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Chapter 1
Introduction: Starting a Conversation with Landscape

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> We say that we "conduct" a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. […] No one knows in advance what will "come out" of a conversation (Gadamer 2004 [1960]: 385).

This volume seeks to explore issues of landscape through the metaphor of *conversation*. Landscape is at once a fascinating subject for research and forbiddingly difficult to define once and for all. A concept with the ring of the familiar and everyday, it has often been understood in a taken-for-granted manner as purely objective and material reality, exterior to the subjective self. On the other hand, its hidden ideological complexities and diverse meanings have given rise to a large corpus of cultural critique that sometimes almost seems to ignore its materiality; the grounded solidity of landscape melts into the air of social and cultural construction. For us, landscape implies a more-than-human materiality; a constellation of natural forms that are independent of humans, yet part and parcel of the processes by which human beings make their living and understand their own placing in the world. By exploring the possibilities afforded by the conversation metaphor, we hope to find different ways to engage with the landscape concept.

We were drawn to the conversation metaphor for several reasons. One is a general interest in approaches that seek to avoid the dualism between the human and the non-human. We see conversation as enabling recognition of the more-than-human character of all meaningful exchanges involving humans and landscape. Moreover, we see such exchanges as involving much more than the visual sense on the part of humans. An oft-repeated critique of conventional landscape approaches – indeed of the very concept of landscape – is that they are irredeemably centred on the sense of sight. At the very least conversation mobilises other human senses, most notably of course that of hearing, but more importantly it points towards a two-way communicative process, as Hans-Georg Gadamer draws attention to in the opening quote of this chapter. A successful conversation – that is, one which results in increased understanding (albeit not necessarily agreement) – involves a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer 2004 [1960]: 304). On the human side, such communication involves both attention and action: landscape encapsulates "embodied practices of being in the world, including ways of seeing but extending

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beyond sight to both a sense of being that includes all senses and an openness to being affected" (Dewsbury and Cloke 2009: 696).

As Solnit (2003: 9–10) has observed, speaking of artistic engagements with landscape, "conversation provokes response, not silence". Artists converse with landscape in the practice of their work. It is in the conversational responses that meaning appears. But meaning does not emerge out of the blue. Rather it is entwined in the process by which the conversation takes place. A conversation will "meander from subject to subject, so that public life spills into personal anecdote, emotion evolves into analysis" (Solnit 2003: 10). Thus a good conversation travels in different directions, touches on various topics and brings in different points of view. In this opening chapter, we will make a start by briefly discussing the two central concepts – "conversation" and "landscape" – calling attention to some important aspects of their use in the past and present. It is not our intention to force any kind of theoretical closure upon the reader, but rather to open up a space for a variety of strategies by which human-landscape interactions can be addressed.

Conversations – With Landscape?

All conversations are suffused with metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and "conversation with landscape" is indeed itself a metaphor. Metaphors are often understood in a narrow sense, as simply a matter of rhetorical or poetic embellishment. As such, they may direct attention to certain aspects of phenomena that may be otherwise overlooked, or communicate meanings to which the speaker wants his or her listeners to pay particular attention. But philosophers such as Ricoeur (1986 [1975]) and Gadamer (2004 [1960]) have argued that metaphors are more elemental than that: they do fundamentally important work in that they reveal possible worlds and possible modes of being. Thus, metaphor "is not a matter of adornment, but installs a new order; in effect it is the discovery of meaning" (Vedder 2002: 198).

The metaphoric idea that landscapes can "speak" is not particularly novel. Indeed, in those most ancient of cultures, the Aboriginal Australian ones, the land itself is imbued with an ability to transfer meaning to humans, who interpret its will through stories of the Dreaming. Animistic beliefs, which presuppose that animals, trees, stones, and the very forms of nature do possess a soul, are found in numerous other cultures. They often involve an intricate consultation with these entities by humans, or "conversation". As Ingold has observed, it would be misleading to suggest that animism is "a way of believing *about* the world" – it is rather

> a condition of being *in* it. This could be described as a condition of being alive to the world, characterised by a heightened sensitivity and responsiveness, in perception and action, to an environment that is always in flux, never the same from one moment to the next (Ingold 2006: 10, original emphasis).

