

Nature and Art in the discussion of the Geographic Landscape

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Nature and Art in the discussion of the Geographic Landscape

Abstract

Art has always been in dialogue with nature and the times of space. Whether in the history of society or in aesthetic movements, art has always echoed and affirmed its place of expression promoting personal and collective experiences. To overcome the obstacles of modern science, increasingly distant from philosophy and art, this article grows in a fluid dynamic of the understanding of the geographic landscape as a spatial category, bringing several geographic-artistic dialogues that act as interventions, discussions, and spatial notes. In this sense, the theory of the geographical landscape rebels, proposing new ways of thinking about socio-spatial relationships and nature. Through rescues, the theoretical and at the same time practical possibility of thinking about the sociospatialities reflected in the landscape. The discussion brings Humboldt and Photography to increase the dialogue between art and science. Art and geography stand out for us to think landscape as a relational construction between the individual, nature, society, time and consequently space.

Keywords: Landscape. Geography. Art. Nature. Geographic Space.

Natureza e Arte na discussão da Paisagem Geográfica

Resumo

A arte sempre esteve em diálogo com a natureza e com os tempos do espaço. Seja na história da sociedade ou nos movimentos estéticos, a arte sempre ecoou e afirmou o seu lugar de expressão diante das vivências pessoais e coletivas. No esforço de ultrapassar e vencer os obstáculos da ciência moderna, cada vez mais distante da filosofia e da arte, este artigo cresce em uma dinâmica fluida do entendimento da paisagem geográfica como categoria espacial, trazendo em seu cerne diversos diálogos geográficos-artísticos que agem como intervenções, discussões e apontamentos espaciais. Nesse sentido, a teoria da paisagem geográfica se rebela, nos propondo novas formas de pensar as relações socioespaciais e a própria natureza, especialmente a grafada em Humboldt. Através de resgates, cresce a possibilidade teórica e ao mesmo tempo prática de pensarmos as socioespacialidades refletidas na paisagem.

A arte e a geografia se sobressaem para pensarmos a paisagem como uma construção relacional entre indivíduo, natureza, sociedade, tempo e conseqüentemente o espaço.

Palavras-chave: Paisagem. Geografia. Arte. Natureza. Espaço Geográfico.

Naturaleza y Arte em la discyssi3n del Paisaje Geogr3fico

Resumen

El arte siempre ha estado en di3logo con la naturaleza y los tiempos del espacio. Ya sea en la historia de la sociedad o en los movimientos est3ticos, el arte siempre ha hecho eco y afirmado su lugar de expresi3n frente a las experiencias personales y colectivas. En un esfuerzo por superar los obst3culos de la ciencia moderna, cada vez m3s distante de la filosof3a y el arte, este art3culo crece en una din3mica fluida de la comprensi3n del paisaje geogr3fico como categor3a espacial, trayendo en su n3cleo varios di3logos geogr3fico-art3sticos que actúan como intervenciones, debates y notas espaciales. En este sentido, la teor3a del paisaje geogr3fico se rebela al proponer nuevas formas de pensar las relaciones socioespaciales y la propia naturaleza. A trav3s de los rescates crece la posibilidad te3rica y a la vez pr3ctica de pensar las socioespacialidades reflejadas en el paisaje. La discusi3n crece desde Humboldt a la fotograf3a para un debate de arte y ciencia. El arte y la geograf3a se destacan para que pensemos el paisaje como una construcci3n relacional entre el individuo, la naturaleza, la sociedad, el tiempo y conseqüentemente el espacio.

Palabras claves: Paisaje. Geograf3a. Arte. Naturaleza. Espacio Geogr3fico.

Introduction

The space is constructed and materialized as a dynamic and fluid set of relations between society, nature, objects and intentionalities (individual and/or collective), or as a set of 'fixed and flows', as stated by Milton Santos (2000). This same space, the stage for the movements of bodies, human relations, materialities and histories, is constructed for all of us as landscapes, territories, places and regions, bringing together a set of marks that point to the transformations, sensations and experiences of the world.

