

## **SEMIOTICS OF LANDSCAPE**

A semiotics-inspired approach to landscape research, based on the assumption that landscapes are sign systems and as such have different meanings; the aim of landscape semiotics is to analyse these meanings.

Landscape semiotics is not a homogeneous field, so different methodological positions can be distinguished within it. Some of them are only inspired by semiotics and boil down to treating landscapes as significant (it is possible to indicate researchers who preach the same thesis, but do not consider themselves representatives of semiotics; these include representatives of landscape hermeneutics), others try to apply semiotic tools to landscape research (especially linguistic tools, but not only, because they are also based on Peirce's theory) developed both on the grounds of structuralist and post-structural semiotics.

The assumption that landscapes are significant systems (structures), composed of elements forming complex relations, results in treating landscapes in a way analogous to texts as composed of separable units of significance. These units (and consequently landscapes) are described by means of a scheme: meaningful (i.e. the medium of meaning, in this case the landscape element) - meaning, with the relationship between them usually assumed to be arbitrary, i.e. the result of a convention (code) functioning in a given group. It is also assumed that landscape elements have these meanings and not other meanings because they enter into such and not other relationships with other elements and that deep structures of meaning (mechanisms generating meanings) can be distinguished from their specific manifestations (meanings of certain elements in specific landscapes) (Lindström, Kull and Palang 2014).

The task of landscape semiotics is therefore to read the landscapes, i.e. to identify significant elements, relations between them and codes determining meaning. In other words, a semiotic approach examines how the meanings given to neutral landscape elements have been given. For this reason, the semiotics of landscape places particular emphasis on landscape interpreters, i.e. on the people who, on the basis of social conventions, give them meaning. The codes to which most attention is paid include those concerning power relations, economics, identity, consumption, race, gender, class – it is assumed that it is these factors that cause landscapes to be perceived by people as meaningful, i.e. as carrying such and not another content. To these factors should also be added aesthetics as associated with valuing. As a field that develops the reflection on how humans relate to their environment, the semiotics of landscape is an important component of humanistic geography.

In the semiotics of landscape one of the leading vehicles used to describe the landscape is the metaphor of the text (also used in other approaches, e.g. in environmental hermeneutics), which is sometimes criticised by the proponents of semiotics themselves for its rigidity and systemic nature, excluding non-normative readings. However, this issue is not so much about the landscape as a text, but rather about the way in which the category of text is understood – in this respect the semiotics of landscape would follow the semiotics of literature. An equally controversial metaphor of language is a related factor, which involves

capturing the landscape as a "speaking", conveying a message (Spirn). The question arises: who is talking?

Landscape semiotics is sometimes combined with landscape iconography (Cosgrove). In such an approach, called the representative approach, the landscape is as Cosgrove wrote: "cultural representation, painterly way of showing, structuring and symbolising the environment" – the emphasis in the research is therefore on the analysis of various ways in which humans present the world in pictures (painting, cartography), writing (literature, official documents) and other media (e.g. film). Thus, the iconography of the landscape is being studied, reflecting the way in which humans imagine their surroundings, giving them specific meanings.

The history of gardens is an area in which research on the significance of landscapes has been developed. Gardens are landscapes designed to convey certain meanings. In the course of history, these meanings took various shapes, from iconographic, resulting from the accepted conventions, to sensual-corporeal, deriving from the physical presence of humans (Lichaczow).

The above approaches, accused of dematerialising the landscape, are opposed by phenomenological researchers, who assume that the meaning of the landscape is not only the product of social codes, but is also the result of bodily interaction between humans and landscape. The phenomenological approach gives up thinking about landscape as a certain image of reality, in favour of presenting it as a real sphere in which humans act and which is manifested in their actions.

This perspective is also connected with increasingly common approaches emphasising the importance of the material aspect of the world and the relativity of human existence, which inevitably enters into various relationships with the material world.

Semiotic research on the landscape is not limited only to the sphere of culture. Ecosemiotics examines the communicative (informative) aspects of the landscape from the perspective of the animal and plant world.

The importance of the semiotics of the landscape itself is complex. On the one hand, it helps to understand how people understand their surroundings (how they read them). On the other hand, it makes it possible to see that non-human organisms, which are usually treated as elements of the human landscape, also "have" their own significant landscapes. For these reasons, landscape semiotics is also important for landscape management and design as areas where various meanings overlap (Treib).

"Geosemiotics" and "semio-geography" are close to the term "landscape semiotics".

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