

Why Is Landscape Beautiful?



Lucius Burckhardt

# Why Is Landscape Beautiful?

## The Science of Strollology

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[Square brackets in the text indicate a translator's note]

## Strollology. A Minor Subject. In Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist

During a taxi ride through Bordeaux in the year 2000, on the occasion of the exhibition “Mutations,” Hans Ulrich Obrist talked with Annemarie and Lucius Burckhardt about an emergent new science, the questions it poses, its methodology, and its cultural and historical background.

*Hans Ulrich Obrist: Can you tell me how the science of walking began?*

Annemarie Burckhardt: It began very gradually ...

Lucius Burckhardt: We held a seminar on the subject of how language conveys the look of the landscape. Six months later we examined texts in the available literature. We looked at descriptions of the “Isola Bella” and asked ourselves what kind of impressions their language conveyed.

*HUO: Did the seminar take place in Kassel?*

LB: Yes, and it was there too that we came up with the idea of doing our “Walk to Tahiti:” a reconstruction of the hike Captain Cook and Georg Forster took across Tahiti in 1773. We asked ourselves, what do explorers discover and how can one convey impressions of Tahiti? The perception of landscape must be learned—by each historical epoch as well as by each individual.

AB: “The Trip to Tahiti” took place in 1987, in parallel to the documenta 8.

LB: You have to imagine Alexander von Humboldt, for example, traveling the globe and then arriving back [in Europe] with a ship full of stones, impaled insects and notes on barometric pressure, and realizing that no one was listening to him, that no one could

even begin to imagine what the Amazon region looks like. And Humboldt accordingly asked himself, how he might give people an idea of it. Even a stuffed crocodile and an impaled mosquito cannot really convey how the Amazonas looks. When Humboldt realized that, he began to write also about art in his book *On the Cosmos*. He had understood that, although he was able to convey the chemical composition of stone, he was unable to show the decaying layer with its humus, which is that which one actually experiences.

*HUO: Have you taken any other walks?*

LB: The most impressive walk was the one we did with car windshields along Frankfurter Straße in Kassel. We'd registered it with the police as "an assembly on the move." We aimed to reproduce the motorists' perspective and so the students bore car windshields before them. A long column of us walked like that into the city. There is a Windscreen Society in the UK that still emulates our model. It addresses the major theme of the Kassel walk: What do we experience through a windshield? We are no longer really conscious of how windshields limit our perception. I remember how incredibly dangerous the action was—because we were not enclosed by the sheet metal of a car.

*HUO: Do photos of the action exist?*

LB: Hessian TV was there but didn't really get what the action was about. Some dismal commentary was made, along the lines of: "the nonsense people get up to."

*HUO: So when was "Spaziergangswissenschaft"—which literally means, the science of walking—actually established as such? And was it called that from the get-go or only later?*

LB: The President of Kassel University became involved in it against his will. The issue at the time was whether the University should be

incorporated in the German Research Foundation. Research priorities had to be specified on the application form. That was in 1990 and in my application I mentioned “*Spaziergangswissenschaft*.” The President said this made things very difficult for him. Nevertheless, it was acknowledged to be a valid research focus.

*HUO: And the term has been current since then? What is the English translation?*

LB: Strollology.

*HUO: Has anyone ever graduated in that discipline?*

LB: One can take it only as a minor subject.

*HUO: You launched the walks because there are certain types of knowledge that books cannot convey...*

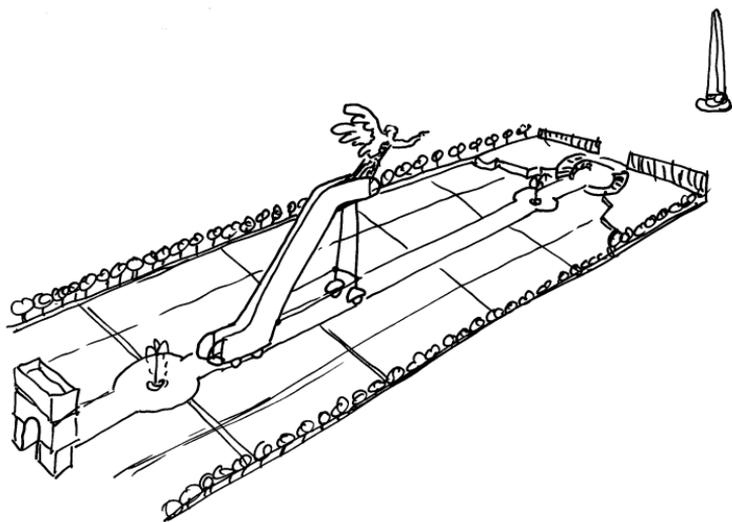
LB: Certain perspectives can probably be conveyed by art alone, since the human gaze is limited in so many ways nowadays that people are scarcely able to step back and even realize it. Art alone is able to communicate this without being preachy or hurtful. With our walks we switch off people’s fear of the unknown. And we have fun, too.

