





- 1 Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar, *Place*.
London, Thames & Hudson, 2005.

Beyond landscape
Neus Miró

«There is no such thing as a dull landscape».
John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Landscape* magazine, 1951.

Landscape has expanded its repertoire and has done so in such a way that the term is no longer convenient and/or appropriate to designate the subject of many current studies of those matters. Contemporary practice more commonly and correctly refers to the subject being studied and explored as «place», «territory» or «site». Attentive and analytical eyes being cast towards places is one of the characteristics of a significant part of contemporary artistic production, which includes political and subjective questioning of the subject being explored.

In the book entitled *Place*¹, its authors, Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar, dedicate the first chapter to outlining the genealogy of the term, along with the possible reasons for its current relevance and attraction to many artists. They agree to define a «place» as a space where the reminiscing process continues to trigger the past as something that is—using the terms of Henri Bergson—«lived and acted, rather than represented». There is therefore an undeniable time component in the definition of place; places recall actions, what happened there, and the time parameter becomes one of its main attributes. The identity of a place is constructed by superimposing layers, which is an accumulation process that requires a certain sense of connection, commitment, in order to visualise it. The work of the artists

- 2 Hal Foster, «An Archival Impulse»
October, n° 110, Fall 2004, pp. 3-22.

to whom we are referring, including Tacita Dean, Roni Horn, James Benning, Darren Almond, Xavier Ribas, Marine Hugonnier, Jane & Louise Wilson, Joachim Koester, Emily Richardson to name just a few, results in a registry of places, the subject of their explorations, being established through a deep sense of connection, although not necessarily of familiarity. Their respective pieces, that are usually in the form of photographs, video and film, are based on and are the outcome of the construction of important connections at the level of experience with the place in particular. They are often hatched over long periods of time.

The places as structures developed by accumulation, as physical depositories of bygone facts and circumstances, have created what Hal Foster refers to as the «Archival Impulse» in many artists. Their interest and attraction for specific (and not such specific) places is based in the visualisation of relevant information, that is sometimes historical and often lost or disappeared, which in some way shapes its idiosyncrasy in the present. Thus, the place is not taken to be a standard archive, such as a categorical database that is meticulous in its ordering and classification; their approach to the place as an archive is characterised by trawling, researching, reconstruction work, linked to a specific subjectivity. This is often fragmented

and does not impose an absolute or closed reading. The authors are «concerned less with absolute origins than with obscure traces (perhaps 'anarchival impulse' is the more appropriate phrase), these artists are often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects—in art and history alike—that might offer points of departure again»².

Likewise, in many of the cases to which we can refer, the concept of archive linked to place also acquires a meaning in tune with the one developed by Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*. There, it is related to what is under threat of disappearing in an immediate future, of perishing or succumbing, in short, it is related to the steady beat of death and loss. Thus, these artists and their works seek to explore untold stories, contained and part of a physical, geographical place, and they therefore seek to reconstruct, which is likewise accompanied by a desire to archive to preserve and conserve, other stories and other narratives.

Right from the start, photography and film have been linked to recording the ephemeral. In their early days, they deeply transformed the ideas around recording, storing data, around constructing memory and knowledge. As Mary Ann Doane discussed, the central contribution of these depiction technologies

3 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time. Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Cambridge, Mass / London, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 222.

4 *Ibidem*, p. 223.

is to record, capture the unusual, the instant, the fortuitous, in a fragmented way in the case of photography, and with the possibility of duration and continuity in the case of film. Even though the infinite reproduction capacity in both media, could be in contradiction with the aura given to the archive material—in its singularity and uniqueness—the archive and photography and/or film share objectives that bring them towards an obvious point of convergence. The archive is a structure that protects against time and the inevitable corruption: «The aim of this historiographic/archival impulse is to retrieve everything possible, driven by a temporal imperative (before it is 'too late') and the anticipation of a future interpretation (in this sense, the archival process is a wager that stacks the deck: this object, because it is preserved, *will be interpreted*)»³.

The incorporation of film as a process to archive and as an archive material also enables a certain kind of temporality of other experiences of time, to be preserved, along with being an undeniable ally of the contingent, the incidental, the fortuitous: «Film's potential as an archive of noise hinges upon its intimate alliance with contingency, its perceived ability to represent *by chance* or even to represent *chance*»⁴.

One of the characteristics of the time parameter is its irreversibility, a factor that it shares with entropy. Film assumes a privileged role in recording that irreversibility. One of the aspects in which it is best reflected is its capacity of capturing the contingent, the incidental and fortuitous through the use of the fixed long shot. This type of take is similar to a lengthy gaze where the non-planned, where the unforeseeable or unexpected can appear at any time. Editing, cutting, montage are factors of the very filming making apparatus, of its acquired language, that cancel that underlying possibility of recording time outside itself. This type of take is what facilitates the contingent, the fortuitous being captured, recorded on film, and enables the encounter of the spectator with the absence of control, with alterity, with other possibilities.

