

VIRTUAL ENTRY INTO A LANDSCAPE IN THE PRE-DIGITAL AGE: FROM THE PICTURESQUE JOURNEYS OF THE 19TH CENTURY TO THE IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE IN AKIRA KUROSAWA'S *DREAMS* (1990)

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INTRODUCTION

To illustrate the fact that virtual worlds are not a contemporary novelty but have in fact formed part of our visual culture for centuries, Román Gubern cites a beautiful ancient legend about a “Chinese painter held captive in the palace by the emperor, who to escape painted an extraordinarily accurate landscape of his home province, stepped into it and disappeared into the distance” (1996: 63). In the 18th century, Denis Diderot occasionally used the idea of physically entering a painting as a literary device to describe the excitement he felt when looking at certain landscape paintings discussed in *Salons* (Fried, 1988: 130). He uses this trope, for example, in relation to Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg's *Landscape with Figures and Animals* (1763): “Ah, my friend, how beautiful nature is in this little spot! Let us stop there. The heat of the day is beginning to be felt; let us lie down next to these animals. While we admire the work

of the Creator, the conversation of this shepherd and this peasant woman will divert us. Our ears will not disdain the rustic sounds of the cowherd [...]. And when the weight of the light has diminished we will go our way again, and at some remote time we will still remember this enchanted place and the delicious hour we spent there”¹ (qtd. in Fried, 1988: 119). Both the Chinese legend and Diderot's literary trope presage the possibility of immersion in virtual worlds, using the motif of the landscape painting as the point of entry.

From the perspective of visual studies, landscape painting has played a key role throughout history as a laboratory for experimenting with the gaze (Arasse, 2008) and especially with our way of looking at the world. Examples include the explicit influence of cartography on 17th-century Dutch painting (Alpers, 1987) and realist painting's prefiguration of photography in the 19th century (Galassi, 1981). In both these cases, visual possibilities were identified in the representation of the

ONE OF THE KEY CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE LANDSCAPE MOTIF TO VIRTUAL CULTURE IS THE ILLUSION OF MOBILITY: THE EXPERIENCE OF ENTERING A PLACE (WHETHER PAINTED, IMAGINED OR DREAMED)

landscape (in painting, in this case) that would be realised with the emergence of new technologies, transforming our way of observing reality (Crary, 2008). In this sense, between the premonitions of immersion in the landscape in the pre-digital age and the contemporary proliferation of virtual landscapes in film genres such as fantasy and science fiction (López-Silvestre, 2004), there was a transitional period of profound experimentation in which the dream of stepping into a virtual landscape became increasingly plausible with the development of new technological devices. These emergent ways of seeing transformed the visual culture of this intermediate period and gave rise to a branch of landscape historiography that shifted away from the realist canon (Milani, 2001; Roger, 1997) to propose that virtualisation, although it poses dangers such as deterritorialisation (Levy, 1999: 15), is nevertheless another facet of the phenomenon of landscape art (Jakob, 2004: 42). This raises a number of questions in relation to visual culture related to the role of the landscape-virtuality binary in the pre-digital age and what the depiction of the landscape has contributed to the historiography of virtuality.

The hypothesis of this article, which presents an overview of some of the results of the research project titled “Virtual Worlds in Early Cinema: Devices, Aesthetics and Audiences” (reference PGC2018-096633-B-I00), is that one of the key contributions of the landscape motif to virtual culture is the illusion of mobility: the experience of entering a place (whether painted, imagined or dreamed), immersing ourselves in it and explo-

ring it. Beyond the visual dimension, the depiction of the landscape opens up the possibility of the viewer’s imaginary journey, thereby hinting at an architectural dimension. To support its argument, this article posits an archaeology of the gaze on the landscape based on two phenomena considered representative of the connection between mobility and architecture: the rise of the picturesque and its consequences in visual culture; and the development of cinematographic techniques whose use of superimposition foreshadowed digital technology. To avoid generalisations, these paradigm shifts are analysed with reference to two specific case studies that serve to structure the article: the use of the Claude glass for viewing landscapes in the 18th and 19th centuries, along with formal derivatives like Hale’s Tours; and the specific use of the cinematographic technique of superimposition in the film *Dreams* (Yume, Akira Kurosawa, 1990). Although they involve different contexts and technologies at very different moments in time, these two cases share a formal approach associated with the virtual experience of stepping inside the depiction of a landscape. Based on the above, this article has the following aims: to analyse the contribution of certain 19th-century depictions of landscapes to the visual culture of virtuality; to identify how such depictions presaged virtual immersion in landscapes in the pre-digital age; and finally, to extend the history of landscape art through an exploration of the virtual perspective.

