

# Multimodal Palimpsests: Ideology, (Non-)memory, Affect and the Senses in Cultural Landscapes Construction in Eastern and Central Europe

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DOROTA KOŁODZIEJCZYK\* & SIEGFRIED HUIGEN\*\*

\*Olga Tokarczuk Ex-Centre, Academic Research Centre and Postcolonial Studies Centre, Institute of English Studies, University of Wrocław ul. Kuźnicza 21-22, 50-138 Wrocław, Poland. Email: [dorota.kolodziejczyk@uwr.edu.pl](mailto:dorota.kolodziejczyk@uwr.edu.pl)

\*\*Erasmus Chair of Dutch Philology, ul. Kuźnicza 21-22, 50-138 Wrocław, Poland. Email: [siegfried.huigen@uwr.edu.pl](mailto:siegfried.huigen@uwr.edu.pl); Department of Afrikaans and Dutch, University of Stellenbosch, Private Bag X1, Matieland 7602, South Africa

This article introduces a collection of essays about the construction of a cultural landscape in Eastern and Central Europe. This part of the world has been subjected to violent changes over the past hundred years that have also left their marks on the landscape, especially in the wake of the Second World War and after the fall of the Iron Curtain. It is suggested that the cultural dimension of these changes will be approached as a multimodal palimpsest, where old layers have partially been erased and overwritten by new layers of landscape text, with the old text still being more or less readable to the researcher. In addition, it is emphasized that this process of rewriting is still ongoing, in attempts to inscribe landscapes within ethnocentric frameworks.

In a village in the mountainous region of Lower Silesia, south-western Poland, buses bring German tourists:

Every year the Germans come pouring out of coaches that park timidly on the hard shoulder, as if trying to be inconspicuous. They walk about in small groups or pairs, most often pairs, a man and a woman, as if looking for a spot to make love. They take photos of empty spaces, which many people find puzzling. Why don't they take pictures of the new bus stop or the new church roof, instead of empty spaces overgrown with grass? We have often treated them to tea and cakes. They never sit down or ask for more. [...] One year an old couple turned up on our land and showed us where houses that no longer existed had stood. (Tokarczuk 2002 [1998]: 91–92)

This fragment from Olga Tokarczuk's novel, *House of Day, House of Night* (2002 [1998]) pictures a scene in which a small village at the Polish–Czech border suddenly turns into a place of recollection and haunting. At this moment, the ruptured history of the place reveals itself in the spectral appearance of the landscape long gone. It is seen only by the elderly Germans who make a sentimental journey across the border to immerse themselves in the landscape they remember from their childhood and youth, while the Poles stand by and wonder why the tourists should be interested in this void rather than acknowledge how the place has been modernized. This fragment comprises the core features of Central and Eastern European cultural landscapes. A place can be made up of many landscapes, some stored in memory, some physically present, triggering emotional and affective response.

The short fragment from the novel illustrates that landscape is rarely just a visible fragment of physical space, yielding passively to the onlooker's gaze. Quite the reverse, landscape, as is by now commonly agreed, is to a large degree a discursive construct, or, even, process, at the intersection of a natural (environmental) material setting and human agency that intervenes by the very act of surveying the place, as in the famous 'monarch of all I survey' imperial gaze in nineteenth-century travel writing (Pratt 1992: 201). The traditional definition of landscape as something between space and place, or as a descriptive category between geography and topography, does not seem to apply anymore. Neither is landscape necessarily perceived as a phenomenon of nature or of nature cultivated by humans. Space reflects cultural and symbolic values (Czepczyński 2008: 36) and, as such, it renders place as a time–space identification of human activities (Lozny 2006: 15), additionally pervaded with the signs and effects of human activity and intervention, but also shaping the human-made environment. This mutuality of intervention and impact lies at the core of the cultural landscape concept (Kirchhoff *et al.* 2012: 54).

Landscape as a semiotic whole is increasingly studied as an entity that is multimodal in nature, combining language, 'visual images, nonverbal communication and infrastructure of the surrounding environment' (Wee and Goh 2020: 1). This landscape multimodality also includes affect (Wee and Goh 2020) with the correlating range of emotions and sentiments that the cultural bearing of the landscape evokes and nurtures through memories, narratives, images and ideologies. The ideological investment of cultural landscape has been recognized in studies on nation(alism) and how it links identity with territory (White 2000: 26). Landscape can 'transform ideologies into a concrete, visual form' (Czepczyński 2008: 38), and conversely, landscape can be transformed into a concrete, visual form by an ideology (Bell 2014: 81). Landscapes are powerful reinforcers for the ideology of belonging through their associative power to bind place (site) and identity in the material and intangible formula of heritage as part of the imagined community resource.

