

'Landscape' is a Sign

Semiotics and Landscape Studies

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Introduction

As is often discussed, e.g. by Olwigⁱ (1996), the interests in and not least the confusions entailing the word and the concept 'landscape' is in no way a novel affair. Hartshorneⁱⁱ made a reflection on this in 1939 (cited in Olwig 1996): Landscape is ...*"perhaps the most single important word in the geographic language"*. Hartshorne pointed to the confusion the word created. The word in English has been derived from the German word "Landschaft" meaning a restricted piece of land. Hartshorne observes that *"while the English word also used in an aesthetic way to refer to "appearance of land as we perceive it" ... "the section of the earths surface and sky that lies in our field of vision as seen in perspective from a particular point"* (Hartshorne 1939 cited in Olwig 1996)

This, Harsthorne further resonates, enable users to shift *"from the use of the same word to mean, on the one hand, a definitely restricted area and, on the other, a more or less definitely defined aspect of an unlimited extent of the earths surface"* (Hartshorne 1939 cited in Olwig 1996). These shifts between area and aspect are interesting – but I find it interesting in a slightly different manner I will elaborate on in this paper: 'Landscape' is all about aspects of an area, and the relation between an area and an aspect makes a vital core in what a landscape is.

Access

The paper has a specific background. Confronted with a task to give advice on how to balance protection and use of a major cultural heritage landscape in Norway – viz the silver mines at Kongsbergⁱⁱⁱ – an initial question arose: How do you access a mining landscape, partly above, partly below ground as it is? The issue soon split in two access-questions: the access in a mere physical sense and access in a mental sense: what did this landscape mean as a worked in landscape, and what can it mean to us today as a landscape?

Thus, a condition for studying or making an analysis of a landscape is to have access to the landscape. By access is then not meant the legal sense, but in the sense of anything from an abstract representation to entering it, being there and move in the landscape. But then, what exactly does it mean enter and be in a landscape - accessing a landscape?

The answer depends on what is meant with the word 'access' - and ultimately the word 'landscape'. With 'access',

- some might have in mind an abstract representation like a map, some statistics etc,
- others the physical relocation of some body through a particular parcel(s) of land - the bodily locomotion so to speak.

- Others again might have in mind the mental "capture" or the understanding of how a particular parcel(s) of land is interpreted or conceived as a landscape for somebody – they could hold that you cannot access something you cannot capture in your mind as something for somebody in a certain respect or capacity.
- Others – and I include ethnologist and their methodological approach here (Lykke 2007^{iv}) – would hold that in order to see you have to understand the respect or capacity of the users, and to do that you have to engage in a peripatetic dialogical process with them in the landscape.

In the latter case, one would have to presuppose that you cannot even see or view, not to mention review as part of policy making process, a landscape, unless you have acquired some mental representation of it. So again: What is 'landscape'?

A semiotic approach to landscape studied

This approach relies on semiotics in a post-Peircean tradition (Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) – something akin to the approach discussed by Vallega 2007^v).

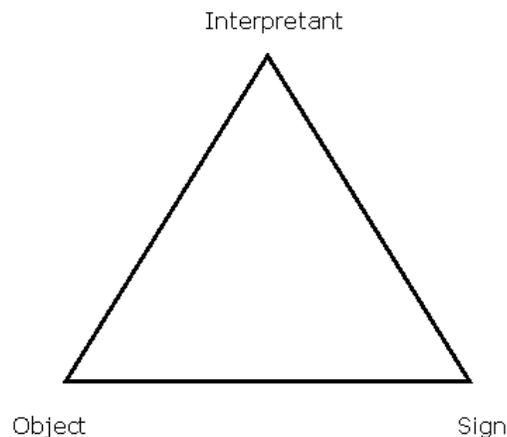
Semiotics is a set out point, and the intention is not to discuss the validity or theory of semiotics as such. Semiotics is where this paper starts, and the entailing elaboration rests on the theory. Thus, the approach will not be stronger than the theory of semiotics, but may of course be weaker.

A semiotic approach to landscape theory is an interest shared with other quarters of landscape researchers. This is not the format for doing a complete review of the litteratur, but the track I will be pursuing is along the line of Pitte (1983) for whom the landscape is a sign indicating the whole spectrum of human needs: the production of food, the consumption of other goods^{vi} and services. The idea is simply to do some reasoning starting from this question: Given a semiotic approach, what is a landscape and what basic methodological issues are a landscape analyst confronted with?

Semiosis is any form of activity, conduct, or process that involves signs, including the production of meaning.

