

Disharmonia Mundi

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1.

Day by day we feel the need to surround ourselves in our visually important living spaces with landscapes – be they real or artificial. We have a desire to summon nature – in both its narrower and wider interpretation – to see it represented in our urban environment. All this, of course, is possible in countless other ways besides in a two-dimensional, traditional visual representation: by nurturing potted plants or arranging artificial flowers, with screensaver sunsets or with chirping ringtones.

Over the centuries, man has conquered ever larger spaces from the nature surrounding him, moulding the niches of every species of flora and fauna into “his own image”. He has occupied lands and waters, transformed mountains and valleys, and engendered artificial heights and depths. In parallel with this perpetual transformation, he also increasingly attempted to smuggle nature – perhaps often unconsciously – into his constructed environment. The art field is no exception to this rule: the traditional notion of the landscape long ago discarded its strictly interpreted boundaries and extended to the wider context of man, to every sort of landscape transformed by civilisation and to its manifold formal representations.

2.

The pure landscape, as genre, appeared relatively late in art history. While we are familiar with a few depictions of nature from antiquity, the Western world considers the pictures illustrating the seasons and work in the Book of Hours made by the Limbourg Brothers for the Duc de Berry the first such compositions¹. This case remained an isolated phenomenon for quite some time, as mediaeval man did not so much wish to see or represent his own environment as the Garden of Eden, or other locations relaying metaphysical content and deviating from reality. Here, the landscape appeared as a decorative background and/or frame built up from symbols, as the set for the scenes played out within. All this was chiefly fed by the rigid dissonance between Christianity and the tangible world, which only gradually, as a result of the strengthening of human curiosity and the desire for knowledge, was able to shake its dogmatism. Régis Debray writes that, “Quand une société aime un peu moins Dieu, elle regarde un peu plus les choses et les gens”.²

For the pure landscape for its own sake, and not only toward the representation of some sort of superior aim, the commercial successes and the strengthening of mercantile capitalism of Renaissance Venice and Flanders were necessary. Travels, and in parallel with these, new navigational techniques, the appearance of reliable maps, the development of optical science, the camera obscura and the processing of the conception of perspective, as well as the discovery of the New World, all brought forth the flourishing of the portrayal of landscape. With the propagation of journeys for diplomatic and mercantile reasons, and with the encounter with distant cultures, grew the demand for faithful documentation, the objective presentation of locales both surrounding us and at an unknown unattainable distance, and for the proud evocation of conquered territories.

The ideal landscape might appear to be of a documentary nature, when in reality, it is born based on memories, experiences and rapid plein air sketches. The artist re-composes nature, taking real elements as his starting point in realising a new structure of ideal beauty, striving for harmony and balance. At first glance, in the paintings of Jacob von Ruisdael, it is precise realism that seems typical, but analysed from an iconographic perspective, the themes are in fact the fate of mortality, Flemish politics, or moral lessons. In other words, the landscape, transcending itself, in this moment, offered a pretext for visualising moral or other site-specific contents. Romantic portrayals of landscape, on the other hand, clearly appeal to the emotions, and to the stimulation of the imagination. The Enlightenment and accelerated urbanization, and later the beginnings of industrialization and the swift development of the sciences, resulted increasingly in a preference for landscapes serving as vehicles for wanderlust and rapture.

The 19th century was the age of the final emancipation of the landscape, in which the appearance of photography played an important role. The first heliograph – realised through a long course of experimentation by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, educated by the Encyclopaedists with scientific pragmatism – ancestor of photography, was a landscape. The slightly foggy and blurred image of roofs, taken by Niépce from his window in the winter of 1825-26, signified the beginning of a novel and multifaceted representative series. Twenty years later, in the middle of the century, photography had already become a dynamic and perpetually renewing medium rivalling painting. It was capable of

1 c. 1410

2 When a society begins to love God a bit less, then it will see a bit better things and people. Régis Debray: *Vie et Mort de l'image*, 1992, Folio/ Essais

recording everything: the living and the inanimate, the near and the far, the microscopically minute and the inconceivably large.

From the outset, mainly for technical reasons, the form that rapidly gained popularity in the 20th century, employing light as an indispensable tool, took as one of its primary themes the plein air landscape. At the turn of the 20th century, Eugène Atget, recording the details of the park at Versailles, represented the emblematic memory of the great past of France. The framing of the images and their internal structure, the interplay of light and shadow, and the details constructed by the human hand, rethought out, and from time to time again transformed, became the tools for interpreting an era definitively concluded.

During the past century, the landscape, just as the world it represents, has undergone a formal transformation raised to the nth degree. Since Cézanne's analytical observations, we could contemplate both the Surrealist inner abstracted landscapes and those of the non-figurative painters, such as Mark Rothko. Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* is only one example of the phenomenon of Land Art, which shows what ensues from the decisive change when man transforms the landscape in an intuitive way, truly without function – the land, by working the chaste, intact nature. Contemporary art brings plants and animals onto the scene of the exhibition space with increasing frequency, calling attention to the reconstruction within the wings of nature, with absurdity particularly to the superiority of man and to his privileged power, and perhaps to his guilty conscience. Is it possible that these artistic strategies react most to our environmental complexes?

