

FACE TO FACE WITH THE LANDSCAPE

Yrjö Sepänmaa

Abstract

We look at the landscape and the landscape looks at us, familiar and strange. Our language includes such expressions as a landscape having a **face**, faces having **expressions**, a summer night **smiling**. The look of the face depends, in a natural environment, on the result of processes of growth and development that are independent of us, in a built environment, on the other hand, on our shaping, our planning, and our doing. In very few cases, are the operations facelifts; they are more ambiguous, like the operations made on the face of the French performance artist Orlan. Most usually, we alter the face of the landscape for financial and practical reasons.

Our relationship to the landscape is also a question of our own way of seeing, and how we see our partner is, in turn, a question of much more than sensory physiology. Alongside the sensitivity and precision of the senses, cultural models appear; descriptions by depictees of nature, communal model landscapes, tourist sights. Just as there are classics in art, there are also classics in the environment: national and traditional landscapes and outstanding architecture. Over time, each group of classics varies, complements itself, and reemphasizes itself.

When landscapes are offered in the same way as art, a place is created for us, a role as the audience of a landscape. This role is also a release from everyday engagements – just as when we examine works of art. But it is also the role of a conscious, active, and responsible environmental and cultural critic.

I. THE FACE OF THE LANDSCAPE

"He knew its frontiers, its seas, its secretly-smiling lakes and the pine-clad ridges that run like stake-fences throughout its breadth. The whole picture of the land of his birth, its friendly mother-face, had sunk for ever into the depths of his heart."

This is how the Finnish national writer Alexis Kivi (in Alex Matson's translation) describes the character Eero in his novel *Seven Brothers*. The relationship between an inhabitant and their native region is like that between a child and its parents:

"No-one describes and itemizes the appearance and character of their parents. They are father and mother, unique, incomparable. Is my native region beautiful? What a ridiculous question. It is my native region. That is sufficient. It embraces beauty, love, everything."

This is how Reino Kalliola, a famous Finnish depicter of nature and Finland's first inspector of nature preservation, states the basis of a love of one's native region. The object of our affection is something other and much greater than external appearance.

Nevertheless, we assume a link between the superficial and the hidden. Perhaps outward appearance does reflect some deeper level or change? Alexis Kivi was a native of Nurmijärvi near Helsinki, where the landscape now has been disfigured by gravel excavation and road-building, and their associated rock cuts, where human settlement has increasingly backed nature into corners. The face of the landscape has not changed naturally; it has been torn open. We speak of wounds; landscaping is a treatment intended to heal such wounds, to restore an assumed harmony.

The Orlan model

Orlan, a French performance artist, says that she had donated her body – in practice, her face – to art. Her dedication to art is expressed much more in concrete terms and the flesh than in public speeches. The nine plastic surgery operations performed so far on her have not beautified her, nor was that the intention. The intention of this ongoing series of performances is a total change in identity, a release from the restrictions of the body.

Bearing, walk, position of the head, gestures and expressions, use of voice and manner of speech all remain to identify their source even when a person's

appearance has been completely altered. Successful "Weight Watchers" emphasize they have changed neither as people nor in their character, only that they have now discovered an external form corresponding to their self image. The outer shell has been wrong – like that of those who have decided on a sex-change operation.

Photographs of the environment halt change, they set the old and the new side by side, that which has been lost and that which has replaced it – sometimes there has been practically no change, sometimes we must stare and stare at a picture or view to discover even the slightest similarity. The Finnish photographer Pentti Sammallahti retraced the footsteps of another Finn, I. K. Inha, in Viena Karelia one hundred years later (1994); in August 1998, I myself sought the points from which Inha photographed the village of Vuokkiniemi. In the 1980s, the photographer Matti Karjanoja sought out the places from which Signe Brander had photographed Helsinki at the beginning of the century. Sometimes the change brings dilapidation, sometimes an obvious improvement, sometimes simply something different. The landscape is a process, though it is easy to forget the changeability of the everyday environment when we live too close to it. We remember change better if we are a gardener, farmer, or forester.

"For beauty against ugliness"

When humankind shapes the landscape, the environment, it does so according to its financial, practical, and aesthetic objectives. Finnish MP Esko-Juhani Tennilä "thought of yet one more reason" against the Vuotos reservoir in Lapland, "the vote is also for beauty against ugliness." The defence of aesthetic values is a moral duty. In the following aphoristic poem, the writer Lauri Viita appeals for a process of change towards a moral stand:

"Not only building, but all of modern industry is based on sculpture. Mechanical saws, pneumatic drills, explosives, excavators, are the means with which the friendly face of mother Finland is sculpted. Only the living sensitivity of art can now decide whether conscience will also grow here, or will the ground only crumble and the water thicken."

