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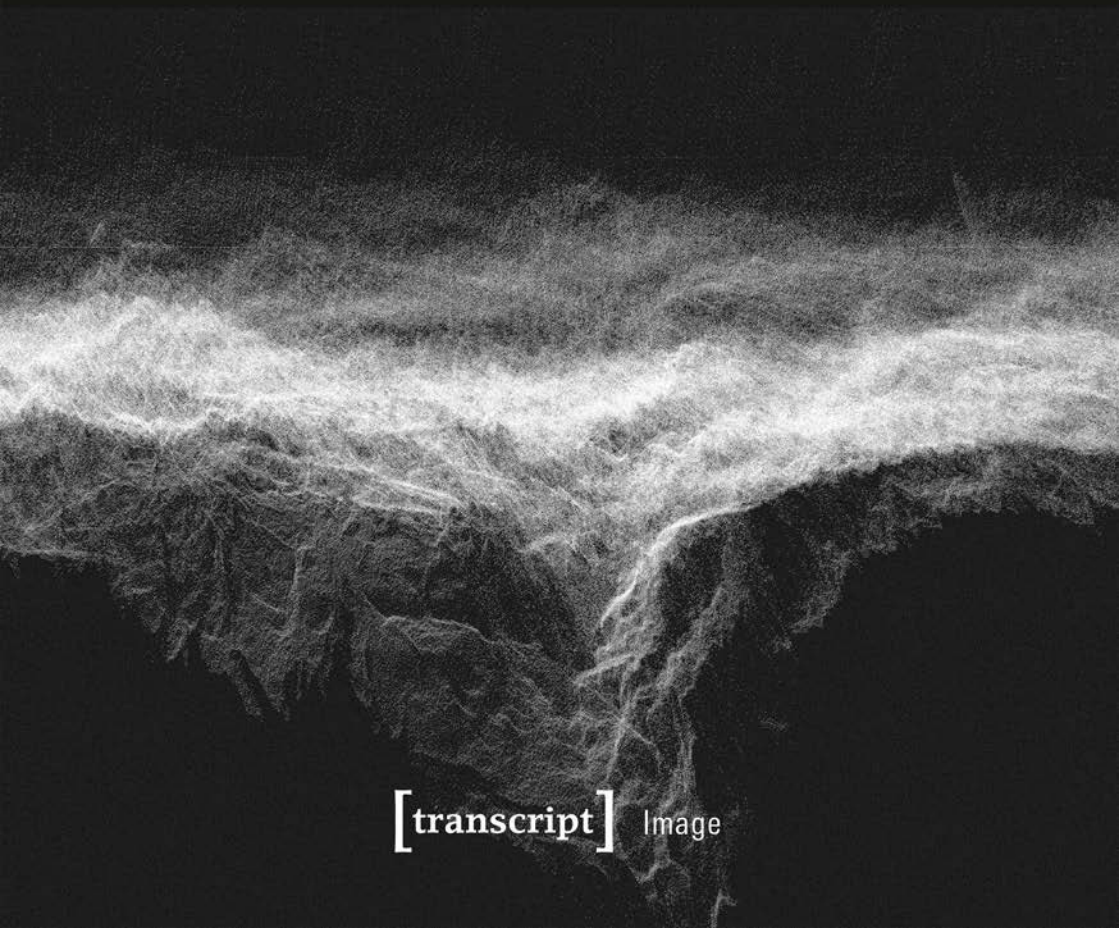
PROXIMITY AND DISTANCE IN NORTHERN LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM, CURATION AND PRACTICE



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Contents

Preface and Acknowledgements

The essays in this collection have their origins in papers presented at a conference held at Sheffield Hallam University on 2nd and 3rd July, 2018 – *Northern Light: critical approaches to proximity and distance in northern landscape photography*. This was the second conference organised by Sheffield Hallam's photography research group addressing critical landscape issues, and as with the 2016 event it was accompanied by an exhibition of photographic work. The 2016 conference and exhibition also provided the foundations for a collection of essays – Chris Goldie and Darcy White (eds.). *Northern Light: Landscape, Photography and Evocations of the North* – published by transcript Verlag, and we are now able to continue our critical project with this volume. We would like to acknowledge the contributions of all who participated in our most recent conference and exhibition, without whom this publication would not have been realised: those who presented their research or showed their work, the academic and technical staff from the university who gave their time and skill in the organisation of the event, and student volunteers from BA Photography, whose assistance throughout the event was vital.

