

›Landscape‹ in moving images - what is it and how does it function? Is it merely a natural backdrop or does it occasionally provide us with something more than the picturesque setting for a film? Can landscapes themselves therefore be treated artistically?

Let us start by taking as a basis of understanding the definition of landscape suggested by the art historian W. J. T. Mitchell: »Landscape is a medium in the fullest sense of the word. It is a material ›means‹ (to borrow Aristotle's terminology) like language or paint, embedded in a tradition of cultural signification and communication, a body of symbolic forms capable of being invoked and reshaped to express meanings and values.«¹

Landscapes are not just an arbitrary slice of nature but motifs which the artist has deliberately chosen and constructed, which have their own history of representation (iconography) and which can be regarded as carriers of cultural significance. An important difference to the traditional visual media painting and print is the fact that landscapes in film and video are, above all due to the recording technology, able to record external sequences of motion in nature (the flow of a waterfall, the trembling of leaves) where paintings and prints can only suggest movement in nature. At an early date, this specific ability of cinematographic art gave rise to theoretical and practical discourse and, besides this, led to the genre of the nature film. In the course of the attempts by cinema reformers to ennoble film and establish it as an independent art form, the Dresden author Hermann Häfker, for example, regarded the nature film as an ideal medium for illustrating the decisive advantage of cinematographic art which, for him, was an »all-embracing, genuine and live painting«². With this, nature had been referred to as a filmic subject but was still, for the most part, disregarded as an independent theme.

For the Hungarian film critic Béla Balász, who formulated the today still most influential mode of regarding filmic landscapes, landscape photography served the scenic design of a film. In this function it took on a high poetic quality which, so to speak, could set the emotional tone of the film's narrative.³ This idea of a »landscape of the soul« was later taken up in the writings of Lotte H. Eisner and her interpretation of the Weimar cinema. Eisner was particularly fascinated by the elaborate studio landscapes of the expressionist films and regarded their (artificial) nature as an integral part of the filmic ›work of art‹: »Only when the director is himself able to construct a landscape is he also capable of breathing life into it [...].«⁴ Before Eisner the soviet film maker and polymath Sergej Eisenstein had also incorporated landscape in his assembly concept and drawn up a complex, culture historical discourse on the analogies between landscape and music.⁵ Both Eisner and Eisenstein in this way renewed a viewpoint of landscape which had its roots in the literature of art theory round about 1800. In 1794, for example, in his essay on the poems of Friedrich von Matthisson, Friedrich Schiller wrote: »If the composer and the landscape painter now penetrates the secrets of those laws which rule over the emotions of the human heart, and if he studies the analogies which reflect the similarities between these emotions and certain external

¹ Mitchell, W. J. T.: *Imperial Landscape*, in: Idem. (Ed.): *Landscape and Power*. Chicago/London 2002, p. 14.

² Häfker, Hermann: *The Beauty of Natural Movement (Die Schönheit der natürlichen Bewegung)* [1913], in: Diederichs, Helmut H.: *History of Film Theory (Geschichte der Filmtheorie)*. Frankfurt am Main 2004, p. 91.

³ cf. Balász, Béla: *The Visible Person or the Culture of Film (Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films)*. Frankfurt am Main 2001, S. 66–70.

⁴ Vgl. Eisner, Lotte H.: *The Demonic Screen (Die dämonische Leinwand)*. Revised, enhanced and authorised New edition Frankfurt am Main 1975, p. 157.

⁵ Eisenstein, Sergej: *A Not Indifferent Nature (Eine nicht gleichmütige Natur)*. Berlin (East) 1980.

appearances, thus will he be transformed from a portrayer of everyday character into a true painter of souls.«⁶

Until now there has been scarcely any challenge to this paradigm of how landscapes in film and research are viewed. But the auteur-film movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and also the contemporary *landscape film* in the avant-garde cinema have realigned the question of the filmic landscape. The in places autonomous impact of landscapes, which becomes visible in the auteur films of Michelangelo Antonioni, Werner Herzog, Terrence Malick or Andrej Tarkovskij, was recognised at an early stage by Peter W. Jansen.⁷ Later on, with his study on landscape in the *New Hollywood Cinema*, Henrik Gustafsson took this a stage further. For him the landscapes were less a backdrop and rather to be interpreted as symbols of space. Even more did they, for Guftasson, document a change in the reception of landscapes, which became visible at the same time in the contemporary photographic works of Robert Adams or Lewis Baltz.⁸ P. Adams Sitney, the great promoter of avant-garde films in the USA, on the other hand, can be seen as the first person who called attention to the concept of landscape in experimental films. In Chris Welsby (*Seven Days*, 1974) or Michael Snow (*La région centrale*, 1971) the landscape is, for Sitney, no longer merely a poetical ingredient. It becomes – and here one must also think of James Benning's works – the catalyst of the question about the artistic signature and, in the end, itself an object of filmic discourse.⁹ To this, Erik Mainharter writes trenchantly: »Experimental films, in particular, provide an approach which lets us view and interpret the cultural construct landscape in its filmic representation as an aspect of landscapes (i.e. as an opinion about landscapes).¹⁰

This realisation is what inspired the US-American film scholar Scott MacDonald to his fundamental work *The Garden in the Machine*, a compendium which offers a selection and systematic analysis of the most important *landscape films*.¹¹

Since the 2000s, film and media scholars have, under the influence of the so-called *Topological Turn*, occupied themselves single mindedly to the (re)production of space in filmic media, and this has encouraged a critical investigation of the vague topic »landscape of souls«. In the future, it will be for individual analyses to clarify the meaning and mechanisms of landscape presentation in films.

