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The European Academy for the Culture of Landscape PETRARCA

Landscape as a mirror of our inner awareness

Biography

Laurens Bockemühl, born in 1966 in Switzerland, studied geography and has worked for about sixteen years as a consultant for the German environmental consulting and planning company Froelich & Sporbeck. He has been involved in the work of the European Academy for the Culture of Landscape PETRARCA since its foundation and is coordinator of the Academy. Laurens Bockemühl lives near Saarbrücken in Germany and has three children.

Abstract

Landscape is not a reality in itself. Landscape is a picture of the relationship of man and his environment. The development of our modern consciousness has led to the separation of human beings and the landscape. As a result we see our landscapes becoming more and more degraded. At the same time modern consciousness can be understood as having the task of becoming aware of the inherent context of life within the landscape. The PETRARCA Academy was founded to support this process. The Academy aims to promote the sustainable cultivation of a human and at the same time viable landscape by training perceptive faculties at various levels in order to promote an independent power of judgement as a basis for taking action. For this purpose and based on long-term research, the PETRARCA Academy's main activity is to organise landscape seminars at different places all over Europe. These seminars are always part of a much larger process of landscape development. The starting point is actual questions relating to the landscape and the people living and working there. PETRARCA has developed a large range of exercises primarily for these seminars which help to deepen our relationship to the landscape.

1 Aspects of the relationship of human beings and landscape

What does it mean to be able to speak about "landscape"?

To use the term landscape means in fact to be able to look at and speak about something that we can consciously perceive through our senses which is outside of us. It is well known that landscape is a whole composed of the interaction of human beings and their environment. We are part of the landscape but at the same time we are able to stand back from it. So we feel separated from the scenery which seems to be only on the outside of us. This separation allows us to be conscious of what we can see and experience. Against this background, the work of the European Academy for the Culture of Landscape PETRARCA mainly focuses on the relationship between human beings and landscape. The supporters of the Academy are convinced that the first stage is to educate our consciousness if we wish to understand our modern landscapes and find new ways of sustainable landscape development.

The Italian poet **Francesco Petrarca** was one of the few people living in the Middle Ages who described the experience of being consciously separated from his own environment. This happened in 1336 when he climbed Mont Ventoux to enjoy the view of the landscape from there.

In the Middle Ages there was normally no separation between man and the surrounding nature. But we do not have to go so far back in history, we only have a look at our children. A five-year-old child, for example, is not interested in beautiful scenery or a landscape panorama. The child is part of it and interacts directly with his environment. Later, approximately at the age of ten, the child begins to see the world separated from itself.

There is an interesting anecdote told in Australia, which illustrates the unity of man and landscape. In a school the children were asked to draw themselves. One child, an Aborigine, drew a picture of a landscape. In this case landscape is obviously an inseparable part of the cultural identity of the people living within their landscape.

To feel separated from our environment is a typical dilemma of our times and our modern consciousness. This development has led to our losing contact with our own living environment. The degradation of our environment leads us to search for a new and conscious approach to renew the connection to landscape.

2 Aims and philosophy of the PETRARCA Academy

On the one hand it is a positive characteristic if we are able to be conscious of our landscapes nowadays. This also means being free and taking on responsibility for our own actions. On the other hand there is the risk of losing the connection to the inherent context of life in the landscape. If we look at ourselves we can easily become aware of the fact that most of the time our inner life, thinking feeling and attention, is not connected to the surrounding landscape. It is increasingly influenced by man-made pictures, theories and virtual realities. Our intentions are

dominated by concepts we impose on our environment without listening to the specific qualities of a given landscape. This becomes progressively more visible in the landscape.

Our separation from landscape has led to the landscapes of Europe reaching an obvious crisis which presents a challenge to our sense of responsibility as human beings.

One of the first steps in the seminars organised by the PETRARCA Academy is therefore to become aware of our own way of looking at landscape. If, during a workshop, we explore and observe a landscape and afterwards come together again to describe this landscape to one another, we can easily see that what we have seen is very much connected to what we have learned and what forms our way of thinking. So the botanist will see plants in a detailed way, the artist will see the composition of colours, the farmer will perhaps be concerned with the “wrong” type of land use.

In conclusion we can say that, as human beings, we do not really experience landscape in its whole context, but more or less as a collection of details.

