

Behind and Beyond, the Picturesque Still Lives

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Beyond the Picturesque. Ghent: S. M. A. K., 4 April–23 August 2009

Beyond the Picturesque, exhibition catalogue edited by Steven Jacobs and Frank Miles, Leuven: Exhibitions International, 2009, 256 pp., 158 col. and 38 b. & w. illus., €30.00

Technologies of the Picturesque: British Art, Poetry, and Instruments 1750–1830 by Ron Broglio, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2008, 236 pp., 19 b. & w. illus., \$50.00

The titles here suggest a concern for the picturesque as a form of culturally mediated visuality. That this kind of landscape representation is not unmediated has been clear since the beginning of its theorization as a genre, when at the end of the eighteenth century Richard Payne Knight argued that ‘the broader and richer one’s cultural capital, the greater pleasure was available in the viewing of art or nature, because of the depth of associations’.¹ Connoisseurship thus provided a vantage point from which both landowners like Knight and the new category of national tourists were able to master the territory of their own country in order to improve it and thus prove themselves fit citizens. If nowadays the picturesque has become such a maligned genre it is mainly because of its implicit support of this normalizing relationship between subject and object. However, the books and the exhibition reviewed here argue that the blurring of the edges between these categories – subject and object – was already at stake in the eighteenth-century picturesque aesthetic, and show on what terms this visual culture still matters for contemporary interpretations of today’s landscape.

Ron Broglio’s interdisciplinary book, which will be particularly inspiring to art historians, eco-critics and medical humanists, is structured through a contraposition of the sensate and the sensible – that is, a phenomenological critique of those representational technologies that establish the primacy of vision over the other senses. His main task is that of focusing on ‘the body as a space of contact with nature that

provides moments of liberation’ (20) from that specific primacy. Thus the chapters of his volume are organized through a dialectic that opposes eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century technologies which are of consequence to the picturesque aesthetic (including longitude measurements, cloud classification and cattle breeding) against the works of art, poetry, and medical discoveries which, in the same period, struggled to find a means of representing nature which involved physical engagement with it. The latter attempts led to a blurring of that subject–object distinction which the official picturesque vision seemed to endorse in full.

Broglio explores the way the ‘survival of the fittest’ methods of representing nature reveal a cultural history of ideas about the world. Thus chapter two describes how John Harrison’s use of the clock succeeding over Nevil Maskelyne’s lunar methods as a means of finding longitude at sea² has contributed to imposing human time upon the globe; indeed, while astronomy involved a connectedness among human beings, the horizon, and the stars, Harrison’s clock determined longitude by comparing local time with a watch that kept time from the port of origin. This economically successful method ‘marks an inward turn by which nature is discarded for human representation of nature’ (42), and reveals how technology creates a cognitive construct of human relations with the world. According to Broglio, the consequence of this specific ‘cognitive ecology’ is the objectification of nature and the loss of its *haecceity*, its specific way of being. The picturesque aesthetic is informed by this technology of representation through William Gilpin’s tour guides, which describe the rules according to which a proper employment of the faculty of imagination on the part of the tourists will give them the chance to improve the rawness of nature.³

Chapters three and four resume a description of surveying technologies through the example of cartography, which ‘constructs the space it reads and in doing so projects the mapmaker’s desires onto the mapped space’ (53), and also offer a major critique of this particular way of seeing distance through an extensive reading of Wordsworth’s adventures at the Penrith Beacon and at the Simplon Pass in *The Prelude*. According to Broglio, as Wordsworth recollects the moments when he encountered the landscape through disorientation, he realizes that the landscape is ‘a field of related entities ... a constant flux rather than a series of fixed moments’ (92). To experience a conjunction with the disjoined objects he meets during his walk gives Wordsworth the chance to abandon Cartesian

