

Wasteland as Landscape: the need of a new perceptual approach

Moya Pellitero, Ana

Spain, STUDIOME B, Mata 1, 6o 2a, Barcelona 08004

moya@studiomeb.com

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Abstract

Wastelands can be transformed into landscape through the “look”, and the “image”. However, not all the “looks” and all the “images” have this transformation power. Most of the time images and the spaces object of representation are simply silent. Society is indifferent to the unknown and the undiscovered. Therefore, wastelands are spaces of absence, because they are non-existent for the majority. Wastelands are like non-spaces or no-man’s-land, simple *transparent spaces*. According to the definition of *transparency* by H. Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space*, (1974), these spaces can be perceived as innocent, freed from cultural memory, visual stereotypes and cultivated look. Visual models despite they help to value and preserve historical natural landscapes, do not help to discover the aesthetic values of wastelands. Do we need new visual models to appreciate their aesthetic qualities? Or do we need a new perceptual approach? The paper examines the theoretical work of M. Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard, John Berger, and Jean Baudrillard, in search for the qualities of this new perceptual approach. The paper exposes the two types of perceptual approach that transforms wasteland into landscape: first, by the voluntary deliberate choice of the observer, after an exhaust reading (Berger, 1982). Second, by the power of the scene that claims the attention of the observer, because wants to be immortalized (Baudrillard, 1999). To prove the theory, the paper selects and compares art work examples in painting, photography and cinema. Regarding the first perceptual approach, with a deliberate choice for the aesthetic framing of wasteland, Armand Guillaumin, Camille Pissarro and Claude Monet choose voluntarily the industrial suburbia of Paris (1870-1880) as a romantic landscape in order to criticize the polluting industrial progress, while the work of Bern and Hilla Becher in Oberhausen (1970) choose to register with neutral photography empty factory sites to transform them into nostalgic heritage landscapes, and Michelangelo Antonioni’s movie *Il Deserto Rosso* (1964) used the location of industrial wastelands to express a feeling of imprisonment and fear. Regarding the second perceptual approach, that one in which is the power of the transparent space which claims the attention, we could mention the work of Vincent van Gogh and the *Banlieue of Paris* (1886), with Jean Baudrillard in his photographic work (1985-1998), and the cinematic work of Andrej Tarkovsky in *Stalker* (1979).

Introduction

The act of looking determines the recognition of the existence of a certain environment. However, such a “look” when it is impregnated by models coming from artistic sources (painting, literature, and cinema) becomes a “cultural look”, with the power to transform the space into landscape, (Roger, 1997). The picturesque visual patterns of centuries ago have become historic clichés, which are used as “visual models” to preserve and value historic landscapes. However, wastelands have nothing to say to the majority, there are absent spaces, non-existent, because there are hardly “visual models” gathered in the cultural memory of society that can work as a reference for judgment. Walter Benjamin referred how the past is a source for modern perception that substitutes the loss of memory taking place in the present. The memory of the urban dwellers is only awakened in those spaces in the territory and the city that remind them of a known historical past. Therefore, wastelands are *transparent spaces*. Transparency implies the individual indifference to perception; an indifference that inhibits the recall of visual references stored in the mind. The viewer is absent from the act of perception.

Most of the representations in media are a bombardment of continuous instant or cinematic images, random and chaotic, that depict the nature of our contemporary territory. The fragility of these discontinuous, and indiscriminate shots, show a passive visual relation with the environment. The gaze has no clear aim and points to whatever space in front of the eyes, as if the real setting imposes upon the individual its presence as a strange attractor, a pure object without connotations of meaning and value. Images show the absence of the individual. Images are visual presences without evocative desires and intellectual intentions. The

representation of the environment is silent when it does not express a subjective “look”, without the intention to communicate a subjective experience. Therefore, most of the time images are silent and reflect a transparent presence that is framed by chance.

