



105.

A Starry Night

The large-format works in the series *Starry Night* by the artist Paul Fägerskiöld are dark and mysterious. Each picture shows a nocturnal sky whose limpidity allows a clear view of the moon and stars. The application of several layers of oil paints onto the canvas gives rise to an undulating surface structure reminiscent of moss or tree bark. The celestial bodies themselves acquire their shape in the form of interspersed holes. The more closely the viewers approach the monochrome paintings, the more intensive and lively these appear. But it is not the figurative depiction of a painterly, even transfigured starlit sky at nighttime that Fägerskiöld undertakes. Instead the central focus is on humankind itself—in its entire range of creation—and on its view out into the cosmos. And so I ask myself: What does *that* have to do with me?

Fägerskiöld has been concerned for a good while with the idea of the representation of a futuristic view of the heavens. Upon investigating astronomical phenomena, he discovered that the movements of stars and planets as well as of their constellations can be calculated with quite a high degree of precision. Created with help from the software “Starry Night” are works that depict not only past and future, but also imaginary views of the sky. They present perspectives that have relevance for the artist.

Besides referring to paintings from the last 120 years or so that range between Symbolism and modernism and utilize an artistic or scientific language, Fägerskiöld also alludes to narratives that are loaded with significance. Important points of reference for the depiction of the starry sky are offered by the deserted, nocturnal cityscapes of Stockholm done by the Swedish painter Eugène Jansson (1862–1915). In his best-known work *Riddarfjärden i Stockholm* (1898), there is a red line along the horizon to which is attributed the capacity to convey to the beholder a view of eternity. In addition, Fägerskiöld has recourse to a dramaturgical technique that is typical of the filmmaker Steven Spielberg and that can be seen, among other films, in *War of the Worlds* (2005): While the camera is focused on the amazed face of the main actor Tom Cruise, it ultimately allows viewers to gaze over the shoulders of the protagonist onto a desolate landscape filled with evaporated blood—a symbol for the end of humanity.

Fägerskiöld’s nighttime skies also present fictitious views that open up a space for interpretations: *Stockholm. 1st January 100 000. North* (2020) and *Stockholm. 1st January 100 000. South* (2020) (figs. pp. 192–197). This is something that we will never live through at the indicated time at the indicated place—nor can we surmise what the experience will be in 97,979 years.

Furthermore, the starlit sky also offers the artist the most immediately possible form of entering into a dialogue with authors or other artists about the contemplation of the heavens. This is evident in *Monastery of Saint-Paul de Mausole, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Night between 17–18th June 1889. View east-southeast* (2020) (figs. pp. 61, 198–201), a paraphrase of one of the most important works by Vincent van Gogh (1835–1890). The painting shows the view from the window of the sanatorium where the artist stayed in 1889 and has the title—how could it be anything other—*Starry Night*.

Fägerskiöld invites us to interact with these works and to explore them until it becomes possible, when standing directly in front of a picture, to envision the future as a physical experience. What the artist is aiming at is the discrepancy between an apparently real, corporeal perception and the simultaneous awareness that this is a matter “merely” of a picture. The views of the sky are always both seductive and dismal, because they awaken a yearning that cannot be fulfilled. They are situated beyond the Anthropocene, untouchable for us human beings today. Fägerskiöld’s starry skies do not present a precise rendition of a software construct but are instead acts of transferring a subjective experience into a painting with all its references, metaphors, and presence within the tradition of art history. They convey the notion of “landscape” held by a person who looks at them. This aesthetic with regard to impact is reminiscent of the pictures of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) and renders indispensable a further reference: namely to landscape painting. But in contrast to Friedrich, Fägerskiöld dispenses with a depiction of the human being. He seeks instead to put to question, even to dissolve the area between picture and viewer as an intermediate space. If we step close enough to the large-format works, there may very well arise the illusion of a merging of external view and actual image.