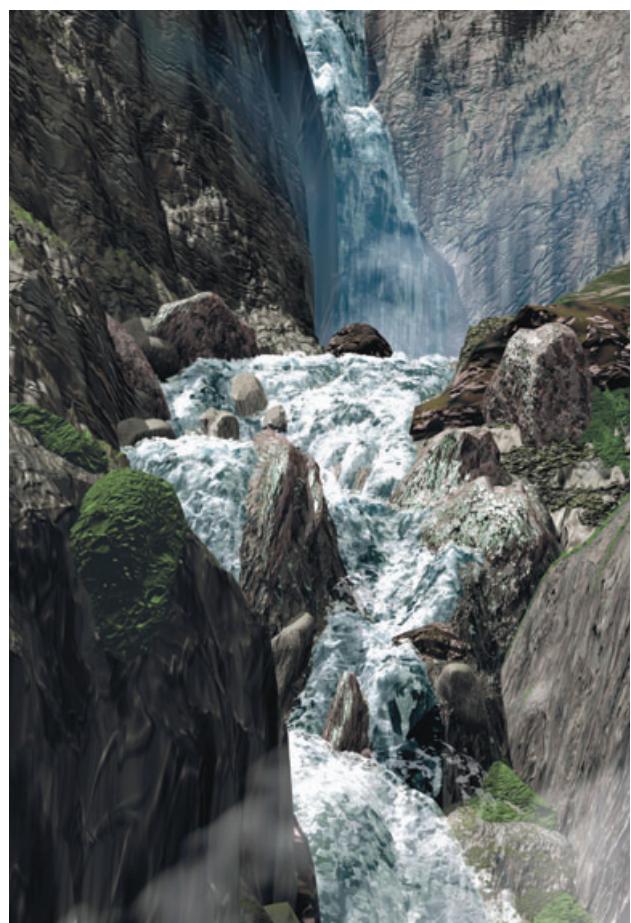
perspectivalism in favour of a new conception of the poet's self, one that 'does not come from within the subject; rather, the subject is an inflection point that takes on meaning as it draws together elements from the surroundings' (85). The optic space of cartography is substituted by the haptic space of walking, which redefines the relation between human beings and nature. By the end of the chapter Broglio manages to convince the reader that the 'trafficking of forms' which occurred to Wordsworth while wandering brings to surface the discovery of internal difference, a concept that challenges the traditional internal coherence of the Romantic subject.

Chapter five is devoted to John Constable and its main task is that of arguing that his studies of clouds do not rely on meteorology,⁴ but rather elude morphological mapping. Unlike traditional picturesque paintings, in which static clouds are set in the background, clouds are depicted by Constable as 'connective tissues', visible signs of what Merleau-Ponty describes in *The Visible and the Invisible* as the 'flesh

of the world'. Indeed, clouds in Constable's paintings connect the different objects in the environment and build a narrative of nature through the unfolding weather they represent, and in thus doing they make the viewer aware that nature has an individuality very different from that of human beings. Whereas early nineteenth-century scientific systems like Luke Howard's nomenclature order clouds and teach a way of seeing them, Constable, interested as he is in the subject, seems more concerned with making the viewer aware 'of the possibility and latency of the felt space of interrelation' (152).⁵ Broglio scores another goal when demonstrating that, by depicting the sky as the 'source of light in nature' (133),⁶ Constable shows 'the landscape as an agent of change above and beyond human agency' (158).

The last two chapters, six and seven, are particularly intriguing because they develop the relationship between nature and culture through the most neglected of picturesque subjects: cattle. By considering cattle-breeding as an important hinge between the wilderness of nature and its cultivation, and by proving how cattle portraits were instrumental to the promotion of breeds, Broglio not only shows that art created a model-type toward which farmers would breed their herds, but also offers another example of an immanent relation to nature by dealing with Edward Jenner's method of inoculation against smallpox, which gives 'animality' back to both animals and humans.⁷ This brings us back to the main subject of the book, which opposes the supremacy of vision to the proximity of touch: while the picturesque aesthetic generally relies on distance in order to frame its object through a 'cultivated' imagination (longitude measurements, mapping, cloud nomenclature), the examples of Wordsworth, Constable and Jenner show how, between the second half of the eighteenth century and the first thirty years of the nineteenth century, poetry, art, and medicine tried to challenge the vantage point offered by technology in order to sacrifice the knowledge of things to their 'thingly quality'. According to Broglio, the main consequence of such a shift was the awareness of a split within the self, which in its turn led to a revision of the traditional subject-object relationship.

It is exactly on this ground that the exhibition at the S.M.A.K. museum in Ghent considered the picturesque aesthetic as a relevant technology for contemporary art. Many of the works represented in the exhibition disclosed the slippery relation between



I Monica Studer and Christoph van den Berg, *Wasserfall* (2002). Laminated inkjet print / photo paper / aluminum, 219 cm x 148 cm.



2 Richard Sympson, *Palmo a Palmo #3* (2007). Lightjet on kodak endure, 281 cm x 375 cm.

subject and object and thus not only went ‘beyond’ the picturesque, but managed to get ‘behind’ it. This was clear from the beginning of the exhibition, when the first installation the viewers met allowed them to observe themselves within a fictional landscape by means of a hidden camera. Thus the viewers’ position was bound to their being observed, which inverted the subject–object relationship until the ‘real’ subject became the ‘reel world’.⁸ This installation, entitled *Loch* (2009), was created by Monika Studer and Christoph van den Berg, whose work *Vue des Alpes* (2000) offers a digital account of stereotypical Swiss motifs (plate 1). The idea of technology as agent of control is also expressed by Sylvia Henrich, whose photographs of *Die Cascata delle Marmore* in Terni (2007) play with the authenticity of nature through a gradual display of the artificial nature of the Italian waterfall, and developed by the Italian duo called Richard Sympson, whose *Palmo a Palmo #3* (2007) is composed of a digital collage of hundreds of zenithal frontal shots of a lawn that was

once covered extensively by the media because of a murder taking place there (plate 2).