Semiosis is, according to Peirce, "*an action ... which is ... a cooperation of a sign, its object and its interpretant*" (CP 5.484^{vii}). Briefly said, semiosis is the sign process.

The term was introduced by Peirce to describe a process whereby a sign user is referring signs to their objects. Semiosis is triadic.



Peircean semiotics operates with three elements in semiosis - the object, the sign

and the interpretant - the latter being the sign user for whom the sign represents the object in a certain respect or capacity.

The relation between sign, object and sign user (community) or interpretant is irreducibly triadic - meaning the relation cannot be reduced to any combination of dyadic relations without loss of what constitutes meaning. This again relates to a basic argument in pragmatism as it is found with Peirce and later Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 - 1951): The relation between language and reality cannot be understood in abstraction from the language user community.

In this irreducibly triadic relation between object, interpretant and sign, what is the landscape?

The landscape is not the object itself, it is the object as represented to an interpretant (community) in a certain respect or capacity.

So, the landscape is a sign.

So, to sum up, the assertion made by semiotics and applied to landscape studies are: All cognition is embedded in interpretation. All interpretation is by sign and sign users. All landscapes are interpretations of an area seen as something, by somebody in some respect or capacity. In this formula, landscapes are semiotic entities, landscape is a sign.

The meaning of a sign cannot be conceived in abstraction from the interpretant community. A sign has no universal valid meaning, it is only charged with meaning as a representation of an object in a given sign user situation

"A sign", Peirce says, "is a sign in actio, by virtue of it receiving an interpretation".

The meaning of a sign is inherently tied to an act, an act whereby signs are used by a sign user community ultimately as an integrated function in a life form – thus pragmatism.

In semiosis, a landscape is a (meaningful) representation to an interpretant (community) of an object that is a physical unit - the physical unit typically being a piece of land with inventory at a scale of square kilometers.

Now, whatever a 'landscape' is, it cannot be conceived as contingent on the interpretant alone nor the physical unit only, but they relate to produce or constitute 'landscape' through language. The relation between the interpretant and physical object is not un-mediated, it is not to be thought of as that of a mirror to its mirrored object. Quite the contrary, it is mediated and thus interpreted.

The landscape is the result of the the interpretant (community) act to cognize the physical unit as something in some respect or capacity. In this operation the interpretant is guided by or contingent on intention, purpose, project, enterprise etc. in conceiving the landscape, and not disconnect-able from intention, purpose, project, enterprise etc. The landscape is a sign representing an area as it is conceived by the interpretant as something in some respect or capacity.

I interpret Olwigs attempt at "*Recovering the Substantive nature of Landscape*" as advancing basically by performing an pragmatic analysis:

"It is not enough to study landscape as a scenic text. A more substantive understanding of landscape derives ... from the historical study of out changing conceptions and uses of land/landscape ..."

In a similar fashion I interpret Krogh^{viii}'s concept (1995) of "landscaping" when he defines "landscaping" as "man's process of creating meaning in interaction with his environment" – the "outcome" of which are landscapes.

While "landscaping" obviously must be understood as an activity, an act materializing as an historical process and through landscaping we make new relations to an area, it is less obvious that landscapes should basically be understood in the same way. This is Krogh's focus exactly, that we cannot access a landscape but through landscaping.

Methodological consequences

Now, if the landscape is a sign, then some methodological consequences can be deduced from that. Four of these will be investigated below in some detail. I have labelled them: (1) accessing a landscape, (2) subsumption or multiple landscapes, (3) landscape change (4) abstraction and landscapes.

(1) Accessing a Landscape

I will return to the opening question: What does it mean to enter, be in and share a landscape - in short accessing a landscape? I am not referring here to this as a legal issue of open, restricted or no access. What I have in mind is access in the sense we depend on when doing and communicating a landscape analysis.

Applying the non-reductionist approach in semiotics: Accessing a landscape can not be reduced to being in the object - that is a piece of land - subjected to interpretation.

Any two persons may be co-located in the same physical unit, without being in the same landscape.

Since a landscape is contingent on intention, purpose, project, enterprise etc., any two persons must master - at some level - the same set of intention, purpose, project, enterprise etc. that is relevant to a given landscape. To have access to a landscape, is not the same as to access an area where this landscape exists. Any two persons can be on the same spot, in the same area, but in different landscapes.

From a pragmatic point of view, to access a landscape means to somehow take part in the life-form / life-style / or simply activity and way-of-doing-things that makes up the core of the interpretants projects or program.

