«Objects are closer than they appear»:
Mirrors and the midwifery of landscape experience

The 2006 SHIFTS Conference in Jyväskylä gave me the opportunity for reflecting once more about the becoming of the occidental appreciation of «landscape». A vague idea that was the result of teaching and research in the present and historical shape of acoustic and visual environment condensed into the more outspoken conviction: our «landscape» is, despite the overall evolution of sight in the history of art and of aesthetics, still an idea of environment that is heavily founded on the picturesque. However, I am not going to judge the appropriateness of the presence of an 18th century perceptual and representational heritage in the 21st century.

I thank the organisers and the public for having given me the opportunity to discuss issues I could not as easily have tested in my home discipline, human geography, and to make discoveries about the relationship between perception, representation and the technologies linked to these processes. Many paths have been shown to me that call for further walking.

I do actually recur to paintings, witnesses of historical stages of representation. I am centring on images, not objects that are «real» in some way or other: even composed objects like the geographers’ landscapes. I also prefer concrete cases to universal principles, following a conventionalist theory of pictorial representation. This means I contend that when understanding and appreciating a picture, be it pictorial or photographic, we use a set of conventions that orders our sight into a view. I contend that this convention is contained in a heritage that evolves constantly under the effect of everyday perceptions, but nevertheless is rooted two hundred years back in the fruits of pictorial and academic aesthetics. To grasp the contemporary everyday experience we have to develop phenomenological awareness, and to understand its historical precursors we have to apply hermeneutic techniques.

2. For the categories see Sarapik 2002.
Black mirror

I start as it were in the middle of night, with an often unnoticed black mirror: Travelling in a train in the night exhibits one of the fundamental ways how the world is made: The windows are black, crossed only from time to time by lights from outside. So you watch into a double of the interior in which you are seated. You see a tinted or slightly distorted replica of yourself which is reflected again in the black mirror of the opposite row of windows. You watch into it, and although you watch your own image, this reverse world is the other, is beyond, is inaccessible, unavailable. This world is neither in front of you, nor besides you, but somehow parallel.

Driving mirror

Hearing me talking about a black mirror you remember that you have noticed that in my title «Objects are closer than they appear» the medium through which «objects» appear is omitted. Usually the line reads: «Objects in mirror are closer than they appear». It is usually found on driving mirrors. Although it sounds as a warning from deception, we do have an everyday competence in correcting and using this kind of reflections, not only with car mirrors. Notice that the objects «are», not just «look» closer in this formulation. It is about physical dangers. Obviously we cope rather well with the distortions of the image appearing
in the mirror, and this satisfies road security laws and insurance agencies. Therefore the line, intended as a warning, can also be read as a simple conclusion. Here I do not want to expound the line neither from its social function to enhance careful ways of driving, nor from the theme of perceptual constancy and the notion of distance investigated by the psychology of perception. I am much more interested in the phenomenological core of it, which is the old theme of illusion, the mistrust to appearances versus the appreciation of phenomena. It serves my interest in landscapes that the driving mirror shows outdoor spaces, something like «landscapes». In the present case these spaces are mostly seen in movement, seen by ourselves moving past them, a common quality of contemporary perception of environment and the earth.

I resume: The black mirror of the train compartment differs from the driving mirror by the shift of quality of the image. The romantic versus the realistic, to use the categories of John Szarkowski. The black mirror re-enchants the technical space of the train by tint and distortion, whereas the driving mirror disenchant and conceptualises the landscape by enlarging the field of vision into the dead angle of sight and by imposing a stance of rational behaviour.


Gray mirror and Claude-glass

The quality of tinting and distorting a view recalls the black mirrors that were in use late in the eighteenth and early in the nineteenth centuries, called Gray mirrors or Claude-glasses. Black mirrors were produced with elaborate craftsmanship in various forms, but dominantly with round shapes. That the names of the two seventeenth and eighteenth century painters Claude Lorrain (Claude Gellée) and Thomas Gray were used for these mirrors, shows their immediate link with a pictorialised view of environment.

