

4. ‘Nonhuman Landscapes’ in Quebec Video Art

Sara Bédard-Goulet

Abstract

This chapter examines two video artworks by artist Nelly-Eve Rajotte that present landscapes in northern Quebec using aerial views provided by a drone, thus interrogating an anthropocentric representation of landscapes as a passive frame for human activity. The videos and their dehumanized perspective are a basis to reflect on the idea of nonhuman landscapes, i.e. non or less anthropocentric representations of the natural environment that open the possibilities of showing nonhuman elements as singular points of view. They contribute to deepen our understanding of northern spaces in Canada.

Keywords

Video art, landscape, drones, nonhuman, point of view.

Vision is *always* a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices.

Donna Haraway

Introduction

Contemporary critical theory has reflected on how modernity has alienated humans from the Earth, underlining, like Bruno Latour (2015), the current ‘return’ of the neglected planet.

How to cite this book chapter:

Bédard-Goulet, S. (2023). ‘Nonhuman Landscapes’ in Quebec Video Art. In: Bédard-Goulet, S. & Premat, C. (eds.), *Nordic and Baltic Perspectives in Canadian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Northern Spaces Narratives*, pp. 137–163. Stockholm University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/bci.e>. License: CC BY-NC.

Regrettably, the present neoliberal condition and its economic principles enhance the destruction of ecosystems despite a new planetary awareness (Latour, 2017). In this context, a conceptual revision of the human connectedness to the biosphere is taking place, involving, among others, the notion of landscape as ‘the familiar domain of our dwelling’ (Ingold, 2000, p. 191). Landscape, in the Canadian context, is closely connected to the notion of wilderness, ‘a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny’ (Cronon, 1996, p. 10). Wilderness manifests the problematic human relationship to the nonhuman as well as the colonial power that created this category to describe places that needed to be appropriated (Costantino, 2012). As both an actual location and a representation, landscape addresses the modern imperative ‘to withdraw, to draw out by drawing back from a site’ (Mitchell, 2002, p. viii) and questions the position of the human vis-à-vis the natural environment.

Landscape as an artistic genre has received considerable attention from art historians, who have shown how it offers an insight into the human positioning towards nature (Gombrich, 1966). In Canada, the Group of Seven, a group of landscape painters from the 1920s, are considered central to establishing a national art movement based on a direct contact with nature (Housser, 1926). They have also been criticised for supporting the modern idea of nature and wilderness by presenting landscapes that are seemingly untouched and uninhabited. Jonathan Bordo dedicates a chapter to the curious specularity that this kind of work displays: ‘It exalts a picture that testifies to an unpicturable condition—the wilderness sublime—while simultaneously legitimating, as a landscape picture, terrain violently seized, dispossessed of its indigenous inhabitants, and reconstituted as territory’ (Bordo, 2002, p. 294).

These artistic landscapes form a relevant material to examine how they encourage us to ‘look at a view’ and thus ‘engage in a kind of conscious apperception of space as it unfolds itself in a particular place’ (Mitchell, 2002, p. viii). In parallel to these modern landscapes, contemporary landscapes that renew a genre mainly associated with painting through various media are

particularly interesting when it comes to studying the human perspective on and place in 'nature' today.

In this chapter, I question the possibility of a *nonhuman landscape* in two recent video artworks that present landscapes in Quebec using aerial views provided by a drone. In *Blanc* (2017) and *Stem* (2020), Quebec artist Nelly-Eve Rajotte uses the robot's point of view to show northern areas mainly empty of direct human presence, interrogating an anthropocentric representation of landscapes as a passive frame for human activity. An increasingly common filming device, the drone, provides an aerial perspective comparable to those previously produced with the help of a helicopter. Yet, it creates a different effect due to the device's features: its size makes it more manoeuvrable and discreet and broadens the movement range, plus it is controlled from a distance and can be automated. It therefore provides a kind of embodiment for spectators distinct from other types of camera, 'troubling the subjective position defined by camera movement' (Bordwell, 1977, p. 24), and addresses, when it comes to landscapes, the modern aestheticising distance that retreats to a broader perspective. I argue that the technological possibilities offered by the drone encourage the viewers to imagine a nonhuman or less human gaze on the environment that, in turn, raises the possibility of a less anthropocentric landscape or non-human landscape. This device would thus offer an insight into other *umwelts*, described by Jakob von Uexküll (2010) as *milieus* centred around each living organism, and create 'what if' landscapes more or less devoid of humans. While this kind of reflection raises the question of a possible nonhuman appreciation of artistic landscape and aesthetic categories, this chapter focuses on the representational artifice that fosters a less human-centred approach to landscape. It builds on video art theory, artistic and other approaches to landscape, and refers to comparable artworks that use robotic cameras, namely *La Région Centrale* by Michael Snow (1971), a seminal work in the field of Canadian landscape and experimental film, and *In the Land of Drought* by Julian Rosefeldt (2015), which shows post-apocalyptic landscapes filmed with a drone.

From human to nonhuman landscapes

To define what could be a nonhuman landscape, one needs to first briefly present the concept of landscape, which goes hand in hand with conceptions of the natural environment and the human relationship to it. Landscape has received considerable attention in several fields of the human and natural sciences and varies greatly depending on perspective, but in this chapter we can build on two main trends that consider, on the one hand, in a realist sense, the real perception of a space and, on the other hand, in an iconist sense, its pictorial representation (Balibar, 2018, p. 11; Lefebvre, 2006, p. 20). In anthropology, for example, scholars have focused not only on the perception of the land but also on the human use of it, in an embodied perspective that considers that ‘landscape is the familiar domain of our dwelling’ (Ingold, 2000, p. 191) where humans are incorporated rather than inscribed. Similarly, if we consider landscape in a new materialist perspective for which the ‘mode of being and knowing in which transcorporeal subjects grapple with “environments” that can never be external’ (Alaimo, 2014, p. 13), we can tentatively describe landscape as a habitat that emerges from the relations taking place in a given location. Indeed, one living organism’s habitat is always formed by the other organisms’ weaving, and inhabiting is always cohabiting with other life forms (Morizot, 2020, p. 28).

