

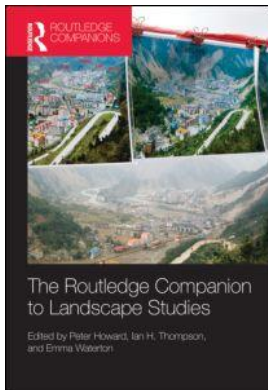
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Publisher: *Routledge*

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## The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies

Peter Howard, Ian Thompson, Emma Waterton

### Picturing landscape

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203096925.ch16>

Harriet Hawkins

**Published online on: 06 Dec 2012**

**How to cite :-** Harriet Hawkins. 06 Dec 2012, *Picturing landscape from: The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies* Routledge

Accessed on: 30 Sep 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203096925.ch16>

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# Picturing landscape

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Landscape has long formed a topic of artistic interest, rising to real prominence in the western art world in the eighteenth century when it was finally accepted as an appropriate subject for ‘academic’ painting, and more recently coming to be a topic of engagement for artists working in a range of different media – from sculpture to performance and land art (Clarke, 1999; Andrews, 1999). Visual arts practices, and especially painting, have long played a crucial role in the development of our ideas and understandings of ‘landscape’.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, to grasp the significance of artistic engagements with landscape it is important to examine how it is they have become enrolled within studies of the social, economic, cultural and political significance of landscape, and its theorizations.

For landscape scholars the value of art lies in the relationship that aesthetic practices develop *between* the ‘really real’, of the physical and cultural landscape, and those things ‘really made up’ – representations, signs, experiences, pictures – gathered together inside our heads (Olwig, 1996; Daniels, 1989). Instead, then, of a separation between the physical material world and our experiences and imaginations of that world – that is, a thoroughly Cartesian divide – studies of landscape art practices point us towards the myriad different ways in which the imaginary and the material are connected. This allows us to explore and appreciate, for example, the ways in which the scenes pictured in landscape painting can have real material consequences for what that landscape looks like, and for those people who live in it (Daniels, 1989; Lowenthal and Prince, 1964).

In order to make sense of such a large field of art practice, this chapter introduces just three examples of the relationship between landscape and art, to: illustrate the scope of the ideas about landscape that art has purchase upon; provide a critical framework for the analysis of landscape art; and indicate future directions for study. Throughout, the discussion will emphasize an expanded field of art and the visual cultures of landscape that encompass everything from large oil paintings, of the sort found in galleries, to quick sketches, maps and photographs, as well as scientific and computer generated visualizations.<sup>2</sup> The first framing of landscape and art relations considered here is an exploration of the visualizations of landscape that are produced by a combination of artist and scientific approaches to landscape in the ‘Tropical Visions’ produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The second focuses on a similar period of painting, but examines how landscape oils of this era have become enrolled in

discussions around the politics of landscape. To end, the third examination of landscape–art relations will focus on future directions, pointing towards, the possibilities that landscape art offers for thinking about embodied and performative acts of *landscaping*, examining how artistic practices can help us to think about our multi-sensory relationships to the landscapes that we inhabit.

Alongside an ongoing preoccupation with politics and ethics, one of the principal coordinates for the analysis of landscape art is vision. Landscape is often understood as something that is looked at, over or upon, with landscape painting associated with a ‘god’s-eye trick’, a seeing subject, and an artist, who engage the landscape from positions of power. Here I want to explore how landscape art opens us up to a range of ways of seeing and of sensing, from the ‘gaze’, to the veiling of unwanted sites, as well as reinforcing landscape as something we experience and engage with through all our senses, not just something we look at.

The three framings of landscape and art presented here are by no means exhaustive, and, despite their approximate chronological ordering, the three sections should resist being read as an historical progression, or indeed a geographical circumscription. For whilst attempts have been made to engage with literatures that explore landscape painting made in countries other than the UK, Europe and the US, the focus of the conceptual engagements with landscape art that form the focus of this discussion have tended towards work originating from these countries. Whether this can be interpreted as indicative of there being something peculiarly English about landscape, as Cosgrove and Daniels (1988) suggest, is something that still warrants further exploration, as recent theorists have, for example found much value in the non-representational traditions of non-western landscape visualizations (Grosz, 2005).

