

The Postmodern Poetics of Landscape and Its Literary Representation

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ABSTRACT

In the history of Western traditional aesthetics and art criticism, landscape has been regarded as an object gazed upon or a textual system deciphered from the perspective of the opposition between the subject and the object, existing in a static state. Postmodernism has brought a new paradigm shift in research, transitioning landscape studies from focusing on formal visuality to the research paths of semiotics and hermeneutics. It views landscape as a dynamic, transitional construct, a process of cultural practice that directly participates in an ecological revolution and the formation of a complex network of cultural, national, and political identities. The decoding of landscape as a utility of multiple cultural symbols has also led to an interdisciplinary combination with literature. Literary interpretation based on landscape strengthens the mediating function of landscape, primarily representing the interaction among landscape, power, nostalgia, and identity.

KEYWORDS

Landscape; Power; Nostalgia; Identity

1 Landscapes: Carriers of Cultural Practice

The concept of landscape is rich and diverse, and its connotations have undergone diachronic dynamic changes. In the West, from an etymological perspective, the word landscape did not appear until the fifteenth century. The English word "landscape" originated from the Dutch word "landscap," with "land" as its root, originally referring to "a piece of land seen from a single viewpoint." (Janfei Zhang, 112) Here, landscape is a place visually occupied, with humans as the subject and nature as the object, emphasizing the interaction between humans and nature. Moreover, this etymology illustrates the close yet distinct relationship between landscape and land. The connection between landscape and land stems from the idea that land is the most primitive element for humans and all cultures. Landscape is constructed based on land. The difference between the two lies in that, on the one hand, land is an objectively existing location, an external natural entity independent of humans. On the other hand, as a tangible property, land is finite, subject to material consumption over time, such as minerals, vegetation, water, and living space. However, landscape is a spiritual asset constructed by humans' visual systems with land as an aesthetic object, "as the antithesis of land, as an ideal estate quite independent of real estate, as a poetic property, in Emerson's phrase," (W.J.T. Mitchell, 15) such as related photography, postcards, and paintings. The landscapes that appeared in the fifteenth century mainly pertained to landscapes within works, mostly presented in the form of images. Before this, the areas depicted in works at most represented places where activities occurred, and landscape was viewed as an object for observation. Observation specifically means "the eyes explore the visual field and abstract from it

certain objects, points of focus, perspectives" (Yi-Fu Tuan, 10) Observation is objective; the mere sensory act of looking at natural objects does not include profound emotional experiences, and landscape is presented as the visual system's imitation of this objective counterpart in nature. After the fifteenth century, the presentation of landscape shifted from focusing on the content being presented, the depiction of nature, to emphasizing the methods and ways of presentation, how to view and think about the world. This marks a new turn in landscape studies under postmodernist thought, exploring not only what landscape is, but also its utility, and how it functions as a cultural practice.

"Postmodernism is an imagined historical social concept. Some theorists use it to refer to the post-industrial or information society that emerged after World War II, while others believe it is a new stage in the development of capitalism." (Xiangyu Liu, 261) Postmodernism began around the 1960s and is a cultural trend and its cultural representation that originated from postmodern society. The basic characteristics of postmodernism are " the collapse of grand narratives, the dissolution of the center and the periphery, the flattening of traditional historical sense and depth, and the clamor of multiple voices becoming a typical sign of postmodern cultural logic." (Xiangyu Liu, 273) The decentralization feature of the postmodernist trend deconstructs the notion of landscape as a natural scenery under formal visual effects. Instead, it views landscape and its representation as readable texts processed psychologically or ideologically, decoding landscape into many decisive symbols and textual systems using idealistic and skeptical interpretations to construct the natural, historical, semiotic, or literary characteristics of the landscape.

