

LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

A PERSONAL VIEW

BY

KYRIAKOS KALORKOTI

Web site: kkpictures.com

Email: kk@kkpictures.com

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Painting is a science, and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature. Why, then, may not landscape painting be considered a branch of natural philosophy¹, of which pictures are but experiments?
— John Constable, Royal Institution Lecture, 16 June 1836

§1. Introduction. In this document I discuss landscape photography as art both in its own right and its relation to other areas of human endeavour. This is very much a personal view. It is *not* a manifesto still less a proscriptive document. A significant part of my concern is to stress the continuity of aesthetic experience across science (especially my own field of mathematics), music and art in general.

Photography in this discussion refers to images without manipulations other than what is necessary to produce a good print or transparency. It would be difficult and not particularly rewarding to attempt a watertight definition of the term *Landscape Photography*. We will just take it to refer to images made in the field either of the wide landscape or intimate studies²

It must be stressed that it is *landscape* photography that is under discussion and not photography in general. Far too often discussions (even so called classics) treat the subject too widely and then, not surprisingly, they find contradictions or at least no convincing coherent theory. Beyond the commonality of the use of the camera there is little to connect the aims of landscape photography with, e.g., those of advertising photography. To underline the point we need only observe that fine brushes can be used to paint exquisite miniatures or to add finishing touches to model aeroplanes. For a contrary view, one that aims to discuss the ultimate essence of photography see Barthes [1] (I don't necessarily disagree with Barthes but cannot get quite so exercised by the question as he was).

A photograph is of course an image and in discussing art in its wider senses I will, for the sake of keeping the discussion fairly straightforward and relevant, focus on images (thus excluding sculpture or installations). For the sake of simplicity I use the word 'art' in this sense, I do not of course mean to imply that art is limited to this.

Before moving onto the discussion proper it is worth giving a little advice on the most effective way to look at a photograph (or any image that conveys perspective). The most comfortable way is with both eyes but this flattens the image. To see it at its best look at it from a distance about equal to the diagonal of the photograph with one eye closed; the effect is well worth the slight discomfort at least for a short while. The distance is not absolutely critical but the effect will not work if you are far too close or distant; just experiment a little. There is a caveat, as usual. There are very effective photographs that do not depend on a sense of depth and for these it is counter

¹i.e., science.

²Readers who find this approach unsatisfactory or even cavalier are invited to produce a watertight definition of such commonly used terms as 'life', 'art', 'dog' or 'number.' I do not deny the possibility of a formal definition of 'Landscape Photography' but doubt that it would serve much purpose other than to split hairs.

productive to follow the preceding advice.

§2. Vision and the artist. Let me start by declaring an aversion to the word *vision*. This seems like a contradiction for a photographer but here I am referring to its use as in ‘my personal vision’ or the appalling ‘vision statement.’ Those working in the arts are often enjoined to develop their vision. There is a sense in which I agree but unfortunately all too often the advice is misconstrued as an invitation to a self centred cultivation of the ego, hence my aversion. I am not implying that those giving the advice always mean it in the objectionable sense but I do think that it needs to be offered with a lot more caveats.

Certainly a work of art is extremely unlikely to have depth unless it is produced as a result of a great deal of significant personal investment involving introspection and skill. However this introspection is likely to be much more effective and communicative if it is genuinely well informed and has contextual awareness. Much of the rest of this discussion expands on this.

Before moving on we should clarify what is meant by ‘depth’ in a work of art. To me this means that it should do more than please. It must have the capacity to engage others in their own introspection and interpretation long after they have seen or heard it. It should repay repeated study, I exclude from this such puerile notions as the artist using some sort of personal or obscure code. It is true that some very great artists have used a personal motif, e.g., Bach often used the note sequence B, A, C, B \flat the last being H in German notation. However in such cases the motif is just the seed for work that can be appreciated without knowledge of the encryption (which in Bach’s case is pretty obvious anyway). There are two fallacies in connection with the assessment of art, held by opposing camps. The first one is that if a work of art is approachable by a wide public then it cannot be worthy of serious attention; clearly nonsense. The second is that if a work of art is not immediately likeable³ or comprehensible then it is a waste of time, this is just plain laziness. My only requirement of a work of art on first encountering it is that it should in some way grab my attention without cheap or sensationalist tricks, thereafter I devote whatever time I can spare to evaluate it and come to a judgement.

The question of depth is discussed by David Ward [17] in detail. Essentially he draws a distinction between works that *denote* (i.e., simply represent) and works that *connote* (i.e., suggest notions beyond the subject matter). To a large extent I agree but I think there is a danger of going too far. In §10 I will make a case for works that denote, the caveat being that they must still evoke a response from us. Of course I am simplifying here (perhaps too much), the argument is subtler than just a polarity and readers are strongly advised to follow it in full by reading the book. It might be more accurate to delineate the extent to which a work connotes because of the way it is executed and work that itself denotes but something that itself connotes.

Perhaps E.H. Gombrich [10, p.326] came closest to a summary by stating that:

³‘Likeable’ is too restrictive a notion. I’m not sure if the *Dies Irae* of György Ligeti’s *Requiem* could ever be described as likeable but it is a critical part of a masterpiece. Similarly, like-ability is an irrelevant notion in connection with many paintings, e.g., Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*.

We prefer suggestion to representation, we have adjusted our expectations to enjoy the very act of guessing, of projecting. And we rationalize this preference by fancying that the sketch must be nearer to what the artist saw and to what he felt than the finished work.

Admittedly he was discussing the tendency to decry finished works (of Constable) in favour of sketches as being less interesting and less artistic. However the first two lines seem to me to be very relevant to considerations of connotation and denotation.

