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Chapter 28

CAN LANDSCAPES BE READ?

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper takes as its starting point a question which can be formulated like this: Through reflection and deconstruction, is it at all possible at this time to maintain the idea that landscapes can be read and analysed in a scientific manner? It is appropriate to ask this question in the context of the Permanent European Conference for the Study of the Rural Landscape (PECSRL). Throughout the history of this conference, the idea that landscapes can be explained in a way that stands over and above local, national and ethnic understandings has formed an important line of thought. What was sometimes in the 1960s and 1970s referred to as the “modern” school of cultural landscape research was thus based on the idea of cultural landscape studies as an international, comparative science. Here, I deliberately use the word science, not simply the Swedish vetenskap or the German Wissenschaft – but science as in natural science (cf. Schaefer 1953: 236).

This modern, post-war cultural landscape research was based on the following three components:
1. The objects of study were the “forms” in rural landscapes. The comparative perspective played an important role, so consequently it was considered important to establish an international terminology (Uhlig 1967, 1972).

1 My use of landscape “reading” refers to the everyday practice of landscape reading, which is also the first step in a scientific analysis of landscapes. This paper is thus not intended to contribute to the discussion of whether landscapes can be read as signifying systems (cf. Duncan 1990).
2. The method was morphogenetic and aimed at uncovering the origin and development of forms in the agrarian landscape.

3. The explanatory framework was heavily influenced by evolutionary thinking. Agrarian landscapes were seen as progressing from one stage to another (see for example Krenzlin 1958).

2. THE FIRST CHALLENGE – FORM VERSUS PROCESS

During the last three decades, this "modern" cultural landscape research has experienced two general criticisms, which have questioned its fundamentals in different ways. These challenges question in their respective fashions whether landscapes can be read at all, cross-culturally and comparatively, as part of an international research agenda.

In a volume on field systems published in 1973, Alan Baker and Robin Butlin provided a voice for skepticism against the morphogenetic methods (Baker & Butlin 1973). And later, in a review of the publication of the eleventh meeting of PECSRL, David Austin expressed his uncertainty in his Doubts About Morphogenesis (Austin 1985).

In his overview of the history of the Permanent European Conference for the Study of the Rural Landscape, Alan Baker divided the intellectual history of landscape studies into three phases: traditional, modern and postmodern. Studies based on the morphogenetic approach were viewed as a subgroup within traditional studies, and characterised as "a few but arguably significant attempts to confront general issues and to address general problems relating to the origins and transformations of European rural landscapes" (Baker 1988: 9). It seems that Baker distinguished modern from traditional based on the use of quantitative methods (cf. also his and Butlin's arguments on the merits of quantitative methods instead of qualitative, Baker & Butlin 1973).

However, seen in retrospect the morphogenetic, evolutionistic approach to studying agrarian landscapes is much easier to understand as a part of the modernist paradigm, regardless of the use of quantitative or qualitative methods. The critique against the morphogenetic school can thus be perceived rather as the first signals of a more profound critique against the spatial, geometrical, and morphological approach that dominated quantitative geography as well as the modern school of cultural landscape research in the 1960s and early 1970s (cf. Helmfried's paper in this volume).

In the early 1970s, Gunnar Olsson voiced his critique against the spatial analytical school in much the same way that Baker, Butlin and Austin were criticising the morphogenetic approach, casting doubt on the whole
programme of geography as a spatial and morphological discipline. The
form-process dichotomy (which, indeed, lies at the heart of the problem with
morphogenetic approaches) was scrutinised by Olsson on epistemological
grounds, and he considered that the spatial analytical school carried “the
seed of its own destruction” (Olsson 1974).

Looking at some of the morphogenetic studies of rural landscapes, it is
easy to understand how such a critique could be voiced – they sometimes
showed little interest in social processes and social theory. Classes and
power, as well as social processes and social relations more generally, often
played a minor role in explanations of landscape change under the
morphogenetic paradigm. As a reaction to this, the critique against the
morphological approach sometimes led historical geographers to abandon a
focus on landscape and instead concentrate more on general economic and
social history.

