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Huomautus taitosta: Alkuperäisen julkaisun vaakasuuntaiset sivut on luettavuuden parantamiseksi jaettu tässä väitöskirjassa kahdelle peräkkäiselle B5-sivulle. Sisältöä ei ole muutettu.

Explaining “Real” in Landscape Photography

Keywords or phrases: art-based education, photography, visual arts

Introduction



Esa Pekka **ISOMURSU**

Esa Pekka Isomursu is a doctoral student at University of Lapland, Faculty of Art and Design, NACER Research Group, and Head of Master's Degree Programmes at Oulu University of Applied Sciences, School of Media and Performing Arts. He is also a professional photographer, specializing in Northern nature. esisomur@ulapland.fi

When I teach Interpretation of Visual Media to bachelor students, nature photographs inspire long discussions about their authenticity. The question about what makes photographs “real” may seem trivial, but it becomes very complex when looked at in more detail. This has led me to search for new ways to extend the students’ understanding of the topic.

Photojournalism and nature photography are considered “the last fortresses of the authentic image.” However, their walls are, if not falling, then at least cracking. In nature photography, using photo hides, feeding wild animals, and organizing the environment to be visually more appealing have become standard practices. Reflectors, even artificial light, may be used to set the mood. New technology enables creation of images that do record the actual nature but in ways that human eye cannot capture. On Instagram, there are images so heavily processed that they no longer describe reality. They are simulacra, representations, or copies where the original no longer exists, as described by Baudrillard (1981).

While Figure 1 is an authentic photograph of the Milky Way and airglow, the human eye cannot catch them with such detail. Similarly, wide angle lenses can “condense” an aurora storm that covers the whole sky into one image, and sensors capture colours better than the naked eye (Figure 2).

In my landscape photography I have extended the concept of “real” even further by depicting elements of our surroundings that are directly unobservable to our limited human perception. I want to relate to the viewer tacit aspects of reality that are hard, even impossible to express in a precise, textual manner. This topic is also part of my ongoing doctoral thesis work.

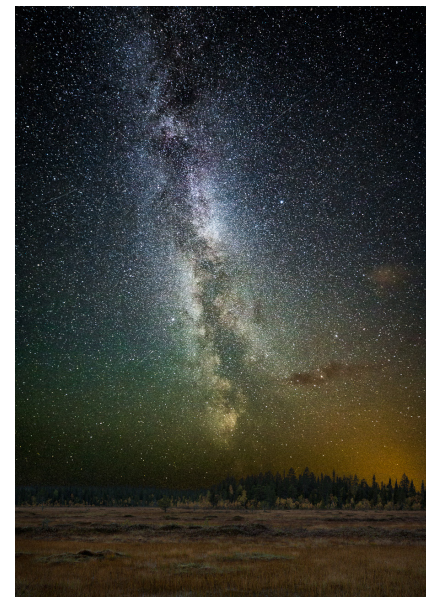


Figure 1
Airglow and The Milky Way at Syöte National Park.
Photo: Esa Pekka Isomursu, 2015.



Figure 2
Rare-colored aurora storm.
Photo: Esa Pekka Isomursu, 2015.

Extending the Real

It is often pointed out how a photograph always has a direct physical connection to reality because it is formed when light from the photographed object draws an image on film or a camera sensor. However, as Shusterman (2012) points out, not much attention has been given to photography as a physical act. He argues that we identify photographic art so one-sidedly with the end products, i.e., the photographs themselves, that it occludes the aesthetics arising from the somatic, performative process of taking the photograph – or viewing it.

The extent of the physical process of making a photograph is obscured by the fact that pressing the shutter button to expose an image requires no special skills. However, a complex performative process occurs before the shutter release. It includes all the actions that are necessary for achieving the desired photographic image. This includes composing the shot in one's mind, selecting the lense and exposure values, moving to the right position, and waiting for the right moment. In a wider sense, it includes everything that the photographer has done previously to gain the skills s/he has.

One aspect of this physical process is being in nature and observing it when taking the photograph. I want to make students think about how, and to what extent, a nature photograph can convey to the viewer the physical experience of being in nature. A photograph can, of course, show what the photographer saw. But is there more to this? Seeing a direct photographic image of the scenery does not alone convey much of the bodily experience.

Consider Magritte's painting *Voice of Space* (<https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/2593>) where huge spherical bells float in the sky, above a Renaissance style landscape. By adding an unnatural element to the landscape, Magritte can make the viewers hear the hum of the wind in their mind and physically transfer them to a moor on a windy summer day.

Another way to relate fragments of the physical experience to the viewer could be the movement of either the photographer, the camera, or the subject while taking the photograph. Consider the two photographs from Lofoten (Figures 3-4). In them, I have used intentional camera movement to convey the prevailing mood and weather conditions better than in a direct presentation of the landscape.



Figure 3
Winter seas at Lofoten.
Photo: Esa Pekka Isomursu, 2018.