The convex mirror reduced the object and its tint affected colours and the visual field, fixing the eye and fixing the unity of the whole view. «Fixing» the images or scenes in order to create a picture, was a substantial concern in the first half of the nineteenth century and

3. I use here environment, intentionally without definite article, in the sense proposed by Berleant 1992: Environment (no plural) aims at designing the appearance of our surroundings a priori not reified and divided into physical objective and perceptual subjective environments, splitting it into an inside and an outside world.

led finally to what we call today photography. Ernst Gombrich remarks that the mirror «was supposed to do what the black-and-white photograph does for us, reduce the variety of the visible world to tonal gradations». Already in 1839, when the first daguerrotypes appeared, they were compared by experts with the reflections in a black mirror.

Where have the Claude-glasses gone to? According to Arnaud Maillet, the historiographer of the Claude-glass, the black mirror left very few traces, its results merged in the pictorial production of landscape painting, it even got lost from knowledge and memory, particularly on the continent. The remaining mirrors were taken care of by the historians of science and technical museums, not by the experts of the arts. But ironically its main use and effect were not scientific or technological, but aesthetic.

William Gilpin, comparison of a natural light (left) and of a picturesque light (right) representation.

Views into scenes

Has the black mirror been the straight way to the photographic eye? No, as we will see in an example from the world of the picturesque. These two engraving are from the work of William Gilpin (1724-1804), which contains tour descriptions and at the same time rules for the picturesque. Five years after Gilpin’s death his systematic and normative search for the picturesque has been caricatured by William Combe, who named him the «Dr Syntax» of the picturesque. The present discussion of the picturesque is a discussion of the relation of tones. The first example (figure, left) shows a realistic scene, taken from nature:

«A simple illumination», «the light falls strongly on various parts, as it often does in nature»

The second example (figure, right), of the same scene, handles the light as if passed through a black mirror, modelling nature in order to create depth:

The scene must be «better inlightened», «nature [taken] in her most beautiful form»

Light «brought more together», is «graduate also in different parts, so as not to appear affected»

In order to understand this, we have to be reminded of the fact that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries «the rawness of natural light constituted (...) an anti-aesthetic affect, disagreeable to the very organ of sight». It needs some effort to imagine the perception of that time, when «tones» were always tones of colours, and the black-and-white world later imposed by photography was uncommon. Interesting, also how the public of early

5. Gombrich 1960, 40.
7. Combe 1809.
photography – still scenes of urban or rural landscapes, and portraits – were marvelled by the «automatism» of these reproductions and their «naturalness» despite the many shortcomings of the new medium. Among many, Alexander von Humboldt, a trained observer with ambition for a scientific aesthetics of the nature, who admired the first daguerrotypes in 1839, yet noted the lack of colours and therefore of atmosphere.  

The systematic of Gilpin points to a high degree of craftsmanship in landscape painting, of painters with a strong presence of models in their mind and a corresponding sensibility. We can also say, that such a sophistication indicates the end of an era, and we find in fact that the turn of the century prepared a change in the view of nature as landscape. Jonathan Mayne's first lines of introduction to the painter John Constable's memoirs read: «The history of Constable's development is the history of the sharpening of the eye's focus upon nature, the history of the emancipation of English art from the Claude-glass and from Sir George Beaumont's brown tree.»

The Claude-glass along with the «brown tree» alludes to conventional, regular and unquestioned representations of nature. The device will vanish together with the changing perception; both, instrument and sensibility, redefine the notion of landscape in a revolutionary redefinition of space and time.