THE VIRTUAL PICTURESQUE: IDEAL LANDSCAPES, THE CLAUDE GLASS AND HALE’S TOURS

In terms of visual culture associated with virtualisation (Levy, 1999: 12), landscape painting qua a school of the gaze was of vital importance to the development of a “variable eye” (Aumont, 1997: 31) that could wander inside the painting from

the static position of the viewer. On this point, Daniel Arasse suggests that “the landscape painting is a privileged place for the use of a gaze that temporarily adapts to the surface of the painting in order to journey around it. The word ‘journey’ partly explains this privilege: the journey of the gaze around the painting replicates the physical trajectory that the fictitious horizon of the image proposes to the spectator” (2008: 242). Such reveries of a faraway place would inform painting’s first virtual journeys, establishing a direct correspondence with the experience of travellers who watch the world unfold around them as they continue on their way. This mobile gaze, defined as a gradual discovery of the territory, is intimately related both to the origins of Western landscape art and one of its foundational dialectics, i.e., the city-country binary (Maderuelo, 2005: 131), and to the subsequent development of the picturesque (Peucker, 1995: 113). To understand the contribution of the picturesque vision to the notion of virtual mobility, it is necessary first of all to consider the so-called ideal landscapes of the 17th

century (Lamblin, 1983), and secondly to explore the viewing mechanism associated with the Claude glass.

The ideal landscapes of painters such as Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin and Salvator Rosa establish the mobility of the gaze as one of the central themes of their paintings, as is evident in compositions like *Landscape with Tobias and Raphael* (Claude Lorrain, 1639-1640) (Image 1), *Landscape with Diogenes* (Nicolas Poussin, 1647) (Image 2) and *Apollo and the Cumaean Sibyl* (Salvator Rosa, 1661). All of these paintings depict nature as *geometricised*, where the spectator’s gaze moves inside the painting, following the (compositional) path traced by the artist in question. The gaze never wanders erratically, as the perspective dictates the direction it is to follow. To the viewer, the visual trajectory into the distance becomes a succession of various planes that are left behind as we move further into the painting, following the course of a river or a winding road, two very common motifs in landscapes of this kind (Salvadó, 2013: 224). As can be observed by comparing the

Left. Image 1. *Landscape with Tobias and Raphael* (Claude Lorrain, 1639-1640)

Right. Image 2. *Landscape with Diogenes* (Nicolas Poussin, 1647)



paintings, the ideal landscapes of the 17th century adhere to very similar schematic patterns that are repeated again and again to reproduce a virtual journey towards the horizon inside the painting (Lamblin, 1983: 391). The perspectivist paradigm adopted by Poussin, Lorrain and Rosa would add a depth and density that until then had not existed in Western landscape art, which would facilitate these movements of the gaze, while also contributing to the construction of a tourist imaginary of travel to far-off lands.

The discovery of the countryside by the urban masses over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, along with the proliferation and enhancement of communication systems around Europe and the popularisation of new forms of land transportation, transformed our way of viewing the world and introduced a new form of perceiving the landscape (Desportes, 2007: 73). The foundational city-country dialectic gradually collapsed as nature ceased to be the unknown *Other* that was yet to be discovered, becoming instead a *familiar* sight fit for contemplation. Playing an important role in this process was the aesthetic revolution that began with the new category of the picturesque created by the English theorists Uvedale Price, Richard Payne and William Gilpin, who adopted the empiricist model of nature as an aesthetic canon. "This meant that nature and architecture were purely visual materials upon which a well-structured and highly 'technified' knowledge was deployed, aimed at the creation of a visual composition which, depending on different combinations, would produce a kind of harmony based on the smoothness of the surface, the depth and variety of colours and the creation of psychological effects and sensations associated with certain presentations or 'views'" (Ábalos, 2008: 17). The pictorial standard was imposed as a way of viewing that revitalised the imaginary of the popular ideal landscapes of the previous century. The first waves of tourists in England in the late 18th century explored nature with the aim of

rediscovering the Arcadian aura that the schematic paintings of Poussin, Lorrain and Rosa exuded. "As both a new mode of aesthetic experience and a means of defining what constituted a proper landscape, the picturesque not only served as a guide to creating and viewing painting, it also directed the gaze of tourist and inspired the ground plans of gardeners" (Gunning, 2010: 34).

