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A Shapeless Landscape

An Examination of the Qualities and Structures of the Landscape Based on an Aesthetic Analysis of the Wadden Sea in Jutland, Denmark

Abstract: *Paper discusses the formal significance of the landscape according to its identity in relation to humans. The paper is based on a project concerning the unique Wadden Sea at the West Coast of Jutland. The surroundings were analyzed with a method inspired by the Koolhaas' architectural manifesto the Generic City. The result of the analysis was based in the concern that the landscape could be characterized as without an identity; it was divided into three parts, Character, Shapelessness and Aesthetic. The paper argues why the project could even be utilizing terms from the architectural field of studies to analyze the landscape by using Nielsen's theory of the Polynuclear City, a place where borders between the city and the country are eliminated; discusses whether an identity of the landscape has any significance to mankind and contextualizes the definition of the landscape to a) the definition made by the European Landscape Convention as an area characterized by the interaction between natural and cultural factors; b) a geological point of view on how cultural interference in nature influences the shape and identity of the landscape and c) the importance of European landscape painting from the 19th century, concerning the visual idealization of the landscape. In a final discussion a mix of the different perceptions of landscape is done to make a complete investigation of the identity of the landscape in relation to us within a perspective to the above mentioned project about the Wadden Sea.*

Keywords: *Landscape, landscape architecture, urban landscapes, Wadden Sea, land art, generic landscapes, existential foothold, artificial landscapes*

Introduction

What separates a specific landscape from others? For example, what makes

the dunes at the West Coast of Denmark different in relation any other beach? If all cultural influences, such as

architectural landmarks, houses, paths, tracks, etc., are taken away, isn't the landscape of a beach simply generic? All beaches contain the same factors such as sea, weed, sand and stones. The sand even consists only of grained stone,¹ making the question of the difference between beach of sand or stones irrelevant. And is it then even possible to categorize the area as a landscape? How to define a landscape? Based on the earlier project *The Amorphous Landscape*, which examined the landscape of the Wadden sea at the West Coast of Jutland in Denmark's quality as fragmented, this paper tries to discuss the following thesis by using the project as subject of the analysis:

"The landscape can be interpreted as without a formal significance in relation to the human perception."

This is conducted with argumentation of Tom Nielsen from the book *Formløse: Den moderne bys overskudslandskaber* (translated: *Shapeless: profit-landscapes of the modern city*). Nielsen describes the decompositions of borders between the landscape and the city as *polynuclear cities*. Likewise, once the

city is derived of the landscape, he uses the term *the picturesque city* as an explanation of the structures of the city. By *the picturesque city* the paper generates a landscape without identity as is defined by Rem Koolhaas in *The Generic City*. Furthermore, the landscape definition by Finn Arler in the article *Landskabskvalitet, naturkvalitet og demokrati* (Translated: *Quality of landscape, quality of nature and democracy*) is included. As multiple points of view are desired, the landscape is also described with the help of Christian Nordberg-Schulz books *A place to be* and *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* in order to get a new perspective on the landscape in the form of Genius Loci, to be understood as a concept for a place spirit.² Landscape painting is therefore also central to the understanding of the task and examination of the landscape's formative expression. It is further examined in the article *Landscape change and the urbanization process in Europe* by Professor Marc Antrop, whether it even is possible to take away all cultural influences.

Analytical standpoint

The Amorphous Landscape is used as the subject of analysis in regard to the qualities of the landscape in relation to humans. During the project of examining

¹ Martin Sønderholm: Sand in *Den Store Danske*, Gyldendal:

http://denstoredanske.dk/It_teknik_og_naturvi_denskab/Geologi_og_kartografi/Sedimentologi/sand (Accessed 23.04.2019).

² Nordberg-Schulz 1980/1979, p. 18.

the formal significance of the Wadden Sea a manifesto was written. It consisted of an interpretation of the landscape as fragmented, formless and without identity, as a generic landscape inspired by Rem Koolhaas manifesto *The Generic City*³. The first paragraph of the manifesto was *Character*. The character was based on the elements of the area; water, dunes, grass and sand.⁴ The landscape was fragmented into a constellation of these pure elements, and thereby it was concluded to be idle. Because the coastline of Wadden Sea consisted only of these pure generic elements, it was therefore concluded there is no difference between it and any other coastline. The tourists were consuming the nature as a tourist attraction, which contributed to a loss of identity because of a deterioration of the possibility of building an identity.⁵ The second paragraph of the manifesto was *Shapelessness*. The shape of the landscape ceases and changes, in time to the tide, waves, weather and wind. One cannot plan the motions and movement of the Wadden Sea. Furthermore, the shape of the landscape was analyzed in two perspectives: the point of view from the city met by an open landscape, or from the sea met by a more closed form of

dunes, which showed the duality of the landscape.⁶ The third paragraph is *Aesthetic*. The constant changes of the coastline create the aesthetic of the Wadden Sea. It is governed by the flexible relations between the elements dominating in turn. It is an uncontrollable movement of many aspects and alternate compositions of the elements, which also changes in accordance to the seasons.⁷ The project is not to be understood as a scientific instance of the thesis, but rather as a tool or a perspective to address and investigate the landscape and its formal significance.

