

GEORGE TEYSSOT – On “That Word, Nature”

Today, artists, architects, and landscape architects operate in an increasingly interwoven network. Much like the cross-pollinating practices of the 1960s, there is a growing complexity in the present situation that eschews sharp disciplinary boundaries. Perhaps what best reunites these experiences are revisited notions of “nature,” “landscape,” and “place,” defined not through traditional aesthetics (such as Immanuel Kant’s), but through the involvement of the beholder. Any building, any landscape, any garden, any sculpture, any installation is a step toward the comprehension of the land, experienced through the progression across cities and territories, and observed through various perspectives. These artworks help us to apprehend our planet, our Earth—not only with its subtle shifts of physiology, climate, and astronomy, but also with the radical alterations brought about by urbanism, technology, and astrophysics. In such a way, space and time, rhythm and duration, seasons and hours, all succeed in mutating landscapes, allowing them to be contemplated while the traveler proceeds through what remains of wild spaces, deserts, ruins, and wastelands. Truly, what the artist reveals (whether a sculptor, an architect, or a landscape designer) is that our planet comprises a series of entropic zones, which could offer the prototypes of an unknown, near future.

Citation: George Teyssot, “On ‘That Word, Nature,’” in *The Avery Review*, no. 1 (September 2014), <http://averyreview.com/issues/1/on-that-word-nature>.

Land/Landscape

AS IS USUAL IN OLD FARMHOUSES, [ITS ROOMS] ARE NOT DESIGNED TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE OUT-OF-DOORS BUT, IF POSSIBLE, TO IGNORE IT.... PEOPLE WHO OPENLY ADMIRERED NATURE—OR WHO EVEN WENT SO FAR AS TO USE THAT WORD, NATURE—WERE OFTEN TAKEN TO BE SLIGHTLY SOFT IN THE HEAD.

—ALICE MUNRO (2006) [1]

As Alice Munro’s apt observation implies, the land exists first without images. [2] It exists before it is seen. One must therefore distinguish between land and landscape. Land is where technology is applied and economics are deployed—a place of production, formed by the union of soil and labor. It is an infra-landscape, which is revealed in the prosaic horizontality

[1] Alice Munro, “Home,” in *The View from Castle Rock*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006), 288.

[2] Mathieu Kessler, *Le paysage et son ombre*, (Paris: PUF, 1999), 8.

of crops. In contrast, landscape is the painted image of a model that for a long time had no image. The true landscape is beautiful. It is the aesthetic vision of a land, a region, an ecumene. Immanuel Kant would say that it is a disinterested vision. Thus, the landscape is portrayed as representation. [3] It freely expresses a beauty that is pure, vague, airy; it offers a presence without concept.

In contrast, when a landscape takes a religious turn—soaring toward the sea, the mountain, or the heavens in a sublime assault—it becomes a supra-landscape. The forms of sublime (lat., *sub* and *limen-liminis*) representation of this landscape indicate that it is stretching toward an edge, an end that it will never reach. [4] The supra-landscape is, then, a symbol for a sublime and supra-sensitive reality. Its function seems to be to evoke a frontier, a threshold, an elsewhere, a beyond, a horizon that always evades the senses. [5] The fundamental dichotomy of land and landscape is a favorite subject for theoreticians, but its origins should be analyzed both in the field of aesthetics (representation) and in the undertaking of specific experiences (progress, travel, discovery, walking, touring, drifting, *dérive*). [6] The notion of nature must be rethought within our cultures—modern and contemporary, local and global—by analyzing the multiple meanings of the Latin term *natura* (*physis* in Greek), its representations, and its mutations.

The New World

Art theories and aesthetic categories offer a variety of ways to interpret the landscape and the site—for instance, the idyllic, the Arcadian, the pastoral, the bucolic, the rustic, the sublime, the picturesque, and the romantic. Those categories are typically born out of the European culture. But from the American continent, i.e., the New World, how might we define today's landscape, which is not rustic, or picturesque, or romantic? How can we characterize its sites? Are they sublime?

Perhaps these categories fit within the tradition of writings by Baron de Lahontan (*Nouveaux Voyages dans l'Amérique septentrionale*, 1703–09) and Father Joseph-François Lafitau (*The Customs of the American Savages Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, 1724), describing Aboriginal civilization. [7] Or maybe they follow the ultimate

[3] Ibid., p. 9.

[4] Ibid., p. 10.

[5] Ibid., p. 43.

[6] Ibid., p. 35.



[7] Louis Armand de Lom d'Arce La Hontan, (1666–1716, baron de), *Nouveaux voyages de M. le Baron de Lahontan dans l'Amérique septentrionale...*, vol. 1 - [Mémoire de l'Amérique septentrionale ou la Suite des voyages de M. le Baron de Lahontan...augmenté dans ce second tome de la manière dont les sauvages se régalaient], (The Hague: Frères Lhonoré, 1709), 2 vols. in a single book; Joseph-François Lafitau (1681–1746), *Mœurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps*, (Paris: Saugrain l'aîné, 1724), 2 vols. English translation: *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of the Primitive Times*, ed. and trans. by William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore, (Toronto: Champlain Society), vol. 1 (1974), vol. 2 (1977).