[Taxi ride comes to an end]

*HUO: This morning, Lucius, you had the idea of using aircraft stairs in Rome. Aircraft stairs would work wonderfully here, too, in this parking lot in Bordeaux.*

[In the mall]

LB: People only see crazy stuff when you do something completely crazy. They’d instantly think you crazy, if you were to draw up in a taxi and install aircraft stairs here.



Of course, aircraft stairs provide an interesting perspective that one doesn't otherwise have. Seen from above, people look like ants. And one would wonder: What on earth are they up to, those people down there?

*HOU: The idea of having the aircraft stairs drive through the city and then park somewhere is rather fine.*

AB: You have to be incredibly fit to shop here. I would end up searching forever.

*HOU: Have you ever used this kind of consumer landscape for your science of walking?*

LB: Yes. We made another experiment. We went around town with three mobile gardens. At various locations we unpacked a garden. We unpacked the Italian garden in a mall, in front of an Italian's store. We thought it would cause a stir. That was not the case. The image never really took shape. In this environment, the effect is completely lost. Because everything here is simulation and so you can simulate all you like but it goes unnoticed. It's like pouring blue ink into blue water. Not even aircraft stairs would raise an eyebrow in these surroundings. People would say: "Oh, there's an advertisement for the airport."

*HOU: Are your walks in the tradition of taking a stroll on the boardwalk?*

LB: The science of strollology addresses something completely different from the traditional stroll. It is a caricature of that role model. It has inherited the leisurely *flâneur's* distance from reality but has nonetheless lost its nostalgic tenor. Strollology was created out of our sense of irony—because there are many things today one can regard only with irony.

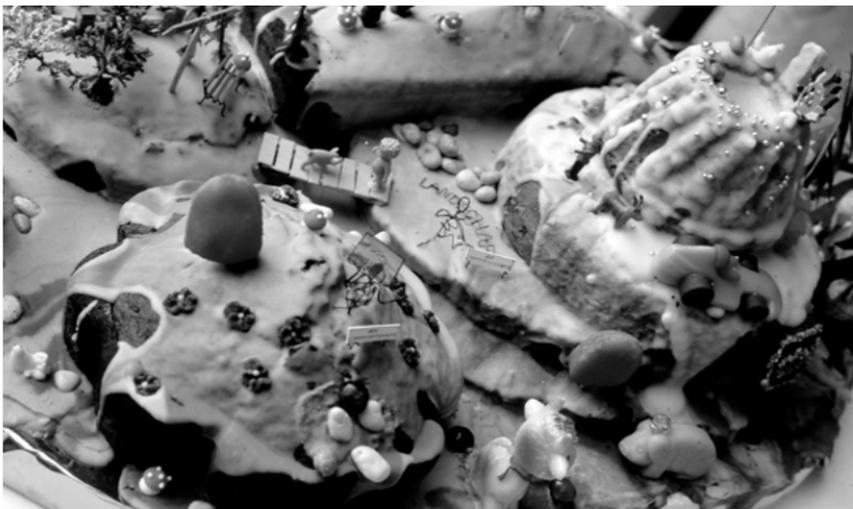
*HOU: Then what other types of walk have existed—historically speaking?*

LB: The walk beginning either on the city margins or outside one's own front door was common in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. People used to leave the city and make a round trip covering various points. Then there was the walk by rail: one rode to one station then walked to the next. Today, we take a walk by car.

*HOU: In listing the various types of walk, I think we have overlooked to mention the walk by taxi that we did today.*

LB: Yes, that was our first walk by taxi. Of course, a walk by taxi makes sense only if we thereby manage to reflect on its own particular qualities. That is, we need to get out and walk a bit. We decided we could ensure that happens by offering visitors to the “Mutations” exhibition the following option: they can buy a ticket that allows them a short taxi ride, after which they get out and go for a walk. Then the taxi picks them up again at the end of their walk. In that way, they experience the taxi perspective then leave it behind then re-experience it. Alvar Aalto, who also deals with urban planning, never goes anywhere on foot, but only by taxi. And some theorists claim this is the reason that cities in Finland look so strange.

Everything is relative. One mainly looks straight ahead when driving a car. One is compelled to take that perspective. But one doesn't even realize it until one begins to think about perspectivism. That was actually the purpose of our “0 m [Point Zero] Walk” with Paul-Armand Gette in the Wilhelmshöhe landscape park. We asked, where does landscape begin?