3. THE SECOND CHALLENGE – LANDSCAPES AS
WAYS OF SEEING

The second challenge experienced by the modern landscape research
agenda was formulated by – among others – Denis Cosgrove and Stephen
Daniels. In their preface to The Iconography of Landscape, they stated that:
“A landscape is cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring
and symbolizing surroundings” (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988: 1). From that
period on, the view that the concept of landscape is much more related to
ways of seeing – rather than to settlement forms, field patterns and other
physical structures – has gained ground in many humanistic disciplines. The
term landscape is now often used to mean environmental perception.²

It is in line with such a view of landscapes that Relph argues that:

Trying to investigate places and landscapes by imposing standardized
methods is like … judging wines by measuring their alcohol content – the
information may be accurate but it seriously misrepresents the subject
matter (Relph 1989: 49).

The analogy comparing the investigations of landscapes with the judging
of wines is to me a very appropriate and interesting one. Wine tasting is
usually described as very structured and standardised method of
investigating wines. It includes a formal procedure progressing from looking
and smelling to tasting. Some of the sensory observations can actually be

² See for example Wall (2002: 99): “By ‘landscape’ I mean the way in which people realise
their world and how they connect to it.”
done at a laboratory, while others are dependent on values and judgments; some of which are shared by smaller or larger groups of experts (intersubjective), while others are more personal, intuitive and subjective. Alcohol content is actually one of the properties of wine which is interesting even for wine experts, and which should preferably be analysed using standardised procedure.

The practice of wine tasting can thus, quite contrary to Relph’s view, serve as a basis for the development of standardised, structured and (dare I write it?) scientific approaches to landscape research. My grounds for such an approach are based on three different but related arguments. The first takes its starting point in the landscape concept. The second looks at the practice of landscape reading. I finally argue that the need for a structured analysis of landscapes can only be derived from an understanding of the present social context of landscape studies, and that we therefore also have to discuss the relevance of reading landscapes.

4. LANDSCAPE AS A CONCEPT

In much recent Anglophone literature on landscapes, the understanding of landscapes as scenery and therefore as ways of seeing has become a taken-for-granted starting point. In his article Recovering the Substantive Nature of Landscape, Kenneth Olwig, however, uncovered the etymology of the landscape concept, and was able to show that the English connotation of landscape as scenery was developed through Dutch landscape paintings based on an older German concept; which refers to the territory, the conditions of that territory, and the customs and rules with which the land was governed (Olwig 1996). Olwig has further developed this theme and has discussed the historical and political role of the two landscape concepts (Olwig 2002).

The understanding of landscapes as lived-in territories is in line with one of the Swedish usages of the word landskap, referring to the old, pre-medieval lands that preceded the state in the Nordic countries. Similar words exist in most languages, often alluding to land, soil, earth, and people and nation. On the other hand, the specific Anglophone landscape concept is missing in – or has been only recently added to – many other languages of the world (for Estonian, see Peil 1999: 3). It is also interesting to note that Luig and Oppen (1997) use the German landscape concept as an important background for understanding and reading African landscapes.

3 Vinprovning (article in Nationalencyklopedin).
It is thus possible to argue that today we are dealing with three interrelated concepts of land and landscapes that landscape studies must relate to (see Table 1).

**Table 28-1. Landscape concepts.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landscape as scenery</td>
<td>Idea (mental construction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“A way of seeing”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscape as institution</td>
<td>Customary law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social order, land rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“A way of communicating, a way of acting”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land as resource</td>
<td>Land use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Production</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Capital</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first concept deals with the understanding of landscapes as scenery, and derived from that as *ways of seeing*. Through the English usage, this understanding of landscape has become a part not only of international language, but through the discourse’s dominant role many authors have also shown that this landscape concept has become a force for ideological control and exclusion (cf. e.g., Neumann 1998; Mitchell 2002).

