

VERTICAL HORIZONS: HERITAGE AND THE CORNISH LANDSCAPE

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INTRODUCTION

Reframing our gaze on landscape¹

Urgent crises

The pressing environmental and climate challenges of our era are not being addressed at the speed required, or to the extent needed.² And progress is currently eroding as Western democracies shift rightwards into a mire of social media disinformation. We argue that the idea of what a landscape *looks like* needs to be reframed in order to think about how we can fix these challenges.

The conventional aesthetics that shape ideas of landscape, and that continue to be reproduced in the art and heritage sectors, are a failing ideology. Recent scholarship that addresses climate catastrophe has tended to overlook the structuring aesthetics of Western ideas of landscape, ignoring or rejecting it outright as representation, focussing instead on ecologies and indigenous or non-Western traditions. And while acknowledging this urgent and vital work, we argue that without redressing the governing visual ideology that sits behind how we understand or shape how the natural world looks – our collective landscape imaginary – we will not be able to get to where we are trying to go.³

Problem - the uncritical reproduction of the horizontal structuring of space

The conventional aesthetic structures of landscape act as a constraining factor in our ability to address climate and environmental change. And so, we ask the following critical questions: What happens if we stop reproducing landscape through established perspectival and horizontal aesthetics? How can new aesthetic structures break systemic barriers and provoke change: in terms of human-to-human relationships (the underlying class structures of the landscape), and the human-to-non-human ones that also shape the landscape and its uses? What might expanded ideas of landscape look like, ones that incorporate a more-than-human perspective and include what is hidden, what is under the ground?

THE LIMITLESS HORIZON: WESTERN VISUAL STRUCTURES AND HERITAGE

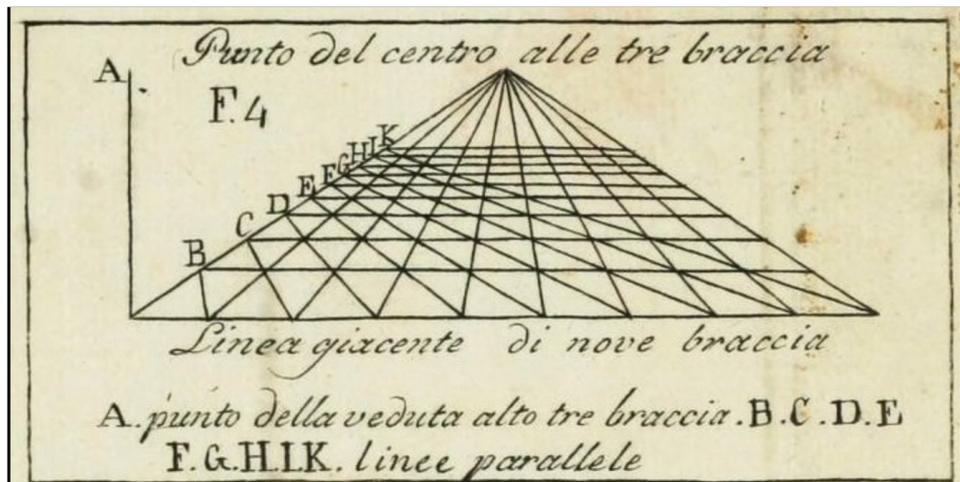


Figure 1. Alberti's diagram showing perspective lines leading to a vanishing point in *Della Pittura* (1804)

The Aestheticized View of Landscape

Linear perspective, invented by the architect Filippo Brunelleschi in the early 1400s and theorised by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *Della Pittura* in 1435, underpins Western pictorial structures, and can be seen as an origin for our Cartesian formulation of three-dimensional space (see figure 1).⁴ Indeed, Descartes, responding more to perspective's rational qualities than to its mimetic ones, saw its ability to mathematically demonstrate extensive space as exemplary.⁵

Under the terms of Descartes's dualism, the perspective grid organised the relationship between the human subject, who was now viewing the landscape object, which became conflated with something called 'real space.' And this ordering has remained alive in the collective imagination since.



Figure 2. Meindert Hobbema, *The Avenue at Middelharnis*, 1689, oil on canvas 103.5 x 141 cm. National Gallery, London

As ‘natural’ or ‘real’ space, landscape is understood in these amalgamated pictorial-spatial terms. Figure 2, a seventeenth-century painting by Meindert Hobbema, currently in the National Gallery collection in London, exists as a beautiful painting, but it also shows the limits of the aesthetic underpinnings of landscape as a visually fixed, spatial concern – it doesn’t provide imaginative access to other viewpoints, or to the deeper enmeshments of the human and the nonhuman worlds. And in the UK, the notion of the landscape view is deeply intertwined with tourism and an often-romanticised aesthetic of the industrial past. The photograph now reinforcing the landscape as a primarily visual object.

