

# INTERACTIONS: SHAPING THE SPACES WE INHABIT

Anneke LAURIE

*Vaal University of Technology*

## Abstract

*A.W. Sprin's definition of landscape as a process of the "mutual shaping of people and places" implies that the inhabitants of any space are implicated in, but also susceptible to, the shaping of their surroundings. This paper examines such interactions by theorising landscape as embodied, individuated experience of place in relation to representations of landscape. The Vaal Metropolitan area is reflected on in terms of the researcher's experience of place, where experience of place refers to the consideration of direct (multi-sensory) perception, memories and prior knowledge as well as imaginings of place. This understanding of experience of place is based on a combination of theories of place from the writings of Edward Casey, J.B. Jackson and David Seamon, would therefore include representations of the landscape displayed publicly, such as real-estate advertisement boards and artworks. Works from the 'THIS PLACE: Engaging with where we are, the local' (2012) exhibition, are interpreted in this context as examples of local interaction and representation of the landscape.*

*Through a discussion of landscape representations created by local artists, about the local area, I aim to interrogate landscape as a medium through which we shape a notion of self as part of a collective or as apart from the collective culture which in turn impacts on the shaping of the spaces we inhabit. Through considering representations of the landscape in relation to individuated experience of the researcher's locality, an image of local cultures of selective valuing, use and abuse of the landscape emerges, providing a reading of landscape representations as interactive processes rather than static views.*

**Keywords:** *Experience of landscape, place, representation of landscape, the local*

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## Introduction

*[Bleached-out dry grass, often burnt, dotted with garbage and building waste; Flat, except for trenches and holes dug for no apparent reason. Bare trees line up in the background against a brownish-blue sky in the yellow morning light diffused by mist rising from the river. I drive on to the sound of Gareth Cliff insulting someone on the radio, past an expansive, manicured green lawn surrounding a neat house against a clear blue sky. This sudden interruption of winter is a picture on a signboard for a new housing development. I semi-consciously experiment with different vantage points and focal lengths, wanting to stop and take a photograph, but I drive on to work, with a half-formed image in my mind.]*

Representations shape my experience of the local landscape as much as physical sensation and perception does. Furthermore, representations literally shape the places and landscape and by extension, I argue, the society that inhabits and forms part of these places. The purpose of this paper is to use experience of place as a theoretical framework in reading publicly presented representations of the local area, specifically the exhibition *This Place: Engaging with where we are and where we stay: the local* (2012), an exhibition by the staff of the Department of Visual Arts and Design, Vaal University of Technology. *This Place* was accompanied by a colloquium on the topic to which I will refer periodically in the discussions of the works.

Participants in *This Place* were invited to create works that engage with our own locality with no restrictions on medium or approach. *This Place* refers to the Vaal Metropolitan area, stretching from Sasolburg to

Vereeniging and surrounding area, on both sides of the Vaal River. This place is classified as rural, but is known for its heavy industries (developed here because of the availability of water) and student protests since 1976.

The title, *Landscape interactions* is in a sense tautological: According to Edward Casey (2001:417), the word landscape already implies interaction. A careful consideration of the various definitions of landscape that have evolved in recent theory, however, indicates that the interactive aspect of landscape has been neglected until the emergence of human geography in the 1970s which coincides roughly with the emergence of land art in the late 60s (Moffat 2007:np). It is interesting to note that, from the start, human geography theorists referred to and critiqued landscape representation practices because such practices are seen to encapsulate any given society's relationship to and ideas about the land<sup>1</sup>. Jeff Malpas argues that indigenous relationships to place which are "established and sustained, not through the exercise of authority over the place—through ensuring one's own exclusive access to it—but rather through journeying across it and through the stories that such journeying embodies and expresses" (2008: np). This statement emphasises the fundamentality of representation to human relationships to land, together with the significance of movement through the landscape which emerges as a central theme in this paper.

When I Google 'define landscape', the recurring definitions amount to the same "more than three hundred year old" definition that John, B Jackson scrutinized in 1975: "a portion of land which the eye can comprehend at a glance" (1975:1). Most definitions refer to 'looking at', picturing and representing a portion of land and not 'living in the physical land', preferencing the visual over the other senses. A combination of phenomenologist Edward Casey (2001:417), and geographer Jackson's (1975:7) ideas explain landscape as a *composition of places on the land*. Yet, in terms of our "visual experience of our everyday worlds" (Jackson 1975:8), landscape is still also "A portion of the earth's surface that can be comprehended at a glance" (*ibid.*) encompassing both "nature and changes that humans have effected on the natural world" (Wells 2011:2).