W.J.T. Mitchell, a renowned American landscape studies scholar, proposed that viewers could interpret the textual system of landscapes from three dimensions, including natural scenery, typical structures and forms, and various genres and narrative types. Natural scenery encompasses primal elements such as trees, stones, and water; typical structures and forms involve the external features of landscapes, such as elevated or enclosed sceneries; genres and narrative types include "the pastoral, the georgic, the exotic, the sublime, and the picturesque." (W.J.T. Mitchell, 2) Landscape, as a medium rich in cultural expression, connotating meaning and value and is represented in diverse ways. Through various media such as painting, sculpture, photography, theatrical scenes, writing, conversation, and music, the rich material properties of the landscape and its cultural significance and value are encoded. "Landscape may be represented by painting, drawing, or engraving; by photography, film, and theatrical scenery; by writing, speech, and presumably even music and other "sound images." (W.J.T. Mitchell, 14) The significance of landscape as a medium lies in its role in harmonizing the communication between human and non-human entities, primarily culture and nature or humans and nature, emphasizing that the relationship between humans and nature is no longer an antagonistic "subject-object" relationship but rather an intersubjective relationship of mutual interaction and influence. Landscape is not merely a natural reproduction of natural scenery but is imprinted and encoded on human sensory organs through the essential structure of nature itself. Landscape is not only an object of pleasure but also promotes the formation of human's awareness of "nature".

2 Landscape and Imperial power

The reproduction of landscapes is not merely a thin process constituted by "viewing" and "painting." It also involves the consciousness and psychological influences of humans as the main subjects, requiring the participation of the viewer in a conscious, ideological "class-based viewing." Additionally, the process of "painting" this reproduction is endowed with "cultural expression," making it a cultural practice activity. Landscapes are regarded as a concept or a practice of

reproduction that encompasses moral, ideological, and political discipline. They not only reproduce power relations but are also tools and means of cultural power. On the one hand, landscapes are closely related to domestic political, national, or class concepts. On the other hand, they are also closely associated with the discourse of imperialism. The relationship between landscapes and power makes them not only point to social class concepts but also reflect the value differences driven by economic forces. First, as symbolic representations of value, landscapes are a special commodity that can be used for exchange, possessing both cultural symbol and commodity value. Through the symbolic structure of exhibition and reproduction, they become objects of purchase and consumption. The value of landscapes can be expressed in a certain price, such as the value of green landscapes in real estate, the price of airfare to Iceland to view the Northern Lights, or cultural commodities like postcards of scenic spots. However, the viewing value of landscapes as commodities also conceals certain social relationships. One of the cultural media of landscapes, landscape painting, became an independent genre of painting with the rise of the bourgeoisie. In the 16th century Roman Empire, the development of the capitalist economy promoted the growth of the bourgeois class. Landscape paintings, which displayed bourgeois aesthetic tastes, gradually liberated themselves from secondary roles such as literary illustrations, religious enlightenment, and decorative paintings.

In medieval Europe, religious paintings were used by religion as a cultural medium to propagate religious doctrines, convey religious ideologies, and consolidate divine power. The emergence and development of landscape painting signified the shift of discourse power from religious group to bourgeois authority. The process of liberating the primary medium of landscape representation, landscape painting, is essentially a naturalization process—that is, the process of nature achieving liberation from the constraints of custom and gaining independence. The history of landscapes has undergone a transition, “progress from ancient to modern, from Christian to secular, from the mixed, subordinate, and impure landscape to the pure landscape seen for itself, from convention and artifice to the real and the natural.” (W.J.T. Mitchell, 17) The semiotic features of the discourse on the naturalness of landscapes are imbued with power relations and can serve as tools for constructing imperialist discourse. Colonial landscapes are a spatial manifestation of imperialist discourse.

Imperialist discourse imagines itself as the expansion of landscapes, projecting the empire’s civilization and culture as a natural process of expansion into natural spaces. The expansion of imperialist colonization is not limited to the empire’s external territories but also exists within the empire’s internal colonization. After the invasion and exploitation of rural areas, the empire transforms rural spaces and lands into colonial landscapes. In the imperial perspective, the remoteness and natural scenery of rural areas align with the standards of landscape naturalness. Under the imperial gaze, landscapes are seen as the naturalistic representation of nature, with the empire’s imagination of the rural naturalness and primitivity imbued with power. The interaction between landscapes and imperialist discourse is reflected in two aspects. First, landscapes serve as tools for imperial expansion and planning. Second, landscapes possess anti-imperialist and nationalist cultural connotations. “Imperialism is not a simple, singular, and homogeneous phenomenon, but a complex system involving cultural, political, and economic expansion and control, which varies with specific places, peoples, and historical moments. Imperialism is also not a one-way phenomenon but a complex process filled with exchange, interchange, and contradictions.” (W.J.T. Mitchell, 9) Landscapes not only reproduce the characteristics of the empire and the traces of successful domination over a place but also depict the traces of resistance by the colonial peoples both internally and externally.