Returning again to the theses of Mary Ann Doane, there is a link with cinephilia in the capturing of the contingent. Even though the term refers to a general love of the cinema, Doane stresses its origins and its link with the appreciation of the fortuitous, subtle or accidental. The term gained ground in the 1950s and 1960s, but its genesis is in and has similarities with earlier attitudes, by those expressed by Jean Epstein and his concept of *photogénie* and the Surrealists

5 Ibidem, p. 227.

6 Pier Paolo Pasolini, «Observations on the Long Take» in: *October*, n° 13, Summer 1980, pp. 3-6.

7 Ibidem, p. 3.

celebrating arbitrariness, of what escapes from conscious control. Cinephilia is therefore a love of films in general, but, above all, of its capacity to capture details, moments, gestures. Furthermore, «what cinephilia names is the moment when the contingent takes on meaning—a necessarily private, idiosyncratic meaning nevertheless characterized by the compulsion to share what is unsharable, inarticulable»⁵. Cinephilia likewise speaks to us about a certain relationship that is established between the audience and the film, a relationship that is also based on knowledge, and from there of the effectiveness of the contingent. On the other hand, this link will not end or disappear despite technological transformations, etc., that film undergoes, as it is not engraved in a historical moment, but rather in its essential nature and its other latent possibilities.

The static long shot is that which enables the fortuitous to be recorded, the sequence of everything that is not planned, of what is apparently insignificant. It is the most disposed to description and therefore, more resistant, in principle, to the development of stories, to the narrative. On the other hand, the fixed long shot is associated with recording reality—from the outside—in a simulated real time and which transmits a certain feeling of plausibility. It is one of

the most common takes in the documentary genre precisely thanks to that alleged umbilical connection with reality. Some authors have even given it the capacity to provide the flow of time in the present.

Pier Paolo Pasolini in an article entitled «Observations on the Long Take»⁶ analyses and establishes relations between the depiction of the different times—past and present—and those elements of film grammar that best record and transmit them. Taking the film of the assassination of J.F. Kennedy as the subject for his analysis, he establishes that the long shot, as can be seen in that case, is a take that communicates what is recorded in present time: «Reality seen and heard as it happens is *always in the present tense*. The long take, the schematic and primordial element of cinema, is thus in the present tense. Cinema therefore 'reproduces the present'. Live television is a paradigmatic reproduction of something happening in the present»⁷.

According to Pasolini, montage, editing and the sequency of scenes transform the present captured by the long take into the past. According to Pasolini, the continuous take embodies the flow of insignificant events that make up life: «The substance of cinema is therefore an endless long take, as it is reality to our senses for as long as we are able to see and feel (a long take that ends

with the end of our lives); and this long take is nothing but the reproduction of the language of reality. In other words it is the reproduction of the present»⁸.

However, the many artists that nowadays use this element of film-making language do so for other and different reasons. Even though they share some aspects of Pasolini's views, other authors consider film not so much the depiction of the present, but rather the transmission of a historical present, which can be re-visited and re-stated.

«It takes time to get to know a place» point out James Benning, and his films are good proof of this, both due to their structure and the method used in their production. Through his work, this author, born in Milwaukee and living in California, has continuously and persistently conducted an audiovisual study of specific geographical areas of the USA: the Benning films shot in 16 mm—except for his latest work—make up a meticulous study of the territory explored, as the different places are presented as a sequence of time capsules (static long takes), which enables the specific place to unfold, to breathe in front of the gaze of the audience likewise preparing narrative structures where image, audio (and occasionally text) are interrelated beyond the more standard film-making patterns.

On the other hand, his work methodology has been based on the recurrent viewing and observing the places being studied and thus recording the changes that occur.

His latest film *Ruhr* [2009] is an exception in Benning's career, both for the fact that it was shot in HD, instead of 16 mm, and, on the other hand, because the territory to be observed, the Ruhr region in Germany, is the first place filmed outside of the USA. However, Benning yet again performs a subtle and well-chosen portrait of a territory, introducing a new *tour de force* for the audience in the second part of the film. The Ruhr region is noted for being a coal-mining and industrial region and for the presence of a large working class. The film is divided into two chapters: the first is made up of six fixed takes of different lengths, where each one recorded a specific place, including a tunnel with vehicles going through it, a wooded zone located near to Düsseldorf airport, or inside a mosque when people are praying. The second chapter that lasts 60 minutes shows a fixed take of the upper part of a large building, the coke-processing tower in Schwelgern. Every ten minutes, this upper part of the tower is shrouded in steam that is released by the very building through its external structure. The first time that the audience sees what is happening, they may easily

think that the building is collapsing even though no detonation has been heard. There are ten shots of this process of thick steam billowing out of the tower and during that hour, the gradual changes of light can also be observed (as in other previous films, such as *13 Lakes* and *Ten Skies*), as it begins to get dark towards the end of the film and all the colours vary.

