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

Heuvel, M.E.N. van den

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**Author:** Heuvel, M.E.N. van den

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## Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have gone through an elaborate process of analysis of my key images and to what outside of the image they relate to. I studied the images' relations to the physical landscape in the georeferencing, to the conventional, collective visual memory of the same place in the geospecific comparison, and to related imagery of other locations in the geogeneric comparison. In this final conclusion, I will condense my findings again in order to give a conclusive answer to the central research question: 'How do the contemporary landscape photographs of the selected cases make place out of rural space in the Netherlands?' I start by giving a long version of the answer, involving the different stadia of research I have gone through for this dissertation, after which I round up this dissertation by providing a short answer.

My three research stadia revealed different aspects of the answer to the question regarding how the way landscape photography 'makes place'. In the georeferencing research step, I found the answer to the question regarding the relationship of a photograph to a physical landscape. I discovered that a photograph makes place by including characteristics of the physical environment in question. Or, to speak with Norbert-Schulz in phenomenological terms: I learned about the physical conditions of the place and how the photograph identifies with these; that is, about the identity of the landscape *outside* the photograph and therefore about the landscape *inside* the photograph. The landscape outside and the landscape inside the photograph are legitimately connected because they are indexically linked, and because the landscape *inside* the photograph can be considered as a *substitute* for the landscape *outside* the photograph.<sup>523</sup>

Seeing the landscape inside the photograph as a substitute for the landscape outside the photograph makes it apt to apply the more-than-representational approach from cultural geography, posited by Lorimer, Creswell and others, not only to the physical landscape, but also to landscape photography. The photographic process or intervention that is witnessed and the result of which is the photograph, is paralleled by and even directly linked to the landscaping process, the interaction between photographer and the physical landscape he worked *in* and *with* the photographer executed in real life. The physical landscape is the material the photographer works with, and the way he forms the landscape into a desired shape can be seen as the landscaping process that *makes place* of the location: the photographer chooses an environment and moves to and fro within it in order to find his ideal camera position. By directing his camera, he determines the indexical relationship of the photograph to an exact geographical location. This is the location that is identified in the georeferencing research step. Through the exact position of the camera (for example high, as in the case of De Ruijter, or at eye-level as in the cases of Baart and Boske) and the direction and choice of the focal point of the

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<sup>523</sup> I referred to the writing on the aspect of a photograph being a 'substitute' by Kitty Zijlmans in Westgeest 2009, p. 222 and the text on art as 'substitute' by Gombrich in 'Meditations on a Hobby Horse or the Roots of Artistic Form', Gombrich 1985 [1963], pp. 1-11.

lens, the framing is determined and, in turn, the selection of subjects that are combined within the photograph's frame. With help of the ground, programmatic and spatial form, as per Steenbergen and Reh, I answer the question about what physical conditions of the landscape we see, and what the photographer chose to include and what to omit from the frame of his photograph. Especially in the case of De Ruijter, knowing, as we do now, that he deliberately left just outside of his frame the hills near Rhenen, Kesteren and Opheusden, which are so famous from seventeenth-century painting, this analytical step was highly informative.

In finding an answer to the research question regarding the way photographs render meaning to space, the second step, geospecific comparison, informed us about the relation the photograph has to the formal and aesthetic conventions (Wells) and the existing geographical imagination (Schwartz/Ryan) of the place. Is the photograph affirmative of this traditional imagery or is it a visual form of critical questioning? Although the theoretical literature on this subject, on complex collective representation by Krauss and geographical imagination by Schwartz and Ryan, is limited to touristic photography, in my opinion, Dutch landscape painting has been highly influential in the Netherlands in determining the geographical imagination, hence my reference to numerous paintings in this dissertation. The strong and rich tradition of Dutch landscape painting and through photographic reproduction, endlessly repeated in publications, popular imagery (posters, calendars, postcards, etc.), and on the internet, the Dutch countryside has become famous.

Finally, in the third step to finding an answer about the question of how landscape photography makes place, I find information about what imagery of the same type, but of different landscapes, is related to the photographs I have analysed. Through this research, it has become clear that the landscaping process, the process by which the photograph renders meaning to a place, is achieved through the photographic process executed by the photographer. He makes the photograph relate to a specific geographical place (georeferencing) through his choice of camera position and camera direction. Through framing, he precisely selects which meaningful landscape characteristics are to be photographed and how they are combined within the frame and which characteristics are to be left out. The photographer determines the style of the landscape in the photograph by his choice of season, time of the day, weather conditions and through further processing in the darkroom or, more commonly today, the digital colour manipulation on a computer. The 'point-of-view' and what is deselected, selected and combined within the frame of a photograph, together transfers a mental 'point of view' and 'frame of mind', which, in turn and together with the style chosen, transfers an opinion or – in Burgin's words: ideology.<sup>524</sup>