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In Western cultures, while Judaeo-Christian religious doctrines have long been held responsible for the alienation of humans from the natural world, it is noticeable that strong and recurrent themes of a more reciprocal relationship are also found within this tradition (Glacken 1967). Even with the arrival of Enlightenment and industrial modernity, the "disenchantment from the world" was never complete: as Latour (1993) has suggested, perhaps we have never been modern. As an antidote to Enlightenment rationalist strictures, the possibilities of direct communication with nature on an emotional basis were stressed by movements such as Romanticism and American Transcendentalism in the nineteenth century, where aesthetic sensibilities were considered particularly important (cf. Chapter 11 by Egilsson). Certain types of landscapes and landscape representations rose to prominence as a result.

The idea that a conversation of some sort can be had with landscape thus has a long and complex history. It has been taken up by various social and environmental theorists, surfacing in various guises. Sometimes it seems to be interpreted fairly literally, but at other times it serves as a metaphor for more ethically sound relations with the non-human world (cf. Chapter 3 by Malenfant). In a famous essay, the central figure of American environmentalism, Aldo Leopold (1949), suggested the possibility – indeed the necessity – of "thinking like a mountain" in order to achieve a new ecological consciousness attuned to not only human but also non-human needs and goals.

The author who has in recent times perhaps argued most cogently for more-than-human conversations is David Abram. He speaks for a radical reconsideration of subjectivity and agency: "To define another being as an inert or passive object is to deny its ability to actively engage us and provoke our senses; *we thus block our perceptual reciprocity with that being*" (Abram 1996: 56, original emphasis). Taking his cue from Merleau-Ponty, Abram makes the point that both sensory perception and language are inexorably *embodied* (see Chapter 2 by Thorgeirsdottir, Chapter 7 by Lund and Willson, and Chapter 8 by Jóhannesdóttir). The voice that speaks is a voice that is of the body: "a profoundly carnal phenomenon" (Abram 1996: 74). This allows him to argue that in effect the *human* language is not fundamentally different from myriad other forms of expression, not only by animate (and vocal) non-human nature (cf. Chapter 12 by Benediktsson), but also inanimate features of the landscape – the tree, the rock, and the mountain. Abram even surmises that while the ability to communicate with non-human nature is found in most pre-modern societies, it has been lost with the advent of written (and thus disembodied) language, most notably through the invention of alphabetic script. This has made abstraction possible and thus contributed to the alienation from nature.

Abram's eco-phenomenological *oeuvre* has been criticised for not paying due attention to the content of what is being said: "in conversation we speak *with* each other, *about* the world" (Vogel 2006: 151, original emphasis). According to this critique, as non-human entities are unable to formulate claims to truth, they should not be thought of as partners to a conversation, however much we would like to instigate such exchange in the name of ethical concerns (cf. Malenfant,

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Chapter 3). Others disagree, arguing that this implies a too narrow consideration of language and subjectivity, as exclusively human (Klenk 2008). The metaphor has indeed been used for other kinds of encounters between humans and things. Gadamer, writing about aesthetic experiences when encountering art, says that "[a]n encounter with a great work of art has always been … like a fruitful conversation, a question and answer or being asked and replying obligingly, a true dialogue whereby something has emerged and remains" (Gadamer 1985: 250). This can be extended to encounters with landscape, many of which are precisely of an aesthetic kind (see Chapter 8 by Jóhannesdóttir, Chapter 9 by Brady, Chapter 10 by Jóhannsdóttir and Eysteinsson and Chapter 13 by Brydon).

An intriguing effort to widen the consideration of communication beyond humans is provided by the recently-established discipline of biosemiotics (Emmeche and Hoffmeyer 1991, Sebeok 2001). Drawing on the semiotics of American pragmatist philosopher Peirce as well as biological and ethological research, biosemioticians suggest that all life be recognised as an exchange of signs. Peircean semiotics allow for a much more encompassing definition of "conversation" than that of an intentional linguistic exchange between human subjects (see Benediktsson, Chapter 12). In biosemiotics, the boundary of subjectivity is moved to encompass non-humans, although most biosemioticians stop short of including inanimate nature in their analyses.

