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Untethering Landscape

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Landscape – or at least European Romantic landscape painting – is an artistic genre that has been subject to a great deal of critical vitriol. Landscape is supposedly one of the most conservative artistic forms, shoring up everything that is reactionary from imperialism and capitalist relations to the disembodied male gaze and bourgeois ideology.¹ It is a form of perception that has been described as deeply limiting. In traditional European landscape imagery – call it normative landscape – the world appears as something static and enframed, ordered according to stricture and convention (think of Henry Tilney, in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, instructing the hapless Catherine on the rules of constructing a picturesque view of the English countryside). According to Denis Cosgrove, landscape is an “ideological concept” – as indicated by the suffix ‘scape’ in the word itself, a semantic construction used to suggest a “unifying principle” imposed upon the world. To think of something as a landscape is to enforce a “timeless unity of form” which allows the world to become “a static, determinate object of scientific inquiry”.²

It is possible to overstate this line of argument. Landscape may indeed describe the orderly parcelling out of the world by the mind and the eye – but there is nothing inherently wrong about doing this, especially if one may see the world in a different light, for a moment. It's only when this strategy of perception is yoked to the forces of, say, imperialist possession or private property, that it becomes a problem. It's not that traditional landscape is a ‘wrong’ way of perceiving the world – rather, what's objectionable is that it has far too long been an aesthetic tool complicit in the domination of human beings by other human beings. There is nothing inherently hateful about wanting to hold a synthetically organized view of the world once in a while – just as long as we don't imagine that such views are anything more than local, temporary, and provisional conveniences. What *is* hateful is to mistake subjectively imperfect prospects upon the world for loftily disinterested ones, to mistake the contingent view for a normative one.

That doesn't mean that we can't choose to see through this ruse. To dismiss landscape is to miss the point. Landscape is not simply an obnoxious genre; rather, it is, in a word, highly dialectical – contradictory and surprising. To dismiss it outright would be, in fact, to capitulate to traditional landscape's pretensions to dominance. Landscape has come to be the name that we use in the West for a

¹ The most nuanced historical materialist critiques of the European landscape tradition appear in the essays in W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), and in Denis Cosgrove's *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, new ed. (London: Croom Helm, 1984; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

² Cosgrove, *Social Formation*, 13, 16. “Unifying principle” is W.A.M. Peters' term, which Cosgrove quotes.

certain kind of bourgeois-Romantic action upon nature that produces an art object as its end result, but this doesn't mean that there aren't other ways of aestheticising nature that we can't also call landscape. For after we have finished critiquing the European landscape tradition, we are free to continue to name what is left with that old but still useful term, [END PAGE 99] 'landscape' – if only to indicate its dialectical nature was already there from the very beginning.

Consider Dan Shippersides's *Coir' a' Ghrunnda 360* (2007), filmed on the Isle of Skye. It opens with a rather familiar view of mountainous terrain, with a stream flowing at the foot of barren rocky slopes wreathed in mist. This lasts three seconds. Then the artist picks up the camera and swings it vigorously on the end of a rope. When this happens, it's as if the monopoly that traditional European landscape has held on our imaginations for some three centuries is once again being broken. After two minutes, the camera comes to a stop – except that it is laid to rest on its side, so that the conventional horizontality of the original landscape view is gone and the disorientation remains. Not for the first time and not for the last, an artist is wrenching the word 'landscape' away from its historical origins – and yet we can still call his images a landscape (we are not just seeing the Isle of Skye in a different way, we are also seeing the word 'landscape' in a new light).

All the works in this exhibition, to varying degrees, serve to break the monopoly of traditional European landscape, and replace it with alternatives for which we might or might not yet have a name – but which we could just as well call 'landscape' and thus splinter the semantic field of that term. And it's not trivial that these works are moving images. The moving image is probably the medium or aesthetic site in which we see, most powerfully, the wresting away and reclaiming of the landscape tradition from its bourgeois-Romantic roots. Film and video art is very good at activating the dialectics – or rather, the multifariousness – of landscape, because, in the moving image, everything that was excised and excluded from traditional landscape rushes back into the picture with a vengeance, not least, movement and sound. This is, I think, what W.J.T. Mitchell meant when he wrote that film landscape served as a kind of unspoken support for the revisionist (largely Marxian) critiques of traditional landscape painting that appeared in his influential anthology of essays *Landscape and Power*.³ The reifying and normative tendencies of traditional landscape find it harder to gain a foothold when translated into the moving image because of the addition of movement and sound, because of the appearance of chance, contingency, and difference in the screen image. I don't mean that there is something intrinsically radical about the film or video medium that it can oppose itself to the ostensible conservatism of landscape. Rather the moving image is, in the best possible sense, a mismatch with normative landscape conventions – such as the enforcement of stasis and immobile enframing – and so the imposition of the 'unifying principle' becomes fractured. Multiple tensions appear. (New forms of conservatism might nevertheless be reasserted in other ways, but that's a different story.) [END PAGE 100]

Which is to say that landscape is and isn't itself when it is manifested as a moving image, for it suddenly becomes riven with alternative possibilities – and we see that

³ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Introduction", in *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed., ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 2.

these possibilities were already latent in its history. Indeed to view a historical landscape painting after viewing an equivalent moving image work might be to realise that it would be a failure of imagination to say that the traditional landscape canon lacks movement and sound, or contingency and difference. In that sense, because of its ‘mismatch’, the moving image can function as a peculiarly effective catalyst (though not the only one) for reactivating what would otherwise remain occluded or forgotten within the landscape tradition.

