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Exploring Perceptions of Northern Landscapes through Nature Photography

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Abstract

This study examines how people perceive Northern landscapes through nature photography, revealing that such images can evoke a multisensory and immersive experience influenced, e.g., by the viewer's prior experiences, image objects, and composition. For experienced photographers, established conventions often dominate the viewing experience.

Drawing on Groys' interpretation of Benjamin's concept of aura, we argue that documentary-style landscape photographs can offer an auratic experience, evoking feelings of uniqueness and authenticity. While traditional styles are popular, a minority, mainly experienced photographers, appreciate creative techniques as authentic representations of nature.

Respondents' perceptions align with two ideal types identified in this study: the contemplative cyberflâneur and the superficial cyberbadaud. The latter has been enabled by our current hypervisual culture, and the widespread use of camera phones that has democratized photography. Our findings highlight the influence and responsibility of viewers and photographers in shaping perceptions of Northern nature, and pave the way to new ways of depicting the Northern landscape in photographs and, perhaps, other visual arts as well.

Introduction

Despite the increasing susceptibility of photographs to technical, artistic, social, political, and commercial manipulation, the faith in the realism of the photographic image persists and is still very much grounded in the belief that a photograph is a mechanical reproduction of reality [1]. However, this perspective overlooks the complexities involved in photographic interpretation. While especially documentary-style photographs may seem objective due to their technical precision, they are shaped by various subjective factors such as subject selection, framing, and viewer biases. Moreover, perceiving a photograph does not correspond to the original sensory experience in physical reality, although they are related. Therefore, it is crucial to critically engage with the complexities of photographic representation, recognizing the active role of both producers and viewers in shaping meaning and interpretation, and appreciating photographs as multifaceted artefacts reflecting diverse influences.

Murray [2, p.99] describes immersion as a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek a similar sensation from a psychologically immersive experience: the sensation of being surrounded by an entirely different reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all our attention. When different senses are engaged simultaneously, the likelihood of immersion may increase because it reinforces the feeling of presence or involvement. However, a multisensory experience does not always result in immersion: one can be exposed to a variety of sensory stimuli without feeling absorbed or engaged. Conversely, it is possible to feel deeply immersed through just one or two senses, such as in the case of a film (sight and sound) or a gripping audiobook (sound alone).

While a nature landscape photograph has the power to stir emotions and conjure feelings associated with being in nature, it cannot replicate the complete sensory immersion of being present in person. But to what extent can a photograph convey the photographer's experience? In this article, we explore the extent to which photographs of Northern landscapes can challenge ocularcentrism,

evoke a holistic, multisensory experience of being in nature, and identify triggers for these responses. We also ponder the role and meaning of authenticity in this context. Our investigation draws upon the results of a survey we conducted, interpreted in conjunction with insights gleaned from relevant literature.

The concept of landscape in Western culture carries strong connotations of an outsider's view, framed and seen from a distance [3, pp. 20-22]. For centuries, the North has been imagined and represented by Western artists and writers. Over time, the accumulation of successive layers of discourse has led to the creation of an 'Imagined North', as described by Chartier [4]. Although this Imagined North continues to thrive, particularly in tourism and on social media, local artists are increasingly seeking to deconstruct it. Landscape is no longer a genre solely tied to the depiction of nature; it has become a fluid concept, encompassing social, political, ecological, psychological, and technological dimensions, as exemplified by the works of Northern artists Marja Helander and Ella Morton, and more globally in [5]. In this context, the concept of landscape closely aligns with that of the environment in environmental aesthetics. Berleant [6] emphasizes that the environment not only surrounds us, but that we, as experiencers, are sensorially immersed within it, forming a continuum with it. In posthumanism, the relationship between humans and nature is viewed as even more intertwined—and equal. We suggest that by gaining a better understanding of how photographs can convey this sense of immersion, our study provides new tools for artists to expand the expressive means of landscape photography.

Theoretical Foundations

Long before the permanent photograph was invented in the early 1800s, there was the camera obscura—a darkened room, or a box into which an exterior image was projected in real time via a small hole or a lens (Figure 1). Typically, the viewer would be located inside the camera obscura, making the viewing experience immersive and corporeal. The verisimilitude of the image was enhanced by the fact that the scene projected by the camera obscura was in its immediate vicinity. The viewer would most likely have observed this scene at some point or at least been aware of its nearby presence. However, one aspect that restricted immersion was that the projected image was upside down.