Cultural landscapes in Central and Eastern Europe after two major historical shifts in the twentieth century – the end of the Second World War and the end of the Iron Curtain divide of Europe and the world – have been subject to profound transformations in their physical structure and symbolic import. Landscapes developing in the wake of the Second World War were premised on population losses,

border shifts, large-scale resettlements and system changes reflecting the post-war bipolar world order. They were changed and structured to fit the ideological imaginaries of communism, of which industrialization and collectivization were the most important, with the incumbent large-scale projects intervening into the natural environment: dams, hydropower plants, river diversions or even spaceports, such as the Baikonur Cosmodrome, or fairly uniform housing programs developing large, apartment-block areas responding to the ideology of standardization in the name of working-class egalitarianism. The uniformity of the lived space concerned not only these gigantic operations profoundly changing landscapes in Soviet-dominated countries, but also the interiors. Writer Dubravka Ugrešić remembers in her collection of essays *Nobody's Home* that both private homes and hotels throughout the people's republics in Eastern and Central Europe were always decorated with the ficus and had the same style of interior design. When already a refugee from war-ravaged Yugoslavia, Ugrešić notes how this still unchanged hotel in a provincial town in Poland in the 1990s granted her a sudden tremor of a homecoming in a nostalgic realization of being one with those who live there, sharing that uniform space at the moment of inevitable transition to another, global uniformity:

I smoothed the linen (my mother had just the same) and realised I'd come home. [...] with them, with the Easterners, liars, smart alecks, tricksters, losers, matchbox swindlers, gab-a-lots, thieves, petty and big-time operators, survivors [...] with people who are clandestinely laying the paths to a future united Europe. (Ugrešić 2007 [2005]: 108)

With the system change after 1989, cultural landscapes went through another sweeping transition, starting with the landscape of systemic collapse (Bell 2014: 84) effecting a void which itself became an object of scholarly interest in ethnography, cultural anthropology or political science (Steen 2004). Ideologization of cultural landscape, common to practically all the countries and regions of Central and Eastern Europe after 1945, throughout the decades of socialism, met a counter-response in 'decommunization' processes after the collapse of communism, sometimes grass-roots and spontaneous, sometimes based on 'decommunization' laws. Demolishing or relocating monuments to the victory of the Soviet army over Nazism, seen also as monuments to Soviet domination, or renaming streets, have been the most visible interventions into the landscape to change it in line with the new political situation and cultural ambience. Military cemeteries and other war memorials and places of commemoration of Soviet soldiers outside of the USSR and of non-Soviet soldiers became subject to protection on the strength of bilateral agreements regulating the conditions of due and respectful maintenance; new museum collections were being put together, testifying to the communist terror, as in House of Terror in Budapest, or histories and communities whose presence or memory had been suppressed in the decades of socialist regimes, such as, for example, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews – Polin, or the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising. Industrial landscapes, so crucial to the communist system

of representation, transitioned in cities to the post-industrial, post-communist landscape redefined to a new functionality of commercial or living urban spaces.

The 1990s was the decade of rampant outbursts of grassroots trade growing out of every street corner in post-socialist cities and taking up any available space. Multi-ethnic, makeshift bazaars selling affordable goods imported in bags and backpacks by individual merchants became a characteristic view in 1990s, a proof of new entrepreneurship linking trading nodes with networks of (yet) informal economy connections from Vietnam across Central Asia to Eastern and Central Europe (Osiecka and Vukosavljević 2019). The bazaars, satiating the commodity hunger with mostly fake-brand merchandise, preceded the malls which fundamentally redefined the urban space of post-socialist cities, smoothly integrating commodity culture into the cultural semiotics of urban space. Gated residential areas, developed in the 1990s and 2000s, marked new class divisions and raised contention as to the legal premises of limiting access to common urban space, proving once again that place and the landscape it comprises are always discursive social interventions. With the accession to the EU, post-socialist landscapes may be said to have transitioned to the “New Europe” landscape responding both to market economy impacts on our immediate environment and to the new sense of a comeback to Europe understood as civic and cultural space. Plaques attributing the modernized and enriched infrastructure to EU funds became a common element of local landscapes and the booster of local pride.