On this matter we need also to be aware of the extent of cultural conditioning. What seems deep to us can seem perfunctory to those from another tradition and vice versa. For example traditional Chinese painting and other arts employ a large number of symbolic devices⁴, enough to fill a whole book (see Williams [19]). Moreover great emphasis is laid on the quality and variety of brushwork. James Cahill in [16] relates the experience of guiding a noted Chinese artist and connoisseur through the very extensive western art collection of the National Gallery in Washington D.C. His response was that the paintings looked more or less the same and did not exhibit much variety in their brushwork. No doubt given sufficient study and time the Chinese artist would have perceived the depths and differences that people brought up in the western tradition do. Likewise we need a great deal of study to appreciate Chinese paintings and even more so calligraphy.

§3. Photography and painting. Photography's means are purely visual. A painter can choose to make a representation of an object that, e.g., is based on how it would be perceived by other senses such as touch. Of course there is an intriguing question of how well an image can represent the other senses but nevertheless it is an option amongst many for a painter. More likely, compositional or coloristic devices can be used to heighten emotional impact, with the work of van Gogh being a supreme example. Over its long history painting has evolved a large set of schemata for representation, even if we limit discussion to traditional art. Such devices are largely denied to the photographer, other than by the use of some techniques such as long exposures, deliberately enlarging the foreground or filters, e.g., to darken clouds. Even so these provide comparatively limited means. Nature can very often provide equivalents, e.g., in his painting *Woman Weeping* Picasso employed sharp angular lines to convey grief. It is not hard to imagine expressing a similar feeling with suitable ice formations or shattered rocks though one could not expect to find equivalents for all of the devices used in the painting. It is mostly (but not exclusively) at the level of intimate studies that photography can approach abstraction though not with the same degree of freedom as painting (see Figure 1). By and large, it seems that most viewers of photographs do not see beyond the subject to the underlying intended composition *per se*; however this is not a weakness of photography as such any more than it is of figurative painting.

The painter has the freedom to leave out inconvenient features or even move buildings for the sake of balance (as Turner did in water colour studies of Venice). The

⁴Indeed much western art is less and less accessible as traditional Christian symbolism is no longer widely understood.



Figure 1: *Flows*. Apart from the fact that this is clearly rock and water is the overall form any different from an abstract painting?

photographer has to find other solutions. In this regard photography resembles science and mathematics; we must deal with things as they are, at least for the major parts of vistas. With intimate studies it is often possible to make changes. In my view this is entirely justified, landscape photography is not documentary. Indeed why should it be acceptable for, say, a deer to have accidentally moved a rock or twig but not for the photographer to do so? There can be no more tedious and irrelevant a question as ‘Did you move that leaf?’

This is not to say that painters can do whatever they like, at least not if they want to produce interesting work. Just to redress the balance a little it is worth bearing in mind that painting is limited in ways that photography is not. No painter can capture the moment with the detail and accuracy offered by the camera—Monet’s *Impression Sunrise* is well titled! Detail and accuracy are not in themselves enough to produce a good work of art though; they simply provide a different base from which to start. Furthermore the photographer is not subject to the well known effect of seeing and representing what one already knows, i.e., fitting it into a pre-existing set of models; this is discussed by Gombrich [10, Ch. II].

I do not want to press comparisons with painting further. In my view photography takes its place as a means of image making alongside painting, lithography, etching etc. They are all united by the same fundamental problem and aim: how to fill a rectangle with marks that evoke a strong and lasting response. Photography has its own strengths and limitations just as any other method of pictorial representation (*all* pictures are representations including abstract paintings). It is important to distinguish between limitations and weaknesses: the former can be a spur to more interesting work.

§4. Things as they *could* be seen. For many landscape photographers the aim is to show the beauties of nature. This is an approach that I can understand though for me it is not quite enough. Moreover I part company with those of its proponents who insist that we must ‘show it like it is.’ This is a delusion. Human vision is significantly different from a camera and in any case no projection of a 3 dimensional scene can represent it ‘as it is.’ The camera records accurately the projection not the reality. My approach is to search for structure in nature and produce what I hope is a striking composition. The aim is to make photographs *with* the landscape not *of* it. Towards this end I use all the controls offered by the view camera. This includes selection of lens; a short focal length to expand perspective and longer focal length to compress it. An equally useful feature that is particular to the view camera is the ability to tilt the back; giving a different kind of control over perspective. This is often described as distortion but the image is no more distorted than any other projection of the scene onto a plane; it just so happens that most cameras limit the user to having the image plane parallel to the lens. In short, my photographs often aim to show the viewer how the scene *could* be viewed (see Figures 2, 3 and 6). After all our eyes are the result of just one evolutionary path amongst many. I should add however that I try hard to avoid my choices being immediately apparent to the viewer, since otherwise the photograph is more about the technique than the landscape and that is of very limited interest. For this reason I have



Figure 2: *Glencorse Burn, Midlothian*. The foreground rock was not as large as implied by the photograph, however tilting the camera back gave the composition more perceived depth and balance.



Figure 3: *Italian Chapel, Orkney*. The chapel was made by Italian prisoners of war out of two nissan huts. The photograph is intended to convey a sense of wonder rather than the physical space as seen by the human eye. There is a type of inversion here: normally the foreground is at the base and leads to a lighter background at the top of the photograph.

no interest in any manipulations that draw attention to themselves.

§5. Light. It is often stated that photography is all about the light, meaning the quality of light. The beauty of warm early morning or late evening light is so enticing that there is a danger of overlooking the equal wonders of other light, e.g., the utterly beautiful gradation of tones often produced by rain. For me structure is normally the prime consideration with light playing a supporting role. Thus I would delete the word ‘all’ from the opening sentence; as it stands it misses the main point for me.

