

Layered landscapes, conflicting narratives and environmental art. Dealing with painful memories and embarrassing histories of place

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What should be the goal of ecological restoration of cultural landscapes? Many believe we ought to somehow recognize not just the natural history of a site, but the cultural history of an area as well. Finding a fitting answer to what a landscape means to us, requires that we interpret the landscape, *read* it as a meaningful text. Cultural landscapes are like palimpsests: manuscripts that contain different legible layers on top of each other. Hence, whereas recognizing the top layers of the landscape text can urge us to restore those elements that help us understand and appreciate the landscape as part of our own history and identity (or restore older cultural patterns), the acknowledgement of the deeper and older layers would have us attempt to restore the continuity with natural history that humans have changed in the past. These perspectives on “landscape legibility” can sometimes be combined, but will often contradict.

But like most texts, landscapes are more than mere information carriers.

Understanding the meaning of a novel, for instance, requires that we allow the text to open up a world, and imagine ourselves in the place of the protagonist. This can lead to different readings, all of which can reveal something about the texts and about us as readers involved in that text. Similarly, understanding the meaning of a landscape requires more than just reconstructing *its* story, it also requires that we relate it to *us* — find out what it has to say to us. We need to somehow recognize the storylines inscribed in the landscape, and decide in what sense these stories are truly ours.

Thus, most landscapes consist of different layers, each of which affords multiple interpretations. All these interpretations reflect on the question who *we* are in these places. An appropriate restoration of historic landscapes, that pretends to be more than just another landscape change by humans, can therefore never simply be the reconstruction of one particular landscape, but should somehow also acknowledge the need to go beyond any particular interpretation of the story of the land. An appropriate restoration will have to seek a common ground, but it should do so without suppressing the conflict between different readings of a place. Without such reflective awareness, restoration of the meaning of layered landscapes is doomed to fail.

In this paper I examine the layered nature of our landscapes and discuss the problem it poses for us understanding their significance. I first introduce a theoretical framework that can help understand how we discover meanings by “reading” landscapes. I will distinguish two conceptions of landscape reading: the semiotic approach, which is the most common conception of landscape reading, and an alternative, hermeneutic approach to reading landscapes. I will argue that the hermeneutic approach is more suited to understand how particular *kinds of meanings* shape our moral relations to landscapes. Next I discuss – using the work of Friedrich Nietzsche – how our understanding of the meaning of landscape is complicated, not just by the multi-interpretability of landscapes, but also because of the contemporary problem of postmodern historicism, in which we do no longer seem to have any common criterion to decide between the different interpretations. Finally, I will suggest that – given this postmodern context - the arts have a particular role to play in aiding our readings of a landscape. The power of imagination in art is already put to work in several restoration projects to help highlight meanings in the landscape that are of particular help to understand the goal of ecological restoration projects, and thus help to create public support. I will illustrate this point by discussing environmental artworks in the Netherlands and

Germany that serve as “landscape reading aids.” I will suggest, however, that art should also play a more critical role of challenging dominant interpretations of landscape that might suppress painful, embarrassing or otherwise difficult aspects of (the history of) a place. By bringing forward or even amplifying alternative views and readings, art can help to contest the taken for granted meanings of landscape again, and thus bring them back to the heart of the moral debate. I will use a design for an environmental artwork in the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge as an illustration.

Landscapes and meaning

Authors such as William Jordan (2003), Eric Higgs (2003) and Andrew Light (2003) have argued in recent years, that a fruitful approach to the question of the purpose and goal of ecological restoration should not so much start with trying to define what “real,” “original” nature is and whether it can be restored, but rather it should take a less dualistic, more human-inclusive angle and ask what kinds of meaningful environmental practices are involved in the social process of environmental restoration. From this perspective, ecological restoration is as much about healing the human-nature relationships as it is about healing damaged ecosystems. The question of what the goals of restoration should be revolves around the meaningfulness of the environmental relationship that is implied in these practices. Thus, a prime goal of restoration should be the preservation, restoration, or even enrichment of the *meaning* of places.¹

John O’Neill, Alan Holland and Andrew Light (2008, 163) argue that “[p]eople make sense of their lives by placing themselves in a larger normative context. For this reason, environments matter to people too: because they embody that larger context.” In this meaning-oriented perspective, landscapes and places embody people’s history and cultural

¹ Cf. Alan Holland’s chapter in this volume.

identity. Places and landscapes are not just valuable to us because of their ecological function, but also because they help us to understand who we are. “Rather, an individual’s identity, their sense of who they are, is partly constituted by their sense of belonging to particular places. Particular places, whether “natural” woodlands, streams and ponds, or “urban” city streets, parks and quarries, matter to individuals because they embody the history of their lives and those of the communities to which they belong. Their disappearance involves a sense of loss of something integral to their lives” (O’Neill, Holland & Light 2008, p. 39).

Scholars have known for centuries that texts also help us to form our identity and orient ourselves. Therefore, if we want know better how we might understand the meaning of landscapes, it will be helpful to have a closer look to how we understand the meaning of texts.