Across the three sections, then, there are similarities and differences to be found: between the ways in which the artists are engaging with landscape as they make their works, between the different ways the art works develop our understandings and experiences of landscape, and, in how it is that art is enrolled within landscape studies. Crucial across these sections are issues of power and politics, together with, in the final section, questions around the place and value for art in relation to an ethical conduct towards our landscapes and environment.

### Empirical, imperial and ideal landscapes

I want to begin with Alexander Von Humboldt’s iconic landscape profile, the *tableau physique*, of the Ecuadorian volcano Mount Chimborazo (1805).<sup>3</sup> This was a period during which the picturing of landscape was closely related to our ways of knowing the world more generally, and thus was thoroughly bound up with the shift from the valorization of knowledge based on teleological or metaphysical expositions (e.g. beliefs in divine powers), to one based in facts derived from close observations and empirical verification. In this context artistic practices were seen as part of the emergence of a scientific gaze, a methodology which demanded close and faithful observation of natural objects, and that would not accept secondhand vision, being there – in the landscape – was key (Dettelbach, 2005; Smith 1988, 1992; Stafford, 1984). In such a role artists were understood as ‘more perfect’ describers, as being able to ‘make drawings and paintings as may be proper to give a more perfect idea ... than can be formed by written descriptions alone’ (cited in Smith, 1988: 15). In the words of the naturalist and draughtsman William Burchell, art was ‘a means of exhibiting nature and conveying information’ (cited in Driver and Martins, 2005: 68).

Humboldt’s profile of Mount Chimborazo, at the time assumed to be the world’s highest mountain, is an interesting form of landscape visualization because it enrolls landscape within a pictorial science that is about conducting analysis and educating the viewer. For

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Humboldt, Chimborazo was of interest as in ascending the mountain it was possible to experience a then unsurpassed range of different environments and plant species. And, as well as marking the climatic bands, Humboldt has also filled in, in a rather jumbled looking manner, the names of different plant species he encountered, and provided data on 13 different scientific variables he had measured, from temperature to pressure, and the height of the snowline, all collected during his journeying (1799–1804) with the naturalist Aime Bonpland (Jackson and Romanowski, 2009). For Humboldt such a scientific appreciation of landscape could only be gained through first-hand experience, and as such, was closely bound into an aesthetic – sensed – appreciation, so he writes of the azure of the sky, the shape of the hills, and the clouds.

The coming together of art and science in these depictions of tropical landscapes was to have an important influence over the subsequent practices of art, but also the practices of science, and in particular earth sciences like geomorphology (Bunkse, 1981; Dettelbach, 2005). If Humboldt's work functions as a form of pictorial science, a second example of landscape visualizations from this period can offer us a rather different view of these same relations between landscape, art and science.

Accompanying Captain Cook on the *Resolution*, when he departed on his second voyage to the South Seas in 1772, was the Admiralty-appointed artist William Hodges. Hodges was a pupil of Richard Wilson, one of the iconic artists of the English Romantic period, and he became known for his large canvases, such as *Tahiti Revisited* (1776).<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the more scientific aesthetic of Humboldt's diagrams, the composition and subject of Hodge's work was dictated by a combination of what he saw at the scene, but also the aesthetic conventions of the time. In *Tahiti Revisited* we see the tropical landscape through the lens of a classically composed landscape, a body of water in the foreground with bathing nudes, ringed by trees and mountains growing hazy in the distance. As Smith notes:

topography ... had always been given a humble place at the bottom of the academic table but here was an attempt to elevate exotic topography to the high places reserved for the ideal landscapes of Claude, the heroic landscapes of Poussin, and the picturesque landscapes of Salvator Rosa.

(Smith, 1988: 6)

But yet such Tropical Visions (Driver and Martins, 2005), which Goethe once termed 'half truths' (Goethe, cited by Dettelbach, 2005: 34), should not be so simply divorced from scientific observations, but were rather to be understood as a blend of the documentary and the aesthetically ideal. Indeed, Hodges worked to capture the light and meteorological phenomena he encountered on his visits to the tropics, his engagements in part shaped by his close working relationship with naturalists, astronomers and meteorologists on board ship.

This was an era from which emerged a 'way of seeing, and knowing, in which the tradition of landscape art was fused with a new spirit of observation informed by the experience of voyaging around the world in the company of naval surveyors, meteorologists and astronomers' (Greppi 2005: 24). Understood as such, landscape is both a site of scientific encounter and an increasingly important artistic subject. Of course the advent of photography, with its associations with realism, was to dramatically refigure the role of painting and sketching in the context of scientific inquiry (Schwartz and Ryan, 2003).