In their *Iconography of landscape*, Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels define landscape as ‘a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings.’ (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988, p. 1) Focusing comparably on landscape in the visual arts, Anne Cauquelin (1989) describes it as space freed from eventhood, as a setting, and opposes it to a scene. These two approaches insist, as elsewhere Alain Roger (1997) or Michel Collot (1997), on landscape as a culturally informed experience of the land, made visible in a representation. Yet, it is impossible to establish such a clear separation between the land as physical and the landscape as cultural,¹ let alone limit the landscape to a background, despite a long artistic tradition that supports this

¹ As demonstrated, for example, in Posthumus, S. (2012). Writing the Land/scene: Marie Darrieussecq’s *Le Pays*. *FLS*, 34, 103–117.

idea. Admittedly, artworks have been made responsible for the indifference of humans towards the natural environment. While Ernst Gombrich (1966, p. 119) claims that the genre of the landscape became the source of our 'landscaping gaze', i.e. our sensibility to landscape in the world, Estelle Zhong Mengual and Baptiste Morizot (2018, p. 88) blame the 'landscape model' for structuring our appreciation of panoramic views, horizon and perspective effects as important elements of nature, for flattening the landscape and for inducing exteriority towards it, as it has to be appreciated from afar. For Allan Carlson (2015, p. 66), the landscape model acts as a screen between the living world and humans that should be substituted to provide new forms of attention to the other-than-humans.

While Carlson (2015, p. 78) recommends replacing the artistic landscape model with one based on scientific and common knowledge about the natural environment, Zhong Mengual (2017, p. 41) suggests that art also possesses resources that can help to reinvent the human relationship with the living world and oppose the idea that humans are the only ones to dwell in an environment that is homogenously composed of all the nonhumans. To reverse the inattention towards what has been considered décor, Zhong Mengual proposes that artworks should acknowledge nonhumans as *points of view*. Rather than suggesting that nonhumans should become actors emerging from the background, she recommends the concept of point of view, defined, following von Uexküll (2010), as a centre that configures its environment in a milieu endowed with meaning, secreting and transporting its own evaluations (Zhong Mengual, 2021). Being a point of view involves a singular existence, comparable to what Florence Burgat (2015) has described for animal lives as an active element rather than a passive unidentified background. In addition to being a fruitful philosophical concept, the point of view is profitable to art studies as it can be used to analyse artworks.

Recently, the idea of 'inhuman landscape' was opposed to the 'human landscape' defined by the European Landscape Convention (2000), which specifies, following anthropological and human geographical perspectives, that populations must be associated with the definition, the regional planning and the preservation of landscapes. In this perspective, inhuman landscapes are 'paradoxical

landscapes, landscapes that are or were inhabited, but in which the relationship of belonging between landscape and people seems to be broken, even more strongly and dramatically than in the “non-places” mentioned by Marc Augé’ (LLSETI, 2019).

These inhuman landscapes are human-made and humans are the cause of their degradation and limited or impossible use. They can be associated with three types of surrounding: transit landscapes (such as encampments), toxic landscapes (such as sacrifice zones used for building nuclear weapons) and hurt landscapes (such as former war zones or places of massacre). They are an extreme example of ‘hybrid natures’, ‘anthropogenic ecosystems’ or ‘transformed umwelts’ (Mäekivi & Magnus, 2020) created by the global and all-encompassing human presence on Earth and increasing friction (Tsing, 2005) between humans and other biological species. A similar, although more positive, appeal for an alternative conception of landscape was made in a recent issue of the *Paysageur* journal (2020), dedicated to ‘parallel landscapes’: informal, pirate, hallucinated landscapes that invite us to look at the land differently.

In parallel to the notion of inhuman landscape and in connection with the current conceptual decentring of the human as well as with multiple contemporary artworks that reinvent the genre of the landscape (Matless, 2018) among the artistic production of the Anthropocene (David & Turpin, 2015), I wish to consider what could be a nonhuman landscape, i.e. a non or less anthropocentric representation of the natural environment. More specifically, I suggest that by providing an alternative point of view to that of the traditional camera, the drone’s aerial view used in some contemporary video artwork generates another, non-anthropocentric, perceptual imaginary of the environment. Even if robotic cameras are controlled by humans (although this is not always the case, as some of them are automated), its impersonal presence offers more space for the natural elements, raising attentiveness to each, or at least some of them, which can be considered as singular entities with their own lived experiences. Even if the drone flies over the land at higher or lower altitude, it can participate in breaking the ‘illusion of disembeddedness’ (Plumwood, 2001) that usually comes with a distant point of view, as has been the case for instance with images of the ‘Blue

Planet' taken from space (Cosgrove, 2001; Heise, 2008; Latour, 2015). Indeed, as Donna Haraway points out in her now seminal essay *Situated Knowledges*:

The 'eyes' made available in modern technological sciences shatter any idea of passive vision; these prosthetic devices show us that all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building on translations and specific *ways* of seeing [...] There is no unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura (Haraway, 1988, p. 588).

Needless to say, drone use varies greatly as do the resulting images that they produce, as well as the editing that is made from their recordings. Moreover, because of its inevitable connection with surveillance and war, the drone draws attention to the imperial appropriation of land, reinforced and legitimised by a withdrawn subject and a representation of an empty and hostile space. In this way it offers visibility to the modern construction of the landscape and can criticise a colonial legitimacy based on the idea of *terra nullius*, a land that belongs to no one, concealing prior settlement and land use (Costantino, 2012). Landscape could then express a form of anxiety in the face of the human impact on nature and the environmental catastrophe that it is causing, and mark the decline of the global capitalist empire (Barringer, 2018).

