

## Seeing it through? Visual markings as earth writing

Päivi Kymäläinen  
University of Oulu, Department of Geography

**Abstract.** Cultural marks in the environment imply how the symbolic and real, and the absent and present are linked in our readings of the environment. The relations between these can also be expressed while writing places: while making them present with some mode of showing or telling. Although verbally written places are often considered to be primary, visual marks write places as well. In the interpretation of images, there has been the illusion of truthfulness and transparency. This insight has, however, been challenged while paying attention to the intertextual relations and differing contexts which are needed for texts to signify. This article deals with textual interpretation of the environment, and the current issues of visual culture in cultural geography.

### Capturing the instant

*“So, have on hand a notebook, a bit of paper, and capture the rapid traces of the instant. That the past which arrives at full speed will engulf in a few minutes. What has just happened will perish. Strange and exultant encounter of the quick and its end. One moves ahead while leaving behind. Human destiny: to be flesh of forgetting. And to have no more vivacious desire than to wrest one’s prey from forgetfulness, to keep the passing in the present” (Cixous 1998: 146).*

It is one of the major questions in geography, how the world is present and presented to us in writing. How places are marked and signified in texts. Since the signs cannot be the same as the world, the writing can only try to capture some parts of the world. Thus, in our environments, there remain cultural traits that cannot be put into the

fixed concepts and descriptions of geography. Differing ways of writing and describing are needed in order to discuss these matters. With a notebook in my pocket I will move ahead, to the mixing of geographical concepts and visual expressions of places. Some rapid changes of particular places and times will be captured; some of them with words, and some of them through visual means. And yet, something will be left untouched, since all I can eventually present is only my own reading of these instants and the texts that try to capture them.

Especially those geographers who are interested in the unseen features of places, have reflected on the limits of one’s writing. This interest in the unseen features shows itself in the unwillingness to restrict one’s subject matters to that what is seen, and what is thus relatively easily translated into descriptions and classifications. Perhaps



it could be said that while digging oneself into the depths of culture, one ends up beneath topography – beneath some kind of ‘surface’ descriptions. The word “beneath” is used here intentionally instead of such expressions as “beyond” or “after”. “Beneath” will probably illustrate better how different ways of textualising places do not exclude each other. Thereby, emphasising the unseen culture does not mean that writing would be somehow ‘beyond’ description and seen traits, would erase them, or would come ‘after’ them. Places are rather made present in differing forms that do not replace each other or cannot be put into a hierarchical order.

The multiplicity of writing places imply that places are never presented as such, but some traces and cultural marks are always added to them while writing. This multifaceted nature of expressions is one reason why the discussion of the limits of writing continues to be an inseparable part of geographical thinking. These discussions have not offered – and will not offer – any simple answers to these questions of describing places. The question is not merely of writing strategies, but also the rearrangements and politicisation of places as they are reproduced in writing (cf. Lindroos 1998: 128-129). The context in which writing happens, is far more complex than what it first appears to be.

### **The illusion of transparency**

It may at a first glance seem paradoxical that I am approaching the unseen cultural traits of places with highly visual means: with images. A closer consideration, however, reveals that this wonder is without cause. As well as there is not a self-possessed and authentic culture out there simply wait-

ing to be expressed, neither is the ideology of transparency in the visual modes of writing any more unproblematically accepted (Burgin 1996: 8). In the mimetic theories of representation, the image began to function as ‘a window on the world’ (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996: 17), or as a mirror of reality. Today that mirror has shattered, and its fragments that are perpetually in motion, reflect nothing reassuring (Burgin 1996: 120). Thus, the photographs of places are not merely pictures of reality, but their subtexts, intertextual relations, and contexts make them more contested writings.