PETRARCA feels certain that the degradation of our landscapes is connected to our way of thinking and looking at landscape. If we are ready to hear and see openly, we can become aware of our own limitations and deficiencies. This is one of the keys to really paying attention to and understanding other people with completely different viewpoints and opens the mind to consider landscape in a broader way.

PETRARCA therefore wishes to lend increased support to researching ways for training perceptive faculties at various levels in order to promote an independent power of judgement as a basis for taking action.

The main aim is to develop a sense for the characteristics of living processes in the landscape and to recognise their interaction with aesthetic and physical effects.

3 The methodological background

The European Academy for the Culture of Landscape PETRARCA was founded in 2000 and one of its main aims is to support the implementation of the European Landscape Convention. The work of the PETRARCA Academy is based on long-standing research carried out by Jochen Bockemühl since the end of the nineteen sixties at the Research Institute of the Natural Science Section at the Goetheanum in Dornach near Basel in Switzerland. This research has contributed to developing the faculty of forming an insightful connection to the most diverse natural phenomena and aspects of landscape and of evaluating these in a relevant way through personal experience. This has happened not only in Dornach but in many other European and non-European countries, involving different people and different landscapes. The methodology used is originally based on Goethean Phenomenology.

4 Practice weeks for landscape observation and planning

The PETRARCA Academy organises landscape seminars, conferences and individual lectures. The “landscape practice weeks” have a long tradition up to the present day. Work during these weeks mainly focuses on exercises to improve the faculties of sense perception. But these exercises are always connected to actual questions relating to the landscape we work in. So there is always a partner who invites PETRARCA to give advice or support for landscape development. Each week is part of a project or long-term development. The project partners include ecological farms, therapeutic and social institutions, land owners and societies and institutions for nature and environmental conservation.



(Photo 1: *T. van Elsen*)

For example in 1995, the founders of the future PETRARCA Academy organised a landscape practice week in Hungary, in the “Dörögdt” basin. The partners there were three villages which wanted to make a landscape development plan together. During this process, the practice week took place together with representatives of the villages, the experts responsible for the planning, a group of students from Budapest and other guests from all over Europe. This mixture of participants coming from very differed professions, circumstances and landscapes was very fruitful for finding new ideas for development of the landscape.

In 2005 the PETRARCA Academy organised a week on a farm named Hohenberg in the Southwest of Germany. This farm specialises in education for schoolchildren and adults. They were therefore very interested in the question of how the landscape on the farm should be cultivated and developed to best fit this educational purpose. Some projects where created based on the stimulus from the week, such as developing the small stream and its surrounding landscape elements on the farm. PETRARCA supports this process as a consultant.

The most recent example is the planned PETRARCA and cape week at Feuilla near Perpignan in France (23^h to 29th May 2010) (see www.petrarca.info).

Feuilla is a small village with about 100 inhabitants on the edge of the Pyrenean Mountains.

Like many villages in mountainous regions, it is in danger of being abandoned or only inhabited during the holidays if no change is in sight.



(Photo 2: J.-M. Florin)

The village has no shops and the arable land around, mostly vegetable gardens and vineyards, is also being increasingly abandoned.

The mayor and other representatives of Feuilla are willing to do something to counter these tendencies. They are looking for new ideas for future development. Many scientific studies have been carried out on the area because of its special features which are worth discovering and communicating. For instance, there is a rare species of eagle, the Bonelli's eagle *Aquila fasciata* living in the surrounding hills. The community of Feuilla is part of the Parc Naturel Régional de la Narbonnaise en Méditerranée.

But how can the unity composed of all the special qualities found here be described? What does it mean for the landscape to be home to the Bonelli's eagle? For the representatives of Feuilla it is a question of their own identity. It was against this background that the PETRARCA Academy was invited to explore and discover what can be called the "genius loci" of the place jointly with them. The results will serve as a basis for taking action and for finding the right guidelines for future development.

The work during this week will mostly take place in groups outside in the landscape, in the village and its surroundings. For this purpose four workshops with different main themes will be formed which will study different aspects of the "Feuilla landscape". At the same time our faculties of perception will be trained to deepen our direct connection to the landscape.