I am not claiming that there is a dichotomy between structure and light, as in most things it is a matter of emphasis. A serious landscape photographer will produce work that lies along all points of this spectrum. The centre of gravity will fall according to his or her inner motivations and preferences. This is not to say that the work is weak in other respects, simply that its signature (or the photographer’s style) is determined by those motivations. Joe Cornish [4] makes a very strong case for warm light. The work of Peter Dombrovskis [6] is a wonderful example of the magic of diffuse light. David Ward [17] often exploits colour contrasts producing thought provoking intimate photographs.

Many of my photographic trips are not made with any particular photograph in mind but are simply explorations. Unless I have to suffer totally cloudless sunny skies I can always find something to do, simply by asking myself ‘given this particular light what can best be done with it?’ In fact even blue skies can be useful (see Figure 4). Perhaps one of the most under explored types of light for vistas is that produced by drizzle or even driving rain. For me this is one of the most exciting, if rather uncomfortable, situations in which to work. Contrast is low and colours wonderful with a somewhat ethereal feeling, at least when the irrelevant discomfort of the rain is filtered out (see Figure 5).

§6. Objectivity or subjectivity? My structural approach to photography is heavily influenced by my training as a mathematician. This has a significant influence on my outlook as regards other matters as well. For example there is a serious fallacy held by many in the arts that there is a polarity between truth (at least of a scientific kind) and beauty. On this basis an Artist with a capital ‘A’ is somebody who is concerned with expression (and nowadays more and more with *self-expression*) rather than verifiable investigations. This view (which is admittedly somewhat exaggerated here to make the point) is totally untenable to anybody who has studied science and especially mathematics to research level. There are proofs in mathematics that are at least as beautiful and moving as any work of art. Unfortunately they require many years of study to appreciate but all the same they are works of truth and immense beauty. The advantage of what we normally refer to as art is that it is based on our common experience and so can be appreciated more directly (for example a very significant part of the human brain is dedicated to visual processing). The point I am making here is not that everybody should be a mathematician but that the art world should become a little less parochial in its theorizing.

It follows that art has a head start in terms of public acceptance and understanding; I do not foresee a situation whereby people gather in large numbers to appreciate the

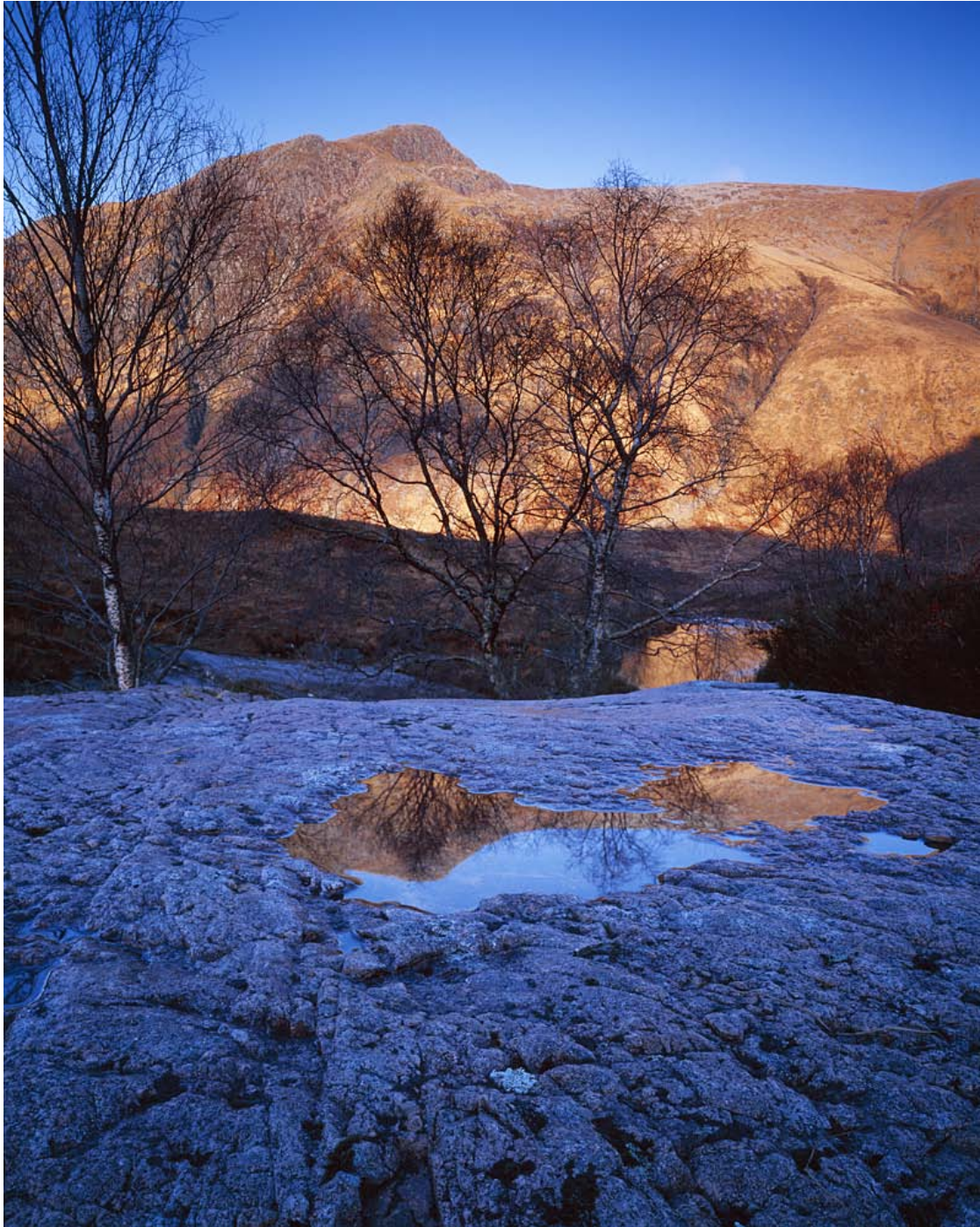


Figure 4: *Stob na Broige Reflections*. The foreground rock is fairly pale in neutral light; only a grad was used for this photograph so that the blue cast recorded.