“Creating” Land

The investigation of the concept of “landscape” is both topical and heterogeneous. On the one hand, the landscape is subject to an intensive process of utilization. On the other hand, the voices of protest against climate change and its effects are growing louder and louder. Inspired by the climate advocacy of the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, pupils are demanding involvement in the shaping of their future and have elevated the landscape to a valuable and threatened asset. In etymological terms, the German word *Landschaft* (“landscape”) is a combination of *Land* and *schaft*.¹ The first comes from Old German, where the meaning of “heath” or “steppe” was later extended to “state territory.” The

suffix *-schaft* is related to the verb *schaffen* and in combination signifies something created through human activity. So *Landschaft* can also be understood as “image of space.” In order to more precisely investigate the relationship between humankind and nature in terms of cultural history, a useful foundation is provided by landscape painting as an artistic genre that has been dominant for several centuries. In a landscape picture, it is never the case that the depicted segment of nature is merely imagined; what is additionally rendered is the attribution of meaning undertaken by the viewer of a place in nature.² Hence landscape paintings are an expression of the reciprocal relationship between a view of the world on the one hand, and a collective as well as individual self-understanding on the other.

From Antiquity down to today, landscape as a pictorial genre has undergone developments proceeding differently according to the respective national context; towards the end of the 18th century, it achieved emancipation as a recognized genre.³ Arising at that time was the idea of organic life—a “whole” that was said to be infinite and could only be thought.⁴ According to the philosopher Helmut Rehder (b. 1927), contemplation of the landscape plays an important role in this cognitive insight. Because it was only in beholding nature that the theretofore dominant dualism of human being and God, sensuality and reason was ultimately overcome in the transition to the 19th century. The human being seeks to comprehend the world not only through thought, but also in the act of knowing.

But what appearance can landscape painting take on today in an era when humankind has become the most important factor influencing the processes of the Earth and is even seeking to dominate Nature? Is it not the case that in the Anthropocene, humankind itself has become part of the landscape along with technological developments as well as the waste that is being produced? Proceeding from this standpoint, Fägerskiöld considers the term “landscape” to refer to a site that includes social milieu, habitus, language, visual symbolism, or personal perspective—everything that affects and influences us human beings there where we actually are.

Understanding Nature

These thoughts come to expression in the work *My Life in the Woods (after Bellini's St. Francis in the Desert)* (2018) (figs. pp. 159–177). Conceiving of the urban living space as part of the current landscape, Fägerskiöld collected signs and symbols that he encountered in the realm of his daily movement between apartment and studio. With the title, the artist alludes to the book

Walden; or, Life in the Woods (1854) by the writer Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) and refers, among other things, to its non-linear narrative depiction. At the same time, he quotes the work *St. Francis in the Desert* (around 1476–1478) by the painter Giovanni Bellini (around 1430/35–1516), which shows St. Francis of Assisi standing in front of his cave. Common to both is the representation of the life of a person who has opted out of conventional society and has chosen to live alone in the wilderness, as well as the concomitant distinction between civilization and nature. In terms of art history, there is also an allusion to the painter Claude Monet (1840–1926) who, in contrast to the discourse of his era, did not “invent” his depictions in the studio but painted them on site.

The dimension of Fägerskiöld's work attributes to the individual signs a significance that is initially capable of raising questions. Taken together, however, they provide reason to suppose the existence of a narrative. The signs point both to their collector's personal perception of landscape and to references that are not only chosen deliberately but also have an aspect of apophenia.

Landscape is constructed both individually and socially; in the last three decades, this conclusion has come to be shared by the various spatial sciences.⁵ It is accompanied by an overcoming of the belief in a visible “reality” all the way to the recognition that there is no possibility of any absolute knowledge about the world (or about ourselves). Perception is always the result of interpretations, of inclusion and exclusion, and of cognitive insights past and present. Fellow human beings, institutions, guidelines, actions, and also physical objects: all of these first gain relevance when they become interactive partners and thereby acquire significance. Thus it is not surprising when Fägerskiöld's abstract depiction of landscapes is not immediately legible for us viewers, or when alternative narratives arise upon a contemplation of these landscapes.

White Flags

Landscape as subject matter—if the investigation concerns not only the relationship between humankind and nature, but also between picture and world—can be discussed in various disciplines with fruitful mutual interaction.⁶ “By way of ‘landscape,’ affiliations and other relationships to nations or mentalities are engendered, acts of colonization are brought to light, bodies are metaphorized and spatially differentiated with regard to gender or ethnicity. These relationships are powerful and discursively create (geopolitical, national, planning-related, artistic, gender-oriented) fields of

106.

