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Picturing landscape : contemporary photography, collective visual memory and the making of place in the Netherlands

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Introduction

Over the last decades, there has been an increased interest in the connection between landscape and culture and the way people give meaning to their physical environment. In fact, this interest emerged in art history in the 1960s and 1970s. A key publication, marking this growing interest, is 'The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape', which Ernst Gombrich published in *Norm and Form* (1966). This essay bears witness to a vision of how an awareness of 'landscape' as a specific cultural construct emerged during the Renaissance.¹ Another important publication from these early years is *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* by Michael Baxandall (1972), who emphasised the way the understanding of 'landscape' is conditioned by the cultural context in which the beholder lives.² Many publications would follow, a number of which I will refer to in this dissertation. They stem, mainly, from three disciplines: art history, cultural geography and landscape architecture. It is at the intersection of these three disciplines that my research evolves.

fig. 1

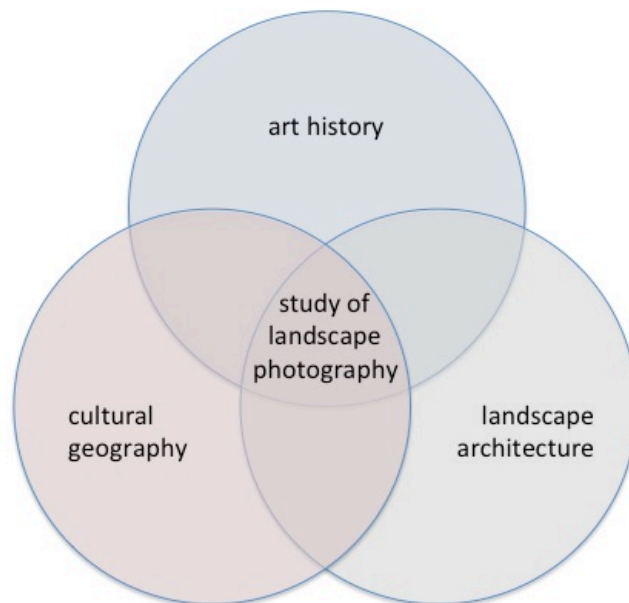


Fig. 0.1 Schematic representation of the position of this PhD research

¹ Gombrich traces the origin of this awareness back to descriptions of art collections, for example by Venetian nobleman and the art lover Marcantonio Michiel, who writes about 'landscapes' (*paesi*) when making notes of the art collection of Cardinal Grimani. Gombrich 1966, p. 109.

² Baxandall 1972.

Firstly, art historians study the way artists and photographers contribute to our individual and collective mental image of landscape and our sense of place. An ecocritical discourse in the broader field of culture studies has resulted in the renewed interest in landscape and environment being understood as a cultural response to the ecological crisis, clearly signalled in the 1970s by, e.g. a report from the Club of Rome.³ It should be noted that not all cultural expressions in this context can be characterised as activist. Ecocriticism has also instigated publications and expressions that explore the cultural character of landscape in general, including in photography and art, in which the human influence on landscape and nature is central. Through the pioneering work of photographers like those from the epic exhibition *New Topographics* (1975) and the viral work of the Düsseldorf School, landscape is well and truly back on the photographic menu. The cases in this research stem from this recently increased production of landscape photography.

Whereas ecocriticism has focused especially on text and time-based narratives of literature, poetry and cinema, there is still a need for an academic study on still, visual imagery within this 'cultural response' to climate change and specifically for knowledge on the way still photography depicting landscape 'makes place'. This research is one such contribution. For this purpose, I draw, in particular, on theories on photography shaping collective visual memory of places, as formulated in *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination* (2003) by Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan. Furthermore, theories about the way contemporary autonomous landscape photography shapes and reshapes our image of a place are also important, as formulated in, for example, in *Take Place: Photography and Place from Multiple Perspectives* (2009) edited by art historian and photography theoretician Helen Westgeest of Leiden University, as well as by Liz Wells in *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity* (2011).

Secondly, there is a growing awareness in the discipline of cultural geography that humans' understanding and valuing of their environment do not only depend on geological characteristics and economic functions in landscapes, which were traditionally mapped by geography. In addition, the cultural appreciation and construction of landscapes, including the cultural specific representation of landscape in thinking, performance and art, has become a key subject of geographical study since the 1970s and firmly embedded in geographical research nowadays.⁴ Within the field of geography, it is mainly cultural geography that deals with the study of cultural historic values in landscape. In this dissertation, I connect to and apply the "more-than-representational" view of landscape expressed in recent cultural geography, for example by cultural geographer Tim Creswell of the University of London in *Place: A Short Introduction* (2004) and in the editorial article 'Until the end of days: Narrating landscape and environment' (2012) by Hayden Lorimer and Stephen Daniels in the journal *Cultural*

³ Key works of ecocriticism, indicating also that ecocriticism originates from literature studies, are *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm; and Timothy Clarck's *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (2011).