"Travel on the snow and winter camping ; Nomad camp in Canada," engraving from the *The Customs of the American Savages Compared with the Customs of Ancient Times* [vols. 1–2, 1724], vol. II, Pl. XI, by Joseph-François Lafitau [1681–1746].

paradigm of North American culture—the simple, solitary, asocial life that Henry David Thoreau described in *Walden: Or, Life in the Woods* (1854). As Thoreau noted in his 1852 *Journal*, “One of the most beautiful buildings in this country is a logger’s hut in the woods.” [8] It is essential to explore not only the history but also the geography of such landscapes.

Among the canonical, literary, or evocative places whose mythographic reverberations must be considered are the ruin, the mountain, the tree, the woods, the forest, the desert, the cabin, the clearing, the lake, and the shore. At the same time, one might explore the contemporary connections that are woven among architecture, the environment, site, and art. About his first feature-length film (*Tres Tristes Tigres*, 1968), which has no plot, the Franco-Chilean filmmaker Raúl Ruiz said, “All the elements of a story are there, but they are used as a landscape, and the landscape is used as a story.” In many contemporary works of architecture, all the elements of a building are there, but they are used as landscape and the landscape is used as structure.

Wonder

A marvel (from Vulgar Latin *mirabilia*) is something that arouses great admiration. Leaving aside the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, certain phenomena, such as rainbows, are considered marvels. René Descartes tried to materialize refraction in his book *Dioptrique* in 1637 and offered an explanation for rainbows in his *Traité des Météores* (1637). [9] As Descartes was defining the marvelous and exploring the sentiments stirred up by admiration in *Les Passions de l’âme* (1649) and Blaise Pascal was evoking the fear provoked by the “abyss,” the Reverend Father Louis Hennepin was discovering Niagara Falls, an engraving of which he published in London in 1697. [10] Views of the falls were reproduced numerous times—for example, by Sébastien Leclerc around 1700, and by Thomas Davies, who portrayed this natural wonder by crowning it with the famous rainbow, a perennial presence at the famous site. The discovery of immense abysses and the encounters with “primitive man” (the Hurons, the Iroquois, the Algonquins, the Montagnais, and other indigenous nations) were to provoke a shift in the conception of nature and of humans during the eighteenth

[8] Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, January 11, 1852.

[9] Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Carl B. Boyer, *The Rainbow from Myth to Mathematics*, new ed. with illustrations and commentary by Robert Greenler, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).

[10] *Nouvelle découverte d’un très grand pays situé dans l’Amérique, entre le Nouveau Mexique, et la Mer glaciale, avec les cartes, & les figures nécessaires, & de plus l’histoire naturelle & morale, & les avantages, qu’on en peut tirer par l’établissement des colonies, Le tout dédié à Sa Majesté britannique Guillaume III. Par le r. p. Louis Hennepin, missionnaire recollect & notaire apostolique*, (Utrecht: G. Broedelet, 1697), with engraving; the plate on p. 44 is the first view of Niagara Falls. Elizabeth McKinsey, *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime*, (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).



“Niagara and the Beaver Dams”, illustration from *Cassell’s History of the United States* by Edward Ollier [c 1900], Private Collection; The Bridgeman Art Library.

century. This was the confrontation with the (good) savage (from the Italian *selvaggio*, “he who lives in the forest”) in the forests of the New World. [11]

Marvelous sites and savages seem to have imposed a theoretical rethinking, the methods and repercussions of which have not yet been completely assessed. What about, for instance, the sublime? One should take a new look at this classic notion, whose original meanings have been lost. In effect, how was the transition made from the marvelous (including *exotica*) to the sublime? Soon, the Irish philosopher Edmund Burke (in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757) was to expound on the relations between sublime nature and divinity. He noted that in the Scriptures, each time God was portrayed in the act of revealing Himself and speaking, the most terrible phenomena in nature were called upon to buttress the respect for and solemnity of the Divine presence. [12] Now, the aesthetics of the sublime made it possible to control the immeasurable (nature, for example), and the subject was offered the capacity to pass over the abyss. This power was obtained through a series of representations: accounts, icons, symbols, allegories, images. As Kant wrote in his “Analytic of the Sublime,” by inscribing magnitude and immensity, the sublime offers space an absolute extension “beyond all comparison.” [13] Two definitive types of spatial arrangement emerged: that of extreme verticality (“vertical empires” and “cerebral chasms,” to use Simon Schama’s expression), and that of an ultimate horizontality (the horizon and beyond). [14]. This disproportionate horizon formed the “prairie” discovered by the Jesuits and the immense steppes of the Great Plains. It was as if, in encountering North America, Western culture was trying to erect transcendental bridges to link these two extremes.