This book would not have been possible without the generous support of Sheffield Hallam University's Art and Design Research Centre, the Department for Media Arts and Communication and in particularly the latter's Head, Geff Green, whose help has been invaluable. The Centre for Practice as Research at the University of Gloucestershire has also generously supported this publication. We wish to especially thank Angus Pryor, Head of Arts, and Andrew Bick, Chair of the School of Arts Research Steering Group, who have been unstinting in their support and encouragement of this publication.

Introduction

Darcy White and Chris Goldie

The essays in this collection discuss the northern landscape from different perspectives but across a range of contributions a number of distinct themes are addressed, all of which can be framed through the concepts of proximity and distance and the relationship of these to the theory and practice of landscape photography. To juxtapose proximity and distance is not to suggest that one is necessarily superior to the other in providing a view of the world and of the reality of landscape. In general, one emphasises the primacy of direct, embodied experience in the perception of place, the other advocates a distant, detached, critical point of view, but they coexist, with neither having the capacity to replace the other, both are valid although mutually exclusive. As Christopher Norris argues in his account of Derrida's deconstruction of both structuralism in its objectivist form and the phenomenology of presence, these are "two different orders of thought which can never be reduced to each other's terms but which nonetheless cannot be assumed to exist in self-sufficient isolation" (Norris 1991: 50).

Photography has, nevertheless, a particular relationship to the direct, embodied and perceptual because, as Norman Bryson argues, it is a *deictic* art. *Deixis* encompasses both the description of an event and the circumstances of describing it: a photograph "is the product of a chemical process occurring in the same spatial and temporal vicinity as the event it records" (89). This process is one of immersion in which the light sensitive surface of the camera bears the traces of the field to which it is exposed; an existential bond between the photograph and that which it represents, the image being less a depiction of a place than its extension. Such an emphasis on photographic process as part of a continuum with its subject must inevitably extend to the photographer herself and her mode of being in and seeing the landscape, hence the significance within much recent landscape photography of walking, a practice within which the proximity of space and the unfolding of an event in the course of time are inseparable.

It is unsurprising, then, that the practice of landscape photography has in recent years placed an emphasis on direct and lived experience, and that it has done so by drawing upon concepts from the phenomenological tradition and its more recent iterations within post-structuralist theory. Landscape photography's af-

finity with phenomenology can be identified in a number of themes and concepts recurring throughout this collection: temporality as a way of conceiving place as an ongoing event rather than a static, fixed, mapped and preconceived location; perception as multisensory and embodied rather than purely visual; a questioning of objectivity and the transcendental point of view.

Because this collection is concerned with photographic representations of specifically northern landscapes – with their own history of being conceived and represented through painting, literature, cultural narrative, memory – to advocate the primacy of direct experience without regard to more distant or detached representations of place would not be desirable, however. Such representations are a significant albeit contested aspect of the identity of places, which is particularly evident in essays with an historical dimension, those chapters where the focus is on the relationship of the present to cultural memory, contributions exploring the framing of landscape images through their dissemination in different material forms such as book illustrations and postcards, video and social media, and in the practices of curation. The North, as several accounts suggest, is a place enfolded in histories originating in the past but realised in the evolving cultural narratives of the present; every 'present' involves remembering and experiencing narratives of the past differently.

Both the direct experience of the present and the histories with which it engages are sources of knowledge, however, and when northern landscapes are considered from such a dual perspective it becomes clear that the relationship between the proximity of direct experience and the conception of place from a distant perspective is nuanced and complex. By focusing on contemporary criticism, curation and practice these studies of northern landscape photography aim to address the complexities of reading and interpreting a field of historically evolving representations whilst engaging with the challenges of contemporary practice.

