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"Ten Versions of the Same Scene" 40 years later: Understanding and teaching the landscape concept

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Abstract

This paper aims to return to the importance of addressing the concept of landscape, and how to teach it, in a multidimensional way, through different perspectives. Starting from Meinig's (1979a) *The Beholding Eyes: Ten Versions of the Same Scene*, we first reflect on how this paper is still effective as a proposal for approaching the landscape issue and its polysemy.

The ten organising ideas proposed in the text can be grouped along three axes: a) the human-nature interrelationship, b) the form vs. function debate and analytical scheme and c) human/cultural perspectives on landscape meanings and values.

More than four decades later, Meinig's scheme seems to remain malleable and adaptive to a series of issues, concerns and purposes resulting from new circumstances arising from world change and socio-cultural transformation. Thereafter, we present a didactical exercise set for a group of master's students that starts from Meinig's paper and aims to acquire the skill of taking different perspectives on landscapes. The results of the students' work confirm how effectively the exercise achieves this aim. In particular, it is noteworthy how the students' gaze, once they have acquired the ability to manage complexity and take into consideration the polysemy of landscape, opens up towards the future of landscapes, generating conscious proposals for actions.

Keywords: Landscape Polysemy, Landscape Consciousness, Master's Students Exercise

1. Introduction

The present contribution originates from a joint reflection by three scholars and teachers sharing their long experience in educational and research praxis dealing with landscape issue. In our experience, research is enriched through the consideration of different approaches to landscape and the multiplicity of points of view on it, opening up different and intriguing interpretations of the world. Of all geographical units of analysis, we turn to landscape, because, by definition, it is the one that most readily and directly mediates between humans and their surroundings, providing the links and interconnections substantiating all human-space interactions.

Accordingly, on the educational side, landscape ought not to be addressed through the mere transmission of conventional teachings or isolated bits of knowledge, but in the framework of education in complexity and plurality (Luginbühl, 1996; Castiglioni, 2012; Calcagno Maniglio, 2017; Antrop and Van Eetvelde, 2019; Castiglioni and Cisani, 2022). By virtue of its polysemy, the concept of landscape is useful for introducing the idea of the variety of the Earth's surface as perceived by humans (i.e. points of view or gazes, contexts, experiences, identity, practices, meanings, models) to students. If landscape is considered as both an object and a tool (Dematteis, 2010), learning critically about/ through it is an important exercise bearing crucial lessons in our relationship with the world and each other.

But what is it, more precisely, that we can learn from landscape? The answer is indirectly provided by German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, whose life straddled the 17th and 18th centuries. In his work *Monadology*, §57, Leibniz claims that "the same town, when looked at from different places, appears quite different and is, as it were, multiplied in perspectives" (Leibniz, 2014, p. 121). Similarly, in his short essay *On Social Life*, the author points out that "thus one can say that the place of others […] is a place proper to help us discover considerations which would not otherwise come to us; and that everything which we would find unjust if we were in the place of others must seem to us to be suspect of

injustice" (Leibniz, 1988, p. 81). Coming back to the landscape, the variety of perspectives we can use in approaching it opens us up to different versions of the world.

Starting from this point and focusing on the educational issue, this paper aims at stimulating the debate on how to progress in landscape consciousness. Even if landscape polysemy is already well-established as a concept among landscape scholars, didactic practices are often oriented towards only one of all possible directions, following the approach that the teacher may circumstantially feel at ease with (Castiglioni and Cisani, 2022). Moreover, in didactic practices, polysemy is often considered as a source of confusion and uncertainty. Our assumption is that, on the contrary, the variety of landscapes and of their constitutive elements, as well as of human reactions and attitudes when dealing with landscapes, when organised in a coherent framework, constitute an advantageous educational resource. The now classic text by Donald William Meinig (1924-2020), *The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene* (1979a), represents, in our opinion, a well-established and widely acknowledged reference point and worthwhile conceptual framework for taking into account and focusing on landscape polysemy, in order to outline educational paths centred on heterogeneity and multiplicity.

