

NATURAL LANDSCAPE Vs. CULTURAL LANDSCAPE: AN ECOSEMIOTICAL APPROACH

PEISAJUL NATURAL VS. PEISAJUL CULTURAL: O ABORDARE ECOSEMIOTICA

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Abstract: *In the human transformations of the landscape lies a history of cultural activity far more pervasive than we usually realize. These alterations of the landscape assume patterns that have been guided by habits and local traditions, as well as by broader social and technological trends. When human activities have developed in a certain area, the landscape has become more and more organized. Landscape organization implies a concentration of its natural characteristics, an integration of natural elements with those created by man, the emergence of complex structures and forms, entirely produced by human beings. According to its broad conception, cultural landscape is that landscape or area bearing the imprint more or less of human activity, and it can be characterized as the outcome of an encounter between culture (understood in a general manner as human activity) and nature. We witness how cultural landscape has been replacing more and more significantly the natural landscape. Ecosemiotics or ecological semiotics is a new science, whose semiotic field is at the crossroads of nature and culture, being most closely related to the neighbouring academic fields of biosemiotics, cultural semiotics, environmental aesthetics, visual arts and hermeneutics. The special focus of this new interdisciplinary science is on the way signs and processes of semiosis determine the way humans interact with their environment.*

Rezumat: *Implicarea omului in transformarea peisajului inconjurator presupune o actiune culturala indelungata si complexa. Modificarile aduse peisajului sunt generate atat de obiceiurile si normele traditionale locale cat si de evolutia sociala si tehnologica a umanitatii. Pe masura ce activitatea omului se dezvolta intr-o anumita zona, peisajul devine din ce in ce mai organizat. Organizarea oricarei zone poate atrage dupa sine o concentrare a caracterului peisajului sau natural, o integrare a elementelor naturale cu cele construite de om, sau crearea unui complex de spatii si forme produse in intregime de om. Conceptul de peisaj cultural se refera la acel peisaj sau zona care poarta intr-o masura mai mare sau mai mica amprenta actiunii omului si in care elementele culturale se imbina in mod armonios cu cele naturale. Asistam la o inlocuire treptata, din ce in ce mai evidenta a peisajului natural cu cel cultural. Ecosemiotica sau semiotica ecologica este o stiinta noua, aflata la punctul de intersectie dintre cultura si natura, fiind inrudita cu biosemiotica, semiotica culturii, estetica mediului inconjurator, artele vizuale, si hermeneutica. Acasta noua stiinta interdisciplinara isi focalizeaza atentia asupra studiului semnelor si proceselor semice prezente in interactiunea omului cu mediul inconjurator.*

In this paper the author attempts to demarcate the specifics of ecosemiotics, or semiotic ecology, to describe and classify some of its main problems, and to introduce several concepts using its specific perspective. The aim of the research was to study man's relationship with the environment, proceeding from the practice of *signification*: how does man define and signify his surroundings. The semiotic aspects of human-nature relationships are of great importance everywhere, and these, particularly, are still not sufficiently taken into consideration or understood. Therefore, without understanding the semiotic mechanisms which determine the place of nature in different cultures, one has little hope of solving many serious environmental problems, and of finding the stable place of culture in nature.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The notion *landscape*, if we treat it as a complex phenomenon, encompassing its mythological background, its ecological, geo-historical and cultural parameters as well as immaterial factors, the ways and levels of its mental perception, is one of the focal points of those traditions, shared values and views that constitute our links with the world around us, our personal, human and national identity.

The idea of cultural landscape often evokes the thought of some sort of investigation of the human and cultural with the natural, the land. The human contribution to the landscape is thought to be constructive and consistent with nature's own conditions and processes. The land and the things that are natural to it have in turn helped to determine the manner in which the human or cultural element has manifested itself. In short, the idea of cultural landscape is often taken to be the idea of the landscape in which culture and nature meet and interact on compatible terms.

Different academic fields and disciplines emphasize different characteristics of cultural landscapes that make such landscapes valuable. The cultural or local historian may consider the landscape valuable for its manifestation or evidence of cultural heritage; the biologist or landscape ecologist will emphasize the area's biological characteristics as worth preserving. Others find certain cultural landscapes worth preserving because of aesthetic, educational or recreational values. Common to these approaches is the view of the cultural landscape as something valuable to the extent that it imposes certain obligations regarding the manner in which people relate to it. In other words, the underlying concept of cultural landscape is "value-laden".