The opposite of a silent image, is a poetic image, which opens up streams of association and affect. It activates the power of imagination, and expresses the essence of a lived experience. Silent images represent and reproduce the urban environment as a “ready-made”, and play an important role in the transformation of the urban environment into a transparent entity. Any reality is a ready-made in the moment that it disappears under its exact reproduction, into an “object-image”. The constant reproduction of the urban environment by “object-images”, make the environment disappear detached from its contextual space, (Baudrillard, 1999). It can not become a landscape with exceptional, distinctive, and aesthetic emotional qualities. However, poetic images transmit the sensorial values of a meaningful space. Poetic images that depict the urban environment, link the city as a “mental event” with the city as a physical entity. Poetic images determine a sense of recognition and appreciation of the space, which tell about a landscape motivation.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty asserts that when perception is not a subjective and spiritual act, the result is a world simply registered, corrupted by passivity. The objective and the subjective, the passive and the active relation with the world can not be reconciled. The objective and passive relation with the world, takes in account reality disconnected from the subject. In opposition, the subjective and active relation with the world takes in account the subject disconnected from the world. However, the world is a “being that is thought”. The perception should value the reflection and the articulation of the interior with the exterior, (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 64-65).

Can silent images and transparent spaces such wastelands become landscapes? Does a transparent space influence the production of silent images? Do visual models help to appreciate wastelands? Do we need new visual models to appreciate their aesthetic qualities? Or do we need a new perceptual approach?

Transparent space

For Henri Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space*, (1974), space is a product, sustained by a double illusion: the “illusion of transparency” and the “illusion of opacity”. “The illusion of transparency goes hand in hand with a view of space as innocent, as free of traps or secret places. Anything hidden or dissimulated – and hence dangerous – is antagonistic to transparency, under whose reign everything can be taken in by a single glance from that mental eye which illuminates whatever it contemplates”, (Lefebvre, 1974: 27-28). In this sense, for Lefebvre, a “transparent space” is a space of mental relations, of thoughts, of perfect readability, where reality that was hidden becomes visible thanks to the intervention of a mental illumination. Instead, an “opaque space” exists by itself, without the intervention of the thoughts and desires of a subject. For Lefebvre both illusions are not opposite, because they nurture and complement each other. Both are based in meanings, by means of an absence of meaning, or an overload of meaning. Lefebvre sees an error in applying to space the requirements of readability-visibility and intelligibility through representation, because images detach space from a lived experience. Images create an unreal abstraction and fragmentation of space. Space does not need to be readable through images in order to provoke desires, because a space in its own “transparency” can unleash desires by itself. Lefebvre observes that the discovery of the word is always ruled by an “illusion of transparency”. However, the fraudulent and deceptive world, guided and ruled by art, culture, money, market, exchange and power, leads the space inevitably to opacity (Lefebvre, 1974: 389).

Wastelands are “opaque spaces” when they exist by themselves, without any type of mental interaction. Therefore the subject is absent, passive, and the space is non-existent (for the social body, the ‘user’ of the space). This situation occurs when the space is not readable because the subject has obsolete visual and sensorial reading codes. Representation of space establishes codes that produce a discourse and a reality adequate to the code, (Lefebvre, 1974: 47). Wastelands are “transparent spaces” when they are approached with an act of vision that is innocent, as if seeing things for the first time, free of cultural preconditions and mental and visual stereotypes. Therefore, these spaces can be discovered without the aid of preconceived images, without visual models stored in the cultural memory. Wastelands as a “transparent space” have the potentiality to activate in the subject new mental associations, articulating thoughts. However to be open to see wastelands as a “transparent space” it is needed a new perceptual approach.