Landscapes as texts

Landscapes have been compared with texts by many before. The metaphor of the landscape text is popular among geographers and geologists (Watts 1957; Lewis 1979; Yarham 2010), environmental scientists (Wessels 1997), historians and archaeologists (Yamin et al. 1996; Widgren 2004; Cronon 1991), environmental educators (Hendrik & Kloen 2007), and writers (Van Toorn 1998). Popular books and brochures (e.g. Yarham 2010) teach us how one can actually get to know many things about the genesis and geophysical history of a landscape by paying close attention to the details of such a landscape. Reading the landscape carefully can help broaden our understanding of a place. Typically, the term is used to point out how landscapes – mostly cultural landscapes – contain signs that can be “read” like meaningful texts that tell a story about ourselves and our history, much in the same way as other texts from our cultural heritage do. In the Netherlands the term is used by several conservation

groups who believe that landscape legibility is the key to understanding – *and increasing* – people’s attachment to particular places and landscapes (cf. Drenthen 2011).

The dominant understanding of landscapes as texts, however, is rather one-sided, as if reading a landscape text would require merely the passive registration or observation of the legible signs in a landscape. We can read texts in many different ways. Informational texts are usually primarily read and understood as a source of factual knowledge, but other types of texts, such as poems and novels, are typically read differently. Their meaning cannot be understood by merely uncovering the signs, they demand explicit interpretation. If we take seriously the possible similarities between texts and landscapes, we should therefore consider the possibility that literature and art can help broaden our understanding of landscapes. Before we turn to the role that art can play in our understanding of a landscape, we will take a closer look to what texts are and what it means to read a text.

What is a text?

The work of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) provides a helpful starting point. Ricoeur distinguishes two distinct ways of approaching a text. (Ricoeur 1981, p.153-164), The first, structural reading (which I call ‘semiotic reading’, cf. Drenthen 2011) attempts to explain how a text is structured, and how it functions, for instance by distinguishing the roles and functions of different literary forms and themes within that text. Such a ‘structuralist analysis’ of a text can and should inform our understanding of a text, because it can give us insight in how the text is structured, and can help explain how the text works, but such a reading remains rather external. A proper (‘hermeneutic’) reading of a text, on the other hand, does not stop there, but aims to understand what the texts means *to us*, what the text says about *our world*. In order to understand what a text has to say, however, we as readers have to do more than just listen.

According to Ricoeur, there is an important difference between texts and speech: a text is “a discourse fixed by writing” (Ricoeur 1981, p.146). Whereas in speech, a speaker can accompany his signs and explain himself, a *text* assumes a life of its own, becomes independent of its *author*. The meaning of a text is not determined solely by the author, if only because literary texts accommodate much richer readings than the author intended. When it comes to it, the author has no privileged position to determine how the text should be read or what is the meaning of that text. Without an external authoritative source to turn to regarding the meaning of a text, a reader can only revert to the act of reading the text itself. It is up to the reader to understand the meaning of the text through an act of *interpretation*.

Moreover, Ricoeur points out another difference between speech and texts. Whereas a speaker can literally point to the things he is talking about, presenting to an interlocutor a “real” world of which both speaker and interlocutor are part, a text, in contrast, presents an imaginary world that has to be supplemented by the reader, if only because of gaps in the text’s references, which ultimately must be filled by the imagination of the reader. Moreover, our understanding of the text presupposes the existence of preceding texts that have already determined both the reader and the world of the text as well. “Texts speak of possible worlds and of possible ways of orienting oneself in these worlds” (Ricoeur 1981, p.177). But in order to understand the meaning of a text, we not only have to be open to the world as presented by the text, but we should also be willing to “place ourselves” – for the time being – in that world. This does not mean that to understand the meaning of a text means that we should project our own beliefs and prejudices onto the text. Rather, we must “let the work and its world enlarge the horizon of the understanding which I have of myself” (Ricoeur 1981, p.178).

Thus, text, world, and reader are engaged in a dialectical relationship. According to Ricoeur, good reading requires willingness on the part of the reader to participate in the world

that is opened up by the text and abstract from the context of one's particular life ("distantiation"), but also means to be involved, to be "present" in the act of reading. A reader has to bring to life the narrative of the text, bring to bear the meanings of words and concepts that play a role in his own life ("appropriation"). Good reading requires both "distantiation" and "appropriation."

What we can learn from Ricoeur's hermeneutics is that understanding a text requires far more than merely excavating the unseen signs, but also implies active interpretation. To truly understand the meaning of a text, one has to engage oneself in the reading of the text and allow for a relation to develop between oneself and the text.

Understanding a landscape text should therefore not be reduced to scientific approaches that are primarily interested in the "objective" features of a landscape. When attempting to understand the meaning of a landscape text we should actively include explicitly *human* perspectives.

Legible landscapes as food for the spirit

The term "legible landscape" was first introduced in the Dutch landscape debate exactly with such a broad inclusive view in mind. The Dutch writer, poet and activist landscape Willem van Toorn (cf. Drenthen 2009) introduced the term to express his ideas on the moral relation between humans and landscapes in a way that is less about the objective features of the land, and much more about what these places reveal about ourselves. The concern for the traditional Dutch river landscape plays an important part in Van Toorn's novels and essays. The term "legible landscape" refers to landscapes that can be "read" as meaningful texts, because they "remind us along complicated and sometimes unconscious lines that there is a past, that people who lived in that past had to deal with the world just as we have to, that they had to protect themselves against nature and at the same time use its resources" (Van Toorn

1998, p.66). The reason we should value the legibility of the landscape has to do with our own sense of identity: “We have to stay in touch with this past – not because the past is better than the present, but simply because we owe our existence, our identity, our vision of the world to it, and because we can only think about the future by making use of our past experiences” (p. 66). Thus, Van Toorn’s legible landscapes embody what O’Neill, Holland and Light (2008) might call the “larger normative contexts” in which we can place our lives.

