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Tartu Semiootika Raamatukogu 16

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Концепты для семиотики

CONCEPTS FOR SEMIOTICS

Edited by
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UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
press

Book series Tartu Semiotics Library editors: Kalevi Kull, Silvi Salupere,
Peeter Torop

Address of the editorial office:
Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu,
Jakobi St. 2, Tartu 51014, Estonia

<http://www.flfi.ut.ee/en/department-semiotics/tartu-semiotics-library>

The volume is related to IUT2-44

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ISSN 1406-4278 (print)
ISSN 2228-2149 (online)

ISBN 978-9949-77-258-2 (print)
ISBN 978-9949-77-265-0 (online)

University of Tartu Press
www.tyk.ee

Landscape as text

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Abstract. From the mid-1980s, the textual paradigm ignited a representational approach toward landscape within human geography. In this context, human geographers largely used the metaphor of landscape as text. Due to a rigid concept of text, this research assumed that landscapes could manifest selective worldviews and dominant discourses of power. Subsequently, human geographers refashioned the notion of landscape as text. The proposal was to consider landscapes as actors able to produce and transform meanings. The task was to uncover the hidden, dominant meanings represented in landscape representations in favour of underrepresented cultural meanings. Despite the promising proposals, geographers especially focused on the meanings of the author of landscape texts, while underestimating the multifaceted interpretations of readers. Likewise, traditional semiotic analysis considered text as an immutable, coherent system of signification produced by a prior authored utterance. In response, this paper advances an approach to include the alternative and unexpected meanings embodied in landscape texts. Following recent developments in semiotic theory, this paper proposes a suitable concept of landscape as text to explain the complexity and the unpredictability of contemporary everyday landscapes.

Keywords: landscape; text; memory; Juri Lotman; human geography

This paper briefly reviews the geographical literature on landscape that emerged from the mid-1980s in the wake of the cultural turn in human geography – which can be seen as a semiotic turn (or at least the beginning of it) in geography. Rather than an external and material reality, this research considered landscape as a cultural construction, a particular way of structuring and representing the world. The symbolic meanings human actors attach to landscape through textual representations were at the centre of inquiry. The assumption was that researchers could reach an appropriate understanding of landscapes through the analysis of

its textual representations. However, due to a rigid concept of text and authorship, this research assumed that landscapes could manifest selective worldviews legitimating dominant discourses of power.

The aim of this paper is to revise the concept of landscape as text focusing on its semiotic aspects. Accordingly, this paper suggests a more dynamic notion of text that enables researchers to include the meanings, interpretations and practices of actors that use the landscape for multifaceted purposes everyday.

1. Traditional landscape studies: from physical landscape to landscape as a “way of seeing”

Traditional geographical studies considered landscape as physical and objective, an external world that can be empirically accessed and analysed. This view was proposed by key figures in the Anglo-American landscape studies tradition, such as William G. Hoskins (1954) and Carl Sauer (1963). According to this approach, landscape analysis consisted in reconstructing the history of landscapes and their evolutions through a “limpid observation and recording of material features in the field” (Wylie 2007: 17). “Non-urban” and “pre-industrial” spaces were the main objects of this approach (Wylie 2007: 11).

From the mid-1980s, a revolution occurred in landscape studies after the cultural turn in human geography (see Barnett 2009). In this context, geographers considered landscape less as an external and physical object. Instead, landscape became a system to produce and transmit meanings through representations.

This geographical research considered text in its traditional form, i.e. a “written material that occupies anything from a newspaper article to a volume sitting on the shelf of a library” (Aitken 2005: 234). In the introduction to *The Iconography of Landscape*, Daniels and Cosgrove stated that:

A landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings. [...] They [landscapes] may be represented in a variety of materials and on many surfaces – in paint on canvas, in writing on paper, in earth, stone, water and vegetation on the ground. A landscape park is more palpable but no more real, nor less imaginary, than a landscape painting or poem. [...] And of course, every study of a landscape further transforms its meaning, depositing yet another layer of cultural representation (Daniels, Cosgrove 1988: 1).

