

Garlick, Ben ORCID logoORCID:
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7257-0430> and Hunt, Rachel (2022)
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Theory/concept: Landscape

Illustrative example: A visit to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park

“Landscape” can refer to a particular, designated area of the environment, but it also expresses how such an environment is encountered, experienced, and perceived through cultural relationships.

A Visit to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park

Ben Garlick & Rachel Hunt

“Landscape” is a common term in discussions of human-environmental relations. But *what* is landscape?

To answer this question, let us consider the places thought of *as* landscapes. One example is the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP), near Wakefield, in northern England, UK. [You can visit it virtually here](#). The [Cambridge Dictionary](#) defines a ‘landscape’ as “a large area of countryside, usually one without many buildings or other things that are not natural; a view or picture of the countryside.” This place certainly fits the bill. Established in 1977 within the grounds of Bretton Hall – an eighteenth-century country estate – YSP showcases nearly 100 artworks amidst 500 acres of grass, woodland and lakeside (YSP, n.d.). Gazing across the estate, we can understand the landscape in different ways, from different cultural approaches, and as the following text will show you, expand the traditional dictionary definition offered above. These are certainly productive surroundings to consider the many, interwoven, meanings of landscape.

Leaving the car park, we encounter the parkland arranged before us as a typical rural scene: grassy slopes gently lead down to a ribbon of water framed by trees; the form of the stately house pokes through, breaking up the view. A picturesque sight indeed, it is Nature *as art* (Figure 1). But to talk about, and see, it in this way, reveals the ‘landscape’ not as a neutral “area of countryside” simple backdrop, but a cultural ideal or visual category, filled with specific meanings. Landscape here is what art critic John Berger (1972) termed a ‘way of seeing’ the world; and one locatable within a specific cultural-historic context. The rules of linear perspective and the many, many rural vistas found adorning gallery walls—not to mention calendars, postcards and social media—depict such views as desirable, and arranged for an observer to consume. In other words, such images, circulating throughout society, inform our evaluation of our physical surroundings in terms of the conventions of art.



Figure 1: A view across Bretton Hall estate, Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Photo by PJ Marriot. (cc)

However, cultural specificity is important. This way of seeing YSP owes a particular debt to *European* traditions of landscape painting. Depictions of the environment in Western art are different to those from other contexts, times, and places (for example, Chinese landscape painting). Thus, a visitors' ways of perceiving the landscape of YSP changes depending on their **positionality**. Gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic position all affect how it is understood. Personal and shared histories and subjectivities, alongside our lived experiences of landscapes and cultures elsewhere, inform these responses (Tolia-Kelly, 2010).

Of course, YSP's management have a vision for how the park's landscape *should* look, perhaps contrasting with that of other land-users, now or in the past. Their rules and regulations, not to mention wider cultural norms, produce a set of expectations for *how* we engage with and evaluate this place. Nevertheless, other ways of using and valuing the park, for example as a picnic spot rather than an open-air gallery, proliferate too. In this way, alongside a set of visual conventions, 'landscape' usefully characterises a bundle of rules, assumptions, or **discourses**; flowing from, and reinforcing, particular 'ways of seeing' to constitute practical, and particular, *cultures of landscape* (see Matless, 2014).

From our elevated vantage point, gazing across the sculpture-dotted parkland, it is appealing to consider landscape in purely visual terms. One may be tempted to view the scene as natural and timeless, exemplifying the myth of a bountiful, pastoral landscape where humans and land coexist harmoniously. But the landscape is also *more* than what is seen.

Through the centre of YSP runs a lake: excavated and dammed at one end in the mid-18th century on the behest of a wealthy landowner, fond of entertaining high-society guests with fireworks and mock-naval battles (YSP, n.d.). Today, visitors arrive from across Yorkshire (and beyond) to appreciate the variety of artworks, as well as relish the opportunities afforded to urban dwellers by a large green space. For YSP to function as an accessible visitor attraction, numerous volunteers and paid staff work to control entry, manage parking, guide guests, sell refreshments, combat growing vegetation, and repair eroding paths.

Consequently, embedded in this environment is the *labour* of generations, past and present, making and remaking the landscape what it is (see **social nature**). YSP is the outcome of these (often hidden) exertions, including complex histories of ownership, management, and purchase (see Olwig, 2016). Its present appearance, reflecting familiar aesthetic ideals of an ‘English country landscape’, is inseparable from the material, social and economic struggles—the *work*—producing it.

