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# Meditations on the Landscape and the LiLa Project

This is not a typical anthropological piece of writing. Limited by the amount of time spent in the field, and inspired by the indeterminate and liminal disposition of art, I decided to write it in a less structured manner. Thus it is a meditation. It combines the time spent and reflections had in the field with scholarly writings about the landscape. In specific, it discusses the difficulty of defining the landscape and the capacity with which artistic practices can help overcome – or, work with – these difficulties. Intermingled in these discussions several philosophers are turned to in order to shed light on matters that are often abstract and theoretical. The process of writing this meditation was an enlightening experience that began with the somewhat too ambitious question: what is the landscape? It is also against this question, which serves as the red thread all through the meditation, that other related topics are discussed. The fieldwork from which this meditation emanates was carried out for ten days in late May 2018 in the Komi Republic of Russia. It was organized by the Living in Landscape (LiLa) project group, which involved collaboration between four universities: University of Lapland, Uppsala University, Syktyvkar State University and Tromsø University. Together this research group spent five days in Syktyvkar and five days in the rural village Kozlovka.

## COMING TO TERMS

Many have written before me trying to construct or deconstruct the landscape. And many have surely asked themselves the same question as I did those wearying yet exciting days in Kozlovka. I was – despite living in the landscape, as it were – lost there and then; I did not know what to think, feel, or where to look. Perhaps this was the infamous devil's work of Cartesian dualism. Then again, perhaps this was merely I embedded in a landscape that was not mine but someone else's. All the same, this landscape, whatever it is and whatever it is not, was at the same time familiar and strange to me: familiar because it was part of the Northern imaginary in which I had been steeped; strange because I had never experienced it before.

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A common mistake when deconstructing concepts of this kind is that their primary function, as abstract concepts, are often overlooked. Tim Ingold importantly noted that what characterizes the landscape is temporality. And while he emphasizes its change over time – ‘an enduring record of and testimony to the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it’ (1993, 152) – we must not disregard our academic pursuits, the fixation to define, as co actors in that change too. Werner Bigell and Cheng Chang mentioned this continual objectification though in a different context: “Projection can lead to [a] transformation of landscape...” (2014, 87, my emphasis). Thus, and as a basis for subsequent analyses, any definition of the landscape will but partake in its historical record of incessant objectification. This is an inescapable truism about us as dwellers in a world that is never true to what it once was, or to what we now define it as. Allow me to alter a famous assertion made by Ingold: even definitions of the landscape flow and researchers have to follow them.

With the above in mind: “Landscape is more than a projection unto nature or the environment: it is a multivalent frame – territorial, political, aesthetic, etc. – determining how the environment is perceived and shaped” (Bigell & Chang 2014, 86), my emphasis). Ingold would too agree with this statement albeit with particular reference to Cartesian dualism, which is made manifest when attempting to define the landscape in sole visual terms. Indeed, the landscape demands attention not only to its spatial and/or aesthetic aspects but so too its platial. While Ingold, in his pursuit to offer a general, true and meaningful definition, would not agree that the landscape is in need of a spatial referent – “You can ask of land, as of weight, how much there is, but not what it is like” (1993, 154) – it is still necessary to acknowledge that the landscape is and has been a political instrument, which thus demands attention to spatial referents such as territory and land (Bigell & Chang 2014, 87 & 88). At least if we are to follow the definitional flows that have through centuries formed what, even if invariably, constitutes the landscape today.

## ARTISTIC MEANS AND ENDS

Insofar as the landscape is that which have been dwelled in it is something that is performed. We too dwelled – or performed – the landscape in Kozlovka. At least for me, the landscape had never felt so prevalent and present as when attempting to directly engage with it, even though that engagement was confused and disjointed. What is central here is not whether we did or did not engage with the landscape. The central question is whose landscape we performed and by what means. For it would be a mistake to imagine the past specific to this landscape being open to my remembrance. Indeed, it seems even more mistaken to refer to that landscape as this landscape. A concoction of theirs and mine – distinctly my idea thereof – that landscape effectively escaped me. Did we then bring into being that which we wanted to research? This seems unavoidably so. The spatial arena might have been at our disposal but the platial not so much – especially if we consider how little time we spent in Kozlovka and other neighbouring villages. An obstacle difficult to overcome, it is here that the at times unfruitful yet natural desire for concrete and rigid definitions can seek reconciliation with artistic practices in which open-ended interpretation is both the means and the end (as opposed to merely the means). Thus, while it is difficult to derive necessary truths about the landscape in Kozlovka, it is possible to say

something about our making of it, as dwellers in it; and perhaps most ideally so by means of artistic practices.

In environmental art the communicative, representative, and communal aspects serve as its most central tenets (Jokela 2008). Also called place-specific (platial) art, the emphasis is placed on (ethical) representation; most generally, the culture and history tied to the place, such as that of a particular landscape. As it turned out, the LiLa research group featured environmental artists whose practical knowledge and experience came to serve as inspiration and guidance throughout the project. Informatively, it was at one point even declared how similar our research methods were, as anthropologists and environmental artists alike. To reiterate, what distinguished us as researchers was not necessarily the means but rather the ends with and through which we worked.