However, it is impossible to understand the notion of the proximate in respect to the distant, without engaging with the new technological and material realities of life and travel. John Tomlinson (1999) argues that accessibility alters the way in which the distant is perceived. In the 21st century the relative affordability and ease of travel over large distances is responsible for creating a new relationship with far-off places – where greater accessibility effectively brings such places closer. For Tomlinson this increased "connectivity" through ease of travel is merely an empirical fact, whereas he employs the term "proximity" as a metaphor to account for the ways in which the distant is increasingly experienced as relatively close. In this way greater accessibility creates a feeling of proximity.

Beginning with the work of contemporary practitioners, it is quite evident that there has been a shift towards a more experiential approach to landscape photography and that aspects of 'northerness' are associated with this development, particularly where environmental degradation through climate breakdown is the

issue of concern. As has been suggested, the character of landscape photography as a material practice does lend itself to a phenomenological understanding, and if the latter's conceptual framework isn't necessarily explicit in all of the following group of contributions it does have an underlying presence.

The emphasis on temporality and of 'being in' the landscape is demonstrated in several essays in the collection but particularly in the work of three practitioners – Olaf Otto Becker, Aileen Harvey and Tracy Hill – each of whom present contributions where their own work is central and where they perform the role of participant-observer. In the interview with Olaf Otto Becker, Julia Peck refers to how Becker's work has changed in recent years, from representing "an untouched landscape to recording traces of how we shape the landscape". Becker's work photographing the Arctic over many years is very well known, as is his more recent efforts to chart environmental degradation in the Global South. Becker's interview is revealing of the importance of a temporal dimension for the evolution of his work. When Becker began photographing the Arctic he also recorded how its landscape changed: firstly by capturing images of the contemporary landscape of hydroelectric plants and dams rather than pristine and apparently timeless views of waterfalls, for example; then through the production of sequences of images in which, through rephotography, the shrinking of glaciers could be observed over a period of years. Subsequently, this approach became part of a dedicated project. Becker returned to Iceland ten years after publishing *Under the Nordic Light* (2005), in order to supplement the book with photographs of changes: "I visited the same places and I waited for the same light conditions and I used the same framing of the image. And I even made portraits after 10 or 11 years to show how we experience time".

Although a very different type of landscape photographer, Aileen Harvey shows a similar but more theoretically inflected concern with photographic time. Her essay proposes links between the "snapshot" as an "everyday object" and "drawing and writing" – considering all of these as "inscriptions" – all *deictic* arts as Bryson would define them. Harvey's own practice and that of other artists she cites responds to the "changeable and liminal qualities of landscape specific to northern latitudes: such as seasonal shifts in light, littorality, weathering, and deciduous woodland". Whilst acknowledging that notions of the photograph as document or evidence are powerful, her essay suggests that photography allows for a relationship of "continuity and proximity" to landscape. This is achieved by activating the temporal dimension of photography and drawing, allowing walking to provide a structure able to grasp place, not as singular and static but fluid and changing; a landscape irreducible to an objective, distancing visuality, allowing for the influence of "visual qualities" such as "colour, shape, scale, tone, and intensity of light", but "also volume, texture, movement, heft, smell, moisture, warmth,

taste, sounds". Following Donna Haraway she argues that "our way of seeing the world is a matter of positioning – and that positioning is mobile, fluid, and active".

Becker's landscape photography can also be understood as having a time-based character associated with the material processes of the medium. This is evident in the dependency of his images on his own protracted presence in the landscape, and the traces of that temporality recorded in the photograph. The image from *Under the Nordic Light*, '60 Minutes Dettifoss', captures the limited duration of the tourist gaze, referring to the average period of time spent by visitors at Iceland's Dettifoss waterfall, whilst Becker is also aware of the time involved in making composite images. Harvey, similarly, discusses the different moments in the photographic process, arguing that the "single instant" of capture or exposure should not detract from the duration of the construction of an image, while its content arises from different "making activities", each with its own "footing in time".