Secondly, we have the Germanic landscape concept, which focuses not only on the physical or cognitive “appearance” of the land, but also places as much emphasis on the people of that land and the social institutions that govern it.

Finally, landscape is often used to indicate land, and the ways in which it has been transformed by labour and serves as a basis for both biological production and the accumulation of wealth.

Of these three concepts of landscapes, the first one is by far the most ethnocentric, in that is tied to a specific cultural and social context; the second and the third lend themselves more easily to comparison and understanding across linguistic and cultural boundaries. It is somewhat a paradox that the critical tradition in geography has been so closely associated with the first landscape concept, where the representation is in focus (cf. Cosgrove 2003) – while the landscape concept of the old German morphological research (for example) was much closer to an understanding of landscapes as land, and the historical materialist definition of geography a study of those conditions (both naturally occurring and humanly created) that provide the material basis for the reproduction of social life (Harvey 1984).

I would thus argue that a cross-cultural comparative understanding of landscapes must be based on a combination of the three concepts, rather than simply following the present emphasis on the Anglophone concept only.
5. THE PRACTICE OF LANDSCAPE READING

A second source of support concerning a structured way of reading landscapes takes its starting point in the everyday reading of landscapes. People do read landscapes and landscape representations daily. Landscape images form an important part of the media flow. Advertisements, propaganda, rock videos, etc., all make efficient use of landscapes in conveying ideas and feelings, and thus make use of our everyday understanding and subconscious reading of landscape sceneries. This becomes obvious when testing a number of landscape slides on a group of first-year Swedish university students. The landscapes in Figures 1 and 2 – on the west coast of Sweden and in England respectively – are immediately located correctly by many of the students. I then used to ask a follow-up question: “How do you know that?” One correct answer to that question could be, in the case of Figure 1: “I have been there”. And in the case of Figure 2: “I have seen Emmerdale Farm on TV” (Students do, however, usually think that I expect a more serious, academic argument). The important argument here is that the practice of landscape reading is based on recognition and on reading the whole image in one glance, in the same way that you read faces of people.

![Figure 28-1. Herrön, Bohuslän, Sweden (1980). Photo: M. Widgren.](image)

It has been argued that experts read landscapes in much the same way (Nesheim 1998). This expert knowledge is, however, often acquired on the
basis of years of more-formal analytical procedure – much in the same way that an experienced medical doctor can often make a diagnosis quickly due to his or her previously accumulated knowledge, while a doctor-in-training might need to put more emphasis on a more formal procedure.

Figure 28-2. Gt Asby, Cumberland. Photo: M. Widgren.

Some parts related to such a formal procedure of reading landscapes become clear when you try to go beyond the immediate recognition and attempt to look into the details of the images. You then have to look at forms that you see and then discuss the possible functions of these forms – procedures well-established in morphological studies of landscapes, but also near at hand in an everyday reading of landscapes. When reading landscape images and real-world landscapes, we also make use of the fact that landscape is process – the result of past processes, as well as the reflection of ongoing processes (labour, seasonal change, expansion and contraction).

But of course, this way of reading landscapes also has its limitations. Foreign students in Sweden do not recognise the landscape in Figure 1 because they usually have not been there – they do not share the cultural background of the Swedish students. And similarly, Swedish students have difficulties in understanding Figure 3, which is an excerpt from a Zimbabwean bill. Because of the different cultural backgrounds, they do not immediately understand the symbolic meaning of the barbed wire fence. Swedes do not always share the notion that “a barbed wire fence implies ownership”, which an English textbook on landscapes tells us in a chapter on
metaphors and meanings (Atkins et al. 1998: 220). In the Swedish landscape, a barbed wire fence is often (and legally) passed in order to find a nice picnic place or to pick berries. Landscapes and landscape elements may remain unintelligible to many of us because the social and cultural context is foreign to us, or because the context of the representation is unknown. This is the argument that followers of the postmodern and cultural turn of landscapes studies are rightly emphasising — landscapes as a way of seeing.