Therefore, after a reintroduction of Meinig's text, for the purpose of reflecting theoretically on the polysemy of landscape, we present the results of a didactic exercise conducted at a postgraduate level. Such an exercise allows for an investigation on the outcomes of students' encounter with empirical applications of the concept of landscape polysemy in specific case studies.

2. The different approaches to landscape and the update of the "ten versions"

2.1 The polysemic landscape concept

Landscape is distinct from place and other geographical units of analysis, mainly on the basis of its property of "relationality", which is the various ways in which humans associate and interact with their environment in body, mind and spirit. As "a portion of land which the eye

can comprehend at a glance" (Jackson, 1984, p. 3), its presence is ubiquitous in human life since it constitutes the surroundings of everyday contexts. This old definition of landscape highlights the fact that landscape means different things to different people. Accordingly, it has been widely viewed as representing both a medium and an outcome of human perception, experience and action, where vision predominates (Lothian, 1999) and where people's notions of and preferences for certain types and characteristics of landscape are largely culturally driven, socially contested and politically/institutionally articulated (Meinig, 1979b; Cosgrove, 1998; Olwig, 2019).

The old predominance of vision in the definition and articulation of landscape is tightly associated with notions of the "scenic landscape" which developed from the Renaissance conceptualisation of landscape as prospect. In recent decades, however, there has been a shift in the conceptualisation of landscape, which has reclaimed its original substantive meaning (Olwig, 2019), that is, "an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors", as captured in Article 1 of the European Landscape Convention (ELC). This definition – although in its political/juridical, not strictly scientific, nature – originates in contemporary landscape notions and encapsulates the whole trajectory of approaches and resulting body of knowledge and understanding of the landscape historically gained by geography and the social sciences. The ELC is also valuable for having reaffirmed the essential interdependencies between landscape and people (Olwig, 2007; Tress and Tress, 2001). Accordingly, for its implementation, the ELC states that the signatory Parties (the Countries) commit themselves in carrying out actions directed to citizen awareness of, sensitisation to and participation in landscape matters.

It is well known that landscape means different things to different individuals and different groups of people (Meinig, 1979a; Zube et al., 1982; Lothian, 1999; Herzog et al., 2000). The fact that landscape notions and preferences are likely to be both genetically and culturally construed is equally well established (Appleton,

1975; Jackson, 1984; Palmer, 1997; Cosgrove, 1998). Decidedly, however, landscape may be viewed as an ever-evolving, mutually-informing medium of human engagement with the world (both natural and human/cultural, objective and subjective, "real" and imaginary, etc.). Therefore, the complex and synthetic nature of landscape renders it a stage set and view of the world with which the observer/user/visitor engages in variable ways (Turri, 1998).

2.2 Meinig's ten versions of a landscape scene

Numerous studies have been carried out on people's notions of and preferences for landscapes, laying out a more or less consistent pattern of lay landscape aesthetic preferences and conceptualisations (Zube et al., 1981; Purcell et al., 1994; Sevenant and Antrop, 2009). It has been argued that people prefer certain types of landscapes regardless of their cultural or personal predispositions and backgrounds (innate, even primordial, preferences). All in all, both subjective and objective qualities, as well as tangible and intangible dimensions, have been recognised in the landscape and infused in individual and group perception and cognition, not only culturally and experientially, but also very possibly, genetically (Lothian, 1999; Herzog et al., 2000). We concede with recent research supporting previous findings, as well as the high degree to which the latter vary and are contingent on the cognitive, emotional and behavioural ways in which "multiple publics" relate to landscapes (Adevi and Grahn, 2012), depending on both individual perceptual and experiential filters and on collective and social cultural models (Luginbühl, 2012).