Why is landscape beautiful? It was with this question in mind that students of the University of Applied Arts in Basel set out with Lucius Burckhardt in summer 1979 for the village of Vrin in the Lumnezia Valley in Graubünden Canton, to take part in a special sort of drawing and painting course. For the aim here, for once, was not to portray the beauty of the landscape but rather to understand what makes landscape beautiful. Students turned up at the final meeting bearing a landscape made of cake. Photo: Annemarie Burckhardt

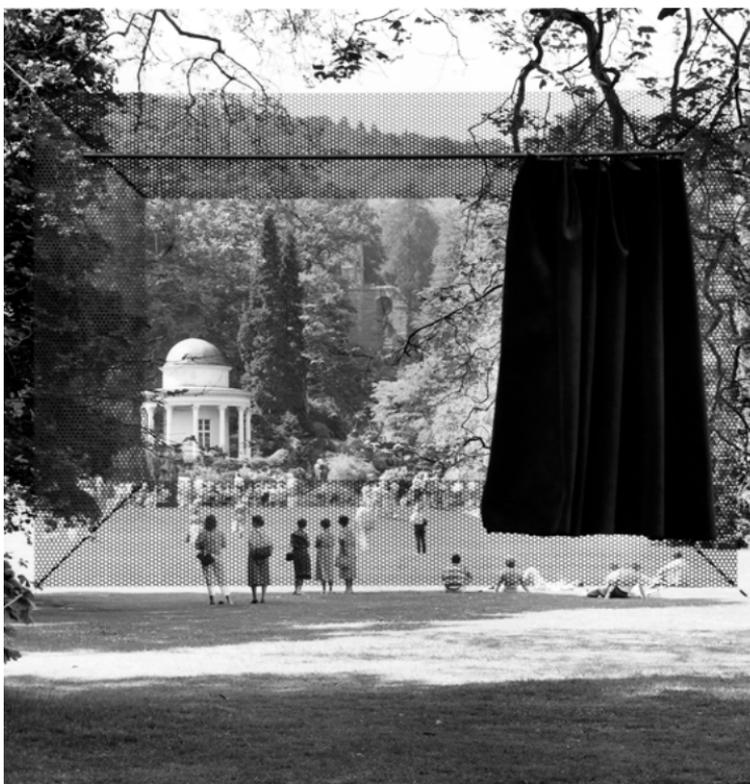
Where does the landscape begin? In 1985, the Parisian artist Paul-Armand Gette used the "0m mark" in Kassel's Wilhelmshöhe landscape park to put this question to the public. Whatever we see lying or growing or crawling in front of us is not landscape, but a stone, a plant or a bug, one more precisely defined by attributing to it a scientific, mineralogical or zoological name. But these days, everything's becoming a part of a landscape ... Photo: Monika Nikolić





Of course, what a landscape looks like depends on who is doing the looking. Annemarie and Lucius Burckhardt on the Furka Pass in 1987.

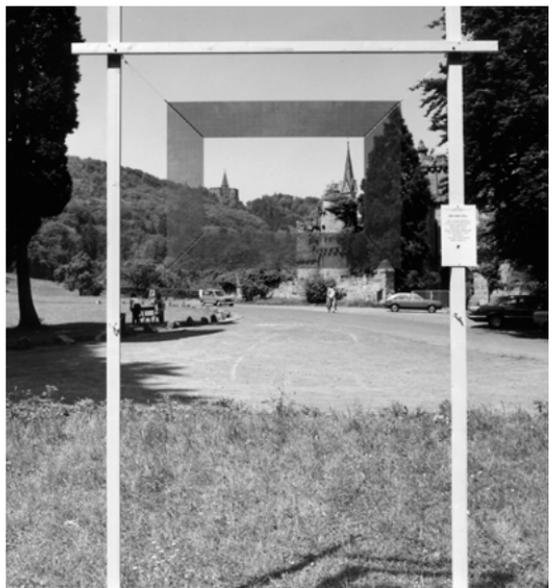
Participants in the "0m [Point Zero] Walk" were able to view and critique the garden in the Wilhelmshöhe landscape park in Kassel through ten metal frames installed there beforehand and hence as if it were a number of paintings. It was therefore possible to criticize certain aspects of the garden in the same way an art connoisseur might criticize works of art. The discussion and critiques of the garden encompassed various levels of meaning. The garden when viewed through certain frames looked just as it must have done when first laid out by a landscape artist in the eighteenth century. Other views attested to a number of eras and might thus be said to evince stylistic inconsistencies, although these too were interpreted here as relevant signs. The first picture frame, once the drape was removed from it, revealed a landscape of antiquity. Photo: Monika Nikolić