Figure 5: *Autumn Rain*. Towards the end of a day of rain of varying intensity I was searching for a subject worth the soaking my camera gear would get yet again; the rain was coming along the glen from the right in an organized torrential procession. Placing the tree in good relation to the background was the most time consuming aspect; its slightly battered state made it perfect for me.

beauties of mathematics! It is therefore all the more curious that so much of the current art establishment has done its best to promote obscurantism and mystification. This is often accompanied by jargon packed dense prose that is as banal as it is impenetrable. There is a well entrenched tendency in some quarters to treat art as some new kind of class divide. Indeed a fair amount of writing exhibits a high handed disdain for anything comprehensible except, presumably, to those occupying a suitably rarified air. Much worse it is very reminiscent of the absurdly intricate and artificial rules of etiquette used by the upper classes in times gone by as a method of distinction from, and source of scorn for, those they perceived as inferiors⁵. Do not misunderstand me, I am not in favour of ‘easy’ art that requires no effort from its audience. However time is precious for all of us and if we want our work to be seen by more than a tiny clique we do need to do more than scoff or issue what are by now cliché ridden ‘challenges’ and ‘confrontations.’ I have had many happy experiences of being drawn to the work of an artist or composer and then following this up with deeper study, e.g., see my comments about Bartók in §8. As an example from photography, I found the experience of reading *John Blakemore’s Black and White Photography Workshop* [3] very rewarding even though I do not work in black and white apart from the odd photograph. I was attracted to his work at the start and by the end found my appreciation to be greatly increased, a result of following his well written and genuinely informative text. Even better my ideas about photography had moved on as a result.

In the realm of art history I know of no better example than the work of E.H. Gombrich [9], [10], [11], [12]. Although he does not discuss photography directly, I view his work as essential reading for any serious study of the subject.

§7. Material or spiritual? One of the objections to viewing photography as Art is the fact that a photograph is an image of some existing physical reality (ignoring manipulations). This objection can only be entertained if we go with the facile view that material existence is somehow mundane and thus is of no particular interest to art; put briefly the view seems partly to be that material existence is no rival to imagination and all that photography can do is to record it. In fact existence of any kind is deeply problematic and mysterious; the nature of material reality is by no means straightforward (e.g., see Penrose [14]) and is thus more than a fitting source for image making that aims at transformation and revelation. The photograph in Figure 6 helps to illustrate the point: to the eye the scene did not look like this. Our brains carry out colour correction so that the bluish nature of the overall colour is not normally perceived in context but of course it is perceived in the photograph. The swirling clouds reflecting the energy of the water are produced by an exposure time running into many seconds; we are not trained to hold all the successive positions of clouds and water in our memory to create an overlay. Finally our eyes show us the world in a perspective that corresponds roughly

⁵I am not claiming that such distinctions in art did not exist in the past, if anything they were more pronounced but largely due to economic and class differences. Moreover art funding was largely a private matter. Nowadays a significant amount of public money funds the arts and yet many of those in charge see no contradiction in promoting art that is so often dismal and dismissive of any genuine attempt to communicate.



Figure 6: *Allt a' Chaorainn, Glen Etive.*

to a 45mm lens in terms of 35mm photography (around 150mm for 4×5 photography); although as noted above human vision is by no means just a biological version of the camera. The photograph was made with a super-wide lens showing us quite literally a new perspective.

To some extent the objection relates to the material versus spiritual split that has pervaded thought especially in the west. It seems to be the view that material existence is subordinate to the spiritual. Admittedly nowadays it is *de rigueur* to deny the spiritual and instead phrases such as ‘the human spirit(!)’ are used. The more we learn about the ultimate nature of matter the clearer it is that material existence is no less mysterious than spiritual. I am not proposing some kind of new age position (which would be utterly repulsive to me) but serious scientific study with an open mind from all sides. The material versus spiritual split (or mind versus body problem) was formulated at a time when the nature of matter was not understood in anything other than a ‘common sense’ way; a point of view that is highly misleading, just how could $E = mc^2$ come out of common sense? I cannot offer a solution to the imponderable questions but feel less and less impelled to find dichotomies where there might not be any. In other words the problem for me is to decide if there is a problem that is in any way different from the fundamental one of existence.

It is considerations of this type that lead me to find some discussions of photography somewhat beside the point. They stress repeatedly that a photograph is an image of *something* of a *subject*, e.g., see Sontag [15]. So what? Every image made is an image of something, whether it is of a landscape (real or imagined) or an abstract construct⁶. Presumably the image shows us what the artist intended (at least to the best of his or her abilities), the question is what reaction if any it elicits from us. The situation is not helped by views expressed in this regard by some very eminent photographers and painters claiming, by turn, that the camera shows us reality as it is or exactly the opposite! As observed in §4 the camera records accurately the projection (in fact the effect of a series of projections) not the reality, thus the two opposing views are a version of the glass half empty or half full dichotomy. My view is that neither photography nor painting are a substitute for reality or its experience and can never present more than a limited aspect of it (which is not to deny the utility of this ability, indeed photography can act as an adjunct to our limited senses). They provide us with experiences of their own which reflect a certain artistic reality, assuming that the work was created as a work of art. In this view I am in good company, e.g., T.S Eliot [7, p.113] states:

The most generalised form of my own view is simply this: that nothing in this world or the next is a substitute for anything else; and if you find that you must do without something, such as religious faith or philosophic belief, then you must just do without it...