On the one hand, the photograph is a document of a single moment, containing historical documentary power. This position still connects the photograph to the idea of the ‘real’, since the spatial and the temporal accuracy of the photograph creates the illusion of truthfulness and transparency. On the other hand, as something in the place is reproduced, and when it is thus isolated from its original context, the decontextualisation provides other meanings for it (Lindroos 1998: 126-127). That is to say, as places are represented, there are another contexts in which they are read and indirectly experienced, and thus also the interpretations and readings of these places will differ from the ‘original’ or ‘genuine’ experiences. This necessarily leads to the impossibility for meanings to remain the same independent of the context. The meanings do not appear directly from a text, but some intertextual relations are needed in order for the text to signify. This has been grasped by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996: 32), who have illustrated that the myth of transparency in visual communication is indeed a myth. They have paid attention to the ‘stylised’ arts of other cultures, and how



we may experience these arts as ‘decorative’, ‘exotic’, ‘mysterious’, or ‘beautiful’, but we cannot understand them as communication, as forms of writing unless we are, or become, members of these cultures’ signification. There will be disruptions in the signification processes of texts, if the ability to read and understand visual marks is incomplete. It is important to notice some kind of context-sensitivity in the studies of visual culture, because meanings derive from a broader cultural context beyond the frame of the image. Not only the image is important, but also that which both temporally and spatially surrounds it (Barthes 1984; Burgin 1996: 60).

Along with this sort of context-sensitivity, the topographical idea of texts as merely describing and representing places is problematised, and more multiple interpretations are needed. Photographs are not just pictures of reality, but something that has to be put into their contexts. The interpretation does not end up to the frames of pictures, but also both that which has been before that particular captured moment, and what comes after that, become relevant. There is not only a text (an image) that would tell about the truth, but the process of signification has intertextual traits, as the reading of the particular text is connected to other texts and meanings.

The following photographs (fig. 1, 2 & 3) in this article would already, in themselves, without any verbal interpretations, tell a lot. In these photographs, the symbolic, the real, the imagined, and the absent / present are mixed. In addition to our assumption that the photographs would show us a true visual image of a particular moment in space and time, they also do something else: they make one to remark on the processes in which the events of spaces are happening,

and the conditions in which places are performed. In a way, different layers of signification and their relations to each other are operating here. The assumptions of the real and present are mixed with the imagined and absent, and the intertextual links to other texts, meanings, and contexts are noticed. And yet, something in writing is also hopefully left open for other meanings.

### Visually marked landscapes

Textual approaches imply that environments are signified not only by that which is present for us at a particular moment, but also by that which is absent, but made present for us textually or by imagination. It has recently been argued (e.g. Lehtonen 2001) that fiction has an increasing significance in piecing together factual states of affairs. That which is present here and now is increasingly defined by that which cannot be directly sensed, and which can be thought of merely through imagination. In order to understand places, one has to relate the present in a particular place and particular time to the past, and also to the presences of other places. Thereby, the place is multitudinously defined by that which cannot be perceived for spatial or temporal reasons (Lehtonen 2001: 208).

In the still images and framed landscapes of this article, there are some visible traces of signifying practices of the environment. These pictures are representations of representations; or images of images. In these photographs, there is already a double translation from the ‘original’. And as I, moreover, interpret the images here verbally, and you read this and make your own interpretations, the place will be further translated several times both verbally and visually.

