

Reverie: A Field Guide for Exploring Scapes

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If the study of landscapes is historically concerned with our representations of geography, then the study of the more abstracted suffix “scapes” is concerned with morphology of the same scale, but open to numerous categories and types. The art historical survey of landscape is certainly included in the widened study of “scapes”, and it also serves as a kind of template for how to proceed; why not look at wide-open spaces in order approach a wide-open category? Similarly, writing about open expanses often takes on an expansive tone, and this preface to an exhibition about scapes will be no exception.

As part of an in-depth group inquiry into *Landscape Theory*, James Elkins points out the free-wheeling attitude that writers often take when discussing landscape:

Like the body, landscape is something we inhabit without being different from it: we are in it, and we are it. That might be a fundamental, phenomenological reason why some writing on landscape, like some writing on the body, seems unusually free of scholarly protocols and signposts. Philosophy melts into impressionism; logic deliquesces into reverie. The object isn't bound by our attention: it binds us.¹

He suggests that landscapes, particularly in garden history, have a semi-hypnotic quality that inspire a looseness in experience and discussion. There is a tendency slip into the space depicted, and speak in a descriptive manner that accepts the observational limitations of your own vantage point. It is not possible to apprehend the entire space in one moment, nor is there access to the suggestive continued expanse past the edge of the frame. Therefore descriptions become similarly suggestive and open-ended. Prose shakes off the “protocols and signposts” demanded of hard research and begins to enjoy itself. While considering the work in the exhibition and preparing to write this preface I caught myself writing notes in a state similar to the one described by Elkins, even though landscapes are only one of several types of scape to be found in this body of work. Rather than crossing our arms and attempting to rhetorically climb out of this reverie, I propose we willfully fall into this mode as a way to engage

with this exhibition.

That said, such an engagement is not necessarily an aesthetic free-for-all of pleasure and spectacle where nothing is articulated, learned, or discovered. Also in *Landscape Theory*, Denis E. Cosgrove describes a dual perspective that is both situated in the experience of the space depicted, as well as conversant in the landscapes' semiotics. He says that “an unalienated, insider's apprehension of the land: of nature and the sense of place, together with a more critical, socially conscious, outsider's perspective” is at the core of his foundational study *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*.ⁱⁱ He also attributes the development of this perspective to landscape essayist J.B. Jackson's “unique capacity to interpret landscapes iconographically and intelligently while remaining true to the everyday experience of landscape.”ⁱⁱⁱ This kind of dual perspective abides in the experience of being inside a space, but enlists a view from the outside to consider socio-political relationships between ourselves and the spaces we view and inhabit. Even if we drop “land” and are left only with “scape,” this dual perspective is not mutually exclusive with the reverie described by Elkins and serves as a guide for artworks situated in the study of space.

Cosgrove's dual perspective on landscape presages the study of virtual reality. Both the promise and anxiety around computer-simulated worlds revolves around this dual perspective. How does the virtual reality theorist establish what the landscape theorist has already achieved: being inside of an experience, but also outside of it in order to evaluate its meaning? The same question is a perennial discourse in video game studies and applies to any embodied interactive software environment. How do we achieve *critical distance* between us and the virtual worlds we inhabit? This is a widely shared concern; from the theory of Sherry Turkle and Anne Friedberg, to science fiction like *Ender's Game* (1985) or *The Matrix* (1999).^{iv} In this context, Snow Yunxue Fu and Mo Chen propose the presentation of new media along with a medium that has a longer resume in dealing with this problematic, namely painting.

In *Modernity at Large* Arjun Appadurai offers a framework that can help us observe the

amorphous spaces curated by Fu and Chen as simultaneous insiders and outsiders. He offers an updated definition of scapes that considers them inseparable from the global imagination, and as a result creates categories that comfortably include the scapes of painting as well as the scapes of new media. Rather than whimsy or false consciousness, Appadurai's notion of the global imaginary is a key element of social practice:

The image, the imagined, the imaginary-these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility.^v

Could this model of imagination as practice span the gap between insider and outsider perspectives on new media in a manner similar to Cosgrove's dual perspective on landscape? Is this how the insider's experience of landscape becomes the work of creating its external meaning? And likewise, could it convert Elkin's description of reverie into the state of its understanding? Perhaps, in Appadurai's mode, if you slip into the reverie of imaginary spaces you are also performing the labor of creating social relationships and meanings. This work, or agency, is characterized not just by giving culture shape, but moving ideas along cultural flows. Appadurai calls these cultural flows "scapes"; a handy suffix that can be affixed to key subjects to define the undefinable, porous, permeable, growing, shrinking, changing, quality of their borders. In particular, Appadurai proposes the study of:

(a) ethnoscares, (b) mediascares, (c) technoscares, (d) finanscares, and (e) ideoscares. The suffix -scape allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes, shapes that characterize international capital as deeply as they do international clothing styles. These terms with the common suffix -scape also indicate that these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs...^{vi}

These scapes provide a dynamic container for understanding ideas about contemporary global culture

that accept the contingency of a viewer's perspective. The scapes can also emphasize how shapes and spaces in painting and virtual reality flow through cultural imagination on global scale. This contrasts from the regionally-focused European and North American analysis of landscape painting conducted in Cosgrove's *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* or Malcom Andrews' *Landscape in Western Art* (1999).

Instead, Appadurai's scapes more coincide with W.J.T. Mitchell's theses on landscape that begin his essay "Imperial Landscape." His fifth thesis on landscape simply states that, "landscape is a medium found in all cultures," a claim which is not mutually exclusive with his 6th thesis that, "landscape is a particular historical formation associated with European imperialism."^{vii} Mitchell implies that this lingering association with European imperialism is one and the same with landscape's state as "an exhausted medium, no longer viable as a mode of artistic expression. Like life, landscape is boring; we must say so" (thesis 8).^{viii} Could the retirement of the "land" prefix be the transformation necessary to recuperate an interesting and in-exhausted medium, while also leaving Eurocentrist associations behind? Scapes, after all, are not necessarily of (boring) life but of the socially-produced global imagination.

Keep these categories in mind as you explore: through Max Hattler's ideoscapes, traveling through the afterlife between different points in history and across media; through the ethnoscares of Alan Kwan's video memories and Philip Hanson's mapping of the human mind; through the reproductive archival technoscape offered by Jon Cates; through the expanded material investigation of Snow Yunxue Fu, Mo Chen's, and Philip Vanderhyden's mediascapes. While you do so, don't be alarmed if you fall into reverie or semi-hypnosis. This may very well mean that you too are performing important cultural labor.

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- i James Elkins, "Writing Moods" in *Landscape Theory*, ed. Rachael Ziady DeLue et al. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 69.
- ii Denis E. Cosgrove, "Introduction to *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*" in *Landscape Theory*, ed. Rachael Ziady DeLue et al. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 17.
- iii Ibid.
- iv For example, see Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005) and Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006) respectively.
- v Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 31.
- vi Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 33
- vii W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5.
- viii Ibid.