Thus if you want the landscape experience then you must go out there. If you want an artistic experience arising out the landscape experience then a photograph or a painting

⁶I exclude here the products of ‘automatic’ art; the Surrealists peddled this notion but in practice were quite selective about what to keep.

might just be the thing.

There is one important respect in which the photograph is tied to the subject (other than the obvious one that it is of the subject). I don't know if the story of Turner having himself tied to the mast of a ship in order to experience a storm in full is true. The point is that he was free to do so and produce his work later on. This option is not open to the photographer; under some conditions he or she simply has to move on with regret. However many give up too easily, e.g., assuming that rain always rules out work.

§8. Music. An equally important influence on me is music especially that of Beethoven and more particularly Bartók. Their music is concerned with structure but at the service of communication and feeling rather than for its own sake. I first heard Bartók's music when I was a teenager skiving from games at school. Although I didn't fully understand it (not surprising as it was his masterpiece *Music for Strings Percussion and Celeste*) it was very clear to me that this was well worth exploring. More than 35 years later I'm still doing that. *Music for Strings Percussion and Celeste* is a particularly good example of Bartók's aim at a kind of perfection in structure but which can be appreciated without knowledge of its immense intricacy. A very valuable lesson, the artist's technical ability and apparatus is *not* in itself a work of art. His credo, based on a very deep empathy with nature, was encapsulated in his *Cantata Profana*, a work that sums up what I feel about nature and our relation to it with uncanny accuracy.

§9. Land and Language In the realm of music some notable composers have been influenced by language, i.e., its speech patterns. In particular Janáček often modelled his themes on his native language, not only in his operas but also in works for instruments. It is not so surprising that music, especially folk music, should be affected by language. However it is surely absurd to suggest that landscape can be so affected. Certainly, but it is more than reasonable to assume that landscape itself has shaped linguistic development to an appreciable extent. Those who traditionally lived and worked within a certain landscape will have needed appropriate terms and phrases to express what mattered to them⁷. Almost all of my photography is carried out in the Highlands of Scotland so the relevant language here is Gaelic (*Gàidhlig*). Most Highland names are either Gaelic or derived from it, though we must also be aware that the Vikings left their mark, e.g., a very large number of the names on Lewis are Gaelic versions of Norse words.

One obvious advantage of having some knowledge of the relevant local language is at least the ability to pronounce the names. Another benefit is that they often give quite precise information, thus the name Stob Dearg of the highest peak of Buachaille Etive Mor (*Buachaille Ètìe Mòr*), not only tells us that it is pointed but that it is red. Useful as this is, it is at the operational end of landscape photography. My view is that a deeper appreciation of the relevant language can give us an insight into the landscape. Those who lived in it for centuries, wrote poems, songs and stories about it surely have something to teach us.

⁷For example Gaelic has more than 30 words to express different types of ground, mostly boggy. See http://www.akerbeltz.org/beangaidhlig/grammar/grammar_bogs.htm.

Duncan Ban MacIntyre (*Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir*, 1724–1812), who could neither read nor write⁸, has been described as the Gaelic Burns. In particular his long poem ‘In Praise of Ben Doran’ (*Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain*⁹) is rated by many as one of the finest nature poems ever written, it begins:

<i>An t-urram thar gach beinn</i>	<i>The prize above each ben</i>
<i>Aig Beinn Dòbhrain,</i>	<i>Is Ben Dòbhran’s</i>
<i>De na chunnaic mi fon ghrein</i>	<i>Of all that I’ve ever seen</i>
<i>’S i bu bhòidhche leam;</i>	<i>She was the loveliest;</i>

(The translation from [2] is not literal and cannot convey the full sense of the Gaelic original, e.g., *urram* has various meanings including ‘awe’, ‘dignity’ and ‘honour’, it does not mean ‘prize’ as such.) The photograph in Figure 7 is one result of responding to these words. It is fairly illustrative but it must be noted that the poem is also concerned with deer and hunting—his work is not marred by sentimentality. I had driven past the mountain many times (it is just after Tyndrum on the way north to Glen Etive) and often thought that maybe I should photograph it. I did nothing about this until I saw an excellent programme by a Gaelic historian and poet in which he not only discussed the poem but also produced his own modern day response. Even so, at my first attempt I resisted the composition shown (from a point near the road) and walked about 5 miles into Glen Coralan. I made one photograph that is quite satisfying and conveys a rather different mood but had to admit that the composition shown here was better as well as more appropriate for the poem; not everything has to be so arduous! A long extract from the poem with translation is given in [2].

I must stress however that the response just described is really just a beginning. Much deeper study and less directly illustrative work are the ultimate aim in drawing inspiration from language and literature. The photograph in question makes a reasonable accompaniment to the poem but does not add a genuinely new perspective. It could be said the the railway line (which would not have been there in the poet’s lifetime) comments on man made changes to landscape, but for me this is just trying too hard for significance. In any case it was not my intention, the landscape is bound to change no matter what we do and it is only worth commenting on changes of particular note. Railways were indeed a significant development but is there anybody who does not know that already?

§10. Setting jewels. Bartók was inspired by his very deep and extensive study of folk music from which he developed a very powerful language of his own. However he also liked to present folk songs and tunes directly in order to make them better known and enjoyed. He described the arranging of folk melodies as the ‘mounting of a jewel.’ We often have a similar situation in landscape photography when the best thing to do is present the scene as essentially a straight record rather than employ any of the many available compositional devices (though great care is still required in choice of lens

⁸This was not so unusual at a time when transport in the highlands would have been difficult and in any case there was a long and very strong oral tradition.

⁹*Beinn Dòbhrain* means Otter Mountain.



Figure 7: *Beinn Dòbhrainn in Spring, Argyll and Bute.*

and selection of what to include which has implications for the format used). Figure 8 presents an example of this situation; arguably Figure 7 is another example though a little further removed. I have visited this spot many times but this is it at its best. The amazing red colour of the rock is complimented very well by the lush green of the vegetation. Such photographs might be viewed as at odds with the overall thrust of this document in that there is little to be said intellectually. However I would counter that an art that can only encompass very serious minded considerations runs the risk of becoming turgid and collapsing under its own weight. The lighter things of life are also important.

§11. The ego. In the past, art sought to express the universal and transcend the particular. Thus the genuine and very extensive suffering of Beethoven resulted in masterpieces of great subtlety and positive affirmation. Bartók, dying of leukaemia, worked ceaselessly to produce his third piano concerto; a limpid and positive work that has at times fooled critics into the nonsensical claim that it is thus not deep. One of the most depressing tendencies to my mind is that now the particular and the ego are often offered as universal. Thus it is very common for certain artists to parade real or imagined sufferings as a justification for the deep significance of their work (another reason for my aversion to the word ‘vision’). This is the inevitable cancerous growth of romanticism coupled with self indulgence.

It does not follow that artists should efface themselves from their work. Any worthwhile work of art requires the artist to put a great deal of him or her self into it. The main point however is that this effort should be at the service of greater and wider concerns. This is the mark of the greatest and most satisfying achievements. There is to me something ludicrous and repulsive in the notion of individuals claiming that their life or experience is so intrinsically important that anything based on it is automatically interesting and is therefore good art.

I must stress that most artists do not indulge in these antics; they just get on with the hard work of making art. Unfortunately we live in an age when a sizeable proportion of critics and much of the establishment cannot or will not blow the whistle on arrant nonsense. This matters because many such people control funding as well as setting much of the agenda for public debate (on the question of art funding I have no personal axe to grind, having never applied for any).

I do not deny the possibility of creative art arising out of the relation of the ego to the universal. The work of the great Hungarian poet Endre Ady is an outstanding example of what can be done in this respect. See the book by Judit Frigyesi [8] for a discussion of this and many related issues on art and society, in particular the approach of turn-of-the-century Hungarian artists as contrasted to that of the second Viennese School.

§12. Anthropocentrism. Related to the egoist tendency is a view widely promulgated in much discussion of modern art that any means of relating a subject to the human condition is automatically interesting and indeed to be preferred. Thus it is not uncommon to find praise for poor photographs of the landscape with rubbish strewn about the foreground on the grounds that they offer a critique of modern society’s alienation from



Figure 8: *River Etive Waterfall, Glen Etive.*

the environment. This is an easy game to play and leads us nowhere; sometimes rubbish is just rubbish (both literal and metaphorical).

One of the most beneficial side effects of being a landscape photographer is that inevitably a great deal of time is spent with the landscape and its other inhabitants. My method is to explore with long walks, the unbreakable rule is that I must take my camera gear. In my view this process of exploration, which is often arduous, is as important as the making of photographs. Walking past or over a mountain range at a necessarily slow pace is a guaranteed way of gaining a sense of proportion and familiarity. Since I work almost exclusively in the Highlands of Scotland I often come across deer and cannot help wondering what they make of me and of their habitat.

I have already mentioned Bartók's *Cantata Profana* the text of which is based on a traditional Romanian colinde. Although these are Christmas carols many are allegorical tales predating Christianity. In this case the text (written by Bartók) concerns nine sons who were brought up by their father knowing no other craft but hunting. One day they wander deep into the forest and cross an enchanted bridge whereupon they are turned into stags. Their father goes to find them, taking his gun as would be normal when going into the forest. He sees them across the enchanted bridge and takes aim, whereupon the largest stag speaks to him. He warns, addressing him as 'dearest loving father,' that if he persists they will gore him ('turning bones to powder'). The father begs them to return home where the table is laid, goblets filled with wine, the hearth ready and their mother waiting. The stag replies that they can never return, their antlers cannot pass through doorways only roam the forest, their mouths can no longer drink from glasses only from cool springs. This final line is transformed by the chorus as the work draws to an end singing softly: *Csak tiszta forrásból* (Only from clear springs). This is a summation of Bartók's artistic credo; I can think of nothing better.

The text of this wonderful work can be interpreted in many ways, including political (it was completed in September 1930, Hungary had been under an authoritarian regime for a long time). For me the text and music express in the most perfect way the fact that as long as we divorce ourselves from nature we cannot be whole. This is to be understood as referring to our state of mind and actions. It is most emphatically not a plea for the fashionable notion of self sufficiency and zero growth. I was born in Cyprus in a peasant society and lived my early years within a system of almost total self sufficiency; there are things I miss but on the whole such a life is harsh and uncomfortable leaving little time or resources for concerns beyond the necessities for existence and religion.

My position thus advocates that an important part of finding ourselves lies through nature rather than endlessly obsessing about *us* either individually or collectively. If rubbish strewn about the landscape is a sign of alienation from the environment maybe the best thing to do is to clean it up thus making the environment somewhat more inviting. In my work I want the landscape to be centre stage; I am present in it through my choices and the fact that it is a result of my introspection and not a little effort.

§13. Interpretations. A natural impulse when looking at a work of art is to try to find some meaning in it. This can be problematic especially if, as is often the case, the aim is to put it into words. Not everything can be expressed in words, at least not

as well as the original. Not all thought is best carried out linguistically: for example, much scientific work proceeds at a level removed from spoken language (see Penrose [14] or Hadamard [13]), there then follows the laborious task of expressing and justifying a discovery in written language aided by symbols and diagrams. In the realm of images and their appreciation we almost inevitably try to express some interpretation as soon as we discuss things with others. The question is: how well is the artist's intention (or rather set of intentions) communicated? The photograph in Figure 9 was in an exhibition called 'Highland Explorations' for which I prepared a small hand bound book with comments on each picture. Here is what I wrote about it then:

This is the foreground to the photograph *River Etive and Sròn na Creise* but on a rather different day; one of my favourite days of light drizzle with superb diffuse light. Such days are ideal for compositions of this type; the drizzle moistens the rocks thus bringing out their colour while the diffuse light means low contrast so that details record well on transparency film. At first I was concerned about the white circular patches of lichen¹⁰ on the rocks in the upper right hand part. However luck was on my side as the swirling water created echoes of these shapes uniting stasis and motion.

This gives no indication at all of any meaning that I might have attached to the image. It does give a pretty good indication of concerns I had in making it. In fact at the time my concentration was entirely on technical aspects as regards the composition and indeed I did worry endlessly about the white lichen. This is not to say that the image was purely formal for me, I was both excited and moved to have found it and knew it had deep significance for me. However none of that can ever be allowed to get in the way of actually making the image, there is an analogy here with an orchestral conductor who must attend to an enormous number of technical issues even with the most expressive music.

The photograph was bought by somebody who, I was told, found it very moving. I met the buyer at a later time and he discussed with me his reaction. He held deep religious convictions and like all of us had various trials in his life. He saw the running water and eddies as a metaphor for the busy and cluttered aspects of his life. For him the still pool in the foreground represented the peace of God. I never had this exact interpretation in mind but I do have a great liking for areas of clear still water and find them very soothing. Running water also excites me because, amongst other things, it creates its own polyphonic and rhythmic music with lower tones changing at a different rate from higher ones. The main difference between the two accounts is that the first is essentially a narrative while the second consists of impressions, but are they so far apart? Both are valid.

Like most artists I will not normally offer an interpretation of one of my photographs. Words can only express a part of any meaning I might have in mind and can only serve to limit others' reactions. It seems very likely that we are affected most strongly by pictures that fit some model (or mental set) that we have already formed at least partly

¹⁰In the interests of honesty I must admit that I erroneously wrote 'calcium' at the time.



Figure 9: *River Etive Pools, Glen Etive.*

so. For some, this is a narrative while for others it is more abstract perhaps even more formal. There is no sharp divide rather more of a spectrum with practitioners probably occupying ground nearer the formal end.

§14. The position of the artist. Artists have been viewed in a very wide variety of ways over history, ranging from servants like anybody else providing a service to the elevated heights of super stars. Since I am not writing art history I will not go into details, other than to point out that there isn't a linear historical development. The question that concerns me here is the place of art and artists now.

In some ways art has become no more than an investment opportunity. High prices are paid which are then used to support claims for the greatness of the art in question which then justifies even higher prices. This is of interest sociologically but has no place in discussions of art.

For some, art acts almost as a replacement for religion and they give it a correspondingly high status. For me this is going too far (recall the quote from T.S. Eliot in §7) and leads to unsustainable expectations. Historically, Wagner's grandiose claims for his work and his notion of *gesamtkunstwerk* (i.e., total art work) are a good illustration of how untenable this tendency can become (I am not questioning Wagner's status as a composer of a certain type).

A claim often made for contemporary art is that it asks probing questions. This leaves me mystified and incredulous. The questions asked are either trite or tread well worn paths. Indeed art is not a particularly good medium for asking deep questions, it *is* however an excellent medium for invoking deep reactions and reflection (prompting us to ask our own questions). The best art, in any form, can take us by surprise and move us beyond our expectations not only emotionally but also intellectually.

Where do landscape photographers and their work fit in? For me a landscape photographer is on two intertwined journeys: the outward one of exploring the landscape and the inward one of self exploration (but not in isolation). Without the latter, style risks becoming mannerism; without the former obscurantism and self indulgence await. He or she is first and foremost somebody who *has* to be in the landscape. Of course love of the landscape is shared by many people most of whom are not photographers. The impetus to create images of a certain type is the second key ingredient. The Impressionists championed the notion of creating pictures *in situ*, landscape photographers are in many ways part of this tradition especially now that we have excellent colour reproduction. (It is very fitting that the Impressionists were, as is well known, very influenced by photography.)

Can landscape photography produce works of great emotional and intellectual depth as happens for example in music? Perhaps not with a single photograph, any more than a few bars of music can. It seems to me though that an extended cycle, perhaps interacting with poetry or other text (not just illustrating it), has some chance of success. I am not dismissing single photographs but I do not see how a single image (which *can* be very effective) can take us on an emotional and intellectual journey of the type we experience with the string quartets of Beethoven and Bartók.

It is clear from what I have already stated in various places that I do not regard

self expression ('my vision') as the overriding aim. Indeed I will at times set myself the task of producing a type of photograph that I would normally avoid. For example I am not particularly fond of green but many people are. I therefore decided to try and produce a photograph that would be pleasing to such people but one which I would also enjoy, i.e., I did not see this as a cynical marketing exercise. The photograph is shown in Figure 10. The result is that by going against what might have been called my vision I learnt that it is possible to make worthwhile photographs even with green¹¹. For me one viable position for the artist is not as a leader (anathema to somebody with anarchist sympathies in any case) but as a maker of work that in some way adds to our lives.