Suggestions for a thorough reconsideration of the relations between humans and non-humans have in fact proliferated in recent years. One is provided by actor-network theory, which has had great impact in human geography and related disciplines. Its proponents argue for nothing less than a radical redistribution of the capacities for agency (Latour 1993, 2005, Law and Hassard 1999). Instead of attributing agency solely to intentional human subjects, they suggest that it be understood as a product of relational engagements of non-human and human entities (Jóhannesson and Bærenholdt 2009). The crucial point, in other words, is not whether "the actor" is able to articulate its intentions through human linguistic conventions, but how he/she/it is created in the very process whereby the network is established, involving translations of interests. This fits with a widened conceptualisation of conversation, which goes beyond a narrowly human linguistic approach (cf. Chapter 4 by Waage), and has generated much interest by those concerned with understandings of nature and the politics of landscape. To mention just two examples, rivers have been analysed as actor-networks (Kortelainen 1999), and Cloke and Jones (2001, 2004) show how the (nonhuman) agency of trees is manifested in the co-constructed landscape of the orchard or the cemetery; a landscape which must be understood as "a complex performative achievement of different human and nonhuman actors, interrelated in time and space" (Cloke and Jones 2004: 314). Importantly however, they do point out that the trees have to be simultaneously understood as "actors" and "dwellers": the landscape cannot be adequately accounted for by reference to actor-networks alone. This chimes with the suggestion by Rose and Wylie (2006) that the "topographical" sensibilities

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of the landscape concept may sit uneasily with the "topological" concerns of the network.

We do not want to pass a final judgement on the divergent ideas presented so far, some of which diverge fairly radically from the ontological and epistemological norms of much science – certainly natural science. What we want to stress, however, is that there seem to be numerous tracks of theory that are commensurable with the metaphor of "conversation with landscape", counterintuitive as it might seem at first glance. Our own preferred path is through the somewhat complex and fractured terrain of phenomenology.

Landscape – Extending the Horizon

As Bender (2002: S106) has pointed out, landscapes by their very existence "refuse to be disciplined". Attempts by academics to define the landscape concept have certainly revealed how it is capable of resisting discipline. Perhaps historically speaking closest to the heart of the subject of geography, landscape was up until the 1980s usually understood in fairly straightforward objectivist terms as a silent and passive surface of forms sculpted by the historical efforts of nature and humans (Sauer 1996 [1925]). While the so-called "new" cultural geographies that gained ground during the 1980s and 90s approached the concept from a more critical standpoint, they also cast landscape in rather passive terms. The symbolic meaning and iconic significance of landscape was to be analysed (Cosgrove 1984, Cosgrove and Daniels 1988), and landscapes were to be "read" as a text (Duncan and Duncan 1988) in order to uncover the (often elitist and unjust) politics of culture. However, Bender pointed out that people always and everywhere – in the past and the present – relate to landscapes in different ways, and thus understand them differently also: "the experience of landscape is too important and too interesting to be confined to particular time, place and class" (Bender 1993: 1). This observation resonates again in her later remark, referred to above, that landscapes "refuse to be disciplined".

In 1993, Ingold published an article which spoke to wide audience of scholars, emphasising the need for a phenomenologically-based landscape analysis. Here he weaves together a sense for landscape through the notion of "dwelling", where landscapes continuously unfold through how people move in and through them, going about their daily tasks. He suggests that forms in the landscape are best understood as "the embodiment of a developmental or historical process … rooted in the context of human dwelling in the world" (Ingold 1993: 170). This process could be apprehended through a phenomenological method, emphasising a qualitative description of the world that the observer encounters through his or her senses and bodily involvement (cf. Chapter 5 by Aldred). Perception is central to this encounter. Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 253) spoke about a "tactile perception of space". Through such perception he claims that "the way is paved

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to true vision" (2002 [1945]: 259); vision that happens through bodily immersion rather than detached observation.