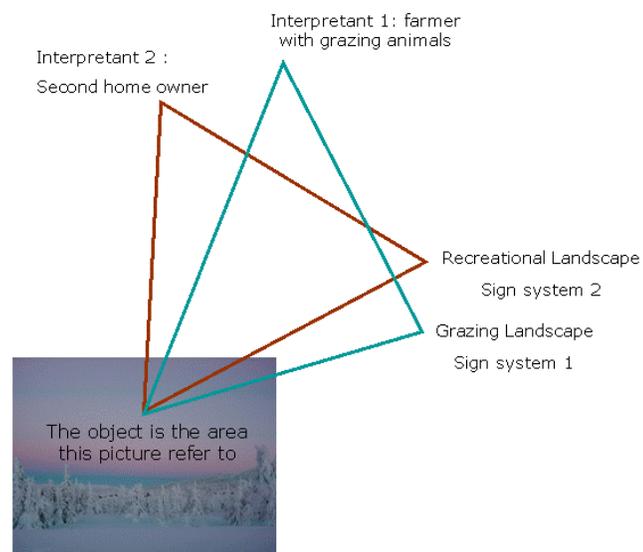
Norman Henderson doing "Replicate dog travois travel on the Northern Plains" in Canada (1994^x) in order to understand the area / technology interaction, and essential features in the native landscape. Another example is Henderson (1996) trying to understand "The canoe as a failure to the Canadian Planes" in the face of how "Canadians mythologize the aesthetics and importance of canoe travel in their nations development" – replicate travel being the means for accessing and assessing the landscape.

(2) Subsumption

It also follows that any one object - in this case an area as a physical unit - can be related to any number of interpretation communities or interpretants.

This has some odd implications: The one and the same (even congruent if you will) piece of land that we wish to subsume under the concept of 'landscape' may or may not contain many co-existent - even congruent - landscapes, related or unrelated.

This situation where one object – in this case an area we conceive as landscape - is interpreted by several related or unrelated signs / sign systems by different interpretant communities, could be labelled the physical mode of subsumption.



Subsumption is not dependant different interpretants conceiving mutually inconsistent facts about what the inventory or status in a landscape.

Of course they may operate with allegedly inconsistent facts – but disputes over facts as such are not the point here.

The point is relating to relevance.

The number of facts that can be ascribed to a piece of land is limitless. A selection will have to be made, and made by the various interpretant communities as part of their sign use – and this selection of relevance is related to the respect or capacity in which the sign is interpreted.

This again relates to the community life style the landscape in question is supporting. What is considered relevant facts legitimately and understandably varies across different user groups. These differences may in a developed discourse in for instance

a landscape analysis process turn up as a use of different data sets, different observation scales, different observation interests etc^x.

As is shown in theories of discourse analysis, these differences may run deep and are complex to resolve as part of a development process in which a landscape analysis may be one element. It is beyond the scope of this paper to pursue this thread.

The figure is an attempt to illustrate this in a situation where two interpretant communities - resp. a second home owner community and a farmer community as two interpretant communities, relates to the same area. They will - according to the semiotic approach - conceive two different landscapes.

Further, any one sign, may or may not relate to any number of physical units - see (4) Abstraction for more discussion on this. This means that an interpretant (community) may subsume many objects - here pieces of land - spatially detached - under the same landscape. This could be labelled the mental mode of subsuming.

(3) Landscape Emergence, Change and disappearance

Landscapes change and landscape change is an important part of most landscape analysis, policy making or review. Landscapes even emerges, dont they, beyond the mere geophysical processes that change our natural surroundings.

But if the landscape is a sign, then in what ways can a landscape emerge, change and even disappear? What modes of change can a landscape undergo according to this approach? A landscape can come into being, change or disappear either by changes in the mental unit - the interpretant (community) - the physical unit - the area as a physical object - or both.

Material changes (whether by nature or human made) in an area may or may not be considered a change in, or a threat to, a given set of landscapes. Material change does not, according to this approach, necessarily imply a landscape change.

The object of a sign is one thing, its meaning another.

Whether or not material change is understood as landscape change is dependent on the way the material change affects the landscape, which reflects the effects on an actual change ('conceivable practical effect') on a given interpretant.

This is the essence of the Peircian type of 'pragmatic meaning theory' (Apel, 1973^{xi}). If the change has no conceivable practical effect within an interpretive tradition, or if the practical effects are considered unimportant by that interpretive tradition, material change may not alter a landscape.

