Bounded by Beauty: The Influence of Photography on Perception and Approaches to Cultural Landscape Assessment

Alice Tao

Excerpt

Instagram, a popular photo-sharing network, reports that its users upload an average of 55 million photos per day with more than 60% of its users residing outside of the United States.[1] Other photo-sharing platforms including Facebook and Flickr have also released astounding statistics.[2] With the increasing availability of cameras and devices with photo-taking capabilities like smartphones, photography has become more accessible and almost ubiquitous: recording and sharing images across the globe takes merely a few seconds. However, the speed of the photo-taking process and the widespread circulation of photos can also cause people to visit a site with the expectation of capturing "the shot:" a photograph taken from a well-known angle, without forming a deeper consideration for its cultural or historic context.

Although the increasing popularity of "smartphone photography" has prompted much debate on the effect of technology on photographers, as well as on the development of modern photography, photography's influence on the perception of the viewers has not been analyzed in the context of cultural landscapes, especially in terms of methods for landscape conservation. When people become more familiarized with various cultural landscapes from constant contact with visual representations, desensitization to the individual qualities of landscapes forms a homogenized concept of an "impressive," photogenic landscape. Photography, compared to other forms of visual media like video, especially exacerbates this desensitization because of both its ease in production and sharing with others. Because of its speed and expansive circulation, photography causes one to perceive and identify cultural landscapes as mere visual landscapes, with more emphasis placed on their aesthetic value than other attributes. Cultural

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[1] "Stats," *Instagram*, accessed December 12, 2013, http://instagram.com/press/.
[2] Cooper Smith, "Facebook Users Are Uploading 350 Million New Photos Each Day," *Business Insider*, last modified September 18, 2013, http://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-350-million-photos-each-day-2013-9.

landscapes are particularly susceptible to this desensitization because the interactions between man and nature are the main factors that distinguish them from other types of landscapes.[3] By considering cultural landscapes in the realm of photography, I propose that the digital flood of postcard-like landscape images or cliché scenes can constrict people's perception by inducing prior expectations about cultural landscapes, which highlights issues in current landscape conservation approaches based on aesthetic appeals.

Work Cited

"Cultural Landscape." UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Accessed October 8, 2013. http://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/.

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"Stats." *Instagram*. Accessed December 12, 2013. http://instagram.com/press/.

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[3] "Cultural Landscape," *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, accessed October 8, 2013, http://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/.

Author Commentary
Alice Tao

When I first approached my Writing Seminar professor about this research paper, I expressed only a general interest in writing about photography. Before beginning the writing process, I spent a lot of time researching the two *topics* – photography and cultural landscapes – separately. Although the thesis in my draft still needed much refining, it became clearer as I began to narrow down the scope of my research to the effects of photography on perception. However, my draft was still centered on an analysis of two photographers. My original thesis focused on the works of two photographers I was interested in, with a vague mention of how "this is important because it allows us to see how photography influences our consideration and understanding of a cultural landscape as well as future promotion of landscape conservation" as an attempt to tie photography to cultural landscapes. My research took me in a different direction, away from the works of the two photographers and towards theories related to photography. As a result, my previous thesis became separated from many of the ideas that were beginning to form in the rest of the draft, and it remained stagnant while the rest of the paper explored topics such as the influence of photography on memory. Furthermore, many of my classmates suggested during a workshop that by basing my paper on the analysis of photographs, the draft read like a collection of related reviews rather than a coherent argument.