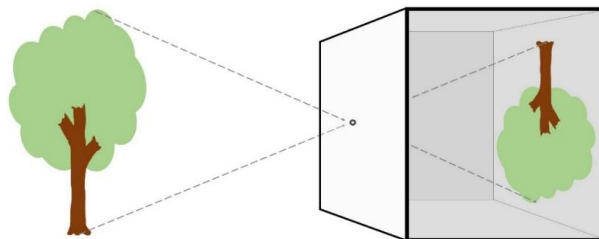


Figure 1. The principle of the camera obscura. Image: Esa Pekka Isomursu.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the camera obscura was the most widely used model for explaining human vision, and for representing the relation of a perceiver and the position of a knowing subject to the external world [7, p. 27]. It stood as a model of how direct observation leads to truthful inferences about the reality. Cray [7, pp. 39–41] argues that by introducing an exterior apparatus to create the observed image, the camera obscura separates the act of seeing from the physical body of the observer, thereby decorporealising vision: 'The camera obscura a priori prevents the observer from seeing his or her position as part of the representation. The body then is a problem the camera could never solve except by marginalizing it into a phantom in order to establish a space of reason.' This concept aligns with the ideas of the homunculus fallacy and the Cartesian theatre, where an internal observer (a homunculus) views images formed on the retinas as if they were projected onto a movie screen [8].

Until the early 19th century, it was commonly believed that sensory perceptions occurred outside the conscious body, with the senses transmitting external reality to the perceiving homunculus. Cray [7, pp. 13–14] argues that, around 1810 to 1840, before photography, a variety of discourses and

practices, e.g., in philosophy and science, made the camera obscura as an explanation of our observation obsolete, and the human body became an active producer of the optical experience. He gives the stereoscope and afterimages as examples of what led to this change. The early Wheatstone mirror stereoscope had a pair of mirrors at 45-degree angles to the user's eyes, each reflecting a picture located off to the side. As each eye could see only the image designed for it, it became obvious that the fusion of the sensory data from the images into a three-dimensional view had to happen within the observer. Also, Goethe's [9] research on afterimages showed that human perception can change without an external object of perception: an afterimage changes in time after the observer closes eyes, without any external stimulus being present [7, pp. 67–69].

Ontologically, the emergence of the permanent photograph has profoundly transformed image perception. Unlike the real-time image in a camera obscura, which requires the presence of the device, a permanent photograph freezes a moment in time which immediately becomes the past, rendering the image independent of the photographic device and its surroundings. However, an inherent connection to reality always remains in a photograph as well:

'I call "photographic referent" not the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it. [...] in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the noeme of Photography.'

— Roland Barthes [10]

Seppänen [11, p. 72] refers to this connection between photographic representation and its objects, caused by photons, as a material trace. He suggests that this trace perpetually fuels epistemological controversy: when a photograph is perceived as a representation of an absent object, the object is still present as a material trace. Conversely, when the photograph is seen as a present material trace of the object, the photograph as re-representation renders the object absent. Therefore, a photograph is always an unstable, unruly representation where presence and absence can alternate, much like the perceived image in a Rubin's vase [12] (Figure 2). Consequently, a photograph not only conventionally refers to something external to itself as a pictorial representation, but the external reality can also be considered present within the photograph itself [13, pp. 9–12].

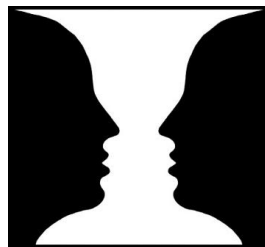


Figure 2. Rubin's vase [12]. Image: Esa Pekka Isomursu, based on Rubin's original.

In contemporary culture, owing in part to the ubiquity of digital media, visibility has become accentuated at the expense of other sensory modalities, particularly sound and touch. Visual perception has emerged as the predominant means through which individuals comprehend their surroundings and process information, thereby dominating the discourse. The diversity of visual communication, encompassing images, symbols, and graphics, provides a broad spectrum of expressive possibilities. Notably, the sense of touch had been an integral part of classical theories of vision in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but it was dissociated from sight in the 19th century. The loss of touch as a conceptual component of vision meant the isolation of vision from tactility and its subjective relation to perceived space [7, p. 19]. Furthermore, the emphasis on minimizing physical contact during the COVID-19 era led to the sense of touch becoming pathologised [14]. Nevertheless, this does not imply an inherent inferiority of other senses in the holistic human perception of the world.

Bowring [15] states that ocularcentrism, or the hegemony of the eye, has dominated the Western paradigm of engagement with the world since the Renaissance. This is illustrated in the term 'visual culture' which encapsulates the breadth of practices associated with the eye, the gaze, and the operations of contemporary culture—everything from the digital, to cinema, to photography, and the consumption of all things visual. Bowring sees the dominance of the visual as a double-edged sword. On one hand, visibility is aligned with knowledge, and there is a plethora of figures of speech in the English language which connect understanding with sight, 'I see' being one of the most obvious. On the other hand, however, pure opticality can also be interpreted as a failure to fully engage, an 'overlooking' of the richness of ideas that might be within what one beholds. The alignment of the 'eye' and the 'I' emphasises the distancing of the subject from the object, the 'disembodied eye' [16, p. 81], or in terms of landscape, a detachment of the self from place.