The reference to practical effects connects to technology, since any judgement of possible action and possible practical effects must refer to technologies within which we generate or discard ideas of how lives could be lived. In this way a landscape is something within a technological context.

Landscape as a sign is to some extent a construct or model, a perspective, filter or a cognitive aspect in which we focus on and fix certain stable features in a continuously changing object, insofar as it represents a special value or attracts the attention of an interpretant.

Landscapes as signs may be lost.

In the extreme case of the interpretant community disappearing or are unable to relate to the physical unit as before, the landscape disappears. If the mental unit changes, the landscape changes.

In both these situations - oddly enough - the physical unit may in principle be the same and not undergoing any relevant change even though the landscape changes. This represents what we could call the mental mode of landscape emergence, development, change and possible disappearance.

If the physical unit changes in relevant ways to the interpretant community, or disappears, their landscape change or disappear. This represents what we could call the physical mode of landscape change and development.

An intermezzo: The European Union and the definition of 'landscape' in the Landscape Convention

These first three points discussed are consistent with, but transcend, the definition of landscape as it is found in the European Union Landscape Convention – a convention also signed by the Norwegian state (Xxdate)).

The definition of a landscape in the convention is:

“Landscape” means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors;”^{xii}

The key point here is that landscape is defined as contingent – and contingency in the sense of being an categorical imperative - on 'perceived by people'. It follows by logic that if a certain perception disappears, the landscape disappears. If a certain perception changes, the landscape changes. There is no requisite in the definition for any material changes for the landscape to change – thus landscapes may emerge, change and disappear without any material changes in the area perceived. The only requisite is that the perception changes. And the perception might obviously change for a lot of other reasons than a material change in the area being perceived as a landscape. New knowledge, new interests and other impulses on the one who perceives might well provide them with a new approach. A good example here would be farmers and other land owners in outfield rural areas who realizes that land of marginal interest from a farming point of view might still contain recreational amenities that can be turned into a commodity in a market as a sale of parcels for 2nd homes. And voila, a significant change has happened of how an area is perceived without any material change taking place. The general point here is that technological, social and cultural development will change landscapes – but not necessarily through causing material change.

And likewise, a material change in the area being the object of perception might be irrelevant to the area as perceived by people. Again, the object is one thing and the perception of it another – and the object is not the landscape.

And again likewise, different groups of people might – and most probably do – perceive the one and the same area differently, even at the same time. And thus we may – and probably do – have different landscapes coexisting in the exact or approximately same area.

So, is the definition offered by the landscape convention sufficient? I think not – the definition should do a better effort at bringing home one vital point to my opinion: The landscape is an representation of an object – and the crucial question in landscape management and policy – which is the main concern with the convention – is how not the perceptions per se, but how these relates to peoples lifestyles or life forms, and in the next step how we can gain access to those perceptions.

The term 'perceived by people' has a certain ease or lightness attached to it. You might be inveigled to think that a people pointing to a picture gives you access to a full blooded meaning.

It does not.

A picture does not amount to much.

A picture per se is in itself almost void of meaning - as is so brilliant demonstrated by Rene Magritte and his series of painting "The Treachery of Images".



Figure 1: Painting by Rene Magritte 1928/29 "The Treachery of Images" If not a pipe, what then?

It is not a pipe, it smells of oil paint, you cannot feel its texture or weight and you cannot smoke it. To understand what it is you are dependant on being initiated in a culture, its technology, enterprises and values.

To coin a sign to refer to an object to convey meaning in use, a community of sign

users must agree on a simple meaning within their sign system. But that sign can transmit that meaning only within the structures and codes of a given sign system. Codes also represent the values of the sign user community culture, and are able to add new shades of connotation to every aspect of life.

From a methodological point of view, very little is gained by using pictures as the tool to gain access to the meanings of a landscape various groups of peoples may have. Sadly, this is an all too common method used by landscape researchers. From a semiotic point of view the result returned in this method probably amounts to no more than reproducing the researchers own sign repertoire.

(4) Abstraction and meaning

Landscape then, is a sign.

As a sign, a landscape is an abstraction relating to the interpretant community and its object is the various ways discussed in sign theory. Various signs lend themselves to abstractions in various ways. To discuss how, we have to look briefly at various types of signs.

