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Reading Ourselves through the Land

Landscape Hermeneutics and Ethics of Place

Introduction

Philosophical hermeneutics is concerned with understanding the meaning and interpretation of texts. In each culture, certain texts are recognized as being particularly significant. Such texts present themselves as meaningful and help us understand what it means to be human. We feel there is something about them that has to be understood, e.g. because we suspect they reveal something about what it means to be mortal, about the meaning of gratitude or compassion, etcetera. In other words, such texts beckon to be interpreted, but in order to grasp the full meaning of such texts, we have to engage not just in reading but also in interpreting them. To truly understand the meaning of a text and understand what it has to say, one has to engage in the process of interpretation and let the words and letters of the texts bring forth a whole world. If we allow texts to open a world to us as a reader, then texts can change the way we understand ourselves and the world.

Environmental hermeneutics is concerned with the question what hermeneutics can contribute to our understanding of environmental theory and practice. Environmental hermeneuticists explore what it means to interpret environments, how environments can become meaningful to us, and how certain interpretations of the environment support certain self-interpretations. It is particularly interested in how specific places and landscapes present themselves to us as being significant and meaningful. We do not always already fully know

what they have to say to us; but we feel their appeal on us: these places present themselves as significant and beckon to be understood and interpreted – ‘what is it about this place?’

In our daily lives, we usually do not find ourselves in mere abstract space, but, rather, in meaningful places. Our moral involvement with our surroundings is part of our being-in-the-world that roots in a conception of the world as an *ethos*, that is: a morally structured, significant place for us as morally sensitive beings to live in. Therefore, according to Ingrid Stefanovic, “ethical discernment is less a matter of intellectual construction than it is one of attunement to a particular way of being-in-place. Rather than simply consisting of a project of internalizing an inventory of rules and principles, ethical awareness also unfolds prethematically and is informed by virtue of the ontological phenomenon of emplacement” (Stefanovic, 2000, p.128). Such a view on ethics differs from more current forms of environmental ethics that tend to seek ethical guidelines for dealing with the environment in abstract notions such as ‘intrinsic value of nature’ or ‘ecocentric egalitarianism.’ Such concepts are meant to help humans distance themselves as much as possible from their own anthropocentric partiality, ‘speciesist rationality’ and ‘human chauvinism’. From a hermeneutical perspective, such an approach on the human perspective is mistaken, because it presupposes a displaced and disembodied view of our being in the world, and - because interpretations about self and world are never innocent but always also determine how we lead our lives - runs the risks of actually transforming people into such abstract beings.

An environmental hermeneutical ethics does not start with a reflection and articulation of abstract values that people should adhere to. Rather, it starts out from the assumption that the world we live in has significance because it is always already infused with meanings. Moreover, hermeneuticists also stress that in order to grasp the full meaning of a particular place, one has to get involved in a process of interpretation. In that sense, landscapes can be compared with texts.

The idea that nature has to be interpreted in order to reveal a deeper meaning is not particularly original but has a long history. It has been first worked out in early Christian theology (cf. Clingerman 2009). Augustine already said that God wrote two books: the Holy Bible and the Book of Nature. Reading the 'Book of Nature' was not that different from reading the Bible: it enabled humans to feel part of God's creation and reflect on God's intentions with the world. The metaphor of the Book of Nature also played a role in 18th Century German philosophy of nature, notably that of Goethe, who assumed that the workings of nature should be understood as revealing some deeper meaning of a World Spirit (*Weltgeist*, cf. Verhoog 1989). These ideas do no longer seem to be of much importance in our present day, postmodern understanding of the landscape. Today, hardly anyone considers beauty in nature as a coded message from God, and romantic philosophy of nature has ceased to be of influence on natural sciences such as ecology and geology. Yet, in some contemporary ideas about landscapes, one can still sense some reminiscences of the old idea of nature as a text with a deeper meaning that must be interpreted.