The special focus of ecosemiotics is on the way signs and processes of semiosis determine the way humans interact with their environment. By *semiosis* we mean any form of activity, conduct or process that involves *signs* including the production of *meaning*.

Ecosemiotics also raises the question of the semiotic threshold: what are the semiotic and the nonsemiotic aspects of our natural environment? Is semiosis always or only sometimes involved in the interaction of humans with their environment? What is the role of natural and cultural signs in the environmental semiosis?

Ecosemiotics can be defined as the semiotics of relationship between nature and culture. This includes research on the semiotic aspects of the place and role of nature for humans, i.e. what is and what has been the meaning of nature for us, humans, how and in what extent we communicate with nature.

Ecosemiotics deals with the semiosis going on between a human and its ecosystem, or a human in one's ecosystem. In this, it can be related to ethnology and sociology of man-nature relationships, to environmental psychology and the anthropology of environment, which, although quite close to ecosemiotics, deal more with the comparative than the semiotic aspects of the problem.

Ecosemiotics can be considered as a part of the semiotics of culture, which investigates human relationships to nature which have a *semiotic* (sign-mediated) basis.

Ecosemiotics (or ecological semiotics) is the study of sign processes in the interaction of humans with their natural environment. This semiotic field at the crossroads of nature and culture is most closely related to its neighboring fields of biosemiotics, cultural semiotics, but *semiosis* in the relation between humans and nature is also of concern to aesthetics, the visual arts, literature, hermeneutics. Environmental studies are not a discovery of semioticians. Natural philosophy, hermeneutics, cultural history, or ecology proper have a long tradition in environmental studies, and more recently numerous other eco-disciplines have been founded, such as ecopsychology, eco-ethology, human ecology, or ecolinguistics. All of them have a specific focus on humans in the context of their environment.

There are two concurring terminologies used in landscape studies. The first uses such terms as *place* and *space*, the other –*natural* and *cultural landscapes*. In both approaches there is a notion of how humans turn one into the other

The environmental implications of culture are embedded in its very origins, for the word *culture* is etymologically derived from *agriculture* (Bensdorff 1998:133). While one must not read whole explanations into etymologies, the connections between agriculture and culture is a curious one. The kind of agriculture, that is, the methods of cultivation that are employed and the technology that is utilized, results in qualitatively different environments. In cultivating the land, agriculture domesticates the landscape, that is, makes it home.

Speaking less literally, farming enables human habitation to establish itself, binding people to place. When hunter-gatherers turn to cultivation, they begin to transform the landscape, turning it increasingly into a humanscape. And this results in different human environments through the influence of many factors, not the least of which is the local culture, which itself evolves out of local environment and human conditions.

In the human transformations of the natural landscape lies a history of cultural activity far more pervasive than we usually realize. These alterations of the landscape assume patterns that have been guided by habit and local tradition, as well as by broader social and technological trends, for the cultural landscape began to replace the natural one with the emergence of human society.

This human landscape of culture and history is embodied not only in cultivated fields but in places remote and wild. It appears not only in the bucolic countryside but in the forms of buildings and roadways as well. This cultural environment is found, moreover, not only in the physical configuration of our surroundings but also in sounds, smells, and substances that fill our ears and lungs and are absorbed deep into our bodies.

A physical interaction of body and setting, a psychological interconnection of consciousness and culture, a dynamic harmony of sensory awareness all make a person inseparable from his or her environmental situation. Traditional dualism, such as those separating idea and object, self and others, inner consciousness and external world, dissolve in the integration of person and place.

A new conception of the human being emerges as an organic, conscious, social organism, an experiential node that is both the product and the generator of

environmental forces. These forces are not only physical objects and conditions, in the usual sense of environment. They include somatic, psychological, historical, and cultural conditions as well. Environment is the matrix of all such forces. As part of an environmental field, we both shape and are formed by the experiential qualities of the universe we inhabit. People are embedded in their world, implicated in a constant process of action and response.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The landscapes differ from one another in terms of power relations, land use patterns with respective technologies, and values people attach to them. However, a new formation is always not able to erase everything that the previous one has created; it rather adds a new layer of artifacts.

As a result we can speak of a landscape as a memory that contains remains of past land uses, remembering past power relations, but it also contains a set of narratives told from generation to generation that largely determine the identity of a place or a landscape.