The landscape history of New Zealand showcases the process of cultural colonization, cultural affiliation, nationalist resistance, and the realization of national independence. As a former British

colony, New Zealand's utopian natural landscapes aligned with Europe's pastoral vision. The empire reproduced the European landscape tradition in New Zealand, and the idyllic natural beauty of New Zealand's landscapes under the imperial gaze highlighted the empire's rationalization of land conquest and landscape hegemony. However, the traces of violence and struggle left in the colonial landscapes also indicated the conflicts and divisions between indigenous cultures and imperial traditions. A close reading of colonial landscapes reveals the confrontation between the passively viewed scenery and the gazing eyes, reflecting the resistance of indigenous cultures against imperialist traditions. The struggle between gaze and counter-gaze in colonial landscapes is essentially a contest over the ownership of landscapes, which are no longer seen as mere aesthetic objects. Landscapes must be "the focus of a historical, political, and (yes) aesthetic alertness to the violence and evil written on the land, projected there by the gazing eye." (W.J.T. Mitchell, 29) Colonial landscapes are also cultural media, a battleground for the cultural, political, and economic discourses of imperialism and nationalism. The process of naturalizing New Zealand's landscapes is an imperialist power discourse that implements landscape hegemony, blurring the lines between imperial traditions and indigenous cultures while masking the ecological impact of natural exploitation with the beautiful lie of pastoral idyll. The violence remaining on New Zealand's land reflects the conscious resistance of the colonies against imperial disciplinary discourse. In the empire's landscapes, landscapes are spaces for cultural activity practices, devoid of pure natural scenery.

Above all, when it deals with the imperial landscape, it is worth noting that "An account of the "power" of landscape or of the medium in which it is represented is not to be had simply by reading it as a representation of power relations or as a trace of the power relations that influenced its production. One must pay attention to the specificity of effects and to the kinds of spectatorial work solicited by a medium at a particular historical juncture." (W.J.T. Mitchell, 3) Landscape as a special cultural medium, which makes differentiated impact on the expression or construction of power relations. Therefore, on the one hand, the landscape as the cultural medium should be put in the specific social and historical context. On the other hand, it is also of importance to differentiating its effects from other medium when exploring the relation between landscape and power.

3 Landscapes and Nostalgia

As the cultural practice of ideology, landscapes form a reciprocal relationship with the nostalgic emotions depicted in literature. The English word "nostalgia" derives from two Greek words, "nostos" and "algia", meaning " (from nostos-return home, and algia-longing) a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy." (Svetlana Boym XIII) The generation of nostalgic emotions is closely related to the transformation between place and landscape. "Landscape referred to a portion of the earth's surface that can be viewed from one spot (Cosgrove, 1984, Jackson, 1997). It combined a focus on the material topography of a portion of land (that which can be seen) with the notion of vision (the way it is seen). Landscape is an intensely visual idea. In most definitions of landscape the viewer is outside of it. This is the primary way in which it differs from place." (Tim Cresswell, 36) The primary difference between landscape and place lies in the positional relationship between locations and people within the field. The contradiction and opposition between landscape and place are not irreconcilable; they can be mutually transformed.

Renowned human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan discusses the conditions for the transformation between landscape and place using Raymond Williams' novel *Border Country* as an example. When the novel's protagonist, Matthew Price, returns to his childhood hometown after studying abroad

for many years, he forgets the details of living in his hometown, which are crucial elements of place. The images that flash through his mind are referred to as landscape. This creates a divergence between the hometown as a viewed landscape and as a lived and perceived place. However, after Matthew stays in his hometown for a while and integrates everything about his hometown into his daily routine, the hometown shifts from an outside landscape to an inside place. Regarding the dimension of hometown or home, landscape is the physical land for viewing, while place is the space for living. Nostalgia reflects the intertwining and alternation of the connotations of hometown over time. Under the nostalgic perspective, the hometown presents a diachronic process, transforming from a lived place into a landscape processed by consciousness over the flow of time.

