

Chris Goldie,
Darcy White (eds.)

Northern Light

Landscape,
Photography
and Evocations
of the North

From:

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Landscape, Photography and Evocations of the North

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These essays confirm the continued relevance of 'north' as a site of cultural practice and artistic endeavour. If northern regions are tangible realities, the place of varied topography, light, climate, and biogeography, the location of distinct peoples and culture, typically they have been depicted through the traditions of northern landscape representation and the cultural narratives of an era. These discussions – focusing on Scotland, Northern England, Northern Europe, Siberia, the Arctic and Nordic lands – by photographic practitioners as well as theorists, explore and question this tradition, considering landscape as experience, reinterpreting notions of wilderness, emptiness and the sublime.

Chris Goldie, formerly senior lecturer in media and cultural history, is honorary research fellow at Sheffield Hallam University.

Darcy White is principal lecturer in visual culture at Sheffield Hallam University.

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Introduction

Chris Goldie and Darcy White

The geographer J.B. Jackson defined “landscape” as “a concrete, three-dimensional, shared reality”, implying through such a definition: possession, boundary, exclusion and inclusion, relative permanence, and function, whilst also acknowledging landscape’s equally viable existence as a two-dimensional picture, an aesthetic spectacle (Jackson: 5). The significance of landscape, according to David Matless in *Landscape and Englishness*, “resides in it being simultaneously a site of economic, social, political and aesthetic value” (12); it is a concept that points towards these different types of reality as well as obscuring distinctions between them. This duality in the conception of landscape indicates the difficulties inherent in any attempt at definition or classification, but also that ambiguity might be one aspect of its usefulness as a term (5). When we approach the northern landscape problems of definition and classification are compounded. As several contributions to this collection make abundantly clear: landscapes are places; and yet, what constitutes them as such may not reside in a distinct topography, nor in the geographical precision of latitude, but in a type of culturally inflected sensory perception. As the book’s main title – Northern Light – implies, landscapes may be classified in terms of a particular characteristic of light, and yet ‘light’ is several things: a measurable quality, a situated, perceived experience, and a cultural preconception.

Northern regions are places, tangible realities, but they are also depicted through the changing, powerful, often contested tropes and traditions of northern landscape representation. Something of the historically changing and contradictory nature of conceptions of northern territories is captured in William Morris’ account of his journeys across Iceland in 1871 and again in 1873. Morris’ account reveals what will become evident in several of the essays contained in this collection, that perceptions of landscapes are powerful and direct but are also informed by preconceptions and shaped by significant cultural narratives. Morris undertook his Icelandic journeys in order to leave behind an unhappy domestic situation. In his journal Morris described his search for “wilderness” in the hope of experiencing catharsis, a “trial by ordeal” (Purkis 1999: 7), and

he did indeed find the place to be “strange and awful” ... “a doleful land” (7). However, Morris became aware that in spite of his own preconceptions of Iceland as a site for both adventure and retreat, that this was also a place of habitation, after which its reality began to impress itself on his experience. On one occasion he “felt a queer feeling something akin to disappointment of how like the world it was all over after all” (17), but on the next day he undertook an arduous journey along a valley from Markfleet to Thornsmark, climbing onto a glacier, where at last his expectations appear to have been fulfilled: “surely”, he wrote in his journal, this “was what I came out for to see” (18). Another journal entry gives a sense of the way that at times he thrilled at the sense of danger. At the end of one long day of journeying he feared that he and his party would not make it back: “Yet with that came a feeling of exaltation too, and I seemed to understand how people under all disadvantages should find their imaginations kindle amid such scenes (18).” It was not only extreme topographies that Morris had come to experience. Morris was also drawn to Iceland by its tradition of Saga, which had to a large extent shaped the route of his journey, and he was elated when at last he saw Thingvellir – the birthplace of democracy in the North – which was, he wrote, “such a joy ... this first sight of the greatest marvel and most storied place of Iceland” (Greenlaw 2011: 167).

Writing more than a century later, Ysanne Holt discusses similar tropes associated with northern landscapes, in this instance in relation to northern England and Scotland, arguing that:

North is a relative concept, but English/Scottish northern landscapes have been typically characterised (mostly by outsiders) as remote, harder places with an adverse climate, biting winds and driving rain. They have been often and variously perceived as anti-or pre-modern places of dearth and emptiness: uplands, debateable lands, untamed and unruly, alienating and abandoned, with a haunting, melancholic pastness; or as physically testing and questing, ascetic sites of solitary contemplation, regenerative retreat and escape, with an elemental purity, sometimes viewed as imagined elsewhere, places of mysticism and miracle (Holt 2013: 218).