107.

meaning that in turn serve as the basis for political actions, practices, myths and imaginative creations.”⁷ Emblematic of homeland or fatherland, the concept of landscape also brings to expression a patriotic attitude. Fägerskiöld thematizes this orientation in his white flags (since 2009) (figs. pp. 46–72) and examines the ritual character of the representation of a group and its constant evaluation and confirmation.

What happens, however, when the referential system of a flag is disrupted? When a flag is deprived of its purpose, namely the visual transfer over a certain distance of information regarding an affiliation? On Fägerskiöld's monochrome surfaces, it is only delicate graphic elements that still allow inferences with regard to possible attributions. Omission as an artistic decision is apparent and, in analogy to the preceding works, points to the perception of the artist. At the same time, the fundamental question of his creative output is revealed: How do we create landscape through the act of imaging and especially through language as living space? What Fägerskiöld repeatedly refers to is the essential nature of language as an underlying technique for the attribution of meaning and for the establishment of a *weltanschauung*.

Language and Worldview

Language serves above all for distinguishing between perceptions and thereby supports the comprehension of the world in terms of signifiatory correlations. The researcher Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) as well considered language to be a contributing factor to our specific views of the world and situated the word as an image within our soul.⁸ Among the fundamental elements of cognition and the concomitant *weltanschauungen* are sun, moon, and horizon—elements that appear repeatedly in Fägerskiöld's oeuvre. For example, the naming of the “sun” is always an act of construction: Not only does the sun offer us warmth or cause droughts, but we also owe our capacity for orientation and our potential for cognition to its light. The various spaces of time in the starlit skies as well as the motifs in the flags point to the fact that there exists no universally valid language, but that it is always necessary to inquire about authorship and reception. From what perspective do we confer meanings?

The history of landscape painting illustrates how we human beings turn ourselves into subjects who are capable of action and constitute ourselves in historical space as well as within institutional structures and definitions. This facilitates the establishment of order and the acquisition of understanding not only in the present, but also retrospectively. Fägerskiöld's oeuvre

offers a multifaceted foundation for that undertaking. At the same time, the artist summons us to become aware of our language, a faculty that seeks not only to emphasize but simultaneously to open perspectives.

In the newspaper *Die Zeit*, I read an article about the researcher Reinhard Genzel, who in October 2020 was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences for his discovery of the black hole in the Milky Way.⁹ The gravity of black holes is so immense that they swallow light and all accompanying information—they are the largest keepers of secrets in the universe. Motivated by the need for better understanding, Genzel would like to reveal those mysteries. If he is successful in that endeavor, he would simultaneously prove the well-known relativity theory of Albert Einstein to be false. Such a subversive act in physics seems scarcely imaginable and would cause a paradigmatic shift in our thinking. Thus the example of Genzel provides exemplary demonstration that what is relevant for our understanding is not physical statements but instead their interpretation—they leave their mark on the narratives through which we create meaning. Although we are aware that over the course of history we have always created new stories, it is not easy for us to allow alternative perspectives from one moment to the next. And Genzel himself will not be able to experience the fruits of his achievement and the recognition of his research. Our view of the world and our concomitant self-identification are firmly anchored in our actions and in our use of language.

Blue Marble

A paradigmatic shift always leads to the dawn of a new era that shakes the foundations of our mental architecture—the construct that we have in order to be able to better understand. It is precisely here that Fägerskiöld identifies the potential of art: It opens up a space of interplay in which we can extend our language, address issues, question conventions, or consider alternatives. Art in its entirety is language that we can use individually to repeatedly learn anew as well as to *unlearn*. Fägerskiöld considers the task of the artist to consist of the formulation of a unique language that serves as a tool for making new contributions and achieving cognitive insights. Not only the scientist Genzel is a link in the long chain of the human species thirsting for knowledge, an ongoing series within which Fägerskiöld's artistic output also finds its place alongside the achievements of his predecessors and his inspired successors. A principle of cause and effect that remains perceptible much longer than we can imagine—like the echo of the Big Bang that is still resonating

today. Fåggerskiöld's works, which are created in a studio filled with books, sketches, material samples, abstract as well as discarded ideas, bear witness to an unswerving investigation of the great questions of meaning and to the urge to probe ever more deeply.