Even though *Ruhr* is Benning's first film on HD and outside the USA, it retains the ability to capture the portrait of a territory through a in-depth film experience of the place that is translated in long takes that foster the perception capacity and an increase of the conscience towards the contingent and the fortuitous. The different takes-scenes that occur provide a portrait of the Ruhr zone where the interrelation is highlighted between industrial manufacturing, the ways of life and culture. In the words of Benning «it is about things that reoccur and the subtle changes that happen. It asks you to look and listen».

These works describe and then «portray» a place, however, they do not explain, as the visual likewise has its limitations. Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar pointed out: «Surely nobody is more aware of the limitations of the visual than visual artists, just as poets are most sensitive to the inadequacies of language.[...] Just as we

may derive visual pleasure from looking at a particular picture, or a particular landscape, a more profound engagement must depend upon more than the visual, upon those things that remain invisible»⁹.

The historical elements, that happened in a place, the narrative of a present that no longer has a future, are often explicitly incorporated in the works of those artists through the text. In her latest work entitled *Memo Mori* [2009], Emily Richardson sets off on a journey through the Hackney district in London which will be home to a new Olympic area for the Games in 2012. Using different shootings, carried out over three years that cover different sites, Richardson makes a portrait of an ephemeral moment and place, which is interlinked with the voice over by Iain Sinclair, taken from his book, *Hackney, that Red Rose Empire*. The film begins with a canoe journey along the canal to Manor Gardens, where the plots of land are shown, each with their vegetable patch or garden and their respective sheds, where the commentary by Iain Sinclair stresses the idiosyncrasy of each of them and the use of reused materials, etc. After the canal journey, she sets off on a bus journey around the zone where the old buildings have been demolished and the land prepared for new building work, and the film epically ends with a procession of

Hells Angels who are following the coffin of one of their members along Hackney Road. Richard's film provides the portrait of a specific area of London and assumes the role of a posthumous homage to landscapes and territories, as well as to human activities and relations with an imminent expiry date.

The narrative in the case of the work entitled *Greenhouse* [2007] by Xavier Ribas is incorporated through the installation format that it uses. The work is made up of two films; while one is being projected, the other can be seen on a monitor that is located on the side of the very exhibition space. The projection, using a continuous tracking shot of twenty minutes, shows the construction of a greenhouse, measuring approximately 800 metres, in Wieringermeer, located 60 km to the north of Amsterdam. The visual journey through that extension initially shows a space that the audience can recognise as an agricultural area and the greenhouse begins to be seen after a few minutes. During the film journey, there is a constant interrelation between the foreground of the image and the background, where the construction is situated; an interrelation that shows two different construction models, of an agricultural holding, of life.

On the monitor, on the other hand, the audience finds itself inside, in the dining room of Lenie and Reinier Muller, one

of the three families who have sold their farms and land to the company that built the greenhouse. On this occasion, the film shows an elderly couple, seated at the table and looking towards the camera or the speaker (who is hidden), and behind them on the left-hand side of the shot, a window offers a view of the outside, a field in the foreground and a busy road in the background, where the cars become more visible as it gets darker. The account does not follow the standard pattern of an interview as you can never hear the questions and, on the other hand, the different «chapters» are separated by black fade outs. Lenie, who is the one who speaks English to the camera with the occasional input from her husband (who only speaks Dutch), tells the past of the space that is outside the window, and she constantly refers to the outside with her body movements as well as her verbal description. Thanks to her narrative, the audience learns that the whole zone was originally covered by water until 1930 where the dykes were built. Families were then able to settle there and farm. Their farms were later bombed by the Germans during the Second World War and were then rebuilt. The account that Lenie is weaving, by interlinking the different episodes, both at a personal level and those recorded in the official history, enable the

temporary recreation of the place that the audience is seeing in parallel through the tracking shot. The two images and accounts complement each other in such a way that they manage to highlight the extreme fragility of the present place.

For these artists, and for many of their contemporaries, places have become verbal syntactic units where the past, present and the possible stories of the future are re-stated. Exempt from a priority contemplative gaze, they are always appealing to the places being scrutinised from subjective and political premises.