During this same walk in the Wilhelmshöhe landscape park, Bernard Lassus gave a talk in front of the House of Socrates on "Heterodite," a term he coined as a positive alternative to the aforementioned notion of "stylistic inconsistency." At the end of his talk, Lassus presented Lucius Burckhardt with a ballpoint pen in the camouflage look—the look used for military operations but which also resembles an abstract landscape. Photo: Annemarie Burckhardt

In building the "Gothic" Löwenburg in Kassel, the landgrave of Hessen reduced the Hercules monument built there by his grandfather to simply one garden ruin among many and simultaneously lent an S-shaped asymmetry to a garden originally designed in the Baroque style. Thus the Wilhelmshöhe landscape park was turned into an English landscape garden without its original features being destroyed. Photo: Monika Nikolić





In 1983, on the sheer and craggy slopes of the Furka Pass, James Lee Byars donned a golden robe then placed a drop of black perfume on a rock: an apparently meaningless gesture in stormy weather, in the company of loyal friends and silvery yarrow. Yet for those who witnessed it, the landscape of the Furka Pass was changed forever. The most minimal intervention in the landscape triggers a shift in meaning and in consciousness. Photos: Annemarie Burckhardt

# LANDSCAPE





## Landscape Development and the Structure of Society (1977)

The landscape appears to be an everyday thing, something we encounter whenever we glance out of a train window and the image of which adorns those travel brochures printed in great numbers to promote our tourist destinations. But the fact that we perceive as a single entity, as a “landscape,” those many and various things that surround us—the tops of fence posts dotting a snow-covered field, the smoke rising gradually from a factory chimney amid the evening clouds, and the group of workers in blue flat caps, returning home—the fact that we calmly pack the blanket term “landscape” around the sum of such diverse phenomena and the wealth of information they convey, just as we’d use a net to capture all kinds of small animals, is an artistic feat with an ideological dimension. For “landscape” is to be found not in the nature of things but in our mind’s eye; it is a construct that serves as a means of perception for any society that no longer lives directly from the land. Such perception may have an impact on the environment, may shape and disfigure it, whenever society begins to translate the image it has acquired into actual plans.

When considering the landscape as a social phenomenon it is necessary to trace how landscape is reflected in popular consciousness and thus to somehow express the social meaning or the “language” of landscape. Like any semiotic system this language is subject to the evolution and wear and tear that go hand in hand with structural changes in society. In intervening in or configuring the landscape we ourselves influence how its meaning develops, that is, what it says; and if we fail to take this fact into account when devising plans, our plans may well be mistaken or in vain. Helmut

Krauch reports thus from Japan that when the popular tourist area around Fujiyama proved unable to accommodate the hordes of tourists arriving there, the government built the necessary infrastructure—roads, restaurants, and other facilities—and thus put an end to the popularity of the place among the younger generation.

Like the meaning of any semiotic system, the social message expressed by landscape must be learned. No naïve relationship exists between the landscape and society, except possibly that between the exploiter and the exploited. A naïve person is unable to see the landscape, for he has not learned its language. Or, to cite this in the profound words of media scholar Marshall McLuhan, “environments are invisible.” The landscape is as invisible as language is inaudible; colors and sounds alone are visible or audible, but the apparitions they evoke through the senses of the “human receptor” remain still to be fathomed. Is it a coincidence that Homer, the first person to portray landscape, was blind?

Thus when we consider the landscape as a semiotic system, as a language—not in an allegorical but in a literal sense—we immediately run into difficulties regarding the question as to which is the performative factor and which the performed? The claim that landscape is natural, not man-made, does not stand up in our present environments. Yet it would be equally wrong to claim that the artifact “landscape” was consciously created for the purpose of expressing some particular message. Thus, the landscape can be neither the object nor the motif nor the subject of that which it expresses.

This precisely is what determines the social character of the meaning of landscape: that the message it conveys lies not in the object itself, but in its interpretation in cultural terms, in the cultural context through the prism of which we see the landscape and learn to understand it. This cultural context consists without any doubt in such cultural accomplishments as have been made in poetry and painting but also and to an overwhelming extent in those fields accessible to the

broader masses: in travel brochures, in naive or sentimental reading matter, and in the portrayals of landscape found both in the trivial novel and in the cheap reproductions hung on hotel room walls.