Qualities of a new perceptual approach

Seeing or Sensing

There are two perceptual approaches to reality, one by seeing it, the other one by sensing it. The first approach corresponds to a subject that, in order to understand and discover for instance, spaces of waste, chooses to stop and “look” at them. Therefore, the act of seeing is moved by a conscious individual choice. The sensing of a space, however, can be motivated by a deep feeling of reverie and body awareness; an unexpected enchantment stimulated by the power of the scene. Maurice Merleau-Ponty states how both, the act of seeing and act of feeling are sustained by the same ‘pure thought’. This ‘pure thought’ can be described; can be proved that is integrated by the rigorous correlation between the individual exploration of the world and the sensorial responses that reality can produce (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 48-49). However, there is an essential difference between seeing and sensing. Seeing depends on the individual power of thinking. The visual perception is a perception of thought, while the approach to reality by means of the body is linked to the unconscious and the dream, and does not have clear consistency inside reason.

Looking at essences

Both perceptual approaches to reality, by seeing it or by sensing it, have been practiced by poets (artists). Once they aim to communicate their personal phenomenological experience by means of images, the representation is able to transmit the same existential moment; both lived by the mind and by the body. In order to represent such a phenomenological experience, the poet– painter, photographer, movie director, visual artist - must have the capacity to forget knowing. Not knowing is not a form of ignorance but a difficult transcendence of knowledge. Then the work of art offers surprise, which stimulates consciousness. This approach implies a pure look to the essence of things, freed of convention or intellectual reason. The artist creates architecture of the mind, touching the soul and the stratum of forgotten memories and feelings. Art can create poetic images that activate emotions. A poetic image is immediate, holding the universe in a single depiction. Gaston Bachelard reminds us that contemporary painters no longer consider the image as a simple substitute for perceptible reality, but they may enrich reality with new interpretations, (Bachelard, 1957). For Bachelard, the communicability of an unusual image is a fact of great ontological significance. He questions how without any preparation, a short-lived event caused by the appearance of an unusual poetic image, reacts on other minds and in other hearts, despite the barriers of common sense and thought. Bachelard sees the image as an entity in its simplicity, which touches naïve consciousness and can become the expression of a youthful language. He asserts that the image comes before thought. The poetic image places us at the origin of the speaking being. It is in the zone, which precedes language. Therefore, it is experienced as a quality of inter-subjectivity. It is a transmission of enthusiasm from one soul to another. In that sense, one can experience through the image what has not been lived, being the self receptive to an overture of language.

Reverie: enchantment by the unexpected

For Gaston Bachelard “Reverie is commonly classified among the phenomena of psychic détente (distension). It is lived out in a relaxed time which has no linking force. Since it functions with inattention, it is often without memory. It is a flight from out of the real that does not always find a consistent unreal world”, (Bachelard, 1960: 5). In solitude it is possible to arrive to a singular world of reveries, unknown for the others. The reverie helps to expand consciousness, and it opens the great universe of the blank page. It stimulates awareness, with a consequent increment of consciousness, and a reinforcement of psychic coherence. Reverie can not be considered simply a derivation of the dream. The reverie is a state of the mind (of the soul), which possesses a sort of stability or tranquillity, helping the individual escape from time. In the case of children, when they dream in solitude, they get to know an existence without bounds, in which escape is translated into flight, a consciousness of freedom. In the reverie, there is a meditation threshold in which there are no regrets, or mirages of nostalgia, and it is reached a “pure threshold of life”, (Bachelard, 1960: 125). The reverie is different from the dream in the sense that reveries do not follow any threat of story or narration, while dreams always want to tell a story. Reveries, like fables, do not amuse but enchant. In the astonishment of the reverie, there is an awakening of consciousness. This is why reverie gives freedom, because, through an object or space, the individual meditates. To be enchanted by the unexpected, it is

necessary to participate in an existential experience, where the perception of the world is replaced by admiration. Therefore, it is necessary to admire in order to receive the qualities of what is perceived.

Everything can become an object of reverie, among them wastelands, therefore, the infinity of realities object of a cosmic reverie become ephemeral. When the solitary subject contemplates while dreaming, time is suspended. It is then when the eyes understand not by seeing and perceiving, but by a deeper path of reflections. Therefore, the reverie causes the individual to inhabit the world, to enter into the world and “to bite into the world with no other “care” than the happiness of biting” (Bachelard, 1960, 178).