In the case of the picturing of tropical landscapes, it is also important to consider these visions as closely bound up with the politics of the European exploration of the South Seas (Said, 1978). Rather than engaging these tropical landscapes only in terms of the "West" projecting

its sense of cultural difference on the “rest”, we should remain aware of the power and dynamics of these landscape encounters, such that these tropical landscapes are not simply screens onto which things are projected, but are ‘a living space of encounter and exchange’ (Said, 1978; Driver and Martins, 2005, 5).

## A politics of landscape

John Constable’s painting *The Hay Wain* (1821)<sup>5</sup> is perhaps one of the most iconic paintings of the English rural idyll, and is a canonical image in discussions of the politics of the picturesque aesthetic (Bermingham, 1986). This section will investigate how this, and other landscape paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the subsequent growth of photography, have become powerfully enrolled in a set of debates around the politics of landscape.

In contrast to understandings of aesthetics as merely decorative, and art as a rarefied indulgent sphere separate from life, a key theme in the discussion of landscape art has been to understand it as ‘not merely a reflection of, or a distraction from, more pressing social, economic or political issues; [rather] it is often a powerful mode of knowledge and social engagement’ (Daniels, 1993: 8). Landscape ‘does not easily accommodate political notions of power and conflict, indeed it tends to dissolve or conceal them; as a consequence the very idea of landscape has been bought into question’ (Daniels, 1989: 196). And it is the role of landscape art in relation to power, social justice and conflict that is the focus of the next section.

### *Fields of vision*

Taking landscape painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a focus, an interdisciplinary body of research has gained purchase on these landscape images through an exploration of issues of national identity, nature, colonialism, and capitalism (Cosgrove, 1985; Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988; Heffernan, 1991; Mitchell, 1994). Key here has been the movement beyond thinking about art as a scientifically truthful record, or as accurate representation of the view, and instead thinking about landscape art following Marxist Humanists, like John Berger (1972) as a ‘way of seeing’, what Cosgrove describes as a ‘social formation’. Landscape painting provides then ‘a cultural image, a pictorial way of presenting or symbolizing surroundings’ (Cosgrove, 1984).

The rigorous interdisciplinary study of art works’ iconography and iconology sought ‘to probe the meaning in a work of art by setting it in historical context and, in particular, to analyze the ideas implicated in its imagery’ (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988: 2). As Daniels (1993: 8) elaborates ‘running through the pictorial analyses are a series of different discourses and practices ... Not all of them were put there by the artists. They are often activated, or introduced, by the various contexts in which the images are displayed, reproduced, or discussed.’ So, in the case of *The Hay Wain*, it is illuminating to consider how Constable’s biography and the demands on his painting might have led him to depict the landscape a certain way. For example, he was the son of a rural landowner, who acquiesced to demands of city-dwelling patrons for pictures of peaceful rural scenes that promoted a timeless ideal of the beauty and social order of the countryside. Constable’s work, like other paintings, can be understood, then, to have developed a particular way of seeing, which creates an aestheticized vision of landscape that is dangerously duplicitous; appearances were deceptive, hiding, in this case, the ‘realities’ of life in the countryside (Daniels, 1989; Mitchell, 1994). In the case of *The Hay Wain*, the calm tranquillity of the country scene depicted belies the exploitative labour relations, and the rural unrest and extreme poverty that was sweeping the countryside in that era.

It was around these questions of the politics of landscape, and the duplicity or ideological blindness of landscape visions that cultural geographers, art historians and other humanities scholars were to coalesce, to explore; ‘the relation between the organization and appearance of land and representations of it, the relation between perception and power, the spatial dimension of social attitudes and relations, the sense of belonging to or alienation from places’ (Barrell, 1980; Daniels, 1989: 14). This was an attention, not as Mitchell (1994:1) suggests, ‘to just what landscape “is” or “means” but what it does, how it works as a cultural practice’. These ideas have also entered, at times controversially, into major art exhibitions and their accompanying catalogues. Here, these sociological and political frames of reference provide a very different curatorial logic to, for example, the chronological hangs that have long held sway (Rosenthal, 1983; Solkin, 1982).<sup>6</sup>

### *Circulating landscapes: making and shaping*

Crucial to this relationship between landscape and art – whether it be painted rural idylls, explorations of nationality, the industrial and scientific agencies in the work of Joseph Wright of Derby or Turner (Daniels, 1993; Fraser, 1988), or questions around the artistic renderings of the debates around Russian national identity (Bassin, 2000) – is an emphasis upon the potency of these geographical imaginaries. What is crucial here are the connections drawn between the symbolic cultural work these landscape paintings do, and how such aesthetics have material and social effects: shaping landscapes and lives.

