

# LANDSCAPE AS AN EXPRESSION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ITS INTERPRETATION AS AN ART FORM

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## Abstract

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The essay elaborates the thesis that reality, in its universality, cannot be captured by descriptive scientific methods. Whatever we see as reality is conditioned by human intention and subject to historical and temporal circumstances. The text suggests the possibility that our landscape awareness could be extended to include the artistic reflection, focusing on objects whose structure is seemingly less clear and graspable, and preferring thinking more abstract than contextual. Despite the progress in, and the extent of, scientific knowledge – or because of it – we realize that such knowledge has its limits, presupposed and insurmountable. One of the meanings of a valuable work of art – a result of the cognitive process of its own kind – is that it gives us an information more or less accurate on something that is beyond our practical and theoretical experience, something elusive and yet existing. A possibility is also suggested that through artistic exploration and understanding of the landscape, a nation's cultural identity can manifest itself.

identity, landscape, perception, descriptive method, artistic interpretation of the art form, poetry, painting

The intentions of the current academic discourse on the landscape as a subject of exploration, discovery and evaluation is dominated by the results obtained and formulated by the methods of science. Yet despite all pursuit of objectivity, these methods are inadvertently selective - they bring just a summary of *measurable* facts.

In an informal talk with Professor Šimek, Head of the Horticulture Department at Mendel University in Brno, I quoted Lawrence Ferlinghetti:

“... and the coach  
creaking on through cornfields  
so slowly that  
butterflies  
blew in and out. (Obeznámeni s nocí, 1967).

His unfeigned reaction was a surprise at the accuracy of this poetic image, revealing the beauty of the landscape, which – if judged by the methods of typologies – was on a peripheral value position. Surely aesthetic quality is one of the criteria of a landscape's value, and somehow we expect that

the more valuable a landscape is, the more it is beautiful. However, the concept of *beauty* is here a given historical fact, a reality knowable to all people, independent of their subjective attitudes and personal experiences. As if beauty in its incomprehensibility demonstrated its metaphysical origins and thus maintained its mysteriousness and at the same time confirmed its identity. Based on philosophical ideas and scientific knowledge, landscape was defined as a part of the earth's surface limited by the horizon as seen from the distance. The word *landscape*, or German *Landschaft*, derived from the Dutch word *landschap*, had earlier meant simply ‘region, tract of land’ but had acquired the artistic sense, ‘a picture depicting scenery on land’, established as an independent genre of painting.

In current academic discourse, the expression of phenomenal reality (in our case, the landscape as objectively knowable phenomenon) using non-scientific methods is still on periphery of attention,

all the more so if it is an *artistic* reflection within current standards of artistic expression.

The question is whether the so-called artistic expression of reality – despite its very reductive sign form arousing general lay suspicion that it is hardly more than a purely subjective record of chaotic thought processes of maverick authors – is in fact a result of a complex cognitive process similar to scientifically structured description. And, in its apparent mysteriousness, it could be a much more comprehensive picture of, and report on, the reality, and thus a materialisation, endowed with universal validity, of cultural identity of man-inhabited space.

The great Czech poet Vladimír Holan, in a poem from *Trialog* (1964) writes: ‘The scientist observes. Science can only forage for truth. Crawling, no wings! And why? But it is simple, I’ve already said: Science is in probability, the poet is in the parable...’ (Pád do výšky, 1967).

In 1968, one visitor timidly asked the poet Bohuslav Reynek at his farm at Petrkov why, during their talk, he kept peeking out of the window: What is there to be seen other than a stable, turkey hens and geese in the yard... Reynek replied: ‘There’s much more to be seen, but you can’t see it...’ (Reynek, 2011). The whole yard was just a stage of an ancient history of the place, eternally resurgent regardless of time, because what is eternal and beyond time, permeates the time both in its linearity, cyclicity, and historicity... Essentially, this is a vision of Karel H. Macha’s ‘*beauty unseen by physical sight*’ as the ontological basis of human life, its dignity and its existence in inhabited space.

The leading representative of the French phenomenological philosophy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, wrote: ‘Art gives a visible existence to what is invisible in layman’s eyes, and shows that we do not need any *muscular sense* to imagine the world’s true voluminosity. Any painter practices the magical theory of vision... things pass through him, the spirit rises from his eyes and goes walking into things, because the artist constantly focuses his vision on them’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1971).

The physics uses the term *imponderabilia*, ie, non measurable but still substantial quantities in the world of physical phenomena. In a figurative sense, they are the ones that fill in the metaphysical space of artistic forms in art, literature and music. They are as sophisticated as the mathematical relationships that surely no one suspects of being the result of subjective arbitrariness or chaotic speculations of their authors just because they are expressed in a sign system whose logical structure we cannot understand because we find mathematics discouraging. Contemporary art is characterized by a multiplicity of means of expression, from those that refer to historical modes of display, through their modifications and shifts of meaning and through signs and symbols of reductionist sign systems called abstraction, concretism, minimalism, etc, to dematerialised displays enabled by current technical means and technologies.