Nonhuman points of view

The drone's disembodied point of view is comparable to what Gilles Deleuze describes as a certain kind of camera in cinema: 'But the sole cinematographic consciousness is not us, the spectator, nor the hero; it is the camera — sometimes human, sometimes inhuman or superhuman'² (Deleuze, 1986, p. 20). Whether inhuman or superhuman, it is significant that robotic cameras provide a dehumanised point of view in which 'the camera movement [...] block[s] an anthropomorphic reading, refusing it as an intelligible or likely surrogate for bodily movement' (Bordwell, 1977, p. 24)

² 'Mais la seule conscience cinématographique, ce n'est pas nous, le spectateur, ni le héros, c'est la caméra, tantôt humaine, tantôt inhumaine ou surhumaine' (Deleuze, 1983, p. 34).

and create new modes of seeing. Reversing Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's proposal about material agency, I suggest that these new modes of seeing allow us to 'apprehend the environment disanthropocentrically, in a teetering mode that renders human centrality a problem rather than a starting point' and insist on the fact that 'the inhuman is not ours to control, possesses desires and even will' (Cohen, 2013, p. xxiv). Drones used for filming landscapes can thus constitute ecocritical apparatuses that underline 'the relationship of the human and the non-human [...] and entailing critical analysis of the term "human" itself' (Garrard, 2012, p. 5). The UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicle) used to film Rajotte's video works, although they fit into a 'drone vision [that] establishes its prominence as a trope in public culture' (Stahl, 2013, p. 664), and mainly include killing UAVs, refer more to a scientific imaginary that involves discovery, recording and surveillance, even if they also move away from this visibility regime with more contemplative moments. Despite the fact that landscape and territory imply different modes of relation to the spatial environment, the 'landscape gaze' and the 'tactical gaze' nevertheless share a common interest in the observation and possession of the land (Lacoste, 1995). This connection is made particularly tangible in the Canadian North, which has been considered since the beginning of colonisation both as pure wilderness and a resource to be exploited. Unsurprisingly, the two video works analysed here are reminiscent of this phenomenon.

These works by Nelly-Eve Rajotte both present landscapes from the northern Quebec. *Blanc* is a one channel 9:30 minute-long video with stereo sound produced in 2017 and presented that same year at the Truck Stop festival, projected on an abandoned drive-in screen in Drummondville. It starts with still shots of an abandoned drive-in screen and white trucks in snow before moving to travelling shots of a northern forest and lake and later of Inuit and sleigh dogs on the ice floe. Those travelling shots include shots taken from closer to the ground, over a path in the forest and closing in on the sleigh dogs, and from a higher altitude, so that they offer a wide view of the forest or the ice floe, where the Inuit are initially barely visible as small dark figures on the white background.

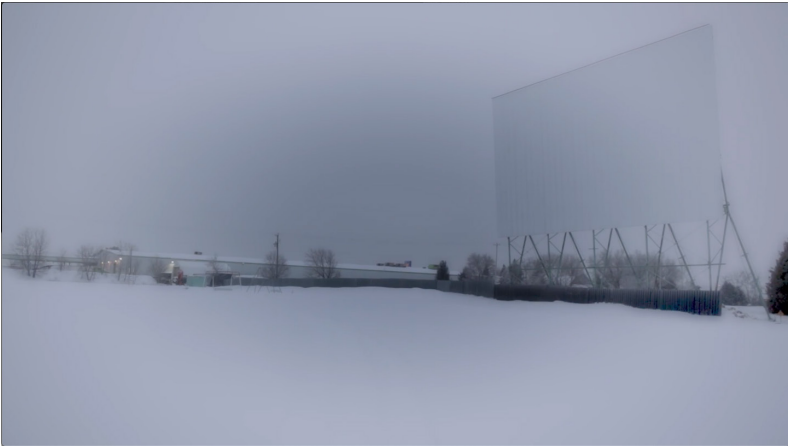


Figure 1. Nelly-Eve Rajotte. 2017. *Blanc* [Film still]. HD film, 9:30 minutes, sound. Courtesy of the artist.³



Figure 2. Nelly-Eve Rajotte. 2017. *Blanc* [Film still]. HD film, 9:30 minutes, sound.

³ All images from Nelly-Eve Rajotte are courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3. Nelly-Eve Rajotte. 2017. *Blanc* [Film still]. HD film, 9:30 minutes, sound.



Figure 4. Nelly-Eve Rajotte. 2017. *Blanc* [Film still]. HD film, 9:30 minutes, sound.

Stem is a one channel 12:00 minute-long video with sound produced in 2020 and intended as an architectural projection, presented for the first time during the summer of 2020 at the Rencontres internationales de la photographie en Gaspésie. It only shows travelling shots of a northern forest and lake, at the Manicouagan reservoir, whose dam is visible for a short moment during the opening credits. The piece focuses mainly on one lake



Figure 5. Nelly-Eve Rajotte. 2020. *Stem* [Film still]. HD film, 12 minutes, sound. Hydro-Quebec collection.



Figure 6. Nelly-Eve Rajotte. 2020. *Stem* [Film still]. HD film, 12 minutes, sound. Hydro-Quebec collection.

shore, which forms a peninsula where a tree stands apart from the rest of the forest, with the camera closing in on that shore alternately from two sides. The UAV stays at relatively the same height over the water, at a distance that prevents any kind of human embodiment, but at one point its camera pivots as the UAV keeps relatively still, reminding the viewer about the apparatus.