However, due probably to the magnitude of the task, there have been almost no concerted efforts to put all these different perspectives on and understandings of landscape in a single organised framework of different "versions of the same landscape". Meinig's effort to do so (1979a) stands out as a classic and a point of reference, continuing to inspire both research and teaching engagement with the polysemy of landscape (Birdsall, 2003; Pavlis, 2012), as well as the main reason and basis of our re-thinking and revising it here. Published over four decades ago, *The Beholding Eye* remains timely and

relevant in its message that landscape is "not only… what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads" (Meinig, 1979a, p. 34), thus inviting various lay perspectives on and notions of landscape. He organises such perspectives into ten perspectives/lenses or versions, namely 1) landscape as nature, 2) landscape as habitat, 3) landscape as artifact, 4) landscape as system, 5) landscape as problem, 6) landscape as wealth, 7) landscape as ideology, 8) landscape as history, 9) landscape as place and 10) landscape as aesthetic.

Meinig's 10-version scheme is clearly not only very comprehensive, but especially effective in connoting landscape polysemy. The first three perspectives on landscape represent the three levels of the relationship between humans and their spatial surroundings, ranging from the version where nature predominates over the human being (landscape as nature), to the version where humans and nature seem to co-exist harmoniously (landscape as habitat), to the version where humans rule over and control nature (landscape as artifact). Next, he articulates three other perspectives that refer to versions of landscape as viewed through its functions: landscape as system, landscape as problem and landscape as wealth. These three versions of landscape functions, implying different dimensions in the ways humans tend to approach and/or utilise them, stand in contradistinction with the last in his list (landscape as aesthetic), which regards landscape as form(s). Finally, the remaining three versions (landscape as ideology, landscape as history and landscape as place) address landscape perspectives as lived in, conceived of and valued as socio-spatial/cultural contexts, perspectives imbuing landscapes with distinctive human meanings and values, thus opening opening up to the political dimension of landscape issues. In sum, regardless of the efficacy of our above grouping of Meinig's categorisations of landscape perspectives, his main objective remains the same. Specifically, he suggests that each landscape observer/user/visitor constructs meaning from and invests value in what they see by adhering to one or more of these ten alternative groupings of ways in which the same landscape may be viewed and made sense of. None of these ways

implies a judgment on the landscape; they are not positive or negative in themselves, but only "lenses", mental organising ideas. Furthermore, he acknowledges that the ten perspectives he offers do not exhaust the possibilities, but that they are meant to "suggest something of the complexities of the topic" (Meinig, 1979a, p. 47), and that these groupings of landscape perspectives may not be distinct from each other in most people's minds (Birdsall, 2003), but intertwine and interrelate in a variety of ways.

2.3 Updating Meinig and other thoughts

The publication of Meinig's work came at a critical point in the history of geographic thought and is highly evocative of the dominant paradigm in geographical research at the time. Specifically, it represents the culmination of the humanist paradigm in geography, building on the work of preceding cultural and historical geographers (Lowenthal, 1961; Tuan, 1979). Humanistic ontologies and epistemologies flourished in the social sciences, but also in all scientific fields pertaining to the landscape during the 1960s and 1970s, as a backlash to the reign of quantitative geography and spatial analysis in the 1950s and 1960s. Although a huge (multi)disciplinary body of research and literature has been produced on the subject since the 1960s, Meinig's work is a direct product of those times.

Furthermore, although landscape theory has developed extensively since then, in geography and numerous other disciplines – through articulated paths that cannot be summarised in this short space – the value, scope and impact of Meinig's work continues to be highly relevant in today's time-space-culture contexts of human life. This becomes apparent through the construction of his framework on the basis of three axes: a) the human-nature interrelationship, b) the form vs. function debate and analytical scheme and c) human/cultural perspectives on landscape meanings and values. This grouping of his landscape versions also seems to accord with the main tenets of the ELC's definition and conceptualisation of landscape, as presented above, and may thus prove to be amenable to adjustments to accommodate contemporary trends without

losing its saliency and value. Perhaps new perspectives, such as "landscape as technology", "landscape as crisis", "landscape as experience/practice" or "landscape as playground", reflecting recent and current issues and preoccupations of our 21st-century world, may be added to this list. However, the latter may as easily be seen to be part of Meinig's articulations of such landscape perspectives, "fitting" into his versions of "landscape as history", "landscape as problem", "landscape as place" and "landscape as habitat", respectively. Therefore, Meinig's scheme so far seems to remain not only "the clearest and most straightforward articulation" (Birdsall, 2003, p. 30) of landscape perspectives, but also ever malleable and adaptive to a series of issues, concerns and purposes resulting from new circumstances of world change and socio-cultural transformation.