For example, the technical artistry of the moving image in these works (by which I include Shipsides’s athletic camera-swinging) activates alternative accounts of nature. The emphasis here is no longer on that aspect of nature which the medievals would have called *natura naturans* – nature as static and passive being, nature as finished product, uniform and unchanging, literally ‘nature natured’. Rather, we get glimpses of *natura naturata*, nature natured, nature as productive principle, dynamic and creative becoming, Heraclitean rather than Parmenidean nature.⁴ In Jo Millett’s *Surroundings: Trees* (2007), shots of a foliage-covered river cliff filmed over the course of a single day are almost imperceptibly dissolved into one another, so that everything begins to appear as a kind of green efflorescence swelling and subsiding in the corner of one’s eye. Meanwhile, in Scott Morrison’s *Ocean Echoes* (2007), which is as much a musical work as it is a visual one, split-second slices of footage of rustling grasses are edited together so that their swaying movements synch up with a pulsing, minimalist drone resembling insect chirps. The electronic drone builds to a crescendo before suddenly falling away at the end – a diminuendo – into quiet birdcalls and shimmering bell-like tones.

Ocean Echoes adds complexity to the ontological picture. It reminds us that *natura naturata* is the necessary flipside to *natura naturans*, and that structure and order are actually commensal with (rather than antithetical to) the ostensible disorder of pure flux and becoming. Acts of ordering can indeed be productive rather than oppressive or exclusionary; control need not be opposed to contingent difference. In this case, Morrison literally parcels out the world through the craft of editing, by cutting the world into slices of image and sound and then arranging them (‘arranging’ in the musical sense as well) – the difference being that, here, the editing of the world functions as a kind of glorious act of symphonic resonance rather than of hierarchic mastery. Or, more accurately, it is an act of symphonic resonance that *arises* out of a local hierarchic control. And isn’t that the nature of music? The local and temporary imposition of order upon the cacophony of the world in order to release and amplify its power rather than imprison it? Morrison’s harmonic arrangement of sound and image produces an ontological picture in which nature appears as a kind of flourishing fecundity precisely because it is so exactly but consonantly coded and managed. (This is what non-human nature might look like if human civilisation weren’t so bent on thwarting its productive power through overexploitation –

⁴ I am using Heraclitus and Parmenides here to represent the two poles of classical ontological thought. Heraclitus’s famous (mistranslated) aphorism that “no man can step into the same river twice” stands for the view that the world is fundamentally constituted out of pure flux (the second time that one steps into that river, neither the person nor the river are the same). Parmenides, on the other hand, claimed that timeless eternity lay behind the appearance of continuous change, such change being an illusion. I should also add that I am somewhat abusing the terms *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* here. For medieval and early modern philosophers, the two terms are not ‘flipsides’ to one another; rather, *natura naturans* functions as the ground or the condition of possibility for *natura naturata*.

Catherine Elwes may be right to read *Ocean Echoes* [END PAGE 101] as an ecological statement about food production).⁵

W.J.T. Mitchell has said that the European landscape tradition is “an exhausted medium, no longer viable as a mode for artistic expression.” But he also points out that landscape itself is “expressive of a potentially limitless reserve of value.”⁶ In other words, it’s up for grabs. That is why it is possible to label Morrison’s image of fecundity with this supposedly worn-out term (as well as Millett’s and Shippesides’s). Let me give the last word to John Conomos (and by extension his film *Lake George* [2008]). He argues that landscape need not be a conservative genre. Instead, it can be a term that is used to describe the making visible and audible of what lies “beyond the cultivated zone. Beyond the law of genre... The challenge [is] to treat landscape as a ‘siren-call’ to see and hear whatever we may intuit that may lie beyond the horizon of a given place, a genre, and one’s life.”⁷ Landscape doesn’t have to mean the closing of the mind; it can also mean a harkening to possibility. [END PAGE 102]

⁵ Elwes, in this volume, p. 72.

⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape”, in *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed., ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5.

⁷ John Conomos, press release, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, Australia, available at < <http://www.roslynxley9.com.au/news/releases/2008/03/04/143/>>. “Beyond the cultivated zone” is Jean-Francois Lyotard’s term, which Conomos quotes.