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PHOTO ESSAY

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From monosensory to multisensory: how forests transform people's understanding of landscape

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ABSTRACT

This essay assesses how forests change how people experience the world. It demonstrates how they alter people's encounters with landscape by preventing them from distancing themselves from and maintaining a sense of control over their surroundings. It examines how, much like art and darkness, forests deprivilege vision and privilege other human senses, which breathes life back to the surrounding landscape. The essay also acknowledges how forests and darkness are mutually reinforcing in this regard, and thus capable of drastically transforming people's understanding of landscape and providing an escape from their semiotic enslavement through landscape.

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Introduction

Several years ago, I came across an old landscape article in which Kalaora and Pelosse (1977) note that people do not see our surroundings as a landscape if they happen to be in a forest. It is only outside the forest that they see the world as a landscape. Unfortunately, the authors did not provide their readers with any photographic evidence of this distinction.

Tempted to assess this, I ventured into two local forests that are already familiar to me, one located in Kohmo and Varissuo, in Turku, Finland, and another situated in Vaarniemi, in nearby Kaarina, Finland. The former features a clearly demarcated fitness trail and numerous smaller trails that crisscross through the forest. The latter features an observation tower on top of a hill, which provides a view over the forest. While taking photos, I realised that the French authors' passing remark is highly useful as it can help people to conceive of landscape in a multisensory way, similar to nightscapes (Savela, 2023).

Following this brief introduction, I begin this photo essay by briefly explaining and problematising how landscapes are generally understood as representational spaces. I then challenge this view by elaborating how they can also be understood as non-representational spaces, followed by demonstrating how something as mundane as forests and darkness can change the way people make sense of the world, deprivileging vision and privileging other senses, pushing them to conceive landscape in multisensory terms.

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Representational space

Consulting a dictionary helps us to understand what people usually mean by 'landscape' (Oxford University Press, n.d.). In summary, it is commonly used as a noun and typically understood as pertaining to a view or to a depiction of a view. It can also be understood in numerous figurative ways, but they all tend to reinforce the understanding that landscape is a view or a depiction of something that can be accounted for and its features enumerated.

Most Western people understand the word in this way. For example, the European Landscape Convention is relevant to nearly 600 million people, to whom landscape is defined as 'an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors' and legally recognised 'as an essential component of people's surroundings', as well as 'an expression of the diversity of their shared cultural and natural heritage' and 'a foundation of their identity' (Déjeant-Pons, 2006, pp. 369–370).

Nearly all landscape researchers oppose such common-sense understandings of landscape (but see Price & Lewis, 1993). For them, landscape is not merely an area, a view, nor a depiction of it. Figures 1 and 2 help us to understand their objections.

They depict a landscape that includes a field, buildings, roads, lampposts and some forest. It is clear that landscapes are physical, yet, as argued by Duncan (1990), they cannot be reduced to mere inventories of their physical features as it is impossible to simply objectively observe them and then depict and describe what has been observed.

This prompts us to think in semiotic terms, which is the hallmark of iconographic, discursive and textual approaches that present landscape as a way of seeing and depicting the world (e.g. Cosgrove, 1985) and indicate that meanings are embedded in landscapes and that they are rarely challenged (e.g. J. S. Duncan & Duncan, 2004). What is typical of these approaches is that they privilege vision, emphasise the connection between landscape and power and conceive landscape as *representational*. To use Lefebvre's (1991) terms, they focus on

Figure 1. A peri-urban landscape (Kohmo). Photograph by author/CC BY 4.0.

Figure 2. A peri-urban nightscape (Kohmo). Photograph by author/CC BY 4.0.

representations of space, i.e., how space is represented in images and writing, and on *representational spaces*, i.e., how space is encountered representationally.

In my view, the problem with these approaches is not that they focus heavily on representations of space, addressing countless landscape images, such as paintings and photos, as acknowledged by Duncan and Duncan (2010), but rather that they treat space representationally. Furthermore, it is not that they tend to ignore the physical aspects of space, as noted by Thrift (1996), but rather that they insist that language and other semiotic modes of expression are representational.

This issue can be understood through Plato's cave allegory, as elaborated by Mills (1990). In Plato's dualist view, people mistake their subjective impressions of a transient sensible material world for the objective reality of eternal immaterial ideas, and it is only the select few who can understand the world for what it truly is. For Marx, it is the ideas that are subjective impressions and prevent people from seeing the objective material reality. Marxist circles are also known to espouse Platonist views according to which a select few are needed to help people see the truth and to make sure that they do not err in their views. Approaching landscape representationally means that it ends up being understood as false reality, like a curtain or a veil that distorts the view, preventing people from seeing reality as it is, and the task of the researcher is then to help people see the truth by revealing this ploy, as summarised by Wylie (2007).