Landscape legibility and environmental restoration

The legibility of a landscape also plays a role in ecological restoration practices. Ecological restoration does not just aim to restore a landscape to a more healthy condition, but usually also entails an attempt to protect the value and meaning of that landscape, by restoring the historic continuity of a place. “Historic fidelity” is seen as a key value in ecological restoration next to “ecological integrity” (Higgs 2003). Ecological integrity refers to the structure, composition, and function of an ecosystem operating within the bounds of natural or historic range of variation. Historical fidelity, on the other hand, is the idea that the practice of restoration should attempt to approximate, within reasonable bounds, some past state of the damaged ecosystem. Typically, however, ecological restoration is aimed not just at *any* historic continuity, but on a special kind of continuity – to that part of history which is usually referred to as “predisturbance condition.” In other words, ecological restoration is the attempt to restore a narrative continuity as seen from the perspective of the “deep time” horizon of natural history. O’Neill, Holland and Light (2008) argue that people:

make sense of our lives by placing them in a larger narrative context, of what happens before us and what comes after. Environments matter because they embody that larger context. This is clearest in the cultural landscapes that surround us that specifically embody the lives of individuals and communities. However, [...] this is true also [...]

with respect to natural processes. Unintentional natural processes provide part of the context in which intentional human activities take place and through which we understand their value (O'Neill, Holland and Light 2008, p. 198).

The narrative meaning of nature is that it stretches way past the confines of human history, and thus provides us with a broader context:

[N]atural environments have histories that stretch out before humans emerged and they have a future that will continue beyond the disappearance of the human species. Those histories form the larger context for our human lives. However, it is not just this larger historical context that matters in our valuation of the environments in which we live, but also the backdrop of natural processes against which human life is lived (idem: 162 - 164).

One should add that there is another dimension of the natural landscape in contrast with a cultural landscape, and that is its deeper time horizon (cf. "deep time") with regard to "what happens before us and what comes after" that puts in perspective the all-too-human view of the world. Seen from this perspective, ecological restoration is a form of making sense of the world.

Willem van Toorn, in contrast, almost exclusively associates landscape legibility with cultural landscapes. To his mind, intentionally reshaping landscape through rewilding is a threat to landscape identity, because to his mind it is *not* based on a credible interpretation of landscape. On the contrary, it merely projects and imposes fashionable ideas about nature onto the landscape, out of "a light-hearted kind of post-modern way of thinking in which history is just a grab bag, from which one can carelessly throw away anything that is not fashionable." (Van Toorn 1998: 76). As a result, in these restored nature areas "humans are [merely] present only as tourists – and no longer as residents for whom the signs and narratives of the land are food for their spirit" (Van Toorn 1998: p.77).

It is apparent that for both O'Neill et al. and Van Toorn, the history of a landscape is no accidental element of its narrative meaning. Being able to read a historical landscape appropriately is essential for developing a meaningful and good relation to that landscape. But what is an appropriate attitude towards a historically layered landscape?

Palimpsest landscapes

Landscapes can be conceived of as texts, but as special kinds of texts. All landscapes are layered. This is true for both cultural and natural landscapes. Cultural landscapes consist of different layers that reflect historically different eras that had an influence on how it evolved. But the same is true for natural landscapes. As time goes by, old things get covered by new things, and this process of sedimentation goes on and on. Sedimentation is an ongoing process: history piles up in a landscape, one could say. In his essay "Layering: Body, Building, Biography" (Mugerauer 2013), Bob Mugerauer shows how sedimentation is a process that can be discerned everywhere in nature, on each level of scale. The most relevant difference between the layeredness of natural and cultural landscapes is the type of narrative that is needed to interpret these layers and attach meaning to them. In one narrative humans are the main agents, in the other case, non-humans have various forms of agency as well.

The layeredness of a landscape poses a challenge to each attempt to restore the meaning of a place. Archaeologists know this: each archaeological site is like a layered text, where one can peel off different layers that all reveal different stories about the same place in different times, provided one can make sense of these signs and traces. Today, archaeologists often decide not to excavate ancient remains in the soil, because excavation would inevitably lead to the destruction of the other landscape layers. It is for this reason that archaeologists see the landscape as a *palimpsest*. A palimpsest is a multilayered text, consisting of different textual layers written on top of each other.

What does this layeredness of the landscape mean for the goals of ecological restoration?