Aesthetics and physical appropriation of landscapes

With the evidence from Maillet's essay on the Claude-glass in mind one can call this device a cultural fossil of a stage of perception of environment, of a stage where the idea of the picturesque landscape got strength beyond the painters' circles. From now on «philistines» dared to watch landscapes at their own, and their tourist behaviour was criticised and caricatured: they were said to accept landscapes, and other people, only seen through the black mirror. We should not forget that in the eighteenth century approaching nature was still not a natural course of action: overwhelming sensations of either scare or delight had to be taken care of and domesticated. Any mediating pretext, from painting to watching into black mirrors could help to experience potentially dangerous and hostile environments as aesthetically managed places. The late eighteenth century was also the era of scientific alpinism, the exploration of the world’s vertical dimension, where the aesthetic

10. Alexander Humboldt von 1839, in a letter to Friederieke von Anhalt-Dessau, quoted from Langholz 1979 and Schnelle-Schnyder 1990:
«Gegenstände, die sich selbst in unnachahmlicher Treue mahlen; Licht, gezwungen durch chemische Kunst, in wenigen Minuten bleibende Spuren zu lassen, die Conturen bis auf die zartesten Teile scharf zu umgrenzen, ja diesen ganzen Zauber (freilich einen farblosen) bei heiterem sonnenklaren Tage unserer nördlichen Zone in 8-10 Minuten, bei Egyptischer Durchsichtigkeit der Luft und tropischer Lichtfülle wahrscheinlich in 2-3 Minuten hervorgerufen zu sehen, das spricht freilich unaufhaltsam den Verstand und die Einbildungskraft an.»

Transl., J.W.: «Objects that paint themselves in inimitable fidelity; light, forced by the art of chemistry to leave lasting traces within few minutes, to delimit to the contours down to the finest parts, even to (...) have this whole magic (though a colourless one) caused, this appeals of course inexorably to mind and imagination.»


12. The brown tree is part of an anecdote connected with Constable, along with the one of the «Cremona fiddle»: Beaumont was a link with a remoter past, old enough to assume a didactic attitude towards Constable, whom he befriended. On one occasion he asked, «Do you not find it difficult to determine where to place your brown tree?» «Not in the least,» said Constable, «for I never put such a thing into a picture.» «http://www.sharecom.ca/phillips/wetpaint05.html (cst 2006-10-14)

and the cartographic formed the panorama pictures that told lessons from this a-historic space beyond the human world.\textsuperscript{14}

The anecdote by the painter Thomas Gray does not report life-threatening circumstances, but is very instructive:

«Straggled out alone to the \textit{Parsonage}, fell down on my back across a dirty lane with my glass open in one hand, but broke only my knuckles: stay’d nevertheless, & saw the sun set in all its glory.»\textsuperscript{15}

What Gray reports here contains the command of the fleeting moment. It is about an accident, not about the elaboration of a painting, of a landscape with sunset. This second of accident corresponds to the movements of the shutter of the camera which will, half a century later, introduce new notions of perceptual time\textsuperscript{16} The capacity for manipulation of scenes by the Claude-glass was used by tourists to change the time of the day or the season within seconds, at least within a few hours. This was useful when they did not have plenty of time to stay in a place. The blue or grey tinted mirror reproduced the afternoon landscape as in moonlight, the yellow, so-called sunrise-glass created at noon an early morning gloom, the frosted mirror created in summer the atmosphere of snowdrift.\textsuperscript{17}

Precursors of the photographic eye

I am coming back to the historical context. The black mirrors are so to speak hinges in the aesthetic approach to environment and offer evidence for having contributed to the prefiguration of the «photographic eye» before it was technically question of photography. This concerned space and time, «fixing», as the eighteenth century called it, a scene, capturing a view with its atmosphere and making it last.\textsuperscript{18} Also the mirror would write a history of \textit{photographic aesthetics} that is as continuous as the history of \textit{photographic technique}. The latter had developed in a spirit, which considered photography above all as a technological achievement, and as such the natural heir of painting\textsuperscript{19}. This kind of history is the formulation of the dream of the landscape viewer to fix the scene in the mirror without having to recur to the skills and aesthetic rules of painting, of being allowed to forget the interplay between eye and environment. A story of success: we are mostly unaware of the weight of this aesthetic heritage in our own appreciation of environment and understanding of landscape.

I have mentioned that the black mirrors were taken care of by the historians of \textit{science}, not of the arts. When you find a device without a manual, you have just a material shell of an unknown cultural technique. But we can tentatively put the camera obscura to the side of technology and the black mirror to the side of aesthetics. Thus technology on the one hand and, on the other hand, concepts of landscape, of perceived space and time, can be thought of as developing different paces, converging in particular moments and places, such a Paris 1839.