It is possible to revive this tradition by shifting from dualism to monism. This is, however, no mean task as it involves going against the dominant way of thinking in the Western world that goes back over two millennia.

Non-representational space

My own approach to landscape research (Savela, 2023, 2024) builds on Deleuze and Guattari's non-representational philosophy. While I find myself largely in agreement with representational

approaches, my interest lies in dismantling the ocularcentric and representational common-sense understanding of landscape, what Porteous (1990) mockingly refers to as blandscape, and reviving it as multisensory and non-representational.

Most non-representational approaches to landscape emphasise affect (Waterton, 2019). I recognise its importance and, more importantly, view these approaches as largely compatible with my approach, even though I do not believe it is possible for us to separate affects from our understanding of them, except in the abstract, as argued by Voloshinov (1973).

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) define *landscape* in reference to *face*. For them, both are surfaces or, rather, parts of the same continuous surface that we encounter everywhere. This notion of surface is borrowed from Stoic philosophers. Summarising Johnson (2017), the Stoics are monists who think that there is *something*, which is either *corporeal* or *incorporeal*. Both are *real*, yet only the former is what *exists* physically, as the latter only *subsists*, adhering immanently to the surface of what exists.

In the Stoic view, we need both to make sense of the world. Nouns are used to refer to *corporeal bodies* that exist, in this and/or that configuration at any given moment, whereas verbs are used to express *incorporeal events*, to *attribute* the nouns (Johnson, 2017). In other words, nouns, such as *the scalpel* and *the flesh*, designate corporeal bodies as beings, whereas verbs, such as *is cutting*, designate their manners or ways of being, what is *sayable*, such as *the scalpel is cutting the flesh* (Bréhier, 1908). The Stoics' insistence on corporeality is particularly important as it prevents them from relying on a set of pre-existing forms or meanings to explain reality, unlike the Platonists, who rely on such to present what we encounter as mere representations of reality, as discussed by Bréhier (1908).

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to all of the corporeal bodies and their arrangement as a *regime of bodies* and all of the incorporeal events that attribute the bodies as a *regime of signs*. They also emphasise that the incorporeal events only transform how the bodies are understood and exemplify this with speech act theory (Austin, 1962), according to which language and, by extension, any semiotic mode of expression does not describe existing states of affairs, but rather defines them. Therefore, Figures 1 and 2 and their captions do not represent anything. Instead, they present the physical states of affairs in a certain way that bears a degree of resemblance to them. They cannot be judged as true or false as that would necessitate a dualist conception of reality. They can only be thought of as felicitous or infelicitous. What matters then is whether people believe something to be the case and how their understanding of the situation is transformed (Ogborn, 2020). Therefore, what people habitually call truth is not something pre-existing, but something that emerges dialogically in between them (Bakhtin, 1984).

For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the difference between face and landscape is that the former is used in reference to the surface of distinct bodies, whereas the latter is used in reference to the surface of all visible bodies when addressed at the same time. One can therefore focus on specific faces in landscapes or, conversely, assess faces very closely as landscapes.

To further specify the two, as discussed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), all faces and landscapes have *traits*. *Facial traits* can be the shape of one's head or one of its many features that make our faces recognisable. Extended beyond humans, they can also be any distinct feature of an item. This also applies to landscapes, which have various *landscape traits*, such as a field, a road, electric posts and some forest, as depicted in Figure 3.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) also insist that faces and landscapes, and their traits, are only conceived in representational terms in a certain dominant regime of signs that results in a doubled subject. In their view, this regime is marked by a dualist conception of reality that privileges a thinking subject that seeks to establish itself as the ultimate authority through language, while failing to recognise the authority of others in the constitution of language. This is exemplified by the Cartesian Cogito that discovers itself through language, without acknowledging its indebtedness to language and other people, how we are not born with language, but learn it from others (Deleuze, 1994). It involves a feedback loop that can be characterised

Figure 3. A rural landscape (Vaarniemi). Photograph by author/CC BY 4.0.

as 'the semiotic enslavement of every individual' (Guattari, 2016, p. 133) as one must adhere to what one presupposes: 'the more you obey the statements of the dominant reality, the more you are in command as subject of enunciation in mental reality, for in the end you are only obeying yourself!' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 130).