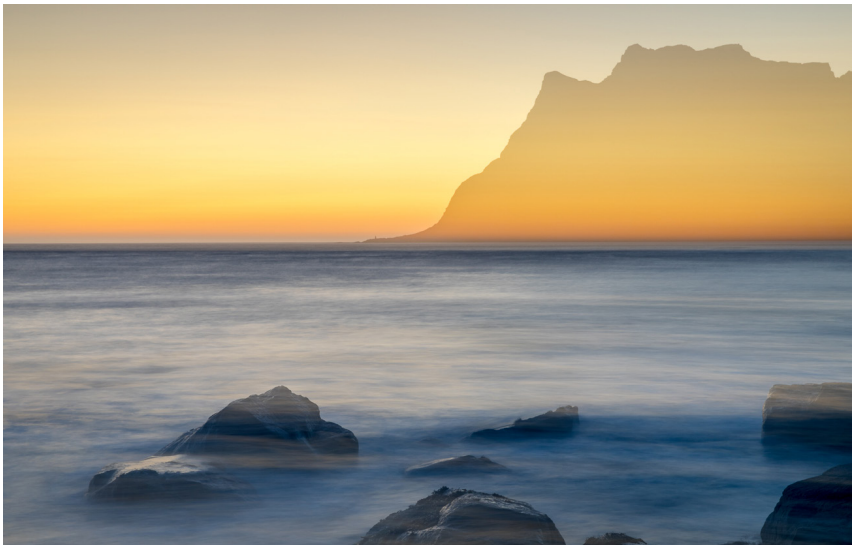


Figure 4
Summer night at Lofoten.
Photo: Esa Pekka Isomursu, 2019.

One inspiration to my work on "Extended Real" is photographer Mikko Silvola. He has recorded echolocation ultrasounds of bats and lowered the frequency to make them audible to humans (Figures 5-6). Thus, a part of reality that normally is not observable to humans is made observable.

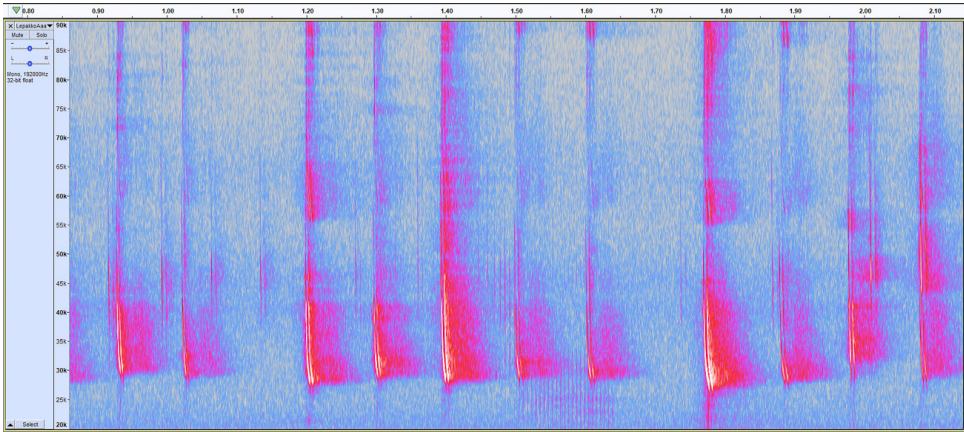


Figure 5
Spectrogram of bat echolocation.
Photo: Mikko Silvola, 2020.



Figure 6
Bat preying on insects.
Photo: Mikko Silvola, 2020.

Modern cameras can create "unreal reality," e.g., by seeing in the dark or by showing a different perspective (focal length). This fact along with images from such artists as Magritte and Silvola have inspired me to think how else we can extend the experienced reality in photographs.

One new dimension would be to break the visible light into its components. In a double exposure of a foggy day, I have combined a natural image with the same view through a spectroscope (Figures 7-8). In the spirit of traditional nature photography, I have created the image on site, directly on camera, and done only basic image editing. The grey landscape is actually full of colour, we just do not sense it. From the picture, one can even recognize Fraunhofer lines, a set of absorption lines in the optical spectrum of the sun.



Figure 7
Double exposure of a foggy landscape.
Photo: Esa Pekka Isomursu, 2021.



Figure 8
Spectroscope connected to a SLR camera.
Photo: Esa Pekka Isomursu, 2021.

Spectroscopic images can also reveal an interesting contrast between natural and man-made landscapes. In a nocturnal cityscape, bright narrow emission lines of artificial light stand out (Figure 9).



Figure 9
Double exposure of a nocturnal cityscape
with spectroscope and normal camera.
Photo: Esa Pekka Isomursu, 2021.

Thermal imaging can reveal yet another level of reality. A double exposure of thermal and natural images (Figure 10) shows how snow-covered trees store heat from the Sun during the day and radiate it out after the sunset. This technique creates visually fascinating images, reminiscent of traditional photography (Figure 11), yet oddly different.



Figure 10
Combination of thermal and natural images of a snowy
landscape. Photo: Esa Pekka Isomursu, 2021.

"To be continued"

In addition to their aesthetic value, images in this essay reveal new dimensions of reality. Presenting such photographs to my students has sparked lively discussion and given them better insight to the concept of authenticity. I am currently working with new ideas to expand the concept. I will present a larger set of concepts and images in my course next fall, after which a more detailed article will follow.

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