

## **The intertwinedness of forest and cultural landscapes in the context of cultural ecology**

---

**Beáta Tisucká**

**Envigogika 9 (1) – Inspirations/ Inspirace**

Published/ Publikováno 30. 5. 2014

DOI: [10.14712/18023061.428](https://doi.org/10.14712/18023061.428)

### **Abstract**

Today, cultural landscape and aspects of it are frequent topics of cultural and landscape ecologies. To be fulfilled and delineated, the cultural landscape and its various meanings quite logically attract their opposite – wilderness and nature. At the same time, terms such as wilderness and nature should also be defined to make sure they are understood in the context of the regeneration and purification of human culture, and their hypertrophied elements. As a representative of nature and the text, which is only comprehensible through inner and not exterior experience, the forest stimulates feelings in relation to the purpose of human existence, and is not much dependant on culture and its peaks, downfalls, and degenerations. The aesthetic value of the forest is also neglected. In his "Forstästhetik", based on philosophy and aesthetics, Heinrich von Salisch elaborated upon the aesthetics of the forest in detail and introduced new perspectives on forestry and landscape ecology.

### **Key words**

cultural ecology; landscape ecology; landscape; forest; wilderness; culture; forest aesthetics

## **Prostoupení kulturní krajiny a lesa v kontextu kulturní ekologie**

### **Abstrakt**

Kulturní krajina a její aspekty jsou dnes frekventovaná témata kulturní a krajinné ekologie. Svět významů kulturní krajiny k sobě logicky přitahuje i svůj protipól v podobě divočiny a přírody pro své doplnění a vymezení. Pojmy divočina a příroda je třeba také definovat pro porozumění jejich významu pro regeneraci a očišťování lidské kultury a jejich hypertrofovaných prvků. Les coby zástupce přírody a *textu* nesrozumitelného zvenku, naopak pouze prožíváním zevnitř, podněcuje pocity smyslu lidské existence, nezávisející tolik na kultuře a jejích vrcholech, pádech a degeneracích. Poněkud opomíjená je i estetická hodnota lesa. Tu do důmyslných detailů rozpracoval Heinrich von Salisch ve své estetice lesa, tzv. Forstästhetik, vycházející z filosofie a estetických nauk, a otevřel tak nové pohledy na lesnictví a krajinnou ekologii.

### **Klíčová slova**

Kulturní a sociální ekologie; Krajinná ekologie

## Wilderness, nature and landscape: their interrelationship

Jiří Sádlo's cardinal essay *Krajina jako interpretovaný text* (Landscape as an Interpreted Text) opened a discussion about the ways in which landscape can be perceived, from which points in its structure and through which components it can be "read" (Kratochvíl, 1994, p. 179).

Sádlo's "landscape cybernetics" relies on the landscape having a relatively strong self-regulating and self-organising ability. He views landscape not as a set of animate and inanimate structures but as a living system. Asked why we cannot consider landscape as a code to be deciphered, that is to say, something with a defined and clear meaning, Jiří Sádlo replies, "... every component reads it differently. The difference concerns both the object of interest and the scale on which the object is perceived. Landscape is of different relevance on a different scale to every component." (Kratochvíl, 194, p. 181) In Sádlo's usage, components refer to two-legged inhabitants and all other living creatures, ecosystems, biotopes, etc. He essentially adheres to the set structural hierarchy of living systems: organelle – cell – tissue – organ – individual – population – society – landscape. In this sequence, landscape abounds with the highest complexity, number of connections and cybernetic softness of structure.

Landscape occupies a special place in the hierarchy outlined above. However, the interfaces on which landscape touches wilderness and nature are of no lesser importance. First let us discuss wilderness.

The terms "landscape" and "wilderness" cannot actually be separated in the real world. The reason is that landscape constantly intertwines and stratifies itself with wilderness. We can imagine wilderness as the Earth's surface, which is constantly superimposed and modified with layers of cultural landscapes. In reality, however, we can never be quite sure whether wilderness is true wilderness without human intervention, because such inviolate places are really scarce at least in the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, even wilderness has cultural significance and meaning if only due to the fact that we interpret and perceive it in certain ways.

Vít Erban writes in the anthology *Krajina zevnitř* (Landscape from Within): "Landscape to wilderness is like conscious to subconscious, waking to dreaming, thought to intuition." (Erban in Hájek, 2002, p. 113) Looking closely at these pairs of notions, we see that one in each is illuminated by culture while the other one is closer to the instincts and roots of humankind, and closer to man's phylogenetic history. You could say that wilderness and culture establish a mutually bipolar relationship in which they objectivise and mutually establish their identity. Erban adds, "Wilderness has established in the human mind all that reflects man's primal experience of the world, of himself, of being alive (...) face to face with wilderness, all the emotions, processes, states and movements awaken in a human being that were once in the cradle of culture, and again become essential to survival." (Erban in Hájek, 2002, p. 116)

In human settlements, being the opposite of wilderness, meaning and implications speak to us from every direction; they are pre-created and awaiting their "decoder". The oversaturation with implications of today's cities and megalopolises of the Western world is evident, and in addition to the considerable "symbolisation stress" and "symbol inflation", a space opens for ridiculing culture, its hypertrophy, and thus follows a loss of respect and responsibility for places.