Ecological restoration and the problem of historicism

The question of the goals of ecological restoration in degraded landscapes has been hotly debated for years. Many criteria have been proposed. Some restoration ecologists and many popular accounts of the goal of ecological restoration seem to assume that restoration implies the re-creation of past landscapes using a specific historic reference point. The primer of the Society for Ecological Restoration stresses, however, that ecological restoration is not about recreating a specific point in the past, but rather about assisting nature to restore itself and resume its historic trajectory². Yet, both perspectives assume that there was a point in the past in which natural landscapes were still “intact”³ and this situation provides a “baseline” for today’s restorations. However, as soon as one has to identify a viable historic reference point for this intact situation, the obvious question is: why this and not another? Many moments in the past have been proposed, ranging from the Pleistocene, or the end of the last Ice Age, to the beginning of the Industrial revolution and the beginning of the 20th Century.

² SER International Primer on Ecological Restoration, Society for Ecological Restoration, International Science & Policy Working Group, Version 2, October, 2004) (1):

“Restoration attempts to return an ecosystem to its historic trajectory. Historic conditions are therefore the ideal starting point for restoration design. The restored ecosystem will not necessarily recover its former state, since contemporary constraints and conditions may cause it to develop along an altered trajectory. The historic trajectory of a severely impacted ecosystem may be difficult or impossible to determine with accuracy. Nevertheless, the general direction and boundaries of that trajectory can be established[...]. These combined sources allow the historic trajectory or reference conditions to be charted from baseline ecological data and predictive models, and its emulation in the restoration process should aid in piloting the ecosystem towards improved health and integrity.”

³ In philosophical debates about ecological restoration a similar idea is seen: ‘original’ nature is seen as the moral measure with which one should estimate the value of restored landscapes. Cf. Robert Elliot, *Faking Nature* (1997)

For debates about restoration of degraded *cultural* landscapes, this problem deepens. For one may think that nature somehow provides a baseline, but how are we to acknowledge landscapes that have been formed partly because of human influences? How are we to decide which of these human influences were degrading or intrusive to the “original” state, and which are valuable modifications? In European conservation debates, the historic reference point of 1900 AD is often mentioned: the moment right before the large scale landscape changes took place as a result of the rapid increase of industrialization and intensification of agriculture. The underlying assumption seems to be that at a certain point of time human changes started to become disturbances, that human influence not just increased quantitatively, but also qualitatively. Whereas certain old cultural landscapes are worth restoring, others are merely regarded as degradation of what was there before. But again, as soon as one decides on a specific historic reference point, one will face the obvious question: why this reference point and not another? Should we try to restore landscapes that were the result of former types of land-use that often have gone outdated today? Why? Or should the conclusion be that whatever we decide that the landscape should be like, we are merely creating the landscapes we happen to like?

The reason why we seem to have so much difficulty in orienting ourselves within this long cultural history in the landscape has to do with a predicament of our time that the nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche already foresaw. Our time, so he argues, suffers from an “historic disease.” According to Nietzsche, we contemporaries spend so much time studying history and other cultures, because deep down we are aware (or at least, could be) that all our cultural images and interpretations are deeply historically contingent.⁴ In *Beyond Good and Evil* (section 223) he describes modern humans as beings that have at their

⁴ Also see Jozef Keulartz contribution to this volume.

disposal several moralities, articles of faith, tastes in art and religion handed over to them in history, but are unable to find a form that really suits them.

The hybrid European—a tolerably ugly plebeian, taken all in all—absolutely requires a costume: he needs history as a storeroom of costumes. To be sure, he notices that none of the costumes fit him properly—he changes and changes. Let us look at the nineteenth century with respect to these hasty preferences and changes in its masquerades of style, and also with respect to its moments of desperation on account of “nothing suiting” us. It is in vain to get ourselves up as romantic, or classical, or Christian, or Florentine, or baroque, or “national,” *in moribus et artibus*: it does not “clothe us”!

We postmodern pluralists hope to gain a sense of freedom from constantly changing costumes, because we are longing for something that fits, and yet we are no longer able to seriously engage ourselves with any particular interpretation of the world for a longer time.

If what Nietzsche is saying indeed connects to the problem of historic landscapes as well, then the problem of finding one historic frame of reference for restoring landscapes will prove to be impossible. The best we can do then is to recognize tension between the different historical layers and meanings inscribed within a landscape, to celebrate the very layeredness of the landscape itself! Nietzsche continues:

But the “spirit,” especially the “historical spirit,” profits even by this desperation: once and again a new sample of the past or of the foreign is tested, put on, taken off, packed up, and above all studied—we are the first studious age in puncto of “costumes,” I mean as concerns morals, articles of belief, artistic tastes, and religions; we are prepared as no other age has ever been for a carnival in the grand style, for the most spiritual festival—laughter and arrogance, for the transcendental height of supreme folly and Aristophanic ridicule of the world.

Indeed, many today are interested in studying past times and other cultures. We study our own history in an attempt to know who we are, and in the hope of finding in history a clue how to proceed. Nietzsche believes, however, that we should not look for models and criteria in the past, for each particular interpretation of the past will only serve as a temporary blinding to the truth that we have these endless possibilities. Instead, we should learn to playfully combine the different images that history hands over to us – we should be the playful artists that use the different historical costumes for a Carnival, without the desperation of someone who is still looking for a fully fitting costume:

Perhaps we are still discovering the domain of our invention just here, the domain where even we can still be original, probably as parodists of the world's history and as God's Merry-Andrews,—perhaps, though nothing else of the present have a future, our laughter itself may have a future! (*Beyond Good and Evil*, section 223)

If Nietzsche's diagnosis is accurate, then art has a more than trivial role to play in the way that we relate to layered landscapes. Art can powerfully evoke landscape meanings and still leave room for playful and creative reinterpretation; it can acknowledge the existence of "deeper" meanings with a special place in our history of interpretations, and yet remain open to other possibilities.