The landscape, one of the categories of analysis of geographical space, is closely linked to the intimacy of the individuals and their own spatial relations, since a space dislocated from individuals and collectivities, thoughts, sensations of our existence and our experiences is inconceivable. And from this notion of woven, permeable and lived space, it is possible to converge geographical knowledge and art, adopting an artistic epistemology as a cultural and critical practice of geographical space, contemplated by conceptual fields, knowledge and creations for a spatial analysis of the landscape.

Landscapes are connected to historical time. Indeed, we cannot speak of a non-spatial history. The world is a scenario, unfolding and events, as well as landscapes. And, together with this storytelling, we can see and identify landscapes in different times, in different ways. However, we need to rescue our pasts to locate ourselves in the present landscape, and driven by memories and memories, connect with the fluid dynamics of time and space. In this sense, illustration and photography can be great allies to this investigation of the landscape, since:

The landscape is not created all at once, but by additions, substitutions; the logic by which an object was made in the past was the logic of the production of that moment. A landscape is written on top of another, it is a set of objects that have different ages, it is an inheritance from many different moments. (SANTOS, 1998, p. 66).

According to Paul Claval (2004), the landscape is operative, i.e., regarded as intentionality. In this context, there is a differentiation from the classical view of the landscape, which is given as an objective reality (biosphere) and begins to be understood by men as meaning-producing agents, which generates a kind of semiosphere (CLAVAL, 2004; MARQUEZ, 2006). With that said, in what ways can geographical nature – especially illustration and photography – help in understanding the landscape through art?

In order to think of the geographical landscape in this sense, we must understand a very important fact in the history of Geography: its consolidation as a science and as a form of knowledge that guides human thoughts and actions. Landscape appears in geography, initially, as the science of describing the earth's surface and accompanies its currents and thoughts throughout history.

In contemporary science, landscape carries great influences from Humboldt's legacy, in addition to dialoguing with other social productions of knowledge, such as art – as much as literature – and mainly with pictorial art. Horácio Capel asks us to think and reflect on

landscape studies in Humboldt, seeking to identify and understand the apparently disconnected relationships of phenomena, whose connections cannot be deduced from a taxonomic system (CAPEL, 2007, p. 17).

Thus, we seek to trace, through this article, an approximation of the study of the geographical landscape with the visual arts, in addition to promoting a practical reflection recognizing the formulation of spatial knowledge constantly impregnated in the production of artistic knowledge.

Humboldt and geographic nature before art

For a long time, before the invention of the photographic camera, illustration was the most realistic and effective way to portray the virgin forests that were present in front of naturalist travelers and explorers. Alexander Von Humboldt (1769-1859) established a reliable bridge, in his explorations and travels, for the approximation of geographical science with the representation of the landscape through illustrations. Humboldt carried into his expeditions a commitment to the new, to what encompassed his visions, having incorporated in his books the term *Weltbeschreibung* – description of the world –, which appears right in the subtitle of *Kosmos*¹.

The description of the world presented by Humboldt's works revolutionized the study of landscape in Geography, and the empirical element coupled with fieldwork methodologically boosted the conceptualization and the theory of landscape. In addition, the geographer of old Prussia later influenced other travelers-artists-naturalists to explore South American lands and, through illustration and painting, to record the diversity of Latin landscapes, as was the case with Count Othon de Clarac (1777-1847).

The fact that Humboldt's study comprises, in addition to the systematic cut, the encounter of the quality of beings in the concrete of their biogeographical relations, presupposes the empirical and experienced contact with the situations of his own existence in the world – the transformation of the self. Humboldt was greatly influenced by the literature and studies of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe². The study of landscape and geographical dynamics in Humboldt is perpetuated as the expansion of the subject in the world. And just as in Goethe, the landscape, for Humboldt, arises from the poetic-romantic and figurative appreciation of a picture of nature:

Nothing will ever be able to erase the emotion I felt on the serene nights of the tropics, on the shores of the southern sea, when, out of the vaporous blue of the sky, the high constellation Argus and the Cross, tilted towards the horizon, sending out their sweet, planetary light, while the delphiniums were tracing their shining wake on the waves of the foaming sea. (HUMBOLDT, 1952b, p. 278).