Specific resemblances between the works in the exhibition and those of the artists dealt with in Broglio’s book are to be found in Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe’s *Retrophotographic Survey Project*, whose *Four views from four times and one shoreline, Lake Tenaya* (2002) recalls the horizontal canvases used in picturesque landscape paintings and gives the sense of passing time, a subject that occupied Constable’s research throughout his oeuvre, and the attempt by Jussi Kivi to create his own maps in order to record the landscape, which shows a concern for that haptic space which engaged Wordsworth while walking.

So far, Broglio and the artists involved in *Beyond the Picturesque* seem to agree as to the challenge art offers to the traditional picturesque aesthetic, whose implicit endorsement of optical supremacy generally hides the culturally mediated nature of its transparent medium. However, as the catalogue introduction by Steven Jacobs and Frank Maes clarifies, ‘every landscape is described by the laws of image making’

(11), and the idea of losing one's self in order to return to nature its specific individuality, which is the main subject of Broglio's study, is only possible once this is understood. Picturesque beauty exists whenever history, through spatial and temporal distance, imposes a new perspective on us, whenever we cease viewing the buildings from the aesthetic point of view from which they were built. (9) That is why the editors of the catalogue quote the architect Mirko Zardini to explain that the late eighteenth-century notion of the picturesque can be related to contemporary developments in photography, visual arts and urban developments: every dialectical relationship between nature and culture that displays irregularity (what John Ruskin called 'coincidence' and Sir Uvedale Price 'connection') is, as a point of fact, picturesque.⁹

Ironically, the exhibition showed how it may well be 'the optic space' that offers the most remarkable challenge to the opposition between an internally coherent subject and one who discovers self-difference through art. In *Rio Negro-2, Brasil* (1998), Axel Hütte both eludes and complicates this dialectic by depicting the aquatic reflex of jungle trees as something that acquires the same visual value of the objects projecting it, which demonstrates their interdependence and the consequent lack of autonomy of both; while Wouter Verhoeven's film *The Eternal Life* (2007), by showing slowly dissolving still images through the movement of a fixed camera, not only makes the viewer forget about his/her individuality but, which is of more consequence to an inquiry into the picturesque, his/her 'situation'.

Together with several other nineteenth-century aesthetic cultures, the picturesque was oversimplified by the twentieth century, which had its own reasons to wish for new aesthetic categories that were conceptually mediated instead of sensate. Now that digital technologies have imposed a hyper-realistic vision upon us, the time has come to refashion the picturesque anew. Broglio's book and the S.M.A.K. exhibition and accompanying catalogue are excellent vantage points for such an objective.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in John Macarthur, *The Picturesque: Architecture, Disgust and other Irregularities*, London and New York, 2007, 10.
- 2 In 1714 the British government offered a prize of £20,000 in order to find a means of calculating longitude within thirty nautical miles. Harrison and Maskelyne were the main competitors.
- 3 Gilpin's notorious rules inspired Thomas Rowlandson's *Dr Syntax* (1809), a caricature of the tourist whose search for the picturesque fashions the landscape according to standards which are predetermined by art instead of being concerned with a direct involvement with nature.
- 4 Unlike Karl Badt and John Thorne, Broglio contends that the analogical correlation between meteorology and Constable's painting will obscure the specificity of his art, which unfolds a narrative through the changing weather.
- 5 For an insightful account of chiaroscuro in Constable through the mediation of Wordsworth's poetry, see James A. W. Heffernan, *Cultivating Picturacy: Visual Art and Verbal Interventions*, Waco, TX, 2006, chapter VII.
- 6 The expression is taken from a letter by Constable and is quoted by Broglio from John E. Thorne, *John Constable's Skies*, Birmingham, 1999, 280.
- 7 By inoculating humans with cowpox, Jenner discovered a vaccine against smallpox, but at the beginning the idea of such a method led public opinion to refuse his practice.
- 8 For an account of the role of photography in the picturesque aesthetic, see the essay by Steven Jacobs in *Beyond the Picturesque* titled 'The photoresque: Images between city and countryside', 24–63. Jacobs discusses Robert Smithson's updated notion of the picturesque, according to which the invention of the camera has made a museum of the earth, so that 'nature falls into an infinite series of movie stills [and] we get what Marshall McLuhan calls the Reel World' (43).
- 9 This has been long realized by Joel Sternfeld, whose pictures of the Roman countryside show local people living their everyday life next to ancient ruins.