Following this approach, landscape analysis was based on “written and verbal representation of it”, as “constituent imagines of its meanings or meanings” (Daniels, Cosgrove 1988: 1). Thus, landscape analysis shifted the focus onto visual aspects of landscapes and its representations. In order to have an appropriate understanding of landscapes, geographers analysed textual representations

of landscapes in literature, poetry, art, photography, and other media. As an example, in *The Effect of the Good Government on Country*¹, the Italian painter Ambrogio Lorenzetti depicted an organised countryside around Siena in Italy arising out of a city gate. From this gate, a path leads from the city to the country: here, the peasantry is involved in its everyday hard works, while some bourgeois are serenely walking. Moreover, a gentleman is proudly riding his horse toward the country. The purpose of this fresco was to represent how a well-organised countryside looked like in peacetime and thanks to good administration. In this context, good government did not attempt to even out differences between social classes. Instead, it was a means to properly administrate and control a land where every social class could live and work in their place. From the viewpoint selected by Lorenzetti, the good government of the country directly originated from city institutions and authorities.

Likewise in paintings, perspective structured landscape, objectifying the space turning the land into territory.² In this view, landscape conveyed meanings of elite groups, representing dominant need and interests. Consequently, landscape became a tool used to build authority and to maintain control over the space.

Landscape is thus a way of seeing, a composition and structuring of the world so that it may be appropriated by a detached individual spectator to whom an illusion of order and control is offered through the composition of space according to the certainties of geometry. (Cosgrove 1985: 55)

2. Landscape as text

The concept of landscape as a “way of seeing” has been examined through metaphors such as spectacle, theatre, text, veil, and gaze (Daniels, Cosgrove in Duncan, Ley 1993: 57; Wylie 2007: 56). From the late 1980s, human geographers increasingly privileged the metaphor of landscape as text:

¹ *The Effect of the Good Government on Country* is part of the fresco cycle *The Allegories of Good and Bad Government*, painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, from 1338 to 1339. This series of frescos is located in the *Sala dei Nove* (Salon of Nine), the council hall of the *Palazzo Pubblico*, in the medieval town hall of Siena, Italy. This series includes the Allegory of Good Government, the Allegory of Bad Government, the Effects of Good Government in the City and in the Country, and the Effects of the Bad Government in the City and in the Country. *The Effect of the Good Government on Country* is on the eastern wall of the hall joined to *The Effect of the Good Government in the City*. The latter includes the depiction of the countryside referred to here.

² By territory, I mean land controlled by a set of institutions and authorities able to set societal and political agendas and to define the social dynamic of inclusion and exclusion.

The landscape, I would argue, is one of the central elements in a cultural system, for an ordered assemblage of object, a text, it acts as a signify system through which a social system is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored. (Duncan 1990: 17)

Associating landscape with text meant to identify the “text-like qualities” landscapes exhibits and to interpret them through textual methods (Aitken 2005: 234). Moreover, the textual association invited questions on authorship: landscapes were considered as “communicative devices” (Duncan 1990: 4), produced by an “author” to transmit information to different “readers”. Analysing landscape as text

[...] invites questions regarding authorship and interpretation – writing and reading. Who is that has written the landscape? Which individuals or groups are its principal authors? What is the narrative of the landscape, what story does it tell? Does the landscape have just one plot or is it composed of many overlapping and even competing storylines? [...] How will the landscape be read? It is written in language that we understand? Or we will need to learn new languages and develop new techniques for reading and interpreting the landscape, if we wish to understand it more deeply? (Wylie 2007: 70–71)

In this context, the authors of landscape texts “foresee a model of the possible reader” while taking readers along predetermined interpretations (Eco 1979: 7). However, readers may interpret landscape texts in various ways, according to their own interpretative habits, cultural knowledge, and systems of values. Therefore, landscape interpretations can greatly differ between authors and readers, as well as among different readers and reading communities. But at the same time, landscape texts are capable of building up their own meanings regardless author’s intentions and readers’ multifaceted interpretations. Landscape texts bear their own inherent meaning potential.

However, the geographical debate around landscape as text has mostly emphasised the role of the author. The meanings authors want to encode and transmit through text were seen as hierarchically more significant than the multifaceted interpretations of readers. Readers were mostly considered as a “theoretical abstraction” and as “unproblematically influenced by the texts they read” (Kneale 1998: 3).³

This geographical research grounded itself on a limited conception of authorship, as the sole mechanism capable of representing the original “intentions of the author” (Eco 1992: 25). This approach emphasised the fact that landscapes mostly display single authored meanings. In turn, landscapes were seen not as “innocent as they look” (Lindström *et al.* 2014: 114), rather as able to convey selective meanings and dominant interpretations of an author.