Faces and landscapes make the regime's semiotic enslavement particularly problematic as it is not merely a matter of what someone says or writes, but rather what someone or something looks like. Having inherited them, we take 'the traits of everyday life' for granted, so that '[t]he normality of yesterday supports that of today' (Guattari, 2011, p. 78). Moreover, to account for the interplay of faces and landscapes, as well as their traits, the supposedly 'normal … faciality constantly becomes encrusted and superimposed upon the normal landscapity' (Guattari, 2011, p. 78). This is a major problem for those who do not adhere to what is considered *normal*, for example, because their skin colour is considered a deviant facial trait (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This is also a major concern to those who wish to alter a landscape but are unable to do so due to concerns over supposedly deviant landscape traits (Savela, 2024).

It is for these reasons that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) oppose the way faces and landscapes are constituted in the dominant regime of signs. Guattari's (2015) assessment of Keiichi Tahara's photography and Deleuze's (2003) discussion of Francis Bacon's portraiture, and Paul Cézanne's and J. M. W. Turner's landscape paintings, exhibit how it is possible to not only dismantle, but also to reinvent them through art. Moreover, I have previously exhibited how, in everyday life, darkness is capable of disrupting them and thus liberating people from the semiotic enslavement (Savela, 2023). In the following section, I seek to illustrate how, much like art and darkness, forests are also capable of dismantling the representational landscape and allowing people to reimagine it in the process.

Reinventing landscape

Kalaora and Pelosse (1977) indicate that Western people privilege wide open space as that allows them to control their environment. This is exemplified by Figures 3–5. In terms used by

them, Figure 4 depicts a *minor landscape* (*petit paysage*), whereas Figures 3 and 5 depict a *major landscape* (*grand paysage*). The former offers control over a narrow view, whereas the latter offers control over a wide-open view. However, one remains outside the forest, at a safe distance from it, in both cases and one's sense of control is therefore largely limited to what is outside the forest.

What Kalaora and Pelosse (1977) find particularly interesting about forests is that they change the way one makes sense of the world. To explain this in terms used by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), one's understanding of landscape is transformed, not through changes in the dominant regime of signs, but through changes in the regime of bodies as one steps away from the open path, as depicted in Figure 4, into the forest, as depicted in Figures 6 and 7.

The lack of tall vegetation in Figures 1–4 makes it possible to see the various landscape traits, such as the fence and electricity posts, even from a great distance, while one controls the entire view in Figure 5. This provides a sense of control over one's surroundings (Cosgrove, 1985). In stark contrast, Figures 6 and 7 convey how difficult it is to see in a dense forest, even in daylight conditions, as the tall vegetation obstructs the view considerably. However, the way forests can transform the way people encounter the world is not categorical, but rather gradual. This is exemplified by Figures 8–10.

Forest density conditions one's reliance on the senses. The areas of forest depicted by Figures 6–8 deprivilege vision as trees obstruct the view to a large degree, even in daylight conditions. It is difficult to make sense of anything visually as one's gaze constantly shifts while one zigzags between the trees. One becomes more aware of what the other senses afford (Koegst et al., 2023). There are sounds, such as bird song and twigs snapping under one's feet, and odours, such as the scent of freshly cut trees and the musky whiff of wildlife that occasionally lingers in the air, albeit one has to be attuned to them to make sense of the sounds (Feld, 2012) and the smells (Porteous, 1990).

Forests are also notably tactile. One must mind one's step and dodge tree branches. There is an alarming sensation of being in touch with reality (Porteous, 1990), an anxiety marked by

Figure 4. A fitness trail (Varissuo). Photograph by author/CC BY 4.0.

Figure 5. A view over a forest (Vaarniemi). Photograph by author/CC BY 4.0.

Figure 6. Dense forest (Varissuo). Photograph by author/CC BY 4.0.

Figure 7. Dense dark forest (Varissuo). Photograph by author/CC BY 4.0.

Figure 8. More dense forest (Varissuo). Photograph by author/CC BY 4.0.

Figure 9. Thin forest (Varissuo). Photograph by author/CC BY 4.0.

Figure 10. Thinner forest (Varissuo). Photograph by author/CC BY 4.0.

what Granö (1997) calls proximity. Much like with darkness (Edensor & Dunn, 2024), any danger is, however, largely imaginary, as the vegetation that obscures the view also makes it very difficult to assail anyone in a forest. In contrast, the other areas of the same forest depicted in Figures 9 and 10 allow one to see further, albeit to a lesser or greater degree depending on the density of the forest in those areas. One retains or regains one's sense of control as one can see afar, even if this sense of control is illusory, as seeing afar also entails that one can be seen from afar (Philo et al., 2017).

In daylight conditions, it is possible to see ahead, even at great distances, as illustrated by Figures 1–5, albeit the forests remain impenetrable to gaze. Figures 7 and 11–13 depict how darkness is capable of transforming the way we make sense of the world and how we understand landscape.