If we are to endeavor now to see the landscape literally and not just paradigmatically as a language, we must immediately mention an insight of modern semiotics, namely that there is no lexicon. A lexicon—as in: cypresses are sad, birch trees cheerful, cliffs heroic, fruit trees in blossom peaceful, etc.—would not only be pedantic and absurd but also rapidly consumed. Think, for example, how rapidly the meaning of rock and ice in all their awesomeness has been reduced to tatters and diffused in the general merriment of winter holidays in a ski resort!

The grammar and vocabulary of the landscape derive from the poetic origins of our culture. The poetry of Imperial Rome took the canon established by Homer then transported the Sicilian cultural landscape to a semi-divine nowhere: to Arcadia. The Middle Ages adopted the well ordered treasure trove thus established and consolidated the role of its requisites: the deep well and the shade of a tree; the reeds from which the shepherd carves his flute; and the flock sleeping so peacefully at noon that not even a lion would wish to do it harm. What we have described here in modern terms, such as “language” or “semiotic system,” etc., was well known to all earlier generations of readers, in particular to the authors of medieval poetics, topics and rhetoric—but in another form. This awareness, that the portrayed and perceived landscape is not a natural phenomenon but one born of scholarship and poetry, began to diminish only when the modern age mistook landscape for nature and vice versa. People tend to attribute this error to Jean-Jacques Rousseau—mistakenly, as we shall see. For in the following, we shall take a look at the evolution of modern society’s relationship to the landscape.

In England, traditional relationships were turned on their heads in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the city, hitherto a place

for the consumption of wealth generated by agriculture, itself became a place to make money. Country estates that previously had had to provide an income to cover their respective lord and master's pleasures in the city now became pleasure gardens in which lucre gained in the city was spent on leisurely pastimes. The basis of this development was enclosure, which excluded peasants from country estates and turned them into cheap labor for urban industries. Hence any rustic landscape found thereafter on the estates was only for show. However, in order that this show, this illusion, might be distinguished from that which it represented, or indeed, might be recognized at all, it required a certain style, namely Arcadian Classicism. It is not my intention here to sketch the history of the English garden, which extends from the first ventures of Lord Burlington and his designer William Kent to such highlights as Colt Hoare (Stourhead House) and Child (Osterley Park), and also gained a literary complement courtesy of Alexander Pope and Horace Walpole. Noteworthy is the prolific scholarship expended on it: the rural landscape of England was rendered manifest by allusion to the Arcadian paradise of Ancient Italy. Horace Walpole struggled to make clear to his aristocratic friends the economic foundation of this shift: a half-acre in the City of London is the manor and the city palace is located in the countryside ... This is how he described the situation of the banker Child.

We mentioned that the blame for mistaking the man-made landscape for nature is often laid at Jean-Jacques Rousseau's door. No one who reads his *the New Héloïse* will approve this accusation. The eleventh letter in the fourth part of that novel apparently spread the fashion for English gardens to French-speaking regions and prompted the owners of Ermenonville to create a natural garden. Yet a careful reading reveals the subtle dialectics that Rousseau developed between ornament and utility, artfulness and naturalness. The garden in front of the palace is the domain of the master: here,

the Baroness's husband has converted the monumental garden he inherited into a kitchen garden: in place of the horse chestnut—a “useless” tree but one easily pruned to make a large sculpture—the young gentleman has planted mulberry trees and so encouraged local farmers to breed silkworms. Enjoyment of a beautiful location was thus enhanced by the notion of having philanthropically provided the local populace with a new source of income. The reader is thus led to believe that he is looking at the truly ideal garden Rousseau had in mind until, that is, the Baroness leads him through a narrow wicket gate behind the palace and into the former kitchen garden. Here, the opposite has happened: the kitchen garden has been transformed into an ornamental garden. The artful wilderness is described in all its detail: forest vines were planted such as to clamber over fruit trees; the course of a distant brook was altered so that it would babble through the garden; the fruit, despite being ripe, could not be harvested but served rather to entice the birds to stay. And in order to completely dispel any doubt as to the artificiality of this natural idyll, mention is made even of the high cost of creating it.

Above all, it was the very lack of purpose in this apparent purposiveness that occupied Goethe especially; he saw it as one of the causes of the revolution. True, his political drama *Die Aufgeregten* [The Agitated] does not show the revolutionary party in the best light: but civic pride is attributed nonetheless to Louise, the governess, who looks disapprovingly upon the Baroness's natural garden. It is the sight of true purposiveness that delights the gaze of the bourgeoisie, a class that, as Louise ambiguously notes, “must think of necessities;” these being either whatever the financially beleaguered class requires or the basis of a livelihood for all classes...