»What does landscape mean in this case?« – This question, astutely posed by art historian Brigitte Wormbs, is also asked in a fascinating and heterogeneous fashion by several participants of previous videonales. In Janet Bigg's *Vanishing point* (2009), the dazzling

⁶ Schiller, Friedrich: On Mathisson's Poems (Über Matthissons Gedichte) [1794], in: Busch, Werner (Ed.): Landscape Painting (The History of the Classical Genre with Source Texts and Commentaries 3) {Landschaftsmalerei (Geschichte der klassischen Bildgattungen in Quellentexten und Kommentaren, 3)}. Berlin 1997, p. 229–230.

⁷ cf. Jansen, Peter W.: inside/outside/inside. Functions of Space and Landscape (innen/außen/innen. Funktionen von Raum und Landschaft), in: Herzog/Kluge/Straub (Series Film 9) {(Reihe Film, 9). With contributions by Ulrich Gregor et al. Munich/Vienna 1976, p. 69–84.

⁸ cf. Gustafsson, Henrik: Out of Site. Landscape and Cultural Reflexivity in New Hollywood Cinema. 1969–1974 (Stockholm, Univ., Diss., 2007). Saarbrücken 2008.

⁹ cf. Sitney, P. Adams: Landscape in the cinema: the rhythms of the world and the camera, in: Kemal, Salim/Gaskell, Ivan (Ed.): Landscape, natural beauty and the arts. Cambridge 1993, p. 103–126.

¹⁰ Meinharter, Erik: Landscape as a Matter for Negotiation. A Commentary on the Discourse About Landscape (Landschaft als Verhandlungssache. Ein Kommentar zum Diskurs der Landschaft), in: Pichler, Barbara/Pollach, Andrea (Ed.): moving landscapes. Landscape and Film (Landschaft und Film). Vienna 2006, p. 76.

¹¹ cf. MacDonald, Scott: The Garden in the Machine. A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2001.

white salt desert near Salt Lake City becomes an existential arena for ›motorcycle heroine‹ Leslie Porterfield. Here the desert as a »form of ecstasy« (Jean Boudrillard) is transformed into a gigantic open-air arena on which the struggle for one's own identity in the intoxication of speed takes place repeatedly. In Christoph Brech's *Break* (2004), a static camera portrays a frosty, mist-permeated sea landscape, into which an enormous freighter ›breaks‹ from the left in slow motion. What at first fascinates the viewer, the moving playback of the weather, gives way, through the freighter's presence, to an [...] observation of the landscape as an economic and commercial zone. And Ascan Breuer's *Paradise Later* (2010) shows – in sharp contrast to our expectations of idyllic pictures of the tropics – a jungle landscape contaminated by the rubbish of civilisation and in no way suitable for our ideas of paradise. On the contrary: In the dialogue with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), paradise has already been lost. In *Black Hole* (2009), the planimetric view is by itself enough to alienate the viewer's outlook on a private garden. The snow-covered plot of land seems like a cinema screen on which a person wrapped in a black coat is digging a hole. The deeper they dig the more their silhouette merges with the black surroundings. Whether they now emerge or submerge in this ›nature‹ remains unanswered. The icy setting and the title – probably a play on Charles Burns' dark graphic novel – make one think here about the transliteration of death fantasies. In *Solitude* (2004), Antti Tanttú takes a critical look at a further romantic topic of nature. Instead of a »forest solitude« (Ludwig Uhland), a wave-buffed rock evokes a sort of »marine solitude«. Yet the text insert (»Solitude is luxury when it is voluntary«) is an ironic counterpoint to the isolation of the man, unprotected and at the mercy of the forces of nature. An equally ironic deconstruction of various landscape topics (musical landscape, landscape of souls) is undertaken by Richard Turner Walker in his work *successive inconceivable events* (2005). The artist, like Petrarch on the Mount Ventoux and portrayed from behind like a Caspar David Friedrich figure immersed in a landscape panorama, initially fills nature with idyllic music from a CD-player and then, in a soliloquy, implores nature to enter into a dialogue with him. But ›pure‹ nature, which he exposes himself to without, unlike a poet or a painter, attempting to change it artistically, punishes him with cold silence and in this way makes him aware of its indifferent nature.

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