In contrast, it is in the individual's vital interest to re-create, find and reinforce this meaning and these implications in nature. Contact with wilderness is very important for

human beings and human culture: it helps stop the degeneration of culture into a set of empty symbolic forms and creates the opportunity for regeneration, life-giving reconstruction and change. Quoting Erban once more: "Nothing is more important for the establishment and retention of human culture than constant contact with wilderness." (Erban in Hájek, 2002, p. 116)

Daniela Hodrová also speaks of wilderness, but she does so in the context of the city and the urban sphere. In her view, wilderness also occurs in the city, growing directly from its core and its inhabitants' subconscious. The "wild" is largely identical with the natural and the archaic, and arises from the depth of the concealed, "whether it is the weeds growing in the cracks between the pavestones or the 'leaking' of the Shadow from the innards of the personal and collective unconscious." (Hodrová, 2006, p. 26)

Wilderness has one more aspect, related to the axes of the known/unknown, safety/danger, and home/foreign territory. Wilderness is "a territory not specified in detail, illegible, unknown (terra incognita), a territory full of danger (hic sunt leones), a territory of anxieties, uncertainties and perpetual erring..." (Hájek, 2002, p. 15). All that is foreign and abounds in difference is understood in one's own culture as a potential menace to the integrity of this cultural system. This almost instinctive attitude still endures in us in spite of the doctrine of cultural relativism and progressing globalisation.

It is appropriate at this point to remind the reader of the actual original and oldest meaning of the word culture, i.e., *colere* – the ancient term associated with cultivating farmland (Soukup, 2000, p. 13). In the manner of Martin Heidegger, who would not have hesitated to revitalise the term and revamp it for its true essence, let me note that all culture ultimately begins, ends, takes shape, defines and specifies itself in relation to the soil and earth.

It also must be said that we often devastate landscape in our effort to cultivate it. The philosopher Zdeněk Kratochvíl points out that man tries to feel at home in the world and destroys this same world in his effort to get to know it and grasp it. Devastation concerns not only landscape, but human nature as such, human thinking and spatial structures. According to Kratochvíl, these tendencies are to be blamed on René Descartes' modern philosophy, which tried to understand the world through the exterior, through the *res extensa* (the extended things). "It is an attempt at being at home in the whole world, cultivate one's own nature. However, it was an attempt that covered the natural world with a network of artificial indicators, and devastated much of our natural experience as well as the exterior landscape out of a fear of the uncertainty of the wilderness of nature," Kratochvíl adds (Kratochvíl, 1994, p. 100).

#### The forest as the most distinct voice of silent nature

It is in the disposition of landscape that it likes to be observed. It stretches to its *edges* and invites us to look; it exposes information to the human being on settlements, altitudes, water, meadows and fields, on the boundaries of forests, centres and peripheries, places that are inhabited and that are "dead zones", etc. In a nutshell, it is made for interpretation like any other text. However, the landscape text would be of no help if we wanted to learn about nature. Nature only uncovers itself to us if we are inside it, experiencing it from within, not from above.

Yet there is also something open in nature that makes it possible to create texts and allows us (kindly) to consider it. David Storch says in his paper *Krajina není* (Landscape does not exist), "We also understand nature somehow, but this understanding is largely not the product of a view from a lookout tower, but rather constant redefinition of oneself and one's

place within it." (Hájek, 2002, p. 12). More precisely, landscape and nature express two different relationships to the world. We define ourselves in opposition to nature, but we also identify ourselves with it.

Current science has taken over this attitude to a large extent: it defines the human being in contrast to nature, but also constantly finds new similarities with animals and our primordial natural origins, or our interconnectedness with ecosystems. We can also find similarities in hunter-gatherer societies and their totemic systems, which singles out the tribe from nature, yet on the other hand integrates it into nature using various references to kinship structures.

"We need landscape as a home, something close and intelligible; we need nature for deeper reasons. Namely, for the necessity of taking care of one's place in the world and the feeling that we are not alone here. (...) landscape may not exist (...), nature certainly exists" (Hájek, 2002, p. 13).

