

Er det langt igjen? Landskap, elva, og avstanden mellom dem.

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MA Research Paper 2021,
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Note: This is a rough translation, and does not reflect the original in its entirety.

I have been thinking about landscapes more or less unconsciously for a long time. It is a concept I have had trouble placing; found difficult to relate to. Landscapes are our everyday conception of nature, but despite this the landscapes we interact with the most, rarely make a significant impression on us. They exist simultaneously very close, yet far away. There is an uncertainty in the relationship and the distance. For how does the defined landscape stand in relation to the outside area, as well as other landscapes. What standard should we use to understand this relationship? These are questions I ask in my own artistic practice, and which I in this text aim to discuss with a different approach.

Based on the landscape's visual nature, I have chosen to address the theme through painting. This choice can possibly also be attributed to my nationality. As national romanticism has had and still has, a solid foothold in Norwegian society. Popularized through national identity initiatives in the 20th century, national romanticism has dominated the popular cultural understanding of what the landscape is. It is thusly a very politically and historically charged genre, however these aspects are not something I plan to address in this text. Yet, it is a natural genre to draw examples from. The paintings used are not taken from a specific artist or time. Rather, they are chosen based on their intuitive potential as gateways to the questions I want to explore. They act as conversation starters; a common point of reference from where the discussion can begin.



Fig. 1: *Fra Stalheim*, Johan Christian Dahl, 1842

I/ Avstand i landskapet.

In painting, the landscape is defined by the physical edges of the frame. Impenetrable barriers, inside which the artist has composed various elements, so that together they form a landscape. There is no area outside that which is painted. In *From Stalheim* (Fig. 1) Johan Christian Dahl depicts a landscape that stretches from a shaded valley in the foreground, up through sun-dotted hills, all the way to monumental and bare mountains in the background. Trees and other vegetation speckle the hillsides, and one can glimpse a river flowing through the bottom of the valley. Despite these different elements, it is difficult to define distance in the image. That the damaged birch in the foreground is closer to "us", than the mountains in the background, can be safely determined. Yet how much closer is impossible to say. The distance exists as a result of the painter's composition, but also because these two elements relate to each other as nature, and thus mimic how we look at nature.

The perspective Dahl has chosen can be described as a low bird-perspective. A feeling of soaring overcomes me when I look into the painting. The ground beneath our feet is non-existent, and this abstracts the experience of the landscape we are confronted with. This mode of abstraction is not unique to Dahl and the national romantic painting. Rather, the bird's eye view

is an increasingly everyday way of relating to the world. Topography, the systematization of what we move through, is largely based on the bird's perspective. Though, a higher flying one than that which we find in Dahl's example. Through the bird's eye view, it is possible to relate given points in an area to each other, with a unit of measurement based on mathematical dogmas, which creates a precise and repetitive method of navigation. This perspective, a surveyor's perspective, is great for understanding an area, but it alienates us from the landscape. It describes the distance between different elements, landmarks, but not the distances between these landmarks and ourselves. The observer is no longer the reference point. A landscape, unlike an area, cannot be defined by mathematically measurable distances, or naturally occurring dividing lines such as mountain ranges. Rather, it is defined through our human interaction with the various elements that constitute it. Both individually and culturally.

Signs of human activity are central to Dahl's painting. A network of roads stretches from the foreground all the way back to the mountains. Cultivated land, a farmyard with rising smoke, and not to forget the various human figures, point to this being an active landscape. Both economically, through the cultivated lands and the isolated clusters of trees. As well as culturally, through the costumes of the few distinct figures, and the architecture of the farmhouses. A landscape emerges from the area, through human interaction. If we put ourselves in the position of the two figures in the left corner, it is obvious that they have a physical relationship to the landscape they are in. The smell of the soil, the mountains that become smaller in the distance, the tree at the top of the hill which gets bigger as they wander. These elements provide an understanding of the distances in the landscape, extending beyond how many kilometres that remain of their walk. It is a relational distance, shared between themselves as well as the various elements of the landscape.

Any discussion about distance will inevitably also involve time, even if the discussion is based around a seemingly stagnant medium. Kitty Kielland's paintings of boggy landscapes may at first glance seem particularly stagnant, especially in relation to the drama that Dahl's use of light creates. Nevertheless, Kielland manages to maintain a sense of movement. In the painting *Fra Jæren* (Fig.2), two figures are out in on a bog, on a mildly overcast day. The clouds are reflected in the puddle in the foreground, and the flat landscape extends inwards towards three ridges in the background. The flat delta is densely overgrown with low moss-like plants and straw. White flowers or cottongrass create white distractions in the otherwise monotonous green. Along with other orange and brown fields, they draw the eye inward to where the delta meets the hill. The ridges are mostly free of growth, except for a few scattered clusters of trees that stand as silhouettes against the sky. This contrast, between the bare ridges and the lush delta, creates a

feeling of movement. The straw in the foreground seems to sway, in the face of the stone. Their own temporality emerges, when Kielland places them in relation to each other, in the same landscape. The stones seem older, in the face of the more fleeting grass and bog. However, neither of them stagnate in their meeting with the other. Rather, they become like two metronomes, moving at a wildly different pace.