Tracy Hill – in "Matrix of Movement: Post-industrial Wetlands of the North West" – bases her essay on her own art practice, specifically two projects, *Matrix of Movement* (2016-19) and *Haecceity* (2018). The art works within these projects are created through the appropriation and repurposing of data collection technologies but the centrality to her work of direct experience of landscapes through walking is clear. The aim of the projects was to challenge historic perceptions of some forms of northern landscape as wasteland, which she does by exploring the tensions between preconceived notions of landscape – formed through conceptions of the picturesque or through the dislocating and distancing perspective of mapping – and landscape perceived experientially and intuitively. She argues that an embodied experience, the practice of walking, can realise the values of place not recognisable through a distant and ordered perspective. She explores these ideas through her art work's engagement with the precariousness of wetland environments in North-West England, responding to them as liminal landscapes and aiming to recover these "forgotten ways of seeing", recognising what went before but also its relationship to the present.

This challenge to preconceptions of landscape involves redefining and exploring the notion of place, which several essays in the collection also attempt. Aileen Harvey argues that "place is not an object, not a static, clear-cut thing. A place has no edges. It surrounds, moves and alters". Tracy Hill follows John Agnew (1987) in suggesting that place be understood as a meaningful location through three vectors: as having a clear sense of "where", as a setting for social relations and as the site of subjective and emotional attachment. As with Harvey and Becker, the primacy of temporal experience is central to her landscape work: "representational traditions of mapping do not lend themselves to the transitory nature of wetlands", she argues, so "what is needed is a system of temporal mapping", or a form of spatio-temporality, forsaking the distant perspective of the purely visual

and striving, through walking and the "physical interaction of touch", towards the multisensory, and through this forming new knowledge.

Darcy White's essay is also concerned with space, understood – following Massey – as composed of "fluid and multivalent elements", as "in a constant state of being made". In contrast to the emphasis on the photographic medium's deictic character advocated by Bryson, White proposes – through a study of commercial landscape images associated with cookery books of the Nordic region – that landscape photography plays a role in envisioning geographical space. As with Becker's repudiation of a pristine and timeless landscape in favour of producing images containing people and signs of historical transformation, White offers a critique of landscape imagery devoid of human activity. These 'stripped-out' and almost abstract images evoke notions of a 'pristine', 'wilderness' landscape and have the effect of reinforcing specific political geographies within which the nordic territories are still and unchanged, denying the ethnic diversity of its populations and the complexity of the globalised world.

Mikko Itälahti's essay is an historical account considering the significance of place within 19th century Finland, exploring literary and photographic images of Finnish travel landscapes, and juxtaposing the spatial immediacy of premodern travel to the detached and disembodied visuality typical of the railway era. There are, therefore, thematic continuities between Itälahti's essay and the preceding ones. For those whose earliest experiences were of coach or sleigh journeys railway travel was initially perceived as alienating and 'placeless'. Finnish landscape photographers would eventually foster a greater cultural acceptance and familiarity with the railway, however. Itälahti argues that even though the landscapes of modern travel involved separation and distance, railway photography tended to mitigate the loss of sensations of actuality, of truly 'being there', through its capacity to re-evoke the foreground eradicated by the industrial revolution. By the beginning of the 20th century, the railway itself was elevated to "the foreground of the landscape, echoing the romantic trope of picturesque roadside views and evoking, visually, the proximity of the old premodern roadside". A more optimistic vision of the railway could even present it, now, as "a harmonious component of a modern cultural landscape".

In an important historical study based on painstaking archival research – "Polar Expeditions: A Photographic Landscape of Sameness?" – Elizabeth Cronin and Jessica Keister argue that as soon as photography was viable it became an integral part of journeys to the Arctic. Images from expeditions appeared in numerous publications as well as being an important component of "lecture tours, and lantern slide extravaganzas", and some of these form the basis of an album of photographs held in the Photography Collection at the New York Public Library. The album, however, shows little regard for the original context of the photographs, but "highlights instead the universal event of the far north: heroism in a harsh

environment, ice cliffs, hut interiors, polar bears, sled dogs, native populations, and scientific responsibilities". This fascinating essay then proceeds to discuss the album's distinct layers of meaning: the event each photograph depicts; the history of these images as material artefacts; and the broader meaning of the album as an exercise in "categorization and organization". Cronin and Keister give a detailed discussion of the history of the album, noting that curatorial interventions have been prevalent and arguing that changes in its material characteristics have had a significant impact on how it has been understood. Their exploration of the album as material artefact is both a history of curatorial practice – the once extensive use of retouching, earlier practices of "collecting, organizing, and synthesizing" – an account of these images as objects of consumption, their physicality giving some indication of the audience for whom they were intended, and an intriguing discussion of changing views of the Arctic.