Methodology of research

In order to be able to use the above-mentioned project as a subject of the paper's analysis, an argumentation of using terms of the city has to take place. This seems to be possible by using the study and terms of Tom Nielsen's book *Shapeless* about surplus landscapes. Nielsen describes the concept of polynuclear urban structures such as the realization of the differentiation model, which means that the landscape no longer lies outside, as a consequence of the city, but is an interacting part of it. This is achieved with new buildings on rural areas that have not been urbanized before and the demolition in the city in

3 Koolhaas, Mau 1998/1995, p. 1248.

4 Group paper 2016, p. 1.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 2.

7 Ibid., p. 3.

order to create new cultural landscapes (e.g. parks).⁸ This means there is no longer a clear border which indicates that the landscape is outside as in the nuclear city structure, where there should be a clean border between the city and the rural landscape surrounding it.

Nielsen describes how the landscape of its time has been used to imply common and unimaginable things into an aesthetic field and that this can be used to look at the undefined and surplus areas of the city created without aesthetic intention.⁹ His concept of the picturesque city is also derived from the landscape. Here he draws parallels to the picturesque garden in which there is a breathing space in the pavilion, as it can also be found also found in the city enclaves.¹⁰ According to Nielsen, the picturesque city is a collection of elements that are diverse and have a varied composition, which means that the city offers a moving experience which typically contains shifts like a varied landscape.¹¹ His conceptual understanding of the city thus takes the starting point in the landscape and nature; both in the merging of landscape and city, but also in the city's

composition of different elements. It is therefore argued that it must seem reasonable to use the theories of the city and apply them to landscape. If the terms can be used in the direction from landscape to city, a conversion is made from city to landscape, creating the possibility to legitimize the use of the terms and manifesto by Rem Koolhaas to describe the formal significance of the landscape.

In the manifesto of the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas a new modern city is described; *the generic city*. It resembles the airport. There is no nostalgia, the structure is all the same and there is no cultural or identical attachment to the city.¹² You could be anywhere in the world, it would be all the same. There is no historical attachment and what loses its function will simply be abandoned.¹³ In contrary to the generic city there is the hyper city. Rem Koolhaas uses Paris as his example of a hyper city. The city is imprisoned by its own identity and can only become more Parisian. It is becoming a hyper-vision of itself, fixated.¹⁴ All the facades of historical buildings are like props from a movie scene. He gives us an example of an exception though: London, whose only identity is its lack of a clear identity. The

8 Nielsen 2001, p. 33.

9 Ibid., p. 82.

10 Ibid., p. 38.

11 Ibid.

12 Koolhaas 1998/1995, p. 1250.

13 Ibid., p. 1252.

14 Ibid., p. 1248.

city “*is perpetually becoming even less London, more open, less static*”.¹⁵ That is the character of the Wadden Sea in Denmark. The sea surrounding it is eating up the coastline,¹⁶ making the landscape less a landscape, more open to the sea, less static, to use the words of Koolhaas.

On contrary, Christian Nordberg-Schulz, a Norwegian architect, describes in his book *Genius Loci* how the man needs to develop a relationship with a specific place in order to live in coexistence with his surrounding landscape. A place of understanding. A place of understanding built up through a friendship. One must discover and experience concrete landscapes in order to understand their qualities.¹⁷ One must understand (as in an existential experience of the meaning) the heaven and the earth in order to stay between the two elements.¹⁸ In other words one must find its surroundings meaningful.¹⁹

15 Ibid.

16 The Meteorological Institute in Denmark has based on number from the IPCC AR5 report calculated possible local sea-level risings of Denmark from 1986–2005 to 2081–2100. The sea is expected to rise in-between 0,34 meters to 0,61 meters. Source (DMI):

<https://www.dmi.dk/da/hav-og-is/fremtidens-vandstand/> (Accessed 23.04.2019).