![Figure 28-3. Zimbabwean banknote (excerpt).](image)

Does this awareness of the context of landscape reading mean that the concepts of form, function and process have lost their role in a structured, comparative reading of landscapes? I would argue that the opposite is the case. The concepts form and function remain essential parts of the reading of landscapes, provided that we have an understanding of the different contexts that define their function. The form is a barbed wire fence, but its function is not — as in many Swedish landscapes — merely to separate different land uses and to prohibit cattle from destroying crops. In the Zimbabwean context, it definitely implies not only ownership, but also a prohibition on trespassing. One must be aware of the different contexts in order to understand the function, but it is the basic questions of form and function — so basic to landscape morphology approaches — that form the starting points from which the enquiry is put into the context.
I would therefore suggest that the four concepts of form, function, process and context may constitute a starting point, a checklist for a critical, formalised and structured reading of landscapes.

6. THE RELEVANCE OF LANDSCAPE STUDIES

In the 1950s, when the first steps were taken towards the present European networks of landscape studies, the concept of cultural landscapes was little known outside academia. Since then, the concept has gained in importance and has become a central part of the political agendas in many countries. Through the European Union, subsidies to preserve cultural values in the landscape are distributed – often on the basis of standpoints and results from academic research on landscapes, and often with a heavy emphasis on the scenery aspect of landscapes. Another sign of the political interest in landscapes is the European Landscape Convention, part of the ongoing work being done by the Council of Europe. Perceptions of what is a valuable historical landscape do therefore direct flows of Euros in different directions and affect the livelihoods of farmers all over Europe. Whether we like it or not, the research on landscape history feeds into arguments on heritage, valuation, uniqueness, etc. Landscape history matters.

If we look at environmental issues on a global scale, it is easy to see that conceptions of environmental problems are often based on – and popularised through – landscape representations. The picture of a dead cow on clay desiccated into polygons symbolised the Sahel drought in the 1970s and 1980s. The image represented what was mostly a generally accepted view of desertification at the time, including its extent and its causes. Landscape history later showed that the explanations of desertification accepted in the 1970s are no longer acceptable today. The picture and its background is scrutinised by McCann in his book Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land: An Environmental History of Africa, 1800-1990.

Fairhead & Leach’s work Misreading the African Landscape (1996) is another good example that demonstrates the relevance and importance of landscape reading, and the problems of previous superficial misreadings. Based on a close empirical reading of West African savanna landscapes, they argue that what previous observers saw as small, remaining forest islands in a previously-forested savanna were in fact the result of people’s efforts in planting trees around their settlements in what was formerly a less-forested area. Fairhead & Leach turned the established landscape history of the area upside down and placed a big question mark on years of donor projects and international programmes of reforestation in the area. They are anthropologists, but the work they have done can equally be considered as
path-breaking historical geography. Their critique of established environmental myths was not based primarily on discourse analysis, but on painstaking and detailed empirical work in the field and in archives. Faced with the questions occupying many culturally-oriented landscape researchers today – those of cultural construction and representation – they wrote: “On the one hand we are dealing with landscape and its history as representation, but on the other hand we are attempting to reveal its empirical ‘reality’ – facts or events” (1996: 15-16). The key to uncovering the myths, the representations and the discourses on land and landscape thus rests in the land itself, not only in the representations.

7. CONCLUSIONS

It has been argued that there is room for a dialectic synthesis between the modern and the postmodern approaches to landscapes. The recent emphasis on context, representation and on landscapes as different ways of seeing does not necessarily stand alone in contrast to a morphological approach to landscapes. Considering on the one hand the politically important role of arguments based on representations of landscape, and on the other the realities of land as a source for power and conflicts, one can see that a critical and empirically-based materialist landscape history certainly has a role to play.

REFERENCES


