

The Evolution of Landscape Photography: From Humanistic Framing to Posthuman Simulacra

Zhaoyi GENG

Academy of Fine Arts, Changchun Normal University, Changchun, Jilin, 130012, China

Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of landscape photography from its humanistic origins in the Renaissance to its transformation under the influence of posthuman culture in the digital age. Initially an integral part of artistic and visual representation, landscape photography reflected humanity's epistemological approach to objectifying nature through the "window perspective." With the rise of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and posthumanism, traditional binaries such as authenticity versus falsity and nature versus artificiality have been deconstructed. Landscape photography now embraces simulacra and digital technology-driven expressions. This study examines how artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and other technologies reshape the meaning of landscape photography, and it highlights the aesthetic and critical potential of contemporary works by artists such as Yao Lu and Yang Yongliang within the broader context of visual culture.

Keywords Landscape Photography, Posthumanism, Simulacra, Digital Technology, Visual Culture

Article History Received: June 29, 2024 Accepted: June 10, 2024 Published: December 31, 2024

To Cite This Article Zhaoyi GENG.(2024). The Evolution of Landscape Photography: From Humanistic Framing to Posthuman Simulacra. *Costume and Culture Studies*, 2(4), 12-18. <https://doi.org/10.6914/ccs.020402>

1 Landscape Constructed by Humanism

In the historical construction of Western humanism, the terms *landscape* and *landscape painting* share almost identical vocabulary. For instance, both are referred to as *landscape* in English and *paysage* in French, denoting a culturally constructed local area imbued with strong humanistic characteristics. As François Jullien (1951) points out in his analysis of this concept:

Landscape is an area (pays) that nature presents to the eye, watched by the eye, or in other words, gazed upon until it reaches the horizon. (Jullien, translated by Zhang Ying, 2017:256).

In other words, landscape, like photography capturing objects, is a product of artificial framing.

It was only in the 16th century that the term *paysage* was introduced into Dutch as *landshap* and later into English as *landscape*, coinciding with the rise of Dutch landscape painting in the 17th century. During this period, landscapes played a significant role in shaping national identity:

The visual transformation of landscapes and its sense of history reassured citizens who were building new political institutions and a large immigrant population. Through a fictional common history of this land, it gave this group a sense of stability through vision. (Mitchell, translated by Yang Li and Wan Xinqiong, 2014:69).

As is well known, the Renaissance is the source of Western humanism. Under the influence of Neoplatonism, art and science reemerged after the brewing period of the Middle Ages, giving rise to a core humanistic value that played a crucial role in later ideological enlightenment and the formation of capitalism. Within the framework of Western humanism, the origins of landscape can be traced back to the Renaissance. However, during this period, landscapes appeared only as backgrounds for *historical paintings* and *portraits*. Without the conceptualization of nature and the external world that took place during the Renaissance, the subsequent Western humanistic perspective on *landscape* and the development of landscape painting as a genre would not have emerged.

The *window perspective* of the Renaissance reflects a humanistic narrative structure, where landscapes predominantly serve as *backgrounds* or *screens* for *stories*. This perspective is embedded in the epistemology underlying the viewing practices of the *window perspective*, a system in which people sought to visually represent nature as an object.

The representational systems of the 17th to 19th centuries utilized the precursor to photography: the camera obscura technique. Early 19th-century photographic practices—whether in Niépce’s (Joseph Niépce, 1765–1833) window view, Daguerre’s (Louis Daguerre, 1787–1851) Paris street scenes, or Talbot’s (Fox Talbot, 1800–1877) window view—emerged as landscapes, marking the birth of photography. Landscape, as a genre rooted in humanistic creation, evolved into modern landscape photography through a process that fused *imitation of nature* with *scientific representation*.

2 Landscape Photography in the Simulacrum of Posthuman Culture

2.1 Shifts in Landscape Photography

Landscape, both as a form of humanistic knowledge (*Epistēmē*) and as a creative expression, has undergone three major shifts in its discursive form. As Mitchell (2014:1) describes: “The first shift (related to modernism) attempts to interpret landscape history mainly based on the history of landscape painting, describing it as a progressive movement toward visual purity. The second shift (associated with postmodernism) tends to decenter the role of painting and purely ‘formal visuality,’ turning to semiotic and hermeneutic methods, viewing landscape as a prophecy of psychological or ideological themes.” The third shift in landscape, extending postmodern dis-

course and incorporating digital media technology, suggests the dissolution of landscape as an entity (*Object*). Viewing practices gradually shift from real landscapes to simulacra, integrating landscape into posthuman culture.