How vulnerable a landscape still is to a political agenda can, however, be seen especially in the last decade, when – with the rise to prominence of the political right (particularly in Hungary and Poland) – the visible, material landscape as well as that more intangible one – made up of social affect, discourse and imagination – started to become subject to political appropriations again. In Hungary, posters linking George Soros with the threat of immigrants’ flowing into the country could be seen everywhere in urban spaces during the 2017 and 2018 elections, raising questions of how anti-Semitism in disguise serves to mobilize nationalist affect and effectively target human rights as an inconvenient obstacle for nationalist governments (Thorpe 2017). The eviction of the Central European University, a landmark of the open society ethos for the whole region, not just Budapest or Hungary, became symbolic of the hostile takeover of the cultural landscape by right-wing revolutionaries. Since 2015, Poland took a similar course of action under a nationalist government. Subordinating places of memory, national commemoration and remembering, such as memorials and museums, to the nationalist agenda fostering new ‘patriotic’ narratives, the ruling camp has worked steadily to erase the complex and contentious, but still unique, cultural landscape of the transition period as a post-communist con game partnering with neoliberalism.

These are but a few nodal points in studies on cultural landscapes in transition in Central and Eastern Europe. The articles in this Focus contribute to an already large and varied archive on Eastern and Central European cultural landscapes following a hermeneutical tradition going back to Clifford Geertz and his proposition to read landscape textually as a social document (1973) and Henri Lefebvre’s concept of space as socially produced, being subject to but also generator of social relations

(Lefebvre 1991 [1974]: 73–75). The visual-textual-materialist perspective renders the Eastern and Central European cultural landscape into a palimpsest where old layers have partially been erased and overwritten by new layers of landscape text, with the old text still being more or less readable to the researcher. At the same time, it is important to note that while some authors in the current collection of essays depart from the notion of landscape as palimpsest, they see the consecutive layers of the landscape as a notoriously ideological intervention subordinating public space to political power (Kornelia Kończal, Neda Genova), including the power of the Iron Curtain geopolitics over western literary imaginaries (Martyna Bryła). The authors in this Focus importantly complement the textualism of reading the narrative and iconography of Eastern and Central European cultural landscape with the dimension of memory and post-memory, showing how memory work is inevitably linked with affect generated by a sense of loss, mourning, trauma and nostalgia (Alevtina Borodulina), especially if cultural heritage yielded by a landscape involves the sites of genocide and their suppressed traces in collective memory (Roma Sendyka). Affect is at the same time a major factor in producing a cultural landscape that helps reinforce a nationalist ideology by encircling the space of belonging and admission to the imagined community with the landscape of hate and exclusion (Dorota Kołodziejczyk). The ideological investment of landscape construction is also examined in such apparently non-ideological phenomena as sensual perception drawing the ethnic topography of the city (Stephanie Weismann), or water infrastructure in territories subject to (neo)imperialist expansion (Sasha Shestakova and Anna Engelhardt).

Together these essays prove that studying cultural landscapes in Eastern and Central Europe requires multifarious methodologies that make it possible to address, alongside their complex multimodality, the particular challenges of the region. The most important among them is the necessity to acknowledge ambivalence permeating cultural landscapes of Eastern and Central Europe and revealed in studies on memory inscribed in social space, especially the hiatuses in memory narratives that the landscape can help uncover. The other crucial challenge for research on cultural landscapes in Eastern and Central Europe is how to study violence operating in attempts to subordinate the cultural landscape – such as, for example, heritage sites or memorials – to political agendas. That landscapes are subject to ideological appropriation is a fact commonly recognized in the interpretive investment of landscape studies. The rapid shifts in the cultural landscapes of Eastern and Central Europe, including the current culture wars wielded by the political right, particularly require methods capable of examining the violence rupturing continuity, commonality and pluralism, which could otherwise have been the foundations of the cultural landscape.

### **Competing Interests**

The authors declare none.

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## About the Authors

**Dorota Kołodziejczyk** is associate professor of postcolonial and comparative studies at the Institute of English Studies, University of Wrocław. She is director of Olga Tokarczuk Ex-Centre, an academic centre for research in new humanities, and of Postcolonial Studies Centre, both at the University of Wrocław. Her publications include *Postcolonial Perspectives on Postcommunism in Central and Eastern Europe* (Routledge 2016, 2018), co-edited with Cristina Sandru, and special issues of the *European Review* about Central Europe and Colonialism (2018), and *New Nationalisms* (2021), both edited together with Siegfried Huigen.

**Siegfried Huigen** is professor of Dutch and South African Literature at Wrocław University (Poland) and visiting professor of Dutch Literature and Cultural History in the Department of Afrikaans and Dutch at Stellenbosch University (South Africa). He was elected as a member of the Academia Europaea in 2013. Among his books and co-edited volumes in English are *Knowledge and Colonialism, Eighteenth-Century Travellers in South Africa* (Brill, 2009), *The Dutch Trading Companies as Knowledge Networks* (Brill, 2010), *Reshaping Remembrance. Critical Essays on Afrikaans Places of Memory* (Rozenberg, 2011), as well as special issues of the *European Review* about Central Europe and Colonialism, and New Nationalisms, both edited together with Dorota Kołodziejczyk (2018, 2021).