With the chosen characteristics, the composition and the style, the photographer can choose to link up with the conventional imagery of the place – as is the case with affirmative landscape photography like Boske's *Mapping 5* – or to confront or conflict with conventional imagery of the place by making his photograph look like very different places - as is the case in critically questioning

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<sup>524</sup> Burgin 1982 [1980], p. 146.

photography of the places featured in *Werklust* by Baart or *Baumschule #2* by De Ruijter (geospecific comparison). The other type of landscape, in which the photographer associates to the chosen place with his choice of characteristics, composition and style, is the 'reverie' Schwartz and Ryan write about, when the photographer connects to the place to give it a certain meaning. The way the photographer uses his photographic techniques and process to work and shape the landscape determines whether the landscape in the photograph confirms or contrasts with the formal and aesthetic conventions of the place, and this determines the way the photograph gives meaning to the landscape - the way the photograph *makes place*.

In his photographic process, the photographer 'works' the physical landscape. His selecting, composing and styling of the physical landscape by means of his photographic technique determines what the location he photographed looks like. If the landscape in the photograph looks like the formal and aesthetic conventions of the place, the photograph is affirmative of the geographical imagination and collectively shared visual memory of the place. If it is very different, it opens up our vision of the place and makes us look in at a location in a different way; in other words, the photograph problematises the place. Thus, by being informed or having an opinion about the place inside the photograph, we are either informed or have an opinion about the place outside the photograph, about the physical landscape, because the two are linked through an indexical relation and in terms of being substitutes.

This is how photography makes place in general. To draw a more general conclusion on the Dutch landscape on the basis of these three photographic projects, one could say that the traditional green and blue areas of the Netherlands have determined the identity of the Dutch landscape and have become famous through Dutch landscape painting of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, or which have disappeared (in the case of *Werklust*, where the Haarlemmermeer has been drained into a polder), or have to be protected against advancing urbanisation and industrialisation (like the systemised tree growing in the Betuwe in *Baumschule #2*) by making it into landscape heritage (in the case of *Mapping 5* by Boske, where the heath is now Goois Natuurreserveaat). Although this general statement is not new, the photography in the three cases makes visual what this means in practice, on a detailed level, and how this generally described phenomenon manifests itself in the scenic details that surround people in daily life.

In this PhD research, I have developed and tested an interdisciplinary method for analysing landscape photographs. I merged methods from art history, cultural geography and landscape architecture into a new approach that encompasses a three-step method of analysis. The three steps of this method are georeferencing (relating the landscape photograph to the physical elements it is based on and shows), geospecific comparison (relating the landscape photograph to the collective visual memory of the place) and geogeneric comparison (relating the landscape photograph to other physical or imaginary landscapes to determine what the photographer 'did to' the place). I tested out this newly developed method on a corpus of three photographic projects on the Dutch landscape: *Werklust* (2015) by Baart, *Baumschule #2* (2009) by De Ruijter and *Mapping 5* (2008-2009) by Kim Boske.

In the first step of this research, called 'georeferencing', the questions addressed were: where was the photograph taken (geotagging) and what physical conditions of that location are

selected/represented in the landscape photograph? These are issues known from phenomenology, which also deals with the way an art work (or building) relates to or even 'makes friends with' its physical environment – this relation determining the meaning and significance of the image. In the case of photography, it comes down to reconstructing the agency of the photographer to his/her environment and which physical conditions together motivated the choice for exactly that place. These motivations, after all, determine the photographers' relation to the place, of which the photograph is a witness and representation.

The second step, geospecific research, focuses on the relationship of the landscape photograph to the collective visual memory or geographical imagination of the place. Did the photographer work at a place with a high density of collective visual memories or at a place that has rarely been visualised before? A photograph, argues Krauss, does not get its meaning by itself, but through inter pictoriality: through its discursive space between the photograph and other images. Does the landscape photograph build further on the formal and aesthetic conventions of the place? Or does it 'visually contradict' or problematise the conventional landscape imagery of the place?

The third step of geogeneric comparison determines how the photographer's intervention can render the location analogous with other places. What did the photographer 'do to' the physical landscape, to make it look this way? To what other landscape type (physical or represented) is it analogous and what consequences does this have for the meaning of the place? This is inspired by the more-than-representational direction in cultural geography, in which the meaning of landscape is understood in terms of interaction between man and his physical environment. In the same way, I suggest to understand the landscape photograph in terms of interaction by the photographer with the physical landscape, which the photograph is simultaneously a witness to and embodiment of.