\textsuperscript{14} In particular Horace-Bénédict de Sausurre 1803 in his \textit{Voyages das les Alpes}, Neuchâtel 1803. See Rabut 1988.


\textsuperscript{16} Schnelle-Schneyder 1990, 14.


\textsuperscript{18} See Batchen 1999, who has been doing seminal work on the concept and conception of photography, relativising naked dates such as «1839»; he argues that there is no strict temporal sequence of before-after in sense of Derrida’s \textit{différance}, but the context of a «conceptual economy» (p. 183).

\textsuperscript{19} Erich Stenger (1878-1957), professor for photographic chemistry wrote in 1929 a short history of photography where the achievement of the chemical support was of foremost importance. Here the subsequent practise of photography appears as the continuation and perfection of painting without the means of painting.
From central perspective to depth

The changing concept of visual landscape covers more than the relatively clear relation between technology and aesthetics. The interplay between the two agents leads to an important change within aesthetics.

So art theorist Jonathan Crary proposes to consider the Claude-glass as the symptom of a rupture. It would «tend to illustrate the rupture defined by Jonathan Crary, in the passage from a geometric [monocular] to a physiological [stereoscopic] optics at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century». This is a process of opening depth and of «a heightened awareness of the body in the formative process of images».

What does this signify? The camera obscura can be considered as the technical paradigm of monocular optics. It realises the central perspective, where all objects are subordinated to its unique rule. Photography is, technically, the continuation of the ancient monocular optics. Aesthetically, however, it belongs to the new stereoscopic paradigm. The black mirror, with its reductive and idealising capacities thanks to convexity and blackness «introduced the breach between nature and its reflection». The far end of stereoscopic optics in landscape painting would be found in the work of Paul Cézanne. He was reported to work «watching the motive like a dog without nervousness or intention», and his Sainte-Victoire landscapes ask for a new binocular sight that replaces the striving eye. «To represent each side [of a pictorial object] simultaneously aims at that convexely spherical optics of reality, which makes its way to a culminating point.» These words by Gottfried Boehm are like a very far echo of the black mirror.

Bodies, positions and postures

Thomas Gray’s accident reminds us to consider the «picturesque mind» or the «photographic eye» in the context of the whole body. We experience a place as whole persons, bodily, in embodied situatedness. That is why I wonder how peoples posture has been when watching in a black mirror. In 1844, Thomas West, author of a Guide to the Lakes, specifies the attitude of a person using the Claude-glass:

He «ought always to turn his back to the object that he views: (...) The landscape will be seen in the glass, by holding it a little to the right or left, as the position of the parts to be viewed require».

In this body position is not expressed a painter's procedure, which would aim at helping to frame the scene in front of the observer, but an attitude that is directed to composing a picture taken off from the bodily and spatial context of its appearance.

23. Boehm 1988, 106. The remark goes back to a letter by Rainer Maria Rilke to Clara Rilke from October 12th 1907, where he mentions a description of Cézanne’s work by the German painter Mathilde Vollmoeller: «Wie ein Hund hat er davor gesessen und einfach geschaut, ohne alle Nervosität und Nebenabsicht.»; Briefe III, S. 375.
I want to illustrate the question of changing perspectives on the land and the world by a set of images of quite different origins. I found that in the history of representations of landscapes changing positions of watching man can be recognised. I want to sketch some correspondences with historical «stages» of the presence of landscapes in paintings. Take this «typology» just as a foothold for a phenomenological reflection that re-constructs the place of the viewer.

«Madonna with carnation» (detail) by Leonardo da Vinci, from the mid-1470s (1473-76). The landscape is part of the background of the main motive. Quite a number of Leonardo's portraits of Mary and other women are made like this. Among them best known the one of the Joconda, where a rather brutal landscape contrasts with the expression of the face of the woman. The person in the centre talks as it were to us. The background is a pictorial space, but the imagination of mountains like these is in most cases not conceived as a realist image of an existing landscape, but rather as a «lesson».

