

25. Wilderness and landscape as socio-cultural constructions in the age of emergency and Capitalocene

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Abstract:

The symposium aims to reflect on how nature becomes spectacularized, fitting a specific representational, political and productive strategy. In particular, we wish to discuss and question the constitutive criteria and limits of what is considered to be wild nature and landscape; and how these concepts evolve with the normalization of states of emergency and crises (Moore, 2014). It would seem that contemporary marketization processes mutate physical spaces into mythical spaces, where sacred elements become accessible to a wide range of people through commodified rituals. Wilderness is then a planned construction and, by virtue of a patrimonialization process, turns natural places into consumption goods which are demanded insofar as they are able to project a divine dimension in the person who consumes them (dos Santos, 2009). We suggest including wilderness in the analytical structure related to cultural heritage to reflect on the existence of different ways of seeing and analyzing landscapes. Besides encouraging submissions related to critical readings of nature as a natural icon (Echavarren, 2010: 1116), the panel also welcomes novel ways to understand landscape and wilderness in the current age of emergency, uncertainty and Capitalocene.

Proposal

The panel aims to discuss and question the constitutive criteria and limits of what is considered to be wild nature and landscape and how these concepts take new forms in our present in relation with the normalization of states of emergency, environmental, economical and health crisis and the effects of 'Capitalocene' (Moore, 2014).

The idea of landscape and its understanding as something which separates nature from culture originated back in the XVI century, corresponding with the setting of the bourgeoisie, the first seeds of the industrial revolution, the process of land abandonment and urbanization and the base of 'cheap nature strategy and today's biospheric turbulence' (Moore, 2014). Landscapes as "natural

goods” are considered geographical places unmodified by human hands – as opposed to places where human activity has altered them, turning them into cultural landscapes. The aforementioned explains how nature becomes spectacularized, fitting a specific representational, political and productive strategy.

In practice, the modern understanding of nature implies a multitude of new abstract social labour forms reshaping our understanding of what wilderness means (Moore, 2014: 5). This is a crucial issue when gauging the extent to which humans and wildlife may continue to coexist. One is left to wonder about the ability of our cultural conceptions of ”wildness” to keep pace with the rate at which wildlife adapts to anthropogenic landscape change, as well as the effectiveness and acceptability of interventions that help maintain expected ”wild” traits’ (Leong, 2009: 124). It goes without saying that the growing interest in defining wilderness in convenient terms for human survival is closely intertwined with the ecological unbalances threatening ever increasingly urban lifestyle promoted by modernity. It was not always so. Although the Greek polis was already complemented by wild spaces (called *eschatiai*, meaning margins or borders of the city), those were essentially defined as non-productive, in contrast with both urban and rural spaces. The mercantilization process has thus expanded the concept of Hinterland, the backcountry, to include and ensnare new spaces of capital accumulation.

One possible venue to reflect on these issues is the notion of patrimony and its capacity to actively privilege – and, by the same token, eliminate – certain human and non-human activities in non-urban spaces. Although the Roman tradition considers patrimony as what one can own individually, the use of the designation has evolved to refer today to public goods and to that which belongs to the gods or to death: what is patrimonial today is what cannot be appropriated by individuals. The sacralization at stake in patrimonialization takes the asset from the profane sphere (of men) to the sacred sphere (of the divine). Assets considered worthy of this process are given a sacred character, by taking them out of the sphere of the mundane and by inscribing in them a certain reading of the past and of the memory allegedly contained by those assets. Thereafter, the utility of the patrimonialized good becomes measured by its ability to project a divine dimension in the person who consumes it (dos Santos, 2009). By virtue of patrimonialization, certain goods will see some of their tangible and intangible features highlighted, modifying their very same meaning. Some cultural expressions will then be glorified, others will require to be re-signified to fit the market needs, and some will be simply discarded (Debelle, 2010).

In line with the work conducted by the group on Popular Culture and Conflict, the aim here is to “recognize the criteria that activate a certain cultural element as cultural heritage from those of expert bodies that act based on political or private interests in matters of imaginaries” (Delgado, 2023). As we see it, the sacralization of natural spaces is deeply connected to the distinction between natural place and natural icon (Echavarren, 2010: 1116). The natural place is a ‘historical, relational and identity space’ where people build an intimate and routinary relation with what surrounds them. On the contrary, the natural icon involves a relationship not with the place as such, but instead with what the place symbolizes. Historical space mutates into a mythical space where sacred elements are accessible to a wide range of people through commodified rituals, also implying the enclosure of those places to previous users. As such, the natural icon urbanizes the wild and markets it as a global good. We suggest including wilderness in the same analytical structure to reflect on the existence of different ways of seeing and analyzing landscapes. Besides encouraging submissions related to critical readings of nature as a natural icon, the panel also

welcomes novel ways to understand landscape and wilderness in the current age of emergency, uncertainty and Capitalocene.

The panel welcomes proposals related to:

- Current, new and future imaginaries surrounding our conceptions of wild nature and landscape;
- Influencing elements of States of emergency and Capitalocene on formulation of landscape, wilderness, patrimonialization.
- Critical deconstructions of the processes involved in the patrimonialization of landscape and wild spaces.
- The analysis of anthropocentric biases in the evaluation of natural spaces as wild or aesthetically worth it.
- The inclusion of new-age spiritual elements in the patrimonialization and consumption of certain natural settings
- Concrete case studies involving resistance against mercantiled landscape discourses (p.e. unregulated and self-construction; light and mobile dwelling spaces)

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