Likewise, the aesthetic concept of *beauty* today is much more difficult to define than in the past, which, from the layman’s point of view, offered at least some clues to allow comparisons, but now are irrelevant and useless not only in terms of the historical context, but also because of the multiplicity of methodological approaches within contemporary art discourse. Despite the achieved level and scope of current scientific knowledge – or perhaps because of it – we can only guess its limits, assumed and insurmountable. One of the most valuable meanings of a work of art as a process of search of context is that it gives a more or less clear information about something that is beyond our practical and theoretical experience, which is elusive and yet existing. Thus the creation and perception of a work of art is a process of seeking for and understanding of relationships that may not be apparent at first glance.

From the philosophical point of view it is now apparent that reality is impenetrable in its universality, and what we consider a reality is always conditional to human intent and subject to historical circumstances. Also, what seems to be a generally understood by the term *landscape* is actually a dynamically changing phenomenon both in historical, linear and cyclic time, and it is exactly its temporality that makes it a phenomenon so very latent and vague for descriptive methods...

The work of the painter Michael Ranný (1946–1981) is ranked among the highest and most timeless values of the Czech art in the second half of the 20th century. Landscape, and its artistic reflection in a non-descriptive, reduced manner, actually was his only topic. The great Moravian poet Jan Skácel congenially reinterpreted Ranný’s work in literary form:

‘... we will understand better  
as soon as the paints get dry  
and in the picture  
remains the great little something  
what the heart wanted  
of which it was so afraid’.

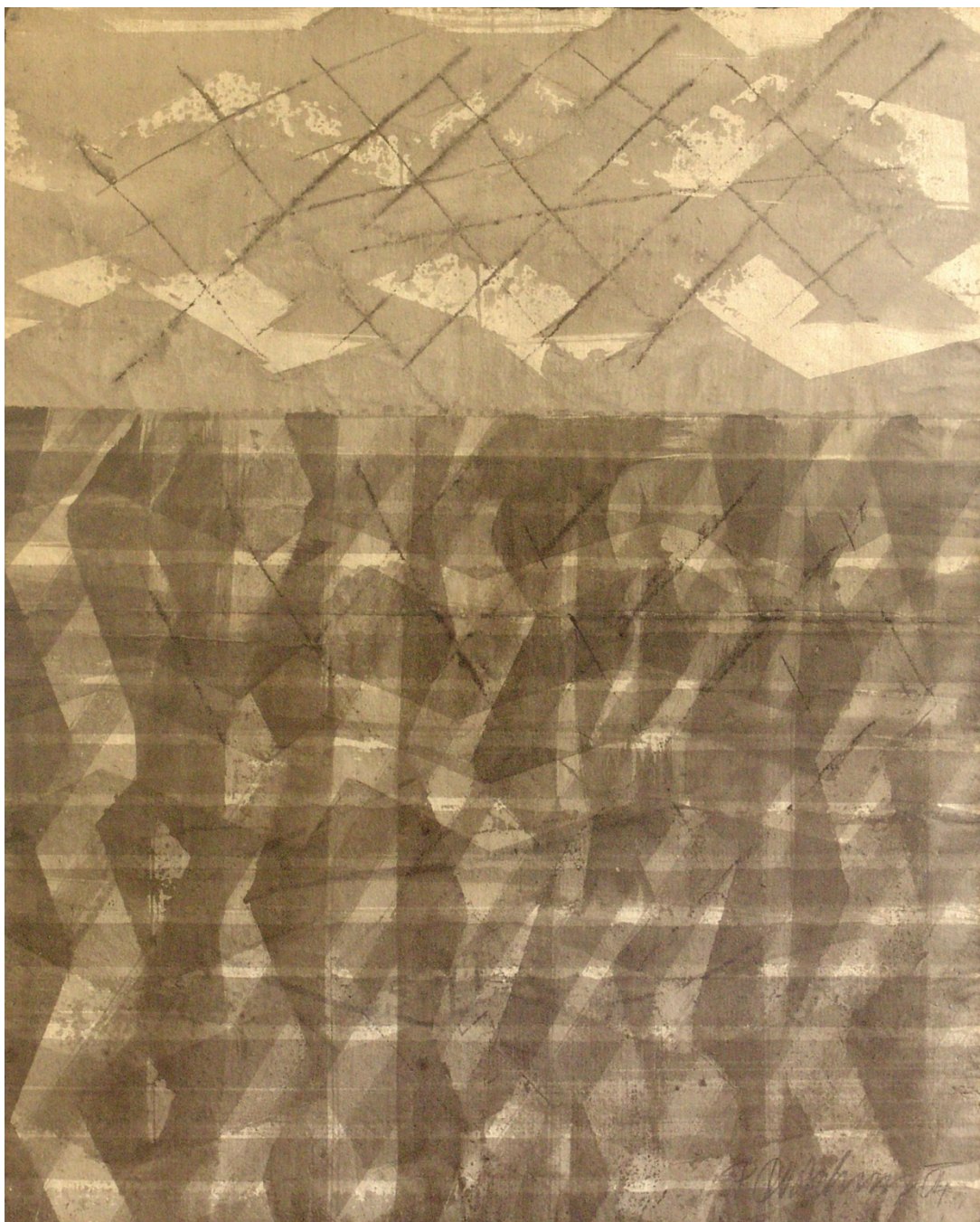
No wonder that Ranný loved Chinese poets. Reading them he understood that the implicit is at least as important as what is spoken. For ‘there are things, thoughts, perhaps even words, trees, rocks, stones and walls that, being said aloud, go silent and cease to be’. (Hlušíčka, 1993). Precisely the fact that the artistic articulation is a purely *subjective* understanding and grasping of reality is its strength, not a barrier to understanding, because it leaves us with the need to participate actively in it, despite its elusive definition...