Both videos are filmed with a UAV⁴ but with one major difference. In *Blanc*, the presence of the UAV is made visible and 'hearable': the soundtrack includes sounds reminiscent of communications between pilots and an airbase, and we can sometimes notice the propeller on the edge of the frame; in addition,

⁴ Seemingly with a human controlled UAV.

the video seems to end with the UAV landing, its camera looking down at the ground. In *Stem*, the UAV's presence is only palpable from the aerial point of view: it is not included in the soundtrack and we cannot see its propeller or legs. Therefore, in the first video, although the camera movement is not a likely surrogate to bodily movement, the spectator can still relate for instance to a drone pilot, while in the second video the point of view is more impersonal, nonhuman. The point of view in the first video is thus more reminiscent of an exploration or surveillance imaginary, especially when added enhanced contrast creates a moon-like landscape with the ice floe, where in the second video it gives more an impression of curious contemplation mixed with nature documentary. The second major difference between the two videos is the presence of humans and domesticated dogs in *Blanc*, whereas *Stem* shows a landscape devoid of direct human presence. Both videos are edited, presenting a careful selection of recordings and discernible added effects, such as overexposure in *Blanc* and fake snow in *Stem*. It is notable that both videos simultaneously create immersive and distancing effects. As respectively large and monumental projections with a unique camera point of view, they immerse the viewers in the environment that they present. At the same time, because of their robotic cameras, which prevent any anthropomorphic reading, they stop viewers from feeling that they are directly experiencing these environments. Although it can be claimed that UAVs provide an even more direct mediation of reality, being a mobile extension of human vision, in the two video works they display the inherent artificiality of any image capture and 'shatter any idea of passive vision'. The possibilities offered by this technological device reposition the human vis-à-vis the landscape by insisting on the presence of a nonhuman eye, which alters the idea of a human landscape, a landscape seen by and intended for humans only.

Shift of focus

The use of an 'automated' technical eye in video art is not entirely new, since the medium is itself part technological and has raised interrogations and experimentations from artists since its beginning. Predecessors such as Canadian artist Michael Snow have investigated this aspect before, specifically in connection with

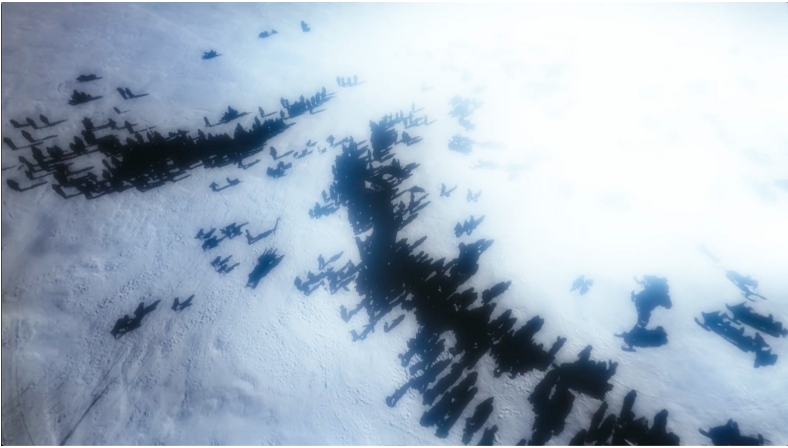


Figure 7. Nelly-Eve Rajotte. 2017. *Blanc* [Film still]. HD film, 9:30 minutes, sound.

remote northern landscapes. For his influential experimental film *La Région Centrale*, created in 1971 (190 minutes), Snow conceived, together with engineer Pierre Abeloos, a remote-controlled camera-activating machine that he set in an isolated location north of Sept-Îles, in Quebec. From the perspective of a mountain-top, this cinematic landscape features vast prospects and a rocky terrain recorded by a camera rigged for movement in any and all directions, including turning, rolling, and spinning – producing a landscape that defies gravity. The camera movement were composed in advance and the artist controlled the motion live by remote control from an off-screen position during filming. The camera-activating machine does not appear in the film, except occasionally as a shadow.⁵

When comparing Nelly-Eve Rajotte's videos and Snow's *La Région Centrale*, we can identify similarities due to the disembodied camera that creates moving images that cannot be observed by the human eye and affects the perception of the landscape. In *La Région Centrale*, it is impossible not to notice camera movement, which tends to attract attention to the frame edge causing it to lead the

⁵ This machine was later recycled and adapted to become the central element and motive force of the kinetic video sculpture *De La* (1972).

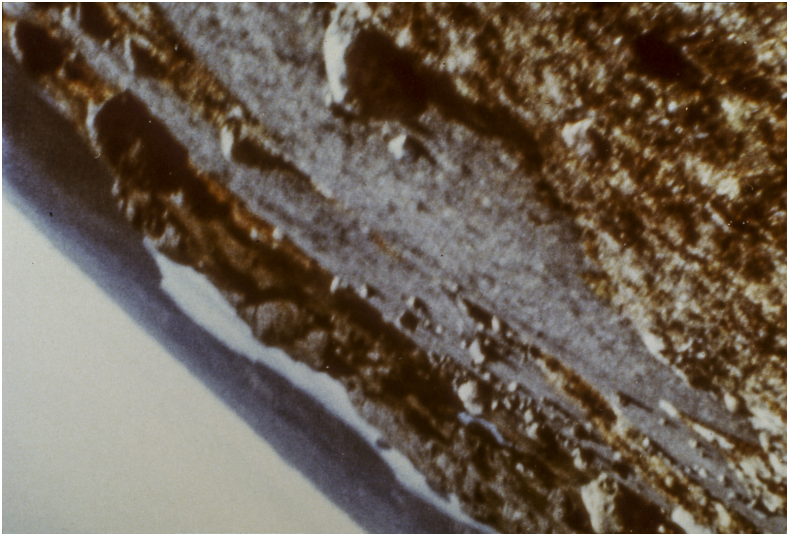


Figure 8. Michael Snow. 1971. *La Région Centrale* [Film still]. 16mm film, 190 minutes, colour, sound. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 9. *La Région Centrale* [Production still], 1971. 16mm film, 190 minutes, colour, sound. Photograph by Joyce Wieland. Courtesy of Michael Snow.