Goethe addressed this paradox of the man-made naturalness of the landscape garden in a burlesque manner. The two heterogeneous parts of his drama *Triumph der Empfindsamkeit* (Triumph of Sensi-

bility) were presumably intended for distinct purposes; yet Goethe ultimately combined them to create an entertaining charade. The central figure in one part, the Goddess of Hell, is persuaded by a deceased English lord to transform hell into a landscape garden. Predominant in the other part is a sensitive prince reputed to be a friend of nature. A picnic in the woods is arranged in honor of the prince's visit but he actually finds the idea in rather poor taste. He is inclined instead to take nature with him wherever he goes, in his myriad boxes and suitcases packed with effervescent springs, birdsong and moonlight—thus with all the requisites of the charming place.

The bourgeois philosophy of Immanuel Kant finally succeeded in identifying the dialectic between that which is unnecessary and that which is useful as the foundation of aesthetics. Among the arts on which Kant draws in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* [Critique of Judgment] “pleasure gardening” is top of the list: it alone most consummately meets the criterion of being purposive yet simultaneously without purpose. It alone may, to put it in more modern terms, represent purpose without having any. The artistic product insofar became alienated from its admirers. While, in *Die Aufgeregten*, the Baroness's daughter was bent on nothing so much as to kill a rabbit in the newly created nature reserve, the path to that purely administrative approach to property, which would later characterize the heroes of Stifter's novel *Nachsommer*, had now begun to be paved.

Now, after having pointed out some foundations of the Western understanding of landscape, we shall next touch upon a few less harmless chapters in its further development throughout the nineteenth century. Striking here, first and foremost, is how dialectics ceased to play a role in this period, as well as the growing confusion between that which has come into being organically and that which is man-made, i.e. the artifact.

We could head the first chapter “The Ideologization of Nature.” Here, “unspoiled” nature and mankind stand in opposition to each

other; or, in other words, man is no longer taken to be part of the natural world and is able thus to look upon it from outside, as “the other.” A most instructive example of such development is the discovery of the Alps. For centuries, the Alps instilled fear and terror in unwilling visitors but now they are not only being made gradually more easily accessible but also acclaimed as the ultimate in rural beauty. This development is making strides like the annual rings in a tree trunk and may be perused in the brochures and engravings it leaves in its wake. It started with the deep mountain lakes—Lake Lucerne, Lake Thun and Lake Brienz—then reached the lower slopes a few years later. There followed a string of waterfalls, such as the Staubbach and Griessbach; then came the ravines and, after them, the higher valleys of the Alpine foothills. Scaling the major highland valleys of the Alps accomplished the next step: Davos first—reluctantly, but on doctor’s orders; then, shortly afterwards, and voluntarily, the Upper Engadine. All that remained then was the zone above the timberline, the actual Alp, and the rock and ice above it. And once these had been scaled and then integrated in the European ideal of beauty, nothing more stood in the way of marketing the winter.

The relevant literature provided a backdrop to this development. Darwin taught us about the origins and survival of the species under conditions shaped by the cruelty of nature; Nietzsche linked heroism to the landscape of Sils; the heroism of Swiss and Tyrolean mountain farmers inspired patriotism and nationalism; a bourgeoisie alienated from its industrial foundations preached the simple life in accordance with such clichés. The national parks established in Switzerland ensued from this confusion of landscape with nature, from demands for the unspoiled cruelty of the natural world. In the high alpine regions, it was said, the forces of nature ought to be protected from mankind and left to wrestle with each other undisturbed, so that storms might fell trees and chamois be abandoned

to death by avalanche. Unfortunately, nature let loose in this way does not do mankind the favor of establishing a natural balance and thus “nature” has been endangered for years, not by mankind but by recently migrated deer.

The second chapter, “Manipulating Nature’s Image,” is based on the paradox that nature must also be visited and hence developed to that end. Man cannot approach nature without changing it. Somewhere between the farmhouse and the castle, “Grand Hotel architecture” is gaining a foothold in the Alps. Each location, each particular spa resort determines what should be on offer there as “nature” and the respective canons of the charming place define which postcard goes on sale; thus, at any one time, the Grand Hotel and the postcard engender the current language of nature as well as novel symbols to give it expression: the Alpine rose and edelweiss, for instance. Sympathy is diverted from the victorious species to the endangered one; the tourist causes the extinction of edelweiss yet simultaneously seeks to preserve it.