Three hundred years later, in this «View from the painter's workshop with self-portrait of the artist» by Jean-Etienne Liotard (between 1770 and 1775) the painter shows himself posing in
front of a realistic, identifiable landscape beyond the fortifications of Geneva. The famous portrait painter of that time «portrays» the view from his window, showing himself transversally in the axe of the onlooker, as if busy with painting, but with no easel and canvas in front of him. The framing is as if from a photographic aesthetics, but 60 years too early.

«Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer» (ca. 1817) is one of the best known rückenfiguren – silhouettes seen from the back – by Caspar David Friedrich. The man watches as it were with us the fog below, the clouds and mountains in front and the sky above. The averted face makes him anonymous, as is the landscape, which is but an echo of some existing landscape. Despite the realism of the painting neither the man, nor the mountain landscape are portraits.

Let me take these three positions as types for the directionality of our attention towards environment, which are at the same time models for the bodily attitude and presence. And let me overlay the idea of the proposed shift from monocular to stereoscopic optics with the following situations:

Albrecht Dürer illustrates the possibility of the construction of central perspective with this engraving, one of sever in his textbook from 1525. Like a cartographer, the

27. Zeichner des liegenden Weibes, Albrecht Dürer 1538. Underweysung der messung mit dem zirckel un richtscheyt in Linien ebenen und gantzen corporen, durch Albrecht Dürer zusammen gezogen und zu nutz allen kunstliebhabenden
draughtsman peers over a collimator through a grid, his eye as immobile as his object has to be.

250 years later Hans Conrad Escher reproduces the panorama from the top of mount Buet near Mont Blanc in a typical circular construction of that time. It has elements both of map and landscape painting. Like with the black mirror hold over one’s shoulder, the onlooker watches the snow under his feet, however, without his feet and his entire body.

Whereas the frontal encounter with portrayed people is a communicational situation, and the landscape, although not autonomous, part of a narrative, the depth of space in the rückenfigur-pictures is about the construction of meaning in the landscape, be it scientific or aesthetic. I do not contend that the first has logically evolved into the latter: all three attitudes – frontal, lateral, backwards – can be found simultaneously in the lifeworlds and in pictorial representations of different eras.

We wonder, if these three positions of landscapes and of man in landscapes have different times. From the Mary of Leonardo to the lonely walker of Friedrich they reveal the much noted fact how in landscape pictures the narration comes to a halt. Lorrains painting which I have shown earlier is about a story, the judgment of Paris, Liotard’s painting is a riddle about the relationship of the painter and the onlooker to a view that is banalised by its everyday


presence, and Cézanne's Saint-Victoire has no longer anything to do with aims at realism, but is the titanic attempt to capture the pure phenomenon.

Conclusion and outlook

Seen in historical retrospect, posture and bodily presence of the onlooker are neither irrelevant nor accidental. «Landscape» is the workplace of this onlooker, who chooses it in function of his or her bodily posture and mental attitude. This choice is not free, but is realised as the application of techniques and aesthetics available by heritage, transmission of sensibilities and skills.

Landscape is created, abandoned and re-created through the presence of an onlooker. By this doing and re-doing it has the capacity to evolve.

The change of the physiognomy of landscape goes along with the change of the «physiognomy» of the viewer's view. The experience of the «outer» world was a shock for the viewers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as the advent of photography was for those in the nineteenth century. This concerned not only the metaphorical «eye», but the person as a whole who was exploring the world.

The transitions from one «physiognomy» to the next are important steps that are done by the help of devices which are – like black mirrors – created in the logic of the old view, but can act like pioneers of a new view.29 They are accompanied by practices and technologies that were either rendered obsolescent by the evolving new aesthetics (such the black mirrors), or entering in a new relationship with the new aesthetics (such as photography).

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29. Gombrich 1960, 275: «But the evidence of history suggests that all such discoveries [as Constables «daylight»] involve the systematic comparison of past achievements and present motifs, in other words, the tentative projection of works of art into nature, experiments as to how far nature can in fact be seen in such terms.»


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