So when at the beginning of this essay the question was raised as to what the view of the starlit sky has to do with us humans, then I cannot refrain from now mentioning Pippi Longstocking. There may very well be something of the Swedish heroine from Astrid Lindgren's books for children in all of us—to some extent we make the world the way we like it. But whereas Pippi thinks in a large context and changes her opinion from day to day, our concept of ourselves and what we are and can be, in spite of the limitless possibilities, seems to be the most restricted one. "The world has no need of categories. We human beings are the ones who need them. We construct categories in order to navigate through this complex, contradictory world, in order to somehow understand it and to come to a consensus regarding it,"¹⁰ writes the political scientist and author Kübra Gümüşay. If we employ new verbal constructs to linguistically expand the spectrum, we should not forget that simultaneously worlds are thereby opened and borders are established. Fåggerskiöld's nocturnal skies may very well evince the character of science fiction, but the plunge into new temporalities and the gaze beyond the landscape into a "skyscape" can also open up for us the window of new perspectives.

Blue Marble, the title of the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Thun, refers to the photograph that first revealed to us a distanced view of the Earth and its vulnerable beauty. It sometimes requires a massive shift of point of view in order to achieve a better understanding—beholding the Earth from the perspective of the stars is one such shift. For me the cosmos is also a symbol for the transformational power of thought. For that reason I am also a proponent of the gender asterisk that is used in the German language to overcome binary thinking in terms of man and woman and to indicate the broad intervening spectrum. The universe knows no borders; it is constantly expanding and creating new (time-)spaces. It is up to me how I perceive the lights in a pellucid sky and in which narratives I choose to believe. Does my fate lie in the stars, or are they will-o'-the-wisps from the past?

With his artistic oeuvre, Fåggerskiöld contributes in his own way to the ongoing discourse. Moreover, by questioning and creating networks of meaning, he is able to awaken the investigative spirit in us—the need to create our own story. At the same time, he reminds us that this is always accompanied by a political act. Just as we repeatedly create our world anew, we also generate

separations, exclude other ways of thinking, and assure the existence of prejudices and disadvantages. Provided with this knowledge, we are always faced as issuers of meaning with an undeniable responsibility.

108.

¹ Siehe Detlev Ipsen, "Landschaft," in: Stephan Beetz, Kai Brauer, Claudia Neu (eds.), *Handwörterbuch zur ländlichen Gesellschaft in Deutschland*, Wiesbaden 2005, pp. 129–36, here p. 129.

² See Tanja Michalsky, *Projektion und Imagination: Die niederländische Landschaft der Frühen Neuzeit im Diskurs von Geographie und Malerei*, Paderborn 2011, p. 22.

³ See *ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴ See Helmut Rehder, *Die Philosophie der unendlichen Landschaft: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der romantischen Weltanschauung*, Halle 1932, pp. 2–3.

⁵ See Olaf Kühne, *Landschaft und Wandel: Zur Veränderlichkeit von Wahrnehmung*, Wiesbaden 2018, pp. 3–4.

⁶ See Irene Nierhaus, Josch Hoenes, Annette Urban, "Einleitung: Landschaft—Landschaftlichkeit: Transformationen eines kulturellen Raumkonzeptes," in: *idem* (eds.), *Landschaftlichkeit: Forschungsansätze zwischen Kunst, Architektur und Theorie*, Berlin 2010, pp. 10–11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11, quotation translated by G.F.T.

⁸ Jochem Hennigfeld, "Sprache als Weltansicht: Humboldt—Nietzsche—Whorf," in: *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, Vol. 30, Issue 3 (July–Sept. 1976), pp. 435–51, here pp. 435–6.

⁹ See Alard von Kittlitz, "So bringen wir Licht in die Dunkelheit," in: *DIE ZEIT*, February 12, 2021.

¹⁰ Kübra Gümüşay, *Sprache und Sein*, Berlin 2020, p. 133, quotation translated by G.F.T.

