

# The Road to Naivasha



We went on a weekend trip from Nairobi to Naivasha in Kenya. Naivasha lies about one hour drive north of Nairobi, at the bottom of the Great Rift Valley. The Great Rift Valley is an immense geological trench which reaches from Israel to Mozambique that was formed by the splitting of the African continental plate into two separate plates. Look down into this monstrous valley, formed by geomorphic forces, is a very special sight. But before I even got a glimpse of the valley I was astonished by something else. The road up to the edge of the valley is flanked by vast forests of conifer trees.

Just after Kijabe town I saw thick, tall and straight trees with high dark green crowns, emerge in the morning fog. The low sun tried to force its light through their dense mass in vain, all we were left with was an atmospheric brightness as the morning light was diffused by the water particles in the fog. It was a magical sight. Sheep and cows were grazing on the bright green grass surrounding the trees. The air up there was cold and fresh and the people we passed on the roadside were wearing big coats and woolly hats to keep warm until the sun became higher and the temperature hotter.

I felt very comfortable in this landscape as it resembles very much the alpine mountain slopes which I know from my holidays in Austria as a child.

Perhaps five years after I saw the trees for the first time, I returned to the escarpment road of the Rift Valley with a friend. Once again I was overwhelmed by the forest landscape. As we were driving up the road in the car my friend told me that the trees are not indigenous to Kenya, but they are exotic. This conifer tree landscape is artificial. The trees, a species of cypress, were introduced by the British, the colonial power in Kenya from 1895 to 1963.

How could I not realize that this landscape was not only artificial, but furthermore a result of colonial history? How could I not question the sight of these straight conifer trees in Kenya?

Landscape is difficult to grasp, it is an ambivalent term which comes in many shapes. The complexity of the term is made manifest by the fact that it can describe both a piece of land and the image of it; the term entails the object itself and its representation. It is both material and representational, scientific and artistic. It tries to bring together the visual image and the material world.<sup>1</sup> The term landscape explores the separation of a scientific representation of the world and our perception of the world when we look at it. The visual is a key sense in perceiving landscape.<sup>2</sup>

Landscape is typically, and actually originally, constituted as a genre of painting which became associated with a new way of seeing.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, until the 1800s the term landscape was not perceived as a scientific concept, but as an aesthetic one; an artistic representation of a visual scene. Alexander von

Humboldt, a “modern geographer” conceived the concept of landscape in a scientific way.<sup>4</sup> He wanted to develop an interest within the European bourgeoisie for the science of nature, hence he developed landscape as a scientific concept. This scientific framing of landscape removed the viewer from the scene making landscape a readable and inspectable object.<sup>5</sup> The sense of vision is thus transformed from being a personal phenomenon to that of a tool for scientific research. The inherently subjective and personal nature of visual perception got scientifically unified and thus is able to define what is true and what not. The subjective nature of perception became scientifically objective.

Linear perspective is a technical and mathematical innovation that made the sense of vision scientifically approved. In her essay “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective” Hito Steyerl meditates on how this perspective changed the way of perceiving and with that the viewer’s relationship to the landscape around them.<sup>6</sup> She convincingly argues how, in the service of a human-centric and exclusive worldview, our individual perception got hijacked. Linear Perspective is a way of constructing a painting where the lines of perspective unite at one stable and fixed line, the horizon. It is a geometrical and mathematical equation of a three dimensional space brought into a two dimensional space. It is a way to represent landscape in a, “coherent”, “true” and “real” manner. Steyerl states: “[Linear perspective] effects the viewer. The viewer becomes central to the worldview established by it.”<sup>7</sup> The constructed landscape reciprocally constructs the viewer and gives them a central position.

Landscape is from then on constructed around the viewer; they are no longer in it and part of it. At the same time though the viewer's agency is undermined; they no longer exists as an individual, their existence is universally permitted by scientific laws.<sup>8</sup>

The individual is removed from the scenery and becomes invisible. This undermines the viewers uniqueness and makes the representation of the scenery appear as an objective image of it, which is not filtered through someones senses. This centred point of view becomes scientifically approved as a representation of truth.<sup>9</sup> Linear Perspective is a mathematically and scientifically coherent concept and so the perceiving and seeing of landscape in that way claims universality. Linear perspective becomes an approved and legitimate mode of perception, and with that it validates a subject-object relationship. It creates a hierarchy between the viewer and the viewed which appears scientifically sound, coherent and in no need of doubt. It appears to be a universal law.