Vos and Meekes (1999) and Palang and Mander (2000) have distinguished different landscape types: *ancient landscapes* which were shaped by their first inhabitants; *estate landscapes* controlled by landlords; *private farm landscapes*, which seem to be the dream landscape for so many of us; *collective farm landscapes* as symbols of communist power; *post-modern landscapes*, where the urban is preferred to the rural, land use is hectic and identity is lost.

Regardless of terminology, it is still people who create the place. A place becomes a place only after it has been given a name; it gets a story (legend, history, etc.). And with the end of the story the place ceases to exist, it returns to its former state of being a space, or a cultural landscape becomes once again a (pseudo)natural landscape.

According to its broad conception, cultural landscape is understood in contrast to natural landscape, as a landscape or area "bearing the imprint more or less of human activity", or as "any landscape which is visibly influenced by human interference (Jones 1988:154). Conceived broadly, cultural landscape can be characterized as an outcome of an encounter between culture, understood in a general manner as human activity, and nature, without further specification of what the contribution or role of each in this encounter is.

Thus conceived, a cultural landscape is a humanly-affected environment, ranging from the drastically transformed industrial and urban environment, in which the signs of human activity are obvious, to rural areas where human activity is not so manifest.

A cultural landscape in the material sense is an individually identifiable area affected by human activity such that the area's history has had humans among its participants. For humans to be participants in an area's history, the area must be the arena of deliberate human activity. This does not, of course, mean that unintended or unforeseen effects of human activity are irrelevant to an area's being a cultural landscape. But such effects must be tied to deliberation which

somehow involves the area. Furthermore, the activity that makes the area a cultural landscape in the material sense is tied to social or communal or collective practices, aspirations and expectations.

According to its narrow conception, a cultural landscape is a humanly modified environment possessing certain qualifying characteristics. A narrow conception implies certain conditions regarding the cultural contribution to the landscape, as exemplified with the rural landscape characterized by traditional agriculture (Frislid 1990:13) or landscape characterized by ancient monuments or cultural relics (Jones 1991:240), to the exclusion of areas that are highly urbanized or areas submitted to forms of agriculture and forestry that in a short period of time have drastically altered the land's biological and ecological characteristics.

Typical cases of cultural landscapes narrowly conceived maintain ecological health and biological diversity and are somehow continuous over an extended period of time with the area's original ecological characteristics. Perhaps one way of distinguishing between broad and narrow conceptions of cultural landscape is to say that it is consistent with the broad conception that nature serves as a mere substratum, a recipient of human transformation, for the formation of the cultural landscape, whereas a cultural landscape in the narrow sense requires that nature through its conditions and processes somehow be a participant in its formation and development. Thus conceived, a cultural landscape is an ecosystem in its own right.

CONCLUSIONS

Both *culture* and *landscape* are notions which allow broad and metaphorical interpretations. Both notions can be examined within the framework of very different fields –among the authors we can find geographers, art historians, environmental aestheticians, semioticians and literary scholars. Such a wide range of authors accounts for the pluralism of viewpoints. However, certain common features and dominants can be distinguished among such pluralism: the creative relationship of human beings with their environment, the relationship between the environment and art and the relationship between landscape and representation.

The value and the meaning of the complex cultural landscape has a material foundation in human activity in relation to the features of the land. Meaning and value are an immaterial dimension of the cultural landscape. The meaning is created in co-operation between the senses, memory, imagination and thinking. The conception of cultural landscape in contrast to natural landscape suggests that only humanly- modified landscapes can have such a dimension.

One can distinguish three senses in which cultural landscape can be understood: the humanly modified landscape in the broad sense as any landscape that has the physical or visible marks of human activity, the humanly modified landscape in the narrow sense as a landscape where the marks of human activity

are subject to the land's limiting conditions, and the landscape in the immaterial or symbolic sense of influencing people's views of themselves, of their history and identity.

Generally, landscape is the part of the environment experienced by man. Landscape and the environment can be used as synonyms, they are never seen as opposed to man, but as including, penetrating, embracing him.

Nature is maternal to man, it is important that he belongs to nature. Culture and nature are in symbiosis. Man creates the environment, and the environment creates man.

Ecological knowledge is not sufficient to understand or solve the ecological problems which humans face, since these are consequences of certain deeply semiotic and cultural processes, intertwined with ecological and biological ones. There exist different types of cultures, among them some which have been able to create balanced relationships with nature, and many others which automatically create environmental problems for themselves. Consequently, ecosemiotics seems to be a possibility for facing these most important, and most difficult challenges of the contemporary world.

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