

*Paper prepared for the
7th Euroacademia International Conference
Europe Inside-Out: Europe and Europeaness Exposed to Plural
Observers*

Porto, 28 – 29 April 2017

*This paper is a draft
Please do not cite or circulate*

Sense of Place

European Photographic surveys and man-altered landscapes

Chiara Salari, University Paris Diderot – Paris 7 / Roma 3 University

Abstract

This paper will consider landscape as a medium for the creation of cultural, social or national identities, and photography as a critical practice which has the power, through representation, of reaffirming or challenging our perceptions and “sense of place” (our roots and routes).

In 1975 the American exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* shows vernacular landscapes (common, ordinary, suburban, industrial, commercial...) and expresses the idea of objectivity and stylistic anonymity that will be inherited by many European projects, like the Italian *Journey to Italy* and the French *DATAR Mission*, which stands as a reference for a proliferation of surveys in the 90s (the French/English Cross Channel Photographic Mission, the Vinex Photo Project in Holland, Archivio dello spazio in Italy, EKODOK 90 in Sweden, Fotografie Und Gedachtnis in Germany...).

In the year 2000 the European Landscape Convention expresses an equality principle for landscape as heritage (natural, rural, urban and suburban; remarkable as well as ordinary or degraded), inviting to integrate it in public politics and to put in place multidisciplinary projects.

The technique of re-photography is used for example by the French landscape photographic observatories to gather information for territory management and awareness, but also by the artistic project « Paysages usagés », part of the collective photographic survey “France(s) territoire liquide” (2008-2012), which questions the relation between national identity and landscape in the 21st century, as well as the supposed new fluidity of territories, individuals and images.

I will take as a starting point some European surveys of the 80s-90s to focus on this French project and on a similar kaleidoscopic vision provided in Italy by the public surveys Atlante 003 and 007 (*Risk landscape, portrait of a changing Italy*), in order to see how urban and suburban transformations are redefining European identities in the contemporary “glocal” context.

Key Words

Photography, Landscape, Europe, USA, Identities

This communication concerns the close connection between photography and landscape in contemporary practices of documentation and planning of territories. I intend to take as a starting point some European photographic projects of the 80s to focus on a new social and political orientation in landscape photography after the European Landscape Convention of the year 2000, when environmental debates lead at the same time to reflections on our sense of place.

Our “Sense of place” is inextricably linked with our sense of identity (our roots and routes), and is also the title of the 2012 exhibition curated by Liz Wells at the Bozar in Bruxelles (subtitle European Landscape Photography), as part of the “Summer of Photography”, an international biennale exploring the cultural exchange between the European member states and places in a global context.

The exhibition simultaneously focused on similarities and differences across Europe, both in the landscapes and in the attitude of people towards those landscapes, in line with the motto of the European Union “in varietate Concordia” (united in diversity), rethinking about the idea of national or regional landscapes in “glocal” dynamics, and about our relationship with the environment while we increasingly acknowledge the ecological impact and implications of technological developments.

We live in fact in the Anthropocene, or human age or new climatic regime, all terms which express a change of scale concerning the effects of our actions on the earth system (not only on landscapes and ecosystems).

As W.J.T. Mitchell has suggested (in “landscape and power”) landscape is most usefully considered as an action or verb (to landscape) rather than a pure artistic genre, and also as a medium for the creation of cultural, social or national identities, better seen as processes rather than fixed entities. So the focus is not just on what landscape is or means but also what it does, on us and on the environment (maybe also on what it asks or wants, if we want to quote Mitchell’s more recent book “what do pictures want”).

At the same time landscape photography is considered as an interventionist and critical practice concerning issues of land, representation and idealization, which has the power of reaffirming or challenging perceptions of space and place (here I quote again Wells and his book “Land Matters. Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity”). But landscape photography can also orient territory planning practices: here the stress is on the photographic medium documentary power and its effects on the transformation of spaces, in the conviction that in order “to landscape” a territory we should first learn to see it (there is a link here between perceptions of places and transformations of territories).

My intervention aims to investigate the relations between European identities, landscape photographic representations and environmental issues, as in the second half of the 20th century the consequences of urbanization and suburbanization in particular push us to rethink the relationships between place and identity, territory and society, photography and urbanism (and to redefine our cultural, social or national identities along with the transformations of spaces and our changing senses of places).