Finding an appropriate answer to what a landscape means to us requires that we interpret the landscape, *read* it as a meaningful text. Palimpsest landscapes contain different legible layers on top of each other, each with a myriad of possible interpretations. Whereas recognizing the top layers of the cultural landscape text can urge us to restore those elements that help us understand and appreciate the landscape as part of our own history and identity (or restore older cultural patterns), the acknowledgement of the deeper and older layers would have us attempt to restore the continuity with natural history that humans have changed in the past.

These perspectives on “landscape legibility” can sometimes be combined, but will often contradict. Protectionists of cultural heritage will want to protect the recent layers that reveal people’s aspirations in recent history. Rewilding ecologists, on the other hand, will be inclined to stress the special importance of the deep time horizon of natural systems, because on hindsight, many cultures of place have proven to be very unsustainable and presupposed interpretations of the natural world that have shown to be problematic. Ecologically restoring a layered landscape will therefore somehow have to give some priority of older layers over younger ones, but it should seek to do so without ignoring or totally wiping out the more recent stories. And it has to recognize that any kind of environmental restoration will never be able to go back in time, but inevitably will add a new layer to the palimpsest. An appropriate restoration of historic landscapes, will need to be more than just a projection of fashionable ideas, a intentional reconstruction of a landscape that we happen to prefer. The key idea of ecological restoration is to restore the continuity with the natural history – or to “help nature resume its own historic trajectory.” But as soon as we recognize that the meaning of the human interventions cannot be reduced to being merely “disturbances,” we can see that this idea is too simple. One can acknowledge that particular human practices have had a devastating effect on the ecology of a place and conclude that ecological restoration of such a site must somehow seek to undo the harm that was done while at the same time acknowledging the ambiguity of a place’s history and meanings.

Restoring a layered landscape also urges us to do justice to the complex meanings inscribed in the landscape palimpsest. Moreover, whereas an appropriate restoration will have to seek a common ground in order to assist in healing the damaged relation between humans and the landscape, it should do so without suppressing the potential conflicts between different readings of a place. One way to come to terms with the conflicting meanings is in a form of a narrative of change and reconciliation: we interpret the story of a landscape, its

environmental degradation *and* its environmental restoration as part of a story about this landscape and about our involvement with it. Without a form of reflective awareness of the limitations and contingencies of each particular interpretation of the landscape, the restoration of the meaning of layered landscapes is doomed to fail.

Yet I believe that for certain conflicts of interpretation it will not be easy to reconcile, or rather, reconciliation should not be too easy. Certain conflicts of interpretation about the meaning of a landscape are actually an adequate reflection of what a landscape really means. Some readings of a landscape can be combined, other layers will be difficult to incorporate in a story. Yet, such difficult interpretations help to form a more complete picture and can provide our life with a context that is truly transcendent. Art, as I will show in the remainder of this paper, can play a role in completing and complicating our understanding the full complex meaning of a landscape. I will use the Millingerwaard in the Netherlands, the Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord in the German Ruhrgebiet, and the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge in the U.S. as examples.

Environmental art as a reading aid

The Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge is a former military site near Denver, Colorado, that I visited on an excursion while attending the conference on which this book was based.⁵ The place has a very interesting and controversial history, and therefore can really count as a good example of a layered landscape.

Many historically relevant and—seen from our age—sometimes shocking events took place here. After a long geological history, a shortgrass prairie landscape formed and was

⁵ Needless to say that what I do say below about the meaning of the site will never be more than my attempt to reconstruct some of the meanings connected to the place. As a foreigner and stranger to this site, its history and the Colorado culture, I will not be able to do justice to all or even most cultural meanings connected to the site. I do believe, however, that my readings of the landscape—from the perspective of a Western-European environmental philosopher – reveal some of the relevant meanings of this place.

inhabited seasonally by native people for millennia. In the nineteenth century, the area was inhabited by Europe settlers who made the place into homesteads. The relative recent history of the area is one of military presence, beginning with the U.S. involvement in World War II and efforts to liberate Europe from the Nazi occupation. But it was also a history of chemical weapons production and environmental degradation, mainly due to chemical pollution caused by the production of chemical weapons in the late 1940s and early '50s and rocket fuel for the Apollo program in the 1960s.⁶

Most of these historic events can no longer be noticed in the landscape today. The chemical pollutants have been isolated and contained, and much of the area was stripped of its surface soils. Efforts by restorationists today are aimed at restoring a new fertile soil that can support the species belonging to the alleged “pre-disturbance condition”: short-grass and mixed grass prairie. If these restoration attempts succeed, little will be left to show what happened here. Already, few signs remain of the lives of the 600 families that lived here for many decades, the primary schools that existed here have been demolished, and there is no sign of the chemical plant whose construction displaced agricultural fields and families. The landscape bears no reminder of what to many must be a painful memory: that the USA produced chemical weapons here.