The influence of the history of art on these tropes of northern landscapes can be considered through two notable studies – by Svetlana Alpers (1983) and Robert Rosenblum (1975): each reassesses the development of northern art in relation to conventional approaches within the Western art history tradition; questioning the influence of Italy (Alpers) and France (Rosenblum), and ultimately of the classical world. Neither study denies the power of such influences but each contributes an additional interpretation of the character, interests and wider impact of the art of the north.

In *The Art of Describing*, a book about 17th century Dutch painting, Svetlana Alpers argues that there is a distinct art of northern Europe in contrast to the

dominant, Italian, pictorial tradition. A painting, as conceived through the Italian Renaissance and according to the “Albertian definition of a picture”, is as “a framed surface or pane situated at a certain distance from a viewer who looks through it at a second or substitute world”. This world, according to Alpers, is “a stage on which human figures performed significant actions based on the texts of the poets”; it is, above all, “a narrative art” (Alpers 1983: xix). Alpers argues that, in contrast, 17th century Dutch art and “the northern tradition of which it is a part” are not, primarily, an art of narrative: northern art “embrace[s] an essentially descriptive pictorial mode” (xx-xxi). Northern art rejects narrative and textual reference and favours instead “description and visual surface”, emphasising “the prior existence of a world of objects depicted on the flat canvas, a world indifferent to the beholder’s position in front of it” (Jay 1993: 120).

In the early 1970s, Robert Rosenblum offered a revised account of the development of modern art in the west – a “counter-French tradition in modern art” – proposing a new perspective on northern art and, ultimately, its representation of landscape. In Rosenblum’s account the sublime is a key interpretive category able to explain not only the achievements of Friedrich and Van Gogh but also of Mondrian, Rothko and others. Reflecting upon a period of 150 years, beginning with Friedrich and his *Monk by the Sea* (1809) and culminating with Abstract Expressionism and Rothko’s *Green on Blue* (1956), Rosenblum observes that the inclination of these artists was towards the representation of “emptiness”, a “renunciation of almost everything”, and the production of images of “almost nothingness” (10). Rosenblum argues that this sublime experience was initially represented in religious subject matter but later became part of a secular tradition and, through an aesthetic approach, “penetrated... the domain of landscape” (17). Rosenblum notes correspondences in the formal structure of such paintings and suggests that these arose from “a similarity of feeling and intention” (10). Equally he identifies comparable tendencies in examples of Turner’s later works, based in the latter’s “isolation of nature’s primordial elements – light, energy, elemental matter” – which he argues were also found in the “abstract vocabularies” of Rothko, Pollock and Still (12).

During the 1960s the prevailing insistence on the ‘death of painting’ meant that artists turned to every possible alternative medium with which to create work. Some continued to explore painting’s potential – Gerhard Richter being the preeminent example – but this was largely marginalised within the art world at the time. However, from the mid-1980s, fine art photographers began to turn to larger formats, thus moving into the domain traditionally occupied by large narrative painting and later by modernist painting, notably Abstract Expressionism. As Maren Polte argues: “essential in that regard was the approximation of formats and processes of composition to those used in painting” ... which was sometimes “seen, art historically, as a kind of backtracking” (Polte 2017: 211). Today, some landscape photographers continue to pursue

image making on a grand scale while others consciously opt to produce work in a quieter, more humble register. In so doing, the latter implicitly demand that any viewer of their work pauses to look carefully. The *modus operandi* of this type of small-scale photography is a rejection of the increasingly visually overloaded world we inhabit, a world from which landscape as a genre also appears to offer a refuge. In their various ways the works discussed by Rosenblum can be interpreted as attempts to address the unrepresentable, as can much landscape work today. And as Philip Shaw suggests: the “difference between Romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism can therefore be measured in their contrasting attitudes to the unrepresentable” (Shaw 2016: 6).