Darkness alters the regime of bodies significantly by obscuring details (Marr, 2021). Forests are, however, capable of much of the same, even in daylight conditions, and their capacity to change the way people encounter the world and their understanding of it cannot be compromised the way darkness can be through illumination (Savela, 2023), as illustrated by Figure 2. This capacity does, nonetheless, depend on the density of the forest, as already noted and exemplified by Figures 6 and 8 to 10.

It is also worth noting that the denser the forest, the darker it appears at night-time, as illustrated by Figures 11–13, and, of course, the darker it is, the denser the forest appears, as contrasted by the photos that were taken in the same spot in Figures 6 and 7. Furthermore, the denser the forest and the darker it is, the more disorienting it feels to make one's way in the forest. Darkness makes it hard to recognise anything (Morris, 2011) visually, except shapes (Edensor, 2013), while other senses are heightened (Holt, 2024) and the trees force one to constantly zigzag in between them, to mind one's step and to protect one's head with one's hand to avoid being hit by branches.

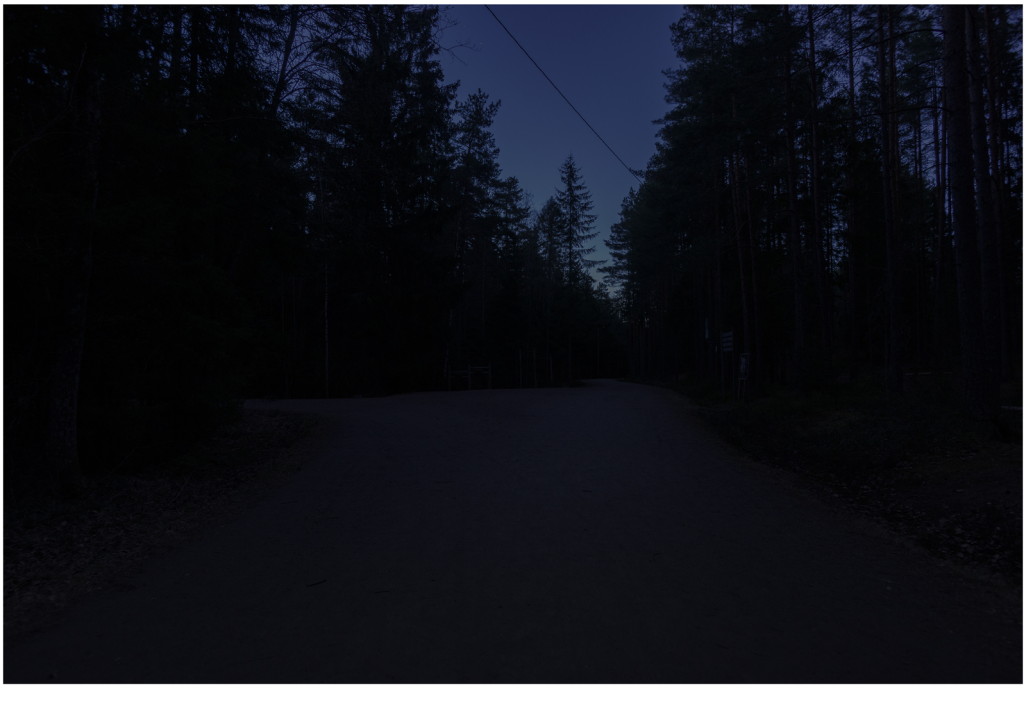

Figure 11. A dark fitness trail (Varissuo). Photograph by author/CC BY 4.0.

Figure 12. Thin dark forest (Varissuo). Photograph by author/CC BY 4.0.

Figure 13. Thinner dark forest (Varissuo). Photograph by author/CC BY 4.0.

Conclusion

It is virtually impossible to change the meaning of a common word. I am therefore tempted to advocate for another term in place of landscape, such as *taskscape*. However, as pointed out by Ingold (2017), what we need is not another term, but landscape brought back to life. This is what I set out to do in this essay.

In the past, I have tried to explain the problem with landscape and representation to people, to no avail, only to realise that maybe they do not need an explanation, but rather a demonstration. It is what I have attempted to do in this essay, to demonstrate that, much like darkness, forests can drastically alter the way we make sense of the world, even in daylight conditions.

This essay also elaborated how language and other semiotic modes of expression are, in fact, non-representational and therefore compatible with affective approaches in landscape research. In the future, researchers could therefore address the semiotic aspects together with the affective aspects. Researchers could also investigate how other landscape features and weather conditions alter the way people make sense of the world.

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Notes on contributor

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