All restoration attempts in RMANWR seem to head in the same direction: to attempt to restore the site to a “pre-disturbance condition”: to get rid of all human disturbances, and recreate a situation that must have existed at a point in the past before the Europeans came.

At this point, I do not want to go into the well-known debate about the problematic implications of the underlying concept of wilderness⁷ at work in this notion of a original pre-

⁶ For additional accounts of the history of the site, see Coates and Havlick elsewhere in this volume.

⁷ E.g. that this idea of wilderness seems to presuppose that the original inhabitants are somehow less ‘human’ and their influence on the landscape is somehow seen as part of nature. For a discussion about this and other criticisms, see (Callicott & Nelson 1998) and (Nelson & Callicott 2008).

disturbance state. Rather, I want to take a more positive approach and show how environmental art could bring to light the meanings of the land and give voice to the recent layers that cannot be easily combined with the (legitimate) choice to restore the shortgrass prairie. I believe that environmental art can be helpful in complicating our interpretation of the landscape, and can help us incorporate elements of the complex history of a place into its narrative.

One thing that art can do is highlight particular historical remainders of a place that are easily overlooked or ignored in the overall restoration. Art can function as a lens that makes the invisible visible, point to things that are easily overlooked, and thus reveal less obvious, hidden historic meanings and layers. Some artists can creatively apply historic meanings anew, e.g. by explicating hidden layers through translocation and translation, and thus, contribute to the active re-appropriation of elements of the place narrative and acknowledge meanings that are otherwise easily ignored. Some fine examples of this kind of recovery artwork can be found along the Limes, the old border of the Roman Empire, in the Netherlands. Different artists created installations in public space that remind visitors that the road they are walking on was in fact the North border of the Roman Empire almost 2000 years ago.

By highlighting these historic features, the artists enable visitors to recognize the particular nature of this place. Art can help us see structures and historic remains that may be hard to see or even invisible, but that we do need as elements in the story of a place, if we are to understand what this place is. Although such artworks often merely emphasize historic *facts* about a place, they also hold a narrative meaning, because they confront us with the fact that this place has a much longer history that we tend to think. By opening up a deeper time horizon, the artwork reveals something about the history of the place, but in such a way that the spectator comes to realize his or her limited understanding of the depth of time. These

reading aids can be very subtle and nonintrusive. In the case of RMANWR they may be easily combined with the overall attempt to restore a prairie. For example, one could hang a wood swing from a tree at the location where the school was, to remind future visitors to RMNAWR that the short grass prairie that they stand in once was a place where people lived, where children grew up.

Sometimes, however, an artwork will have to provoke a new narrative that has an explicit moral dimension in order to stress particular meanings of a place. One of the nicest examples of such a work that I know of is the Woodhenge tree monument in the Dutch river rewilding area Millingerwaard.

The Millingerwaard is one of the first sites in Europe where it was decided that the river forelands, that had been claimed from the river to be used as farmland, had to be given back to the river to give more “Room for the river” with the aim of flood prevention. The dikes were breached, the clay deposits were taken out, beavers introduced, all with the goal of kick-starting the natural processes of erosion and sedimentation that had formed these places before humans started to interfere. At the start of the project in the 1980s, many locals protested against this project, claiming that their valued historical landscape would get destroyed.⁸ They claimed that the new area would not be nature, but merely a human product and a tribute to human ingenuity: these days we can even make ecosystems (cf. Drenthen 2009).

In 1995, a few years after the project started, several 8500 year old half-fossilized hardwood trees were dredged out of the Rhine river nearby—a concrete reminder of the fact that a landscape similar to the one that was currently being formed did exist here many years before. The site managers decided to erect these trees into a Stonehenge-like configuration and place them on top of a newly formed river dune in the area (photo 1).

⁸ By now a vast majority of the local inhabitants consider the project to be a success.



Photo 1: Woodhenge tree monument at Millingerwaard, photo © Martin Drenthen.

The Woodhenge tree monument at Millingerwaard presents a statement: the meaning of this area cannot be reduced to human efforts to fight floods and design nature, but is also a tribute to the natural forces that are creating the place now as they have done for centuries. This form of *rewilding art* evokes an experience of deep time that widens the context from which we tend to look at our world and ourselves. These half-fossilized trees belonged to one of the first generations of oaks that recolonized Western Europe after the last Ice Age. By putting our everyday time-horizon in perspective, the tree monument points to the value of the longer natural history of the place, and reminds us that the presence of humans in this landscape is not to be taken for granted. We are relative newcomers – this place has had a long history of which we were not a part. As such, the monument pays tribute to natural forces, and suggests

a deeper, explicitly normative interpretation of the meaning of rewilding in this area.

Rewilding art like this can invite reinterpretation of the landscape, not by ignoring the recent additions, but by recognizing that we inevitably inscribe (not impose) new layers on the land, while enabling us to pay tribute to what already exists.

The art of inviting nature to comment – reconciliation and critique

But sometimes ecological restoration needs art that does more than that. William Jordan has argued that ecological restoration should not aim to restore ecosystems as such, but disrupted human-nature relationships. In his book *The Sunflower Forest*, he discusses some interesting examples where the process of restoration can be seen as a process of reconciliation with nature.