2.2 The Concept of Posthumanism

The concept of “posthuman” holds various interpretations across different theorists and remains in a state of continuous development. However, it generally reflects a focused critique of modernity and humanism. According to Rosi Braidotti (1954), posthumanism is a “monism” that emphasizes the continuity between nature and culture. This fundamentally denies the dualistic relationship between “nature” (prototype) and “representation” (replica) established since Plato, as well as the history of art constructed upon it—namely, the history of visual representation.

2.3 Simulacra and Visual Representation

Michael Camille (1958) argues that this history of representation suppressed the simulacrum because it threatened the very concept of representation. Simulacra subvert the cherished dichotomies of prototype and replica, original and reproduction, image and imitation. While mimetic images are celebrated as affirmations of reality, simulacra are criticized as its negation. Lacking dependence on likeness or resemblance, the simulacrum stands as a “false witness” to existence, challenging the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is representational.

Simulacra also disrupt the original hierarchy, in which an image is necessarily inferior to or derivative of its prototype (Camille, 2022:32). If the relationship of representation between prototype and replica constitutes a humanistic epistemology, then simulacra, as images without prototypes, evidently break this causal epistemology, embodying posthumanism’s critical reflection on modernity. This critique is particularly evident in the works of Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) and Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), where discussions of simulacra contain subversive critiques of humanistic modernity.

2.4 Digital Technology and Posthuman Visual Culture

Simulacrum deconstructs the one-to-one correspondence between prototype and replica—a relationship André Bazin (1918–1958) regarded as the ontology of photography. From the invention of linear perspective (*Prospettiva*) to the birth of photography and later the “movement-image” (Deleuze), humans have developed diverse forms of visual perception and ideologies. In posthuman culture, binary structures such as prototype/replica, reality/illusion, and science/art are dismantled, particularly within the new technological perceptions of the digital age.

On one hand, this shift has revived the role of the amateur enthusiast, enabling anyone to become a creator of images by mastering a range of techniques from capture to post-production and distribution, thereby fostering a shared aesthetic community. On the other hand, the proliferation of digital images has become our “formalin,” ensuring that we appear “alive” on the surface while remaining trapped in mundane visual tastes and the manipulation of capital.

2.5 Landscape Photography in the Digital Age

The birth of photography transformed human viewing practices by linking the act of seeing with mechanical reproduction, ushering humanity into what Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) called the “age of mechanical reproduction.” This development brought image culture further into the public eye, culminating in widespread public participation in landscape photography, particularly in pictorial and amateur styles.

With the advent of the digital age, however, the recording, acquisition, and dissemination of images shifted from analog to digital formats. This transition shifted the function of images from representation to an exploration and renewed focus on simulacra. In the simulacra generated by digital technology, images—treated as coded information—are transmitted and derived in discrete forms. Within this flow of information, the continuity between nature and culture is both perceived and constructed.

Consequently, in the posthuman context, the redefinition of information has transformed how images are produced, disseminated, and interpreted. A new ecology of images has emerged, with digital images permeating nearly every aspect of life. Virtual landscapes and sceneries dominate social media, reconstructing a libido economy and raising new questions about contemporary landscape photography.

2.6 Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Landscapes

In the digital age, images establish a posthuman community in the form of landscapes through social media platforms, where both humans and artificial intelligence coexist as virtual private networks (VPNs). For example, Google’s virtual photographer project explores the agency of machine learning by employing an experimental learning system for artistic creation. It simulates the workflow of a professional photographer by browsing panoramic images from Google Street View, identifying optimal shots, and performing various post-production processes, thereby creating virtual landscapes with aesthetic value.¹

Moreover, current models like ChatGPT can generate realistic landscapes and narrative images from text, making it increasingly difficult to discern whether these images are created by humans or if they lack a corresponding “prototype.” Such images demonstrate that, in the posthuman context, not only has the boundary between human and artificial intelligence as image producers become blurred, but the distinction between image and material entity has also lost significance. The landscapes we see have evolved into “hyperrealities” created by simulacra. In this sense, simulacra render images incapable of any traceable correspondence with reality