If we follow the puddles further inland, we first meet the two people, before we then glimpse buildings in the middle of the valley. One of these people is bent over, possibly on his knees, with the other standing upright next to him. I read no drama in their relationship, nor any romance. The figures seem to be engaged in some form of gathering, as the white-clad one is carrying something. Whether they are collecting cottongrass for insulation, peat for ore smelting or fish in the puddle right behind them, is difficult to say. Either way, they're working on something together. By working outside in this way, the two figures are bound to the light. They exist in a pre-industrial everyday. They need light to see what they are gathering, and as such their work will be over when the light disappears. In the same way that work began when the sun rose. As sunset approaches, they will follow the bog along the puddles inwards into the picture, towards the building visible in the background. Past the swaying grass and the solid ridges. In the days before man-made lighting, the fireplace was the focal point around which houses were built. When the sun disappeared, it was the light source that defined the second half of the day. All the tasks that did not depend on the sunlight outdoors were relegated to the time around the fireplace, and the next day started when the sun rose again. I see a hint of yellow in the clouds at the top right of the picture, but can not place whether it is in the east or west.

As mentioned earlier, I experience the different temporalities function as metronomes, where each one goes at its own pace. The solid ridges, the grass and the bog, the figures, their work and the fireplace. A cacophony of steady yet unsynchronized clicking, which creates a tension in Kielland's landscape. A calm, but still active tension that lifts the painting from being a purely technical exercise in representation of nature, to becoming a landscape. By placing these elements in relation to each other, and thus reducing the distance between them, she creates something that is not stagnant. The landscape is in a state of "becoming". Not under development, as that assumes that at some point it will be finished, it is rather in a state of continuity. An endless change, where the different temporalities fall in and out of phase with each other, and thus change the shape of the landscape.

Until now, the discussion has mainly been about what is within the physical framework of the painting. Which elements are in relation to each other, and how they contribute to creating a

whole. A landscape. But, defining and creating is just as much about exclusion. It is a given that there is an "other" area that is neglected in favor of the defined landscape. In *From Borgøya* (Fig. 3) we see a sharp horn rising out of low-lying coastal clouds. The sharp silhouette is prototypical for Western Norway, and this impression is amplified through the rocky areas around the horn. The mountain serves as the center of the painting, and in combination with the clouds that pull towards us from the background, it blocks the view of the sea. The foreground is characterized by cracked boulders and sheepback-formations, that rise out of the otherwise flat grasslands. Beyond the brown-green tones in the grass, there are few if any signs of vegetation. The foreground gradually slides down into a quiet fjord that completely separates the foreground from the mountain on the other side. The only human activity to be seen is the faint outline of a schooner, apparently on its way into the fjord under the horn. Otherwise, nature is left to itself.

Yet, *From Borgøya* seems less isolated as a landscape compared to the other paintings discussed in this text. The area outside our field of vision is more present, and attention is drawn to it to a greater extent. The clear horizontal surface that the fjord forms in the middle of the picture is one of the reasons why this happens. The fjord runs almost parallel through the picture, and shows no signs of getting bigger or smaller where it meets the edges of the painting. It is not delimited, and therefore remains apparently independent. This in combination with the central location in the painting, makes the fjord the natural reference point for everything around. It holds our gaze and leads it on to the different parts of the image. It is the fjord that defines the distances. Since the reference point is larger than our field of view, it also brings in what is outside the image. Rather affective, than as a pure visual consequence. We get the feeling that a greater view exists; one that transcends what we see represented in the painting. By using a reference point that is itself outside the landscape, Hertervig has reduced the distance between the landscape and the surrounding area. A side effect of this compression is that the viewer's distance to the landscape increases. Because when our own eyes are no longer the point of reference, we can see the landscape in the context of the surrounding area. But, this also removes us from the landscape itself.



Fig. 4: *Hellefossen*, Johan Christian Dahl, 1838

2/ En elv igjennom landskapet.