Cronin and Keister's archival work provides an insight into the role of landscape photography in establishing the meaning of place, not simply in the choice of subject matter and point of view but in terms of the materiality of images, their intended audience and the form of their organisation and dissemination. This focus on the materiality of landscape images, particularly when illustrations in books aimed at particular readerships, is comparable to White's discussion of the phenomenon of Nordic cookery books in which lavish illustrations of sparse, pristine and purportedly timeless northern landscapes address their readers' "hopes and fears, ideas and values", constructing and confirming conceptions of "Nordicness" rather than being guides to food preparation.

The insights of Cronin and Keister are paralleled in other essays in this collection with an emphasis on the archive. Anne Wriedt's essay is based on work with photographs by Knud Knudsen, contained in the picture collection of the University of Bergen library. Knudsen's photography is considered in the context of a transitional moment in the evolution of Norway's landscape. In the late 19th century landscape photography played a crucial role in the formation of Norway's national identity. During this era landscape photography redefined the nation, producing images within which the physical and topographical features of Norway were emphasised. The production and dissemination of these images occurred in a period of growing modernity involving: the building of the railway infrastructure and the mechanisation of coastal and inland passenger shipping; the growth of tourism; the commercialisation of photography and its development through new forms of distribution and mass circulation; and the transformation of the photographic medium through new technology. The essay considers how Knudsen's landscape imagery developed in these contexts as well as the extent to which his images were drawn from earlier depictions of the Norwegian landscape. Wriedt shows how the consolidation of Norwegian national identity occurred in relation to the appearance of now familiar landscape images, and that Knudsen

was at the forefront of these developments, but that these images framed their subject in new ways as their audience changed, culminating in the emergence of the tourist postcard as the most significant means through which they circulated.

Wriedt's emphasis on the material form of the postcard, the wider dissemination of Knudsen's landscapes – and the relationship of these to the development of tourism in the 19th century indicate the significance of travel, an aspect of the discussions of both Itälahti and Cronin and Keister, in the former case the landscape of the railway journey, in the latter the polar expedition. Tourism as discussed by Wriedt is a particular form of travel, but in essays concerned with the contemporary landscape travel and tourism are still present, albeit in novel and sometimes virtual forms. Whites' essay considers the Nordic territories in relation to the forms of mass migration typical of the global era, but the landscape images of the books she discusses also constitute a distant, tourist gaze in which the complex realities of places are subordinate to an unchanging, timeless vision. Ease of travel and distribution has also changed the relation of the local to the global, particularly where local practices impinge on people and places elsewhere in the world. Such factors are explored by Becker and White in their respective discussions of environmental degradation.

Furthermore, new technologies of recording visual information, and then disseminating it via the Internet – perhaps instantaneously – facilitate new ways of experiencing distant places in relation to the local. Meaning that in some ways places that once seemed at a great geographical distance are now experienced as more proximate. However, this new relationship with the distant is not necessarily an easy one and may instead create feelings of unease or incongruity about a given, far-away place. Lena Quelvennec's analysis of digital recordings of the aurora borealis addresses these issues.

Quelvennec considers how landscape images produced in the context of tourism transform them, preserving some of the meanings and effects that would have been evident in their forerunners whilst intensifying others, as well as producing new ones. Quelvennec is concerned with the contemporary tourist experience and recognises tourism as now involving both a physical presence and a virtual element, which she explores through tourist recordings of the aurora borealis and their subsequent dissemination as YouTube video as well as the relation of these to older representations of wilderness spectacle. If the image of northern wilderness reached its apogee in 19th century narratives of heroic exploration, hardship and remote landscapes, there is still a connection, she argues, between this vision and the contemporary tourist gaze. Tourists seeking a direct experience of the northern lights are still under the influence of wilderness narratives. The key aspect of YouTube recordings of the phenomenon, however, is immediacy: experience is recorded in 'real time', there are opportunities for viewer feedback, and in the technical production of the images there is an emphasis on movement

