The World in Front of the Text:
Landscape As Medium of Mutuality

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While visiting North Dakota in 2018, I took a photo of a collection of signs at the top of a road leading into pastureland that my family bought in the 1970s (figure 1). I saw an analogy between the light breaking through the line of gray clouds and the road leading past the ominous signs warning, "DANGER: AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY." The parallel contrasts—light into darkness, passage into forbidden territory—captured my ambivalence about the changes oil had brought to the region during the fracking boom from 2008 to 2014. In the image, I saw hope (or something like it) despite the destruction the landscape had undergone.

Figure 1. Signs from Whiting Oil & Gas Corp. warning against unauthorized entry into a drill site in western North Dakota, July 2018. (Source: author)

I keep coming back to this photo.[1] Among other things, it reveals ways the space of my family's land is structured. The signs, for instance, produce an inside and an outside: past this line the "unauthorized" may not pass. But it's not an absolute line: Whiting Oil & Gas, which owns or leases the mineral rights, cannot deny entry to my family, which owns the surface rights. Nor is it the only line: the distinction between mineral and surface rights is a symptom of a settler logic—the source of many more lines of exclusion—that has allowed my family to assert ownership over the land in the first place.

In this way, this photo captures more than just the play of light and darkness that initially piqued my interest. The site depicted by the photo is shot through with relationships mediated by proximity and distance. I read the site differently depending on whether I'm standing in front of the signs, as a person wanting to take a walk, or considering them from a distance, as a scholar trying to adopt a disinterested view of the spatial and social relationships the signs produce. Similarly, Whiting Oil & Gas is present—

paradoxically—at a distance, able to exert its authority from its headquarters in Denver, seven hundred miles away.

These observations, which derive from Marcello Vitali-Rosati's description of how space and authority produce each other, are my starting point in this essay, in which I describe the broader implications of the meaning produced by the landscape itself. [2] Space, Vitali-Rosati says, is inscribed through structures of delimitation (in the example of my photo, the signs that establish boundaries), positioning (my reading practices in North Dakota or my university office), and distance (the absent presence of Whiting Oil & Gas). Building on his work in media studies and on the work of geographers such as Henri Lefebvre and Milton Santos, I contend two things: first, that landscape is a medium, and second, that a given site, such as the one depicted in my photo, becomes a text in front of which a world unfolds, to employ an image from Paul Ricoeur.[3] My first argument is well rehearsed in geography and will be familiar to media scholars accustomed to transforming objects into texts, even if the object is new. My second argument, however, explores a feature of Ricoeur's hermeneutics largely neglected by geographers and media scholars, namely the way that sites exist *within* the world but also as texts that *produce* a world of their own. In the play between these two worlds, the first ostensive, the second not, landscape opens up a relational space of mutuality where imagination plays a central role.

Landscape As Medium

First, some definitions. I share with human geographers a concern for the production of social space, or the relationships between people and their environment that develop through dialectical processes of labor and representation, as people build (within) their environment and then interpret what they have built. "(Social) space," Lefebvre writes, "is a (social) product."[4] When I speak of *landscape*, I mean the natural and built elements that fill space and bear meaning, with perceptible qualities such as color, shape, placement, and depth. When I speak of a *site*, I mean a specific configuration of these elements, or a "set of forms that, in a given moment, express the legacies of successive, localized relations between humans and nature," such as the signs, the gravel road, and the hills depicted in the photo in figure 1.[5] Landscape in this sense is a medium, akin to words or images, because its elements bear meaning. And a site is a text, akin to a specific essay or painting, because it realizes the potential for meaning by arranging

the elements of landscape in a concrete way. A photo (such as in figure 1) might suggest a site at a given moment, but it does not exhaust it. Another photo (such as the one in figure 2, taken from the same vantage point in 2022) can suggest the site's evolving configuration, although it, too, captures only a fleeting moment.

Figure 2. Signs from Whiting Oil & Gas Corp. warning against unauthorized entry into a drill site in western North Dakota, August 2022. (Source: author)

How does a site come to be? Can we speak of a site's author the way we might speak of the author of a more conventional text? Yes and no: a site is inscribed by multiple authors in both active and passive ways. A person arriving at a site finds a set of features, both natural and built, already in place. The natural terrain influenced the choices made by people who came before, and the changes they made, including the structures they built, influence the choices of those who come later. The new arrival's actions will in turn shape the site people encounter in the future. A site is always in an emergent state, although its traces are visible in the sedimentation of human actions through time. As Milton Santos puts it, "The mode of production that creates fixed spatial forms . . . can disappear without the fixed forms

themselves disappearing. The moment crystallizes . . . as the memory of a present that is past."[6]