From the etymological point of view, as explained by the philosopher Zdeněk Kratochvíl, nature is something that comes into existence without man's intervention, and natural is what "belongs to nascence, belongs to 'nature'." (Kratochvíl, 1994, p. 13) It is interesting to consider the connections between nature and philosophy: at least in its beginnings, philosophy grew out of the relationship to nature and discovered its regularities. Philosophy is the litmus paper indicating the degree of the experienced, experiential and natural in the container of scientific thinking. "We are too accustomed to the fact that philosophy lives on lack of knowledge. There is something about that as well, though, because philosophy has traditionally grown out of astonishment, including astonishment before the yet unknown." (Kratochvíl, 1994, p. 10)

In the real world, the forest is the image of nature. The phenomenon of the forest is neglected; I believe that its inaccessibility plays a role in it; not physical but symbolic inaccessibility. It is difficult to populate a forest with symbols and meanings as we do with landscape. Forest has an immense natural coherence and defies understanding "from without". Therefore, whilst we understand landscape, we will only understand forest once we turn it into landscape, such as by mapping it and dividing it into some basic intelligible units. Although landscape contains forest as one of its components, forest is not landscape. Being the representative of nature in landscape, forest is elusive, both foreign and known at the same time, and we also understand it by constantly redefining our place within it and, ultimately, redefining ourselves (Hájek, 2002, p. 12).

In spite of their "non-textuality", forest stands are a distinct landscape component, if not the most important, that contributes to the landscape character. The appearance of forest stands and their composition, extent, age, forestry management method, or absence of human intervention, fundamentally affects the appearance of landscape. We can say that forest significantly contributes to the aesthetic qualities of landscape. That is one aspect which relates to the whole landscape.

The other aspect is the aesthetic value of the forest from within. Today, many people perceive the forest as a space for recreation, relaxation, as a "fitness gym" or "sanatorium". Practical and economic exploitation of the forest has a long tradition in the Czech Republic, and has significantly contributed to the cultivation of the landscape.

However, people have been able to appreciate the beauty of forests since time immemorial, both lay persons and experts (from the biologist to the gamekeeper to the forester). Nonetheless, forest aesthetics are of a completely different type than vistas of

landscape. Most people are able to distinguish between a negative and positive aesthetic value of forest. We find pleasure in the accidental circumstances of the natural environment and the fortunate yet unperceived interventions of foresters. In the forest we allow ourselves to be pleased with wilderness, its purity, even though we are cultural foreigners to it. (Of course there are few absolutely wild forest stands in the Czech Republic, but forest is definitely the closest to wilderness among all the landscape components.) The forest provides us with a refuge as it does to game – we can hide in it away from what seizes our attention, slogans, meanings we did not choose, and the stepmotherly commands of our culture.

### **Forest aesthetics according to Heinrich von Salisch as forest landscaping**

The German forester and politician Heinrich von Salisch introduced a unique term, and established a discipline, of “forest aesthetics” (*Forstästhetik* in German), which was part of the curricula of forestry schools in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Klvač, 2009, p. 35). Salisch tried to elaborate a highly comprehensive doctrine of the aesthetic effect of forest and design basic instructions for improving the aesthetic qualities of forests in Germany. His effort was rather unique – few people dealt with the forest and its qualities this systematically – yet his teachings had a wide influence on forest management not only in Germany but also former Austro-Hungarian countries. Salisch’s legacy therefore may live in Czech forestry without us realising it.

What was the essence of his “Forstästhetik”? Salisch was well-read in philosophical concepts and aesthetic teachings. The predominant opinion in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was that aesthetic delight is based on physiological delight, that beauty is delight based on the perception of certain visual or acoustic forms. Salisch disagreed with this prevalent school of thought and tended to be closer to the traditional modern notion that aesthetic liking is something free, independent on human utility or profit, and cannot be explained with Darwinian struggle for survival (Klvač, 2009, p. 37). Salisch was the closest in thought to the writer Friedrich Schiller, who regarded as beautiful what appeared to be free and demonstrated itself as freedom in phenomena. In fact, Salisch identified himself with the Platonic view of beauty, where beauty is a true entity manifesting itself in the agreement of the idea of beauty viewed by our spirit with the projection of these ideas in the world (Klvač, 2009, p. 37).

It is remarkable what thorough foundations of these philosophical-aesthetic principles Salisch had for his teaching of forest aesthetics, while at the same time giving prominence to practical aspects of forest management; in his work, he was interested in the practical application of his ideas. He tried to present foresters with valid artistic rules that every forester could apply even though not every forester would necessarily be endowed with intuition or creative genius. He thus created a unique system of recommendations and rules which has not been outdone by anyone in its comprehensiveness. Essentially, Salisch regarded “forest aesthetics” as a discipline of landscaping tasked with beautifying a place for humankind. “Forest aesthetics is to aspire to something similar to the theory of architecture or rhetoric (...), which also deals with objects intended for human use.” (Klvač, 2009, p. 36)

In the chapter titled Applied Forest Aesthetics, Salisch gave illustrative examples of aesthetic management of forest and its landscape, while also dealing with nature and its properties. He discussed colours in nature, geological formations and bedrock, thoroughly describing various forms of trees (“how different a young pine is from a pine in continuous

forest or a solitary old specimen!") (Klvač, 2009, p. 36), he also discussed the association of plants and animals, highlighted the beauty of shrubs and herbal undergrowth, and included the specific forest scent as well.