The understanding of landscape is therefore dependent on the understanding of place, which Casey describes as "the immediate ambience of my lived body and its history, including the whole sedimented history of cultural and social influences and personal interests that compose my life-history" (2001:404). Casey's description of place could still be visualised as a frozen scene (Cresswell 2009) (much like a photograph). Anne Winston Sprin's (2010:92) conception of landscape as the "mutual shaping of people and place", however, foregrounds landscape as a continuous process of interaction rather than a passive object of aesthetic appreciation and activity or resource. According to Seamon, place is a monadic concept in that, "human beings are always conjoined, enmeshed, and immersed in their world. In other words, a relationship that is assumed conceptually to be two (people/environment) is lived existentially as one (people- environment intertwinement)" (2011:4).

While this "mutual shaping of place" occurs through a variety of phenomena, in this article I will focus on representation as a manifestation of how individuals and groups shape and are shaped by places, which invariably refers to other shaping processes such as the use and over-use of resources; access and restriction of mobility (current and historical). These processes are indicative of the kind of people and social/political structures that have shaped the landscape, and in turn the very society responsible for these processes. Landscape is therefore not created by the artist or designer. It is a continuous process that the inhabitants/visitors of an area engage in through their daily activities, habits of movement (Seamon, 2000:2) and acts of representation. Over time, human plans, needs and purposes change, resulting in a more or less haphazard evolution of the landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> See amongst others publications by Cosgrove (1984), Meinig (1979), Appleton (1996) and Tuan (2001).

*[In spite of resolutions not to, I lose my temper (again) at a taxi that turns in front of me and stops. The road works are progressing quite fast. Soon the red earth base will be covered with grey. I brake hard for a teenager crossing the road without looking. This is what I get for being late. Once my son is safely in the school grounds I relax, my mind starts to wander, out over the private game reserve - no mist to day over the river. The light is crisp and clear on the increasingly dilapidated big properties on this side of the road].*

## **Method**

This paper reports on a process of reflection on 'being in place' (with a camera) that forms part of a larger research project in progress exploring my own landscape photography practice and the processes involved in creating photographic landscape representations. I work with experience of place as a key concept in landscape representation in an effort to transcend the duality of observer/occupant inherent in landscape photography traditions, but also to some extent dictated by the photographic apparatus.

Experience of place does, however, not merely consist of direct sensory perception, but also depends on other levels of consciousness, namely memories, anticipation and imagination, according to phenomenologist Robert Sokolowski (2000:85). It involves the physical, emotional and intellectual aspects of human existence, which Edward Relph (1976:9) explains, forms a continuum between direct perception and abstract thought. Experience of place furthermore occurs in time and space and is characterized by movement and mobility as well as moments of rest and encounter (Seamon 1994:2,3; Unwin & Adams. 2008:67; Cresswell 2009:7). This notion of movement and mobility as a central characteristic of certain locations has been explored by Augé through the concept of non-places (1995).

Cresswell however cautions that a preoccupation with experience over-emphasises the role of the individual and disregards the unavoidable impact of power structures and the social construction of places. Casey's explanation of place mentioned earlier, however, takes these forces into account when he refers to "the whole sedimented history of cultural and social influences" (2001:417) on place. While experience of place is necessarily individuated, it cannot be divorced from the social and political structures that shape the places.

Through considering representations of the landscape from the theoretical perspective of experience of place, but also in relation to individuated experience of my own locality I aim to provide a reading of landscape representations as interactions through which we contribute to what Christopher Tilley describes as the "sedimented layers of meaning" (1994:18) that make up a landscape rather than static views steeped in ideological overtones. Through publicly displayed representations we do not only shape the landscape, literally, but we also shape our relationship to the places represented. Representation is a form of naming; making accessible and thus giving meaning to a location which transforms it into a place (Tilley 1994:17-20).

## **This Place**

*[In my rush I forgot my phone at home. Now I'll have to rely on my own sense of direction and I'm cutting it fine as it is. I take the highway. The sun is low and colours the layer of low-lying smoke in the cold sky.*

*I did not realize the squash courts are so close to Sasol. The huge flame tower looms up over me against the night sky as I turn in to the courts - just in time.]*



**Figure 1** Thinus Mathee, 2012, *26° 46' 33'' S*, Pigment ink on archival paper, 200x70 cm



**Figure 2** Thinus Mathee, 2012, *I See You*, Pigment ink on archival paper, 20 x 20 cm



**Figure 3** Thinus Mathee, 2012, *I See There*, Pigment ink on archival paper, 20 x 20 cm

As a whole the exhibition *This Place* offers the full gamut of human experience represented in varying intensities: memory and history, spirituality and imagination, emotions, and physical sensory perceptions.