And lest we forget the sheep! Visual representations of the ‘rural’ often feature familiar animal icons: their expected, ‘natural’ inhabitants. But more than this, our *interactions* with such beings—as well as their own activities—also shape how landscapes are made and experienced. For some visitors, these grazing animals might add rural charm. For others, their skittish demeanour and faeces detract from an otherwise pleasant parkland. And, whilst their presence reflects active agricultural management (herding the flock and grazing as a strategy to keep vegetation in check), they also have a role in making this landscape what it is. Roaming the park on their own terms, sheltering from rain and sun, approaching, or fleeing visitors; such animal comings and goings are part of this landscape’s liveliness.

In addition to its **social construction**—whether through histories of art or working the land—YSP is *experienced*. Standing looking across the park affords a view of the land by virtue of the body’s senses and situation within its immediate surroundings. Light hits our optic nerve, which becomes images. We might feel a light breeze, the prickle of sunburn, a dull calf-ache from walking up the steep incline. We may even smell sheep poo, or a nearby picnic lunch. In this vein, landscapes are a gathering of such bodily sensations, each revealing the different ways in which the body interacts with its environment. Might YSP appear so inviting if one suffered sunstroke, or was soaked by a rainstorm? And what of those with differently abled bodies, navigating the grassy slopes on crutches, or negotiating sculptures via a visual impairment? Different bodies all play a part in creating the landscape we experience, and, consequently making the same landscape a different experience for others (Wylie, 2018).

We might appreciate the way in which the sculptures themselves texture such experiences (see Warren, 2012). Figure 2 depicts Henry Moore’s *Large Two Forms*, sat near the shore of the lake. Glinting in the sun, glistening in the rain, these bulky bronzes invite curiosity as their qualities change. Circling onlookers peer at them. The sculptures, in turn, reframe their surroundings, from different angles and in different ways for each visitor. The installation disrupts lines of sight, buffers wind,

deflects rain, refracts sound, and offers an arresting subject for photographs. Like the sheep, the sculptures are involved in an experience of landscape. They are both features of it, and active things making possible a particular appreciation of the environment.



Figure 2: Two Large Forms, Henry Moore. Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK. Image by Nigel Homer, geography.ork.uk.

And what of the other, less tangible forces captured by the term 'landscape'? After all, environmental experience is also shaped by emotions, feelings, sensations—what we might call **affects**—changing encounters in various ways that exceed an ability to adequately put them into words. Such affects come together to give landscapes an **atmospheres**—a 'vibe' or 'energy' associated with place (for example: the solemn quiet of a churchyard). For one of us, YSP holds personal significance as a site that *nearly* hosted a wedding proposal. On a late September afternoon, the park was a damp, drizzly place; anxiety swirled around the upcoming question. The ring clutched in the pocket; a sense of exposure being out in public. The atmosphere was all wrong. It didn't *feel* right.

So, *what* is landscape?

As YSP helps us understand, it is a great many things. Landscape names a construction of our cultural imaginations; the accumulated traces of overlapping labours; a domain of bodily experience; a field of material forces; and a space charged with feeling, memory and emotion. The sculpture park is simultaneously a particular physical environment that we encounter and perceive, and a site prompting all manner of conflicting questions about the ways that people understand and relate to such environments. If there is a common thread to landscape, it is a concern with how we encounter our surroundings; and the role played by the process, forces, and other beings (human or not) shaping that encounter. Landscape is no simple matter.

Discussion Questions:

1. Picture a 'landscape'—anywhere you associate with this term. What are some of the different ways in which your experience of this environment might be affected by your gender, race, ethnicity, cultural or socio-economic background? Can you think of any other aspects of your social identity that might shape how you experience this place?
2. Choose a piece of 'landscape art' and consider it as a story, told from a certain perspective. *What* is the story being told, *why*, by *whom*, for *what purpose*, and *to what effect*?
3. Working with a partner, picture a specific landscape you have visited recently in your mind, and describe to them any smells, textures, sounds, tastes, or emotions you associate with that scene. Your partner should then describe what they can 'see' based on these descriptions. Compare their response with the example you were thinking of. What might this tell us about how landscape is experienced by different people?

Video Resource:

Yorkshire Sculpture Park. An Introduction to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1w58UGpza6k>

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