and speed. The author compares a 19th century painting of the aurora borealis to the most recent developments in photography, film, video and online distribution, and is able to identify significant continuities in these representations of northern wilderness, whilst forms of observation associated with the tourist gaze have also evolved, in particular she identifies a symbiotic relationship between real and virtual tourism through the functioning of social media. What is quite evident from Quelvennec's image analysis is that Barthes' "reality effect" remains a powerful element in northern wilderness tourist landscapes.

Nicky Bird's "Ghosting the Castle: the case of (re)landscaping in a Northern place" is a discussion of a project she undertook, to investigate issues of heritage, the archive, memory and "layered histories" in Helmsdale, a fishing village on the North-East coast of Scotland. Bird's project involved archival research, oral history, and an engagement with images from the past through rephotography. Archival photographs are shown to have significant meaning within people's narratives: they "prompted memories and knowledge" of heritage sites, but this is not a matter of simple recollection because "heritage" – in a quotation from Raphael Samuel – "is continually shedding its old character and metamorphosing into something else". And in fact the connections people made to different landscape photographs were diverse and sometimes uncanny, bringing distinct conceptions of the past into a relationship with present-day concerns. The essay is particularly interesting in its efforts to investigate received ideas about the meaning of 'North'. If some standard approaches to northerness imply remoteness and a lack of connectedness this is very much a distant perspective, a view from outside; when places are viewed from within, the landscape is more complex, something revealed through photography-based memory work. There are several aspects to this work, however, involving not simply recovering the past but "mediating the memories and knowledge of others". A key element of this research involves gaining knowledge of the history of the photographic materials in the archive. It is also vital to understand the location itself and its people. Finally, of critical importance is the production of "collaborative photo-based artworks that respond meaningfully to place and people", in which rephotography has a significant part.

In Tim Daly's essay – "The North as a fantasy playground: re-evaluating the literary influences in the landscape photography of Raymond Moore" – Moore is recognised as working outside of the observational, documentary category so significant in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. Paradoxically, perhaps, it was this lack of interest in the mainstream of documentary photography that framed his images of northern England and informed his interest in places such as Silloth on the Cumbrian coast. This was a distinctly unpicturesque vision of northern England with a focus on the unexceptional environment of places in a "kind of limbo land"; they were a "depiction of inanimate objects in the quasi-surreal landscape of concrete, tarmac and pebbledash". Moore's representations of "an unpeopled

terrain" communicated a sense of "loss and decline", combining the "sublime and the banal, making the commonplace both recognised and mysterious". Moore was drawn to bleak, derelict landscapes, "liminal spaces and deserted edgelands", and "had a fascination with the nondescript in a social landscape, overlayed with his own sense of entropy…".

Moore's orientation towards some versions of English surrealism – Daly compares him to 1930s artist Paul Nash – is particularly interesting because it was also given a northern character: as his work became more focused on northern England "it took on a deadpan and poignant undercurrent", thus it could be suggested that his work promoted an English northern landscape aesthetic. He did this partly through the activation of a literary sensibility in his work – particularly the influence of Arthur Machen – and significantly through the influence of the "literal, deadpan style" of American photographers associated with the New Topographics show, who represented a "social landscape physically and spiritually depleted, released from romantic and picturesque concerns".

Across the range of essays contained in this volume, issues of place and space, proximity and distance are prominent. As a whole the essays demonstrate that notions of northerness rooted in an earlier era and represented in the landscapes of the 19th century have continued to have an impact since, even when the aim of these different discussions is to question received ideas about place and its conception in visual and literary representations of the North, whether in historical case studies or contemporary practice. An important strand throughout is one exploring the extent to which framing and reframing of northern landscape images both preserves and consolidates older, historic meanings whilst intensifying and transforming them. The subject and point of view of a landscape image is important but its source and conception lie outside of the field of depiction and these frame the image in numerous ways; the image, consequently, is never static and stable and is historically malleable.

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