The concept of the picturesque, which became the 19th-century way of viewing (Hussey, 2013: 26), involves a mutation of the static-mobile dialectic inherited from painting: from the static viewer subjected to the perspective of the gaze of ideal landscapes to the dynamic viewer who moves around a natural landscape in search of the view or series of views that could evoke the paintings of Lorrain, Poussin or Rosa. In the quest for the picturesque, the excitement arises from the spectacle of (re-)experiencing the aesthetic pleasure associated with the contemplation of those paintings in the real world (Bruno, 2003: 212). However, the creation of this aesthetic experience poses the difficult question of how this series of ideal views of nature can be captured in the real world. The task of establishing cohesion between reality and imagination, between the moving and static landscape, would be achieved using the Claude glass, a device that exemplifies "the process of turning nature into landscape through a technology of vision" (Gunning, 2010: 35).

The operation of the Claude glass is very simple: using a small, dark-tinted convex mirror, the viewer observes a landscape motif that is literally framed like a kind of ephemeral photograph. The uniform tonality that the landscape acquires in the mirror simulates the luminous atmosphere characteristic of Claude Lorrain's paintings, which is why the device was given his name (Roger, 1997: 39). Using this little contraption, tourists would try to capture the different natural scenes that constitute the visual journey inscribed in ideal landscapes in a real environment, as if the connection of each image projected in the Clau-

de glass could replicate the perspectivist journey of the gaze inside the paintings. The successive images produced by the device reproduce the changes that a landscape undergoes as the spectator progresses around it through the adoption of different points of view and different distances. In those days, William Gilpin summed up the essence of this viewing device as “a succession of high-coloured pictures [that] is continually gliding before the eye. They are like visions of the imagination, or the brilliant landscapes of a dream. Forms, and colours, in brightest array, fleet before us; and if the transient glance of a good composition happen to unite with them, we should give any price to fix, and appropriate the scene” (qtd. in Andrews, 1999: 116).

Despite the apparent artificiality of the process of perceiving a natural scene offered by the Claude glass, it raises a whole range of formal questions that are worth considering for their contemporary relevance and their revolutionary impact on the visual culture of the landscape. First of all, it presaged the way many of us today view landscapes, as an experience mediated by all kinds of frames (Andrews, 1999: 127): the viewfinder of a camera, the movie screen, and of course, the screen of a mobile phone. Secondly, the use of this viewing apparatus is rather unique, as the landscape is literally viewed with one's back to it, in a backward projection of the gaze that constitutes a novel way of contemplating the landscape. And thirdly (and most importantly for the purpose of this study), the image shown in the mirror constituted one of the first experiences of mobile virtuality. On the one hand, the superimposition of the image reflected with the *atmospheric* tint of the mirror produces a landscape that is anchored in reality but that at the same time appeals to the viewer's imagination. It is in the gap between the real and the imagined (or even the dreamed) where the Claude glass emerges as a technological precursor to today's virtual landscapes, taking the imaginary journeys through ideal landscapes of

THE ARTICULATION OF THE VIEWING-MOVING BINARY TRANSFORMS THE TWO-DIMENSIONAL IDEAL LANDSCAPES INTO THE THREE DIMENSIONS THAT CHARACTERISE ARCHITECTURE

the 17th century a step further. On the other hand, while the process of observing the landscape inherent in the Claude glass anticipates film editing (in the succession of *shots* from different points of view), the articulation of the viewing-moving binary transforms the two-dimensional ideal landscapes into the three dimensions that characterise architecture. The Claude glass would also have a huge influence on the nascent art of gardening, with its efforts to design nature in accordance with pictorial images and the pleasure of contemplating a landscape and savouring the variety of different views in a manner resembling a film sequence (Bruno, 2003: 277). In this sense, the landscaped garden was another of the visual devices of the 19th century to facilitate virtual access to the painted landscape (Peucker, 1995: 108).