Letting the world talk

Gaston Bachelard in “The Poetics of Reverie” (1960) refers how between the subject and the world there is an exchange of looks. He asserts that everything we look at looks at us, (Bachelard, 1960: 185). When a dreamer speaks, also the world speaks. In Bachelard’s opinion, the world as a being dreams since the beginning of times, before “culture”, and the layer of established cultural codes. The world is not mute and reverie may bring the world to its original words. In this sense, Bachelard believes that everything lives with a secret life; everything speaks with sincerity and is the poet who simply listens and repeats the voice of the world. Therefore wastelands, despite seeming silent spaces, talk to the subject open to listen. Maurice Merleau-Ponty in “The Visible and the Invisible” (1964), states that things should be expressed from the bottom of their silence. The silence of reality has a big potentiality. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 20). The philosopher, like the poet, should pretend to be ignorant in order to listen that silence, making the world talk, because the new knowledge and new experiences about spaces of waste come from this conscious passive awareness.

The observer’s choice

This section compares examples of poetic images that have transformed wasteland into landscape, with a visual perceptual approach that takes into account the observer’s choice to see and frame industrial areas, reflecting on a specific spatial reality and recalling an existential experience. In the next three examples, the artists, “look” voluntarily to industrial compounds, abandoned industrial areas, and residual polluted and empty spaces of waste.

In 1860, Argenteuil, part of the environs of Paris, had the suburban mixture of leisure and industry. It was located fifteen minutes by train from the Gare de l’Ouest. Argenteuil had gypsum quarries, an iron foundry, a sawmill, several distilleries, a tannery, gas works, a mineral water establishment, a factory of cardboard boxes and a rubber factory. (Clark, T.J., 1984). However, not only industry marked the identity of this town but also the invasion of Sunday pleasure seekers. Claude Monet moved to Argenteuil in 1871 and lived there for six years. During that time, he painted more than 150 pictures of the surroundings. He had in his hands the power to choose a point of view and avoid any sign of industrial occupation, but instead accepted such reality. In the painting ‘Argenteuil, La Berge en Fleurs’ (1877), Monet details a foreground of flowers, emphasizing the presence of factories, and making evident the coexistence of both elements in a new landscape. In the example of ‘Le Pont de Péage à Argenteuil’ (1874), Monet frames the reflection of town and industry on the waters of the river. In order to frame the scene, he uses the new steel bridge construction, a symbol of modernity and technology. Not only Claude Monet, but also other painters like Armand Guillaumin in ‘Soleil Couchant à Ivry’ (1873), depicted the river and the skyline of chimneys belching smoke like if it was a forest in the background. Camille Pissarro, in his painting ‘L’Usine, Saint-Ouen l’Aumône’ (1873), shows a metamorphosis in which the vegetation on the left side of the painting gradually is transformed into chimneys on the right side. These painters discovered industry as an object for depiction with the intellectual aim to criticize the polluting industrial progress, and show a hybrid new environment that was neither pastoral, nor industrial. These painters accepted the myth of modernity, which was that one of the marginal. Therefore, they did not prevent themselves from painting industrial sites, and they did not want to hide such reality. Industry was the symbol of a new social reform, because it allowed a new form of life that claimed for pleasure one day a week. Industry, labour, and mass leisure came together. Industry was seen as a positive symbol of progress and the natural environment around it, was the Arcadia of a new free society. However, in reality, those natural marginal settings were not idyllic places; on the contrary, most of the time they were polluted by the incipient industry.