Beauty is seldom the first goal when shaping the environment, though the final result can always be judged according to a scale of beauty. More often beauty can be an obstacle to shaping! The goals and results reveal a culture and order of values in the same way as the face of Orlan, which has been savaged in the name

of art. It is quite as painful to see the wounds of the environment as it is to watch a facelift operation. The sensitivity of the human face, the effect of even the smallest change on the expression, makes the operation unpleasant, even though we may enjoy the result.

The message of a landscaped milieu appears to lie essentially elsewhere than in what can be seen directly. Much is covered, destroyed. The eternally young face of Dorian Gray expressed innocence and sensitivity, though beneath it he was already internally depraved and callous. When someone's face expresses a different message than their acts, we refuse to believe the stories of evil, which seem no more than gossip – we believe the face. However, in an interpretation, one cannot trust only that which can be seen and observed: the essential is hidden, and for precisely this reason an interpretation that penetrates more deeply is needed! Hidden messages, uncontrolled gestures and looks, often tell and reveal more, if only they are noticed. In an interpretation, we seek an articulating explanation, leading to understanding.

The model of the encounter

The expression of the landscape is our expression, our own face looks back at us from the mirror with a message that is our message. But, at the same time, we also look at our biological past, the history of our species. In the words of the Nobel prizewinning writer, F. E. Sillanpää in his novel *Elämä ja aurinko* [*Life and the Sun*]:

"When someone stops like that, the forest and the person look each other in the eye, beyond all past ages, which have progressed far, far from each other and the original connection. And thus they sometimes meet, the person realizing instinctively both the original connection and the dizzying estrangement created by those ages, and being touched by a light feeling of dread, even without the joy of love."

In Franz Kafka's short story *Eine Kreuzung* [*Crossbreeding*], the contact between species has already vanished; the expected reactions of recognition do not arise – the animals look past each other, because the cat lamb is too far from its origin.

We are still in contact with a state of nature, though artificial environments draw it ever further away. The more the landscape has been made and built, the more the question is literally one of evaluating our own work. We have caused the problems of the environment – and the optimism lies in the fact that, in that

case, perhaps we can also remove them. Analysis and interpretation are followed by the time to act.

The young philosopher Pekka Himanen has spoken of the encounter as a model for the practice of philosophy. The aesthetician Arnold Berleant speaks of immediacy, of being entwined, and of engagement, no matter whether our partner is a work of art or the environment. The poet Paavo Haavikko writes of the encounter of wine and the drinker, from the point of view of the wine. The environment meets us, enters us, becomes us. We do not only entwine the environment, the environment entwines us – nor is the relationship then between us and the environment, rather we are in the environment, penetrated and possessed by it.

Surprisingly, it begins to appear that there is now reason to take a step backwards in our thoughts, in order to preserve the image. The environment cannot be the same as a landscape. A certain degree of distance to a landscape is needed – if it is to be a landscape. We are face to face with the landscape, staring it in the eye. We look at the landscape and the landscape looks at us, it has an **expression**, it **smiles**, as in Ingmar Bergman's early film *Smiles of a Summer Night*, 1955. A model of an encounter of this kind – instead of union – can be found in the theatre. Mentally and in our feelings we participate in the events on stage, but physically we are behind the invisible fourth wall of the stage.

II. THE AUDIENCES OF THE LANDSCAPE

I am looking at four pictures, in all of which there is the same basic situation, with variations: a landscape as a sight, which a crowd has gathered to admire or a lonely person is looking at. I, a citizen of the real world, peep inquisitively at the same place over the shoulders of the people in the picture who are looking at the landscape. What do I see? – (1) A full stadium at a park-like playing-field watching some event, with a polluted large city in the background; (2) a group sitting on a bench watching the eruption of Old Faithful at Yellowstone; (3) another group of people, in Luigi Ghirri's photograph "Salzburg," next to a mountain landscape provided with the names of the places; and (4) a lonely woman in a photograph by Roger Minick, the title of which, "Woman with Scarf at Inspiration Point, Yosemite National Park, California 1980," tells all but

the essential: the drawing on her scarf presents the landscape in front of the onlooker.