This inscription process is a key moment in the dialectic of labor and interpretation that produces social space. People arrive at a site by means of paths and signs (such as those in my photos) whose meaning is familiar from their everyday experience of navigating through space. Ricoeur refers to this level of "precomprehension" as the *prefiguration* of space.[7] In some cases, they respond to what they find by altering the terrain. The changes they make might be small or great, some going so far as to *configure* the space by building structures that enter into conversation (for instance, at the level of form) with the surrounding environment.[8] Finally, new people arrive and interpret the structures as indices of the successive alterations the site has undergone. Some come to live in the site's structures, navigating through and interpreting them, ultimately incorporating them into their everyday lives. Ricoeur compares their active (and retroactive) meaning-making, which he calls the *refiguration* of space, to that of a reader's encounter with a narrative text: "just as the reception of the literary text inaugurates the test of a plural reading, of a patient welcome given to intertextuality, so too does receptive and active inhabiting imply a careful rereading" of the environment.[9]

These two dimensions of space—its sedimentation and its modes of figuration—both suggest ways of interpreting landscape. In the first instance, it is worth noting that my definitions, synthesized from Lefebvre and from Santos, derive from Marx's political economy, especially his assertion in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* that people make their own history "not out of conditions" they have chosen, but out of those "such as [they find] close at hand."[10] In this respect, my definitions suggest that to interpret a site is to account for its production through time.[11] In the second instance, it is worth noting that the distinctions between different modes of figuration are heuristic: people prefigure, configure, and refigure space simultaneously, each interpretive act informing the others. In this respect, Ricoeur's hermeneutics suggest that to interpret a site is to account for its phenomenological and semiotic dimensions.[12] They are complementary approaches, linked, among other ways, by the idea that "production is at the same time also consumption," as Marx writes in the appendix to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.[13]

These approaches, however, do not account for a quality that defines all texts, according to Ricoeur, namely the spatial and temporal distance

between a text's creation and interpretation that renders the intentions of the text's authors fundamentally unknowable. This alienation is the paradoxical key in making landscape a medium of mutuality because it prompts the people encountering a site (or other text) to relinquish their claim to interpretive authority.

The World in Front of the Text

A text, according to Ricoeur, is a "finite and closed totality," in contrast to an ongoing discursive event where speakers occupy a shared space and can respond to each other.[14] Its form is fixed by writing, and it contains propositional claims contending, in varying degrees of complexity, that *X is Y* or *A does B*. One reason it is closed is that its author is not immediately present and can exert no control over who reads what they have written. Indeed, a text "creates an audience which extends in principle to anyone who can read," according to Ricoeur, and "what the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant; henceforth, textual meaning and psychological meaning have different destinies."[15] One consequence of a text's closure is that it can make only non-ostensive references, which is to say, it cannot point to a world immediately occupied by the reader because the "concrete conditions of the act of pointing no longer exist."[16]

Although a geographic site might not be written in a conventional sense, it is inscribed by actions that have "left their mark," so to speak.[17] Such inscriptions, not to mention potential interpretations, are evident in the space of the site depicted in my photos, to continue with my example. The authors of the "SAFETY FIRST" signs are no more present than the architects of the land-use policies that severed surface rights from mineral rights or carved the land my family bought into ninety-acre parcels. Anyone driving past the point where I took my photos, which is accessible by public roads, can read the traces of these actions in the site itself, offering very different interpretations of their propositional claims, depending on the observer's frame of reference.

Consequently, the world to which these inscriptions point is, counterintuitively, not that of the space I occupied when I took my photos. What I mean is this: in a broad sense, the references made in a conversation where the speakers are present are first-order references. Those of a fixed text are second-order, reaching "the world not only at the level of

manipulable objects" but also—and more importantly—at the level "designated by . . . [Heidegger's] expression 'being-in-the-world.'"[18] To interpret a text is thus not to "search for the psychological intentions of another person which are concealed *behind* the text"—intentions that are inaccessible because of the spatial and temporal distance between author and reader—but instead to "explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded *in front* of the text."[19] In other words, a text *creates* the world to which it points. Admittedly, in the narrower case of a geographic site, this idea is abstract, but it can be made more plain by analogy with fiction: just as a book tells a story to create a world (such as Tolkien's Middle-earth, to name a vivid example), so, too, the inscriptions in and on the landscape tell a story (of settler colonialism, of the oil boom, of my family) to create a non-ostensive world superimposed upon the hills and roads depicted in my photos.

Conclusion: Mutuality and the Paradox of Appropriation

How does a reader come to see the world in front of the text, whether a geographic site or something more conventional? Because of the distance between author and reader, and because of the closure of the text, readers must surrender themselves to the text itself, citing it—and it alone—in support of any claims they make about what it means. They must relinquish their claim to interpretive authority, rejecting what they think they know about a book or a geographic site so that their presuppositions do not obscure the text itself. Through a process of de- and refamiliarization (or "appropriation-divestiture"), they must "'make [their] own' what was initially 'alien'," a process involving the "dispossession of the narcissistic *ego*."[20] As a result of this work, "the text unfolds its capacity to illuminate or clarify the life of the reader."[21]

In this unfolding, produced in the tension between copresent worlds (the one to which I could point when I stood within it to take my photos, the other produced by stories inscribed in the site about how it took shape), landscape becomes a medium of mutuality, a means to readers' greater self-realization through an experience of otherness, a bargain whereby they trade their illusions of interpretive certainty for an enlarged conceptual horizon: "To understand oneself in front of a text is quite the contrary of projecting oneself and one's own beliefs and prejudices; it is to let the work and its world enlarge the horizon of the understanding which I have of myself."[22]

This expansion raises a question whose answer requires imagination: how might the world be if it were other than it is?