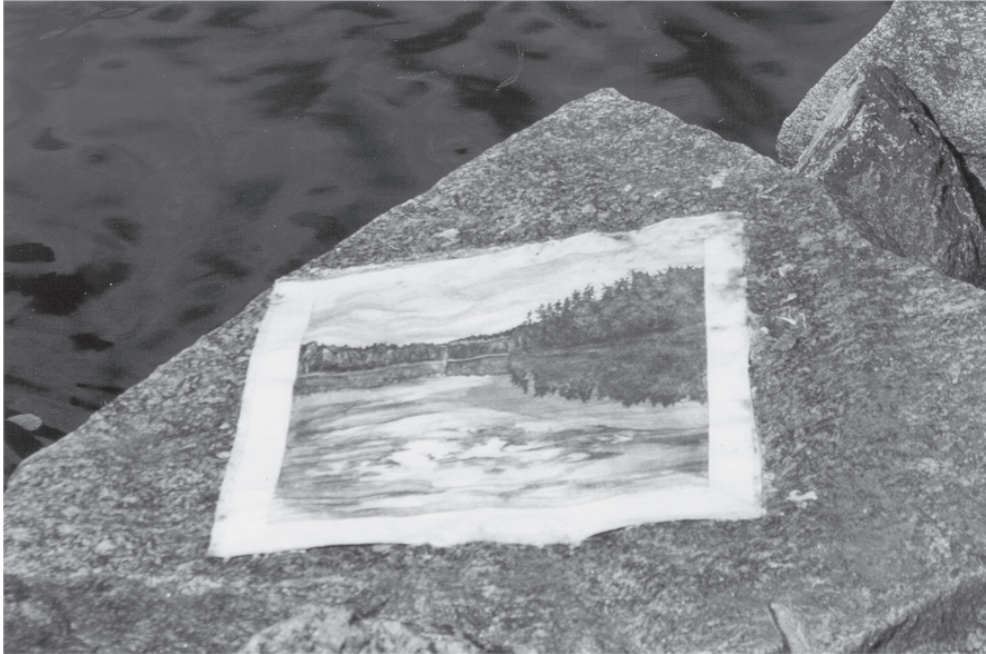


Figure 1. Tiina Salmi's "Maisemat" ("Landscapes") in the environmental art exhibition "Exterus", Lahti, Finland, 1999. (All photos by author.)

The first picture (fig. 1) is an image of an image in the environment. It represents a part of Tiina Salmi's work of art "Maisemat" ("Landscapes"), which belonged to the environmental art exhibition "Exterus" ("exter" and "exterus" meaning "on the outside" or "outward") that dealt with time and gaze. In connection with some of her exhibitions, Salmi has told that her starting point is to look at the environment from close, because this kind of looking is more intimate. Also Salmi's works of environmental art are marks in the landscape, since they mark visually certain points in the environment with their hints of meanings. They may make visible something that is usually merely in the background of impressions, and affect less visibly by being in our minds and in cultural ways of under-

standing. In Salmi's "Landscapes" the images of Finland's national landscapes are united to the actual hardness of the stones at a lakeshore. There are four pictures of the ideal Finnish landscapes with lakes and forests attached to four big stones in the environment. These pictures are images of such landscapes that are often understood as being somehow original and authentic; something that belongs to Finnish culture and to the mental images of people.

The pictures at the stones give tips of the frames inside which our interpretations of landscapes are easily situated. As the intertextuality of the environment is made more visible with these images at the stones, one perhaps becomes more aware of the process of signification that happens every time one understands something of his/her en-

vironment. This process thus becomes more real and more present for a reader of the environment. If these cultural meanings are not consciously shown in physical urban spaces – as has been done in this case with the means of environmental art – they would be visually absent, but still affecting the ways in which these landscapes would be read.

The value of using these kinds of pieces of art in examining places and their writing, is perhaps in that they often present the world in unconventional ways. By performing radical experiments, by going outside limits, and by refusing accepted categories, artists have been able to also bring up the conservative in interpretations. In other words, by overlapping boundaries, they have been able to show the norm(al) (cf. Olsson 1991: 111); the normative assumptions of how things ought to be. Could this, on some occasions, also work the other way around? It seems so, at least in this example, in which the conventional and norm(al) are made visible in the pictures at the stones at a moment of signification of both the landscape and the work of art. Salmi's pictures imply how the actual landscape in which these pictures have been put, are probably seen, watched, and interpreted. Landscapes are preformed in them, since they tell how this kind of a landscape is usually repeated as it is re-told, re-folded, and re-interpreted. In the pictures, there are not merely landscapes, but also the way in which they are seen. These pictures in a way foresee the forthcoming interpretation of a particular landscape. They perhaps also make one to think why this interpretation is so obvious and foreseeable? As the apparentness of the cultural ways of understanding and seeing is coming across in these pictures, also the process of signifi-

cation of the environment becomes more clearly present. The significations do not appear from nothing, but everything is already in some way or another textualised: brought into the culture, and into its meanings and relations.