Indeed, I am going to start by broadening the discourse to the United States and to the second half of the 19th century, when photographic surveys supported national identities: for example the French Mission Héliographique and the Italian Alinari campaigns helped to create photographic archives as part of a collective national memory, and the explorations of the American West contributed to show the wilderness of the landscape as a separated identity from Europe and its cultural richness. We can remark that, on the opposite, in the 20th century and especially after World War II cultural identities are redefined through influences in landscape practices between Europe and the United States (in photography but also in cinema as we will see).

In 1975, the American exhibition “New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape” (at the George Eastman House in Rochester) gathered some photographers who abandoned the idea of a natural landscape (beautiful, picturesque or sublime) for an attention to the everyday, ordinary and common places (urban and residential suburbs, industrial sites, agglomerations, commercial zones).

Actually not many saw it at the time but the exhibition has been revisited in the years 2009-2011 as itinerant (it also came to Europe), and stands as an example of an event that hasn’t been important in itself but for the cultural meaning and the legacy developed, as it is now considered to have marked a “paradigm change” in landscape photography.

The title suggests a typology of landscapes (man-altered), but also the idea of objectivity and stylistic anonymity (topographics) that can be linked to the Düsseldorf school (Bernd and Hilla Bechers were the only European photographers, presenting their typological approach on industrial architecture and showing the relation between utility and form through an 8x10 inch view camera). This new subjects and approaches are inserted (by the second exhibition) in the more general context of a cultural, economic and environmental crisis (the end of the American dream after the Vietnam War), offering a more political vision which seems to link citizenship, mass culture and environment (rather than an esthetic approach to nature and wilderness as it was in the work of Ansel Adams in particular and in the sierra club exhibit format series of the 1950s-1960s).

Some of these American photographers declared themselves deeply influenced by some movies of the Italian “post-neorealism” and the French “new wave” of the 60s and 70s, whose settings expressed in their turn the “Americanization” of the European landscape (we are talking about the Italian economic boom and the French “société de loisir”). In particular Lewis Baltz was marked by Michelangelo Antonioni’s “Deserto Rosso” (its industrial landscape for its series “The New Industrial Parks”) and “L’Eclisse” (explicitly quoted in its work “total eclipse”), while the suburban landscapes of Jean-Luc Godard’s films (“Alphaville” and “Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle”) had a direct impact on some of Robert Adams’ series (like “The New West”).

The main point here is in the link between a new modern condition (a human condition related to a certain loss of a territorial identity), new landscapes and new forms of representation which privilege a kind of detachment, the observation rather than the action, the shift from a snapshot aesthetic to one of duration (the “decisive moment” Henri Cartier-Bresson style for an “in-between moment” Robert Frank style) that in cinema could correspond to the shift from the image-movement to the image-time (if we want to quote Gilles Deleuze). Therefore, we are not seeing a moment in the flow of time but time at work, often through an indefinite point of view and the use of wide-angle lens (a less situated perspective giving the idea of being nowhere or everywhere).

We saw the influence of some European cinematographic approaches on some American photographic practices, but we have to remember that in the second post war period the great tradition of the American documentary photography was already appropriated by a certain European cinema (in particular in Italy, where for example Walker Evans’ book “American Photographs” had an important role in the development of a neorealist esthetic and ethic, along with the French cinema of the 30s).

In their turn, the New Topographics approaches influenced many European photographers, like those of the “Italian New Wave” of the Eighties, who offered a kind of “archeology of the gaze” on ordinary, marginal and transitory places. In the collective project “Journey to Italy” for example the objective was to renovate the perception and the experience of places through photography, making the correspondence between a precarious landscape and a modest tone. At the same time the purpose was to counter the classical image of the “Bel Paese”, offering an iconography of Italy far and even opposite to the grand tour icons provided for example by the Alinari views (and then by the fascist rhetoric and by postcards), which catalogued architectural, monumental and artistic heritage, creating real “photographic places” (like Capri, but also the Vesuvius, the Coliseum in Rome and San Marco square in Venice).