This question, I think, is why I keep returning to the path into my family's pastureland. The world that unfolds in front of this text confronts me with an obligation: to imagine another world, I must read this site with a sense of humility. When I saw hope in the play between light and shadow in the first image of the signs warning "DANGER," the "prairie idyll [lost] to widespread drilling and disruption" was very much a *settler* landscape, as Mary E. Thomas and Bruce Braun write.[23] In other words, my family can claim ownership only because of the US government's dispossession of Indigenous land, from the 1862 Homestead Act to the Missouri River Basin Project of the 1940s to the approval and construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in recent years. The potential for mutuality is foreclosed by the legal structure of a settler state that works to exclude Indigenous presence and erase traces of Indigenous authorship.

To be clear, my role is not "to represent Indigenous interests or subjects," to borrow from Thomas and Braun again.[24] On the contrary, I must listen to the people asserting their claim to the land of which the site in my photos is part.[25] To aspire to mutuality means to engage in a paradoxical act of letting go to grasp something new. The signs in my photos are an invitation, despite their warning to stay away: as objects in an occupiable space, they close off a path, but as part of a site-as-text, they open to a world that is other than the one I know.

Notes

1   I have written about it elsewhere: Kyle Conway, "Chez moi, loin de chez moi: Paradoxes identitaires de la pétromodernité," *Collectif Quatre-Temps* 1 (2022): 6–19, hdl.handle.net/10393/43689.
2   Marcello Vitali-Rosati, "The Crisis of Authority," in *On Editorialization: Structuring Space and Authority in the Digital Age* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2013), 10–32.
3   Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991), and Milton Santos, *The Nature of Space*, trans. Brenda Baletti (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021); Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
4   Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 26. I have removed Lefebvre's italics.

5   Santos, *Nature of Space*, 62. Note that Santos uses the term *landscape* where I use the term *site*, which I prefer for clarity's sake.

6   Milton Santos, *For a New Geography*, trans. Archie Davies (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 104.

7   Paul Ricoeur, "Architecture and Narrativity," trans. Eileen Brennan, Robbie Carney, and Samuel Lelièvre, *Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* 7, no. 2 (2016): 33, doi.org/10.5195/errs.2016.378.

8   Ricoeur, "Architecture and Narrativity," 36.

9   Ricoeur, "Architecture and Narrativity," 39.

10   Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Daniel de Leon (1897; Project Gutenberg, 1998), sec. 1, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1346.

11   This idea is consistent with Lefebvre's discussion of history in *The Production of Space*, chap. 2, sec. 7, "Social Space," 110–11; and with Santos's discussion of what he calls "roughness" in *The Nature of Space*, chap. 4, "Space and the Notion of Totality," 69–80; and chap. 5, "From the Diversification of Nature to the Territorial Division of Labor," 81–90.

12   For example, see Martinho Tomé Soares, "From Ricoeurian Hermeneutics to Environmental Hermeneutics: Space, Landscape, and Interpretation," *Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* 12, no. 2 (2021): 85–101, doi.org/10.5195/errs.2021.559.

13   Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. N.I. Stone (Chicago, 1904; Project Gutenberg, 2014), 276, gutenberg.org/ebooks/46423.

14   Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 98. Ricoeur's most systematic account of texts and their interpretation appears in Paul Ricoeur, *Herméneutique: Cours professé à l'Institut supérieur de philosophie de l'Université catholique de Louvain, 1971–1972*, ed. Daniel Frey and Marc-Antoine Vallée (Paris: Fonds Ricoeur, 2013), bibnum.explore.psl.eu/s/psl/ark:/18469/mx9z. I synthesize this and other works, especially *Hermeneutic and Human Sciences*, in Kyle Conway, *How to Read Like You Mean It* (Athabasca, AB: Athabasca University Press, 2023), chap. 1, "To Read Is to Feel Lost," 29–53, doi.org/10.15215/aupress/9781771993746.01.

15   Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 101.

16   Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 103.

17   Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 167.

18   Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 103–4.

19   Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 104.

20   Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 147, 153, 155. See also Conway, *How to Read Like You Mean It*, chap. 4, "To Read Is To Be Free," 107–132 and Conclusion, "To Read Is To Live with Other People," 133–152..

21   Ricoeur, "Architecture and Narrativity," 39.

22   Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 140.

23   Mary E. Thomas and Bruce Braun, eds., *Settling the Boom: The Sites and Subjects of Bakken Oil* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023), xii.

24   Thomas and Braun, *Settling the Boom*, x.

25   For example, see Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon, eds., *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

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