³ Like in the transmission model of communication (Shannon, Weaver 1949), authors transmit messages to readers who are supposed to unquestionably accept them.

If landscape are texts which are read, interpreted according to an ingrained cultural framework of interpretation, if they are often read “inattentively” at a practical or nondiscursive level, then they may be inculcating their readers with a set of notions about how the society is organised: and their readers may be largely unaware of this (Duncan, Duncan 1988: 123).

In this view, landscapes were assumed to fix selective meanings and legitimise social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, landscapes were largely associated with dominant discourses of power and authority.

3. Critics of landscape as text

From the last years of 1980s and the early 1990s, post-structural geographic research refashioned the notion of landscape as text. Researchers calling for this new proposal gathered around the slogan “there is something outside the text!” (Peet 1996: 23). The new attention toward minority and subordinate interests within cultural studies (Hall *et al.* 1980) started to emancipate landscape from the borders of textual representations. In turn, landscape began to include those readings that were previously left out from the dominant textual representations.

As a consequence, classical topics of cultural geography were reinterpreted in an “ideological way” (Wylie 2007: 81). A new generation of cultural geographers attempted to uncover the hidden meanings of the text and to challenge dominant perspectives in favour of underrepresented cultural interpretations.

More recently, critics of landscape as text have brought into question the representational model of landscape. The so-called “non-representational theories” have emerged as a critical perspective on those theories reducing the “naturally present reality” into representational models (Thrift 1996: 7; see also Thrift 2007; Crang 2005; Lorimer 2005, 2008; Wylie 2007; Vannini, Taggart 2012). Non-representational theories have proposed to shift from text to context, i.e. “a necessary constitutive element of interaction, something active, differentially extensive and able to problematise and work on the bound of subjectivity” (Thrift 1996: 3).

As opposed to the concept of text, practices have been seen as “open and uncertain”, able to change according to time and spatial setting (Thrift 1996: 7). Practices have been embodied in a space that is “a practical set of configurations that mix in a variety of assemblages thereby producing new senses of space” (Thrift 1996: 16). Rather than being made up of representations, the world is seen as “made up of all kinds of things brought in to relation with one another by many and various spaces through a continuous and largely involuntary process of encounter” (Thrift 2007: 8).

Moreover, non-representational theories have conceptualised objects as actors involved in various performances and in complex relations with other human and non-human actors. The human body has not been counted as separate from

the world: human bodies co-evolve with things, taking them in and adding them to different parts of the biological body to produce something which “[...] resemble[s] a constantly evolving distribution of different hybrids with different reaches” (Thrift 2007: 10).

The proposal of non-representational theories has been to focus attention on practices, as opposed to texts. Likewise, traditional semiotic research has erected a great boundary between the concepts of text and practices. As products of prior utterances, texts have been traditionally considered as immutable, coherent systems of signification (Floch 1990). In consequence, texts have been delimited within a temporal structure that has necessarily included a beginning, an elaboration and an end. Conversely, practices have been defined as on-going processes, continuously developing and changing in situations of social interaction.

However, human practices can be completely stable and stereotypical (Paolucci 2010: 174). The open nature of practices does not make them more peculiar than texts. Practices often assume the form of stable “scripts” or “frames” (Eco 1986: 71), which are coherent systems of experiential knowledge that describe how actors usually behave within social situations. For instance, the practice of “going to a restaurant” develops similarly for different actors: calling the restaurant to book a table, reaching the restaurant, reading the menu, making a choice on the food to order, waiting to be served, eating, and finally paying the bill. Human practices like “going to restaurant” hardly suffer from abrupt changes or get rewritten by unusual circumstances.

4. Revisiting landscape as text

Further proposals for reviewing the concept of landscape as text grounded themselves on post-structural literary theory (see Duncan, Duncan 1988; Duncan 1990; Barnes, Duncan 1992; Duncan, Ley 1993). In this context, post-structural literary theory served to criticise referential theories of language: language cannot reflect reality and written texts do not mirror real world. Moreover, post-structural literary theory could overcome the concept of the empirical landscape merely made of “physical artefacts” (Cosgrove, Jackson 1987: 96). Instead of an “apparently stable external world, all we have are texts, which are capable of being interpreted in countless ways because they are *polysemic* (hold multiple truth)” (Kneale 1998: 4).