To deepen our direct connection to the landscape, PETRARCA has developed a large range of exercises which can be introduced spontaneously depending on the working process and the people taking part in it. It is therefore always an individual and open-ended process. The so-called leaders also participate without presenting any results. It is up to the group to find results and share these with all the other participants in the seminar.

The role of the leaders is to be facilitators only as regards managing the process and training abilities.

This is why the work of the PETRARCA Academy is always connected to education. It is not intended to teach people how the landscape should be defined, seen or interpreted. PETRARCA wishes to train the faculties for encountering landscape without preconceptions which is the first step to becoming more connected and to really understanding the inherent context of life.

On the one hand, human beings need to learn to develop their aims and the way in which they work from the perception of nature, on the other hand it is necessary to reflect on their own relationship to that which is perceived through observation.

In general we have to deal with the fundamental contradiction of being either connected to the landscape or reflecting on it. A fundamental element of the workshop is therefore to alternate regularly between the work outside when we perceive and experience the landscape and the work “inside” which means reproducing our inner images and impressions and thinking about these experiences. The following description of methodological steps is intended as an example of how the work during a workshop might be organised:

- 1) On a preliminary walk through the landscape – without talking - we observe the landscape with all our senses as intensively as possible. We try to quieten our own interpretations, explanations or judgements of the phenomena we perceive. We try to be really open and attentive.
- 2) Afterwards we gather again and describe to each other what we have seen and experienced as our first impressions. We try to do this in a way so that the other people can follow and create a definite picture in their mind.

Naturally this initial description is influenced by our interpretations. For example: “this valley looks like this *because* water has formed it” - although in fact we have not seen water outside at all. Or it is influenced by our feelings and judgement: “it is a beautiful place”.

Both lead no further towards a real comprehension of this landscape. So we can introduce supplementary exercises:

- 3) Everyone is asked to describe the landscape where he/she comes from or one he/she likes best. Sharing these descriptions and talking about them is a good way of becoming aware of your own intentions and preconceptions in the relationship with landscape.

We do not wish to exclude this individual or subjective part in our perception but to work with it in a conscious manner.

For any conscious perception we need to open our senses for the impressions from outside. But at the same time we need to form concepts. In fact we do this all the time when we are awake. It is an extremely uncomfortable feeling in those rare moments when we are not able to put sense perception and concepts together. This can happen for example at night: we see a shadow in the dark but do not realise what it is, so we are afraid until the moment we have recognised it, meaning we have found the concept. So there is always an active part in our perception, something we have to form or find in ourselves to complete reality. This is a very important fact to note.

But at the same time our concepts can hinder us in going deeper. Usually if we have realised that this is a table or a tree we are satisfied and our attention will turn to other things.

- 4) We now try to change the concepts normally used as a sort of "judgement" to questions which will open our senses for a deeper perception: This is a tree, for example an oak tree. We will now ask: what does this oak look like? What are the characteristics of this individual oak? You can be sure, it will certainly not look like any other tree we have seen before and even if we meet this tree again tomorrow it will show us many other aspects we did not see the day before.

To use terms and concepts means to reduce the phenomena, so we now try to diversify, to recognise reality in its diversity. Thus our image of the tree becomes richer.

We use drawing and painting as a useful tool because they stimulate our attention. I concentrate on what I have seen in order to draw or paint it.

All these steps are meant to deepen our attention. We are now filled with the pictures and details we have seen, heard, tasted etc. But where is the landscape as a whole now?