Photo 2: Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord, photo © Martin Drenthen

The restoration of Germany's Landscape Park Duisburg Nord is generally considered to be a good example of how the care for cultural identity can be combined with efforts to find a more ecologically sound culture of place. In this former heavy industrial site, a park was designed that is open to the public for recreation, but also harbors many nonhuman life forms (photo 2).

The site is heavily used by humans, and yet has the highest biodiversity in North-Rhine-Westphalia. Moreover, in this site nature is actively invited to take over old industrial installations: old steel machines are grown with weeds, creating a sometimes lush environment that humans and non-humans like. The project was applauded because it succeeded in involving the local inhabitants of this highly urbanized region to care for the restoration of this site, without denying their attachment to the long history that has led to the ecological degradation of the landscape. As a result, the community today consciously and collectively engaged in leaving behind the historic era that believed humans could master nature through fossil-energy-fuelled heavy industry. By allowing nature to take over, to overgrow the former industry sites, the project celebrates the return of nature, and at the same time supports a cultural transition in which locals are actively engaged in a collective effort to find a more ecological culture of place. As a result, the landscape park is a breathable, livable place for humans and non-humans alike, where one can really feel the vibrant ecologically-minded transition going on. And yet, the people of Duisburg also have this ambivalent feeling towards their own history: although they are pleased that they no longer have to live in heavy pollution, it was *their* way of life. There exists a strange ambivalent pride in their collective memory of the "ugliness" of the Ruhrgebiet: "*Ruhrgebiet, Woanders is' auch scheiße*" ("Ruhr district, it also sucks elsewhere!"), so a local saying goes. It is this ambivalence towards their unsustainable history that has found a new expression in the Landscape Park: the collective history is acknowledged, and yet the decision has been made to leave the

past behind and move forward. The transition is achieved not by denying the downsides of history, but rather, by confronting them. Restoration can lead to a reconciliation, but only if the collective is prepared to deal with the past.

But sometimes, the idea of reconciliation in itself is problematic and the idea that one could come to a closure is in itself troubling. The Dutch artist and writer Armando uses the terms “guilty landscapes” to express a particular ambivalence in certain natural sites that witnessed dark histories.⁹ Armando was living in the Dutch city of Amersfoort, before, during, and after the Second World War, close to a concentration camp situated in the woods. Armando knew that the innocent forest of his youth had witnessed the horrors of war and the Holocaust. The disturbing thing, however, was that, somehow, the beauty of the site was not diminished, but on the contrary intensified by the knowledge of what happened. Armando shows that it can be deeply disturbing, or even wrong, that certain places are beautiful. The experience of such a painful place is highly complex: nature still is a place of beauty and peace, but the aesthetic experience is highly ambivalent: “one shouldn’t allow oneself to be aesthetically moved by such scenes, it doesn’t seem right.”¹⁰

Indeed, in some places, events took place that require us to resist easy interpretation, to confront ourselves with uneasy questions and troubling interpretations of place. Guilty landscapes witnessed troubling events that *should not* be reconciled easily, comfortably. In these cases art has a role to play in a way that no others can: to remind us about what we would rather forget, to bring up uncomfortable interpretations, address embarrassing histories, to force us to come to terms with the darker side of our history.

Ecological restoration can in itself already be interpreted as a reinterpretation of the landscape, because it emphasizes a new and critical place narrative that puts humans and their

⁹ I make use of the special issue of *Volume* magazine devoted to the concept of a “guilty landscape” (Oosterman 2012), especially the editorial by Arjan Oosterman.

¹⁰ Armando, cited in Oosterman 2012.

history in perspective, opens up to deep time and to the perspective of other species.

Environmental art can help this reinterpretation by focusing our attention to things easily overlooked. Rewilding art such as the Woodhenge tree monument in Millingerwaard can help play tribute to that which came before and will remain after we're gone. But there is also a need for other, more radical art in restoration projects, which actively invites nature to talk back, but not per se in a reconciliatory tone.¹¹

Art in general can challenge us to change our common perspective by turning the mirror against us. The kind of art that I am proposing, Nature Mocking Art, takes on this idea by imagining what the non-human others would think of us humans, given the ecological wrong that we did.

Restoring certain ecosystems and places requires that we first acknowledge our own role in its damage, and see the darker sides of our own past before moving on. We restore landscapes because we made mistakes in the past, and know we did. Restoring an injured landscape can quickly turn into a way of pretending that nothing happened, if we are not prepared to confront ourselves seriously with our past deeds. We first need to recognize the full gravity of the wrong we did. Moreover, if we want to move on, we need some form of reconciliation with that past, and for that we need pardon. However, one cannot forgive oneself for wrongs in the past, one has to be pardoned by the other. That is why we need *Nature Mocking Art*. Nature mocking art does not attempt to repair our wrongs, it does not directly strive for reconciliation, rather it gives nature a chance to mock us over our wrongs – and possibly forgive us.