One of these ideas is the 'legible landscape', a concept that plays an important role in Dutch debates about landscape conservation. Typically, it is used to point out how old cultural landscapes – some more than others – contain signs that can be 'read' like meaningful texts that tell a story about ourselves and our history, much in the same way as other texts from our cultural heritage do. By reading the landscape carefully, one can find a deeper meaning. The term was originally introduced by author and landscape activist Willem van Toorn, for whom the ability to read a landscape is be part of a much broader normative view on the moral relation between humans and landscapes. Yet, term has been widely adopted by several conservation groups in the Netherlands, mostly because they believe that landscape legibility is the key to understanding – *and increasing* – people's attachment to particular places and landscapes. In 2004, the Dutch Association for Environmental Education (IVN) developed a

method - *Project Legible Landscape* - to help local inhabitants' increase their capacity to 'read' the landscape and help them develop a deeper attachment with particular places.

In this paper, I will first briefly present Van Toorn's original concept. Next, I discuss the Legible Landscape Project and some of its underlying assumptions regarding the concept of landscape legibility. I will show that the project is rather heavily influenced by a particular understanding of the relation between texts and readers that focuses on revealing objective features in the landscape. In this perspective, reading a landscape boils down to getting to know the objective relationships between different recognizable features in a landscape. I will argue that such a semiotic view on landscape reading is of limited value because of it fails to recognize the moral implications of the concept of the legible landscape. Reading landscape texts does not merely revolve around information, landscape texts also present of 'open up' a meaningful world to the reader and can thus play a crucial role in developing a view of self and world that can support an intimate and morally engaged relationship with these landscapes. I will suggest that a hermeneutic account of the legible landscape is more suited for articulating such a normative vision of what it means to read a landscape.

Legible Landscapes as Food for the Spirit

The term 'legible landscape' was coined by the Dutch poet, novelist and landscape activist Willem van Toorn. In his work, Van Toorn expresses his commitment and concern for the traditional Dutch river landscape, which plays an important part in both his novels (Van Toorn 1988 and 1999) and essays (Van Toorn 1998). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Van Toorn joined a landscape protest movement that resisted plans of the Dutch Directorate-General for Public Works and Water Management to reinforce embankments along the major rivers (Rhine, Waal, and Meuse). Due to both climate change and established water management policies, precipitation is expected to rise of in the near future, urging the Dutch

government to take precautions. For reasons of cost-effectiveness, it was decided not to strengthen the old dykes – often century-old, small-scaled, rather winding dykes – but replace them with higher, more robust and straighter ones.

The plan would be disastrous for the traditional typical Dutch river landscape, made famous by the works of 17th century landscape painters such as Jacob and Salomon Ruysdael, and would damage age old remains of human habitation. The landscape activists warned that the implementation of the original plans would destroy many of these old ‘signs’ and memory traces in the landscape (wooded banks, terraces, old small dykes and large artificial mounds), and would transform the ‘habitable, meaningful world’ into a uniform, merely functional landscape dominated by straight lines; a ‘systematized’ or even ‘medicalized’ landscape (with artificial veins, bypasses and heart valves) devoid of meaning. Willem van Toorn was one of their spokespersons.

It was in this context that Van Toorn introduced the term ‘legible landscape’: landscapes (some more than others) contain signs which enable people to ‘read’ them as meaningful texts. Such landscapes “remind us along complicated and sometimes unconscious lines that there is a past, that people who lived in that past had to deal with the world just as we have to, that they had to protect themselves against nature and at the same time use its resources” (Van Toorn 1998, p.66). The reason we should value the legibility of the landscape has to do with our own sense of identity: “We have to stay in touch with this past – not because the past is better than the present, but simply because we owe our existence, our identity, our vision of the world to it, and because we can only think about the future by making use of our past experiences” (p. 66). Thus, legible landscapes embody what O’Neill, Holland and Light call the “larger normative contexts” in which we can place our lives as to have a sense of orientation; and that serve as frames of reference that tell us “what happens before us and what comes after” (O’Neill, Holland & Light 2008: p. 163).