Parting from the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, Merleau-Ponty [17] emphasises the body as the primary site of knowing the world, instead of the consciousness or the mind: a painter paints with his body, and a viewer views with his body. Merleau-Ponty [17] compares the body to the heart in an organism: it gives life to the inner spectacle that we experience as a world. Following Merleau-Ponty, Hoppe [18, p. 43] states that '[o]ne's relationship to the world [as a body] is to a great extent non-conceptual, something that cannot be articulated with propositions'. What we regard as knowing, is not merely related to our cognition or language, but knowledge consists of our embodied activities as well [19, pp. 151–154].

In his essay 'Cézanne's Doubt', Merleau-Ponty [20] finds Cézanne's theory of painting analogous to his own philosophical thought. In Cézanne's series of impressionist oil paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire, he not only shows the landscape, but also leaves visible the elements that make the painting. Traces of brushstrokes are easily recognizable, and he has left patches of the canvas uncovered by paint. The impression of these paintings is twofold: while contemplating the painting one can concentrate on the subject matter, i.e. the landscape, or, one can concentrate on the surface structure, the paint, and the pattern of colours. The spatial depth of the painting does not correspond to that of the real world but instead follows 'the lived perspective', that which we actually perceive, not a geometric or photographic one. This lived perspective is rooted in an experience prior to the artificial isolation of the senses and the hegemony of sight. Thus, Cézanne tried to present objects that were present to all the senses at once, claiming that we could see the depth, the smoothness, the softness, the hardness, even the odour of objects [20, p. 14]. Cézanne's comprehension that expression comes from the material, from the paint itself, defined Merleau-Ponty's idea of artistic expression as well. It is not only the subject matter of the painting but all these elements together, corporeally experienced by the viewer, that convey the artist's vision.

On a similar note, Shusterman [21] argues that we tend to 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. Although the photograph is the standard end product of photography and conventionally recognised as the goal of photographic art, the process itself of making—not merely 'taking'—a photograph can constitute a real aesthetic experience and value that cannot be found by contemplating the mere end product. In our study, as explained later, we sought to determine whether making this process visible could also help the viewer more closely relate to the photographer, thereby enhancing immersion.

In addition to the viewers' preoccupation with the photograph as an object, Shusterman [21] gives other reasons for the collective negligence in the process of photography. The fact that pressing the release of the camera shutter requires no special skill or thought and that the camera mechanism automatically does all the rest to produce a realistic photograph diminishes the sense of photography as a performative achievement. The instantaneous act of shutter release likewise suggests that there is no sustained duration of effort involved as one would expect in a performative process. These reasons, however, neglect the complex performative process executed by the photographer that occurs before the shutter release.

The performative process of photography includes all the actions that are necessary for achieving the desired optical image that then forms the photographic image on film or camera sensor. This includes, among other things, composing the shot in one's mind, selecting the right lens and exposure values, moving to the right position, and possibly staging the scene as well as guiding the

model(s), or posing as a model. In a wider sense, this can be thought to include all the previous work that the photographer has done to gain the skills s/he has as a photographer. The fact that this whole process is ontologically complex and difficult to demarcate in its experiential dimensions provides further reasons for its neglect [21].

In the context of perception of photographs, authenticity often relates to the ability of photographs to convey or capture reality in a certain way. By using photographs as a document or record of a specific moment or event, people may perceive them as offering genuine glimpses into the past or other places and events. In this sense, the authenticity of photographs relates to their ability to convey reality or at least a perspective of it.

Authenticity as an experiential value is a Modernist construction, first articulated in Rousseau's Romantic philosophy [22, p. 38]. The continued craving for experiences of unmediated genuineness seeks to cut through what Rousseau called 'the wound of reflection', a reaction to modernization's demythologization, detraditionalization, and disenchantment. The notion of authenticity implies the existence of its opposite, the fake, and this dichotomous construct is at the heart of what makes authenticity problematic. Identifying some cultural expressions or artifacts as authentic, genuine, trustworthy, or legitimate simultaneously implies that other manifestations are fake, spurious, and even illegitimate. Disciplinary practice has 'nostalgize[d] the homogeneous' and decried 'bastard traditions', thus continually upholding the fallacy that cultural purity rather than hybridity is the norm. Today, in practice the genuine and the spurious are often converging, their identities separable only by their narratives [23, p. 9] [24, pp. 8–9].