movement rather than the centre. This is not the case in *Blanc* or *Stem* because of the travelling shots, which are mainly forward and bring the focus in the direction of travel, distancing the work from the more traditional panning shots from the motion picture industry, which derive from painted panoramas (Barringer, 2018). In both artists' work, the more or less 'independent' camera, freed from traditional narration and its temporality, structures an alternative time and space. This spacetime is suggestive of how it can exist outside of the human realm, for different living beings, and it opposes a common association between landscape in films and *temps morts*, lulls in the story, which has contributed to connect landscape with death (Lefebvre, 2006). As described by von Uexküll (2010) for the tick, spacetime for nonhuman organisms can vary greatly, with some perceiving the world more slowly or more quickly and keeping within a limited perimeter during their lifetime, or, on the contrary, travelling great distances every year. By suspending human time and space the three works present the viewers with alternative umwelts and mark how the 'ecological project of thinking beyond anthropocentricity requires enlarged temporal and geographical scales' (Cohen, 2015, p. 9), while they 'stretch material intimacies across [those] scales' (Alaimo, 2016, p. 10).

In terms of representation, the shift of focus to landscape and its content can be described as a switch in the obvious and obtuse meanings defined by semiotician Roland Barthes (1982). While the obvious meaning refers to the symbolic addressed to the receptor within a sign system, the obtuse (or third) meaning exceeds it, being a signifier without a signified (Barthes, 1982). Landscape films would then reverse the usual balance between the two meanings and give the most space to the obtuse rather than the obvious one (at least until this type of film is no longer a novelty). Although this perspective prolongs in a way the traditional negative definition of landscape in art (landscape is a setting *without* action), it insists on how the nonhuman exceeds human apprehension, modelling and representation and is thus part of the indescribable. At the same time, human efforts to understand and translate the nonhuman are numerous and landscape videos contribute to these efforts by shifting the focus to the 'surroundings', the 'background' (Bonamy, 2013).

The presence of nonhumans in the moving image pieces, while contributing to create a landscape, echoes the three notions identified by Barthes to describe the obtuse meaning. First, the signifier 'is discontinuous, *indifferent* to the story and to the obvious meaning'⁶ (Barthes, 1982, p. 55). Even if different genres (documentary, landscape, surveillance) structure Rajotte's videos, they partly escape the narrative form with natural elements that break away and introduce a counter-narrative. In *Stem*, this is made tangible, for example and paradoxically, with the fake snow added to the footage, which introduces an 'elliptic emphasis' that blurs the border between authenticity and disguise. Second, the signifier is incomplete, 'it is in a permanent state of *depletion*'⁷ (Barthes, 1982, p. 55), it can never thoroughly name. This is the case, for example, in *Blanc*, where the final image of waves on a shore, which comes after numerous shots of snowy landscapes, is suggestive of climate change while displaying the impossible encompassing of the phenomenon, which belongs to 'deep time' (Chakrabarty, 2018) and involves 'slow violence' (Nixon, 2011). Third, the obtuse meaning 'can be seen as an *accent*, the shape of emergence itself, of a fold'⁸ (Barthes, 1982, p. 56). As an anaphoric gesture, the obtuse meaning marks the sign system and the information it conveys. This is suggested in *Blanc* through the white surfaces of the screen and trucks and then the snow, which become projection and inscription surfaces, not only for human emotions, as was the case in modern landscapes, but also for vegetation. In short, the reversal of the obvious and obtuse meanings in Rajotte's video pieces goes together with a renewal of the landscape genre, as it attempts to distance itself from the human perspective.

⁶'le sens obtus est discontinu, *indifférent* à l'histoire et au sens obvie (comme signification de l'histoire)' (All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.)

⁷'le signifiant (le troisième sens) ne se remplit pas ; il est dans un état permanent de *déplétion*'

⁸'le sens obtus peut être vu comme un *accent*, la forme même d'une émergence, d'un pli (voire d'un faux pli), dont est marquée la lourde nappe des informations et des significations.'



Figure 10. Nelly-Eve Rajotte. 2017. *Blanc* [Film still]. HD film, 9:30 minutes, sound.

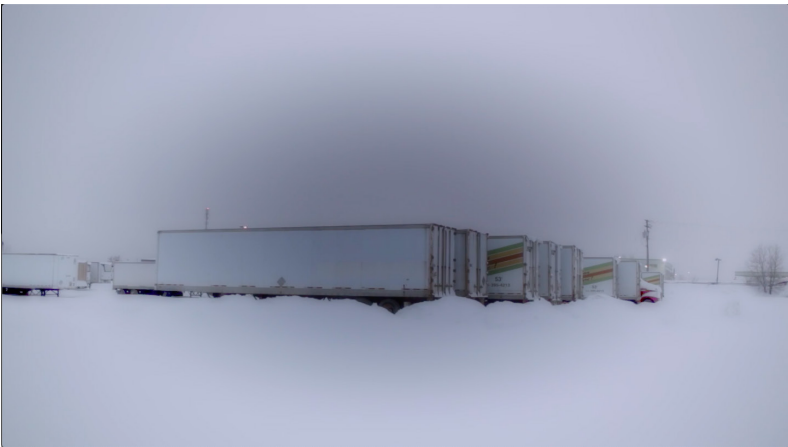


Figure 11. Nelly-Eve Rajotte. 2017. *Blanc* [Film still]. HD film, 9:30 minutes, sound.