17 Nordberg-Schulz 1986, p. 14.

18 Nordberg-Schulz 1980/1979, p. 41.

19 Ibid., p. 5.

Analysis

The diversity of the Wadden Sea creates a fusion between different landscapes. In the dunes you are safely protected by the hard winds. The hilly landscape can be interpreted as the Nordberg-Schulz’s description of the romantic landscape. The romantic landscape is characterized as alternating and diverse.²⁰ He describes how man does not live in the rural countryside socially, but lives there because he tries to find his own hideaway in the nature.²¹ There is also space for exploring, resting or wandering up and down the endless hillside peaks. What is said to characterize the romantic landscape is the unlimited diversity of places, as well as the changing weather from day to day and through seasons.²² It is in the landscape that human beings seek genius loci for an existential foothold.²³

If you go away from the dunes towards the water, you meet another endlessness; the eternal sandy beach that is unmistakably reminiscent of the desert landscape. The monotonous widths give a look to the eternal horizon. The desert landscape is what Nordberg-Schulz refers to as the cosmic landscape.²⁴ Unlike the latter mentioned

20 Nordberg-Schulz 1986, p. 17.

21 Nordberg-Schulz 1980/1979, p. 42.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., p. 45.

romantic landscape, the desert landscape has a total order characterized by its structure and permanent state.²⁵ However, many sand grains were lifted and shaken by the violent wind like a small sandstorm. It was barely possible to open the eyes without getting sand in them. According to Norberg-Schulz, the sandstorm refers to the only surprising moment you can have in the desert. However, it is still monotonous because it does not account for another order, but merely conceals the already known.²⁶

However, such a sharp distinction between the dunes and the shore cannot be set, as the beach can be understood merely as an element of the romantic landscape. Behind the cliff, there is a new place, but there are various new places the Wadden Sea, or as he writes about the romantic landscape:

"Behind every thaw and stone there is a new place, and only exceptionally, the landscape is united to form a simple, unambiguous space."²⁷

The definition of the landscape must be defined for a further examination of landscape as an analytical term. The

definition made by the European Landscape Convention, according to Professor with Specific Responsibilities at Aalborg University, Finn Arler, goes as follows:

"An area perceived by local or visitors, and whose character is the result of actions and interplay between natural and / or cultural (human) factors"²⁸

According to Arler, there is a duality in this definition: the landscape is shared as a delimited space and as a place perceived by humans²⁹, both perceptions will be examined in this paper. The first part can be related to the human perception. Here a tradition of landscape paintings is central, as the landscape is mediated through the artist's aesthetic optics into a shape on the canvas. It is based on Romanticism, which by Jacob Wamberg Professor in Art History at Aarhus University, in the article *Kunstens Landskaber* (Translated: The Landscapes of Art) is argued to be the period of western visual art in which the landscape painting had the greatest effect.³⁰ Wamberg thus describes how two elements competed against each other; realism in the sense that man had occupational control over nature and the romanticism in the form of the

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., p. 42.

28 Arler 2008, p. 151.

29 Ibid., p. 152.

30 Wamberg 2005, p. 23.

sovereign nature. It is a landscape paradigm that describes the extent of the motifs from the magnificent wilderness to cultural-minded elements such as roads and fields.³¹ The motifs are as snapshots, which are related to the invention of the photograph in the same period.³² This however does not necessarily mean a true motif. In the same anthology, in the article *Europæiske Landskabsmaleri omkring år 1800* (Translated: European Landscape Painting around year 1800) by Tine Blicher Moritz, it is described how the painting is occurring realistically but has actually undergone artistic work.³³ It emerged, among other things, in a cultivation of the universal landscape, where it was not intended to reproduce the world as it actually was, but how it should look; a landscape utopia.³⁴ Other artists made use of inventing reality by referring to specific places or exact dating in the title. In this way, one dares to believe in the authenticity of the place, which can also be encouraged by objects strategically placed in the picture frame for a more credible expression and idealized reality.³⁵ Is this idealized reality an expression of the understanding of the landscape and its identity that we have today? It is at least

a symbol of the form the landscape has had: the image that emerges at the thought of the landscape. The other aspect of the definition of the landscape as a delimited space, is related to Marc Antrop, professor of Geography at Ghent University. He rests his investigation of the landscape in Europe in relation to the expansion of the urban cities like the above mentioned Tom Nielsen. Unlike Nielsen, he has another perspective on the relation between the city and the landscape; instead of seeing it as a differentiation model, where city and landscape interact, Antrop sees the landscape as a product of urbanization³⁶. With the great expansions of the cities during the industrialization a higher developed infrastructure was needed. Railways were especially necessary for transporting goods by locomotives. Later on, roads and highways took over the, as he explains, fragmentation of the landscape.³⁷ He believes that the new landscapes occur because of the fragmentation of the landscapes:

“Urbanization, effects of transportation networks and globalization are the important driving forces of these changes and emergence of new landscapes. Urbanization is a complex

31 Ibid., p. 15.

32 Ibid., p. 21.

33 Blicher-Moritz 2005 p. 25.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Antrop 2004, p. 10.

37 Ibid.

process of change of rural lifestyle into urban ones".³⁸

In that way he describes how the landscape has to make the urban development inferior in order to be able to keep a sort of existence. Therefore, he gives the landscape another term as the *urban fringe* or *suburban landscape*.³⁹ An issue he sees in the suburban landscape though is the fact that these landscapes are organized by urbanites, people living in the city⁴⁰. This creates, especially in the future, a rural countryside planned in function of the city⁴¹. The landscape is defined by mosaic of infrastructures and constructions depending on processes of the city's changing lifestyles, functions and accidents.⁴² This, Antrop claims, makes the necessity for an urgent landscape inventorying and monitoring.⁴³ In between the city developments and suburban landscapes, he assures, that untouched countryside can still remain, but mostly rural areas are falling in an 'urban shadow':

"Although the landscape still has a rural appearance, however, it has been urbanized functionally".⁴⁴

The visual qualities of the landscape, he explains, are though important for the urbanites⁴⁵ and they search for sceneries that reflect their conception of an unspoilt Acadian countryside.⁴⁶ This explains why landscape keeps its appearance. Antrop concludes that the affection by the city has created a landscape which is multifunctional and works within an urban frame. The traditional landscapes become fragmented and thereby gradually it loses its identity.⁴⁷

Discussion

Landscape was partly described by Arler as an intersection between nature and culture. For a further discussion of the identity of the landscape, the ambiguity of the definition of *nature* has to be examined closer in relation to the Wadden Sea.

In the article *Landscape Quality, Natural Quality and Democracy*, he sets out five constellations for the definition of nature. (Table 1.)

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., p. 21.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., p. 16.

43 Ibid., p. 24.

44 Antrop 2004, p. 17.

45 This reflection can be related to the mentioned theories of Nordberg-Schulz.

46 Antrop 2004, p. 17.

47 Ibid., p. 24.

	1. constellation	2. constellation	3. constellation	4. constellation	5. constellation
God	The creator	The creator	---	---	---
Human	In the picture of God	The sinner	The creator	The sinner	The creator and the created
Nature	The material	The creation	The material	The creator	The creator and the created

Table 1: Model of Finn Arler's five constellations.¹

Third, fourth and fifth constellation seems highly relevant to this assignment because they relate to the relationship between man and nature (culture and nature). This is in line with the definition of the landscape. In the *third constellation*, man is seen as the creator and nature as the material. Nature is thus under human influence, and it is human duty to master it. There is complete control over nature while at the same time the constellation can also be understood as the fact that humans must improve the nature at the best of

their ability and standards.⁴⁸ If this is put in perspective to the Wadden Sea at the Danish west coast, there is an interplay between nature and man as in this constellation.

Seven years ago, the Danish Wadden Sea was proclaimed as a National Park and in 2014 as a World Heritage Site of UNESCO.⁴⁹ With its predicate 'World Heritage', the National Park received international recognition of the work made concerning the protection of the area.⁵⁰ People have given particular

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 154.

⁴⁹ Nationalpark Vadehavet in *Nationalpark Vadehavet*, Naturstyrelsen: <http://nationalparkvadehavet.dk/om-nationalpark-vadehavet/> (Accessed 23.04.2019).

⁵⁰ Verdens Arv in *Nationalpark Vadehavet*, Naturstyrelsen: <http://nationalparkvadehavet.dk/om-nationalpark-vadehavet/udpegninger-og->

importance to a certain area and thereby focus on protection here, rather than on other parts of the Danish natural areas and landscape. Man acts almost as God superior to nature. With the protection of a natural area, there also comes a number of regulations for how nature must be worked with.⁵¹ These regulations are also a consequence of the Wadden Sea Festival's major cultural event *Wadden Tide*, where international artists from Wadden Sea areas around the world come and make art related to the area's special nature.⁵²

Nature conservation of the area can also be linked to the *fourth constellation* in which nature is the creator of the world we live in, where human destroys it as its enemy. Man and nature are heterogeneous and will never be able to unite, no matter how strong a wish for it is, and nature must prosper when human beings come. However, few understand what is good for nature and they can speak for it and keep the 'bad'

[reguleringer/verdensarv/](#) (Accessed 23.04.2019).

51 Udpegninger og Reguleringer in *Nationalpark Vadehavet*, Naturstyrelsen:

<http://nationalparkvadehavet.dk/om-nationalpark-vadehavet/udpegninger-og-reguleringer> (Accessed 23.04.2019).