The textualising of this piece of art means that it is caught within a network of differences and references that give it a textual structure (cf. Derrida 1994: 15). Differences and intertextual references connect Salmi's "Landscapes" to particular cultural discourses. Thus, "Landscapes" is not merely a work of art, but with its contexts and discourses it tells about our ways of understanding the environment. One trait in its context is that this work of art is meant to be "exterus" – on the outside. Thereby it is necessarily already in an intertextual relationship with its surrounding environment and the discourses through which that environment is signified. One of these discourses is the one of ideal national landscapes, which is reinforced in the work itself in the form of the images. If following the ideas of Jacques Derrida (1976: 159) and stating that there is not anything outside the text, or outside the context, every environment would then be seen – as in the above interpretation – as already textualised: marked by signifying practices and processes. Texts do not thus refer only to some physical embodiments that could be called texts; like books, pictures, pieces of art, and so on. Moreover, their understanding is diversified as the understanding of texts is also extended to signifying practices.

Although Salmi's landscapes are visual representations of the ideal landscape, the context in which they are presented, makes interpretations more diverse. The symbolic is needed in order to express anything of 'the real' – and yet, the symbolic cannot be



Figure 2. Translating The Branderburg Gate into an image. Berlin, Germany, 2002.

straightforwardly read from the text. Rather, it suggests some traces of signification that can in differing contexts be re-interpreted.

### “Bild”: A picture of reality?

“Bild”, says the landscape – not with some discreet tips that could be sensitively ‘read’ from the landscape (fig. 2). Instead of that, there is a pure fact that can actually, in a traditional sense, be read from the landscape.

Into the picture of figure 2 a moment has been captured at which the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin has really been transformed into an image. It is no longer an image merely in the minds of people, but also an image in a traditional sense; it is physically there to be touched and otherwise sensed. Through it can also be passed

by, since the real gate is in fact in-between the lines of the image. If the symbolic is often sought for from in-betweens, this time it is rather the other way around: the real has to be looked for from in-between the image.

The assumption of the transparency of the visual images would in this case assume a twofold transparency. First, as the actual gate is transmitted into the fabric, and, second, as the fabric has been captured on my film. These kinds of perfect translations are not, however, here assumed. The relation between ‘the real’ and its image is a more complicated issue, and it works in both directions. For instance, “das Bild” does not necessarily distort one’s experience of the ‘real’ Brandenburg Gate – or at least it depends on how intimately the gate is experi-



enced. Straight stretches in the wide streets nearby already allow some flashes of the gate to be seen from far away. If there is no foreknowledge that the gate has been replaced by the image, the view still matches with the expected image in one's mind. That continues until the picture is clearer, and advertisements hanging from the gate bring about a rupture in the before-image. Also the unsymmetrical pillars reinforce the impression that something is not right; the way it is supposed to be. There appears a gap in what is seen and what is expected to be seen. The expected, normative experience has been disturbed. One has to be quite close to see that the pillars are actually forming a word – that later one is revealed to be “Bild”: “a picture”, “an image”, “a view” / “a scene”. A real, authentic gate has been replaced by its image.

In this case, before knowing that the image had replaced the authentic gate, sensing from different scales determined when the real was transformed into its image. Is the gate the real one as long as one does not know that it has been changed into a picture? From a distance, the experience of the “Bild” could be like any other, earlier experience of the Branderburg Gate. Only when sensed from close up, it ceases to be that. Not until the proximity is achieved – when seen clearly, when being able to interpret the marks in the picture, and to touch the fabric – the real becomes unreal, a copy. Despite the fact that the real is not available and there to be experienced, the place becomes perhaps more present than it would have come otherwise – if the expected experience was available.