My draft not only needed editing in terms of the mechanics of writing but also required a new strategy for writing. What really sharpened the motive and impact of my paper was letting the thesis take control of the direction of research. In the draft, because I was trying to incorporate all the research I had done, I presented a variety of angles that were related to an overarching topic but were not directly connected together or relevant to the generic thesis I had. The lack of cohesion also indicated a weak understanding of what impact I wanted to create or the main motive behind the paper. Careful consideration of the keywords I had chosen helped me phrase what I had wanted to emphasize, which was the incredible volume of available photographs and how "the emphasis placed on the aesthetic values of landscapes creates a narrow definition of a landscape's value and identity." After establishing this main motive of my paper, I realized that I had misunderstood how the specificity of a thesis should be expressed. For the thesis of the draft, I thought directly stating the two photographers and their works would imply specificity. This direction did not resonate with the ideas that I had started to develop in the body of the paper, which considered photography in general but examined its ease in production and circulation specifically. I narrowed down my sources by retaining those that would support my main argument of how "photography and photo-sharing networks exacerbate this domination of the viewers' perception with the deluge of photographs when images with 'Most Desired' qualities are constantly uploaded, circulated, and searched."

By having a clearer destination and motive, it was easier for me to construct the thesis so that it could incorporate the two seemingly distinctive ideas of photography and cultural landscapes and demonstrate how they are applicable to an analysis of current landscape conservation approaches. Because the structure of my paper can be broken down into two subsections of photography and cultural landscapes, this composition of the thesis also increased the overall cohesion of the paper since it echoed the progression from one section to another. The first section focused on developing how photography influences perception and the second section while the second section used the ideas present in the first subsection to illustrate how the issues are present in landscape conservation methods.

From the research outline to the draft to the final paper, the degree to which I explored the topic deepened as my ideas and structure of those ideas became more specific. One of the steps that helped to further define my argument was the consideration of counterarguments. By having to "defend" my paper, I was able to discuss my ideas in greater depth and add supporting arguments that strengthened my paper. One of the questions my Writing Seminar professor raised during a conference was what distinguishes photography from other forms of media such as video. The answer I provided, which was that the ease of photography allows for a more rapid circulation rate, not only answered a critical question but also made the scope of my thesis even narrower. Overall, the writing process for the paper was similar to conducting an experiment. While the data and information could be easily collected, the time spent planning the experiment, analyzing the sources and data, and figuring out the best strategy to present the data were the most important and rewarding steps.

Fellow Commentary
Conor Dube

One important, and often undervalued, effect of a strongly worded thesis is that it can serve as a template for the rest of the paper, signaling to a careful reader the general format the argument will follow as well as the key terms that will link together various sections of the paper. A good thesis can echo the macro structure of an essay and allow the reader to be informed of the various moves the writer will make before they happen.

In this essay, Alice does an exemplary job of indicating the structure of her argument in a microcosm in the thesis. To begin with, from the very first words of the sentence it is clear the general topic of the paper — Alice will be discussing photography, and specifically how something named "cultural landscapes" manifests within it. Next, she articulates the specific format of her argument — that "cliché scenes" impose expectations on people's perceptions of "cultural landscapes." These expectations constrict perception in a way that limits the ways the landscape is conceived. Lastly, the impact of this limitation occurs in the context of conservation efforts focusing on aesthetics.

As a reader, I need only to read Alice's thesis to understand how her argument will generally be structured: she will discuss what cultural landscapes are, talk about the "flood" of images and how it restricts perception, examine the expectations imposed by a popular culture of photography, and lastly return to the interactions between these expectations and conservation movements. Moreover, I have a set of key terms — cultural landscape, photography, conservation, aesthetics, and so on - that will allow me to connect various strands of the paper together from the outset.

Alice's example shows how structure operates on a number of levels at once. Of course, macro structure should be consistent throughout a paper, as it ought to be the general form of your argument. However, there are frequent opportunities for encapsulating the macro structure in individual elements of the paper, none more important than the thesis. By setting strong expectations for the reader with the thesis, the writer is able both to provide a "checklist" of sorts allowing the reader to keep pace with the argument but also inform the reader in advance of the information they will be seeing and the way it will be laid out. It is often worthwhile, for this reason, to go back after completing a paper, and check to see if the paper's general structure matches the thesis. If it does, awesome! If not, reconciling the differences between the two can illuminate how your thinking has evolved over the writing process.