John Berger, in his essay ‘Appearances’, in “Other Way of Telling” (1982), explains the importance of the task of choice in the photographer’s work. The intentionality of photography then, requires sometimes a fast

deliberate response or the exhaust reading of reality before making a choice. For Berger, such a choice can be understood as a cultural construction. The rejection of what is not going to be photographed, or the reading of what it is going to be framed, builds that cultural construction. It is this reading, most of the time very fast and intuitive that helps to take the choice for a specific instant and not another one, (Berger, 1982). In the case of the photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, they were choosing to read industrial architecture, taking black-and-white photographs of water towers, coal silos, blast furnaces, lime kilns, grain elevators, preparation plants, pithead gears, oil refineries, and the like. In 1970, they published their first book *Anonym sculptures*, based on the photographic inventory of industrial architecture in Oberhausen, Ruhr Valley. They organized their photographs into a series based exclusively on functional typologies and arranged them into grids or rows, showing their sculptural properties. These images registered a specific historical past, like nostalgic archaeological ruins with an imposing beauty. They became an inventory of a disappearing, monumental industrial heritage. The technique of photography they practiced was direct and descriptive, using the same type of camera employed by the great landscape photographers of the 19th century. These realistic images eliminated optical distortions and captured detail. With these "record photographs", they transformed industrial sites into nostalgic industrial landscapes, increasing the public social awareness towards the preservation of derelict industrial sites as cultural heritage.

In the 1960's, independent cinema was experimenting with space. The description of space was done fragment by fragment, through the rhythmic continuity of shots by montage. The fragments created a particular abstract place. Deleuze states that this fragmentation built an "any-space-whatever", independent of specific locations and time coordinates, (Deleuze, 1983). In this "any-space-whatever", the location was not framed, but appeared as an expression of psychological qualities. Therefore, spaces entered into a "system of emotions", being capable of inducing affects in the viewer, (Deleuze, 1983: 210). Locations were blurred, emphasizing "the modern affects of fear, detachment, but also freshness, extreme speed and interminable waiting" (Deleuze, 1983: 121). Antonioni in *Il Deserto Rosso* (1964), shows a peripheral and empty urban space independent of spatial and temporal coordinates. He abstracts an industrial periphery that could be located in any suburbia. Among residual spaces, factory buildings, boilers, electric poles, and dumps, the characters move in a disoriented and lost manner. This industrial urban space formulates with great intensity what is not said in the narration. The environment speaks by itself without the need of any voice-over. In this movie, images themselves become abstract; shots are blurred, with an intentional out-of-focus. There is also a smoke or dust effect that invades the shot, until it engulfs the human figures, making them disappear. Antonioni aims to frame the nature and psychological qualities of industrial deserted areas in order to show and describe a feeling of imprisonment and fear.

The power of the scene

This section compares examples of poetic images that have transformed wasteland into landscape, with a sensorial perceptual approach taking into account the sensing of a space, motivated by a deep feeling of reverie and body awareness; an unexpected enchantment stimulated by the power of residual spaces of waste.

Jean Baudrillard, in "The Perfect Crime" (1995), observes how the object in a real setting imposes upon the observer its presence as a strange attractor, a pure object without connotations of meaning and value. The image of such an object becomes a visual presence without evocative desire, (Baudrillard, 1995). When in the perceptive approach, the individual is moved by the power of the scene, the space is undressed from subjective interpretations and is experimented and depicted as it is, in its full transparency. Perception has no aim, and the approach is innocent and naïve. Therefore, the environment is undressed from the referential and ideological power of images and reality talks by itself to the viewer. When Baudrillard makes an exhibition of his photographic work at the Neue Galerie Graz (1999), he chooses a pictorial straight faithful attitude that is at the same time innocent and absent-minded. Baudrillard's pictures show the instant beauty of fragments of residual spaces, urban junk, harbour fringes, empty urban spaces, without searching for a specific theme or frame, focussing in the recreation of urban textures, tactile and corporeal sensations. The observer is attracted to whatever space is claiming the attention, enchanted by the unexpected and stimulated by what reality can offer to the senses. "You think you photograph a particular scene for the pleasure it gives. In fact it's the scene that wants to be photograph. (...) It is the world which reflects us, it is the world which thinks us. This is the basic rule. (...) The magic of photography is that it is the object which does all the work", (Baudrillard, 1999).