1 Humboldt's work.

2 He was born on August 28, 1749 in Frankfurt, Germany, and died in March 1832 at the age of 83 in Weimar. His university education was marked by a diversity of knowledge in the humanities, applied social sciences and nature. As a writer, Goethe was one of the most important figures of German literature and European Romanticism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

For both Goethe and Humboldt, landscape appears as a vital portion of the natural totality framed by the sensibility of the trained eye and transfigured into art, literature and painting, respectively. In Humboldt, we read: “The man who is sensitive to the beauties of nature...will take pleasure in examining the variety of sensation vegetation produces in the soul of the person who contemplates it” (HUMBOLDT, 2009, p. 73).

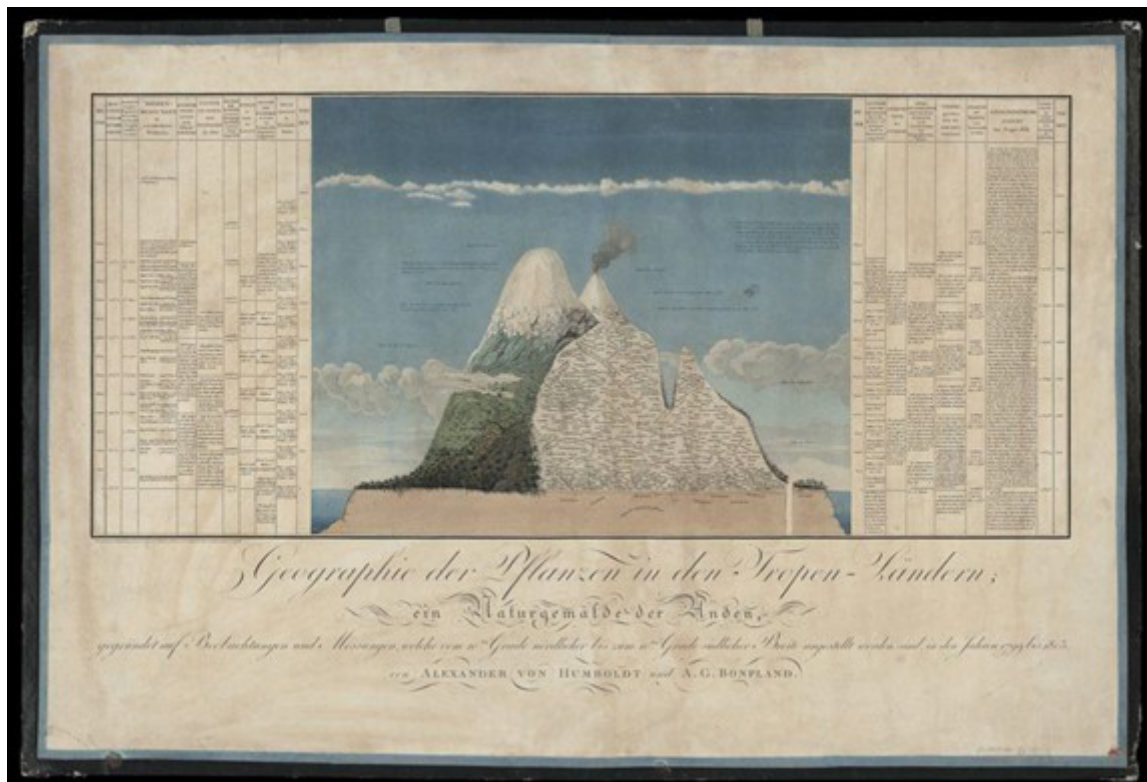
The artistic elements broaden the worldview needed for the understanding of landscape in both Goethe and Humboldt. Understanding the world as an organism, through a dynamic dimension, Goethe does not see a linear homogeneity, offering to the scientific analysis the appropriate a language to the artist’s and poet’s thinking; and this is what will allow to overcome the limit and the restriction of the simple causal connection.