Landscape got transformed into a scientific realm by the construction of this subject-object relationship through the way one perceives and judges their perception. Landscape, and with it nature, therefore became objectified.

*“This reinvention of the notions of subject, time and space, was an additional tool kit enabling the Western dominance, and the dominance of concepts - as well as for redefining standards of representation time and space.”* says Styerl.<sup>10</sup>

It is not surprising that the newly defined subject-object relationship coincides with the imperialistic and colonial endeavours of the eighteenth century.

This way of perceiving landscape is a construct which makes meaning of the world, by proposing a division between the human and the non-human. It established a scientific apparatus for othering and the removal of the human from its surrounding.

When I drove along the forests of the Rift Valley I was not able to sense the distance between me and my surrounding. My view was constructed along the lines of linear perspective. My sight established meaning, value and order within the scenery which I was perceiving subjectively, but judged objectively. It did not even occur to me to reflect on the sight of these conifer trees in Kenya. The landscape appeared to me as a coherent picture of nature which did not require questioning. It presented itself to me as an objective status quo, a place that must have always been like that. I was removed from my surroundings. How can one re-see or re-think landscape in an inclusive and less dogmatic way?

W.J.T Mitchell proposes turning landscape from a noun into a verb.<sup>11</sup> This implies thinking of landscape not as a thing to be seen or to look at but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed. Therefore landscape presents it self more like a medium which expresses, shapes and represents cultural codes, political decisions and mindsets.

So if we start to embrace landscape as a medium in which cultural meanings and values are encoded, and do not think of it as a representation of a visually perceived scenery, we can take the misplaced responsibility for truth which the visual sense was burdened with and redefine it. The notion of linear perspective evidences some basic, practical flaws.

For example, it implies that the viewer is standing on a stable ground looking into the horizon, but the ground we are standing on is rarely absolutely stable. A stable point of view denies the bodies movement while breathing. Our bodies are naturally physically, and emotionally in flux and imbalanced. Furthermore, the process of lining up our perspective for scientific purposes fuses our two eyes into one, so that we can focus precisely on one point on the horizon. As well the complexity our bodies can offer was neglected in the construction, the unintentionally but constantly reaching out, the activity of the other senses was not considered.

This all suggests that the assemblage and hierarchy of our bodily senses is a social construction, deeply informed by an imperial ideology that tried to establish humans above nature. And as landscape is not only non-human, but includes the people living in that environment, this way of perceiving creates an atmosphere of othering between humans as well. It is the viewer opposed to everything they are looking at.

Driving through the conifer forests on the Naivasha road in Kenya I was not aware that my point of view today was still so powerfully shaped by a mindset which was established by the imperial ideologies of the mid eighteenth century. It is a way of sensing which is still being perpetuated in the culture within which I grew up. Landscape is not an expression of the natural world, in fact it is just the opposite. Landscape makes a cultural and social construct seem natural.<sup>12</sup> This seems to me the most difficult thing to understand because it means to reflect on and question the way I sense.



- 1 Minka, Claudio. "The Cultural Geographies of Landscape." In: *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin 62 (1)*. Hrsg. Research Centre for Astronomy and Earth Sciences. Hungarian Academy of Sciences (RCAES MTA). 2013. p 54
- 2 Landscape as a field of study is very complex. In this essay I am not able to engage in every aspect of it. That's why I focussed on what seemed to me the most pressing question resulting from my experience, the construction of landscape and with that the construction of the human senses. There are many more ideas surrounding that topic and I can recommend Mitchell, W. J. T. (Hrsg). *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1994 and Cosgrove, D. E. *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*. London and Sydney: Croon Helm. 1984 for further reading
- 3 Mitchell W. J. T. "Imperial Landscapes." In: *Landscape and Power*. Hrsg. W.J.T. Mitchell, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1994. p 7
- 4 Minka, Claudio. "The Cultural Geographies of Landscape." In: *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin 62 (1)*. Hrsg. Research Centre for Astronomy and Earth Sciences. Hungarian Academy of Sciences (RCAES MTA). 2013. p 57
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Steyerl, Hito. "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective." In: *The Wretched of the Screen*. Hito Steyerl. Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2012. pp 19-30
- 7 Steyerl, Hito. "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective." In: *The Wretched of the Screen*. Hito Steyerl. Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2012. p 19
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid, 20.
- 10 Ibid, 19.
- 11 Mitchell W. J. T. "Imperial Landscapes." In: *Landscape and Power*. Hrsg. W.J.T. Mitchell, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1994. p 1
- 12 Ibid.