Although *beauty* (as an aesthetic category) as well as *art* today are concepts indefinable by their contents, there are their equivalents to consider, such as *charm*, *pleasure*, *surprise* or even *shock* or *blow*. In the case of reception of an art form, the essential fact is that it is not an arbitrary combination of forms, but the search for reality, or whatever can be expected in its context.

During the early modern period, in comparison with the previous epochs, our landscape changed beyond recognition due to the fundamental changes in agriculture and manufacturing. In assessing the landscape today, we appreciate what we call the equilibrium of all elements, both natural and man-made, and looking at the landscape with Baroque residues we are always willing to dish out words of praise and strive to protect such territory, forgetting that exactly in this period, the first and

most dramatic exploitation of landscape took place in the form of ruthless deforestation, because wood was the only available source of energy for the earliest forms of industrial production.

This catastrophe was problematically corrected by Theresian and Josephine measures, creating forest monocultures which has determined the character of our landscape ever since. Landscape, modelled for centuries by the cyclic rhythm of farm work and feudal administration, then underwent



1: Pavel Kostřhun, *Landscape*, 2005, Chinese ink painting

The author's artistic reflection of the landscape, which is in fact a drab industrial Moravian countryside reduced to a synthesising signs typical of its character. "Plowed flat fields, drab monoculture of wheat and corn..."

the most important change during the 19th century's industrial boom. This process culminated in the forty-year post-World War II period, when the 'socialist landscape' evolved as one of the forms of the European industrial landscape.

Has such a landscape its values worthy of admiration, care and protection? Does it contain such qualities and beauty that allow us to identify

with it and recognize in it its personal and national identity? Countless works of art of all types, as a concrete manifestation of the national cultural identity, say yes. Let's mention at least two extreme examples of artistic reflection of landscapes gone through cataclysmic changes where artists well nevertheless able to reveal great beauty.



2: Pavel Kostrhun, *Winter Landscape*, 2002, oil on fiberboard

The author's interpretation of his native landscape with a characteristic structure of plowed fields covered with melting snow.

I mean the thrilling paintings by Bohdan Kopecký inspired by the 'lunar landscape' of the Most coalmining area, or the photographic cycle by Josef Sudek inspired by the Ostrava industrial landscape. It seems as if the artists used a special microscope and revealed a deeper reality speaking with convincing spontaneity, which can be found in the human heart as well as in any environment, in the nature, in landscape, in the city...

The important philosopher of the 20th century, Jacques Maritain wrote: "Art and poetry have an essential and indispensable role in the existence of mankind. People can live authentic lives only when participating in the life of the spirit which forever. They desperately need poets and poetry who are outside the thankless drudgery and thankless laws of

conservation of the rational animal, and bear witness to the freedom of spirit. Poetry is necessary insofar as it is useless and free, because it makes people to see the reality beyond reality, to experience the hidden meaning of things, the dark community with the world of beauty, without which people can neither live nor lead a moral life" (Maritain, 2011). A work of art is not just a simple amalgam of external influences, often seemingly disparate and operating discontinuously in time, but is primarily an expression of intrinsic personal experience, of an authentic and distinctive vision of its creator. It is a distinctive and irreplaceable way of understanding the reality – the landscape. On this road, we people are not supposed to achieve the target: but we are supposed relentlessly to walk in its direction.

### SUMMARY

The physics uses the term *imponderabilia*, ie, non measurable but still substantial quantities in the world of physical phenomena. In a figurative sense, they are the ones that fill in the metaphysical space of artistic forms in art, literature and music. They are as sophisticated as the mathematical relationships that surely no one suspects of being the result of subjective arbitrariness or chaotic speculations of their authors just because they are expressed in a sign system whose logical structure we cannot understand because we find mathematics discouraging. Contemporary art is characterized by a multiplicity of means of expression, from those that refer to historical modes of display, through their modifications and shifts of meaning and through signs and symbols of reductionist sign systems called abstraction, concretism, minimalism, etc, to dematerialised displays enabled by current technical means and technologies.

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