Of course art cannot directly speak on behalf of nature or the landscape. Landscapes do not care. Nature Mocking Art is giving voice to our own bad conscience in a playful manner, by making visible the other nonhuman world — a world that does not participate in

¹¹ Cf. the work of Shiloh Krupar and Sarah Kanouse for some strong examples of art that aims to complicate rather than reconcile our relation to landscapes.

our all-too-human projects and ambitions, but that does suffer from our mistakes and obsessions — and lending it a voice. Would that non-human world — if it could have an opinion — not find our paranoia ridiculous, wouldn't it want to mock us, make a fool of us? And shouldn't it be allowed to do so? Such a form of Nature Mocking Art does not have to be a deceitful attempt in which we merely use nature like a ventriloquist, because it can explicitly give a role to non-human agents, nature's others need to become part of the evocative work.

Art can be a reading aid that helps us to understand the meaning of a landscape, but can only do so if it does not shy away from difficult stories, when these too are part of the meaning of a place. One might even say that it is precisely *in* the controversy about its meaning that a landscape gets noticed; only if we stop taking for granted the easy, conciliatory interpretations of a place, it can start conveying meanings. Provocative artworks have a role to play here, if only because they force us to look again, reconsider our initial view and judgment, pay attention to what beckons to be noticed.

The kind of artwork that I am proposing emphasizes a particular meaning of nature that is often at work in our conservation and restoration efforts: nature as a transcendent, meaningful order that we use for moral orientation. The concept of wildness often seems to have a similar moral meaning: it serves as a critical border concept, a “view from the outside” that we use as a criterion with which we can put ourselves in perspective.¹² It plays with this notion by introducing an “outside stance” that can serve as a critical mirror that shows the all-too-human foolishness of much of what went on in our relation to particular landscapes.

When visiting the ecological restoration site at RMANWR, I was surprised to see how little acknowledgement there was of the problematic nature of the past human activities such as the production of chemical weapons. Having grown up in a landscape where the historic

¹². Cf. Drenthen 2005, Drenthen 2007.

layers are evident everywhere, I was shocked at how this site was being restored. Even though I agree that restoring the site to shortgrass prairie can be legitimate, I do believe that current management ignores, suppresses, and destroys landscape layers that have a story to tell about the meaning and history of this place. I believe art can be helpful in supporting a more complete understanding of the landscape palimpsest in RMANWR, even if the general direction does not change.

For Rocky Mountain Arsenal, I envision a Nature Mocking Art work that consists of a series of statues of big brightly-colored plastic toy soldiers who are watching each other, just as the military personnel watched one another in the twentieth century (photo 3). Looking back on it now, much of the Cold War rhetoric and war preparations seem foolish: as if the obsessive fixation on the Danger of the Evil Enemy Empire made the care for our own living landscapes seem insignificant. The proposed work invites the prairie dogs in the site to “comment” on the embarrassing history of the site. They will be seen standing next to the toy soldiers, also on the lookout, but seeing them standing next to the soldiers somehow will put in perspective this human militaristic project of the mid-twentieth century, that polluted this site with poisonous chemicals and the minds of people with paranoia: militaristic states distrusted other military states at the other side of the world and prepared for chemical warfare, meanwhile poisoning the natural world. Nature Mocking art invites nature to speak back, it allows nature not just to correct our ecological wrongs, as in Duisburg, but also to set the record straight, to correct the narrative and show that humans have been foolish. Only then, can we move on to seek reconciliation.

Of course such an artwork will be provocative, and many will feel angry about this particular interpretation of the meaning of what happened here. That’s okay. There are many stories to tell, also stories that stress the hopes and ambitions of the people living here, the big

and small narratives of life on a military site near Denver – stories about patriotism, about love for the land, about loss, etc.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the way we interpret the landscape is always already entangled with how we look at ourselves. Conversely, our identities are at stake as soon as the meaning of landscape stops being self-evident. I argued that the conventional “objective,” or semiotic approaches on landscape interpretation are not really suited to understand this relation but that a hermeneutic perspective on reading landscapes can help us understand the interconnectedness of landscape and moral identity. I discussed that our understanding of the meaning of landscapes is furthermore complicated in contemporary culture, because most traditional frames of interpretation have stopped being self-evident. It may be true that there are several images and interpretations of landscape and self, but we no longer seem to have a criterion with which to determine the value of these different interpretations. Each proposed criterion itself is already just another voice in the history of competing voices and identities.

That is why ecological restoration cannot simply chose according to a value judgment between different historic reference images which particular reference will be used for restoration.¹³ If we agree that the goal of ecological restoration is not just the repair of damaged ecosystems, but about correcting our disturbed relationship with nature and finding our place in the natural world (Jordan 2003), then we already implicitly recognize that there is a non-human world that should serve as a reference point, a frame of orientation, a framework from which we critically reflect on ourselves. I believe that art can be useful to restoration projects because of its evocative ability to highlight this moral dimension of

¹³ Cf. Haak (2007).

ecological restoration. However, this also means that art should not just be used as an ornament, but as a lens. Moreover, if art is to play a role in highlighting the moral dimension of ecological restoration, it should not only be used to “sell the idea of ecological restoration,” but be allowed to seriously question ourselves. Even if that means that its message will be uneasy and disconcerting.



Photo 3: Nature Mocking Art – proposed artwork at RMANWR, © Martin Drenthen

(for the color version of this picture, see <http://goo.gl/KQskG2>)

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