The research led to the insights that *Mapping 5* by Kim Boske confirms earlier formal and aesthetics of the place it depicts: the heath area south of the mid-Netherlandish town of Laren. It builds on pictorial conventions that were established by the Laren School of painting that was active in this area in the late nineteenth century and which also contributed to the area becoming a heritage site – the Goois Natuurreservaat. *Baumschule #2* by De Ruijter conflicts with the formal and aesthetic imagery of its location. Whereas the geographical imagination of the area is strongly determined by seventeenth-century riverscapes, painted by masters of Dutch landscape like Aelbert Cuyp, Jan van Goyen and Jacob van Ruysdael, De Ruijter chose not to photograph from the river banks, but a few hundred metres away, situated in an industrialised tree growing zone. And he employed aerial photography, cropping his image in such a way that he appropriated a very different pictorial tradition: the geometrical abstraction of artists such as Piet Mondriaan. Baart is a different case, he is the first person to elaborately photograph a land with almost no visual history - the land in question being a relatively new polder that came into existence in the nineteenth century. In this case, Baart laid the first foundations of a visual history and the formal and aesthetic conventions of this place.

A landscape photograph *works* the landscape, much in the way land art does. Making a landscape photograph is a landscaping activity in the sense of the more-than-representational way of seeing. As a result of the insight that has been popular since W.J.T. Mitchell's *Landscape and Power*, 'landscape' is understood as both the physical environment and the collective visual memory of it. While

*working* the landscape, the photographer relates to – conducts *agency* towards – both the physical elements of the land as well as to the conventional imagery of it. The landscape photograph gets its meaning through its relationship with both of these. The tools the photographer has at his or her disposal are part of the photographic process: camera position and direction, choice for time of the year, hour, weather conditions, lens, filter, depth of field, etc. These choices include or exclude, emphasize or conceal characteristic landscape elements. They result in showing the place while showing or avoiding those formal and aesthetic characteristics known from earlier, conventional pictures of the place. The more the landscape photograph shows *analogies* with characteristics and elements of conventional images of the place, the more the photograph is experienced as confirming or possibly even stereotypical. The more the landscape photo shows *different* elements of the place, with different formal characteristics, the more problematising the photograph is of the place and the more it alters the location's meaning. The more the landscape photograph makes the place look like another type of landscape – and again, this might be a physical or an imaginary/represented landscape – the more it associates the place with the meaning of that other landscape.

Evaluating the benefits of my new interdisciplinary approach for the analysis of landscape photography, different achievements can be discerned for the three different disciplines that converge in this dissertation: for art history, for cultural geography and for landscape architecture.

For art history, this interdisciplinary approach has brought the connection to and the awareness of the physical landscape to landscape art. Relating landscape photography (landscape art and architecture in general) to art works and connecting them to their physical environment, again in general, by georeferencing and analysing the ground, programmatic and spatial form, is a process that is also advocated by phenomenology. It gives the researcher and the beholder more insight into a photograph's relation to its physical environment and makes him better understand the identity and all the characteristics of the landscape he sees in the photograph. Cultural geography gives art historians a way of seeing the interaction with land – which through the indexical relationship of substitution is applicable to a landscape *photograph* as well – as a landscaping process: an ongoing process through which humans render meaning and sense of place to a location. Finally, in terms of art historical methods, landscape architecture uses the four dimensions of ground, programmatic, spatial and image form in order to better understand landscape characteristics.

For cultural geography, this interdisciplinary, three-step method provides information, through the georeferencing, about which landscape photographs and other art works were made on which location and how they visually shape the place and give meaning to it. Cultural geographers learn about geographical imagination, i.e. that the meaning of landscape is not only determined by the practical use and shaping of the physical landscape. The way a landscape has historically been imagined, determines the way it is understood. Information about the photographic process and how photographers select, compose and stylise landscape elements provides insight to cultural geographers about the visual means through which photography renders meaning to a place.

To landscape architects, this three-step and three-disciplinary approach of landscape photography offers the same benefits as it does to cultural geographers: to know which landscape photographs and art works link to which locations, to learn about geographical imagination and the

photographic process of visual rhetorics. Landscape architects differ from art historians and cultural geographers because they are engaged in the practice of working in and reshaping the physical landscape and must operate in a complex process of decision-taking, crucial to which is convincing through visual means. Especially in the light of this last phenomenon, that decision-taking and therefore the shaping of the physical landscape happens on the basis of visual rhetorics of landscape images, I will finish this dissertation with an example from real-life practice, in which landscape photography was rhetorically shaped and introduced in the process of landscape development.