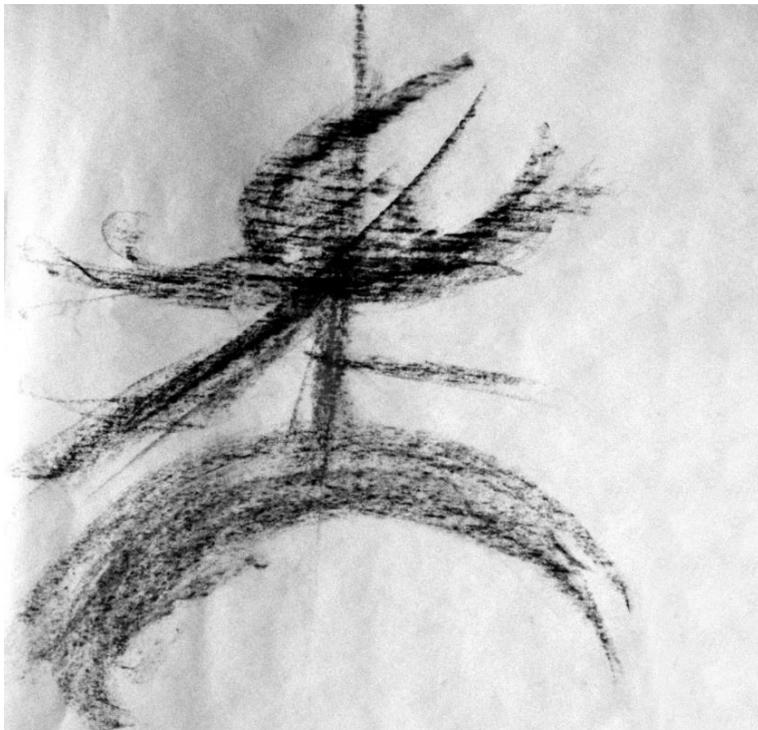
All impressions create within us something we can call an afterimage. After a long and intensive day working in the landscape the afterimage appears after a certain time, for example in the

morning when we have slept and “digested” our impressions as it were. Like a dream this afterimage is very delicate and not easy to capture or to express. It is a certain atmosphere or image in which all my impressions of the day before are integrated. It gives us the very beginnings of an idea of the character of the landscape we have studied.

- 5) The next step of the exercise is to make this afterimage clearer. We try to create it within us again. We try to bring up what we can remember of the day before and we try to describe it to each other. While doing this we can realise “holes” in our image of the landscape and we feel the need to go outside again with a changed view and study the landscape.

We increasingly look at the details with a changed outlook. What is the role of this or that detail in the whole? How can we see the relationship between the details? Where are the “limits”, contrasts and breaks or transitions in the landscape?

We are increasingly able to develop a certain sense for the inherent concept of life within the landscape. This is something we cannot see in the way we normally look at things. It is not something we can define. It is like an image of a characteristic form, a typical gesture.



(Picture 1: “typical gesture...” - L. Bockemühl)

To become aware of this we need a sort of artistic intuition. If we want to talk about it, it is very useful to try to express this image in an artistic way: drawing, music, dance or any other art form.

It is very interesting that we are able to recognise similarities to our own inner images within these individual expressions .

There is a little exercise which demonstrates that there is a sense that leads us to discover essential aspects of the inner context of life in nature. The following picture shows the shapes of all the leaves of one plant.



(Picture 2)

In this case it is *Sonchus oleraceus* but for this exercise it is of no importance because the principle works with many other plants as well. The requirement is now to arrange these leaves aesthetically in order to find a harmonious sequence. While doing this you have to play a little bit and change the composition, stand back somewhat and see if it is aesthetically convincing and so on.

What we use to find the right sequence is a sort of artistic sense of harmony. It is the sense for the inner “sound” as Vassily Kandinsky describes in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (Kandinsky, 1959).

In the end it is interesting to realise that this composition is not accidental. It is exactly the sequence of the leaves along the stem of the plant.



(Picture 3: J. Bockemühl (1986), p.14)

This reveals a kind of process which cannot be seen in “reality” because it happens in between the leaves. The leaves are the visible result of an invisible development in a way. To “see” this process we have to create it actively within us.

To develop these kind of perceptive faculties requires elements of both an artistic and a scientific approach: artistic in the sense of aesthetic in its original meaning as the art of conscious sense perception and experience; scientific as regards the comprehensibility and transparency of the results.

This enables us more and more to experience what we can describe as the “whole” or the “genius loci” of a landscape in a conscious way.

6 Conclusion

It goes without saying that the criteria and ideas for a future development of landscape do not evolve “automatically” out of this kind of work because they depend on the individual aims of the people living and working in the landscape.

But working like this will intensify their relationship to nature and create a fundamental respect for the integrity of nature. It will change how people interact with landscape so their activities will no longer be destructive but creative in a healthy way.

In this way the PETRARCA Academy for the culture of landscape hopes to promote a sustainable cultivation of a human and at the same time viable landscape.

For further information about the activities of the European Academy for the Culture of Landscape PETRARCA and its background, please refer to the PETRARCA Position Paper available in English, German, French and Italian, the website www.petrarca.info and the following bibliography.

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