Alberti’s conception of the “vanishing point” set space as something to be viewed by an individual, while perspective’s fixed horizon (Alberti refers to this as the “centric line”) had ramifications well beyond painting.⁶

Cartesian Horizontalities and European Navigational Legacies

These perspectival and rationalized visual structures enabled advances in mapping and navigation practices, which gave Britain and other European countries the power to travel further afield under faster and safer conditions, accelerating trade and the practices of colonialism. In figure 3, Hendrik Hondius’s seventeenth-century map, the perspective grid has been adapted from the individual subject viewing a spatialized object, to an overall, God-like understanding of space through the same mathematical and rational coordinates (Alberti’s gridlines now wrap as latitude and longitude around the surface of the globe). While the engraving from a Dutch sailing handbook dated 1608, shows all the instruments of measuring and mapping space set within a perspectival ‘box’ (figure 4). Perspective here, orders the seventeenth-century spatial imagination.



Figure 3. Hendrik Hondius, *New Geographic and Hydrographic Map of the Whole World*, 1630



Figure 4. "The light of navigation", Dutch sailing handbook, 1608, (showing compass, hourglass, sea astrolabe, terrestrial and celestial globes, divider, Jacob's staff and astrolabe)

Latitude and longitude together produce space and time as linear, placing heritage in the past and preventing its understanding as today or as tomorrow. While space becomes a navigable, fixed container that at its heart is pictorialized.

The success of Western cartography, and of perspectival painting's (and the subsequent photographic tradition's) merging with 'real space' means that the landscape object is primarily understood in horizontal, territorial terms, which includes the conflation of aesthetic considerations and how much it looks like a beautiful painting (see figure 5). It is a horizontal concern, an extensive surface, over there in the distance – a nice view – one attached to a strict (if often invisible) rationally organised subject/object spatial arrangement. Its problematic aesthetics need no interrogation because it looks like what we see, while its ties to capitalism remain hidden. Industrial landscapes enter this aesthetic definition only when they are considered to be of the past (and so can be categorised as 'leisure'); seen in terms of relaxation; a place to visit when work is completed. A place to rejuvenate to prepare for work again. In the UK specifically, the idea of landscape continues to be deeply intertwined with tourism – presented as a static space for the human subject to use at their and for their leisure. We urgently need to reconfigure its spatial dynamic and its fixed position within our collective imaginary.



Figure 5. The northern section of the Presidential Range in New Hampshire's White Mountains. Viewed from the NW side of Mount Washington. From left to right are Mount Clay, Mount Jefferson, Mount Adams, and Mount Madison

Reframing the Landscape Gaze

In *Terror Incognita*, and *In Uncharted Waters*, 2022, (figure 6) Simson's work plays with the horizontality of landscape, with the idea of a fixed horizon, and in both paintings the horizon is uncomfortably unstable. The space within the paintings appears not as *extension*, but rather it contains a psychological undercurrent of unease. Both works have also been made using graph paper, and so allude to the practice of mapping, but the graph paper is disintegrated and partial. We are in uncertain territory.



Figure 6. Henrietta Simson, Terror Incognita and Uncharted Waters, (2022), 62x47cm (each), oil and graph paper on linen

BEYOND THE SURFACE: EMBRACING VERTICALITY AND TRANSFORMATION

The temporal and vertical planes

What happens if we flip the horizon? How can a vertical and temporal understanding of landscape speak to these issues? If we extend the plurality of the 'critical zone' – an idea adapted by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel in 2020 – so that it encompasses the landscape image, rather than rejecting it as representation, can we alter our troublesome landscape aesthetics?⁷ This conception sees the Earth not as a globe, or a surface, but as a series of 'zones' that encompass underground bodies of water, minerals and microbes, soil and surface rocks, extending to the air and the lower parts of the atmosphere. It is the space of Gaia, an entanglement, where life happens. Conceiving landscape thus

helps us to wrest it from the horizon line, but it doesn't necessarily shift how we understand it, our relationship to it. For this, we need to enlist help from the past, from the pre-representational, pre-perspectival landscape imaginary of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.



Figure 7. Scenes from the Life of Mary Magdalen: The Hermit Zosimus Giving a Cloak to Magdalen Giotto, 1320s, Magdalen Chapel, Lower Church, San Francesco, Assisi, fresco

Figure 7 shows Giotto's fresco of Mary Magdalene in her cave high up in the mountain of St Baume in the south of France, painted in the 1320s in Assisi, Italy. Baume, being French for balm, lends healing connotations to the landscape; suggests the landscape as a salve. According to legend, the Magdalen spent the last 30 years of her life living in this cave. She was lifted to heaven by angels several times a day, to receive her heavenly nourishment.⁸ The image of a holy figure in a wilderness landscape near or in a cave was very common in this kind of Franciscan painting and shows us how these landscapes were understood as existing outside of habitual time and space.⁹ They were part of the medieval Christian's penitential imaginary, whereby contemplating the stories and these spaces brought about a spiritual transformation.