"In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition." (Svetlana Boym XV) Nostalgia signifies resistance to the irreversible nature of time, transforming places where humans once lived into imagined landscapes. Therefore, in nostalgia, the significant contrast between the actual homeland and the imagined landscape often manifests as an emotional bond and critical thinking. This type of nostalgia is presented through individual or collective memory. Nostalgia is divided into restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia, in the form of collective memory such as collective imagery and oral culture, aims to rebuild the homeland and recall the nation's past. Reflective nostalgia, through individual memory such as personal narratives, lingers in the traces of time and history to reminisce and critique the homeland. Restorative nostalgia, with its emotional attachment to traditional landscapes—the past homeland—resists the modernization process on a spatial level. However, such collective memory also has many drawbacks. On the one hand, individuals can easily form idealized interpretations of traditional landscapes. On the other hand, the exclusivism that often accompanies nostalgia can lead to unreasonable interpretations of the current homeland. Both tendencies ultimately result in the distortion and misreading of history.

Raymond Williams' book *The Country and the City* delves deeply into the drawbacks of nostalgic thinking in the context of the relationship between the countryside and towns. Nostalgia for traditional rural landscapes was once the dominant view in British society and literature. This nostalgic pastoral tradition believed that pre-industrial and pre-urbanized British countryside exemplified a natural, moral, and idyllic lifestyle, and thus criticized the destruction of the countryside's tranquility, innocence, and abundance brought about by capitalist development. This nostalgic tradition that placed the countryside and towns in binary opposition actually masked and romanticized the feudal order behind traditional landscapes.

The natural economy practiced in the countryside was a tool for oppression by the landowning class and feudal society, and it was a system of brutal exploitation. "Under this system, people and land alike were considered property; most people were reduced to laboring animals, forced into tribute, forced labor, or bought and sold like livestock. Of course, the lower classes were also 'protected,' but only as the property of noble landlords, so they could provide more labor and produce more food, which was a form of thorough physical and economic control." (Raymond Williams 4-5) Under the operation of the rural natural economy, ordinary people without means of production could only become objects of oppression by the feudal propertied class, losing their physical freedom and personal dignity. Therefore, according to the materialist conception of history, the economic base determines the superstructure. The countryside and towns do not have the binary opposition relationship upheld by nostalgic traditions, but rather an interconnected, continuous relationship, where one leads to and evolves from the other.

The natural economy of the countryside harbors the exploitation and domination of people and

nature by the landowning class, while the capitalist economy that supports the functioning of cities reflects the control and oppression of the proletariat by capital, ultimately manifesting as profit. Essentially, both economic models demonstrate the exploitation and oppression of the proletariat by the power discourse under the control of the means of production. Furthermore, there is a certain continuity in the roles of the ruling classes within these two economic models. As the British feudal order declined, many members of the landowning class underwent identity transformations, "extensively engaging in various commercial activities, living off profits from rent and capital investments, gradually evolving into new-style capitalist landlords." (Raymond Williams 5) Therefore, many capitalists were formerly the ruling landowners of the agricultural economy, indicating a connection between the natural economy and the capitalist economy. The countryside and towns are not opposites. Nostalgic feelings for traditional rural landscapes, although cloaked in opposition to the capitalist monetary order and carrying humanitarian sentiments, idealize the pre-capitalist world.

Secondly, the exclusivism that accompanies nostalgic emotions resists urban and industrial civilization. The industrial civilization catalyzed by large-scale machinery invades the countryside, eroding and dismantling traditional natural landscapes, and destroying the collective memories formed by rural communities. Additionally, the growing wealth gap between the countryside and cities has escalated from a domestic issue to a global concern, becoming a worldwide pattern. The adverse consequences include global food and population crises. The destruction of rural landscapes and the excessive plundering of resources by industrial civilization have brought about a profound and comprehensive crisis. Although industrial civilization has caused ecological damage through a form of systemic, covert violence, cities and the countryside, as carriers of all human civilizational information, are interdependent and closely connected.