Benjamin's [25] concept of aura can be seen as adding depth to the concept of authenticity in photographs. Benjamin famously argued that an original artwork possesses a certain quality he called aura, a sense of 'here and now', that is inherent to its singularity. This aura is associated with the time and place of the artwork's creation, as well as its physical presence. The aura is closely tied to the uniqueness and authenticity of an original work of art and is easily lost in the age of mechanical reproduction. This is especially strongly manifested in photography and film.

Groys [26], however, argues that, although the idea is often neglected in the interpretations of Benjamin's work, Benjamin also opened up the possibility of reproductions becoming auratic, original pieces. Groys interprets Benjamin's concept of aura as purely topological. The original has its proper place, an aura: the copy is out of place and without history, therefore without an aura. The difference is decided by the observer: the original is the one you go to, and the copy is the one that comes to you. Groys compares the internet surfer to Benjamin's flâneur. The flâneur does not demand objects to come to him but goes to them and thus encounters them as 'original'. Similarly, in their mind, Internet surfers visit the 'original' web addresses rather than ordering the content to the terminal they are using, even though the latter is technically the case. A key feature of the Internet is that all signs, words and images are assigned a unique address, i.e., they are localised, territorialised, and written into the topology. In this sense, the information network makes an original of each record that may have originally been created as a multiple copy. [26][27][28]

Groys extends the concept of the flâneur to Internet users, following an academic trend emerging post-1990s with the World Wide Web. As flânerie acquired new meanings on the Internet, new terms were derived, such as cyberflâneur [29], virtual flâneur [30], and online flâneur [31]. We use the term cyberflâneur for all Internet-based flânerie.

As Benjamin [32, p. 62] points out, an active flâneur who enjoys the power of observations and is dominated by curiosity may easily turn into a passive badaud, a gaper dominated by sentiment. Echoing Benjamin, Badami [33, p. 93] states that there is a thin line between a cyberflâneur and cyberbadaud. The ideal has been a curious wanderer that seeks authentic knowledge, explorations, and connections in the limitless virtual world, but the reality is often 'mindless mob mentality of [cyber]badauderie', demonstrated by 'frictionless sharing of cat videos and retweeting meaningless memes on Facebook and Twitter, users thoughtlessly clicking likes or re-sharing others' recycled links, the hysterical screeches of outrage and maudlin sentimentality, the credulous posting of hoaxes and celebrity gossip, [and] the dependently narcissistic anxiety over likes and friends and followers[.]' [33]

Thus, being a challenged concept even before the internet revolution, authenticity has increasingly become associated with its experiential value—a development that began already in the early modern era. Cyberflâneurs seek to establish their experiences as genuine even in virtual reality, distinguishing themselves from cyberbadauds that are perceived as lacking the discernment to identify authentic web content. As Woolfe [34] suggests, ‘it is not mindless novelty that the flâneur wants but new directions that feel organic and authentic.’

Survey Settings and Selection of Images

Based on the theories presented above, we curated 21 photographs (Figure 3) taken by the first author in northern Finland and Norway. This selection was used for a nationwide survey in Finland. The aim of this survey was twofold: to investigate whether landscape photographs depicting Northern nature can transcend ocularcentrism to foster multisensory immersion in viewers, and to identify specific subjects within these images that facilitate such experiences. The exact location depicted in the photographs—beyond being from the North—was not of significance. What was essential was that each photograph illustrated one or more of the theoretical perspectives we wanted to explore.

We selected photographs that were not overly distinctive within their genre to ensure respondents’ focus on the survey questions rather than the image quality, deliberately retaining certain imperfections, such as tilted horizons, as part of our methodology. The selection included documentary-style images as well as images employing creative techniques.