Alpers’ argument is illuminating because of the parallel she draws between northern art and photography: both are “modes of visualisation” or of “pictorial making” quite distinct from the mode of representation prevailing in the southern artistic tradition. In both can be found: “fragmentariness; arbitrary frames” and “immediacy”; an “attention to many small things versus a few large ones; light reflected off objects versus objects modelled by light and shadow; the surface of objects, their colours and textures, dealt with rather than their placement in a legible space; an unframed image versus one that is clearly framed; one with no clearly situated viewer compared to one with such a viewer” (Alpers 1983: 43-44).

Holt, Rosenblum and Alpers all offer differing perspectives on the tropes of northerness and the notion of a northern artistic tradition. All suggest in more or less explicit terms that this tradition is a mode of pictorial representation, a way of depicting scenes and objects rather than a record of actuality. The landscapes of the North may be real, therefore, but artistic representations with a northern theme are not simple records, they derive their form and content from decisions made by photographers or painters; choices inevitably shaped by prevailing traditions, preconceptions, ideas about the ‘North’ that in some respect are the product of perception and observation whilst also an encoding of social and cultural relations of power. All of the essays in this collection to some extent address the tensions revealed in these critical approaches: through addressing the complex relationship between the perception and conception of landscape; exploring the limits of signification; proposing a photographic practice within which narrative and perspective is supplemented by the immediacy of direct experience; and by critically examining the sublime, its relationship to the northern landscape tradition in painting and the influence of this tradition on contemporary photographic practice.

The richness of and variety in the essays contained in this collection are a confirmation of the continued as well as renewed relevance of ‘north’ as a site of cultural practice and artistic endeavour. Geographically diverse and emerging from different critical traditions there are common themes across the range of contributions. Essays by four photographers – Aileen Harvey, Fiona Maclaren

and Susan Brind & Jim Harold – all stress that experience, of being in the landscape rather than a detached and distant observer of it, is crucial to their practice. Darcy White and Julia Peck each, from quite different perspectives, undertake a critical reappraisal of a German landscape photographer, both, nevertheless, dealing in questions concerning the sublime, a key concept inherited from the 19th century landscape tradition. Joanne Lee and Chris Goldie discuss northern England, the former considering the region's post-industrial spaces through contemporary artistic practice, the latter undertaking an historical study of the northern landscape represented through the 1930s documentary movement. The geographical diversity of these individual studies is considerable: Aileen Harvey's photographic practice and research was carried out in North-West Scotland; Fiona Maclaren's study ranges across locations from Iceland through North-East Scotland to Scandinavia; Susan Brind and Jim Harold's research was undertaken within the Arctic borderlands of Russia and the Nordic countries; Julia Peck's critical examination of the photography of Olaf Otto Becker begins in Iceland and Greenland and concludes in the Global South; the work of Axel Hütte, discussed in Darcy White's essay, occurs across a range of landscapes: Arctic regions, Alaska, Greenland, Iceland, and Norway; the Alps, parts of which are in Italy, are also the subject of his work. Whilst the diversity of northern landscapes examined in these studies is interesting the distinctive approaches taken by their authors is not driven by geography, primarily. Rather, the purpose of these studies is to question dominant modes of landscape representation, particularly as it has been established within conceptions of the northern landscape.

The tropes of northerness to which Holt alludes are wide-ranging, but at least some of these can be detected in representations of landscape in other places beyond England and Scotland. A key aspect of Susan Brind and Jim Harold's essay, "At the limits of reliable information: Finland's Arctic Borders with Sweden, Norway and Russia", is to question the type of 'outsider' perspective emphasising emptiness and adversity as characteristics of northern territory. They cite the case of an 18th century visitor to the place now forming the border between Finland and Sweden who defined it as 'wilderness' or *desart*, a term he used firstly to denote a landscape of no value, within which nothing useful was produced, secondly to suggest a challenging physical environment characterised by dangerous cataracts, dense woods, treacherous marshes, steep mountains, and insufferable insects. Brind and Harold argue that such a conception made no sense to the indigenous people of the region, however, and contrast the notion of northern regions as wilderness, found in the writing of outsiders and explorers, with the argument found in Sámi writing in the 1940s, in which the real value of this landscape is said to be in its inhabitant's symbiotic relation to it; it existed as a "series of dynamic and interlinked spaces and time registers" held together through both narrative and experience (86). By shifting the

perspective from observation to experience, an indeterminate landscape – irreducible to abstract measurement – is substituted for one anticipated through historically formed predispositions, determining the mode of observation and the nature of the encounter. Brind and Harold are sceptical of the capacity of representations to provide accurate information about places: landscapes cannot be reduced to fixed entities or measurable locations; abstractions of space cannot capture the full sense of a landscape, which can only be apprehended through other forms of knowing and imagining a *place*.