The mobile gaze associated with ideal landscapes applied to reality both through the Claude glass and the emerging practice of landscaping predisposed viewers to appreciate variation as an intrinsic quality of the landscape. Tourists became familiar with the pleasure of change, cultivating an aesthetic taste for *moving landscapes*. It is thus no mere coincidence that new viewing devices that extended the virtual journey into the picturesque based on the representation of the landscape should have appeared over the course of the 19th century. Most of these, labelled with the suffix “-orama”, offer simulations of travel experiences where, like the paintings of Lorrain, Poussin or Rosa, the journey towards the horizon became the central theme of the composition. The panorama, the diorama, the kineorama, the georama

and the cosmorama “have their origins in the discovery and experience of the horizon and the idea that journeys serve to expand our horizons” (Bruno, 2003: 220). Offering a kind of visual spectacle that could pique their geographic curiosity about the world, these devices gave 19th-century spectators the chance to be transported in grand virtual tours (Oettermann, 1997: 32). For example, the cosmorama—a room with small windows and lenses through which to observe panoramic and dioramic views of landscapes—was publicised as a “picturesque journey” (Bruno, 2003: 223), reinforcing the continuation of the picturesque imaginary in the new technological inventions.

With the aim of radicalising the connection with movement in the picturesque viewing model, early cinema hybridised the cinematographic device with the gaze associated with modes of transport, especially the train. A dialogue was established with the ideal landscape tradition and the dream of journeying to the horizon in its paintings. Early cinema genres such as railroad views and phantom rides (Musser, 1990: 123), where the camera was placed on the front of a locomotive, brought the pictorial journeys embarked on in previous centuries to life. “As opposed to the carefully framed, distanced and static picture offered by Claudean Ideal Landscape, early landscape films actually moved into the landscape via technology. [...] In doing so these films make explicit a fantasy of penetration and visual voyage implied in the Claudean model” (Gunning, 2010: 36).

The inherent virtuality of these train journeys was taken to the extreme in Hale’s Tours. Evolving out of the railroad views and phantom rides, this attraction involved the projection of filmed images inside a train carriage literally converted into a movie theatre, taking the connection between the two viewing devices of train and cinema to the limit (Kirby, 1997). The projection of moving images was combined with a range of sensory-motor sensations aimed at making the body feel as if it were travelling while in a statio-

nary train carriage, similar to other attractions that first appeared in amusement parks around the same time (Quintana, 2011: 29). Although they were popular for only a very short time (1904-1907), Hale’s Tours were uniquely meaningful for their capacity to articulate better than any other device the affinity between the *railroad gaze* and the *mobile gaze* characteristic of cinema. Or to put it another way, it was a technological invention that encapsulated the spatio-visual revolution of the picturesque, turning travellers into film spectators and film spectators into travellers in a dual movement that defined the turn of the century.

SUPERIMPOSITIONS: FROM BACK PROJECTIONS TO AKIRA KUROSAWA’S IMMERSIVE DREAM

Both imaginary of the picturesque and its articulation in viewing devices like the Claude glass used the superimposition of two visual layers: the imaginary layer (derived from the paintings) and the real layer, as a mechanism for observing the landscape. This operation, which anticipated the process of integrating real and synthetic images that characterises many of the digital landscapes of the 21st century, was repeated in early cinema. A good example of the persistence of these visual approaches can be found in the experiences of filming in William K. L. Dickson’s Black Maria studio for Thomas Edison’s factory. In his discussion of these experiences, Àngel Quintana points out that “the act of putting the filmed subject inside a room painted black, a precursor to the blue chrome of today’s film studios, made it clear that the motivation behind early cinema was simply to create the conditions for superimpositions and magical effects” (2011: 29).

The virtual nature of superimposition is also present in the technique of back projections popularised by classical Hollywood cinema in the late 1920s, particularly after the introduction of sound. Recorded in the studio, this technique in-