3.

The landscape is more than a genre or a subject: it is a medium. It is the medium of the relationship between man and Nature, through which we can attempt to determine, to recognise our place on Earth, and to map our connection with the world surrounding us. This kind of curiosity, or volition, which speaks not only to the things perceivable to the eye, is present in every culture. In this way, the landscape, through its recognition and summoning of experience, calls not only for perception functioning on a purely aesthetic basis, but can also evoke a barrage of emotions and messages in the viewer. The emphasis and representation only become reality if a process coupled with mental links is initiated in the consciousness of the recipient.

Nature cannot be beautiful without an observer, as Baudelaire formulated it in connection with the 1859 Salon: "Si tel assemblage d'arbres, de montagnes, d'eaux et de maisons, que nous appelons un paysage, est beau, ce n'est pas par lui-même, mais par moi, par ma grâce propre, par l'idée ou le sentiment que j'y attache".³

In other words, the landscape is the subjective measure of nature. In its various forms, it has been in use for centuries to present a spectrum of viewpoints and to interpret artistic attitudes. Its two principal courses are the descriptive and the metaphoric, which, hand in hand, modify the image generated of the world and increase our knowledge of it. The descriptive tells us where we are, what we see and how we have moulded our environs. The metaphoric, formulated landscape, on the other hand, always conceals within itself layers of meaning above view, and awaiting reception and comprehension, which, however, only the initiated can understand. The artist can raise questions to the latter, can indicate historical, ideological, sociological or other problems; in other words, can transcend the simple aesthetic level.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the landscape fills an important role "...liaison innée entre moi qui perçois et ce que je perçois (le visible et l'invisible)".⁴ Namely, the landscape, which is a product of the human spirit, operating in two directions, indicates what sort of environment we live in, while through its reception, influences our consciousness and reacts on our subsequent actions, with which we again modify our living space.

Through the recognisable topographic and other characteristics and details in landscapes, reference to personal or collective historical events is also possible. The mechanism behind this is well described through the fusion of Thomas Mitchell's defined space/place/landscape trinity.⁵ Here, the space is the Earth itself, taken as an universality, inhabited by man, which is not specific in itself, but accords

3 If the combination of trees, mountains, water and houses, which we call a landscape, is beautiful, it is not for its own sake, but it is thanks to me, through the idea or emotion I have attached to it. Charles Baudelaire, "Le paysage", In: *Curiosités esthétiques*, Salon de 1859

4 "in the innate liaison that exists between myself as the observer, and the thing that I observe (visible and invisible)" Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Le visible et l'Invisible*, 1979, Gallimard; 1993, pp. 59-60

5 W. J. Thomas Mitchell: *Landscape and Power*, 2002 University of Chicago Press

the basis for our comprehension. The place is the concretely determinable, geographic stage, which possesses a past and memories, and thus gives the possibility for association. The represented landscape is the summary of all of these.

In the current period, loaded with transitions and changes, the landscape takes on an increasingly important role, because as a vehicle of communication, it offers the possibility to aid in comprehending the past and the recognition of territories and responsibilities transformed in the present world. Where the image of the inhabited landscape changes the most dynamically, there is the greatest demand. All this is an unequivocal reflection on the fact that local cultures and an ethnocentric universalism are approaching their end, while we are progressing on the path of the slow but sure rise of global, multi-centred and tolerant cosmopolitanism.⁶

4.

Why exactly does Gábor Arion Kudász choose the landscape medium as his vehicle in the early 21st century? What prompts an artist in the present era to create documentary-like landscapes that press delicate questions, charged with multi-layered meaning, and with this, insist on social problems that, almost unnoticed, have accumulated and are already ubiquitous? Do the warning words of his thematic series produced with his own particular photographic vocabulary, in fact, reach the recipient? Do their fundamental aims come across to their viewers?

Behind the picturesque and harmonious composition of Kudász's photographs, the distorted present strikes the eye. His images record the polluted panoramas of the reality encompassing man. The conquest of nature and man – present in the details – in either the concrete or figurative sense, understood as the occupation of territory and the accumulation of waste, appear in his large-scale photographs that enrapture our eyes. The dissonance of the *genius loci* in his perfect compositions soon perplexes us; however, after a longer examination, our every remaining romantic notion falls into ruin.

Bands of highway, "forgotten" garbage, or other traces and human interventions taint his landscapes. According to Kudász's own choice, this is the New World that he immortalizes and perambulates with a specific image-creating process, whose conceptual focus is the image of a landscape that transcribes a modified, designated social space. Within this, sometimes its creator, man without a guilty conscience, also appears, most often in the role of the unconscious convict, as an almost disturbing element, himself also simplified into pollution.

The works of the young photographer speak in the language of traditional landscape painting and photography, but in fact, survey a transformed environment, locations of the third millennium. Although the structure of his images suggests harmony, with observation of the details and unequivocal recognition, as well as the premonition of responsibility, the only possibility open to us is disillusionment. Kudász confronts us with the naked facts of the cleared out Garden of Eden on Earth, and his photographs can only depict *Disharmonia Mundi*.