Eventually, and partly as a result of the landscape protests, the Dutch government decided that the dyke improvements should be integrated into the existing landscape with more care. At the same time, because in water management the dominant paradigm shifted from fighting against the water towards working with nature and giving room for the river, plans for dyke reinforcement also gave way to the ambition to restore the original river dynamics by ‘rewilding’ large parts of the old agricultural land along the river. Yet, Van Toorn pointed out that these rewilding projects would have equally disastrous effects on the legibility of the land: again, legible signs that had been the result of a century-old history of human habitation would eventually disappear, this time whipped out by natural processes. Early protests warned against modernist civil engineering projects, now they opposed the ideas of ‘green’ water managers, restoration biologists and urban wilderness lovers. In this new context, it became clear that the main worry about landscape legibility is anthropocentric, and concerns the meaning landscapes have for human identity: “A landscape that does not contain enough ‘signs’, or where too much of these signs have disappeared, cannot tell us much” (p.66). From this perspective, landscape rewilding is just another modernist threat to landscape identity: “I consider it a dangerous development that, with nature construction, people aspire to create landscapes, in which humans are present only as tourists – and no longer as residents for whom the signs and narratives of the land are food for their spirit” (p.77). According to Van Toorn, rewilding will produce illegible landscapes, in which people will eventually lose their sense of identity and will become merely “visitors”: tourists without a proper identity. What also becomes apparent is that for Van Toorn, the ‘legible landscape’ is not merely a purely descriptive concept, but has a normative significance as well. In Van Toorn’s view, being able to read a landscape is essential for having a meaningful and good life.

Van Toorn's concept of landscape legibility has received much public recognition. Apparently, it gave voice to a broadly recognized moral concern for the loss of significant feelings of place attachment. Moreover, it supported a vision on human life in which a meaningful existence should be embedded in a meaningful and non trivial relationship with the landscape.

Many have attempted to acknowledge these kinds of concerns in environmental policy, by adopting the concept of landscape legibility in nature management and education. It is assumed that place attachment depends to a large extent on the accessibility of landscapes, both in the literal and epistemological sense. Landscape legibility is considered by many to be of key importance for increasing people's attachment to particular places and landscapes, which in turn is considered vital to assure future support for landscape conservation. Since a few years, Dutch nature managers from the Dutch State forestry service and *Natuurmonumenten* (Society for preservation of nature monuments in the Netherlands) aim to increase the legibility of a landscape by protecting and highlighting particular telling landscape elements. Environmental education groups, on the other hand, try to educate the public to recognize these legible features. Efforts have been made to translate Van Toorn's concept in such a way that they can be more easily applied in landscape governance and spatial policy. Yet, as we will see below, in some of these translations, the normative aspect of Van Toorn's original idea tends to be overlooked.

Four Ways to Read the Landscape

In 2004, the Dutch Association for Environmental Education (IVN) adapted Van Toorn's idea and attempts to utilize the concept in a method for nature guided tours (Hendriks & Kloen 2007). The basic idea is that nature guides organize short 2-hour walks in people's neighborhoods in which local residents and others are taught to 'read the landscape'. The

purpose of these walks is to enable people to have a better/deeper *understanding* of a particular place, thus offering them a sense of orientation in space and time. By helping people discover the ‘stories that these landscapes tell’, their relationship with these places is expected to deepen.

The IVN-method distinguishes 4 different ways in which one can ‘read’ a landscape. Together, they enable people to get a fairly complete understanding of the character, structure and meaning of a particular landscape.

The first perspective or manner of reading looks at *the vertical structure* of a landscape, and considers the relation between subsoil (soil composition, groundwater level, geomorphology, relief) and what grows and land use on the surface. Certain biotopes such as ditches, pools, hedges, and wood banks can be used to determine soil composition (poor or rich in nutrients; backland or old river bank), which in turn can help us to understand which plant species should be at home here. Not all landscapes are equally legible in this vertical sense. Some places express the geomorphological structure clearly; here one can witness what happened in the (geological) past. Spatial patterns in these places tend to be rather complex, for instance because road patterns follow former river banks. In contrast, places which are structured merely on functional grounds are much less legible in this vertical sense. The square pattern of roads in the American Mid-West, for instance, tend to conceal the structures underfoot and therefore lack verticality, in some sense at least. One could consider these landscapes are ‘equalized’, ‘flat’. Contrary to what Van Toorn believes, ecological restoration *can* play a role in increasing the vertical legibility of the land, because some restoration projects actually highlight and uncover ancient, hidden texts such as old riverbeds and thus deepen the time horizon and add a longer sense of history in a certain place.¹

¹ An often-used method for rewilding floodplains in the Netherlands is the excavation of clay deposits, revealing the subterranean relief that preceded the cultivation of those floodplains by farmers. The Ark Nature Foundation

The second perspective on the legible landscape focuses on the *horizontal structure* - those observable patterns that are visible on a topographical map. A horizontal reading gives us a clearer understanding of all the functional relationships in a landscape. It recognized patterns of roads and waterways, zoning of housing areas, agricultural activity, ecological networks, but also whether an area is accessible for hiking and cycling; whether it plays a role in water storage or drainage, whether its spatial structure is open or closed, how different adjacent spaces are confined and separated from each other, etcetera. What do the spatial patterns tell us about functional, ecological and hydrological relations in this place? Is there a network of natural elements expressing of the underlying ecological relationships? Landscapes with a high horizontal legibility tend to have complex, multifaceted functional patterns and therefore tell an interesting story, whereas illegible landscapes tend to be monotonous and dull (e.g. the huge monocultures of the agro-industry).

The third reading of the landscape focuses on the *seasonal composition*: what do colors, shapes and structures in the landscape reveal about the particular time of year? In places with much variation throughout the year, one can use the colors and forms of plants, vegetation and crops to notice which season it is. In some places these changes are abrupt; in others they are more gradual. A poorly legible landscape looks the same all-year round, whereas a highly legible place talks about the meaning of spring and fall, brings to mind meaning of the passing of time and conveys what impact the seasons can have on the land.

Finally, the fourth perspective looks at the *cultural history* of a landscape and how observable patterns and elements in the landscape reflect specific moments in history. Central to this perspective are anthropogenic landscape elements and patterns such as buildings and road patterns. Age, style, type of build and material (e.g. river clay) of buildings tell about the history of a place. A brick stone farm house on artificial mound in a Dutch river area tells a

even uses the economic yield of these clay excavations to pay for nature conservation activities, thus making

story of a time when the river could still move around freely and occasionally flooded the land, providing fertile soil and building material, and how humans adapted to that natural system. But pattern of parcels can also reflect the organizational structure of society during time of land cultivation. Even vegetation can be an expression of specific times or phases in history: exotic tree species bring to mind the Romans who introduced them 2000 years ago, certain trees and bushes, that have been planted by farmers to provide for ax handles, still remain in the landscape long after the farm houses to which they belonged have disappeared. Finally, present land use (grass land, silt dump, clay excavation) tells us about the local historical phase that we are in, today. And all these signs can say something about the future prospects.

By teaching people to look at ‘their’ landscapes through these perspectives, the Legible Landscape Project aims at making the land more intelligible by teaching people how to look. Together, these four ways of reading the landscape enable us to gain a complex understanding of a place and the story that it has to tell. Moreover, the project can also explain why some places appeal to us in particular: because they tell more interesting, more complex and more colorful stories than other places.

Like with Van Toorn, although less clearly and more implicitly, the Legible Landscape Project also presupposes a particular normative ideal about how people and landscapes should relate. The project considers landscapes as texts worthwhile reading, and tries to get people to pay closer attention to the landscape. Implicitly, it is assumed that a human life is more worthwhile in a landscape that is legible: the ‘spatial quality’ or ‘landscape quality’ is said to increase with increased legibility. But the project does not explicate *why* people should read the landscape more carefully, *why* it would make our lives worthwhile, and why it is better morally to read a landscape than – for instance – to watch a

large scale rewilding possible without much financial costs (cf. Drenthen 2009).

reality soap on television. To understand that, one needs a richer approach to landscape legibility.

The Semiotic Bias in Current Landscape Reading Practices

The approach of the IVN towards the legible landscape is heavily influenced by a particular conception of textuality – semiotics – that assumes that the meaning of a text derives from the connections between the constitutive parts within a text - the ‘signs’. According to semiotics, understanding the meaning of a text, which is seen as a network of signs, primarily means that one can recognize these relations within this network and represent them in a network of symbols. According to semiotics, anything can be read as a text, since all things in the world are part of a relational network with other things. With regard to the landscape as a text, the semiotic view focuses on the way in which individual elements in the landscape (a hedge, a farm, a ditch) refer to each other and form a network of interconnected signs.

It is this semiotic view of reading a text that is at root of the four perspectives of the Legible Landscape Project, which all refer to some relationships between objective features that exist ‘out there’. Reading the landscape in the semiotic sense merely focus on recognizing all actually existing relationships of elements in the objective world. The focus is on knowing the relations between the legible elements: recognizing how the species of trees is related to the soil composition; how the road pattern reflects the way the river has shifted its course, etcetera. Once I know the relationships between objective features of the world, I can represent these relations by telling the story of a place – a story that reflects the different complex relationships in the world in a symbolic order.

Because the semiotic approach *equals* the reading a landscape with merely as the acquiring of *information about the world* ‘out there’, the semiotic idea of textuality is fundamentally unable to explain why people feel deeply connected and committed to

landscapes. Its conceptualization of meaning starts with a clear disconnection between the objectivity of the text and an uninvolved reader, and thus presupposes (or rather creates) a gap between the understanding subject and the objective signs. This focus on knowledge as representation of a place ignores other ways of 'knowing' a place, such as having an intimate acquaintance with a place. What semiotic landscape reading practices do not address is the relationship that *we* as readers have with this legible landscape. The semiotic reading shows why the story of certain particular landscapes may be considered more interesting than others, but it does not address why certain places appeal to us in a way that involves who we are. It does not tell us *why* people (should) care about the legibility of the land, why they (should) want to get to know these places, why is there more 'quality' in a legible landscape?

Thus, the semiotic view does not recognize the normative element that proved central to Van Toorn's concern: the "residents for whom the signs and narratives of the land are food for their spirit." The very connection between a legible landscape and a good life, which is at the heart of what Willem van Toorn originally tried to express with the concept, cannot be addressed through the type of landscape readings that the IVN project is promoting.

It should be acknowledged that the authors of the IVN method explicitly recognize that their four reading perspectives can only be a first step in the process of developing a deeper understanding of a place. Seeing and knowing the different aspects of the land can be the start of a conversation among those who made the guided tour to talk about what the landscape really means to them. But the authors recognize that in our relation to place, other, more intimate meanings are in play. Landscapes also have subjective and personal significance for people; people develop a relationship with a landscape by connecting the objective story about the landscape with their personal experiences. The IVN project acknowledges that merely *knowing* a place is only part of the story. After the guided tour, the floor should be opened for a conversation about more personal experiences of the landscape.

Yet, because IVN's collective reading of the landscape starts from a semiotic conception of reading, the nature of these other meanings tends to be viewed as subjective and highly personal, and rather disconnected from the idea of nature as a text in need of interpretation. In the end, it is suggested, the landscape is different for everyone, since everyone has his own favorite spots, his own little stories to tell about the place. IVN acknowledges that the objectivist approach ignores the way that individuals experience and value particular landscapes. But to the extent that these more intimate meanings are conceived as being highly personal, it is difficult to see how they could play the normative role that they do in discussions about legibility of the landscape.

Like many who are unsatisfied with a merely objectivist account of the relation between humans and landscape, in order to address more personal meanings, the IVN project reverts to environmental psychology as a subjective supplement. Environmental psychologists study how individuals experience and value certain landscapes and places; some even try to determine why people value particular places more than others. The problem with a psychological approach, however, is in the end, that it too cannot explain the normative content of the reading of landscapes. For psychologists, experiencing meanings of a landscape can never be anything else but a mere subjective attribution to an otherwise value-neutral landscape; the landscape itself is merely the white screen on which individuals project their personal tastes and preferences. However, if all these other, more intimate and relational aspects of our understanding of place are merely subjective personal *attributes* to an otherwise 'mute' objective landscape, then the experience of humans would not so much testify something about the meaning of the landscape itself, but rather on the structure of their character and their personal history. Environmental psychology indeed complements the objectivist approach, but as a perspective on the legible landscape it is equally unsuited to understand how certain places can present people with a moral frame of reference. Merely

adding subjective experiences to objective legible features cannot explain how certain place meanings can support a morally deep sense of belonging in which places can be “food for the spirit”. Both the semiotic focus on gathering knowledge about a landscape, and the psychological approach to nature experiences remains deeply embedded in a notion of reading landscapes that is fundamentally unsuited to understand how landscapes can serve a role as a normative frame of reference.

The semiotic perspective on the landscape presupposes a distanced perspective on place in which landscapes can at best be interesting objects that tell interesting stories. We can choose to value these places, or even choose to recognize their intrinsic value, but a semiotic reading the landscape would also be perfectly compatible with a detached, self-centered relationship with place. It is true that the average resident will know more about a place than an average incidental visitor will, but that does not mean that having more knowledge about a place will lead to an increased place attachment. Visitors can discover new information about a place, but they will at best become better informed visitors. A place can become more interesting to them, but that is not enough to support a true attachment to place and become a true resident. For those who are already attached to a place, the semiotic reading method can add depth and meaning to the landscape, but for those with a rather shallow relation to the landscape, visiting the place will at best be another nice thing to do in the weekend. And next weekend, they will visit another place that will be just as interesting. But this was precisely the type of tourist attitude that Willem van Toorn dreaded so much: when he complained about the prospect of becoming merely a ‘visitor to his own landscape’?

If we want to take seriously the *meaning* of a place, we must also allow places to be of importance for the way we understand ourselves, as moral frames of reference, than can develop a much deeper relation with place, and a moral commitment with a place that goes far beyond merely recognizing a place’s intrinsic value.

Hermeneutics as an Alternative Perspective on Reading

Instead of starting with a semiotic conception of the legible landscape and supplementing that with purely subjective personal experiences, we should acknowledge from the start the intimate relationship that can exist between a text and a reader. In order to understand the actually existing moral ties between people and their landscapes, we should be open to a new ontology that focuses on the relation between ‘subject’ and ‘object’, people and their places. If we want to understand how the legibility of the land is connected with environmental identity and ethical commitment to place, we need a different perspective on legibility and textuality. Whereas semiotics tends to focus on texts as information carriers, hermeneutics tends to look at the way that interpretations play a part in our understanding of ourselves and the world.²

A hermeneutic approach towards the legible landscape can begin from the work of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) on texts and reading. Ricoeur defines a text as “a discourse fixed by writing” (Ricoeur 1981p.146). According to Ricoeur, there is an important difference between texts and speech. In speech, a speaker can accompany his signs and explain himself. Because in a text the author is absent, it is up to the reader to understand the meaning of the text through interpretation. When language is transformed into a *text*, Ricoeur argues, it assumes a life of its own, independent of that of its *author*; or phrased in a typical Ricoeurian sense: “the text has emancipated from its author”. If one wants to understand the meaning of a text, it makes no sense to ask the author what he intended to say in a particular text (even in the exceptional case that we *could* ask him), if only because some texts accommodate much richer readings than the author intended. In a way, the author is merely the first reader of the text; but when it comes to it, he has no privileged position to

² For that reason, hermeneuticists typically focus on literary rather than non-literary texts.

determine how the text should be read or what is the meaning of that text (this is especially true for literary texts). Without an external authoritative source to turn to regarding the meaning of a text, a reader can only revert to the act of reading the text itself.

Moreover, whereas in speech, a speaker can literally point to the things he is talking about; a speaker presents to an interlocutor a 'real' world of which both speaker and interlocutor are part. A text, in contrast, presents an imaginary world that has to be supplemented by the reader, if only because of gaps in the text's references, which ultimately must be filled by the imagination of the reader. "Texts speak of possible worlds and of possible ways of orienting oneself in these worlds" (Ricoeur 1981, p.177). But in order to understand the meaning of a text, we not only have to be open to the world as presented by the text, but we should also be willing to 'place oneself' – for the time being – in that world. To understand the meaning of a text means that we should project our own beliefs and prejudices onto the text, but rather, that we "let the work and its world enlarge the horizon of the understanding which I have of my self" (Ricoeur 1981, p.178). Moreover, we never read a text in isolation – our understanding of the text presupposes the existence of preceding texts that have already determined both the reader and the world of the text as well.

Thus, text, world, and reader are engaged in a dialectical relationship. According to Ricoeur, good reading requires willingness on the part of the reader to participate in the world that is opened up by the text and abstract from the context of one's particular life ('distantiation'). However, understanding a text also means to be involved, to be 'present' in the act of reading. A reader has to bring to live the narrative of the text, bring to bear the meanings of words and concepts that play a role in his own life. Good reading therefore does

not only require ‘distantiation’, but also ‘appropriation’: the reader must use the context of his own life to ‘bring to life’ the world that is being brought forward by the text.³

Ultimately, text and reader are tied together in a narrative, in which the reader tries to explain the meaning of a text, but at the same time testifies about his own identity. It is through the texts that he reads and by imagining himself in the worlds that are being opened by these texts that the reader gets to know himself. Through the act of reading and interpreting texts, one gets to know ‘oneself as another’ (Ricoeur 1992). It is this later notion of identity that Ricoeur calls narrative identity.⁴

I believe that this Ricoeurian perspective can provide us with a new mode of understanding the legible landscape that enables us to understand how the legibility of a landscape can inform one’s place-based identity and intensify one’s relationship to these landscapes.

Landscape Hermeneutics and Ethics of Place

As argued above, central to Ricoeur’s hermeneutic conception of textuality is the idea that the meaning of a text depends on the act of reading, and that this reading act implies an active stance from the reader. If we want to connect this Ricoeurian perspective with environmental philosophy⁵ and with the discourse on the legible landscape, we can start by noting that the legible landscape shares the features crucial for texts in a Ricoeurian sense: the legible

³ Elsewhere, I have shown that for us, today, there is also a principal limitation to this idea of appropriation, because in our post-modern age, we seem to have become too self-aware and too aware of the contingency of each particular appropriation of nature. Post-modern wilderness desire could be a symptom of this nihilistic self-awareness: we long for something that is not interpretation because we seem to lack a culture of nature - are not at ease in any cultivation of the world (cf. Drenthen 2007).

⁴ David Utsler has repeatedly demonstrated that this Ricoeurian conception of narrative identity can be a model for understanding what Utsler calls ‘environmental identity’ (Utsler 2009).

landscape contains fixed signs that are in need of interpretation, while the author of this text is absent.

According to hermeneutics, the act of reading a landscape presupposes that we are already ‘engaged’ with a landscape that has already presented itself to us as meaningful and worthwhile exploring. Landscapes are always already infused with meanings, embedded in a larger whole of meanings and interpretations that are already in play in how we see the world and ourselves. A hermeneutic perspective on landscape legibility thus starts with the connections and dialectics between text and reader that are always already at work. Instead of starting with a distinction between objective land signs and subjective experiences of meaning and value, and then having to face the question how to understand the connection between both separated entities, landscape hermeneuticists presuppose that there already exist several connections between landscapes that beckon to be interpreted, and ‘readers’ who need to interpret their meaning.

Moreover, a landscape hermeneutic will not so much attempt to describe how certain groups and individuals happen to be interested in reading the land (as environmental sociologists and psychologists would), but rather seeks to show what it means that the landscape presents itself as a text worth reading.