For the Prussian traveler, the description of the world is strongly present through the illustrative features. The geographical and biological nature was coupled with the sensitive nature of what was apprehended by the landscapes submitted in his expeditions. In this sense, Humboldt did much to make scientists focus their attention on the need for accurate and systematic data collection, and incorporated fundamental techniques of data presentation such as isotherms and geological profiles. In addition, Humboldt had an indescribable capacity of admiration regarding nature. For the scientist, the diversity of nature can only be understood and explored in conjunction with the aesthetic experience, and only in this way could universal laws be constructed and explain the geographical distribution of the natural landscapes explored.

In one of his famous illustrations – the “Geography of Equinoctial Plants” (Figure 1), Humboldt presents the section of South America with the Chimborazo volcano (Andean region of Ecuador) and the relationship of topography to plants. The illustration scientifically records the distribution of Andean vegetation in the relief. The naturalist projects the topographic and altitude data and their relationship with latitude, indicating the diversity of plants in the landscape in the topographic distribution. The illustration specifically served science in proving the relationship between the topographic movement of the relief (altitude) and latitude through the manifestation of the various vegetative strata in the landscape: art-science.

Humboldt’s aim, both in this illustration and in all his literary travel accounts, refers to the exposition of the principle of the unity and totality of nature, i.e., the understanding of the world, of phenomena and physical forms in their mutual connectedness (FALCÃO; FALCÃO SOBRINHO, 2016). Humboldt showed how it is possible to synthesize man and nature, and all the connections of nature with man. Similarly, one can comment on the idea of Goethe, who had a holistic view of the things around him, did not analyze only an isolated fact, but the cause and consequence relationships between them, as Milton Santos later claimed about the animated and relational construction of space – of territory, places, region and landscape.

Figure 1 – *Geographie des plantes equinoxiales* – Humboldt and Vonpland (1803).



Source: <https://www.gallica.bnf.fr> – Gallica (French National Library).

In this context, the relationship of individuals with the natural environment is also constantly addressed in geographic science and even more in what regards the current environmental problem. And, in addition to the landscape description of these relationships, art can act as a spokesperson and as a denunciation of the way in which society and the production of space interfere and alter the landscape. Humboldt contributed to the thinking about the landscape through expeditions and naturalistic accounts that sowed for the future of geography-art ways of thinking about the landscape as a reflection of environmental problems faced.

Balanced by the overflying gaze, he now feels tormented by the desert aspect of the plain – by the absence of the known – and its traces of ruin, which he tries hard to deny. Frames: the landscape, an exact transcription of the image visualized in direct contact with nature, and the landscape that, although programmed by exact and punctual calculation, will be manipulated and reconstructed in order to achieve an ideal landscape. (HUMBOLDT, 1952a, p. 188).

By dealing with this landscape that encompasses the whole and considering the spatial interactions between cultural and natural units, thus including man in its system of analysis, landscape ecology adopts a correct perspective to propose solutions to environmental problems – problems that are the fruit of an idealism of desires and consumptions that affect the production of space. Moreover, with the power of art, this discussion gains even more power and impact in various socio-spatial spheres if we think of art as a workshop of knowledge and knowledge production.

Still within the timeframe of the 1800s, the archaeologist Othon Frederic Jean-Baptiste de Clarac (1777-1847), who arrived in Brazil possibly in 1816, continued the importance of making records through illustrations for the tropical world. French draftsman and scientist, Count de Clarac was strongly influenced by Humboldt. He participated in some expeditions in Brazilian lands, whose records became emblematic of the representation of the Brazilian forest in the 19th century.