Appropriate distance

Another notable contemporary production that uses a UAV to film an uninhabited land is *In the Land of Drought* produced between 2015 and 2017 by German artist Julian Rosefeldt. In this 43:15 minute-long 1-channel film with sound, landscapes seem to be part of 'an imagined future upon the post-Anthropocene',

visited by what looks like scientists or technicians investigating ‘the remnants of civilisation after humanity has made itself extinct’ (Lapper, 2018). More and more, ‘figures dressed in white lab suits emerge to inspect the ruins of civilisation – which are in fact abandoned film sets close to the Moroccan Atlas Mountains [...] like alien visitors who were perhaps once familiar with this ruined wasteland’ (Lapper, 2018). Midway through the film, we ‘are transported to the comparably bleak Ruhr area of Germany where the remains of industrialisation lie’ (Lapper, 2018). The same scientist-looking people ‘prowl the abandoned mining region, wandering across lonely land before finally descending upon an amphitheatre’ (Lapper, 2018). The whole video is filmed with a drone, giving the impression of a robot accompanying the scientists’ expedition and recording their discoveries.⁹

When comparing Rosefeldt’s video with Nelly-Eve Rajotte’s, we notice a similar use of the UAV, with long traveling shots that create a space in which the viewer is invited, with the immersive effect of the monumental or very large projection so that ‘the physical crossing of a spatial distance constitutes or conditions the work configuration’¹⁰ (Davila, 2002, p. 10), just as is the case for works that involve walking. The UAV allows the spectacle to break away from the usual frontal and static landscape view and offers the engaged and immersed posture called for by Arnold Berleant in the field of aesthetics:

The boundlessness of the natural world does not just surround us; it assimilates us. Not only are we unable to sense absolute limits in nature; we cannot distance the natural world from ourselves in order to measure and judge it with complete objectivity. Nature exceeds the human mind, not just because of the limits of our present knowledge, not only because of the essentially anthropomorphic character of that knowledge so that we can never go beyond the character and boundaries of our cognitive process, but by the recognition that the cognitive relation with things is not the exclusive relation or even the highest one we can achieve (1993, p. 236).

⁹ Information available on the artist’s website: <https://www.julianrosefeldt.com>.

¹⁰ ‘le franchissement physique d’une distance spatiale constitue ou conditionne la configuration d’une œuvre, elle trace un signe d’équivalence entre marcher et créer.’

On the one hand, we can consider that immersive works prolong the anthropocentrism of art by creating a central place for the human viewer. On the other hand, in the case of Rosefeldt's and Rajotte's work, the UAV provides a point of view inaccessible to humans that offers an insight into nonhuman points of view. It also suggests that an impersonal, technological device can have a point of view, mirroring the modern distant perspective that, this time, includes the human along with the nonhuman, as if the land was considered from an alien point of view. From this outsider's perspective, the human and the nonhuman are no longer in opposition, in the common subject–object relationship that informs modern landscapes, but rather they share space and time, so that the videos display the entanglements that create a landscape without denying the malign effect that humans can have on nonhumans.

Returning the gaze

Rosefeldt's and Rajotte's works, like many contemporary artworks, are a meeting point of artistic and scientific practices that crystallise Anthropocene visual culture (Matless, 2018) and shape the current epistemological framework through an 'investigation effect' (Zenetti, 2019). Interestingly, in *In the Land of Draught, Blanc* and *Stem*, the surveillance or 'documenting effect' (Zenetti, 2017) created by the UAV bounces back, with the videos gazing at the viewers in return and breaking away from the usual subject–object paradigm. This is very tangible at the end of *In the Land of Draught*, where the amphitheatre resembles a large eye, with its all-seeing ability reflective of the aerial viewpoint, unfolding a dialogue between the two perspectives: the eye on the ground (like the Earth's eye) and the drone's nonhuman eye overhead. In *Blanc*, this specularity, revealing nonhuman points of view, is noticeable towards the end of the video, when the drone approaches the sleigh dogs, a few of which get interested and walk towards it carefully. This animal–machine interaction testifies of a nonhuman perspective that challenges the anthropocentric one and insists on defining those points of view from their encounter rather than in an essentialist way. In that sense, the videos call into question the nature of identity, 'troubling the assumptions that prop up the *anthropos* in the first place, including the assumed separation between "the human" and its others' (Barad, 2012, p. 27).



Figure 12. Nelly-Eve Rajotte. 2017. *Blanc* [Film still]. HD film, 9:30 minutes, sound.

Stem presents a subtler returning of the gaze by playing with the Romantic tableau of a single tree standing apart from the forest on a lake shore. Singled out, the tree becomes an individual that also insists, because of its disposition, on the presence of the other trees, in a known composition effect. It is tempting to consider, as is the case in Tom Thomson's *The Jack Pine* (1916–17), an influential painting for the Group of Seven and the Canadian landscape movement, that the 'solitary tree is a stand-in for the specular witness' (Bordo, 2002, p. 299). For Bordo, witnessing is determinant in modern picturing, as indicated by the constitutive framing operation of picturing, and is connected with the notion of wilderness in colonial art. In paintings such as *The Jack Pine*, the single tree figures the witness of wilderness, before European human presence in North America; this figure obliterates history by positing testimony as the rupturing event that inaugurates human presence in the land. Where in modernity 'the subject as a witness comes to organize the space, frame, and contents of visual arts' (Bordo, 2002, p. 299), the postmodern posthumanist eye of the drone shifts the witness figure of the single tree to a singular being with its dose of uncertainty. The tree is no longer a static stand-in witness that attracts, thanks to the painting's composition, the spectators' gaze and in which the spectators

can project themselves. Instead, the camera movement, showing the tree from different angles and distances, presents a singular being, more similar to a character (or a point of view, in Zhong Mengual's terms). The special effects used by the artist to alter the tree's appearance enhance its character-like features, described as mysterious and almost magical by critics (Lévesque, 2020). These effects increase the uncertainty of the tree: we are unsure whether it is dead or alive, so that it appears as an in-between, unstable figure. Not only does the tree become a being with a singular existence, it also displays an ontological indeterminacy that points to identity as something performed rather than given (Barad, 2012, p. 41), based on the 'ongoing differentiation of the world' (Barad, 2012, p. 47).