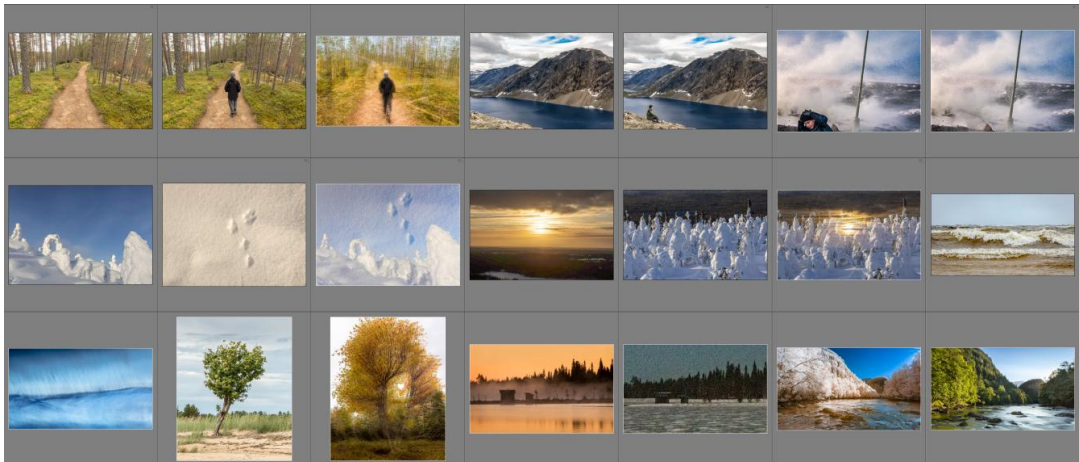


Figure 3. Photographs used in the survey. $N = 141$. Photos: Esa Pekka Isomursu.

Based on the ideas of Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne, and Shusterman we hypothesised that incorporating visible traces of the creation process into images could enhance viewer immersion. Therefore, we selected images featuring various creative techniques, including multi-exposure, long exposure, intentional camera movement (ICM), high-ISO sensor noise, and infrared imaging. We also thought that making visible the embodied, active engagement of the photographer with the landscape could reveal the somatic, performative process described by Shusterman. This approach aimed to convey the photographer’s corporeal presence in the landscape, thereby enhancing viewer immersion and appreciation of the image.

Some images included people. We theorised that the presence of a human figure could prompt viewers to consider the photographic process and the photographer’s involvement during the shoot. To maintain consistency in the reference images, certain images were edited to remove human subjects.

The survey, conducted online via Webropol, was distributed nationwide through both national and local photography organizations, and social media. A total of 141 respondents participated, though not all participants answered every question.

Participants were asked about their age, photography skill level, and interest in nature photography, as these factors might influence their opinions (Figure 4). The six-step rating scale required respondents to rate themselves as either below or above average. Notably, 50% of the respondents were over 55 years old (Figure 5). Gender was not specified, as it was deemed irrelevant to the study's objectives.

Each image was assessed with four identical five-point Likert scale questions (from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) focusing on viewer immersion: 'When I look at the image: I perceive myself within the world of the image; I feel I can touch the world of the image; I feel the presence of a photographer; The image conveys an authentic experience of nature.' Subsequently, participants were prompted to rate the activation of their senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and movement) using the same five-point Likert scale. Thirdly, a seven-point scale was utilised for four semantic differentials (Unemotional—Emotional; Static—Dynamic; Cold—Warm; Uninteresting—Interesting). Finally, respondents could also provide written comments on each image.

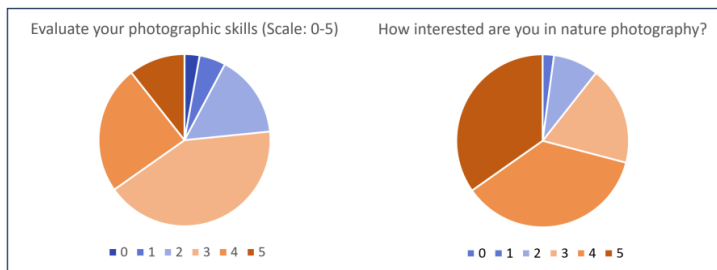


Figure 4. a) Evaluate your photographic skills. 0 = Beginner, 5 = Professional.
b) How interested are you in nature photography? 0 = Not at all, 5 = Very interested.
Blue = below average. Reddish brown = above average. N = 141.

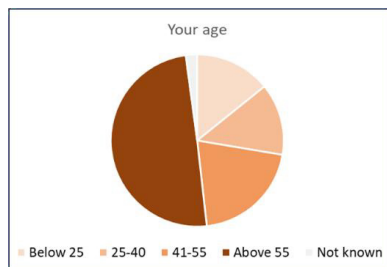


Figure 5. Age distribution of the participants. N = 141.

After answering questions about individual images, participants were asked: 'Do you have any additional thoughts whatsoever related to the topic?' They were also given the option to provide contact information for a potential follow-up interview.

Survey Results and Reflections

The survey results indicate that the images were indeed perceived in a multisensory and immersive manner. However, our theoretical assumptions were not fully confirmed. Elements we thought would trigger specific responses did not always do so. Additionally, experienced photographers (those with self-assessed skills above average), though not asked, provided written judgements on the images, offering unexpected insights into landscape photograph perception and contemplation.