This post-structural research on landscape adopted various definitions of text. Moreover, this type of research mainly focused on the meanings of authors while underestimating the role of readers. The meanings of authors were assumed to be hierarchically more significant than the multifaceted interpretations of readers.

In response, the next section revises the relation between text, authors and readers while proposing a less rigid concept of text.

5. From sign to text

There have been several theoretical and methodological developments throughout the history of semiotics before the concept of text became “fundamental” in semiotic theory and analysis (Uspenskij *et al.* 1998 [1973]). Peirce (1931–36) took the first step toward the foundation of a science of signs. Ferdinand de Saussure proposed a theory able to include broader systems of signs: as far as we know from his posthumous *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), the aim of Saussure was to develop a systematic method to analyse the internal organisation of language. Later, linguists such as Louis Hjelmslev (1975) attempted to define the basic, essential features of a language and a linguistic sign to be defined as such. This development showed that signs operate only in relation with other signs (Volli 2000: 60).

Hence, linguistics increasingly broadened its boundaries from single signs to sentences and from sentences to paragraphs. At the end of the 1960s, the need for a theory that could include broader units of analysis became apparent (Marsciani, Zinna 1991: 11). The works of Propp (1968 [1927]) and Levi-Strauss (1983) helped in accomplishing this task: their researches represented an attempt to identify the irreducible narrative elements of Russian folk tales and American myths respectively. In the wake of this research program, semiotic theory began to focus on literary and written texts such as fairy tales, myths, and novels.

Traditionally, semiotic theory considered texts as already expressed products, immutable, coherent systems of signification (Floch 1990). In this view, texts were seen as products of a prior utterance, defined by internal coherence and enclosed by precise temporal boundaries (Paolucci 2010: 174).

Regarding authorship, authors were the only ones defining the borders, the structure, the language, and the grammar of texts. Moreover, authors alone were engaged in designing a coherent system of characters, spaces, and times within the borders of their text. For instance, Greimas’s *parcours génératif* (1970; 1983; see also Greimas, Courtés 1979) was a model attempting to register the essential semiotic elements that allowed the generation of any potential discourse.

6. Textual communities: revising the role of the readers

Between the 1970s and the 1980s, semiotics broadened the concept of text including other cultural products. Everyday objects, advertisement, newspapers, television broadcasts, architectures, design, and music became suitable of being analysed through semiotic analysis. Moreover, semiotics started to draw attention on social practices (for example, Landowsky 1989) and cultural processes (for example, Lotman, Uspenskij 1975). However, this research was influenced by a fixed concept of text and a rigid notion of authorship. Here, readers could arduously renegotiate and challenge meanings once authors established them in text.

In the early 1990s, semiotic research focusing on textual interpretation revised the relation between author and reader (Eco 1990). Previously, Eco (1986) showed how research on the interpretation of texts had polarised those stating that text can be interpreted only according to authored intentions and those affirming that text can support every possible interpretation. Later, Eco (1990: 50) suggested that textual interpretation lays on an intermediate way between the author's intentions and the total arbitrariness of the readers' interpretations⁴. As a consequence, semiotic analysis began to include the interpretations of readers as equally fundamental for the definition of textual borders and interpretations: instead of being fixed, textual borders could be redefined; instead of being everlasting, textual meanings could be refashioned.

As a consequence of this, actors interpret different text according to their own system of values and cultural identity. When actors have similar interpretations, they gather around textual communities. Each textual community differently evaluates different texts. Each textual community has its knowledge about events and identities represented in texts (cognitive dimension) and its way to evaluate texts (axiological dimension). Furthermore, each interpretative community has its specific emotional responses to texts. All these dimensions are strictly related one another and intervene in the interpretative processes of textual communities. The concept of textual community is a meaning-focused approach to consider readers as an active part of the meaning-making process. Yanow (2014: 16) states that the single-authored text has been replaced by a concept of text capable to include the multiplicity of various interpretations:

[...] meaning resides not in any one of these – not exclusively in the author's intent, in the text itself, or in the reader alone – but is, rather, created actively in interactions among all three, in the writing and in the reading. (Yanow 2000: 17)

7. Textuality: Revising landscape as text

The post-structural, geographical debate on landscape as text has shown that landscape can include “ideological and social struggles over the symbolic meaning of place and the social order” (Kneale 1998: 4). However, this research has adopted a traditional concept of text: “[...] the text metaphor remains relatively rigid and hierarchic. It is characterised by very little fluidity, living little space for creativity and spontaneous irregular processes” (Lindström *et al.* 2014: 115).