Count Clarac's illustrations influenced traveling artists in America. The Humboldtian tradition is embedded in his naturalistic representations of Othon Clarac and acts as a way of contributing, through sensitivity and intuition, to scientific studies with the aim of achieving a totalizing apprehension of the universe.

Through the extraordinary detailing of Brazilian tropical flora and fauna, as shown in Figure 2, we can see that the illustration of the natural landscape with the representation of the tropical landscape was gaining importance. In this context, the Portuguese crown itself was responsible for promoting requests for artistic commissions to travelers-artists to obtain detailed information regarding the Brazilian landscapes and their possible future appropriations.

Figure 2 – Othon Frederic Jean-Baptiste de Clarac – Virgin Forest of Brazil (1819).



Source: <https://ims.com.br/?s=For%C3%AAt+vierge+du+Br%C3%A9sil>.
Iconography Collection/ Moreira Sales Institute. Accessed on: Jan. 4, 2021

If science is to understand the concreteness of information, art, in Humboldt, is beyond rational explanation and goes hand in hand with philosophy, imagination, fear and creativity. The man cannot be understood without the world, nor the world understood without the man. The mutual relationship between objectivity and subjectivity interacts and formulates knowledge.

Thus, Humboldtian writing breaks the boundaries between literature and science. While describing, Humboldt expresses his feelings and emotions. The beauty and color of nature are present in his vast work (MIRANDA, 1977, p. 7). Nature is embodied, caressed and defined in poetic and precise tones in everything Humboldt might contemplate.

With this, the concept of landscape for geography, which has often been limited to the act of describing and unveiling physical characteristics of certain spaces, gains new directions when thought in other areas of knowledge. The landscape unfolds and fluidizes in literature, thus providing new possibilities to investigate the concept of this category and to bring new meanings to geography.

The idea of landscape dispersed in the most diverse bodies of knowledge invites us to observe the multiplicity of meanings that can compose the concept. This multiplicity encourages us to broaden the concept of landscape and to read and understand the contemporary movements of space from the images of this concept.

Photography and landscape: an interrelationship in the socio-spatial investigation of nature

The perspective of discussing the geographical landscape can also be extended to photographic art and therefore produce a series of spatial reflections. Photography helps and guides us to understand many socio-spatial processes. Photography is a text expressed by imagery and presents a mutual relation with the arts, being confused in its origin with the montages of paintings. A photo can draw our attention to the landscapes that give new realities to the geographical space, whether in its dimension of registration without artistic pretension or in its appropriation as a work of art.

At the heart of a photo is the originality and creative process of a particular time, space and subject that produced it. But it also contains a gathering of different times, such as the millions of years spent by geological processes to define the relief, or the days, months and years to build what is shown above that same relief, the result of millions of years of natural processes. This photo can be seen as a frozen instant of matter; however, human processes and events make it unique due to specific characteristics and forms from that particular moment.

From the framing and conscious and unconscious intuitions, the artist leads us to infinite possibilities of readings to produce the photographic conception and the portrayed landscape. We know, however, that the landscape is not loose in time, as it comprises geographical and socio-spatial processes:

I loved to admire the beauty of things, to discover in the imperceptible, through what is tiny, the poetic soul of the universe. [...] There is poetry in everything – in the land and in the sea, in the lakes and on the banks of rivers. [...] Poetry is like astonishment, the admiration of one who has fallen from heaven in full awareness of the own fall, astonished by everything. (PESSOA, 1966, p. 345).

Photography is the construction of a new reality: the photographic one, in which there is a transformation, a creation of some real object in the capturing process. Photography is memory, it fragments space, paralyzes time, perpetuates representation; however, it cannot be just that, because coupled with photography are the senses of the landscape of the photographer.

If we reflect upon or admire a photo for a moment, we will be exercising the understanding of the spatial totality and its implication in the landscape cutout captured by the photograph. Nevertheless, we would also be starting from the perspective, the experiences and the intentions of the photographer in a certain unfolding of the space-time quilt.