A sign is a representamen with a mental interpretant. Peirce operates with an advanced system of classification of signs. If we focus on the relation between the sign and the object, Peirce operates with three qualities of signs which all are present in all signs, but more or less pronounced and of more or less pronounced in their function as signs. There are

- iconic signs, or icons. They fulfill their function as signs due to a likeness between the sign and the object it signifies. The map or the picture are good examples.
- indexical signs, or indexes. They fulfill their function due to the fact that they are in physical contact with the object, or that the sign is really affected by or dependent on the object, they are in a direct time- and space relation to their object. The thermometer, the flag, "my hometown", the road sign, these are all examples of indexes, or signs where the indexical quality is important.
- and finally, symbols, or symbolic signs. These are signs who is given a function pr convention (they are also time- and space-independent)

When we focus on the relation between the sign and the interpretant (sign-user), Peirce operates with several categories, among those with "Qualisign's". Qualisigns are signs where "quality" (as opposed to convention, law, causality and so on) is an important part of the sign function.

One example is feelings, and how feelings in a specific sign-use-situation are a sign for us. This is important in landscape discussions. In Peirce's classification, the landscape in many practical situations functions as an indexical qualisign. For some, being "there" and being overwhelmed by the feeling it arouses, is the sign quality which is *sine qua non* - it is identity experienced - it is a practical effect indeed.

Peirce offered a maxim for determining the meaning of a sign:

"Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object" (CP 5.402).

This is a meaning principle, and not a criterion of demarcation separating the meaningful from the meaningless. It is a method for ascertaining meaning. It also makes clear that the meaning of a sign is something else than its object (thus an area has no meaning per se)(CP 5.412).

An object is whatever a sign refers to, however indefinite (CP 5.412). Note that the maxim refers to "conceivable", and not actual, effects, thereby separating it from behaviourism.

The maxim reaches beyond the actual practical situation, and allows for the flight of imagination provided this ultimately alights upon possible practical effects (CP 5.196). The important thing here is the internal constitutive relation between sign use, cognition and action. The point is that the ultimate purpose of thinking is action. This may be considered a valuable quality in relation to management and politics.

Landscapes become the most general and publicly accessible and shareable aides-memoire of a culture's knowledge and understanding of its past and future (Küchler, 1993^{xiii}). As such it is the indexical and qualisign aspects of the landscape as a sign which is important. Because of this, landscapes, and memory of landscapes lost, may serve as an important focus for political organisation around the issue of territory (and not around the space-independent class interests for example), and this has been witnessed many times in the course of history. A landscape is not something external to groups in society. It is part of society, of the matrix of action and possible action in social groups, and part of identity.

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- ii Hartshorne, R. 1939. "The Nature of Geography. A critical survey of current thought in light of the past." Lancaster, PA: AAG.
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- iv Syse, K.V.L. 2007 "Moving about: An ethnographic approach to landscape research" in Roca, Z. Theo Spek, Theano Terkenli, Tobias Plieninger and Franz Höchli (eds.) 2007 "European landscapes and lifestyles. The Mediterranean and beyond" pp 323 - 330 Lisboa: Edicoes Universitarias Lusofonas
- v Vallega, A 2007 The landscape: Places and Cultures in Roca, Z. Theo Spek, Theano Terkenli, Tobias Plieninger and Franz Höchli (eds.) 2007 "European landscapes and lifestyles. The Mediterranean and beyond" pp 57 - 70 Lisboa: Edicoes Universitarias Lusofonas
- vi Pitte, J.-R. 1983 "*Histoire du paysage français.*" Paris:Tallandier
- vii CP: Throughout the paper CP is referring to the collected papers of CS Peirce, (volume number).(paragraph number).
- viii Krogh, E 1995 "The phenomenology of landscape" Norges Landbrukshoegskole, Aas (Norway)
- ix Henderson, Normann
- x An illustrative example is found in Sevenant, M and M. Antrop 2007 "Assessing land use intensity and dynamics in a rural Mediterranean landscape: Lassithi plateau in Crete" in Roca, Z. Theo Spek, Theano Terkenli, Tobias Plieninger and Franz Höchli (eds.) 2007 "European landscapes and lifestyles. The Mediterranean and beyond" pp 175 - 197 Lisboa: Edicoes Universitarias Lusofonas
- xi Apel, K-O 1973 "Das Apriori der Kommunikationsgemeinschaft und die Grundlagen der Ethik" Berlin: Suhrkamp
- xii European Landscape Convention (ETS no. 176)
- xiii Kuchler, Susan. (1993). "Landscape as Memory: The Mapping of Process and its Representation in a Melanesian Society." In Barbara Bender (ed.), *Landscape, Politics and Perspectives*. Oxford: Berg.