The dwelling concept thus usefully emphasises the intertwining of landscape and humans through everyday life and mundane practices, although many critiques (e.g. by Massey 2006, Tilley 1994, Urry 2000, Wylie 2003) have pointed out that its ideological overtones (from Heidegger's original formulation) of harmony and authenticity can downplay the sense of tension and disharmony. The concept of dwelling therefore connects people to landscape in a way in which naturalises the sense for landscape, providing a sense of rootedness (Wylie 2003), assuming "an essential harmony of rhythms and resonances – a *coherence* of landscape" (Massey 2006: 41). In this, Ingold's conception of landscape comes very close to that of *place* in the academic literature.[1]

While landscape may still "refuse to be disciplined" once and for all, a phenomenological approach can indeed be broadened to include a consideration of fluidity, transition and motion. It not only prompts awareness of how people are forever moving in and through landscapes, but also of how the landscape itself is simultaneously on the move. Ingold writes:

> Imagine a film of the landscape, shot over years, centuries, even millennia. Slightly speeded up, plants appear to engage in very animal-like movements, trees flex their limbs without any prompting from the winds. Speeded up rather more, glaciers flow like rivers and even the earth begins to move. At yet greater speeds solid rock bends, buckles and flows like molten metal. The world itself begins to breathe (Ingold 1993: 164).

Landscapes are thus in constant motion, taking on new shapes and forms. The lives of human beings are tangled up with the temporalities of constantly unfolding landscapes, in a never-ending journey (cf. Chapter 6 by Árnason). This recalls Jackson's argument against the Heideggerian notion that "being is primordially a mode of dwelling"; rather it can be understood as a "mode of journeying" (Jackson 2002: 31). This allows us to comprehend a world of fluid landscapes that are never bound nor framed (cf. Aldred, Chapter 5). As Bender (2001) has pointed out, although the phenomenological approach may be able to account for "familiar" places – the places we inhabit and know – the unfamiliar and unknown always exists. Awareness of the unfamiliar is, however, generated through encounters with the familiar.

The concept of the *horizon* may be helpful here, in that it allows for an appreciation of the differences between place and landscape. As Husserl put

1 In fact, Cresswell (2003, 2004) has suggested that awareness of this lived-in and meaningful quality is much better ensured by using the concept of *place* rather than *landscape*, the latter carrying in his view irredeemably strong notions of a distant visual gaze. See Setten (2006) for a critical review.

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it, "every experience has its own horizon" (quoted in Casey 1996: 17). From a phenomenological perspective, the horizon characterises

> the way one's range of vision is gradually expanded. A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him. On the other hand, "to have a horizon" means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it (Gadamer 2004 [1960]: 301).

The concept of the horizon thus denotes not a fixed limit to perception, but an invitation to go further. Horizons are inherent in any consideration of perception, as they "make it possible to perceive more than what is directly sensed" (Vessey 2009: 535–6). Casey (2001: 417) has suggested that the horizon is the "primary feature of landscape" that "opens it up for further exploration, that is, for bodily ingression".

The idea of horizons thus also grants a depth to the concept of landscape beyond vision: the landscapes that humans perceive and converse with are certainly visual, but not merely "seen". In discussing Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Abram (1996: 68), talks about "the reciprocity of the sensuous": to see is also to be seen; to touch is also to be touched. In this way it is possible to speak of the "touching eye" (Lund 2005a, see also Tilley 2008): visual perception of landscape happens through a more general bodily engagement that involves all senses. Conversations resulting from such an engagement are based on mutuality and direct affect. By making use of the conversation metaphor, we want to explore how studies of landscape can be enriched through attention to such embodied processes.

However, conversations do not always flow smoothly and the perceptual touching between humans and landscape is not necessarily comfortable (cf. Chapter 14 by Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson). As Gadamer (2004 [1960]) emphasises, how one is situated in the conversation has a bearing on what points of view are brought in and what kind of understanding is brought about by the process. In a similar way, the result of the perceptual encounter between humans and landscape depends upon where and how the human is positioned in the landscape and what intentions he/she may have for acting upon it. This brings attention to political issues and contests of power. Solnit points out that the situation involves not only varying emotions, but also complex interests:

> [Landscapes] have political as well as aesthetic dimensions; on the small scale they involve real estate and sense for place, on the large scale they involve nationalism, war, and the grounds for ethnic identity … [Landscape is] not just where we picnic but also where we live and die. It is where our food, water, fuel, and minerals come from, where our nuclear waste and shit and garbage go to, it is the territory of dreams, somebody's homeland, somebody's gold mine (Solnit 2003: 10–11).

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In other words, conversations between humans and landscapes are almost never conducted from a neutral position (cf. Chapter 13 by Brydon). They are often very much tied to the interests at stake, excluding or ignoring messages and understandings that are not deemed to be advantageous for the individual or social group to which he or she belongs.