This gives rise to the dialectics of tourism as identified by Enzensberger. The presence of the tourist destroys the very solitude he seeks. Tourism persistently wears itself out: one place after another is sought out by the fashionable avant-garde, swamped by great hordes of tag-alongs and then abandoned, finally, to economic slump. Tourism becomes a speculative business affair. Whoever manages to discover an up-and-coming location has got it made. The private weekend retreat is an open invitation to get in on the act. Anyone who buys at the right time can earn a second income from his vacation hobby. Perhaps it will prove possible in the future to find a healthy core in this frenzy of activity, namely holiday-home owners’ interest in and commitment to landscapes that will otherwise at some point be deserted by their indigenous populations . . .

While the discovery of the Alps was not exactly free of nationalism, the “Politicization of Nature” only really got into gear after the

First World War. Each of the nationalist movements that paved the way to Nazism—the “völkische,” the “Bündische” and the “country folk” varieties—offered its particular interpretation of nature and of the German people’s relationship to it. Franz von Wendrin declared in 1924 that the Old Testament’s vision of paradise had been stolen from a Germanic tradition and that true paradise lay in Mecklenburg, and he thereby named Rügen and Usedom “the Islands of the Blessed.”<sup>1</sup> The ground on which these monstrous fruits and figments of pedantic minds thrived was German cultural criticism in the style of Langbehn, Lagarde and Moeller van den Bruck. As to literary phenomena symptomatic of the same, there is, on the one hand, Ernst Wiechert’s *The Simple Life*, which provided the bourgeois class compromised by National Socialism the comfortable illusion that spending time in the great outdoors remained apolitical even under those circumstances; and, on the other, Ernst Jünger’s symbolist tendency to collect beetles, the connection of which to cruelty the author himself pointed out. The extent to which the science of race and anti-Semitism are part and parcel of this ideological complex may be read in the prescient Countess zu Reventlow’s *Memoirs of Mr. Lady*.

The simple life in this second edition, i.e. the German people’s roots in earth and clay, demanded space; and ideology consequently proved apt also to engender a people without space. Heirs to German cultural criticism, Alfred Rosenberg and Paul Schultze-Naumburg in particular, demanded commitment from the National Socialists to a rural settlement program and, in consequence, to territorial expansion in the Eastern territories they claimed were either empty or populated only by inferior races: policy that was bound to end with the loss of the East.

1 Cf. Armin Mohler: *The Conservative Revolution in Germany 1918–1932*, Stuttgart: Friedrich Vorwerck-Verlag, 1950; reprinted 1971.

After the Second World War and not least as a result of the war effort, especially that of the United States, there followed an era of economic expansion that did not shrink from “Rationalizing Agriculture and Rural Landscapes.” Following in the Americans’ footsteps, centuries-old traditions and farming practices were called into question, and agricultural life and the lifestyle of farmers themselves were radically revised. Monocultures and an end to self-sufficiency were the most far-reaching changes. Nowadays, farmers produce only the one product that thrives best in their locality. Those combinations once so familiar to us are particularly threatened by extinction. The landscape will soon no longer consist of fields and pockets of land in a broad range of tones; the machinery that attests to a mix of hay and fruit farming will likewise vanish. The incidentals too will disappear from the farm: chickens clucking, corncobs drying and hams suspended in a chimney. Whatever the farm no longer produces, the farmer’s wife will buy in a shop, just like a city girl. Although we have probably not yet fully realized it, such changes really shake up the traditional world. Children are still being raised on books in which horses are shod, grain is threshed on the threshing room floor, and cattle are driven by herdsmen—but for how much longer? We cannot yet say what impact the loss of familiar symbolism will have on reality. We suggested above that holiday-home owners might under certain circumstances help steer the fate of their chosen location. It is quite possible that the traditional and, for us, meaningful style of agriculture may continue on a hobby basis.

Meanwhile, “Deterioration of the Landscape,” such as we have shown occurred in the Alps in nineteenth-century Switzerland, has now reached global proportions. With the help of charter airlines landscapes that can still provide some visual stimulus are being sought in the world’s most far-flung corners. Yet the advent of standardized, uniform tourism rapidly dispels the exoticism of any area visited. Neither the Nordic tundra nor the African bush, not even

the primitive world of the Galapagos Islands is able to preserve the charm of novelty. And the pace of such deterioration gives rise to the anxious and simultaneously hopeful question: What comes next?

The final chapter would have to be provisionally headed "The Discovery of the Environment." We use the word environment here in the sense it has acquired in recent years, namely to describe the ecosystem that supports us and which our erroneous economic system is currently robbing of its sustainability and hence destroying. It is distressing above all to learn that our Western society has adopted an economy and a standard of living which, were all the earth's inhabitants to adopt them, would instantly exhaust ecological resources. All that remains for us, therefore, is to go "back to nature," to return to the "simple life." And yet to do so would prompt political and economic upheaval of a sort we could barely even have begun to imagine in the 1930s. Or are those who are building new technologies and rectifying the shortcomings of nature rather than those of society simply abusing the discovery of the endangered environment? Or will mankind manage this time to tear down the ideological veils that have been draped before nature and the landscape and develop a rational and yet at the same time ethically underpinned political program?