While we are not suggesting a return to a medieval Christian worldview – and we have both discussed elsewhere in our individual research how the landscape itself carries material-semiotic meanings – there are useful parallels to draw between the latent materiality/spirituality of these landscapes, and the political and ecological complexities of what is and what isn't thought of as landscape today.¹⁰ These paintings can help us to see vertically, to see the underground as a central locus of expanded landscape awareness, not one defined through capitalist extraction, but rather as an aid with which to transform the idea of landscape itself.

Cornwall: a g/local lens for critique

These aesthetic and structural issues can be usefully explored in the representation of mining heritage in the UK. Specifically, we explore these issues in Cornwall where the politics of landscape and heritage have served to reproduce object/subject distancing in the aesthetic orderings of landscape. Located in the south-western corner of Britain, Cornwall is characterised by rich and extensive critical metal and mineral deposits particularly copper, tin, arsenic and lithium. Here landscapes are designated as either beautiful and worth preserving as heritage (an ongoing legacy of the interest in

the picturesque among middle-class tourists in the nineteenth century), or as an economic resource to be extracted from.

This distinction is evident in the contrasting visual representation of these different ‘types’ of landscape. Designated as World Heritage by UNESCO, the visually striking landscapes of the coastal zone have been packaged for tourism and commercial gain. But controversially, this traditional heritage framing has tended to idealize the past, often ignoring economic and ecological collapse and the social and cultural impacts of deindustrialization on working-class miners and communities. For some commentators this economic shift to the ‘soft’ industries of leisure and tourism is a threat to Cornish culture and identity, which has been historically based on technological innovation and engineering success both locally and globally.¹¹

In contrast to the heritage sites of the Atlantic coast, the interior heartland of Cornwall is characterised by the ruins of historic mining, alongside modern industrial processes and prospecting for future extraction and economic growth. This paper focuses on two landscapes, in particular. Wheal Maid (Gwennap Parish) was used as a dump for waste from surrounding mines in the now closed and de-industrialized tin and copper mining district. Wheal Martyn (St Austell) is in China Clay Country where Imerys Minerals Ltd operates to extract and process kaolin.



Figure 8. Wheal Martyn Pit as Critical Zone, St Austell, Cornwall

Figure 8 shows a vertically aligned digital image of Wheal Martyn pit. Here is a landscape in constant flux, never static, simultaneously growing taller and deeper as clay is extracted from granite on a daily basis. It is a landscape whereby the underground is brought to the surface, where the substrate becomes the mountainous heights, the horizon impossible to determine. The fluctuating contours of its deeply excavated space, over one hundred metres, and its towering sides, help us think space as vertical, dynamic and destabilised. Any photographic realism, maintained by the colours of the original, has been discarded, allowing for vertical *zones* to emerge. Its visual inferences become more those of the transformative wilderness spaces of Giotto's frescoes than the contemporary aesthetics of landscape. Here, the spiritual wilderness of the past collides with the industrial wilderness of the present. However, the visual similarities hide the complexities of a different kind of emptiness. Modern industrial processes have carved out a deep void in a place that was once inhabited – by

communities made up of schools and chapels, male voice choirs, crafts and farming activities. This weave of social – and spiritual – practice once stood in this newly sculpted industrial landscape.



Figure 9. Wheal Maid Tailings, Camborne-Redruth-St Day, Cornwall

Figure 9 shows a (digitally manipulated) image of Wheal Maid. Located in Gwennap Mining District Wheal Maid, a former copper mine, is listed by UNESCO World Heritage. In the 1970s and 1980s the site was used as a dump for mineral processing wastes and tailings from adjacent mines, and is one of the most contaminated sites in the UK.¹² Situated within the heart of Cornwall's historic tin-mining district, the landscape of this abandoned tailings site appears to seep. This site whose tailings contain unrecovered metallic elements including arsenic, cadmium, chromium, copper, iron, lead, nickel and zinc is a landscape that has been reclaimed by the local community as a commons space. Sitting in the industrial heartlands, it is proximal to those communities most affected by mining and the industrial uses of landscape, rather than to the tourists who visit Cornwall's aestheticized edges. Its human-non-human entanglements and the toxic mineral injustices that need addressing, wait to be incorporated into ideas of landscape and linger in the photographic negative of the image.

CONCLUSION

Cornish heritage and its romanticized visualizations, underpinned by the idea that the industrial landscapes are somehow of the past, is challenged by sites like Wheal Maid, where past industrial activity continues to play out into the present and an uncertain future, the life-spans of toxic waste in the earth, air and water set to remain with no clear sense of resolution.