Vincent Van Gogh painted a small picture of the city outskirts, 'The Outskirts of Paris' (1886). It displayed this brief interval of open country between the working suburbs and the countryside. Not only Van Gogh, but also other painters and writers saw in the banlieue, a space of modern poetics. "(...) to take a stroll (...) is a good way for a philosopher to spend his time; particularly in that kind of bastard countryside, somewhat ugly and bizarre, made up of two different natures, which surrounds certain great cities, notably Paris. To observe the banlieue is to observe an amphibian. End of trees, beginning of roofs, end of grass, beginning of paving stones, end of ploughed fields, beginning of shops, the end of the beaten track, the beginning of the passions", (Hugo, 1861: 26). The banlieue was the place where one could experience the last traces of a world, with the last kiosk, the last lamppost, and the beginning of a hazy space of rag pickers, gypsies, and workers, strewn with rubbish, shabby grass, miserable hovels, and distant factory chimneys with columns of black smoke. This uncertain space was desolate but at the same time, was a space that could provoke reverie, expanding a corporeal consciousness in a suspended time. "(...) on the pallid slopes of Montmatre, surrounded by the great forest of factory chimneys blocking out the horizon, in that chalky and desolate banlieue, where the green trees shading the cheap taverns moved them to the edge of tears" (Zola, 1877: 28). In Van Gogh's painting, the gaslight in the field shows ambiguity and desolation. The mud in the foreground shows a space that is derelict and brutal, showing sensorial devastation.

Andrej Tarkovsky, in his movie *Stalker* (1979), shows the experience of a sensorial perceptual approach to wasteland. The movie narrates the solitude of three men in a journey through the Zone, a desolate landscape of abandoned buildings and wild nature. The three men are aware of their corporeal experience; the time is suspended, opening a universe of the unknown, where the most secret hopes are hidden. They move in this space with great respect, measuring their steps and listening to the prolonged silences. Their bodies are transformed by the experience. The uncertainty of what is going to appear next, brings them to a prolonged despair. Their expanded awareness makes them observe with attention any new sign of an unnamed space.

Conclusion

Wastelands are transparent spaces when in their observation visual models are not used as a reference to anticipate judgment. The view is free from cultural visual memory constraints and the self looks at a space as if it is seen for the first time. Transparency in the observation of the urban territory is not a negative quality in visual perception if it is a conscious passive approach. Artists tend to follow this approach. They look at the essence of things, being aware of their passive "look". They perceive the derelict space as a transparent space. The transparency of wasteland, when is depicted using poetic images, captures the essential manifestations of the space; transmits what the space is saying to the viewer, which persists over the passage of time without any loss of identity; and transforms a space depicted into a touching and evocative landscape representation.

By giving priority to the power of the scene, it is possible to discover the unexpected and to learn from what reality wants to tell us. It opens awareness and brings to crisis cultural pre-conceptions. Instead, the perceptual approach that gives priority to the observer's choice, limits the possibility of new astonishing discoveries, despite it is a powerful tool for individual expression and interpretation. The visual perceptual approach to wastelands, aims to undress reality from cultural codes, and discover what the transparent space of waste is saying by framing those spaces that are silent. The sensorial approach, enters inside the silence, absorbs knowledge about a transparent space, inside a state of reverie, interiorising an unexpected body experience. In both cases, the poet (artist) represents a perceptual approach by poetic images, expressing essences. In both cases, the representation of a perceptual approach to wasteland, as a transparent space, with poetic images, transforms the space into landscape.

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Figure 1: Claude Monet, Argenteuil, la Berge en Fleurs, 1877.



Figure 2: Vincent van Gogh, The Outskirts of Paris, 1886.



Figura 3: Jean Baudrillard, New York, 1994.



Figure 4: Michelangelo Antonioni, *Il Deserto Rosso*, 1964.