or, on the contrary, reinterpreted, contested, or denied.

\textit{Zuzanna Dziuban (University of Amsterdam)}

\textsuperscript{19} See http://www.terroscopes.org.