“Thinking this way, for example, in a space-territory, space-place or in a space-landscape without considering human experiences means not conceiving space in its nature.” (BRAGIONI; ARAÚJO, 2020, p. 6). The landscape-space assumes a balance and a kind of equation engendered by the form and the different meanings that it is capable of arousing and conditioning (SANTOS, 2000). In this sense, equated and socially constructed, the senses and meanings of the landscape organization are always derived from the relationship, i.e., the landscape-space is a relational constitution exposed to the sensitive.

Photography, therefore, also reveals a subjectivity and a shared, collective sensibility, which offers itself to reading as a source, referring to the world of creativity, culture and its set of meanings built on a certain reality and spatial materiality. This space present in the photograph is the space that, herein is understood as geographical and that seeks to understand the social relations present in the landscape manifestations of the world and in spatial history.

In addition, the landscape or landscape-space, as well as the art of photography, takes the role of witness or “memory of a present that has already been” (SANTOS, 1978, p. 138), either with or without its artistic pretension. Such landscapes-photographs would be the fixed forms that remained and were considered and consolidated by various scales of time, as can be understood in the previous photograph with the presence of the church in the center of the community of André do Mato Dentro, marking historical processes and the historicity of the place (Figure 3). However, the landscape in history is expressed by individual and social movements. The dynamics of bodies and their transience are the result of often invisible processes that relate to the production and use of space, delineated by places, constituted by territories, and energized by borders and limits (HISSA, 2009). Thinking under the perspective of Georg Simmel:

When we are faced with a landscape, the unity of existence natural strives to integrate us in its fabric, the break between an “I” that sees and an “I” that feels shows doubly visible. It is with our whole person that we stand before the landscape, be it natural or artistic, and the act that creates it for us is simultaneously a seeing and a feeling, split into isolated instances by reflection. (SIMMEL, 1996, p. 6).

Figure 3 – The Church of André do Mato Dentro (2019).



Source: Guido Lins.

As a photographic expression, landscape comprises the movement of the social totality itself in constitution through the sense of observation. Its mathematical root is linked to the development of perspective and the understanding of the phenomenon of light. From the man's position in the world to the possibilities for his vision, photography falls back on geometric mathematics and indicates that it took a process of education and experience of meaning and geographical space (SIMMEL, 1996):

But for the landscape to be born it is necessary, it is undeniably necessary, that the pulse of life, in perception and feeling, should be torn from the homogeneity of nature and that the special product thus created, after being transferred to an entirely new layer, should open itself, as it were, to universal life and welcome the limitless into its flawless boundaries. (SIMMEL, 1996, p. 6).

Photography is directly associated with the revival of the landscape discussion in the modern era. In this sense, photography gave a greater opening to the thought of landscape, not only as a conditioner of development, but also as a kind of reflection of the actions of society. But this was not only because of its reproducibility and mobility due to its size and low cost, speed of production (BENJAMIN, 1936), but also because it harbors the presentation and representation of space and society. Photographs can talk about lives, desires, difficulties and memories and everything that the eye and feeling seek to see.

Thus, the landscape that emerges as a stage and a product of social, cultural and spatial relations can be defined through photography as “[...] a cultural product resulting from the environment under the action of human activity” (SCHIER, 2003, p. 80). In this sense, it is determined by spatiality and temporality, therefore subjected to change. In other words, the landscape-photography is the representation of a given space, at a given time, which exposes numerous elements of that region-place-territory – physical, social, cultural, geographical.