My argument does not exclude works of confrontation or protest. Many artists who witnessed the horrors of World War I (as an example) produced outstanding confrontational work. It is very unlikely that they believed this would prevent further war but the work certainly reinforces the positive message that war is not a glorious affair. Maybe some day we will learn to do away with it. Such works of art will then be a testament to genuine enlightenment and a warning not to revert to old ways. Their role would be a small but honourable one. This work should not be diminished by routine products of agitprop by numbers and postures of lazy disaffection.

§15. Conclusion. Discussions on art range widely from the highly introverted or even parochial to more interdisciplinary attempts. Clearly I am antipathetic to the former and sympathetic to the latter. However such discussions often gloss over points or simply get the science wrong. As an example I cite a radio discussion programme involving a very well known critic and a mathematician who was certainly qualified to represent the subject. The critic at one point stated that for her the biggest divide between mathematics and art is that mathematics is concerned with unchangeable notions while art is about transformation. She went on to expand a little and, in the course of this, to show that her view of mathematics did not go beyond basic arithmetic. Perhaps her ignorance is not surprising though it is unpardonable since having agreed to take part in the discussion she could have made some effort to inform herself better. What is inexplicable to me is why the mathematician let her assestion go unchallenged. Mathematics is very largely concerned with transformations, pick up any book on just about any branch of mathematics and you will see a definition of the transformations appropriate to the discipline. For example in topology two figures are regarded as equivalent if one of them can be deformed into the other without tearing (so a doughnut is equivalent to a single handed cup but not to a sphere). The one unchangeable feature of mathematics is that no matter who you are you must prove your claims.

A prevalent feature of mathematical work is the search for structure. Initially one is faced with a situation that contains, if anything, too much information. Long and patient work coupled with flashes of insight will, with a bit of luck, lead to a solution. In landscape photography we are often faced with a similar, though normally more tractable, situation. We feel very strongly that there is a good or even great photograph to be made but somehow whatever we try just doesn't seem to work, e.g., see the

¹¹Of course it can be argued, quite reasonably, that what I have described is just another way of developing my vision. I have no problem with that, my problem is with highly self centred approaches.



Figure 10: *Eas an Fhìr Mhòir, Gleann Ètie.* (Waterfall of the Big Man, Glen Etive)

discussion under ‘*The struggle for inspiration*’ by Joe Cornish [4, p.34]. Yet on a different occasion and on the same location the composition presents itself with complete clarity. Of course it is experience and all the hard preparatory work that make us ready for the magic moments of instant recognition. Figure 11 is a case in point: I had looked at this spot many times over several years. Each time I was convinced there was a worthwhile composition to be had out of the sharp rocks but could never succeed and never took my camera out. On the occasion of this image it took less than 15 minutes to decide, the excellent reflections were the decisive factor.

To describe scientific work as elegant is high praise. In terms of a proof this means that not only is it correct (from which there can be no exception) but somehow captures and explains the essence of the situation. This is not so different from evaluations of art in its various forms. In photography the compositions that attract me the most have a certain irreducible quality, everything plays a key part without dominating so much that it fights other elements. Quite often ‘simplicity’ is advocated but care has to be taken that this is not seen as an absolute term. To seek structure in the world is to seek simplicity relative to what is under consideration.

The discussion here has ranged fairly widely and suggested various sources for thought as well as standards. These considerations provide for me a frame of reference for evaluation of my photographs. In this I follow the advice that I always give to my students: *You must be your own severest critic*. In landscape photography a photograph that needs an excuse is not a good photograph but it can provide a good lesson. Every part of the photograph needs to be examined minutely. I must admit that this can be taken a little too far, perhaps the time I gave myself a good telling off for a misplaced tiny blade of grass in a vista was one such occasion (it was slightly brighter than I’d have liked).

It is important to prevent one possible misunderstanding. Good photographs cannot be brought about by formulating some theory and going out to illustrate it. A photograph must stand on its own unaided by some supporting theory. People do like reading supporting text but this can be kept to more general information (see §13 for an example). When working in the field I do so instinctively for most of the time. However this is not a random process, I get to know my locations very well and have an increasingly long list of images that I’d like to make, under various conditions. Most images are motivated by what I see in the landscape but some are suggested by other sources (e.g., music) and then it is a matter of finding the right setting to express the idea. This increases my chances of making at least some worthwhile photographs. All my considerations feed into the way that I see the world and how I choose to show it but not in any formulaic way.

More generally I think that it is necessary for the photographer to have a very deep knowledge of a place to have a chance of producing a body of work that reveals it beyond the illustrative. This does not rule out illustrative photographs playing a supporting role as part of such a body of work. Indeed much discussion is too concerned about the single photograph as a statement; photographs that would not be suitable for display in isolation can play a crucial role in modulating and setting the mood in a set.



Figure 11: *Tranquility, River Etive*. A slightly ironic title. As the carved rocks show this part of the river can be anything but tranquil; indeed only a few days before it had been a raging torrent.

On the issue of theories it is worth while bearing in mind the fact that not everything benefits from such an approach. Joseph Weizenbaum wrote his book *Computer Power and Human Reason* [18] to express his ambivalence towards computer technology in connection with artificial intelligence. He makes the following observation about the tendency to develop theories of everything: think about picnics. There are great picnics and some not so good ones but it really does not make any sense to create a theory of picnics! Clearly I think that it is worthwhile discussing aspects of art and landscape photography but in the end an unconvincing image cannot be salvaged by any amount of theory.

Ultimately landscape photographs must above all be made with and communicate love of the landscape. No amount of theorizing can replace this.

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