The same arrangements, with or without the vanguard, repeat themselves in real life: (1) the line of sight at the Lake Urajärvi in Asikkala, Finland, descends to the lake; on a knoll a boulder stands as a stone memorial on which there is a line from the Finnish national anthem "Our Land": "Land of a thousand lakes, oh land!"; (2) "Dante's View," states a name-plate in Death Valley, California; (3) the auditorium of the bat theatre in the Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico as a semi-circular ring at the opening of the bat cave; (4) *Kolinportti* ('The Gate to Mountain Koli') as a boundary in Juuka, Finland, after crossing which I come to Koli itself, into a three-dimensional painting.

The group in the picture, or, in real life, a marked point of assembly, gives a hint to join the crowd. As it is well known, a crowd attracts the curious...

The paradigmatic landscape

In all of these we meet a paradigmatic, model-like landscape or a natural object. Such an object is something communal, decided to be worth looking at on account of its perfectness or typicalness. In fact, a landscape is more of a landscape the more it is the object of examination and discussion. An audience is an essential part of a landscape; a landscape arises as a result of the interaction between an object and an audience. Thus reputation is also a factor in landscape.

In a paradigmatic landscape, in the sense of an ideal landscape, the expectations and hopes of the audience are fulfilled – and formed. In a short essay in "The Book of Our Land" (reprinted in his collection of writings *Nature at Heart* in 1978), Reino Kalliola writes of Koli:

"When artists paint a landscape, they usually leave out some irritating details, or alter some outlines or forms to create a complete entirety. At Koli this is unnecessary. From here a finished painting opens out in which there is nothing to be left out or altered. It is so immense and restful, its composition is so beautiful, and its colors so pure."

And even though there might be something to be "removed" or "altered" in most objects, it is precisely this which means that most, the core, of the ideal remains. The praiseworthy and distinguished meet the ordinary and everyday. On the other hand, a paradigmatic landscape can gain its position, for example, precisely on account of that typicalness and averageness – just like the landscape of forest

and water at lake Urajärvi, any one of thousands, the most ordinary of the ordinary, in Finland.

Even though it seems that anything at all may become a work of art, not everything does, and even though anything at all may be institutionalized as a landscape, not everything is. A landscape is not an arbitrary collection of elements, but their totality, which is to some degree articulated. The articulation is made by interpretation, and the "assembling" of a landscape is thus also a matter of skill. Even famous peaks, fixed points comparable to classic works of art, are only as many in a culture as can possibly be retained in the general consciousness – that is, not very many.

The internal audience of a landscape picture

In literature there is the practice of speaking of an internal, or implied, reader, a character in the form of a reader who belongs to the world of the work in question. They may be either visible or invisible. One convention of landscape pictures – not, however, an essential one – is the use of a visible internal audience. After all, the presence of an audience reinforces the sense of importance: an audience has gathered for something – to admire or out of curiosity. Because a landscape is a sight, it naturally includes an audience, even in a picture, and an internal audience is present, even when it is not shown separately. As citizens of the real world, we cannot step in front of it or among it. We always remain outsiders, at the back.

The depicted audience makes layeredness visible. I, from the real world and therefore ontologically another, join in, even in the background, behind an invisible, but nevertheless impassable, wall. As viewers, we all group ourselves as an additional crowd, with our points of view.

Inside one of René Magritte's paintings we see a landscape painting that might also be a window view. In the same way, the map with place names in Ghirri's photographs from the 1970s is a deceptive cover of a faithful correspondence of the real landscape. Is his work a late reply in a philosophical discussion, for as Ludwig Wittgenstein remarked – in a comment on the philosophy of psychology (TS 229, No 170) – even though we can decide something about a landscape from a map, we cannot look at a map and cry: "What a beautiful view!"

The content of the remark lies in the fact that a map presents the features of a landscape as such a general suggestion that the appearance, the face, of the landscape does not appear. Aesthetic examination is then not possible – on account of its scale, a map does not provide a sufficiently concrete picture of the landform (not even an aerial photograph does so).

Nonetheless, some people read an interpretation from a written score, hear the music in their minds and enjoy the tone, and at the same time the score leaves space for alternative realizations. Why would a landscape score be impossible: maps and map depictions **are** notations, even if indistinct? An orienteer reads the landform from a map, imagines forms and recognizes objects even when seen for the first time. The degree of accuracy varies with the scale: the more accurate the map, the less need and space for individual imagination. Does not art act in precisely this way: it provides even tight frameworks and structures, but leaves the rest open for constructive imagination? On the basis of a map we can concretize possible landscapes and even admire them. Only if we are interested in the reliability of the map depiction do we have to compare it, and the images it gives rise to, with reality.