Other contributions acknowledge that tropes of northerness are formed from an outsider's perspective. A key theme in the essay by Chris Goldie – "Landscape, Documentary, and Northern England in the 1930s" – is that landscape is always the product of forces outside of its field of depiction, the encoding of social and cultural relations rather than a direct representation of actuality. The argument is based on Edward Said's conception of the "Orient", in which Said argues that such a complex and persistent notion is far more than a description of a particular location's geographical coordinates and material existence: It "is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely *there*" (144). Following Said, Goldie argues that the otherness of the North is conceived on the basis of exteriority, an outsider's assertion of a rudimentary distinction between the North and the South. This is not to propose a reality beyond signification, however, but to suggest that the relationship between the moment of the analogical recording of a material reality and its signification is critical. All landscapes are encoded depictions, their meaning determined as much by agency and the social and cultural perspectives of the observer as by the actuality of the place observed.

That northern territories have been defined in terms of the adversity of their climate may have been the consequence of an outsider's perspective in the past but some contributions to the collection suggest a different approach in more recent periods. In Fiona Maclaren's "53 Degrees Parallel North" the encounter with the landscape of mountains is moulded and determined by constant, dramatic changes in the weather. Maclaren argues that a cultural perception of mountains based on awe and fascination and motivated by the quest for the sublime and the desire to conquer has been replaced by one more attuned to the climactic conditions of mountainous terrain. For walkers and climbers an immersion in the weather – the driving wind, ice cold air, fluctuating light – is the basis of knowledge of this type of landscape. For three of the artists and writers whose work is considered in relation to mountain landscapes – Lesley Punton, Olafur Eliasson, and Nan Shephard – the weather is a crucial factor in their embodied encounter with this terrain. And yet it should also be acknowledged that not all photographers represent the weather in terms of embodiment and lived experience. As Axel Hütte, the subject of Darcy White's essay, has argued:

At times, when looking at clouds in the sky ... you realize that it is only a small step from the reality to dream." ... "My images are deliberate constructs. What one cannot see is as important as what one can see. Mist, darkness and water reflections are the protagonists of my work. They turn reality into phantasm or a dream. The image is what we see, but above all it is presented as an opportunity to explore a wider territory. The imagination of the spectator reveals the work" (Ewing 2014: 249).

In Chris Goldie's essay the landscape of Blackpool is discussed in terms of the relationship between sea and land and the important role that periodic violations of the boundary between these played in the development of the town as a popular resort. It is argued that working-class experience of Blackpool took the form of a collective sublime, not on the basis of visitors looking at awe-inspiring scenery – this was largely absent – but as a tangible, embodied, exciting, occasionally terrifying experience of sea, wind and rain. Goldie suggests that this physical experience might be comparable to the encounter with the harsh climate of mountainous regions but that it is also different as a consequence of its communal dimension, the terrifying force of nature becoming intertwined with collective social energies, the liminal space between sea and land acquiring through this a utopian potential.

In "Walking and photographing Northern Landscapes: a dialogical approach", Aileen Harvey discusses the idea of landscape as experience – lived, embodied, tactile, sensory – whilst also recognising that this is shaped through anticipation, through historically formed conceptions as well as the individual expectations of the photographer. There is a tension between the directly perceived and the indirectly conceived aspects of a landscape, and therefore a questioning of the capacity of the photograph fully to capture the meaning of a place. Harvey argues that "the problematic aspects of landscape photography are very much connected with the false equation of photography and seeing". Her practice had often produced results in which "there is almost nothing to see. The experience of viewing these images is one of straining to make something out, of a thick darkness pressing on one's eyes"; within the "poverty of pictorial content" there can be discerned "just a faint shadow of a promontory, an indistinct grassy edge, or an overwhelming blueness" (43-44).

Nearly all of the contributions address at some point in their discussion the relationship between signification and indexicality in the photographic image, some positing the idea that the experience of landscape can move us beyond signification, others arguing that the relationship between actuality and its representation is always unresolved and in a state of tension. Arising in these essays is an interest both in the actuality of these places and the ways in which they have been represented.