Industrial civilization has brought high productivity and progress in rural modernization, driving the development of the rural economy. The lifestyle and value structures of urban civilization have also injected vitality into rural life. The countryside, as a bearer of history, has witnessed the historical transformation from agricultural civilization to industrial civilization and further towards ecological civilization. Additionally, the abundant material resources of the countryside provide material support for the development of urban civilization. Therefore, urban and rural civilizations are not in a contradictory and oppositional relationship but rather have an equal and interdependent relationship. Exclusivism is an irrational perspective that views urban civilization as the other to rural landscapes, placing it in opposition. The concept of ecological civilization, a new development approach, reconciles the polarized relationship between urban and rural areas under nostalgic emotions, advocating for an ecological balance that coordinates the conflicts between them.

4 Landscape and Identity

Landscapes, as carriers of cultural significance, are crucial venues for the formation of cultural identity. People shape group identity through a series of landscape-related activities, such as reading, watching films, sightseeing, and appreciating landscape paintings. Shared interests and tastes place people within specific cultural communities, fostering shared identity and emotions among acquaintances and within the broader cultural collective, thereby helping to form new identities. The Picturesque is a landscape aesthetic concept that includes two important aesthetic notions: the Beautiful and the Sublime. The Beautiful refers to perceivable landscapes with boundaries, "those cultivated, smooth, quiet, and harmoniously varied gradations." (Darby, 53) The Sublime refers to feelings of awe and eternal ideas inspired by the infinity of landscapes, "those wild,

rugged, unimaginable, vast, and boundless landscapes." (Darby, 53) Thus, "regulated nature is beautiful, while wild nature is sublime." (Darby, 53) The prevalence of the Picturesque made landscapes culturally valuable commodities, presented through mediums like art, poetry, and literature, and eventually became a way to distinguish social and class differences. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Agrarian movement in the United States shaped cultural identity by praising the agricultural landscapes of the Old South. They constructed a literary group that revered the Old South's landscape, including its agricultural lifestyle and traditional values, through organizing poetic gatherings, reading poems, publishing the small magazine *The Fugitive*, and writing articles. This helped shape the cultural identity of a specific group.

After World War I, the capitalist machine-driven large-scale industry dismantled the traditional plantation economy of the South, plunging the region into hardship. The destruction of the traditional agricultural lifestyle not only dismantled the Old South's farming economy but also led to a crisis of identity and survival confusion for Southerners. In the Agrarians' collective memory of the Old South landscape, "the Old South is an agricultural society with stable religious faith and class structure, valuing community bonds and family relationships, a harmonious and orderly ideal home where people coexist peacefully with nature and the community." (Jinjin Wu, 22) The agrarian lifestyle and values of the Old South, refined over time, became cultural imprints for the Agrarian group. For Southerners facing an identity crisis during a period of intense social transformation, the Old South landscape reinforced a sense of belonging brought by their collective cultural identity.

Secondly, landscapes are also an important path for the reconstruction of cultural nationalism. The combination of landscapes and nationhood holds profound metaphorical and ideological power because "the essence or character of a national culture develops a more lasting connection with the essence or character of its inhabited region." (Darby, 85) The way to maintain this enduring connection between nation and landscape is through the use of native language or mother tongue, as language is a rich carrier of national culture and memory. The link between landscape and language is preserved through the memory and isolation of place names. The Lake Poets of the British Romantic period are a typical example of this. They were praised as "poets of nature" or "landscape painters," integrating the cultural aspirations of the nation into their poetry about the Lake District landscape. British Romanticism emerged during the Industrial Revolution, "tending to oppose the central British state and its institutions, focusing on class, social change, natural religion, regional and national pride, and world revolution." (Darby, 87) Romanticism was born in an era of rising bourgeois movements and national liberation movements. Politically, it criticized feudal monarchical despotism and capitalist exploitation and oppression; artistically, it opposed the rigid and formulaic norms of classical creation. However, the Lake Poets maintained a dialectical view of the technological industry under bourgeois rule. They believed that the scientific understanding of nature did not diminish its beauty. They resisted the cold rationalist ideology behind science. Thus, they used the landscape of the Lake District as a powerful cultural symbol. Through their poetic praise of natural scenery, they advocated for the beauty of nature, opposed technological rationalism, and incorporated the cultural concepts of the local, national, and natural community into their poetry. By imitating the natural landscape of the lakes, the Lake Poets projected the consciousness of the cultural national community into their poetic creations.