The landscape presupposes the presence of man and a rationality to be understood, i.e., the space itself can be morphology, vegetation; however, it is not landscape itself. To become landscape, this environment needs to touch someone and be absorbed by that someone, only then is the space given meaning, is transformed into landscape. In analogy, every space-landscape is theoretically a space-photography, in which we can only “capture” spatiality when the body meets the environment and deciphers it, feels it and transforms it into a woven, visceral, social, subjective space, etc. There is an in-between access to photographic truth and the existence of the world that first of all precedes the existence of the subject. There is a search, a practice, an experience through which the subject operates on himself the necessary transformations to access the truth. In the sense of the landscape, this practice is evident and immediately requires the study of the subjective relations operated in the landscape and in the ways of seeing.

From this approach, the landscape also arises when the man, previously inserted in the environment, begins to distance himself from it, a distance that allows him to understand the universe and all the things that compose it. In a second analogy, distancing can be compared to the lens of a camera that allows us to see the world in varying degrees of detail, as a dynamic event of moving away from and approaching space.

The compilation of photographs proposed in Figure 4 allows us this “angular” work of approaching and distancing the landscape through photography. In some photos, we have the sadness installed in the look and countenance, in others, the resistance in the form of festivity, but, finally, the amazement of mining activity. Nevertheless, in the alternations of lenses and captures, all records correspond and are interconnected to the “same” place, ‘André do Mato Dentro’:

Like any territory in Minas Gerais, André do Mato Dentro is found in the midst of recurring dualities: wealth and depletion, small and large, internal and external. In a context of exploitation, André remains in his place, he establishes his roots, because he knows that he belongs to that land. André sees himself in the community, in the social relationship, in the encounters. (CESAR, 2019, p. 16).

Figure 4 – Photography Series – A Cry for Help (2019).



Source: Guido Lins

In this sense, photography is able to move us through issues that are social urgencies. Photography holds us to feeling, making us see, listen, experience and never forget. Photography is also an act of resistance, of transmitting information, texts and feelings. In this way, we understand art as a reflection of social reality and also as a form of knowledge capable of interacting with it, with the power to modify it. We attribute to art a liberating character, due to the possibility of it exercising such a function through the formal and realistic or metaphorical representation of the contents of the class struggle. Art is awake and walks together with the spatial transience of the landscape. Precisely by following the movements of space and society, art can inscribe in its arrangements, geographies and spatial marks. With this, art as science is constituted in historical and necessary movements in the expansion of world and space experiments.

The landscape, at this point, assumes a metalanguage, since it participates in our daily lives and allows us to experience the space, tell our story through the streets, write our pain and expose our indignations through the air. Thus, we also build the landscape in which we are inserted through our wills, needs, desires and interests.

Art, by fulfilling the role of vigil and contestation, can point out the limits and the interaction between the real and the possible, between the word and the image, and between man and his symbolic as well as continuity and rupture (NIETZSCHE, 2000). It can be inferred that the artist acts as an agent of change, debate and criticism regarding the established order by presenting new meanings between the real and the possible, including what regards the landscape.

Final Considerations

Through art and the experience provided by the senses, men perceive the world and life in each moment of their social history, forming concepts, thoughts, culture, understanding and purpose. Rather than an abstraction of changes in things or social transformations – from one era to another – this perception is about the participation of the man, through his relationship and understanding of things, giving importance to the past, i.e., what has been transmitted from past generations to the current one, a process of development in search of knowledge about nature and social reality.

In this sense, artistic practice reattaches links and proximities with information, with reports, and, above all, with socio-spatial processes, both for its capacity for subjectivation and for historical rescue. When we analyze any landscape, we are automatically rescuing and engaging social actions in space.

With that said, it is conclusive that the landscape narrates, tells stories, describes and represents the memory and existing relationships of a place. While geographic, it contemplates all human senses, because it is not only image, it dialogues with the experiences of those who observe them, thus being a cultural construction and a set of signs to be deciphered by those who observe them, as did Humboldt and other naturalists. The landscape, together or through art, enables the understanding of man in space and time from a political and aesthetic perspective. Art allows the subject to identify and experience experiences, in time and space, not only as entertainment, but also as a way of seeing the world from a new perspective, different from what is established.

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