Going into the landscape

Of course we do not only passively look at landscapes. A road does not run along a ridge only because a sandy ridge is a good foundation, but also because the journey is more pleasant to make in a beautiful landscape. We show our interest by going to a place, by hiking and travelling, trampling routes into paths, by choosing a route or drive, the line of a road, building environments, as inhabitants or summer guests – and by depicting the landscapes in words, photographs, and by making video tapes. Our own depiction is, of course, active and independent, even though in practice it is often regulated: I have seen Kodak sign posts showing a recommended photographing point, and nameplates that show the footsteps that a tidy and diligent viewer should step into.

Some activities change the landscape, even destroy it. A demonstration of honor and appreciation by travelling – made by too many – turns against a landscape, destroys what is appreciated. For this reason – **if** we go to a place – remaining at viewing points and on marked trails is to the advantage of the landscape. As viewers of a picture we are, of course, safe outsiders to the landscape,

even though our minds wander through the world of the picture; in the real world we would inevitably leave a trace.

The provision and marketing of landscapes – and through that the invitation to become an audience – create a role into which we are invited and suggested to place ourselves. Reception becomes role activity. When we have adapted to the figure of the viewer, we are no longer purely ourselves. But this need not be only something bad: the adoption of a rôle extends the dimension of imagination to everyday activities. We do not live solely as the prisoner of role pictures, but are also released into their otherness – in the same way as art frees us by offering us another reality for our minds to move and work in. Individually we may think anything at all about an object, but at the same time, as part of a group, we are able to experience group feeling and consciousness. Even as we cheer with others we examine ourselves as an audience; we are the first critic of our own role behavior.

References

- Berleant, Arnold 1991. *Art and Engagement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press
- Brand, Peggy Zeglin 1997. The Reconstructive Surgery of the Performance Artist Orlan. – *Place and Embodiment*. Proceedings of the XIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics, Lahti, Finland, August 1–5, 1995. Vol. I. Eds. Pauli Tapani Karjalainen, Pauline von Bonsdorff. University of Helsinki, Lahti Research and Training Centre, pp. 113–117
- Havikko, Paavo 1977. *Viiniä, kirjoitusta*. Kolmas painos. Helsinki: Otava
- Himänen, Pekka 1994. Joulukuukausi. – *Helsingin Sanomat*, 24. XII
- Jackson, John Brinckerhoff 1979. Landscape as Theater. – *Landscape*, Vol. 23, 1, pp. 3–7
- Kafka, Franz 1983. Eine Kreuzung. – *Sämtliche Erzählungen*. Hrsg. Paul Raabe. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, S. 302–303
- Kallio, Reino 1978. Lohjanjärven rantamilta. Sampo-juhlassa Sammatissa 4. VII 1965. – *Luonto sydämellä. Kirjoitelmia ja puheita 1930–1977*. Porvoo, Helsinki, Juva: WSOY, s. 200–212
- Karjanoja, Matti 1983. *Rinnastuksia Signe Branderin kuviin Helsingistä*. Helsinki: Tammi
- Kivi, Alexis 1929. *Seven Brothers*. Trans. Alex Matson. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc
- Orlan 1995. *This is my body, this is my software*. A lecture and video presentation by the performance artist Orlan in the Atheneum Hall of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki on 14 October 1995, organized by the MUU Art Association

Pentti Sammallahhti and I.K. Inha Visiting Akseli Gallen-Gallela. Gallen-Kallela Museum 6

September – 6 October 1996. Catalogue. Ed. Tuomo-Juhani Vuorenmaa. Helsinki: Musta Taide & Finnfoto, 1996

S a s, Miryam. The Doyenne of Divasection. – *Mondo 2000*, Issue No. 13, pp. 106–111

S i l l a n p ä ä, F. E. (1916) 1948. *Elämä ja aurinko*. Viides painos. Helsinki: Otava

T e n n i l ä, Esko-Juhani; L i n t u n e n, Martti 1998. *Vuotoksen vuosi*. Helsinki: Otava

V i i t a, Lauri 1961. *Suutarikin suuri viisas*. Runoa ja proosaa. Helsinki, Porvoo: WSOY

W i l d e, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (First published 1891)

W i t t g e n s t e i n, Ludwig 1980. *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*. Vol. I. Eds. G. E. M.

Anscombe, G. H. von Wright. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell