Rewilding in cultural landscapes: the ethics of reading a landscape palimpsest

Martin Drenthen, Radboud University Nijmegen

Rewilding is booming and wild nature is increasingly being valued. At the same time, traditional landscapes are steadily recognized as part of our cultural heritage and worthy of conservation. These distinct ethical concerns can run into conflict when old cultural landscapes are ‘rewilded’, either through deliberate human action, or spontaneous natural processes. Whereas rewilders are worried that conservation of heritage landscapes will reinforce the anthropocentrism of traditional land practices, heritage protectionists fear that rewilding will inevitably produce historically meaningless landscapes. Both approaches tend to see themselves as mutually exclusive. Most environmental ethicists also tend to understand these conflicts as conflicts between competing moral values and frameworks: rewilding advocates typically argue from a non-anthropocentric framework, with biodiversity, ecological fidelity, ecological integrity, and wildness as key values. Landscape heritage protectionists, on the other hand, value landscapes as meaningful reflections of human history; their core values are sense of place, regional identity, historical authenticity, and narrative continuity. Many have argued that the opposition between heritage and rewilding should be overcome, and that ecological restoration ought to include a recognition not just the natural history of a site, but in some sense or another of the cultural history of an area as well. However, as long as both perspectives are understood as mutually exclusive, a reconciliation or fruitful exchange between them will be difficult to find.

In this paper, I present an alternative approach to these conflicts that starts with an acknowledgement of the inextricable relationship between environmental ethics, interpretation of landscape and moral identity and aims to find a shared understanding of the moral meanings at stake in these conflicts.

**Landscapes as texts in need of interpretation**

The starting point for such an approach is the idea that both rewilding and heritage protection are normative interpretative practices that built on a particular interpretation of the landscape, and that the
conflict between them derives from the layered nature of cultural historic landscapes. If landscapes can be conceived as texts (texts in need of interpretation), than Old World landscapes can be seen as palimpsests, that is: as layered texts that are result of an ongoing process of landscapes being written, reinterpreted and rewritten. This means that layered landscapes not only can, but need to be ‘read’ in multiple ways. This opens up a possibility of thinking anew the conflict between different readings of the landscape.

Landscapes have been compared with texts before. The landscape text metaphor is popular among geographers and geologists, environmental scientists, historians, archaeologists, environmental educators, and nature writers; popular books and brochures teach us how one can actually get to know many things about the geophysical and cultural history of a landscape by paying close attention to the detailed signs contained in specific landscape features. One may study the relation between soil composition, groundwater level, geomorphology, relief and what happens on the ground; observable patterns on a topographical map may give us a clearer understanding of all the functional relationships within a landscape; one may look the cultural historical elements that reflect specific moments in history – reading the landscape carefully can help broaden one’s understanding of a place.

Two approaches to reading a text
This dominant view of reading landscapes takes the way we understand informative texts as a general model. Informative texts are typically read and understood as representations of the world – they consist of a complex system of interrelated signs that mirror the interrelationships of elements within the world. Understanding these texts entails making a representation of the system of signs in the text within the reader’s mind. Almost anything can be read in this sense – and everyone who knows how to read will understand the signs in the same way. ‘Structuralists’ hold that abstract structures such as language systems matter far more than individual subjects. The subjectivity of the reader does not really play a role in this type of understanding, readers are merely seen as neutral observers.

There is, however, quite another understanding of reading, that starts with the way we interpret other types of texts, such as poems and novels. Literary texts do not merely represent the world, they present a world that the reader can inhabit. If we look at the way we read literary texts, we quickly
discover that readers have a vital, active role: to find out the meaning of a novel, one has to be
‘present’ and involved in the act of reading. A proper interpretation of a novel, for instance, may start
with a structural analysis of how the text is internally structured, but will not stop there. We need to
allow the text to open up a world, and step into it. That one has to bring oneself along in the act of
reading does not mean that literary texts are merely about us and our subjective feelings and desires.
We can only understand what a novel means to us if we assume that the world of the text is somehow
also our world. Although each interpretation has to do justice to the text, each reader has to interpret
the text himself, which means that there may more than one possible reading.

**Reading and identity**

According to Paul Ricoeur, humans are truly narrative beings, who know themselves through the
stories that are being told. If the reader answers to the ‘invitation of the text’, then the ‘refiguration of
the world by the text’ can bring about an active reorganization of the reader’s being-in-the-world.
Thus, according to Ricoeur, one’s narrative identity is determined by texts that disclose horizons of
new worlds. Through the act of reading, a text can change both the reader’s world and his identity.

Ricoeur’s hermeneutics can easily be expanded to include landscapes, enabling us to think through
how the act of reading landscapes might be formative for our personal place-based identity. Reading
the land as text requires an active engagement with the meaning of a place that beckons to be
articulated in an act of interpretation, in which we must both actively appropriate the meaning by
investing ourselves in the landscape, and at the same time let the text change our world. Understanding
what a landscape means requires more than just reconstructing its story – we need to somehow
acknowledge the storylines inscribed in the landscape and decide how these stories are also about us.

These stories about the meaning of a place and what it means to be in that place reflect and support
our identity but can also transform it. Through the act of reading, the land can become intertwined
with my own life story; it can tell me something about myself that I did not know before. Thus, it can
become a true dwelling place – an ethos – that defines who I am and what my life is about.

Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that our interpretations of important texts will always already be
influenced by a history of texts interpretations (‘effective history’). Similarly, one may argue that
landscapes are always already infused with meanings, and have always already presented themselves to us as somehow meaningful and worthwhile exploring, embedded in a larger whole of meanings and interpretations that are already in play in how we see the world and ourselves.

Reading landscapes is a normative practice that makes explicit how we are always already ‘emplaced’ (cf. Clingerman 2004), that is: we are already being formed by the existing meanings and interpretations of the land. A serious landscape reading requires that we must also learn to understand how places have always already contributed to who we are, acknowledge the existing connections and dialectics between we as readers and landscapes as texts worth reading – connections that beckon to be understood. We should learn to understand ourselves through the landscape that we find ourselves in, and then move on to produce more adequate interpretations of the meaning of the land to enable more adequate practices.

Rewilding and heritage protection as interpretative practices

Our current place-identity is partly determined by the way we have always already been emplaced – narratives that themselves were already a response to the landscape text – but new readings might also lead to a rethinking of how we think of ourselves.

From a hermeneutic perspective, one could argue that rewilding and heritage protection are both built on particular but partial readings of the palimpsest landscape that not only imply particular understandings of the moral significance of a landscape but also support a specific view of what it means to exist in these places. Heritage protectionists typically relate to (relatively recent) textual layers: seeking to protect cultural landscape elements as shared reference points that tell a meaningful narrative about human place involvement and therefore support place identity and a place-based ethics. Many rewilders, on the other hand, seek to restore a sense of continuity with a deeper textual layer that tells the natural history a landscape that is often forgotten, and broaden the context for our moral self-understanding using the concept of a non-human 'base-line'. Although both readings can be complementary and can contribute to a more comprehensive view on the meaning of layered landscapes, there is an obvious tension between them.
According to Holland, Light and O’Neill (2008), conflicts that arise from the pull of competing and often incommensurable environmental values can only be addressed properly if more attention is paid to the role of time and narrative in the human relations with environments. Whereas recognizing the recent top-layers of the landscape text can urge us to restore those elements that help us understand and appreciate the landscape as part of our own history and identity (or restore older cultural patterns), the acknowledgement of the deeper and older layers would have us try to restore the continuity with a deeper or older natural history that humans have changed in the past.

**Place narratives and palimpsest landscapes**

Many ethical disputes about environmental issues involve different narratives on the meaning of particular landscapes, in which landscape interpretations are inextricably linked to conceptions of identity. Landscapes and places embody people’s history and cultural identity, they are not just valuable to us because of their ecological function, but also because they help us to understand who we are. From this perspective, the prime goal of ecological restoration should be the preservation, restoration, or even enrichment of the *meaning* of places that is tied to the history of a place.

But in ecological restoration practices the history of a landscape also plays another role. Ecological restoration in general does not merely seek produce an ecosystem whose structure, composition, and function operates within the bounds of natural range of variation (‘ecological fidelity’, Higgs 2003). Usually it also entails an attempt to protect the value and meaning of that landscape, by restoring the historic continuity of a place, attempting to approximate, within reasonable bounds, some past state of the damaged ecosystem (‘historic fidelity’, Higgs 2003). In other words, ecological restoration is aimed not just at restoring *any* historic continuity, but the kind of continuity as seen from the perspective of the “deep time” horizon of natural history. O’Neill, Holland and Light (2008) argue that people:

“make sense of our lives by placing them in a larger narrative context, of what happens before us and what comes after. Environments matter because they embody that larger context. This is clearest in the cultural landscapes that surround us that specifically embody the lives of individuals and communities. However, […] this is true also […] with respect to natural
processes. Unintentional natural processes provide part of the context in which intentional human activities take place and through which we understand their value.” (O’Neill, Holland and Light 2008, p. 198)

The narrative meaning of nature is that it stretches way past the confines of human history, and thus provides us with a broader context:

“[N]atural environments have histories that stretch out before humans emerged and they have a future that will continue beyond the disappearance of the human species. […] It is not just this larger historical context that matters in our valuation of the environments in which we live, but also the backdrop of natural processes against which human life is lived.” (idem: 162 - 164)

In contrast with a cultural landscape heritage protection is concerned with, rewilders often refer to a deeper time horizon with regard to “what happens before us and what comes after”, which puts in perspective the all-too-human view of the heritage world. One could argue that the project of rewilding is essentially a moral critique on the human centeredness of traditional heritage perspective.

The problem ecological restoration in cultural landscape faces today is that both perspectives make sense, both readings of the palimpsest are valid, yet only partially true. Both perspective aim at a restoration of a historic continuity, albeit with a different past, they refer to different layers of the palimpsest.

Towards a narrative reconciliation?

The first step towards a fruitful exchange of perspectives may be the realization that the layering process in the landscape that has produced the landscape palimpsest is still going on. Whatever our take on the meaning of a particular landscape, our attempts to restore historic continuity will necessarily involve adding new layers to the palimpsest. In the best case, those new layers will be inspired by, and meaningfully connected to older layers, and will provide a basis for a new narrative turn that meaningfully connects the past to future, old layers of the landscape palimpsest to new ones.

An appropriate attempt to meaningfully restore a historic landscape, can therefore never simply be the reconstruction of one particular historic landscape layer. If rewilding pretends to be more than just
another voluntaristic change of the landscape by humans, than it will have to be based on an interpretation of the landscape that acknowledges the layered nature of historic landscapes, as well as the fact that we are always already part of a landscape history. We must somehow acknowledge the need to go beyond any particular interpretation of the story of the land, but acknowledge the layered nature of the landscape itself and the inevitability of adding new layers. Both perspectives might be connected through a narrative of change, but without significant reflective awareness, the restoration of the meaning of layered landscapes is doomed to fail.

**Objectivity and the rewilding narrative**

Our understanding of a place will necessarily be deeply intertwined with our understanding of ourselves. To some, an old agricultural landscape may bring to mind long-gone worlds of traditional farming, where humans and land lived together in mutual dependence. Such a world only comes into existence by the active interpretative act from us – the readers and interpreters of this text – and yet these meanings are not freely invented, but result from a serious attempt to understand the meaning of the landscape text. The narrative connects the land to a sense of our identity – the story of what it means to live on this land – but also tells a story that is ‘real’ in a much more literal sense.

But an adequate narrative understanding of a landscape should not simply reinforce existing place-based identities, but stimulate a critical self-examination in light of a critical reading of the landscape text. One could argue that this is the role of a structuralist reading of the text. Place narratives cannot be rewritten at will, but should somehow be ‘grounded’ in an understanding the objectivity of a place: its history, soil composition, hydrology, habitat, food, climate, etcetera. One could say that rewilders provide such a structural reading of the landscape text that focuses the attention on the ‘real’ features of the text that any interpretation of the text will have to acknowledge: calling attention to suppressed ecological processes or forgotten landscape features and stress that the existing cultural landscape only exists through those formative ecological processes which have been suppressed in recent times. From that perspective, one may characterize cultural landscapes as ecological disaster areas. Because these structuralist reading will necessarily become part of broader interpretation, this view will necessarily criticize the identities that are at home in these traditional landscapes. But if the conflict between
rewilding and heritage is a palimpsest-based problem of meaning, it might be possible to find middle
grounds, creative solutions that grant the significance of the different layers in new ways. Not all signs
have to be conserved literally. Examples exist of land artworks that rescue particular historical
significant structures that would easily get lost in a rewilding process. They translate or transpose them
into new green materials (trees, ditches) that do not need the problematic land practices that the
original texts layers were dependent upon – thus helping to recall elements of the place narrative that
might otherwise get lost.

I believe that the essence of the rewilding perspective lies in its ability to provide a meaningful
narrative perspective that challenges us to reinterpret ourselves and the landscapes we made in light of
a broader and deeper ecological history. Yet, if rewilding aims at critical reflection on how we
conceive of the landscape and ourselves, then its perspective on landscape will have to be integrated
within a broader narrative understanding on the meaning of landscapes. Only through narratives do
landscapes get intertwined with our life stories and narrative identities, and can they provide an ethos
– a normative context or frame of orientation that help us to orient ourselves and from which we know
who we are and what being in our particular place is about.

References
Clingerman, F. (2004). ‘Beyond the Flowers and the Stones: “Emplacement” and the Modelling of
Nature’, Philosophy in the Contemporary World 11: 17-24

Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics. New York: Fordham University Press