A river is, after the movements of glaciers and continental plates, the most powerful influence on the geography around us. Wide valleys, gorges, wetlands and caves define the topography around us, all a result of the river's flow. Hence it is to no surprise that virtually all early civilizations arose along riverbanks, and that a change in river flow could tear a dynasty to pieces. The inherent power of a river is both destructive and constructive, and it is no wonder that it became the centre of Norwegian industrial activity. Therefore it is probably not surprising that Dahl's painting *Hellefossen* (Fig.4), also contains signs of this industrial activity. The red hat and white jacket make the solitary figure in the middle of the picture stand out from the background. Bent over, and with a long stick in his hand, the figure is at work on a bridge built of logs. The river cascades frothy white below. The bridge connects the immediate foreground in the left corner, with a partially bare-cut area, to the background on the right side of the painting. Here, several cabins stand in front of a wooded hill, and three other figures are visible. They are apparently busy stacking timber next to the largest cabin. As in *Fra Stalheim*, the landscape here too is characterized by a dramatic light, thrown out behind dark stormy clouds. The sharp angle highlights a solitary birch, separated from the felling field by the river. The light continues further inwards in the image, yet stops just before the wooded hill. Though to me it is the river that appears to be the most illuminated in *Hellefossen*.

The water cascades over the small rapids, and breaks up into a rushing white chaos. The light accentuates the energetic movement in the water, but also the apparent movement in the leaves of the birch just to the left of the rapids. I feel the chill of cold, humid air that the water throws out. The intense outpouring of energy calms down quickly, and the river returns to its usual colour. Gradually from brown to blue, and further it darkens to a deep green. But the movement of the river does not stop; the stream continues out of the frame of the image, through the foreground on the right. The light draws the gaze towards the figure on the bridge and further inwards towards the felling field. At the same time, the river draws the gaze out of the picture and beyond. Our gaze goes against the current. There is a disharmony between the river and the rest of the landscape. The river exists in, and is part of the landscape, yet it is still experienced as independent. A landscape within a landscape. Through its movement, the river has a completely different understanding of time than what surrounds it. The river feels fleeting, but at the same time constant, as evidenced by the dilapidated rocks at the water's edge. For although the river has undeniably been where it is geographically is for a long time, it is in constant motion and change. It digs itself down, moves, and becomes something. The landscape around the river has no influence on it. Even though the bridge is an attempt at just that, the relationship between them is one-sided. The river influences the landscape, but not the other way around. For the landscape Dahl presents is locked within the framework of the painting. The river, on the other hand, seen as a separate landscape, extends further out. Possibly also through other landscapes.

As mentioned, industrial activity is visible in *Hellefossen*. Based on the stacks of logs, the small pictured community is either a dispatch point or a timber reception centre. The timber is "floated" along the stream, down to a place where the material can be refined. For the four figures we see in the painting, the river is therefore essential infrastructure. It is their highway, at least financially, if not also for actual travelling. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that the river is an active landscape for these figures, as well as a geographical phenomenon. It is the point of reference from where they see themselves in relation to the world. It functions as a time marker; they know how long the current takes to transport a log to its destination, after the figure on the bridge pushes it into the water. But, also geographically, in that its turns and rapids act as landmarks and clues as they navigate the surrounding landscape and area. The river becomes the reference point from where these four figures understand the landscape they are in, the landscape they pass through, as well as themselves.



Fig. 5: Utsnitt fra *Fra Stalheim*, og *Hellefossen*

3/ En ny nullmeridian.

Until now, I have mainly considered single landscapes. The frames that the artists have placed have been left unchallenged. However, after the river has gained its own status as a landscape, it is important to explore what happens when it crosses multiple landscapes. How do the intersections affect the distance between them, and not least also the areas that may lie in-between. In *From Stalheim*, the presence of the river is more implicit than explicit. The topography hints at it via the elevated foreground, but the river does not become visible until further right in the painting. It can be glimpsed, as it winds its way between high cliffs, which it probably made itself. The water shimmers subtly, before the river turns around a boulder, and we lose sight of it. Where it goes next is impossible to say for sure, but I imagine it continues at the bottom of a ravine. Steep mountain sides on each side lead it further down towards the lowlands, down rapids and through lakes. Eventually it is conceivable that it reaches *Hellefossen*, and crash over the rapids and under the bridge where the human figure is busy with his cane. The landscapes are bound together. If one of the children living in the cabins in Stalheim makes a bark boat, it will eventually float under the bridge in Hellefossen. With a little luck, maybe the figure on the bridge will notice it, when it passes by.