Approximately 39% of the written answers (155 out of 399) appraised the quality of the images, offering straightforward judgments on whether the images were good or bad, or providing normative criticism regarding the image's content, composition, or technical aspects. Notably, only 5% of these evaluations originated from individuals with below-average skill levels, despite them constituting nearly a quarter of the respondents. In many cases, preconceptions appear to strongly influence perception, which means that judgements about the quality of an image supersede the actual viewing

experience. This phenomenon can be examined through Husserl's [35] concept of 'natural attitude' and Scholes's [36] 'protocols of reading'. Husserl [35, p. 61] called the prejudices and preconceptions that dominate the perception natural attitude (natürliche Einstellung), referring to unconscious assumptions in everyday life. These are acquired through, and influenced by, specific sociocultural practices [37]. In other words, we can state that depending on their prior epistemological stances, viewers employ various reading protocols to make sense of the photographs [1, p. 106]. Protocols of reading is a formulation by Scholes [36], and they point to understanding, interpretation, and criticism when reading books, bodies like in dance [38, p. 5] or, as in this case, photographs.

Hence, it appears that individuals deeply engaged in photography tend to align their responses with the established conventions of the field, rather than drawing solely from their immediate experiences. Strong preconceptions might solidify one's stance towards perceived objects, directing focus to details appreciated within the specific sociocultural context. In contrast, inexperienced photographers, lacking such context, approach survey questions with greater openness.

Our pre-assumption that leaving visible traces of the creation process might increase the viewer's immersion in the image was refuted. The use of creative techniques, adding visible noise, or a person in the image did not have such an effect in our survey. This finding contradicts the ideas of Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne [20], and Shusterman [21] about the importance of leaving marks of the artist's creation process visible. A possible explanation for this discrepancy is the deeply rooted idea of photographic authenticity. Unlike a painting, which is not expected to contain a material trace [11], a photograph is often subject to expectations of authenticity. This is especially true for nature photographs, which are typically expected to be documentary and authentic depictions of nature [39], as can be seen from these answers to the survey:

'Hares do not jump in the sky!'

'Excessive image editing is disturbing, at least if you think you are looking at a photograph. Editing changes a photograph into something else.'

When a person was featured in the photograph, the presence of the photographer was perceived as more prominent. However, contrary to our initial assumptions, this heightened presence did not contribute to an increased level of immersion in or appreciation of the image. Again, this might be due to the differences in how people interpret the authenticity of a painting and a photograph.

The results also show that creative techniques used in photography strongly divide opinions. There are much more respondents considering photographs with creative techniques to be strongly uninteresting or strongly interesting compared to their documentary-style counterparts (Fig. 6). This observation aligns with our findings from an earlier survey [39], indicating a nearly equal division of people expressing support and opposition to creative techniques. This strongly polarised stance was particularly notable among respondents aged over 40.

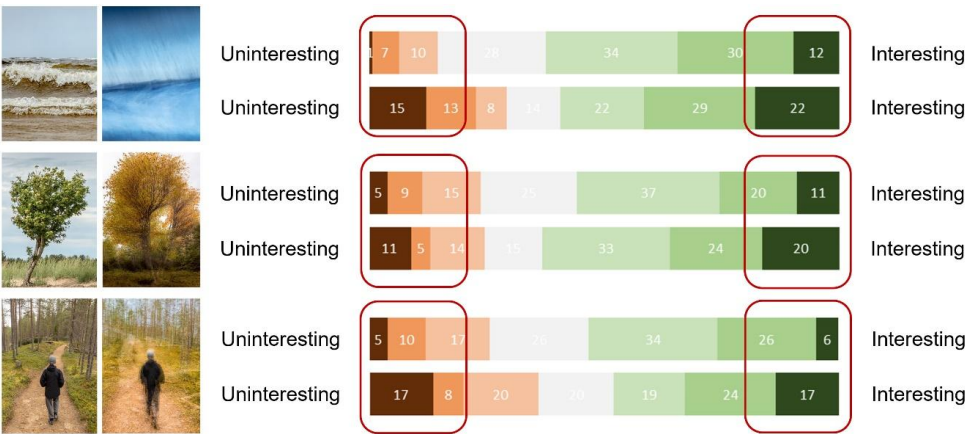


Figure 6. A Comparison of images with documentary style and creative techniques.

The respondents often reported that, in addition to sight, some of their other senses were also activated when looking at the given photographs. The degree of activation varied among images and senses. The strongest multisensory response occurred with three documentary-style photographs of the sea (around the upper right corner in Fig. 3). For these photographs, over half of the respondents reported experiencing activation in hearing and movement, and 43-57% in touch.

The sense of movement was also perceived by many in images depicting a path, and images with flowing water (upper left and lower right, respectively, in Fig. 3). Taste and smell were the least activated senses, with some activation mainly in documentary-style photographs of a stormy sea. Notably, photographs utilising creative techniques caused significantly less activation in all senses. Thus, in the survey, a documentary style emerged as a prerequisite for a strong multi-sensory experience. An interesting anomaly was that nearly half of the respondents felt their sense of touch activated in response to the photograph with snow-capped trees and blue sky (middle left in Fig. 3). This may be because the weather in the image appears particularly cold, evoking a sensation of 'biting cold', a condition very familiar for the Finnish respondents.