52 Wadden Tide in *Vadehavs Festival*, Wadden Tide: <http://vadehavsfestival.dk/wadden-tide.aspx> (Accessed 23.04.2019).

people away.⁵³ It is therefore a necessity to formulate laws and restrictions as man is unable to take care of the surrounding nature. At the same time, it can be argued that the human impact on the Wadden Sea landscape is not a danger. The landscape is created both by nature itself, by the wind shrugging in bushes and moving sand, the water as rain, creating puddles and the sea that shimmers on the coast, and by tourists and locals whose marks and footsteps on the dunes and on the shores shapes path to walk along the beach.

The landscape is thus formed in a collaboration, as *fifth constellation* is also being built on. Here is the relationship between man and nature, as something that belongs together and is united. Man is part of the cycle of nature that is created and creates. One can also look at humanity's position in several ways, for example from the perspective of social Darwinism. From this perspective, humanity is one of many species that must fight for space and resources. A way of understanding where nature is just a substance to fulfill the needs, and vice versa as human being is merely a materiality for the fulfillment of other species. In this constellation one can also see man as a co-creator who strives to create and

53 Arler 2008, p. 154.

preserve the nature and landscape.⁵⁴ The three constellations thus provide a clear definition of nature but also a good picture of how its relation to man can be understood. This also explains why the definition of the nature is not obvious. The constellations are all important for this assignment, in the sense that they can be linked to the landscape's identity or lack thereof.

The ambiguity of the fifth constellation makes a discussion of the landscape as fragmented or non-deformable more obvious. The constellation is used in this paper in relation to both the landscape's identity or lack of it, because the landscape in the constellation by its definition becomes a more interactive part of the nature, in relation to humans. In the previous section, it was put together with Rem Koolhaas's understanding of the adaptability of the generic city. Does that mean that the understanding of the landscape consists solely of natural hierarchy and human space in it? How about understanding the coexistence as an assumption for human dependence on nature?

As according to Nordberg-Schulz you must understand and get attached to your rural surroundings to be able to live in general. The landscape's qualitative characteristics that form an identity cannot be overcome. This is where you

as a person find the existential foothold. Genius loci is an epoch-making for a place of understanding in which one can live in coexistence with nature. One must understand the landscape through its identity, but what is the difference between the romantic view of the absolute shape of the landscape and the identity and the fake history of the city?⁵⁵ Is the landscape not simply caught in the idea of an identity? Are the shape and identity of the landscape designed by people to understand the complexity it contains? The complexity consists of the definition of the landscape as a blend of culture and nature and in the confusion about nature's definition in relation to man. This relationship must have an impact on the landscape understanding, because nature plays a significant role in it. The landscape is also constructed through the romantic landscape paintings that formed an understanding and order of the uncontrolled. They were on the spot, feeling its atmosphere and went home to produce a work that represented that experience. Therefore, it did not matter if the motive was changed in the process of remarking the scene. It was the mood and place of mind that was the most important.

55 Koolhaas 1998/1995, p. 1248.

54 Ibid.

Conclusion

If the landscape's identity can be recognized, first and foremost, depends on which perspective is used; the fragmentation of the landscape to a lack of identity or the recognition of the importance of an identity of the landscape. It is thus that two theses completely exclude each other in the interpretation of a particular term or expression. As was exemplified in the previous section, the fifth constellation can be related both to identity and a lack of it in its ambiguous definition of nature. The same is done in understanding the landscape painting, which can both be seen as an unseen interfering with reality or an expression of feelings and moods. However, the position of the landscape as being culturally dependent must manifest a message of such a large link between city and countryside that makes the generic landscape an opportunity. To abolish all cultural influences would not be possible, according to Arler's definition of the landscape. In this view, the landscape can be termed as formless and generic. Looking at fragmentation of the landscape, it can be understood as a collection of banal elements that together shape the landscape. This angle also partly makes the landscape generic as there are the same elements that go on and over again. What, however, gives the

landscape a special character is the exposure of the various elements, and specific landscape types are then created? The duality of Antrops terms about the landscape, could also be the answer to the discussion. He manages to epitomize both the understanding of the landscape as fragmented and without an identity and the understanding why are landscapes significant to humans. Of course it is always possible to find the solution as question of understanding or attitude, but by Antrop we can acknowledge the fact that the landscape is changing because of the city development at the time (as Koolhaas and my manifesto would prefer it), but that it is still necessary to keep some sort of formal significances (as in the landscape painting) of the Arcadian countryside (as Nordberg-Schulz would argue this is because of the search for an existential foothold).

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