Images 3 and 4. *Sunrise* (1927)

volved combining actors with backgrounds filmed at different times and locations into a single shot. The characters would perform in front of a screen onto which a specific moving landscape was projected, thereby creating the illusion of being in an outdoor setting without the audibility issues normally associated with filming on location (Mulvey, 2012: 208). It was also often used to represent exotic settings in adventure films (Castro, 2015: 140), superimposing the protagonists in a scene shot in the studio over documentary images of remote locations that thus served as backgrounds. However,

it was the filmmaker F. W. Murnau who would establish an especially innovative model for the use of this cinematographic technique, in terms of both depiction of a landscape and the imaginary of virtuality. His film *Sunrise* (1927) tells the story of a married couple living in the country and the husband's adulterous relationship with a vampish city woman. The city-country dialogue is not only embedded in the narrative but also appears in the scene that articulates the landscape-virtuality binary. In this scene, we see the couple coming out of a city church, where they have just experienced an amorous epiphany that has resulted in their reconciliation. At this moment, to express how the couple's inner feelings transform their external reality, the back projection of the bustling city street they are walking across turns into a bucolic landscape of a field of flowers lined with willow trees (Images 3-4). As the couple, who are filmed from behind, walk away from the viewer, the shift between urban and rural settings on the screen produces an effect of immersion in nature in the heart of the city.

Murnau's formal and technical innovation combines the excitement of movement derived from the progress of the two characters as they walk on together with the pleasure elicited by the visual transformation of the setting through which they are walking. The articulation of the viewing-moving binary characteristic of the Claude glass is reinterpreted in this system of representation that explores the architectural dimension of the virtual landscape: the protagonists are immersed in the dream of love that they themselves have created. The scene ends with the couple kissing in the romantic natural landscape, when suddenly *reality* is imposed and the back projection returns us to the city street where the lovers have just caused a catastrophic traffic jam. Murnau's use of a back projection of a landscape to create an association between the setting and the characters' feelings extended the influence of the picturesque dream and its connection to vir-

tuality throughout the 20th century, as the idea would spread to other films with markedly urban settings, such as *Pépé le Moko* (Julien Duvivier, 1937) with its famous scene of the protagonist running through the Kasbah quarter of Algiers to the port. But how has the introduction of new filmmaking technologies and the transformations of landscape art affected visual culture? What impact have they had on the culture of virtuality?

With respect to technology, the emergence of video and the systematisation of electronic imaging in the last quarter of the 20th century opened up new possibilities for superimposing two (or more) visual layers. As Raymond Bellour suggests, “video is, above all, a propagator of passages. [...] Passages, corollaries, that traverse without exactly encompassing these ‘universals’ of the image: thus, between photography, film and video, a multiplicity of superimpositions, of highly unpredictable configurations, is produced” (2009: 14). These passages in the artistic practice of video facilitate dialogue between the reality of the world and the reality of the image, directing the filmic reflection towards painting (Bellour, 2009: 16) or, in the case of the depiction of a landscape, towards the landscape-image.

In terms of the landscape imaginary, this period saw experimentation with the first manifestations of what the landscape theorist Michael Jakob refers to as *omnipaysage* (2008: 7-15), which could be described as the post-modern condition of landscape based on two aspects: the integration of the landscape into all kinds of fields of knowledge (often completely unrelated to its origins); and the extraordinary proliferation of landscape-images of all styles and conditions, resulting both in visual oversaturation and in desensitisation to the experience of the landscape. While the 19th-cen-

tury picturesque was based on imagining landscape-images to mediate in our relationship with nature, the *omnipaysage* of the late 20th century reflected the fact that nature itself had been replaced with landscape-images, a situation that is not strictly related to landscapes but that forms part of the visual culture of this period and the progressive usurpation of reality by images (Baudrillard, 2005: 35).

In this context of changes to technology and to our understanding of the landscape, in 1990, the Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa made what would be his second-last film, *Dreams*, shot with high-definition video cameras (provided by the Japanese television network NHK) and with special effects directed by George Lucas’s company Industrial Light & Magic. It is a film made up of eight independent episodes that have the filmmaker’s dreams as a common theme. Although it is not intended as a biopic, the film begins with his childhood dreams and ends with the darkest nightmares of his adult years. It is in the fifth dream, titled “Crows”, where we find a paradigmatic example of what electronic imaging could contribute to our conceptions of landscape and virtuality. This ten-minute dream begins in a museum where the protagonist (the director’s alter ego), a middle-aged man who is a combination of

Image 5. *Dreams* (Yume, 1990)