The New Topographics approach on the so-called vernacular landscapes is also inherited by some European surveys, like the French DATAR Mission, in which took part photographers from different nationalities, providing different cultural viewpoints (for example the Italian Gabriele Basilico, who participated in Journey to Italy; and the

Americans Baltz and Frank Gholke, who took part in the new topographics). This mission used photography to document a sort of “state of the places and powers” (in a cultural and historical analysis of the territories) and to provide at the same time an artistic point of view (a sensible expression) to objective analysis which supported planning decisions, for example aerial views (therefore a human perspective).

Considering the transformations of territories as traces of changes in ways of life, the DATAR mission also questioned on photography institutionalization, on its role in society and its function as a material for land or urban planning, and became a reference for a proliferation of public surveys in the 90s in different European countries: for example in Italy those of Linea di Confine (on the relation between local and regional characters and the impact of global economic processes on the territory) and of Archivio dello spazio in Italy (a ten years project in the province of Milano by 58 photographers, about the memory and identity of suburban and post-industrial landscapes).

But also EKODOK 90 in Sweden (on the relation man-nature), Fotografie Und Gedachtnis in Germany (an homage to history and cultural landscapes), Documenta natura in Switzerland, and 04°05° mission photographique à Bruxelles.

Here I will touch upon the French/English Mission Transmanche/Cross Channel Photographic Mission, on the construction of the channel tunnel, its impact on the environment and the threat on national identities it represented; and on the Vinex Photo Project in Holland, on photography as material for urban or suburban planning processes, and the cooperation between photographers, architects and town planners. The focus is on photography’s power to reach a broader audience and its contribution to the process of shaping opinion about the experience and use of the landscape and the environment.

There are many studies produced recently on these photographic experiences at the end of the century, which push us to reflect on heritages and influences, but also on divergences and turns in more contemporary practices: not only territories and landscapes have changed, but the role and place of photography in the art world and in the institutions have changed too.

In the year 2000 the European Landscape Convention considers the landscape as cultural and natural heritage (contributing to consolidation of the European identity), and expresses an equality principle among natural, rural, urban and suburban spaces (remarkable as well as ordinary or degraded landscapes). Realizing the acceleration of the territories transformation, the convention invites to integrate the landscape in land planning public politics and to put in place collective, multidisciplinary and participatory projects.

Photography is not only considered as an instrument of diagnostic but also of prefiguration, and has a new place in the dialogue between territory, landscape and project: it can serve the knowledge but also implement the resources for a project on the territory.

The technique of re-photography is used for example by the Flemish project “Recollecting Landscapes”, which comprises of four sets of photographs, each taken from the same location since the beginning of the 20th century. Starting with photographs produced by a botanist (Jan Massart) and commissioned by the National Botanical Garden and the Ministry of Agriculture in 1904, the 1980 set of photographs (by Georges Charlier) lead to the creation of an exhibition and a book (Landscapes in Flanders then and now: from Green Poverty to Grey Abundance), while the third set was taken (by Jan Kempenaeres) at the request of the Flemish Architectural Institute in cooperation with Labo S, the urbanism laboratory of Ghent University in 2004, and in 2014 photographer Michiel De Cleene made a fourth image, this time commissioned by the Province of West Flanders and Labo S.

The present website, the result of the intensive co-operation between Ghent University Library and the Architecture and Urban Planning Department, offers an archive set up as both an interpretive instrument and as a didactic tool, available to scholars and the general public. Moving from the study of botany and urban planning to a more general understanding of the scenic transformations of the landscape caused by such factors as residential expansion, changes in agriculture and nature, infrastructure networks, the project questions at the same time the changes in the everyday way of life and the idea of cultural or national identity as related to living and changing places.

This technique, based on relocating the vantage points in order to see the changes in landscapes over time, was used by scientists since the 19th century, but can be considered to have been introduced in the history of art photography by the American Re-photographic survey projects “Second View” and “Third View” (1984; 2004), undertaken by a group of people with different backgrounds and interests in photographic history, conceptual art and physical geography.