Through the variety of disciplines and media used in this exhibition a complex understanding of the Vaal landscape emerges, with each medium and discipline lending itself to different ways of engaging with the local.

The medium of photography is best suited to the description of visual phenomena, but in the works of Thinus Mathee, instead of describing the place, he comments powerfully on the relation of the human body to place and space. Mathee presented two sets of images: a pair of panoramic prints depicting expansive skies, and a set of four square images of moments captured while driving, through the car window. The panoramic set, foregrounds background (Mathee 2012:np). We are invited to look at the great expanse and drama of the skies over the Vaal area as a setting for our everyday lives. With no reference to scale except a distant lightning bolt, it is difficult to comprehend the vastness of the view that is included in the frame and contained by the dark edges of the images. If I was to stand outside and look at the area of sky depicted, I would have to physically move my head from side to side and up. Mathee combines various “single glance[s]” (Wells 2011:2) into one. This disruption of our sense of scale, perhaps more than the subject matter that is associated with the ‘heavens’, evokes a spiritual experience in that it allows a perspective beyond human visual capabilities.

This work expresses the desire to look beyond the everyday, to find the spectacular in the local, without yearning for somewhere else. This drama is to be found here, where I am writing, in the Vaal area. It is the background to the everyday scene. On the opposite wall, as it was displayed in the gallery, Mathee offers precisely these everyday moments. We now take note of the sky as background which invokes memories of car fumes and polluted air. These images show the habit of moving from place to place as integral to understanding the Vaal area, where many people regularly drive, cycle or even walk from town to town. The perspective from the car window gives us a sense of the speed of the car, and the distances involved.



**Figure 4** Therese Scholtz, 2012, *Captured*, Various materials, Variable Dimensions

The set of three garments titled *Captured*, by Therese Scholtz, provide a very different perspective on the human body in relation to place in that she uses garments (that envelop the body) to reference the industrial structures and the Vaal River that are emblematic of the area. The layered textures of grey and white contrast with the felt flowers with their organic shapes, textures and colours that emerge from the garments as if escaping envelopment. Scholtz' garments encapsulate her acceptance of having to live in an environment that she feels alienated from while yearning for other places.



**Figure 5** Avitha Sooful, 2012, *Conversation Please*, Coal dust and metal Installation

Avitha Sooful shares Scholtz' discomfort with the heavy industrial and mining landscape. Sooful's work is however much more forceful and critical of the threat that heavy industries pose to human well being. *Conversation Please* consists of a coal-dust covered floor with heavily rusted chair frames placed on the coal, as if inviting the audience to sit down and have a conversation. But the chairs are not functional and the coal dust is repulsive in its promise to turn everything that touches it black. If it is stirred, it rises up and pollutes the air. The installation poses a physical threat to the human body while referencing the coal mines and iron works that established and sustains the economy of the area. Structures (the chairs) that on face value have been put in place to bring people together have in fact kept them apart and absent. Pollution in the Vaal Area continues even though the hazards and dangers are well known and documented.



**Figure 6** Linda du Preez, 2012, *Lifting Myself By My Own Hair*, Mixed Media, Variable dimensions

Linda du Preez' work, *Lifting Myself By My Own Hair*, represents 'this place' as an oppressive atmosphere from which she manages to lift herself, but with considerable vertical force. The material used references the body and mind in the use of hair-like but also brain-like platted and knotted twists that extend up and down from geometrically fitted PVC elbow-joints that resemble various other joints in the human body. The work speaks to human experience, namely integrated emotional and physical experience of the artist's place of work. What causes this oppressive atmosphere is not important in this work, but is hinted at in works by Matsepo Matoba, Nkululeko Khumalo and Mashaole Makwela respectively.