Images 6 and 7. *Dreams* (Yume, 1990)

tourist and amateur painter (he carries a number of archetypal tools of the trade with him), is looking at a series of reproductions of iconic works of Vincent Van Gogh, including *Wheatfield with Crows*—the painting that gives this section of the film its name, and which for many years was considered the artist’s last work—and *The Langlois Bridge at Arles*. While he is examining the latter painting, a cut takes us out of the museum and to a real bridge replicating the one in the painting (Image 5). Wearing the same clothes he had on in the museum, the protagonist enters this scene with striking colours that give it a dreamlike tone, and he approaches the washerwomen in the painting to ask them where he can find Van Gogh. They tell him where to find the artist, and he crosses a series of bright yellow wheatfields with houses that are also painted in colours typical of Van Gogh’s palette. Finally, in the middle of a harvested field, he encounters Van Gogh himself, standing alone, sketching on a canvas. The two engage in a conversation in English in which the painter talks about his creative process, saying he loses himself in the “natural beauty” of the landscape in order to “devour it completely” and then express it in a painting. Then suddenly the painter hurries away, and the protagonist tries to follow him under an oppressively bright sun. As he wanders on in search of the artist, the real-life

setting is replaced with details and re-framings of different parts of landscape paintings and sketches by Van Gogh (Images 6-7). Finally, after walking along the paths of nine of his paintings, the backgrounds become real again and in the middle of a field resembling the initial painting, *Wheatfield with Crows*, we glimpse the distant figure of Van Gogh walking away on a path and disappearing over the horizon. A murder of crows is then superimposed over the shot, and finally the scene cuts to the reproduction of the aforementioned Van Gogh painting without any frame of reference until the camera zooms out to reveal that we are back in the museum where the protagonist is contemplating the painting (Image 8).

As the above description shows, “*Crows*” is structured around three movements reflecting three ways of viewing that progressively recount the trajectory from the traditional gaze on the landscape painting to the experience of immersion in painted landscapes. The first movement is in the museum, where a distance is established between the viewer’s position and the paintings framed on the wall of the gallery. The second movement is in a hybrid space where painting and reality coexist, where the paintings resemble real landscapes and the real landscapes are painted as if they were works of art. The third movement is the immersion inside the painted landscapes,



Image 8. *Dreams* (Yume, 1990)

where the two-dimensional space of the canvas is experienced as if it were three-dimensional. Finally, as a coda, we return once again to the space of the museum. It is in the third movement that we can visualise both the legacy of the landscape depictions of previous centuries and the new possibilities that the electronic image offers the landscape-virtuality binary.

From the outset, this third movement is structured around a superimposition technique, where the protagonist's actions are filmed in the studio in front of a blue screen to create a hybrid between cinematic and pictorial media. On the one hand, the montage of the nine enlarged Van Gogh paintings used as backgrounds for the sequence reveal the brushstrokes and the thickness of the painted surface, thereby rendering visible both the tech-

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nique and the temporal nature of the moment of their creation. Kurosawa turns the paintings into objects in their own right, stripping them of their traditional status as windows into imaginary scenes to use them as a space for formal experimentation (Ng, 2021: 27). On the other hand, the protagonist moving through the nine paintings functions as an avatar for viewers, enabling us to *inhabit* Van Gogh's landscapes. Unlike the film genre of the *tableau-vivant*, which

generally explores the idea of inhabiting a painting through the static logic of the wax museum, in "Crows" the protagonist's movement along the paths depicted animates the landscapes, breaking them out of their two-dimensional nature. He moves up and down and across the paintings, sometimes walking towards the camera and sometimes away from it. These movements give depth to the image—a sensation that is reinforced when he disappears behind a painted tree, for example, thereby creating an impression of volume—while at the same time introducing a sense of temporality. It is precisely the incorporation of time and movement, in a combination of views of Van Gogh's landscapes, that gives Kurosawa's approach here an explicitly picturesque dimension. The juxtaposition of cinematic and pictorial images expands the boundaries and specificities of film and painting; it is a visual construction that presaged the virtual landscapes created using the digital palette, while at the same time appealing to an architectural dimension of the painted landscape that is also characteristic of the picturesque gaze.