It is nowadays used by artists, amateurs and institutions alike, for example by the French landscape photographic observatories (we have the national, but also local and popular ones) to gather information for territory management and awareness. This method is questioned by the artistic project « Paysages usagés », which tries to switch from the illustration of already well known issues to analysis propositions, calling on a committee of geographers, landscape designers and land planners, and inviting the public to “adopt” a landscape (namely to ensure the re-photography for 10 years). As you can see in these postcards the project documents landscapes between nature and city proposing an alternative hike (represented by the white lines).

This project is part of the collective photographic survey “France(s) territoire liquide” (2008-2012), that gives a kaleidoscopic vision of the changing territory, questioning the relation between national identity and landscape in the 21st century. Here we can make a comparison with the DATAR Mission we already mentioned: while this project of

the Eighties aimed to “recreate a landscape culture” – facing the aesthetic and philosophic thesis of a “landscape death”, appearing at the time fragmented, exploded and in identity crisis – the photographers of “France(s) territoire liquide” reflect on the supposed new fluidity of territories, individuals and images in the digital age, showing at the same time how, now that photography is an integral part of the art world, personal projects often arrive before the institutional request (the survey starts as an independent project and finds only later an artistic curator).

A similar multiple vision is provided in Italy by the public surveys Atlante 003 (on a contemporary and unusual belpaese) and 007 (titled “risk landscape, portrait of a changing Italy”, it presents 5 risks including the building boom), both commissioned by the DARC (General Direction for Architecture and Contemporary Art). These public commissions offer a new field of work for affirmed and young photographers, aiming to express the relation between the historic and artistic heritage and the territory, and constituting at the same time the collections of the newborn MAXXI (National Museum for the Arts of the XXI Century).

While these projects offer a kaleidoscopic vision on the national territory, expressed also by the idea of “atlas”, a more focused approach on specific territories and researches is provided by some surveys of “Linea di confine per la fotografia contemporanea” (a cultural association founded by public institutions), remarkable for her attention to local transformations, her international overture and her editorial line). Here too we can make a comparison with some projects of the Eighties like the already mentioned “Journey to Italy”. While this collective journey was born in an artistic and editorial context, and as a collection a posteriori of photographs taken on the totality of the Italian territory, the public and collective survey “TAV Bologna – Milano. Photography, research and territory (2003-2009)” for example focuses on a high-speed railway line construction project, showing its consequences on the territory and its identity by Italian, European and American photographers.

If we think back to the idea of “sense of place” as a sense of belonging, to the fact that settlement was usually determined by transport possibilities, and to the important role the railway development had in the unification of Italy, this project questions the idea of regional or local identities not only in relation to a national dimension, but also in the context of European and global networks and dynamics, providing at the same time some foreign visions on an Italian landscape in transformation.

As a generalized mobility alters the identities and memories of the places, personal journeys and narratives contribute to the creation of individual and collective imaginaries, and to the composition of a collective identity that is reflected less in “the mirror of the Grand Tour” (if we want to quote Cesare De Seta) than through its broken pieces.

Short bio-note

I am a 2nd year PhD candidate at the LARCA (Research Laboratory on English and American Cultures) at the University Paris Diderot – Paris 7 in France (PhD School “language, literature, and image: civilization and human sciences”), and I have a co-tutelle with Roma 3 University in Italy (PhD program “Contemporary city landscapes. Politics, technics, and visual studies”, architecture department), where I previously obtained a Bachelor’s degree in “Visual and performing arts” and a Master’s degree in “Cinema, television and multimedia production”, before undertaking the Erasmus Mundus Master “Crossways in cultural narratives” between Canada (Guelph, Ontario) and South of France (Perpignan).

As to my working experience I did some internships in the audiovisual field in Italy and France (editing and post-production, film cataloguing and programming) and I was project advisor for the multimedia platform “Mémoire filmique du Sud” at the Cinémathèque Euro-Régionale Institut Jean Vigo in Perpignan, before being a volunteer for the EVStart paying forward project in Satu Mare, Romania (a 6 months’ European voluntary service on the organization of cultural events).

I am currently working on a thesis on “Contemporary practices of landscape photography in a cross-cultural European/North American perspective”, focusing for the moment on Italy and France (and on the American West and South-West), and investigating on the hybridization of artistic, institutional, and amateur images in the context of the digital and web turns.