The latent underground: informing a new collective imagination

The Material and Spiritual Dimensions

The aesthetic structures of the landscape image continue to perpetuate a perspectival, dualistic 'realism,' an effect of representational thinking that sees landscape as passive background, or in this case, a setting for the human narratives of bygone eras. The grid of space and time, of latitude and longitude that orders the landscape imaginary omits the possibility of understanding the past as being about the future.¹³ Heritage reproductions of Cornish extraction tend towards a framing as historical, romanticized and coastal, with large swathes of the extractivist landscapes of the present excluded from this imaginary. What we argue, and have begun to articulate here, is that we need alternative imaginaries and visualizations for promoting extractivist heritage that are open and reflective towards the problems caused by mining past and present, locally and globally. This ingrained structuring of space is unfit for a twenty-first-century heritage sector because it focuses on the horizontal, ignoring the underground, and so any possibility of relationship with it beyond a visual background. It fixes the human subject as outside of the whole, and it fundamentally ties landscape to 'object,' keeping

subjectivity an exclusive characteristic of the consuming, viewing public – exploited by the industrial capitalism that reaches further into the future.

By recognizing the hidden layers, the transformations and the non-human elements that shape our world, we will be able to perceive, interact with, and conserve a genuine imaginary of landscape and heritage. This reframing is essential in a twenty-first-century world grappling with climate and ecological crises.

NOTES

¹ This paper draws from arguments made by Henrietta Simson in her Phd thesis, 2017. See “Landscape after Landscape: Pre-Genre Italian Backgrounds in a Post-Genre Digital Age.” PhD diss., University College London. <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1563810/>.

² “Progress in Adapting to Climate Change 2025 report to Parliament,” Climate Change Committee, 30 April 2025, accessed 15 November, 2025, <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/progress-in-adapting-to-climate-change-2025/>.

³ Prominent voices in recent scholarship include T.J. Demos and his critique of the Anthropocene Aesthetic in *Against the Anthropocene. Visual Culture and Environment Today* (London: Sternberg Press, 2017); Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin *Art in the Anthropocene* (London, Open Humanities Press, 2015), Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2020)

⁴ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting* (London. Penguin, 1991).

⁵ In his discourse on Optics, René Descartes argues that linear perspective’s rational qualities (interpreted by the mind itself rather than an object’s ability to resemble itself via a direct image) prove his theorem which thus departs from the optics of the day. See René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*, trans. Paul J Olscamp (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 90-113.

⁶ Hubert Damisch argues that linear perspective has become paradigmatical and remains fundamental to Western thought. *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman, (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT, 1994). For a contemporary critique of linear perspective see Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall, A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective,” *e-flux journal #24* (2011): <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective>.

⁷ “Critical Zones. In search of a Common Ground” was an exhibition and thought experiment curated by Peter Weibel and Bruno Latour at ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany, accessed August 10, 2025, <https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/project/anthropocene-india/anthropocene-mumbai-2018/critical-zones-in-search-of-a-common-ground>.

⁸ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, c.1259-1266.

⁹ Amy Neff has written about the penitential underpinnings of the landscapes of Franciscan painting in, “Byzantium Westernized, Byzantium Marginalized: Two Icons in the *Supplicationes variae*,” *Gesta*, Vol. 38, No. 1, International Center of Medieval Art (1999), 83.

¹⁰ See Henrietta Simson <https://researchers.arts.ac.uk/1667-henrietta-simson/publications>. Also Nicola Whyte “Sacred Heritage, Spiritous Waters and the Subterranean Imagination in Early Modern Britain” in Jay Johnston, Marion Gibson, Jamie Hampson, Nicola Whyte, eds., *Emplaced Beliefs* (forthcoming, Berghahn 2026, chapter 10).

¹¹ See Bernard Deacon, Andrew George and Ronald Perry, *Cornwall at the Crossroads: Living Communities or Leisure Zone?*, (Exeter: Cornish Social and Economic Research Group, Redruth, 1988); Philip Payton, *Cornwall. A History*, (Fowey: Cornwall Editions Limited, 2004) and Bart Zwegers, *Cultural Heritage in Transition: A Multi-Level Perspective on World Heritage in Germany and the United Kingdom, 1970-2020*. Studies in Art, Heritage, Law and the Market 4, (Springer Nature, 2022).

¹² See Verity Fitch, Anita Parbhakar-Fox, Richard Crane, Laura Newsome, “Evolution of Sulfidic Legacy Mine Tailings: A Review of the Wheal Maid Site, UK,” *Minerals* 12(7) (2022): 848, doi: 10.3390/min12070848.

¹³ In *For Space*, (London: Sage, 2005) Doreen Massey critiques the conventional idea of space as a static concern, able to be mapped in this way, and argues instead that it is “multiplicity” and “heterogeneous.”

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