According to Ricoeur, humans are truly narrative beings, who know themselves *through* the stories that are being told. Through the act of reading, a text can change both the reader’s world and his identity. 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 the opening horizon of new worlds that are being disclosed by texts. Landscape texts and place-

⁵ In this section, I draw heavily on reflections on the relevance of Ricoeur for environmental philosophy by Forrest Clingerman on ‘emplacement’ (Clingerman 2004), David Utsler on environmental identity (Utsler 2009) and Brian Treanor on ‘narrative environmental virtue ethics’ (Treanor 2008).

identities could be linked in a similar way as well. If landscapes and places can be read like texts, then the act of reading landscape texts could be formative for personal identity as well. Reading the land as text requires an active engagement with the meaning of a place that beckons to be articulated in our act of interpretation. We must therefore both actively appropriate the meaning by investing ourselves in the landscape, and at the same time let the text change our world. The stories that we tell about the meaning of a place and what it means to be in that place reflects and supports 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.

Our interpretations of the world and ourselves have always already been determined by earlier texts and interpretations in play. To take the analogy one step further, we can say that a similar thing might be true with earlier landscape-texts: our current place-identity is partly determined by the way we have always already been emplaced. Our identity is already being formed by the place-narratives that surround us. We are always already ‘emplaced’ (cf. Clingerman 2004), that is: we are being formed by the existing meanings and interpretations of the land.

If this perspective makes any sense, then understanding the legible landscape would require that we must also learn to understand how places have always already contributed to who we are. 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.

The Role of Semiotics in Landscape Hermeneutics

It is at this point that the semiotic approach to landscapes might become especially relevant again. Hermeneutic and semiotic landscape reading could be complementary. An adequate place-based narrative ethics has to reflect and strengthen place-based identities, but also has to acknowledge that each place has a status, specific nature and history of its own. This ‘otherness’ or ‘autonomy’ of the world has to somehow be part of the place narrative as well, and semiotics could be a way to do ensure that our stories actually reflect the nature of a place. Place narratives cannot be invented at will, but somehow have to be ‘grounded’ in an understanding of the nature of this place: its history, its soil composition, the way it changes throughout the year, what species live there, what food you can grow there, etcetera. Our place narratives should consist both of stories about the nature of a place and about what it means to live here.

The semiotic approach brings into play the ‘objectivity’ of a place by conveying certain place features with a specific ‘gravity’. For Ricoeur, the world of the text is fundamentally different from the ‘real world. A speaker can point to the things that he talk about – the world that both speaker and listener live in. A written text, in contrast, opens a world, but this world is incomplete, for it has many gaps which have to be supplemented by the imagination of the reader. Such a view could imply that the world that is being opened by the landscape text is in a sense ‘not real’: it exists only insofar as it is interpreted. An old agricultural landscape can 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. The narrative connects the land to a sense of our identity – the story of what it means to live on this land – but in addition the legible landscape also tells a

story that is 'real' in a much more literal sense. Forrest Clingerman has noted that, in this respect, the landscape is a very special kind of text, because the world that it is bringing forth by the landscape-text *is* the real world (in a very specific sense at least).⁶ One could say that semiotics focuses the attention on these 'real' features that the reader can 'point out', and to the 'reality' of the world of the landscape-text, in which the readers finds himself.

Thus, the IVN Legible Landscape Project can call our attention to how any particular place functions, how it has come to be, what intrusions it can and cannot take, etcetera. Yet, in the end, the objectivity of the semiotic approach has to be integrated with an overall hermeneutic of the landscape, in which all the objective features are put into context and get to *mean something*. It is this narrative context that connects our fate with the legible landscapes we live in. Only when the land is somehow already intertwined with our life story and narrative identity, can it provide an ethos – a normative context or frame of orientation with which we can orient ourselves and from which we know who we are and what being in our particular place is about. Yet objective landscape reading like that developed by the IVN provide a tool to become critical and reflective about the true meanings of places and landscapes and maybe adjust the image we have of ourselves.

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⁶ Cf. Forrest Clingerman 2004, who also reflects on the differences and similarities between a Ricoeurian idea of emplotment and the materiality of a place-oriented notion of 'emplacement'.

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