⁴ See Vries et al. 2013 on the measurement of 'attractiveness' of Dutch landscapes, in which the presence of 'recognisable elements' turns out to be one of the 'valuing' aspects; and Bos 2015 on the increase of landscape value as a result of landscape painting.

Geographies. The “more-than-representational” approach highlights how the physical environment gains meaning as a process of landscaping activities - through *performance*. In analogue, I will understand landscape photography as one such *landscaping process*, photography being the embodiment of a photographer’s intervention in the physical environment.

Furthermore, within geography and geoinformation science, the interest has grown in how cultural expressions relate to a specific geographical locations and areas. Geography provides the example of a good practice to do that: georeferencing. According to a definition by A. Hackeloer, georeferencing means 'relating geographical objects to geographical locations.'⁵ This, in turn, is stimulated by the current digitisation of art historical and geographical information. There is a growing number of digital image bases of (landscape) art collections, on the one hand, and increasingly improving and accessible geoinformation (such as big data on elevation) on the other hand. Currently, there is a tendency to link artworks and photographs *about* a place to geographical maps: the activity we call 'geotagging'.⁶ This is achieved through the simple addition of the geographical reference to the metadata of a cultural object. More than just pinpointing where a certain artist has been working or which geographical location an artwork represents, which was common in conventional monographical art history, the large scale linking of artworks to digital maps enhances the possibilities to compare different pictures of the same place; thus, insight is gained into the relation of the image to elements and characteristics of the physical environment and in its relation to the image tradition and visual memory of a place.⁷

Besides being inspired theoretically and methodologically by these different developments in the field of geography, this PhD research is also related to a specific European project in this field, the European Waterway Heritage project (hereafter, EUWATHER), in which the georeferencing of artworks is key. In this project, the cultural history of (in this case, secondary waterways in) landscapes is related to a digital map through digital linking in a Geographical Information System (GIS). This cultural-historical information is made accessible through a touristic hiking and boating app, which people can use in the physical landscape via their mobile phone or other mobile device. The theory and insights on georeferencing, developed in the EUWATHER project, provided a useful basis for my doctoral research. Equally, my research has facilitated the embedding of this technical exercise of georeferencing in an academic context.

Within cultural geography, the term 'cultural' may refer to very different cultural expressions,

⁵ Hackeloer 2014, p. 61.

⁶ Representative for this development is the launch in October 2017 of the 'Mapping artists' tool in the digital research environment www.rkd.nl, by the RKD Netherlands Institute for Art History, in which geographical information on the lives of artists and content of art works is visualized on maps permanently from now on. See www.rkd.nl

⁷ This attitude of openness to the physical environment and 'letting the landscape speak', the apparent need humans express to be open or even subject to nature, is echoed in the work of some artists. Dutch artist Irene Fortuyn, for making landscape photographs, was led by the grid of longitudinal and latitudinal lines. She placed her camera at the crossings of the lines and took photographs in the four cardinal directions. See her exhibition in 1999 at the Center for Contemporary Art Witte de With in Rotterdam. Awoiska van der Molen makes often non-descript landscape photographs, 'gauging', by means of the senses, the genius loci or spirit of the place; Molen and Mulder 2017.

ideas and products.⁸ However, traditionally, when focusing on landscape, it concentrates primarily on tangible landscape elements, such as field systems, settlements, architecture, road systems etc.⁹ When ever intangible culture is at issue, the emphasis lies on text-based and narrative cultural expressions like literature and poetry, as Stephen Daniels and Hayden Lorimer point out.¹⁰ Although the interconnection between still imagery and visual art on the one hand and landscape on the other hand is acknowledged, there is still a need for the study of visual art within cultural geography. This dissertation aims to meet this need.