This interconnection does not reduce the distance between the landscapes geographically. They will still be located where they are, wherever they are. But it highlights the fact that there is a distance between them. Seen as they are, representations of landscapes in oil

paint, they exist as unique objects. Unique instances of landscape, limited by what is immediately visible via the perspective presented, without connection to areas and landscapes outside. But, when the river is brought in, it contextualizes the landscapes in relation to each other. The distance that was previously unknown, or not present, now becomes relevant through the river's presence. The areas outside the framework of the paintings, where it was previously almost empty, now have dimension. As a result of the river, something now exists between Stalheim and Hellefossen. Though I will add that even if the river connects the landscapes, it does not mean that the two are now one landscape. The two landscapes are still their own accumulations of individual elements. Unique individuals. Rather, the river functions as a prime meridian; a reference point that allows us to place two elements in relation to each other. It is the first line in a coordinate system without straight lines, which allows us to say that "Stalheim" is here and "Hellefossen" is there. It does not define the distance, other than to point out that the distance exists. The distance is defined by the areas between the landscapes, and they are unfortunately not visible from our perspective.

As previously mentioned, distance cannot be solely understood as a spatial relationship between A and B. Time and space are linked, and the temporal relationship is therefore equally important. Both the landscapes and the river have their own unique temporalities, and how these interact will define the temporal distance. For landscape is, as I pointed out in the discussion around Kielland's bog landscape, a complex network of elements. Worn stones, or clusters of cotton grass, they all have their own time. And it is these elements, in relation to each other, that together create tension in the landscape. They appear to me like metronomes, all with their own pace. And it is this continuous cacophony of clicking, the way they fall in and out of phase, that creates the temporality of the landscape. Since these elements vary from landscape to landscape, there is a distance between them. A temporal distance.

The encounter with the river is therefore very interesting, because as I have previously pointed out, it interacts with the landscape in a way that overrules the landscape's own understanding of time. The river is not assimilated by the landscape, but rather participates as a separate voice. It becomes the prime meridian, also in a temporal sense. A substrate the other metronomes can stand on, and their frequency is measured against. And with the status of prime meridian, an interesting phenomenon arises; for unsynchronized frequencies tend to gradually fall into step, given that they are located on the same surface. Natural rhythms, time layers, synchronize themselves with the base frequency they are in relation to, and the river represents such a base frequency. In the face of a single landscape, I would not say that this is too

important. But, seeing that the river flows through several landscapes, the difference will be greater. For the river's own time will remain the same, and this will have the effect of synchronizing two very different landscapes. The rural Stalheim falls in step with the more industrial Hellefossen. They no longer exist as purely individual events, but through the river they are rather placed in context. The relationship between them becomes understandable, through the river placing them in context of itself. The temporal distance between Hellefossen and Stalheim is defined, and they are incorporated into an overall landscape network.

4/ Mellom oss og landskapet.

The practical significance of this for our understanding of the landscape depends entirely on what we are looking to understand. In relation to landscapes in visual representation, it allows us to see unique instances in the context of each other. The landscape is no longer a singularity, but rather a community of interconnected elements. Where the interaction between different elements, as well as ourselves, together form the whole. And, by acknowledging our own role in the landscape, the previously romanticized status as individual snapshots is abolished. The landscape's own temporality emerges, and is allowed to exist in a state of continuous change. The role our own interaction with the landscape plays, both geographically and temporally, reduces the distance. Not only between us and the landscape in question, but also the distance to other landscapes. This occurs as discussed earlier, outside of a historical or topographical systematization. This is done rather by activating the landscape's own logic, and by using the river as a reference point.

These phenomena that I have described also apply to ourselves in our daily interaction with the landscapes around us. Like the figures in Stalheim, we too move through landscapes and areas. Whether the elements are naturally eroded stones or cast concrete; it is nevertheless landscape. The same type of network, as I have described in the paintings. The form our interaction takes, from where we see the landscape, therefore greatly affects how we understand these landscapes. It affects the distance. As in any other form of systematization, it is where we measure from that is defining. Do we use a topographical bird's eye view as a reference point, or our own presence? It will affect the distance between the landscape and ourselves, as well as landscapes between themselves. For a topographical description does not differentiate between landscape and area. From that perspective, the landscape exists only as coordinates. Only as space. Through our own presence however, we can understand the landscape as the previously mentioned network. Though this only applies to the particular landscape we actively participate in. The distance to the outside remains undefined.

The river is therefore our best option for understanding. By using it as a prime meridian, we can form a more thorough understanding of the relationship between landscape, us and area. As previously mentioned, the river serves not only as a reference for geographical distance, but also temporal distance. Through its own movement, it connects landscapes to an overarching landscape network. The distance between the landscapes is defined, and thus also the areas that separate them. If we accept the river as the prime meridian, then the question is no longer what the distance means in the landscape. Rather, this new understanding of distance affects our interaction with the landscape we are a part of, and those we only know where we are.

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