Moreover, landscapes are a category laden with political significance, and the representation of landscapes is a mode of expressing political discourse, often manifesting as national ideology and class identity. The composition of landscapes is closely related to specific ideological contexts. By reproducing the history of ideologies related to particular places, we can better understand landscapes and the political discourses they carry. For example, the western landscape, frontiers and wilderness, during the *American Westward Expansion* were not merely scenic natural views but were closely tied to national identity. *The Westward Expansion* began in the late 18th century, when the

United States had achieved national independence and started the historical process of expanding and conquering territory from east to west. The western landscapes of this time, frontiers and wilderness, were symbols of the American spirit, representing ideals of freedom, equality, competition, adventure, innovation, and pioneering, which were crucial in shaping American national identity.

Additionally, landscapes often become mediums for constructing class identity. Starting from the 1820s, the urban middle class in Britain “regarded the tranquil farmland as synonymous with national identity,” and they idealized the myth of rural England. During this period, a large number of oil paintings and literary works emerged to reproduce the rural landscapes of England, aiming to reinforce the vision of harmonious coexistence between the middle class and farmers. In reality, the middle class used the myth and beautification of rural landscapes to obscure the deep political characteristics behind agricultural capitalism—escaping the industrial civilization of the city and returning to the countryside to exploit nature and people through agricultural capitalism.

5 Conclusion

From the perspective of postmodernism, landscapes are not merely static objects of natural aesthetic models used to confirm the viewer's subjectivity. Instead, they are dynamic practices involving the viewer's psychology or ideology, breaking down the binary oppositions of self-other, viewer-viewed, and audience-spectacle. Landscapes can be decoded as texts with multiple symbols and meanings. They shift from being vague visual objects to readable metaphors. As cultural media, landscapes have a dual role, “it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes the representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site.” (W. J. T. Mitchell, 2) The utility of landscapes reflects the intersubjective process of interaction between the viewer and the landscape, where both landscape and environment shape each other, and the reconstructed states of both are naturalized. In recent years, the cultural turn in landscape studies has made landscapes a focal point in literary research and has invigorated their potential cultural vitality. Critical landscape aesthetics in literature encompass colonial literature, nostalgic literature, and travel literature.

As a cultural practice, landscapes signify and symbolize power relations, serving as tools and means of cultural power. They manifest geographically as imperial colonial expansion and discipline, as well as the conscious resistance of colonized peoples, and as a battleground for the gaze and counter-gaze between colonial and indigenous cultures. Additionally, landscapes act as cultural media that carry nostalgic emotions and historical significance, bridging the past and the present. Nostalgia for the homeland landscape contains a certain humanitarian sentiment and collective consciousness but also signifies rebellion against the irreversibility of time and can distort historical facts. At the same time, landscapes, as carriers embedded with cultural meanings, are essential paths for individuals seeking identity recognition, including shaping cultural, national, and political identities.

Overall, “Landscape is a medium not only for expressing value but also for expressing meaning, for communication between persons—most radically, for communication between the Human and the non-Human.” (W. J. T. Mitchell, 15) Landscape can be deciphered from the above-mentioned three aspects, power, nostalgia, and identity when it is related to the literature. From the perspective of art, the natural landscape is transformed from objective sceneries to the imaginative space imbued with human's emotion and recognition. In return, landscape also plays an essential role in activating human's emotion. Landscapes “inspired us with curiosity and awe. They have been

objects of delight. We have recreated them in our imaginations to reflect our moods. And we have come to think of them as contributing to an idea which we have called nature. Its rise and development since the middle ages is part of a cycle in which the human spirit attempted once more to create a harmony with its environment.” (W. J. T. Mitchell, 6)

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