**Figure 7** Nkululeko Khumalo, 2012, *Untitled*, Etching, 40 x 50 cm



**Figure 8** Masempe Matoba, 2012, *African Women*, Pigment ink on canvas, Variable dimensions

Khumalo's etching and woodcut references the history of oppression that haunts the whole of South Africa in a style influenced by struggle art from the 1980's. "History overwhelms us and truth swamps every act of the imagination", writes Michelle Mountain (2010:10), with reference to J.M Coetzee (1987). Khumalo's contribution reminds us of a history that informs the inhabitants of this area and also to a great extent

determined the positioning of 'main' town and 'township' areas in a haphazard way (Nieftagodien 2012). Matoba's work, *African Women*, a series of commemorative portraits of prominent African women that have connections with the Vaal area, by contrast, points out that oppression of African women persists. Khumalo and Matoba focus on the "sedimented history of cultural and social influences" (Casey 2001:404) that make up an integral part of experience of place, mentioned earlier. Makwela's production, *Class of Hell*, in turn represents local townships of unforgiving circumstances that produce harsh people. This locally conceived and produced film focuses on social issues that plague the townships in the Vaal Area and ends disturbingly with the imminent death of the main protagonist and similar fate awaiting his close friend, suggesting that there is no escape from that place.



**Figure 9** Poster for *Class of Hell*, 2012, co-directed and produced by Mashaole Makwela

My discussion of the works included in *This Place* paints a grim picture of the VAD staff's experience of local place, but the exhibition as a whole does not communicate a simple negative experience. Reshma Maharajh's interactive installation explores colour as symbolic of emotional states according to the theory of Rasa. Exhibition goers were invited to select a coloured powder based on their emotional state. From an array of suitably labelled powders various colours were added to a backlit container of moving water. Within a short while the water was coloured with swirls of 'emotions'. Emotional responses to place are well documented in literature and the arts, but remain difficult to explain. With *This Place* we find a willingness on the part of the artists to engage with their experiences of place constructively by engaging in the representation thereof.





**Figure 10** Reshma Maharajh, 2012, *Untitled*, Mixed Media interactive installation

In my own work, *Between Three Rivers*, I built up photographic images around the path of the Vaal River between the Sugarbush- and Klip Rivers along which I frequently walk, run, cycle (where I can get access) or drive. The line of the image represents the river's edge, and the images are silhouettes of what I could see around this edge against the sky or water, over a period of more than a year. Most of these little scenes are not aesthetically pleasing in the picturesque sense, yet the resulting image is true to the sense of serenity I experience when I move around this area. I have come to accept the torn-up river banks, earth and trees; the junk and sometimes dead animals that litter the area. These aspects come about because we have access to the river here. We can fish, walk and drive our noisy quad-bikes. Human activity, use and abuse of the open areas, together with the natural elements, interact very directly to form the character of the places that are connected in this image.



**Figure 11** Anneke Laurie, 2012, *Between Three Rivers*, Pigment Ink on Canvas, 300x75 cm

*[All along the river road from Three Rivers to Vanderbijlpark are advertisement boards for housing developments. There is no present for the places where these boards are planted, only a promise of a future in perpetual summer. Further along the road from Three Rivers to Vanderbijlpark I drive past equally summery promises of fun and relaxation by images of water sport and leisurely cruises on the river. Opposite these signboards is an old Yskor housing project. Pedestrians who walk from here to work have to wait long to cross. No motorist stops at the faded 'zebra stripes' any longer.]*

## Conclusions

From the discussions of the exhibition as a whole and the various representations of place exhibited, it seems evident that the theoretical context of 'experience of place' is fruitful, providing an alternative to more traditional approaches such as ideological readings or aesthetic critiques.

Contemporary theories of place and space are not only illustrated but also extended in a number of ways. Various works developed understanding of place as defined by yearning and longing for other places. Through reference to physical human mobility, emotional yearning and imaginings, place is represented as not only what is here and now, but also through history and what is imagined or feared for the future of a place.

The exhibition highlights the paradox of place in that it can both sustain and threaten human well-being, as the local industries of the Vaal area do, by sustaining the economy but at the same time causing pollution and defacement. In this, nostalgic notions of place-attachment and '*genius loci*' or the 'spirit of place' are challenged. Through this consideration of visual representations in terms of experience of place, The Vaal Area emerges as a highly industrialised, yet rural place that is characterised more by characteristics of non-place than place in that "marked by a lack of attachment, by constant circulation, communication, and consumption that act against developing social bonds and bonds between people and the world" (Cresswell 2009:6).

Through this exhibition, and my discussion thereof, another layer of meaning has been deposited (or perhaps eroded), shaping the visitor and local's experience and understanding of the of Vaal area. As Andreij Wiercinski states, "understanding is a participation in meaning. (Wiercinski n.d.)". Reading landscape representations from the perspective of 'experience of place' is one step towards transcending the duality of observer/occupant; insider/outsider. It draws attention to the interactive nature of landscape and our surroundings. Every inhabitant of a place has an active role to play in the shaping thereof.

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