To return to *The Hay Wain*; over the centuries this image, and the artist’s other paintings of that same part of Suffolk, have led to that area being named Constable Country, after the painter, and shaped after his paintings. For example his rural imagination has been evoked to prevent housing developments, to drive environmental campaigns as well as, during the First and Second World Wars, to mobilize people to support the war effort, protecting England’s ‘green and pleasant land’. As such then Constable’s landscape vision has direct material, economic and social consequences within the landscape (Daniels, 1993; Rosenthal, 1983).

This power of aesthetics to shape landscapes and lives is reinforced in studies of colonial landscapes, wherein, for example, English landowners remake their plantation landscapes in the contours of the aesthetic conventions of home, from the planting of vegetation, to the placement of property and the undertaking of huge earth-works that quite literally shape these foreign landscapes (Seymour et al., 1995; Seymour et al., 1998). These territories are far from a blank canvas however; they are ripe for moulding in the vision of European homelands, and rather new and interesting visions develop as European aesthetic ideals are negotiated alongside the landscape practices of these areas. Ryan (1998) further unpacks this reciprocal relationship between the modes of landscape depiction, the geographical imagination and Empire in his study exploring developing technologies and the expansion of the British Empire under Queen Victoria.

These different examples, and many others to be found within the literature, attest to the ‘fluency of landscape, not its fixity’ and sensitize us to the multiple and mobile geographies of artworks; the relationships between ‘the initial time and place of the images’ production, the location and the places figured within the works, and the endlessly variable arenas through which they circulate’ (Nash, 1996: 152). Analysis, must, therefore engage in careful studies of the production of these works of art, as well as explore the contexts of their consumption, and, the ways in which they circulate around the world. Writing more recently Daniels (2010) notes how landscape scholars are coming to engage with this intersection of the making of art, and the making and shaping of landscapes in new ways, engaging, often at first hand with the arts practices. In doing so scholars are becoming active participants, and observers, of the political

relations that frame the ways in which landscape art practices can make and shape cultural and physical landscapes.

### Landscape art: spaces of sensation

When Paul Cézanne, the French Post-Impressionist painter, wrote of the role of his *en-plein air* methods in the making of his famous series of Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings,<sup>7</sup> he was writing of a very different mode of artistic landscape encounter than those delineated by Humboldt or Hodges, detailed above. Cézanne's mode of working highlights the 'lived-experience' of landscape and puts emphasis on individual experience of landscape, as opposed to an acceptance of societal norms and universal precepts based on reason or aesthetic ideals (Zaring, 1977).

This final section will explore encounters between artist and landscape that relate to recent landscape scholarship that emphasizes the experience of landscape by 'being in' and 'moving through' it, rather than looking over it (Ingold, 2000; Dewsbury et al., 2002; Rose and Wylie, 2006). Interestingly, such studies of embodied acts of landscaping, despite focusing on the experiential and emotional, have largely turned away from art as an empirical source, preferring instead to report first-hand experience (Wylie, 2005; Lorimer, 2006). Considerations of *both* the production and consumption of landscape art works can, however, add much to thinking about how it is we experience landscapes.

#### *Spaces of sensation: disrupting the 'gaze'*

When thinking about landscape as a 'way of seeing' one of the dominant ideas is the gaze: an idea of sight in which the distance and objectification of a disembodied eye are paramount, forming pictures of an 'explicit topography constituted through surveillance, perspective and detachment' (Crouch and Toogood, 1999: 72). There is a range of studies of art works though – of colonial and masculine landscapes, as well as in explorations of nature and everyday practice – in which we find sight becoming firmly located in the body of the artist as they experience the landscape (Dubow, 2000; Mitchell, 1999). By locating vision within our messy, fleshy bodies we are reminded that we do not just see landscapes, but also hear, smell and feel them. Moreover, as Nash and other feminist scholars make clear, landscapes emotionally engage us, and we should not deny the 'pleasure and emotive force which landscapes may provide' that, as Nash continues, 'disrupt any sense of a pre-formed subject' (Nash, 1996; Pollock, 1996). In other words, admitting the pleasures and desires prompted by experiences of landscape, and of landscape art, is to thoroughly disturb the position of a stable and detached seeing subject, and to open up the 'possibilities of multiple and mobile identifications with and ways of seeing landscape,' and it is also to develop landscape as a more intimate space of encounter (Nash, 1996: 156).