Salisch dealt with so many aspects of the forest with such remarkable care that it is abundantly clear from his work what affection he must have felt towards the forest, how much it meant to him, and how much respect he had for it. I wish such motivation was behind most Czech scientific papers and textbooks on landscape, landscaping or forestry, dealing with practice and application.

Some of his recommendations straddled the boundary of garden architecture, such as installation of stones and monuments in forests, beautification of forests with ancient ruins and pretty foresters' lodges. In a section on path creation, Salisch discussed whether to make paths straight or curved; finally, he inclined to the straight option saying that it offers good vistas of the landscape (yet he did not turn forests into parks). In the forest as well as in the landscape, he condemned signs and billboards and described their destructive effect on the beauty of landscape.

It seems self-evident that present-day landscapers, developers and officials should be given Salisch's *Forstästhetik* as compulsory reading. Salisch did have some followers or contemporaries in Bohemia, but none of them achieved such a comprehensive approach. Perhaps the first Czech-language text dealing with comprehensive forest protection and, among other things, citing the significant aesthetic value of the forest, is the work of the Czech aesthetician Josef Durdík *Pozor na lesy!* (Mind the forests!) (Klvač, 2009, p. 40). The 1956 work by Štefan Korpeľ *Pěstění lesů* (Cultivation of forest) reigned long among forestry textbooks. It contained the chapter *Forest aesthetics*, but it was largely tendentiously influenced by the Marxist doctrine (Klvač, 2009, p. 40).

The present-day tendency in forest management highlights the economic aspect but largely also the ecological and nature-accepting one. If non-economic qualities of forest are realised, then they are recreational, or educational (botany or forestry) or tourist-oriented. However, society seldom views the forest as an aesthetic object. The reason may be the great difference in its wilderness content and the natural component compared to the populated landscape, if not the urban environment. Simply put, it will take some time before we learn to navigate forest environments free of human meanings known to us and before we accept the dictate of nature instead of the known cultural environment.

However, as I described above, this self-definition against nature is indispensable in order to preserve the human psychic equilibrium, as it is for the constant strengthening of culture. With a little simplification, the most important thing is not what there is in the forest (and, to human astonishment, there is more than enough), but rather what there is not. In our times, the forest has a purist character: it purifies self-assurance and somewhat hypertrophied culture.

Pavel Klvač found it apt to make a remark on this topic: "... many of the so-called educational paths, built with great enthusiasm (and frequently generous funding from European bodies) often practically devalue the beauty of numerous natural corners. Nature, landscape which you view through an information board (or with it in your field of vision) is more like a museum or a botanical garden." (Klvač, 2009, p. 45)

Books and papers on forest aesthetics are still somewhat rare in the Czech context, yet people also write about forest management and the forest in the context of landscape. The anthology from the conference *Tvář naší země – krajina domova* (The Face of Our

Country – the Landscape of Home) contains the paper by Bohuslav Koutecký *Les v krajině a ochrana přírody* (Forest in landscape and nature protection), where the author remarks, "In advanced countries, the social function of the forest gains increasing prominence; it takes the forest as a necessary component of the environment preserving the autochthonous gene pool and, most importantly, as a source of insubstitutable non-material values." (Koutecký, 2001, p. 32)

## References

- Hájek, P. (2002). *Krajina zevnitř*. Praha: Malá Skála.
- Hodrová, D. (2006). *Citlivé město*. Praha: Akropolis.
- Klvač. P., (ed.), (2009). *Člověk, krajina, krajinný ráz*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita.
- Koutecký, B. (2001) Les v krajině a ochrana přírody. In I. Dejmal (Ed.), *Tvář naší země – krajina domova: Sborník příspěvků z konference konané ve dnech 21. -23. 2. 2001 na Pražském hradě a v Průhonicích* (pp. 30-34). Lomnice nad Popelkou: Studio JB.
- Kratochvíl, Z. (1994) *Filosofie živé přírody*. Praha : Hermann a synové.
- Soukup, V. (2000). *Přehled antropologických teorií kultury*. Praha: Portál.

**Beata Tisucká studied culturology at the Faculty of Philosophy of Charles university in Prague, she deals with cultural and social ecology**

**e-mail: [beata.t@seznam.cz](mailto:beata.t@seznam.cz)**