3. The exercise

3.1 The context, the didactical aim, the instructions

Meinig's *Ten Versions of the Same Scene* was used as a basis for the final exercise of the first-year lecture, *Introduction to Landscape Studies*, for students of the Master's degree in Landscape Studies at the University of Padua – a master's degree in geography, with a particular focus on landscape issues – in the classes of two academic years: a) 2020-2021 and b) 2021-2022. The students came from different bachelors and had undertaken few or no geographical studies in their previous curriculum. At the beginning of their master's course, this exercise allowed them to understand the complexity of the concept of landscape through the application of theoretical reflections on this complexity to a concrete situation. It also allowed the instructor to verify their preparation and aptitude for critical reflection on landscape issues.

The exercise was assigned approximately in the middle of the course, with students given 10-12 weeks to complete it. It was an individual exercise, for which each student chose a landscape which was known to them and easily accessible (both academic years were marred by mobility restrictions due to the pandemic). The

exercise was then divided into the following steps:

I. a first "immersion" into the chosen landscape and its framing, using two didactic templates: a) walking in the landscape (described in Castiglioni et al., 2020) and b) reading the landscape (described in Castiglioni, 2012).

II. a series of visits to the landscape (we suggested ten), more or less once a week, each time after studying one of Meinig's ten landscape versions ("lenses").

III. a short essay (between 2000 and 4000 characters) prepared after each visit, describing the landscape through that specific "lens".

IV. compilation of conclusions comprising: a) a title for the studied landscape; b) personal considerations, assessments and/ or proposals for it; and c) a brief reflection on the meaning of the exercise carried out.

The evaluation of the exercises by the teacher took into account the clarity of the landscape descriptions, the precision in adopting each of the ten versions and the students' consequent ability to identify emerging issues in the landscape, as well as the discussion of the exercise itself during the oral exam.

The students were aided in carrying out the exercise through the organisation of debates in class and supervision of papers in preparation. With regard to the 2021-2022 academic year group, the activity itself was preceded by a brief workshop in which the students, divided into groups, analysed the same landscape according to some of the ten versions (three-four per group), before coming together for a whole-class discussion.

In the following section, we present some considerations that emerge from the analysis of the students' work (42 exercises in the academic year 2020-2021 and 24 in the academic year 2021-2022). We focus on the final texts (step IV), in order to identify through them the evidence of the overall effectiveness of the exercise, with respect to the didactic objectives.

3.2 Analysing the students' work: from awareness of landscape polysemy to generation of new actions

Most of the students at the end of the exercise reported certain difficulties in executing it, especially in clearly differentiating the ten versions from each other and in discerning their specificities. Nonetheless, most of them stated that they acknowledged the exercise's efficacy in developing a deep understanding of landscape complexity, and expressed that in different ways that we proceed to delineate in the following, quotes of their own words.

A.D. explicitly affirmed that "[the exercise] allowed me to understand complexity". In line with this statement, most students recognised the importance of this activity in engendering a greater awareness of what the landscape is, can be, and represents. In other words, thanks in particular to the demanding task of identifying the specificity of each version and of distinguishing one from another, the exercise seemed to serve in "broadening the gaze" (D.B.) and acquiring awareness of landscape polysemy.

Moreover, some students underlined how the exercise allowed them to acquire methodological tools through which to confront the landscape in its complexity. The words of E.F. and F.M. are very clear: "I was convinced that I knew this landscape, but I lacked a method to do so" says the first; "It is thanks to the details that I was able to make sense of my thoughts" is the observation of the second. With reference to how the exercise on the ten versions forced the students to "give content and shape to their gaze" (using the words of B.N.), the work done by R.S. is very interesting. She used ten different characters, each with an invented name, to voice the description of the landscape in the ten different versions, in order to be sure that she was clearly distinguishing between them.