The understanding of these kinds of different subtleties and possibilities of textual interpretation are important in today's cultural geography, since multiple meanings

and the domination of texts and visual culture are a part of today's meditated landscapes. What is interesting in these images of images, and representations of representations from a cultural geographer's point of view, is how these textualised environments are brought into the discussions of cultural geography. Postmodern and poststructural approaches have made cultural geographers more aware of the process of signification that is happening in the environment. In addition, the difficulty in putting this movement of meanings into the fixed ways of explaining and describing has been noticed. With these I refer, first of all, to what in visual studies have been called ‘still images’ (e.g. Barthes 1984) – meaning photographs and other such images in which both space and time are frozen into one image. Secondly, the still ways of describing here also refer to the fixed language of science, in which concepts and theories are mainly describing something that is assumed to stand still, and which can thus be observed and explained without the dilemma of continuous movement of meanings.

Different modes of media are side by side, parallel with each other, and effect each other's contents and borders. Thus, if texts are multimodal – if their meanings are realised through more than one semiotic code (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996: 183) – reading them is a complex activity, since the reader has to pay attention to different modes in which the marks are created (Lehtonen 2001: 201, 207). Each medium has, however, its own possibilities and limitations of meaning. For example multimodal texts using both images and writing may carry many different meanings, since not everything that can be realized in verbal language, can also be realized by means of images, and vice versa (Kress & van Leeu-



wen 1996: 17). For example, fixed images lack much of the possibilities of showing movement that is more easily expressed in such modes of media as hypertexts or films. Thus, in the context-sensitive interpretation of images, one could keep in mind what has spatially and temporally existed before the picture has been taken, and what will further come after the shot. As the absent has to be imagined, the obscurity of the line between the imagined and the real becomes more evident in reading.

### Only tips of the worlds

*“Take the living instant with the closest and the most delicate words. Without words as witnesses the instant (will not have been) is not. I do not write to keep. I write to feel. I write to touch the body of the instant with the tips of the words” (Cixous 1998: 146).*

Writings, whether verbal or pictorial, do not signify merely with their marks, but also with the impressions, traces, and feelings that they leave for their reader. Writings do not so much tell about the reality, but they rather give tips for signification that can further develop in intertextual interpretations and relations. As Burgin (1996: 21-22) argues, contemporary visual culture can no longer be seen as simply reflecting or communicating the world; it contributes to the making of this world.

In the pictures presented here, it is somehow more distinct than in randomly taken pictures from urban environments, that the interpretation of the image does not end at the point at which the question of representing has been grasped. Something more is needed in order for the pictures to become meaningful. And in order to find that something, the frames of pictures can-

not set the limit for interpretation. Images express the culturally coloured ways of seeing the world. Rather than in the frames of the picture, their signification is stopped at the limits of culture, and of understanding. Since photographs are still images, the absent and the imagined has to come along in order the process of signification can occur. Lindroos (1998: 128) writes that since the position of a reader of an image is at the crossroads of the past and present, s/he gains a position in the midst of events. A photograph thus appears as a document of the temporal and spatial distance between the original moment when it was taken, and every present moment in which it is seen.

These sorts of questions of visual culture are important in cultural geography, since the aesthetics of the materials used in geographical research have changed. That has also meant changes in the politics of geographical practice: in framing what is considered as geographical. The emphasis on visual culture is not new in geography, since perception, observation, and describing have largely happened under visual conditions. The change is more likely to be seen in the possibilities of multiple pathways in moving pictures, fragmented narratives, and hypertexts, in which places are textualised in differing ways. While places are more likely with these kinds of materials to be interpreted as processes of continuing signification, they also demand methods of becoming instead of the methods of being. Thus also the politics of geographical practice is about to change, since the lines between what is said and unsaid, or showed and hidden will become more obscure. As the sensitivity to the context, and the process-like nature of the signification are taken into account, the ideology





Figure 3. Colin Pearce's "See it Through" in the environmental art exhibition "Exterus", Lahti, Finland, 1999.

of the transparency in pictorial expression is at the same time challenged. One has to jump across the frames of marks and descriptions in order to understand these processes. Therefore, places are not some-

thing that could be seen through the frames of signifying words and images (fig. 3), but the seeing – or rather feeling – leaps into other texts and contexts in relation to which places are written.

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