These disruptions of dominant ideas about vision enable us to begin to think about art practices as creating 'spaces of sensation'. Think, for example, of land art-cum-performative works produced by Richard Long who deploys walking as an artistic mode, creating works produced in direct contact with the landscape.<sup>8</sup> Describing *A Line Made by Walking*, Long (1967) talks of getting a train from London Waterloo going South West, getting off in the countryside, finding the nearest field and walking back and forth until the flattened grass caught the sunlight and formed a discernible line. Long takes a photograph and then reboards the train. These photographs present us with an artefact of the walk, but they do not convey Long's thoughts and feelings, nor in subsequent works that document longer walks, the sweaty, arduous and at times painful experience of walking hundreds of miles. Where Long does begin to

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explore the experience of the walk is in the words and poems, lists of observations, feelings or conditions, that often accompany the photographs; it is through these words that we are reminded of the experience of being in and moving through those landscapes.

In a rather different vein we can think of abstract landscape painting, by, for example, Peter Lanyon,<sup>9</sup> which has provided a valuable way for a number of landscape scholars to explore the more-than-visual, more-than-representational knowledges at work outside of the symbolic orders and ‘views’ of landscape (Crouch and Toogood, 1999; Causey, 2006). In this case Lanyon’s expressive paintwork is suggestive of a ‘tactile knowledge’ (e.g. the sound of the sea, the feel of the wind on the side of your face) of the world rather than an ‘explicit topography’. This is a relationship between body and world that phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1968) describes as being ‘caught in the fabric of the world’, painting is not then about an overseeing, but rather is about the centralization of perceptions, movements and memories; painter and painting are *in* and *of* the landscape. This is to direct us towards how, in making ‘sense’ of landscape, the immediacy of smell, touch, and hearing must also be situated in the context of past experience and memories.

### Conclusion: an ethics and politics of landscape art?

In this discussion of three cuts into the relationship between landscape and art, a series of key words have come up time and again; vision, the body, the senses and of course politics. By way of a brief conclusion, I want to think about the potential of landscape art in linking together questions around the embodied experiences of landscape and politics. For some scholars the focus on the self that first person accounts of landscape experience develop is apolitical (Sidaway, 2009), for others, however, these intimate experiences between bodies, landscapes and the environment have much potential with regard to building an environmental ethics (Hinchliffe, 2002). An interesting future direction might be to explore the potential of landscape art to harness and engage audiences with such an embodied ethics of landscape, and hence the capacity for artistically produced experiences of landscape to ‘contribute to a shift in [environmental] consciousness’ (Miles, 2010: 19; Hawkins et al., 2011; Boetzkes, 2010).

### Notes

- 1 It is worth noting that the ‘visual arts’ referred to here moves beyond paintings, drawings and sketches to include sculpture, performance and installation works, as well as graphic arts and botanical illustration.
- 2 I take the term ‘expanded field’ from the work of art theorist Rosalind Krauss. See also Hawkins 2010.
- 3 Humboldt’s tableau can be seen at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Humboldt1805-chimborazo.jpg> (accessed 10 May 2012).
- 4 *Tahiti Revisited* can be seen at <http://nmm.ac.uk/collections/explore/object.cfm?ID=BHC2396> (accessed 10 May 2012).
- 5 Constable’s *The Hay Wain*: <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/john-constable-the-hay-wain> (accessed 10 May 2012).
- 6 These emerging sociological and thematic frames of reference for art practices form a strikingly different exhibitionary strategy to the chronological hang that has long dominated museological practices.
- 7 Examples from Paul Cézanne’s Mont Sainte-Victoire series can be seen at <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/29.100.64> (accessed 10 May 2012).
- 8 Long’s *A Line Made by Walking* can be seen at <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=8971> (accessed 10 May 2012).
- 9 Examples of Lanyon’s work can be seen at <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=99999961&workid=20168&searchid=12364> (accessed 16 January 2011).



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