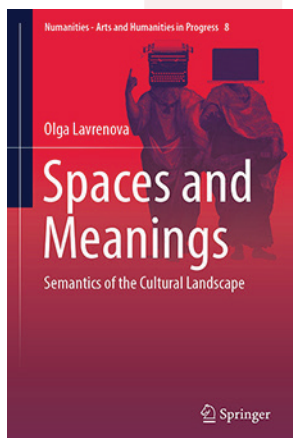


Spaces hiding within spaces

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Olga Lavrenova

Spaces and Meanings: Semantics of the Cultural landscape.

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I'm ready to go—where there's more sky—but pure longing now won't set me free from the still-youthful hills of Voronezh, to those, clear, and wholly-human, of Tuscany" [Osip Mandelshtam]; "I love you, provincial haunts, off the map, the road, past the farms, the more tired and faded the book, the greater for me its charms" [Boris Pasternak]; "A sense of basic truth in every soul nests-The seed that's sacred and eternal: In flesh of time it always can embrace Space, endless, and the century's kernel" [Mikhail Lermontov]; "Paris is not all houses in this or that face, It's part of history, an idea, a tale, a rave. You know your eternity, oh great city, And your rave will never disappear!" [Valery Brusov]; "... And the scriptures of roads written in the desert" [Maksimillian Voloshin]; "Mais cette voix ne parle que dans le silence. ...Et de même que pour la ville, de même pour l'empire. Se fasse un calme extraordinaire et tu vois tes dieux" [Antuan de Saint-Exupery]; "The most important thing is to be master of metaphors. But you cannot learn it from someone else, it is the property of talent, because to verse good metaphors means to notice similarity" [Aristotle].

These are some of the epigraphs which introduce the chapters of a new book written by Olga Lavrenova, a geographer, a culturologist, and a philosopher. Poetic intonation of the preceding lines sets a drastic contract to the rigorous language

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of the monograph which is filled with specific modern terminology. Such polarity is inevitable as this book is meant primarily for the scholarly reader whose research lies within the field of natural sciences and humanities. However, an educated, curious and, most importantly, eager reader will find a truly vast amount of information on the actual extent of presence of a human mind within the physical nature; the reader will also learn about the ways culture can be studied from various point of view so that one could come a little closer to grasping this phenomenon in all its entirety.

When travelling the world or even when simply daily commuting to the office and back, we hardly pay any attention how the surrounding space of our life is filled with meanings and metaphors. This is the topic which Olga Lavrenova invites us to ponder upon in her new book where she offers the readers her thought and ideas on the semantics of the cultural landscape.

A person chooses themselves the space to live: in the space of a district in a city, a particular locality, a country, the world... Each of these hierarchical levels is surrounded by numerous invisible threads of meanings woven by the perennial cultural tradition. These threads become fabric of the universe where the cultural landscape is one of its "patches." "Fabric" and "text" are synonymic in their etymology. The scope of scientific interests of Olga Lavrenova is cultural geography and the philosophy of culture, and that is precisely why she tends to return to these two synonyms in the given work where through the metaphor she reveals the patterns of the space that has been assimilated by culture.

Noosphere, pneumatosphere, semiosphere are the terms that define different aspects of the human activity on a global scale. Reason and spirit, signs and symbols (as products of both reason and mind) penetrate all manifestations of culture and form the above-mentioned "spheres" thus changing the face of the Earth. A civilization leaves its footprint with the cavities of mines, the wrinkles of the canals, and the bald spots of anthropogenic deserts. However, it would be a mistake to think that people only deform the face of the planet since culture creates its spiritual expression by bringing the Heaven to the Earth. Through symbols and construction of public places of worship, people are capable of turning some piece of land into an icon and express transcendental categories. There are also lands of infernal character, which the humanity consigned into oblivion: illegal dumping sites, prison camps, tent camps of the homeless which from time to time appear in the city landscape but in the places that remain uncontrolled by the urban civilization, etc. Both categories are defined as "a cultural landscape" by the modern science (implying that the underbelly of culture also constitutes a part of culture), since value interpretation of the culture proposed by Roerich has not been accepted in the academic circles.