Thirdly, from within the design discipline of landscape architecture, there is also a call to explore and design the cultural dimension of landscape. Beyond the usual values of economics and safety (i.e. managing the threat that water poses to the Netherlands), cultural values and representations of and in the landscape help inhabitants connect and identify with their environment. There is a growing demand among landscape architects and their commissioners to render cultural value in landscapes to be explored, (re) developed and (re) designed. They aim at determining how the cultural history of a location can be (re) introduced, used and processed in the landscape's future development, how this can be visualized and how it will be experienced by those inhabiting and visiting the resulting landscapes. In the process of landscape design, often historical maps or art reproductions (prints, paintings and photo's) are used as arguments in decision taking. Sometimes, artists are also involved in the preparatory process of landscape design. Discussions focus on the preservation and redevelopment of landscape elements, such as monumental buildings or protected landscape reserves. However, there is a persistent need to explicitate and contextualize the vision on the cultural dimension in landscape architecture. Photography plays an important role in this regard. There is an interest among landscape architects in photography as a tool for monitoring changes in the physical environment. Such monitoring is currently being executed by numerous *observatoriums* in the landscape. Furthermore, photography is used for rhetorical purposes, i.e. existing landscapes being photographed *in a certain way*. This visual rhetoric is even more salient in the digitally composed views of newly designed landscapes, referred to as 'renderings' by landscape architects. Nowadays, through digital animation technology, these come very close to photography. However, this practice of visually communicating the cultural meaning of landscape through photography lacks a theoretical and academic foundation.¹¹ I hope that this dissertation can address this lacuna in some way.

Beside the fact that landscape architects increasingly express the need to explicitate the cultural dimension in their work, this discipline also provides schemata for discerning different characteristics of landscapes, such as the four aspects of landscape (ground, programmatic, image and spatial form)

⁸ See e.g. Crang 1998.

⁹ This position specifically emerges from *Landscape* (2007) by John Wylie.

¹⁰ In fact, among the very few photographic examples they refer to, is the exploratory writing and photography by John Berger on discontinuous and non-chronological storytelling. See Daniels and Lorimer 2012, p.7; Berger and Mohr 1982.

¹¹ Cultural geographer Stephen Daniels only shortly refers to this, when he writes that 'recent computer-based skills of spatial representation have opened a new meeting ground for art and geography'. He however does not elaborate on this. Daniels 2004, p. 442.

formulated by landscape architects Clemens Steenbergen and Wouter Reh in *Architecture and Landscape: The Design Experiment of the Great European Gardens and Landscapes* (1996). As the title suggests, landscape architecture in general and this book more specifically, posits the theory of gardens as being – analogue to landscape photographs – selective human representations or visions of the world. These theories are of much help in my art historical research.

While working in the overlapping field of the three disciplines, art history, cultural geography and landscape architecture, the aim of this research is to develop specific knowledge on the way *photography* makes place of a certain location. The central question I seek to answer in this PhD research is: How do the contemporary landscape photographs of the selected cases *take place* and (thereby) *make place* out of rural space of the Netherlands? Making use of the necessary delineation, I limit myself chronologically, medium-wise, geographically and with regard to landscape type to, respectively: contemporary time, camera-based photography (meaning non-animated and not-digitally composed 'fictive' images¹²), the Netherlands and rural (meaning non-urban) areas, including the numerous waterscapes in the Netherlands.

To answer the central research question, in chapter 1 I set out my theoretical position and clarify my research method. In 1.1, I define key terms, like 'landscape', 'place', 'landscape art', 'landscape photography' and 'place making'. In 1.2, I explain which theories and research methods on 'place making' have been selected from art history, cultural geography and landscape architecture to discuss the cases chosen for my corpus. In 1.3, I merge the latter into my own method, which is then used, in the subsequent chapters, to analyse the selected photographs. I introduce a three-step method to analyse the way landscape photographs make place, which consists of georeferencing, geospecific comparison and geogeneric comparison. The first methodological chapter is concluded with notes on the delineation of my research field and on the selection of the three cases.

Three photographic landscape projects are central to Chapters 2, 3 and 4: *Werklust* (2015) by Theo Baart; *Baumschule #2* (2009) by Gerco de Ruijter; and *Mapping 5* (2008-2009) by Kim Boske. These three projects have been chosen because they embody profoundly articulated photographic approaches, often developed over a timespan of many years by the photographers. Moreover, they are complementary with regard to their directedness: the first project by Baart represents a centrifugally, outwardly directed exploratory approach in the documentary tradition; the second, by De Ruijter, embodies the vertically downward directed gaze that resembles the view in maps; while the third case, by Boske, represents a centripetally inward directed gaze in which photographs made during a circambulation of a spot show the same place from different sides simultaneously.

After discussing the three photographic projects, Chapter 5 conclusively highlights the merits of the interdisciplinary approach of this dissertation, of the georeferencing interventions and my three-step interpretation method, for the three disciplines I work from: art history, cultural geography and landscape

¹² Examples of these fictive landscape photographs are the computer-generated 'Landscapes Without Memory' (2005) by Joan Fontcuberta or the landscapes of the 'cs_0, cs_01' series (2012) by Julie Monaco (b. 1973). Batchen 2005; Bast 2011.

design. The last and challenging part of this chapter attempts to formulate what these new insights can mean for the design of new Dutch landscape within the discipline of landscape architecture.