Mythography

The symbiosis between cinema and architecture is oft commented on; one could mention many an operative *mise-en-scène*. [15] [16] Within Canadian borders, one might revisit Michel Brault and Pierre Perrault’s black-and-white docu-fiction film *Pour la suite du monde* (1963), about the life of fishermen on L’Isle aux Coudres in Quebec. Canadians often fish for tommy-cod on frozen lakes, boring a hole with an auger and building a small cabin. Such ephemeral ice fishing villages, built on frozen stretches of water, form fascinating nomadic settlements. On this subject is the stunning short film made by Éric Morin, *Opasatica* (2010): Against a background of ice fishing on the eponymous lake in the James Bay region, a Spanish woman has a brief, intense affair with an outfitter in an atmosphere dominated by cold, imbued with the odors of gasoline and fish. The action is situated in a cabin, a secluded spot in an infinite space, and draws an extreme contrast between an enclosed intimacy and a vast extimacy. [17]

Before being a bond, passion is developed in a place. When this passion (or its object) is gone, the first reflex is to return to where it appeared. Love, here, refers less to an object than to a situation: The landscape that gives room to breathe, the space that offers a life worthy of being lived—in other words, the frame within which one might tell stories, shoot films, build buildings. By the filmmaker’s images, and through the architect’s

[11] Olive Patricia Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1984).

[12] See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* [1757, 1759], (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2008).

[13] See “Book II: Analytic of the Sublime,” in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* [1790], trans. by Walter S. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 103.

[14] Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

[15] By zeroing in on photography and cinema, one could examine how certain films present a commentary on nature, or the environment. For instance, it is inevitable to turn to Alain Resnais’s *L’année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), made from a story and script written by Alain Robbe-Grillet, and shot in the Baroque Schleissheim garden (Bavaria, Germany). Another classic example is Peter Greenaway’s *The Draughtsman’s Contract* (1982), which was set in Groombridge Place (Kent, England). These two films offer a vision of nature as an integral part of the story.

[16] And one must not forget the absolute paradigm: another Greenaway film, *The Belly of an Architect* (1987), inspired by the work of Étienne-Louis Boullée, shot in Rome with the cooperation of contemporary Roman architects. More tragically, there is Andrei Tarkovski’s film *Stalker* (1979), shot in Tallinn, Estonia. The “stalker” of the title is a guide who takes visitors through “The Zone,” a place situated outside an unidentified city confined after an invasion by extraterrestrials. The film’s “zone” was inspired by a nuclear incident that took place near Chelyabinsk in 1957. Such a film, outside of any genre, offers materials for reflection, especially today after Chernobyl and Fukushima.

[17] *Opasatica*, directed by Éric Morin, Canada (Quebec), 2010, fiction, col., 18 min.; specifically, it is fishing for Atlantic tomcod (*Microgadus tomcod*).



Still from: *Opasatica*, film, Éric Morin, dir., Quebec, Canada, 2010, col., 18 minutes.

lines, this world creates a common space, a community. A shared territory, but also a stereotype. Here, one might briefly evoke the stereotypes that are the foundation for architectural memory, in North America and elsewhere. Remembering types of bygone backdrops and foregone landscapes does not constitute a melancholic quest for nostalgia, as films like Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* (1971) or Alexander Payne's *Nebraska* (2013) show well. Rather, the challenge is to see if a stereotype can serve as fuel for some kind of collective, memorial mythography.

Architecture is about making, doing, building with the minimum gesture. To bring a minimal order to our fragmented, shaken world, one must trace boundaries that indicate sites of operation and that mark places of occupation. Much of what architects do is about landscapes and territories. What an architect builds are "houses," which define a new geography while scoring measurements onto things. Like Thoreau, architects erect cabins in the woods. Their task is an exercise of construction; not literally to build houses, but rather to define the limits of territories through an act of continuous and iterative foundation. Only by redefining and by tracing limits is an architect able to delineate and concretize a sense of place. Through this work, the artist and the architect create boundaries and thresholds, evoking "typical" forms, or stereotypes. However, many of these "types," extracted from a timeless time, progressively disappear, vanishing together with the silent, melancholic memories they entailed; and other references surface with resolute persistence. A sphere of contemporary technology replaces such a theater of memory, and this evolution focuses our attention on the present, which now replaces the archaeology of the archetype with an exploration of prototypes.

As a coda to this brief review on "nature," one could recall *Le Mépris* (1963), the film based on Alberto Moravia's novel, which Jean-Luc Godard shot in the Villa Curzio Malaparte, the celebrated building designed by Adalberto Libera for the writer in Capri (1938–43). Libera's architecture condenses the building into a solar deck, a solarium. Godard's film is about the shooting of a film directed by Fritz Lang. An instance of *mise-en-abyme*, the film within the film is titled *Ulysses*, an adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey*. Both house and film are a stirring, contemporary celebration of the Mediterranean landscape, mixing ancient, Greek archetypes with (modernist)

prototypes. In the epilogue, Godard reflects, “Cinema substitutes for our gaze a world attuned to our desires.” This sentence could be paraphrased: Landscape substitutes for our gaze a world attuned to our desires.