In sum, we argue that the metaphor of conversation can assist in finding a variety of new directions in the complex terrain of landscape studies by bringing attention to the mutuality of human-landscape encounters. Landscape is not comprehended as a predetermined, culturally contrived and passive "text", but as a conversational partner that is certainly more than human. The concept of the horizon, with its implication of movement and constantly shifting positions, takes landscape away from the often romantic and rather static association with place. It brings forth the importance of the visual as a part of a more encompassing sensuous engagement of humans with landscape. And lastly, by thinking of human-landscape relations as conversations we can also appreciate the diverse interests and challenges of power which are inherent in these relations in many cases.

The Book

For some years, the editors of this volume – a geographer and an anthropologist – have been studying landscape issues, broadly speaking, from their own differing disciplinary standpoints, on their own and with others (Benediktsson 2000, 2007, Benediktsson and Waage 2005, Huijbens and Benediktsson 2007, Lorimer and Lund 2003, 2008, Lund 2005a,b, 2006, Waage and Benediktsson 2010). The idea for this book came out of a certain feeling we both had, that recent theorising was not really satisfactory when it came to analysing those landscapes we are most familiar with. These are the landscapes of Iceland.

While Icelandic society and culture is unmistakably Nordic in origin, Icelandic landscapes are somewhat unusual in many respects, as visitors are often quick to recognise (cf. Brady 2007); not least as they are so obviously "in the making" by the forces of nature. The relations between humans and landscapes in Iceland also have their specific characteristics. Nordic landscape scholars, heirs to a long and remarkable tradition in landscape studies, have emphasised that there exists a "Nordic" cultural understanding of landscape as lived/worked/practiced (cf. Mels and Setten 2007, Olwig 1996, 2002), which is quite removed from the visually-centred and pictorial understanding prevailing in Britain and much of the English-speaking world (Setten 2006). While a useful antidote to the pictorial emphasis, an analysis of landscape that proposes another essential conceptualisation in its stead is not the road we want to follow. If nothing else it would, we argue, be unable to do justice to the diversity and dynamism of Icelandic landscapes. This book can be seen as a search for alternative understandings and metaphors, which take visual sensibilities as well as other aspects of perception seriously, and hopefully open up for a more diverse set of enquiries into human-landscape relations. It should be

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kept in mind that "[t]he hermeneutic power of metaphor comes from the creative ability of the imagination" (Vedder 2002: 202). The metaphor of conversation is only one of many possible options for enlarging the imagination about landscape: we hope there will never be one officially sanctioned way to undertake landscape studies. We fully expect the concept of landscape to remain "undisciplined".

The contributors to this book come from widely varying backgrounds, but all share a curiosity about where this metaphor can take scholars of landscape. Their disciplinary home provinces include anthropology, geography, environmental studies, philosophy, archaeology, literary studies and visual arts. Apart from making use of the metaphor of conversation (in quite different ways), a common thread which is found in many chapters is in fact a connection with the landscapes of Iceland. The authors include Icelandic, British, American and Canadian scholars.

Following this introduction, three chapters (2, 3 and 4) explore the meanings, opportunities and limitations of the metaphor itself. The next four chapters all depart from a phenomenological standpoint. Movement and temporality is the subject of three of these, tackling such divergent themes as the production of archaeological knowledge (Chapter 5), narratives of speed and death in the contemporary roadscape (Chapter 6), and walking in mountain landscapes (Chapter 7). The eighth chapter shifts the focus to the aesthetics of landscape, making use of the concepts of *flesh* and *atmosphere*. Aesthetics are also the subject of Chapter 9, but this time with an emphasis on what the author terms "difficult aesthetic appreciation". The two chapters that follow (10, 11) give examples of the entanglement of landscapes within the worlds of art and literature. Landscape paintings, poetry and prose are all forms of conversations that reflect the *Zeitgeist*. Then four chapters address conversations with non-human nature beyond landscape per se: animals, rocks and waterfalls, and the perpetual motion in the sky at night. The book concludes with an Epilogue by anthropologist Tim Ingold, whose ideas have informed recent landscape studies considerably and whose influence is actually felt in many of the chapters. Thus the book is itself a meandering conversation of various disciplinary approaches. We hope that the reader will enjoy the different vistas presented here across the complex theoretical landscapes of landscape.

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