Through the students' words, the exercise is also shown to have been effective in letting them reflect upon their own positioning: "it allowed me to get out of the personal sphere with which I was used to observing a landscape" (M.A.); "it pushed me to go beyond the idea I had" (F.B.); "it led me to have a non-partisan vision, to then rework my point of view" (R.S.); "there have been moments in which I thought I had come to the end of my usual vocabulary, but something always appeared between the meanderings of thought, mental drawers opened, and, amazing myself, I got back into gear. I have discovered the landscape as a tool "to reveal what is false, what is invisible in the visible" (Turri, 2004, p. 82) in my reading of myself, too" (C.C.). In sum, most of the students highlighted the value of this didactic activity in acquiring a critical spirit and a new approach to landscape, learning to question both the landscape itself and their own selves.

Somewhat unexpectedly, the students largely underlined a second area of effectiveness as concerns the assigned didactic exercise. For many of them, in fact, the ability to read the complexity of the landscape appeared to open up a dimension that we could define as "planning/generating actions", combining the analysis and interpretation with the development of proposals for the landscape in question , thus mobilising the students as to their future interrelationships with the landscape: "this awareness and understanding of the various aspects is necessary to activate the required processes" are the explicit words of D.B. More precisely, F.R. – who analysed a small urban park in a state of semi-neglect – wonders "about the initiatives that could be undertaken, starting from this methodology to broaden the debate on the theme of abandoned landscapes and to arrive at project proposals". R.M., recognising the potential of the exercise, proposes taking an extra step, specifically to also have this exercise carried out by "political actors and stakeholders involved in planning for the future in the area" (provided they could be involved in landscape training processes). These considerations confirm that education in/ through landscape – at all levels – has far greater potential when it is approached as a process of "landscape literacy" (Spirn, 2005; Castiglioni, 2022) than as a simple set of theoretical notions and instructions. They confirm that the process of learning to "read" (analyse and interpret) the landscape is necessarily intertwined with that of learning to "write" it, that is to imagine what the landscape could become and to act responsibly ("do" the landscape) in the process of its future transformation, moving from sensitisation to action.

It is, however, necessary to note a difficulty which the students did not always overcome. Some of them embarked on the exercise "imbued" with an unconscious ideological approach, so that the "landscape as ideology" versions apparently permeated all others. Often, in fact, in most common approaches, the best thing we can expect from a landscape reading is that it is reported to be "green", "natural", or "the mirror of a traditional rural society", in "perfect harmony between humankind and nature". Accordingly, in some of the exercises we found declarations such as "humans have distorted the original natural landscape" or "I feel the urgency to intervene to restore the lost harmonies" (A.C.). In particular, with regard to the first three versions (those referring to the human-nature relationship, the first axis above), some students attributed a decidedly positive judgment to everything that could be identified as "nature", going on to assign a negative meaning to any inclusion of signs of human activities, in particular those of modern and present times. A deeper analysis might better define students' positions concerning this axis, particularly the theoretical evolution of relevant issues over the last forty years and how they underlie some of the connections between the framework of the sustainability (and/or post-sustainability) paradigm and landscape.

Since the exercise requires an analytical approach taking into consideration several landscape elements and aspects useful for presenting each of the ten versions, most of the students were able to combine them into their suggested title for the studied landscape, at the end of the exercise. It is worth remarking that, in the considerable effort made by the students to create an effective final synthesis, most of their titles encapsulate both the denotative/ material and connotative/ perceptual aspects of the landscape: not only in a personal way, expressing the emotions they felt and their *topophilia* towards it, but also – and most remarkably – what could defined as the *genius loci*, the distinctive and essential character of that specific landscape. The examples in Table 1 show different students' attempts to combine their description of physical characteristics with the expression of their personal relationship and the specific landscape "essence".

