

# FOREWORD

The present volume of the *Journal of the LUCAS Graduate Conference* brings together a number of articles that emerged from the 2017 LUCAS Graduate Conference on *Landscape: Interpretations, Relations, and Representations*. I recall this conference as a landscape in itself: rich with grandiose sights, multiple views, unexpected angles, interdisciplinary get-togethers, and intercultural encounters. The articles in this journal reflect this abundance by offering various takes on the overarching theme of the conference.

Landscape is a term that seems plain enough at first sight, but on closer inspection turns out to be confused and obscure. Everybody knows what ‘landscape’ means, through life experiences such as hiking, admiring a view from a window or a hill top, or browsing through the illustrations of a travelogue. Yet when I recently asked a group of undergraduate students to explain what the word ‘landscape’ signifies, the classroom remained silent. Attempts at defining ‘landscape’ tend to fall flat or imbue the unpleasant feeling that a rich and complex notion, ripe with metaphorical power, has been reduced to a pale ghost. I suspect that any scholar working on the theme of landscape will experience moments when she or he envies the poet, who may luxuriate in the boundless realm of emerging signification that the word opens up.<sup>1</sup> The majority of our ideas about landscape have sprouted from written lines. Petrarch’s report of

1 Indicative of this ‘poet’s envy’ is the tendency of scholarly discourse on landscape to meander, instead of following a straight line of argumentation.

his ascent of Mont Ventoux in 1336, undertaken for no other reason than to admire the scenery, is usually referred to as the first occurrence of the notion of landscape in the Western world.<sup>2</sup> Other cultures have their own legends and tales with regard to landscape, as one of the articles in this volume shows.

Literature, then, seems to be landscape's most natural haunt. Yet the Germanic word 'landscape' is etymologically closer to the visual arts. The realistic type of landscape painting that emerged in the southern part of the Netherlands, more than one hundred years after Petrarch's epic climb, seems to have played an important role in the establishment and transmission of the term.<sup>3</sup> Landscape painting enforces, by means of pictorial representation, the connection that Petrarch established between a delimited part of the earth's surface and a view enacted by a living person.<sup>4</sup> Confusingly, the pictorial doubling of this act of viewing tends to obscure its own artificiality and presents itself to the spectator as a truthful image of the world, as something that exists independently of the viewing subject. As W. J. T. Mitchell has argued, and as most of the articles in this volume show, this tendency to naturalize its own constructedness turns landscape into a highly effective instrument of cultural power.<sup>5</sup> However, the ambivalence between landscape understood as an actual view, and as the representation of what this act of perception produces, also results in landscape's inclination to work as a theoretical tool.<sup>6</sup> Landscape emphasizes both the performativity of viewing and the possibility that our acts of perception emancipate themselves from us and appear before us as an image that can be apprehended and contemplated. With landscape, viewing (in Greek: *theorein*) easily turns into theorizing.

Yet landscape is also characterized by its resistance to such 'imperialistic' acts of apprehension. As Mitchell points out, landscape "always greets us as space, as environment, as that within which 'we' (figured as 'the figures' in the landscape) find—or loose—ourselves".<sup>7</sup> Landscape offers the possibility of projecting oneself into it as a figure in a scene; but it also draws us into a

2 See for instance Ton Lemaire, *Filosofie van het landschap* (Amsterdam: Ambo, 2002), 17.

3 Vittoria Di Palma, "Is Landscape Painting?," in *Is Landscape ...? Essays on the Identity of Landscape*, eds. Gareth Doherty and Charles Waldheim (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 47.

4 This connection is also articulated by the aesthetic category of the picturesque, which arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

5 W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1ff.

6 Di Palma, "Is Landscape Painting?," 47.

7 Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 2.

boundlessness where we tend to lose grip of our surroundings and ourselves.<sup>8</sup> The ambiguous mixture of delight and fear brought about by the experience of landscape made Petrarch reach out for his copy of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, which he had taken to Mont Ventoux for the sake of spiritual reassurance. May the reader of this journal be less fearful, and joyfully indulge in the wealth of the budding thoughts assembled in it.

<sup>8</sup> Western aesthetic discourse has termed this experience 'sublime'.

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