Between in a landscape that was both strange and familiar to me I resolved to write poems. We all took pictures. Some made drawings. Classes were conducted in Kozlovka where it was taught how to dye using indigenous plants; we learned how to make traditional Komi dolls, and also how to make clay sculptures with local clay. In addition, there was a willow artwork that was constructed in the landscape using various – though primarily willow – materials found therein. Discussions took place between students and teachers alike about how best to communicate, using both art and more traditional academic work, what we had experienced in Kozlovka; that is, to avoid imposing too much of our own narrative and context: without making them the dwellers in our landscape. Artistic practices proved to be constructive for us to represent and come to terms with the landscape in Kozlovka in a non-determinate fashion. Together these different art projects, including many others, were featured in a public exhibition at Syktyvkar State University.

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I wrote this poem (p. 61) for Dmitry whom together with his wife Irina hosted us in Kozlovka. I do not usually share my poems, as I am not a professional poet, but thought – inspired by the ethos of environmental art – that it was due time to give something back directly to those one meet and become familiar with during fieldwork. Which the chapter title revealed, the poem is about the landscape in Kozlovka. Timo Jokela (2008: 9) noted, and which the poem is meant to reflect, that the idea of the ‘wanderer, traveller or artist seeking a grand, sublime natural experience’ relates back to a particular tradition of thought; in specific to 18th, 19th and 20th century German and American (environmental) romanticism. These ideas are still very prevalent today (Cruikshank 2005; Liechty 2017) and influence the so-called romantic tourist gaze and its almost obsessive like desire for what are considered authentic experiences. Indeed, the conception and commercialization of the North play along with these ideas (Jokela 2008, 8-9). In short, the non-authentic experience of nature and culture is one that is noticeably mediated and tinkered with – that which can be experienced as if staged.

The above can arguably be related to Dmitry and his desire for Kozlovka to be turned into a non-commercial cultural heritage museum. For, as Hannah Arendt (1998) put it, consumption destroys everything. In addition, the aforementioned tradition of thought has apparent theosophical (Western esoteric) undertones, which pertains to the idea that modernity has disenchanting the world; and as a result, that humans have been alienated from their true nature – that we have lost our spiritual con-

## A POEM ABOUT THE LANDSCAPE IN KOZLOVKA

*wet grass and wind  
traversing this place  
conflicting thoughts  
an ephemeral world  
red cheeks and tea  
this foolish wanderer*

*seeing himself  
in the river of Vym  
the beginning and end  
a world without frame  
time stands still  
this foolish wanderer*

*songs echo  
in a landscape  
engulfed by the night  
warm fires  
worlds they create  
this foolish wanderer*

*how strange it is  
this world he sees  
mirroring himself  
in the river of Vym  
nowhere to be found  
this foolish wanderer*

nection with the world. This loss of meaning is then projected onto seemingly less modern places in which said past and more meaningful and authentic ways of being can be reclaimed and/or reunited with. Historically this conserved past has been related to places like Tibet and Nepal (Liechty 2017) but seems to now be projected onto 'the North' as well. And if the landscape represents – or is – 'an enduring record of and testimony to the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it', as Ingold suggests, then such renders the landscape into an ideal means and platform for such ideas to transpire.

Jokela moreover notes: "The collectivism of images of the landscape that art has created programs the way in which we look at the environment and also ideologises [sic] this perspective..." (2008, 8). This takes us back to the beginning of this meditation where it was argued that the definitional flows of the landscape is something one must follow – owing to the temporality of landscape. The poem, insofar as it is indefinite, reveals this riddle that is the landscape – its fleetingness – but makes no attempt at explaining it. And lest we not also acknowledge that this supposed riddle is also situational and temporal. For it reflects not only the landscape as such but also particular historical ideas associated with it. As Walter Benjamin writes with reference to a work of art: "His creation is by no means all of a piece; it is composed of many separate performances" (1999, 223). With all this in mind, I would like to describe this poem, and all other art projects undertaken by the LiLa project, regarding the landscape in Kozlovka, as just that: complex and entangled landscape performances.

## CONCLUSION

We struggle as designers – as Homo Faber – to make order out of disorder in the (temporality of the) world, and in our case the landscape. Søren Kierkegaard noted that philosophy concerns too much about what is and why it is instead of asking why we ask those questions to begin with. It seems that the order we seek is not due to disorder in the world as such but rather due to the disorder caused by our own coming to terms with it. As was asserted previously, artistic practices enable for this disorder to remain insofar as its methodological ends are open-ended. Therefore, art allows for the riddle to remain a riddle – for it is the riddle alone that stirs us. This can be extended to mean that there is a 'spiritual' element to art that resonates with something fundamental to us. Dmitry told us that Kozlovka moved him spiritually and that its landscape represented a portal through time – a timeless reference point to the experiences of past dwellers. He told us that he wanted others to experience what he and those before him had experienced, as I wanted him to experience what I had experienced through the poem – lost and confused in his landscape. When given the poem Dmitry told me that he too saw himself in this foolish wanderer. And with this meditation in mind I can more clearly see myself in his attachment to that landscape: as a fellow dweller alongside him. While the question about what the landscape is will forever escape me, by virtue of its temporality, that is neither good nor bad, but merely what is. And what the landscape is – and whatever it might turn out to be – denotes both platial and spatial elements. Thus, the landscape is at the same time yours and mine – theirs and ours – inside and outside. And perhaps art is the most ideal means with which to come to terms with the landscape and its definitional and conceptual fleetingness, owing to this dualism.

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