Human dialogue with land and water
Between heaven and earth, a country with a rural vocation
Dancing slowly in a field, in the summer
Ten characters in search of a landscape
A timeless landscape between the lagoon and the sea
Intra: landscape of a land in the middle
That corner of Saccisica that I call "home"
Ten views on the hill: a Mediterranean heart in the city
A meeting place
The abandoned "balloon": green, grey, white, blue

Table 1. Some of the titles proposed by the students for the landscapes they analysed.
Source: Students' exercises, a.y. 2020-2021 and 2021-2022.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that the exercise stimulated one of the students, A.R, to add three further versions to Meinig's ten versions. She also described the landscape through the following lenses: "landscape as inclusion", "landscape in a time of pandemic" and "landscape as gender". In the first, she simulated the description of a blind person, walking through the landscape with her eyes blindfolded and a companion at her side, highly attentive to the different sensory reactions to the different aspects of the landscape emerging from her and her companion's perceptions of them, as well as to accessibility issues. The second focused on the absence of people and presence of natural elements. The third was approached through interviews with a small sample of male and female respondents with the aim to understand different attitudes to that landscape and the interviewees' openness to be involved in its management. Despite their slight naivety, and without at all wishing to modify or integrate Meinig's work, these proposed additions illustrate how this didactic exercise encourages students to be creative (also from a methodological point of view) and reinforces their proclivity to take an open approach to landscape.

4. Discussions and conclusions

The outcome of the analysis of the works carried out by the students confirms the overall effectiveness of this exercise with respect to the proposed didactic objectives. Their efforts in distinguishing one landscape version from the other, together with their final remarks and the titles they gave to the chosen landscapes, led us to a positive assessment of the acquired results.

Through this exercise, they seemed not only to "learn to see more" and "through a flexible lens" (as presented in the didactic experience of Birdsall, 2003), but also to learn to understand the gaze of others, as the exercise by R.S. – who named a character for each version – testifies. Such skills may come in handy in the dialogue with other academic fields and other disciplines, with different approaches to landscape. Moreover, in future professional activities, these skills will be useful in dialogue with interlocutors from different areas (such as landscape project professionals, technical staff of public administrations, operators in tourism development and various actors/ stakeholders and audiences involved in awareness-raising actions). All of these sides/ interlocutors are bound to approach landscape differently: as either nature or aesthetics, or history, or problem, and so on. Developing a profound understanding of landscape polysemy will help our students to understand their interlocutors' perspectives and build positive and effective relationships with them.

Furthermore, in many of the students' exercises, it is possible to find reflections on their own positioning in relation to the landscape concept – that is, the "lens" they unintentionally adopt. This exercise thus helps to strengthen their self-consciousness, to put in evidence the existence of preconceptions and, therefore, to detach from them and open up to complexity and multiplicity. The latter could be reinforced by introducing an occasion of discussion among the students, at the end of the course.

These first reflections on the students' activities, carried out on the basis of the methodology proposed above, indicate once again how landscape may constitute an intriguing concept in didactics. Even if its polysemy at first generates disorientation and confusion, we strongly encourage that it is taken seriously into account in different educational contexts, including classes that first deal with landscape issues. When confronted through an effective conceptual framework and a suitable methodology – as, in this case, the use of Meinig's text – such difficulties may nevertheless encourage students' critical thinking, empathy with multiple points of view, as well as greater awareness, depth of analysis, and the ability to propose actions for sustainable future transformation.

Moreover, it is noteworthy to ascertain how the students' gaze, once they acquired the ability to manage complexity and take landscape polysemy into consideration, opened up, towards the future prospects for the landscape, generating more conscious actions. Such an opening up adheres to the approach introduced by the European Landscape Convention regarding the need to consider different kinds of action vis-à-vis the landscape: not only its safeguarding – as traditionally proposed in the Italian and other European law frames – but also its appropriate management and planning.

Finally, reflection on landscape polysemy and its different levels (from multidisciplinarity to personal preferences), either in education or in research, must never be regarded as a completed mission. By combining traditional texts with current and updated reflections and by comparing theory with didactic practices and actions in the landscape, polysemy continues to emerge as a distinctive trait and an element of strength – not a weakness – of landscape as a key concept in geography.

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