Darcy White's "Wanderings through the fog: Axel Hütte and the German landscape tradition re-imagined" conceives of fog as a metaphor for problems

of interpretation for Hütte's landscape photography, while also exploring its use as a recurrent motif. White explores the uneasy tension in Hütte's work between very different traditions: the cool, detached and rigorously neutral mode of representation, an approach epitomised by Bernd and Hiller Becher at the Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf, where Hütte studied; and the tradition associated with the sublime aesthetic of 19th century German Romantic painting. This essay contests interpretations of Hütte's photography that foreground the influence of the Bechers at the so-called 'Düsseldorf School', arguing instead that it is more fruitful to place this artist's work in relation to a trajectory of painting – from Friedrich, to Barnett Newman, and to Gerhard Richter. White suggests that such work operates through the suppression of detail and an insistence that the experience of art takes place 'now', rather than through interpretive modes of engagement.

As with other essays in this collection, White explores the tensions in relation to the indexicality of the photograph, considering the role of the indexical in the wider experience of landscape art. She argues that Hütte's work embraces the challenge of working *with* the indexical while it resists the powerful inclination of the human perceptive organ to make sense of what is seen.

In her chapter Julia Peck explores the photography of Olaf Otto Becker – whose work began in depictions of the Arctic landscapes of Iceland and Greenland – and how it has addressed the causes and effects of climate change. The key to understanding the significance of Becker's work, Peck argues, lies in their indeterminacy, the tension they exhibit between the affective and the effective, in their "renegotiation of the sublime through an engagement with the real" (114). By taking this approach Peck questions orthodox readings of Becker's work – those describing his aesthetic as "lyrical documentary" – arguing instead that a recognition of the ambiguity of his images enables an analysis of its relationship to a neoliberal world order. Drawing upon Jason W. Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, the chapter argues that photography "plays a role in producing and reproducing" conceptions of nature; it contributes to how capitalism organises nature, through: "earth-moving" and "idea-making"; but it can also produce "a multitude of practices where a critique of neoliberalism can be enacted" (98).

Joanne Lee begins her chapter by noting the types of indeterminacy that are a hallmark of certain places: landscapes in which there is "a curious mix of the rural and industrial" or "the beautiful and the despoiled", characteristics not exclusive to the part of England "framed" as the North, but, she suggests, this condition of being "in between" does seem to be one of northern England's notable features in the post-industrial era.

Lee examines the various definitions of North that might incorporate such an indeterminate landscape. Some writers postulate fixed but relatively arbitrary boundaries; others insist that the definition is cultural and political rath-

er than geographical, emphasising the relational aspect of the North and its identity – places in northern England are defined “by their subordinate and residual relationship to London and the South East” – whilst the tendency to define the North in negative terms is considerable: “a narrow and inward-looking enclave”; the site of production of “necessities such as coal, steel, cars” but for “the use and financial gain of those elsewhere”, a ruined and “fallen landscape”, and “bleak, harsh and unforgiving” (134). Various notions have been employed to define this condition of indeterminacy: “edgelands”, “junkscape”, “urban void”, “deadzone”, and “urban interstice”, but Lee favours the concept of “terrain vague”, a term of 19th century origin but mostly associated with Surrealism and used as the title of a photograph by Man Ray in 1932.

To conclude, each of these essays confronts a range of issues concerning the actuality of the ‘north’. They inevitably deal with a question addressed by Jorge Luis Borges in 1946 in his short fictional account of the dilemma faced by cartographers when mapping a terrain – what to include and what to leave out? In “On Exactitude in Science” he describes – through a fictional storyteller, Suarez Miranda, purportedly writing in Lerida in 1658 – a “Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it” (Borges 1975). The story serves to illustrate the task faced by all representational landscape artists, in the context when no image can usefully include everything seen. Selection must always take place.

Similar in some ways to the map discussed by Borges, landscape images are not depictions of an unmediated reality but are, as Gerhard Richter proposes, “abstractions”; a distillation, a reduction, always and necessarily a partial account of a place (Elgar 2011). As Jorge Luis Borges demonstrated, for a map to show all that a given place contains it would need to be the same size as that place itself (op cit). Artists also add to what they encounter. Since ‘landscape’ as a concept only exists as a result of cultural framings, landscape images are not simply manifestations of actual or imagined places, but also the result of the complex of ideas that artists carry with them when they make images of land.

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