The photograph depicting a boy holding his head amid a storm generated a weaker sensory response compared to the version without the boy. This pattern was consistent across all images that had versions with or without a person present. As one respondent noted:

'[...] the person in the picture immediately distances me—I feel more like I am in the world of the picture if there are no others in it.'

However, another respondent pointed out that image composition and the position of the person also have an effect. For example, the person walking in the middle of the image (see Figure 3) and the boy obstructing the view of the stormy sea block the viewer's ability to 'step inside'. In contrast, the photograph where a person is viewing a mountain lake from the lower left corner invites the viewer into the image.

The presence of a human figure in an image does enhance its emotional impact. The image with a boy amid a storm, in particular, was perceived as much more emotional than the same storm image with the person edited out. This phenomenon, evident in today's selfie culture, can be traced far back in the history of visual arts. In the first European drawing of Niagara Falls from 1698 [3, p. 136], the sublimity of the scene was emphasised by depicting individuals with hands in the air or covering their ears.

Approximately 9% of the written responses indicated that a person's previous experiences with nature strongly influence and extend their perception of the photographs:

*'Makes you long to return to the autumn nature trail for a walk with the dog.
I connect strongly with my past memories / experiences.'*

'I immediately remember the drops of the wave on the skin.'

The concept of kinaesthetic empathy [40] can explain this phenomenon. The more the viewer has experiences of movement in nature, such as hiking, the stronger their kinaesthetic empathy and ability to understand the photographer's experience as a physical sensation. In another publication [41], we have further explored how familiarity with the depicted landscape — though not a prerequisite — can deepen the viewing experience.

In addition to activating more senses, documentary-style photographs were also perceived as more interesting. Their popularity compared to those employing creative techniques may, in part, be explained by the concept of aura [21][25][26][28]. We posit that contemplating a documentary-style landscape photograph can be an auratic experience, much more so than with most other types of photographs. Aura, in this context, conveys feelings of uniqueness and authentic experience to the viewer.

Benjamin [25] identified two instances where photographs retained art's auratic cult value: pictures of loved ones, absent or deceased, and early portrait photographs where the lengthy process of taking a photograph created a ritualistic experience. The aura associated with the latter case diminished as the photographic process became faster, more commercial, and impersonal. However, Shusterman [21] argues that many ritual events, such as weddings, baptisms, and

graduations, preserve some of the ritualistic elements of early photography, thereby retaining their aura and cult value.

In nature photography, there still remains a strong sense of ritual. The photographs serve as a testament to the photographer's journey into nature. Such trips always demand an—often substantial—effort and can be physically and temporally demanding. Thus, photographing nature involves a ritualistic transition to, and presence in, a meaningful location.

Consider Figure 7, captured in Norway by the first author. The planning of this trip spanned several weeks, excluding both the actual travel time and the time required to capture the photograph. Figure 8, on the other hand, was taken hastily to avoid mosquito bites: a quick stop with the car and a visit to a nearby marshland. Despite the brevity of the nature visit, the process retained the transition rite of moving to nature—and capturing the image on site.



Figure 7. A view from Norway. Figure 8. Sunset on marshland. Photos: Esa Pekka Isomursu (2019, 2020).

The examples above illustrate the inherent presence of aura in landscape photographs. Figures 9 and 10 further underscore the uniqueness of nature images in this regard. Figure 9 depicts a studio portrait, lacking a specific sense of place and thereby failing to establish a topological connection. In contrast, Figure 10 evokes a strong sense of a unique location even in viewers unfamiliar with the exact setting, thereby creating an aura.



Figure 9. A studio portrait. Figure 10. A nature landscape. Photos: Esa Pekka Isomursu (2023, 2015).

Groys' interpretation of Benjamin's aura as purely topological raises intriguing questions when applied to nature photography. As images generated by Artificial Intelligence, along with other manipulated images, become increasingly prevalent and difficult to distinguish from authentic photographs, ensuring authenticity becomes paramount for preserving the aura. We posit that the bond forged between the photographer and the viewer through their shared experiences and appreciation of nature imbues the photograph with its aura—but this aura will diminish if there were uncertainty of the authenticity of the photograph, thus compromising the authenticity of the original nature experience. We anticipate that, in the near future, the topological dimensions of aura will assume even greater significance in the perception of images as authentic. For instance, images showcased on esteemed museum websites or the social media accounts of recognized nature photographers possess a heightened aura and sense of authenticity compared to those encountered randomly in social media feeds lacking a valued topological anchor point.