The concept of the cultural landscape has been developing at the intersection of natural sciences and humanities. In geography, cultural landscape is primarily seen

as a natural landscape which has experienced some historical and evolutionary anthropogenic influence, according to the definition given by L. Berg in 1915. This book mainly focuses on the approach accepted in the humanities where cultural landscape is interpreted as a phenomenon of culture rather than that of space.

The theory of the geographic determinism that dates back to the ancient times posited the influence of the natural environment on the mentality of culture. In the very least, the type of agriculture as well as the kind of settlement in the traditional culture is strictly defined by the natural landscape. Culture, in its turn, shapes the landscape, either intervening harmoniously or interfering in a more destructive fashion. According to the noospheric concept, cultural landscape is formed by the material and spiritual culture and cultural heritage (Vedenin 2004).

Olga Lavrenova relies on the semiotic concept of culture through the prism of the Tartu–Moscow School of Semiotics and defines the cultural landscape as "matrix system and cultural codes expressed in signs and symbols directly connected with a territory and/or manifested in some material expression; this system may be interpreted as a text in its wide cultural meaning" (Lavrenova 2019: 8).

Lavrenova considers the cultural landscape from an ontological and phenomenological point of view as a metaphor, as a system of signs and as a text, and geocultural space—as a process and as a result when a human being imbues the surrounding world with the categories of meaning and value, which is seen as a never-ending process and a result of semiosis.

In the cultural landscape, universal categories of culture find their expression, and they create "a worldview" ("a model of the world", "an image of the world"), "a grid line" characteristic of a particular culture and age. Such elusive categories as time and transcendence can be expressed through symbols and signs.

Time is considered as one of the meanings in the semiotic system of the cultural landscape, which structures and rhythms this system. It acquires spatial characteristics: it possesses clusters of loci where it concentrates; it has roads where it moves, and there are crossroads where time flows forward and also backwards. Different rhythms of times give cultural space additional fluidity and plasticity. Within the cultural landscape time exists in its geological, mythological, historical and physical facets. More than that, some places can become a representation of such categories and eternity and hard times. Within the "landscape of time", toponyms represent this or that quality of time generated by culture. Understanding space and time in their variety leads to new meanings that constantly appear in the culture, which, in its turn, pushes the boundaries of semiosphere.

Despite the fact that in the world culture the image of the world is shaped predominantly by the paradigm set in the natural sciences, its initial religious mythological worldview is looming through it. Eliade, Toporov, Gurevich, Terebinin, and

Bashlyar, etc. have been studying this aspect. “The historical angle of vision shows us the physical cosmos moving centrifugally in a four-dimensional frame of Space-Time; it shows us life on our planet moving evolutionarily in a five-dimensional frame of Life-Space-Time; and it shows us human souls raised to a sixth dimension by a gift of Spirit, moving through a fateful exercise of their spiritual freedom, either towards their Creator or away from Him” (Toynbee 1996: 504).

Cosmogony is the basis for the religious and mythological image of the world. Ontological and cosmological categories are reflected in the structure of the world, and as a result, depending on different aspects of one’s worldview, either the whole space becomes sacred, or it becomes divided into secular and sacred. Spatial loci become signs in which the signified are sacred categories and concepts. Cultural landscape brings out such mythological categories as the core and the axis of the world, cosmos and chaos, heaven and hell.

It is through the ritual of naming, blessing, building a place of worship and performing such acts when the consecration of a place happens. Sacred space can usually be interpreted in two ways—not only as a text but also as an icon. The “landscape-as-icon” has all the properties of an iconic sign, because in its structure it is likened to the structure of transcendental concepts and images.

One of the characteristics of culture, its imagery, and of its multi-layered semantics is its metaphoricity. The author of the article goes into great detail in her description of how a metaphor can give structure to geocultural space and how it can fill the mentality with some new meanings.

An image, a metaphor and a symbol appear spontaneously in the process of the artistic familiarization of the world [Arutyunova]. While meaning is particularly important for a metaphor, it is the form that is essential for a symbol. Proper geographical subjects which possess particular visual, quantitative and qualitative characteristics such as the height of mountains, the length of a river, the width of some plains play the role of symbols. For example, the river Volga, which is considered a symbol of the Russian soul, is different from other rivers of the Russian plains with its length, full-flowing character, and its unique width of its lower course. Each landscape becomes a metaphor: mountainous landscape is perceived as a metaphor of the ontological vertical, while plain steppe landscape is seen as a metaphor of limitlessness and vastness, and a river landscape would become a metaphor of life and one’s way, and so on in all their possible variations.