Unsurprisingly, the ontological indeterminacy that marks the current period is made visible in artistic landscapes, which are emblematic of certain processes typical of the Anthropocene for David Matless (2018). As a geological epoch defined by the human impact on Earth, the Anthropocene draws attention to the intricate entanglements of humans and nonhumans and how they take place. In this context, the 'anthroposcenic' (Matless, 2018) can help visualise the epoch and its new geographical imaginaries of altered natures. Rather than the mainly photographic familiar 'working landscapes' examined by Matless, Rajotte's video works present at first sight remote locations that are not as much 'in use'. At the same time, the UAV footage used in both videos could easily originate from control UAVs that check, for instance, water level, especially close to a dam (in *Stem*). Moreover, *Blanc* includes visible spatial practices, as if reminding us that the Canadian North is not an empty land belonging to no one. Strikingly, the non-anthropocentric perspective provided by the UAV does not erase the past enfolded in the territory but instead exposes it through the surveillance imaginary that it summons. The title of *Blanc* ('white' in French) points to the connection between the 'pure' white snowy northern landscapes and the colonial power that created this historical visual medium. *Blanc* thus shows how the natural is connected to the political, how the land retains traces of exploitation, its material agency (Bennett, 2010) highlighted by a camera device intended for watching humans and nonhumans

alike. Instead of prolonging the ‘conquering gaze from nowhere [...] that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, [that] signifies the unmarked positions of Man and White’ (Haraway, 1988, p. 581), this video work proposes a ‘critical habitat’, i.e. ‘art informed by geopoetics [...] that critiques the relationship between media and environment and explores forms of global identification’ (Apter, 2002, p. 22).

Conclusion

To conclude briefly on this exploratory analysis of two video artworks by Quebec artist Nelly-Eve Rajotte, I endeavoured to show how they support the hypothesis of a nonhuman landscape, as a non or less anthropocentric representation of the natural environment. Building on new materialisms, I suggested that landscape, in the first place, is a habitat that emerges from the relations taking place in a given location, and that it can be represented through various artistic media. Video art seems to be an appropriate medium to reverse the modern inattention towards the natural environment and its inhabitants, especially through specific uses of UAVs. By dehumanising the camera effect, the drone creates the possibilities of showing nonhuman elements as singular points of view, reversing the usual obvious and obtuse meanings of representation while involving the viewers within the landscape to meet with the elements represented and possibly being affected by this encounter. As seen with the works analysed, presenting elements as points of view can sometimes create an uncanny return of the gaze towards the viewer (Didi-Huberman, 1992) and highlight the ontological indeterminacy of the elements presented. The drone can also offer an alien perspective that enhances the shared materiality of the human and nonhuman, while the large or monumental format of the works immerse the viewers in the altered environments that they show. When comparing Nelly-Eve Rajotte’s works with Snow’s and Rosefeldt’s, it appeared that they create an alternative spacetime more suited to a disanthropocentric approach to the natural environment. Moreover, *Blanc* and *Stem* deconstruct the assumption of wilderness that usually comes with representations of the Canadian North, by revealing traces of

human activity (the dam in *Stem*) and human dwelling (the Inuit in *Blanc*). They produce an alternative narrative of the northern spaces in Canada, critical of the colonial legacy and its ongoing effects on the landscapes. The northern forest that they present contributes to reveal 'the vegetal foundations of capitalism and colonialism' (Sandilands, 2017, p. 25) and the commodification of people and plants alike by the political and economic ambitions of European imperialism. At a time when human activity is altering the planet at a geological level, artworks such as these 'muddl[e] the commonsensical assumption that the world exists as a background for the human subject' (Alaimo, 2016, p. 1).

References

- Alaimo, S. (2016). *Exposed. Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Alaimo, S. (2014). Thinking as the Stuff of the World. *O-Zone: A Journal of Object-Oriented Studies*, 1, 13–21.
- Apter, E. (2002). The Aesthetics of Critical Habitats. *October*, 99, 21–44.
- Balibar, J. (2018). Du paysage représenté au paysage réel. *Nouvelle revue d'esthétique*, 2(22), 9–23.
- Barad, K. (2012). Nature's Queer Performativity. *Women, Gender & Research*, 1(2), 25–53.
- Barthes, R. (1982). Le troisième sens. Notes de recherche sur quelques photogrammes de S. M. Eisenstein. In *L'Obvie et l'obtus. Essais critiques III* (pp. 43–61). Paris: Seuil.
- Barringer, T. (2018). Landscape Then and Now. *British Art Studies*, 10. Retrieved from <https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-10/landscape-national-contexts>.
- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bonamy, R. (2013). *Le Fond cinématographique*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Bordo, J. (2002). Picture and Witness at the Site of the Wilderness. In W. J. T. Mitchell (Ed.), *Landscape and Power* (pp. 291–315). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Bordwell, D. (1977). Camera movement and cinematic space. *Ciné-Tracts*, 1(2), 19–25.
- Burgat, F. (2015). The Unexpected Resemblance between Dualism and Continuism, or How to Break a Philosophical Stalemate. In L. Mackenzie & S. Posthumus (Eds.) *French Thinking about Animals* (pp. 49–59). East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Carlson, A. (2015). L'appréciation esthétique de l'environnement naturel. In H.-S. Afeissa & Y. Lafolie (Eds.), *Esthétique de l'environnement. Appréciation, connaissance et devoir* (pp. 55–84). Paris: Vrin.
- Cauquelin, A. (1989). *L'Invention du paysage*. Paris: Plon.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2018). Anthropocene Time. *History and Theory*, 57(1), 5–32.
- Chamayou, G. (2013). *Théorie du drone*. Paris: La Fabrique.
- Chesher, C. (2016). Robots and the Moving Camera in Cinema, Television and Digital Media. In J. T. K. V. Koh, B. J. Dunstan, D. Silvera-Tawil & M. Velonaki (Eds.), *Cultural Robotics* (pp. 98–106). New York: Springer.
- Cohen, J. J. (2015). *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cohen, J. J. (Ed.). (2013). *Prismatic Ecologies: Ecotheory Beyond Green*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Collot, M. (Ed.). (1997). *Les Enjeux du paysage*. Bruxelles: Ousia.
- Cosgrove, D. (2001). *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Cosgrove, D. (1998). *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Cosgrove, D. & Daniels, S. (Ed.). (1988). *The Iconography of Landscape*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Costantino, T. (2012). Terra Nullius: A Possessed Landscape. *Proceedings of the 1st Global Conference: Monstrous Geographies: Places and Spaces of Monstrosity*. 18–20.07.2012.
- Cronon, W. (1995). The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature. In *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (pp. 69–90). New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