From the judgemental and analytical survey responses, we can clearly identify the cyberflâneur who contemplates the image, appreciating its aura and authenticity. From other responses we can also identify the cyberbadaud, a passive gaper dominated by sentiment who is uncritical and interested only in the surface of the image: approximately 20% of written responses merely described the content of the image without further analysis.

'The beauty of Riisitunturi fell'

'Lovely seascape by the coastline [...]'

The cyberflâneur and the cyberbadaud can be seen as two ideal types [42] of the viewers. The cyberflâneur seeks realism—whether in documentary or creative forms—in the photographic portrayal of Northern nature. Conversely, the cyberbadaud is content with Baudrillard's simulacra [23], images that depict an imagined, superficially beautiful North but lack deeper meaning and authenticity—at least for the observer.

One might expect that environmental concerns would prominently feature in the open-ended responses to our survey, especially given the current global focus on such issues. However, out of the 399 written responses, not a single one expressed concern or took a stance on environmental matters, even though some of the images particularly encouraged it. Paradoxically, these images of nature may represent not only a return to the natural world but also an escape from reality. People seem to seek an idyllic connection with nature through these images, rather than confronting the harsh realities of environmental change. The survey responses reflect an idealised vision of nature, rather than acknowledging a changing and endangered environment. Perhaps this suggests that Chartier's concept of the Imagined North remains very much alive and well.

Conclusion and Future Work

Our study provides insights into how people perceive Northern landscapes through nature photography. It indicates that nature landscape images can indeed evoke a multisensory and somewhat immersive experience. The viewer's previous experiences with Northern nature, as well as the objects in the image and their composition all influence the immersion. However, for experienced photographers, previously acquired conventions and discourses of photography—i.e., protocols of reading photographs—dominate their viewing experience. This dominance may make it difficult for them to focus on aspects beyond what is formally expected from a 'classic', documentary-style, and traditionally composed nature photograph.

Drawing from Groys' topological interpretation of Benjamin's concept of aura, we argue that contemplating a documentary-style landscape photograph can be an auratic experience for the viewer, more so than with most other types of photographs. This aura brings feelings of uniqueness and authentic experience to the viewer. Protocols of reading, kinaesthetic empathy, and the topological aura all explain why traditional, documentary-style photographs of nature are so popular. However, there is a notable minority, especially among more experienced photographers, who also perceive images utilising creative techniques as authentic depictions of the experience of being in nature. Although we found a correlation between photography skills and an interest in creative techniques, our survey did not reveal the root cause behind this interest—if there is any. It would be intriguing to investigate further, for example, whether users of creative photography techniques possess a stronger-than-average knowledge of art history or have a background in other arts. We speculate that these characteristics might override the otherwise dominant 'classic' reading protocols of photographs. Furthermore, with the emergence of advanced image manipulation techniques, artificial intelligence, and the proliferation of simulacra, could the growing interest in and acceptance of creative techniques signal a paradigmatic shift? Such a shift might influence how Northern landscapes are perceived in the future.

The respondents' perception of the photographs can also be interpreted by the two ideal types that we identified, namely, the cyberflâneur and the cyberbadaud. The first enjoys the intelligent contemplation of the images whereas the latter takes them at face value. Times have changed since Sontag [43, p. 55] described the photographer as a flâneur armed with a camera. Contemporary culture has created space for photographers—and viewers—akin to the badaud. There is now a significantly larger number of photography enthusiasts at all levels, as practically everyone carries

at least a camera phone, and taking pictures incurs minimal cost. Had Sontag lived today, she would likely have acknowledged the role of the (cyber)badaud alongside the (cyber)flâneur among both photographers and consumers of photographs in today's visually saturated environment.

Many respondents have a strong personal connection with nature. Also, the increasing awareness of environmental issues and climate change, combined with posthumanist thinking, has fostered a sense of interconnectedness between humans and nature. This shift suggests that fewer people now view nature as something separate from themselves; there is a growing awareness of our dependency on nature—and nature's dependency on us.

The cyberflâneur's intellectual approach to observing photography and nature provides an opportunity to understand change and recognise that something can be done about it. In contrast, the cyberbadaud seeks momentary pleasure, and remains indifferent to the state of things. Since these are ideal types rather than distinct individuals, elements of both perspectives can coexist in a single person's thinking. A potential area for future research is exploring how the mindset of the cyberbadaud can be shifted towards that of the cyberflâneur. Such a shift could enhance awareness and potentially inspire action to address environmental threats.

Our findings underscore the influence, and perhaps the responsibility, of both viewers and photographers in shaping how Northern nature is perceived and understood. By understanding the mechanisms behind the viewing experience, individuals can become more aware of their impact and better equipped to act responsibly towards the environment.

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