¹To evaluate the effectiveness of the “virtual photographer” algorithm, Google designed a Turing test-style experiment. In this test, images generated by the virtual photographer algorithm were mixed with other images of varying quality levels and presented to a group of professional photographers. These photographers were tasked with rating each image based on quality, using the following criteria: 1. The shutter was pressed without considering composition, lighting, etc. 2. Good work in popular photography, but lacking a strong background or distinctive artistic style. 3. Semi-professional level, where the photo displays a clear artistic style, though the photographer is still developing their own style. 4. Professional level. The results showed that approximately 40% of the images generated by the virtual photographer algorithm were rated between semi-professional and professional levels. (Source: <https://research.googleblog.com/2017/07/using-deep-learning-to-create.html>)

(Bazin). Simulacra become a reality without referents, presenting imagination as presence and forming part of our daily technical perception.

2.7 Simulacra as an Artistic Tool

In the context of posthuman culture, the reintroduction of simulacra is not necessarily negative. Although simulacra may be seen as forms of fictional hyperreality, they can also be viewed as a liberating force in visual technology. Since the 1990s, simulacra in landscape photography have emerged as an important artistic language for contemporary artists. Some visual artists appropriate and simulate motifs from traditional Chinese art, drawing inspiration from traditional culture to explore digital imagery and conceptually develop landscape photography.

For example, Yao Lu's *Pine Rock Viewing Waterfall* series simulates traditional green landscape painting, yet these seemingly landscape-like photographs actually depict mounds of construction waste. Similarly, Yang Yongliang's *Urban Landscape* appropriates the visual form of traditional ink landscape paintings to critique the binary between "urban" and "nature" in contemporary contexts. These landscape photographs serve as concentrated reflections on the human living environment from the perspective of posthuman culture.

2.8 Posthuman Perspective on Landscape Photography

Contemporary landscape photography faces the challenge of increasingly concrete virtuality, where the producers, receivers, and the images themselves diverge from the modernity shaped by human subjectivism. As a result, the interpretation of images has shifted into the context of posthuman culture. This progression does not represent a transcendence or outright rejection of humanism; rather, it underscores the importance of recognizing the perceptual shifts brought by this turn.

First, the posthuman perspective emphasizes the form of data as information. Claude Shannon and Norbert Wiener proposed that information is distinct from its medium, existing as an independent entity. From a posthuman viewpoint, there is no essential or absolute boundary between physical existence and computer simulation, interpersonal relationship structures and biological organizational structures, or robotic technology and human objectives (Hayles, 2017:4). Thus, from the posthumanist perspective, the real and the virtual in images become indistinguishable in essence.

In the process of image transmission as a "fluid," the boundaries between the tangible and virtual dissolve. Images, as streams of information, are massively uploaded and downloaded on social media via mobile phones and computers. To a certain extent, landscape photography in the digital era has become a "spectacle," produced through dissemination. The processes of production and dissemination converge, contributing to the overall meaning of the image, which continuously "differs and defers" (*Différance*) within the fluid, ever-changing field of meaning.

3 Conclusion

As landscape photography in the digital age presents the world as a spectacle, it has become increasingly challenging to view it through a binary lens of authenticity and falsity. In this era, landscape photography has shifted from merely "taking" images to "making" them. Conceptual artists embrace simulacra as a means of expression through imagery, while digital technology facilitates the appropriation and modification of images. However, these manipulations also involve techniques of sensory control, potentially leading landscape photography to be directed by the capitalist market. This results in a relatively fixed aesthetic taste, turning landscape photography into symbols that condense human desires into spectacles.

In the context of posthuman culture, the ambiguity in the ontology of digital imagery is a defining characteristic determined by the medium of photography. This very ambiguity allows images to become a cross-media form. With the emergence of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and posthumanism, binary thinking—such as perception/reason, science/art, self/other, and human/nature—has been gradually transcended. Critiques centered on rational humanism have unsettled traditional foundations of knowledge, encouraging a dynamic and fluid perception.

If, in the 20th century, Walter Benjamin's notion of mechanical reproduction led to what he called "educated philistines," then digital imagery may appear to return the "image economy" to individuals. In reality, however, it is more likely a tool controlled by the capital-spectacle complex. Thus, with the development of virtual reality, artificial intelligence, cognitive science, and information technology, landscape photography today demands a critical and reflective perspective within the realm of visual culture.

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