- Davila, T. (2002). *Marcher-Créer*. Paris: Regard.
- Davis, H. & Turpin, É. (2015). *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*. London: Open Humanities Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1986). *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.
- Deleuze, G. (1983). *Cinéma 1. L'image-mouvement*. Paris: Minuit.
- Department of Semiotics at the University of Tartu (2018). *Semiotics of Hybrid Natures: Anthropogenic Ecosystems, Multimodalities, Transformed Umwelts*. Retrieved from <https://www.flfi.ut.ee/en/semiotics-of-hybrid-natures>
- Didi-Huberman, G. (1992). *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*. Paris: Minuit.
- Dubois, P. (2011). *La Question vidéo. Entre cinéma et art contemporain*. Liège: Yellow Now.
- European Landscape Convention (2000). Retrieved from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/landscape/home>
- Faucon T. (2011). *Montage/énergie. De l'analyse des forces à l'analyse des formes*. Lyon: Aléas.
- Garrard, G. (2012). *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge.
- Gombrich, E. (1966). The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape. In *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*. London: Phaidon.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599.
- Heise, U. (2008). *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet. The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Housser, F. B. (1926). *A Canadian Art Movement*. Toronto: Macmillan.
- Ingold, T. (2000). *The Perception of the Environment. Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.
- Jones, M. (2011). Camera in Motion. Part 2: Means and Methods. *Screen Education*, 61, 112–117.
- Laboratoire Langages, littératures, sociétés, études transfrontalières et internationales (2019). *Paysages inhumains*. Retrieved from

<http://www.llseti.univ-smb.fr/web/llseti/704-paysages-inhumains.php>

- Lacoste, Y. (1995). À quoi sert le paysage? Qu'est-ce qu'un beau paysage? In A. Roger (Ed.), *La Théorie du paysage en France 1974-1994*. Seyssel: Champ Vallon.
- Lapper, E. (2018) In the Land of Drought – A film by Julian Rosefeldt. Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/265368002>
- Latour, B. (2015). *Face à Gaïa. Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique*. Paris: La Découverte/Les empêcheurs de penser en rond.
- Lefebvre, M. (2006). Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema. In M. Lefebvre (Ed.), *Landscape and Film* (pp. 19–59). London: Routledge.
- Lévesque, I. (host), Thivierge, É., & Tremblay, M.-C. (writers) (2020). Stem : une œuvre cinématographique projetée à Vaste et Vague [Radio program episode]. In J. Desgens (Executive producer). *Bon pied, bonne heure !* Montréal: Radio-Canada. Retrieved from <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/premiere/emissions/bon-pied-bonne-heure/segments/entrevue/199865/stem-vaste-et-vague-nelly-eve-rajotte>
- Lindström, K., Kull, K., & Palang, H. (2014). Landscape Semiotics: Contribution to Culture Theory. *Approaches to Culture Theory*, 4, 110–132.
- Mäekivi, N. & Magnus, R. 2020. Hybrid Natures — Ecosemiotic and Zoosemiotic Perspectives. *Biosemitotics*, 13, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12304-020-09382-z>
- Matless, D. (2018). The Anthroposcenic: Landscape in the Anthropocene. *British Art Studies*, 10. Retrieved from <https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-10/landscape-anthropocene>
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (2002). *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Morizot, B. (2020). *Manières d'être vivant. Enquêtes sur la vie à travers nous*. Arles: Actes Sud.
- Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Parfait, F. (2007). *Vidéo : un art contemporain*. Paris: Regard.
(2020) *Paysageur*, 4.
- Plumwood, V. (2001). *Environmental Culture. The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. New York: Routledge.
- Posthumus, S. (2012). Writing the Land/scape: Marie Darrieussecq's *Le Pays*. *FLS*, 34, 103–117.
- Roger, A. (1997). *Court traité du paysage*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Sandilands, C. (2017). Vegetate. In J. J. Cohen & L. Duckert (Eds.), *Veer Ecology. A Companion for Environmental Thinking* (pp. 16–29). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Stahl, R. (2013). What the drone saw: the cultural optics of the unmanned war. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 67(5), 659–674.
- Tsing, A. (2005). *Friction. An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Turner, M. G., Gardner, R. H., & O'Neill, R. V. (2001). *Landscape Ecology in Theory and Practice: Pattern and Process*. New York: Springer Verlag.
- von Uexküll, J. (2010). *Milieu animal et milieu humain*. Paris: Rivages.
- Zenetti, M.-J. (2019). Paradigmes de l'enquête et enjeux épistémologiques dans la littérature contemporaine. *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 334.
- Zenetti, M.-J. (2017). Trouble dans le pacte. Littérature documentaire et post-vérité. Paper presented at MARGE annual seminar, Lyon.
- Zhong Mengual, E. (2017). Habiter le paysage. *Billebaude*, 10, 40–41.
- Zhong Mengual, E. (2021). *Apprendre à voir. Le point de vue du vivant*. Arles: Actes Sud.
- Zhong Mengual, E. & Morizot, B. (2018). L'illisibilité du paysage. Enquête sur la crise écologique comme crise de la sensibilité. *Nouvelle revue d'esthétique*, 22, 87–96.