The interpretation of nature as an environment is based on the idea of an "ecosystem," that is, a system of natural forces capable of sustaining and regenerating itself, if only its equilibrium is maintained. There are two risks inherent to this interpretation of nature as a system, both of which may lead today's society to deceive itself as to the consequences of its actions. The first is the fact that our beautiful natural environment does indeed evince a degree of stability, and especially so in the Alps. The diversity of plants and animals and other factors ensures that disruptions are remedied and equilibrium restored. Habitats outside the temperate zone are far more labile; they can be quickly and permanently damaged if overly

burdened by air pollution or buildings. We alone have managed to delude ourselves that nature is not only adaptable, but actually something quite purposive, like a control system that oscillates around a state of normalcy.

The second risk is that nature, whatever that may be, also includes mankind. Yet mankind does not fit into a self-regulating system, for a highly specific reason. Control systems require elements that react reflexively and proportionally to stimuli. Mankind responds “linguistically” however; he perceives stimuli as signs that he must “read,” understand and interpret. His behavior is subject to social processes and learning processes, is bound up with its historical context and is therefore political. Man ignores shifts in nature or perceives them under the heading “landscape;” the image of the landscape—an historical construct in the mind’s eye—determines man’s behavior and actions, which are therefore by no means controlling or even self-regulating, but have an irreversible impact on history—for better or for worse.

## Why is Landscape Beautiful? (1979)

This paper begins and closes with a discussion of what exactly “landscape” is. Which parts of our visible environment are included in that which we call landscape, and which other, equally visible phenomena are excluded? For we agree unanimously on this much at least: the cow pats in Vrin<sup>1</sup> belong to the landscape while tin cans tossed aside by a tourist do not.

So the basic idea here is that the landscape is a construct. And what this terrible word, “construct” conveys is nothing other than that the landscape is to be found, not in environmental phenomena but in the mind’s eye of those doing the looking. To espy a landscape in our environment is a creative act brought forth by excluding and filtering certain elements and, equally, by rhyming together or integrating all we see in a single image, in a manner that is influenced largely by our educational background. Was our excursion to Vrin therefore nothing more than a mental exercise? Naturally, we had given the matter some thought during the discussions we had prior to the trip. Consequently, we arrived in Vrin with two scenarios in mind. The first went something like this: when we picture a landscape, we draw on the range of phenomena found in our environment—colors, structures, identifiable natural contexts and signs of human intervention. The environment here resembles the artist’s palette. Yet this comparison, like all good comparisons, is not altogether steady on its feet. The phenomena that make up this palette are too different from one another to be able to lie side by

1 A seminar with Leo Balmer in Vrin in Lugnez in 1979 for students of Basel University of Applied Arts.

side in a single plane. In a sense, it is truer to say that the landscape consists of many different layers: the merely visual layer of colors; a more complex layer comprising the first hints of natural or productive-technological contexts; and a layer in which social aspects and hence, also a temporal dimension can be identified: an abandoned farmhouse, an annoyingly modern building, or—evidence of an era when farmers were still self-sufficient—a field full of a certain variety of grass.

And then our second scenario: the landscape constructed thus from the various phenomena on the palette is oriented to the ideal of the “*locus amoenus*,”<sup>2</sup> the “charming place” upheld by painting and literature since the time of Homer and Horace, through that of Claude Le Lorrain and the Romantics and, finally, by our tourism brochures and cigarette advertisements. To identify a landscape as charming is insofar synonymous with the endeavor to “filter out” whatever we actually do see in the place visited, so as to be able to integrate the outcome in our preconceived, idealized image of the charming place. The more the walker sees that matches his expectations—the fountain at the city gates, the quiet shore of a lake, Conrad Ferdinand Meyer’s white peaks<sup>3</sup>—the greater his degree of satisfaction.

Do these two hypotheses—the “palette” and the “charming place”—stand up? They do and they don’t. What follows is an attempt to cover the key points in a debate the class held on the final day of its trip to Vrin.

2 [The term has been used traditionally to denote an idealized place of safety or comfort, which incorporates trees, grass and water, lies usually beyond the city limits, and is suggestive hence of a natural paradise untrammelled by the dictates of urban civilization.]

3 [Conrad Ferdinand Meyer (1825–98) was a Swiss poet and historical novelist.]