Conversely, contemporary semiotic research considers text as “considerably more dynamic, including both creativity (that is, non-regulated future possibi-

⁴ Eco (1992: 25) calls this intermediate way “*intentio operis*”, “as opposed to – or interacting with – the *intentio auctoris* and the *intentio lectoris*”.

lities and unpredictable processes) and memory (that is, individualised past) as opposed to crystallised universal codes” (Lindström *et al.* 2014: 115). This concept of text allows the analysis of the complexity of the social and cultural world, drawing attention on the everyday practices of actors.

Contemporary semiotic research has progressively shifted the meaning of textuality to reconceptualise the traditional notion of text as a closed product with fixed borders, defined by internal coherence. Textuality is considered as both “the form and content of a reality that is intelligible through the semiotic eye, which periodically redefines its boundaries, opening new perspectives of analysis” (Stano 2014: 61; see also Volli 2000: 224).

As a methodological concept, textuality allows the semiotician to periodically redefine the borders of the texts so as to include significative processes considered as relevant for the analysis. Accordingly, the semiotician is simultaneously consumer and producer of the text. In this view, the researcher’s interpretation represents only a further point of view on the analysed text. Moreover, textuality considers readers as always able to redefine the textual borders of empirical texts, progressively including further layers of meanings and original interpretations. Rather than exclusively focusing on authored intentions, textuality draws attention to the “signifying practices” that continuously redefine the meanings of texts, enhancing specific readings while narcotising others (Eco 1986: 35). As a consequence, textuality “not only transmits ready made messages but also serves as a generator of new ones” (Lotman 1990: 13).

The metaphor of textuality conceptualises landscape as both the outcome of multiple interpretations and as the creative device that can generate new meanings. Moreover, focusing on the textuality on landscape draws attention to the complexity of social practices and cultural processes. Finally, it overcomes the mutually exclusive oppositions that have been traditionally used in both academia and everyday language, such as culture/nature, core/periphery, global/local, and so on. Mutually exclusive oppositions function only at a local level as hierarchical sets of instructions to interpret specific cultural texts (Eco 1986: 83; Paolucci 2010: 357–358). In semiotic analysis, mutually exclusive oppositions can be used as “analytical tools in each particular case at hand” (Lindström *et al.* 2014: 125), but they are not suitable tools to analyse the holistic nature of landscape and the contradictory, complex, and open nature of social and cultural practices. Conversely, the concept of textuality considers categories as “participative” rather than oppositional (Paolucci 2010). Within participatory categories, the terms stand in a relation of mutual participation: the former term participates on the values of the latter and vice versa. Participative categories define a mutual process in which terms are directed and received by each toward the other. As a result of this, participative categories can overcome traditional binaries associated with landscape in the scientific debate as well as in everyday language. For instance, landscape text formation cannot be grounded on the dominant/subservient

opposition: both the meanings of elite groups and the alternative, unexpected interpretations of landscape users equally contribute in the formation and development of landscape texts.

8. The practical use of landscape textuality

Post-structural, geographical research on landscape representations has grounded itself on a rigid notion of text. A semiotic approach could prove to be very useful for the study of landscape providing a more dynamic concept of text as a mechanism of meaning generation.

This paper introduced the concept of textuality. As both the object of analysis and a meta-concept, textuality allows the landscape analyst to periodically redefine the borders of the text so as to open new analytical perspectives. Focusing on the textuality of landscape is a methodological perspective that can help in better defining the objects and the processes of signification that are under analysis within specific landscapes.

Moreover, textuality considers readers as capable of including new meanings and to make interpretations diverging from the author's intentions. Landscapes as texts are always exposed to multifaceted interpretations of its actors.

Focusing on the textuality of landscape is a holistic approach that takes into account the potential multiple meanings circulating in landscapes. Therefore, this approach can help us in understanding the complex relationship between different interpretative communities that evaluate the meaning of landscape in a different manner. Moreover, it enables us to overcome mutually exclusive oppositions. There are only transitory attempts to reduce the complexity and the contradiction in landscape texts.

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