In parallel with the above, in this third movement of "Crows" we find another feature of relevance to virtuality: the disappearance of the frames of Van Gogh's paintings, implying the eli-

KUROSAWA'S DREAMS EVOKES VISUAL SPECTACLES OF THE 19TH CENTURY LIKE THE PANORAMA, AMONG OTHERS, WHILE PRESAGING ARCHITECTURAL VIEWING DEVICES SUCH AS THE IMMERSIVE EXHIBITIONS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

mination of the boundary between the physical space that surrounds the viewer and the space of the spectacle presented on the canvas. As Román Gubern points out, this de-framing “constitutes a transgression of the aesthetic legacy of the Renaissance, which gave it to us together with perspective, which in a way was a complementary artifice” (1996: 168). Moreover, the succession and reframing of the different Van Gogh paintings alters their original meaning. Kurosawa breaks with the unitary gaze on the painting that begins and ends the sequence and recreates a new, purely cinematographic space, similar to what Alain Resnais did in his documentary *Van Gogh* (1948). The disappearance of the frames also raises the question of the boundaries of the screen on which the action unfolds, which is turned into a kind of interface that connects different paintings with no narrative logic or spatio-temporal continuity. In a certain sense, it points to what Jenna Ng describes as the concept of the “post-screen” (2021: 20) intrinsic to virtual reality.

One final point that is equally important is the fact that the dreamlike atmosphere of the sequence as a whole reinforces the perceptual effect of immersion. It is no mere coincidence that one of the clearest prefigurations of virtual reality created at the beginning of the digital age used a dream as its starting point, a mental state that opens us up to the possibility of entering new worlds. “Crows” should therefore be understood as a prototype of virtual reality that expresses the immersive experience of art, a visual represen-

tation of the idea of entering a painting used by Denis Diderot in the 18th century with reference to certain landscape paintings. Kurosawa’s work—shot in the same period when filmmakers like Peter Greenaway, Chantal Akerman, Chris Marker and Raúl Ruiz were experimenting with the intersection between the cinema and the museum (Bruno, 2003: 475)—uses the electronic image to combine (pre)cinema, painting and architecture. This episode of Kurosawa’s *Dreams* thus evokes visual spectacles of the 19th century like the panorama, among others, while presaging architectural viewing devices such as the immersive exhibitions of the 21st century that use augmented reality to allow visitors literally to step inside a landscape painting. The connection can be made clear by comparing Kurosawa’s film with digital exhibitions dedicated to Van Gogh’s work, such as *Van Gogh: Starry Night* (Atelier des Lumières, Paris, 2019-20), directed by Renato Gatto, where the visitors walk around inside an old 19th-century foundry in which the Dutch painter’s works are projected onto the walls and floors, and in most cases are animated. This architectural device obviously recalls the panorama, although the immersive effect of stepping inside the painted landscape is completely different, as visitors view the paintings in large dimensions, but at the same time they are completely surrounded by them. It is essentially an evolution of the museum in which painting is experienced more as a visual attraction than as a contemplative act. Herein lies the formal premonition of Kurosawa’s “Crows”, which begins in a museum and then transcends it with a kinetic experience of the landscape painting.

CONCLUSIONS

From the journeys of the gaze in the ideal landscapes of the 17th century to the pre-cinematic devices where the landscape is usually the vehicle for experimenting with the illusory effect of reality, and finally to certain intermediate depictions of

landscapes arising from the use of video, the concept of virtuality has always been present. These different episodes of visual culture confirm that the landscape-virtuality binary has had a direct impact on the evolution of our ways of viewing. Conceived of as an *educator* of the gaze since its origins in Western painting, the landscape motif has served as an expression of the longing to journey to other realities or the dream of entering new worlds. The potential of such longings has been realised to a large extent in the depiction of landscapes articulated by means of various viewing devices over the past few centuries. This is why landscape historiography has been marked by the emergence of an approach quite different both from realism and from the static contemplation and aesthetic enjoyment associated with notions such as beauty or the sublime. The move towards the virtualisation of the landscape in the pre-digital age reflects the existence of a significant proportion of landscape depictions associated with artifice, visual spectacle and kinetic experience, all of which are characteristic of the imaginary of the picturesque (Ábalos, 2008: 36). It is the persistence of this aesthetic category since its emergence in the late 18th century right up to the present day that constitutes the common theme among most visual devices that use the landscape as the point of entry into the virtual world.