In the cultural landscape, one uses anthropomorphic metaphors (such as “Moscow is the heart of Russia”, “Russia is a snow-white woman, spreading in breadth”, etc.) and the transfer of meaning from one geographical object to another, for example, “Moscow, third Rome”, cosmographic metaphors in which the landscape as a whole participates conforming to space. The most common metaphors are those which liken mountains, lakes, forests to a human body or its parts. For example, J. Lakoff and M.

Johnson consider the metaphor “a mountain is a man”, which is expressed in such lexemes as “the foot of the mountain”, “shoulder of the mountain.” In mountaineering and tourist folklore, the metaphor “a mountain is a man” (Lakoff, Johnson 1980) lays the foundation for a particular neopagan cult, and defines the custom of greeting mountains before climbing, adding your stone to the stone pyramids similar to those of *ovoo*¹ on the passes thus paying tribute and expressing gratitude to the mountain for successful completion of a certain stage of the journey.

One way or another landscape appears to be a system of messages which can be read as a text. Toponymy allows considering texts of the cultural landscape as “rolled-up mnemonic programmes” (Lotman 2002: 83). Further, the author considers this problem mainly within the framework of the Lotmanian discourse of the semiotics of culture.

Elements of the landscape structure (centre, province, periphery, border) define the meaning of each geographic object in this matrix. And roads within the cultural landscape convey the idea of communication as well as express communication as such, which becomes evident during the trips that generates new meanings (see the classical example of “A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow” by Radishchev).

Text of the culture that occur at different times overlap and create unique combinations, many of which are ‘read’ differently when they appear in a new cultural and historical context, and sometimes they can acquire a completely opposite emphasis and meaning.

One can think of geocultural space as of weaving meanings. And if there are knots, then the fabric is uneven. Within the cultural landscape, there are polysemic signs and the lacunae of meanings. Natural characteristics of a place as such already have significance of its own, although it talks place in the presence of an observer. Lacunae can appear as the inner side of the meaning in a certain system of philosophical, aesthetic, and ethical coordinates.

There are always several directions, lines and “blocks” of interpretation for cultural landscape. The easiest case would be the landscape-texts of the national history. For instance, study of the semiotic structure of the geocultural space in Russia as it is expressed in the Russian poetry shows that it is perceived as a “a wave of colonization frozen in space.” Cultivated European part of Russian is separated from the structure-less toponym-space of Siberia by the border/ frontier of the Ural Mountains.

The text of the cultural landscape of Russia can be read not only from the historical point of view but also from the religious and mythological angle. This interpretation, as opposed to the historical one, is more universal and at the same time more general.

One more strategy of reading cultural landscape is through travelling. When facing it directly, the semantics of the cultural landscape requires actual experiencing rather

¹ *Ovoo*—places of worship in the culture of the Mongols, Buryats, Tuvans, Khakas and other Turkic-Mongolian peoples of Central Asia.

than impassive observation. Ordinary secular space is available for observation and description but it is extremely poor in its semantic. All these spaces coexist within the same cultural landscape, and the traveller moving across the planet chooses themselves in which space their trip will take place in and how rich and polysemantic their experience will be. The book offers a classification of the trips within the context of a semiosphere: a vector on the plain for ordinary travels, circular motion for eternal wanderers or cursed mythological characters, an ascension vector for spiritual travels and pilgrimages.

Thus, geographical objects and toponyms become texts, metaphors, symbols and signs, since there are stable cultural links with specific artifacts, historical events or features of the natural landscape. Olga Lavrenova concludes by saying that “the cultural landscape is a scale of values deployed in space where geographical objects and zones act as analogues of the social and /or cultural status, or as spiritual stages” (Lavrenova 2019: 214). So the monograph “Spaces and Meanings” is a multivariate analysis of the symbolic activity of a human being on the Earth, and the scale of this activity justifies the definition of a human as a symbolic creature (*homo symbolycus*). This study brings to a new methodological and theoretical level a whole layer of disparate research in various disciplines related to geography and the humanities, such as the semiotics of space, the geography of culture, cultural and semiotic studies of geographical images.

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