At a time when a significant part of our relationship with the landscape is associated more with the aesthetic experience of an image than with a real experience of the location (Jakob, 2008: 24), reassessing the genealogy of virtual landscapes helps not only to identify connections between past and present but also to posit new aesthetic tastes that adapt to new ways of viewing and reinterpret our traditional approach to constructing and relating to landscapes. Thus, for example, the landscape theorist Alain Roger argued that there were two ways to turn nature into art, through the landscape *in visu* or the landscape *in situ* (Roger, 1997: 16). The first refers

to the action of turning it into art through an image (as in painting, photography or cinema), and the second involves intervening in the real location (as in gardening or land art). The overview offered in this article, which reveals the intersection between film, painting and architecture to be key to the exploration of virtual landscapes, makes it clear that the distinction proposed by Roger is becoming increasingly problematic and requires a reconsideration, because the dreams of immersion of Diderot and Kurosawa are now a reality.

NOTES

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- 1 "Ah! mon ami, que la nature est belle dans ce petit canton! arrêtons-nous-y; la chaleur du jour commence à se faire sentir, couchons-nous le long de ces animaux. Tandis que nous admirerons l'ouvrage du Créateur, la conversation de ce pâtre et de cette paysanne nous amusera ; nos oreilles ne dédaigneront pas les sons rustiques de ce bouvier [...] Et lorsque le poids du jour sera tombé nous continuerons notre route, et dans un temps plus éloigné, nous nous rappellerons encore cet endroit enchanté et l'heure délicieuse que nous y avons passée." Author's translation.

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VIRTUAL ENTRY INTO A LANDSCAPE IN THE PRE-DIGITAL AGE: FROM THE PICTURESQUE JOURNEYS OF THE 19TH CENTURY TO THE IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE IN AKIRA KUROSAWA'S DREAMS (1990)

Abstract

In the evolution towards virtualisation, numerous visual devices have used the landscape motif as a tool for experimenting with the viewer's gaze. From the landscape paintings of the 17th century to most of the pre-cinematic viewing devices of the 19th century, and finally to the use of superimposition in 20th century cinema prior to the digital age, numerous examples of the prevalence of the landscape-virtuality binary can be found. This raises the questions of what landscape art has contributed to virtual culture and the place virtuality occupies in landscape historiography. In order to answer both these questions, this article takes an archaeological approach to landscape depiction, beginning with a consideration of the influence that the concept of the picturesque had on the visual culture of the late eighteenth century, followed by an analysis of its evolution and impact on devices and approaches to viewing that presaged the act of entering virtual worlds prior to the introduction of digital technology. This exploration reveals the connections between landscape forms of different time periods and, in parallel, studies how these forms are inscribed in an imaginary of the landscape that has traditionally been based on reality.

Key words

Landscape; Immersion; Virtual; Cinema; Painting; Pre-Cinema; Viewing Device; Picturesque.

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ADENTRARSE VIRTUALMENTE EN UN PAISAJE EN LA ERA PRE-DIGITAL: DE LOS VIAJES PINTORESCOS DEL SIGLO XIX AL RECORRIDO INMERSIVO DE LOS SUEÑOS DE AKIRA KUROSAWA (1990)

Resumen

En el camino hacia la virtualización, múltiples dispositivos de visión han utilizado el motivo del paisaje como herramienta para experimentar con la mirada del observador. Desde las pinturas de paisaje del siglo XVII, pasando por gran parte de los aparatos visuales precinematográficos del siglo XIX, hasta llegar a las sobreimpresiones cinematográficas del siglo XX previas al digital, podemos encontrar muestras de la pregnancia del binomio paisaje-virtualidad. Ante este hecho nos preguntamos, por un lado, ¿qué ha aportado el paisaje en el seno de la cultura virtual?, y por otro lado, ¿qué lugar ocupa la virtualidad en la historiografía del paisaje? Para dar respuesta a ambas preguntas, el siguiente artículo realiza una arqueología de la representación paisajística, partiendo de la influencia que tuvo la categoría de lo pintoresco en la cultura visual de finales del siglo XVIII, para posteriormente analizar su evolución e influencia en artilugios y planteamientos visuales que, antes de la llegada de la tecnología digital, prefiguran la acción de adentrarse en mundos virtuales. A través de este recorrido se evidencia el vínculo entre formas paisajísticas distintas y distantes en el tiempo y, en paralelo, se estudia cómo éstas se inscriben en el imaginario paisajístico, tradicionalmente basado en la realidad.

Palabras clave

Paisaje; inmersión; virtual; cine; pintura; precine; dispositivo de visión; pintoresco.

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