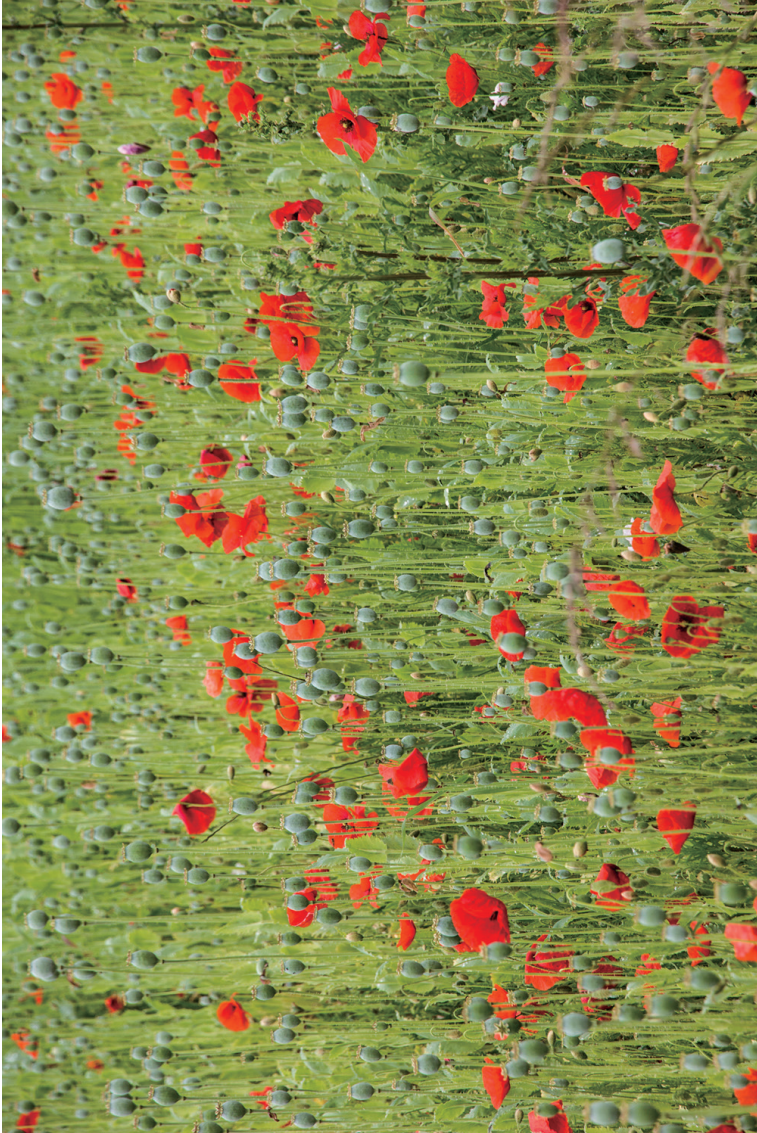




Dans les cieux (février 2017)



Coquelicots n° 5 (juin 2016)



Voyage (janvier 2015)



Carrnac dans la brume (juin 2015)

The Eye of Light: Sophie de Roumanie and the Aesthetics of Landscape Photography¹⁾

OLIVIER AMMOUR-MAYEUR

Working before an exalted landscape, I only
dreamed of making my colours sing [...].

Henri Matisse

No longer is it a matter of speaking about space
and light, but of making space and light,
which are *there*, speak to us.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

If we take a close look, in 2017, landscape photography still remains a poorly liked aspect of aesthetic analysis. Although monographs, both individual and collective, of high quality have multiplied in terms of works on landscape photographers, theoretical studies on this genre are still rare, unless they are books on landscape photography techniques. It is as if the landscape requires a special learning process, but does not seem to achieve an aesthetic level worthy of attention.

There are few books dealing with the photographic aesthetics of the landscape. In French, we can mention: *Les inventions photographiques du paysage*, a collective published under the direction of Pierre-Henry Frangne and Patricia Limido in 2016 at the PUR; while in English we find: *Letters on Landscape Photography* by Henry Peach Robinson—in fact a work published in 1887 and reprinted in 2017 by Hansebooks. Otherwise, the

1) I warmly thank Sarah Sanderson for her invaluable help in translating this article into English.

publications addressing landscape photography do so from a geographical and environmental rather than an aesthetic point of view²). In fact, it is undoubtedly the utilitarian vision of photography in general that has relegated the aesthetic apprehension of this art form for several decades.

By taking an interest in the works of Sophie de Roumanie, this article aims to take a critical and theoretical look at the question of landscape photography, by showing how this genre, until now rather neglected, has nothing to do with a flat “exercise of style” for amateur photographers, nor a simple substitute for the landscape painting that dominated before the emergence of the camera. If it has been finally established for decades now that photography is indeed an art in itself, it is now necessary to look closely at the landscape genre in order to analyse its aesthetic and poetic proponents.

Aesthetic uses of photography

One of the major works about the art of photography has been, and still is, *On photography* by Susan Sontag. Now, upon reading, it becomes obvious fairly quickly that the book is lacking in two aspects: first, the political bias prevents a true analysis of photographic aesthetics; secondly, and this follows from the first aspect, the question of landscape is completely overlooked by the author. It is as if the landscape could not have an essential ethical scope by itself.

In fact, the criticism here directed against Sontag’s work is not just an affectation, since the author’s bias deserves attention, and, despite the aforementioned lackings, remains topical to certain aspects of photographic practices in the field. Thus, all of Sontag’s political arguments are indeed essential to grasp the inherent use of this art of the *cliché*³—which has to be

2) An exception to this disinterest is the work of Danièle Méaux, professor at the University of Saint-Etienne. Among her works: *Voyages de photographes*, Publications de l’Université de Saint-Etienne, 2009 and *Géo-photographies. Une approche renouvelée des territoires*, Filigranes Editions, 2015.

3) In French, *cliché* bears two meanings: first, it refers to the act of taking pictures;

heard in all the polysemy of the term. The concern is that the vision thus offered by the criticism of this art remains dichotomous. For Sontag, photography is always already a bourgeois art, which is targeted at the bourgeoisie who then use it for its own advantage, and that conveys a “blameless” conscience to itself. Unless, for Sontag, the photographic *cliché* is used from a propagandist advertising point of view, this will inevitably lead to the alienation of the people who would then be under the domination of these images. Thus, when she writes that:

The limit of photographic knowledge of the world is that, while it can goad conscience, it can, finally, never be ethnical or political knowledge. The knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism, whether cynical or humanist. It will be a knowledge at bargain prices—a semblance of knowledge, a semblance of wisdom; as the act of taking pictures is a semblance of appropriation, a semblance of rape. (SONTAG, 23-24)

It seems that this reflection greatly reduces the scope of photographic art to a purely utilitarian register, the one used in advertising, to put it generally. This register has always been considered tainted with liberal economic propaganda by the theoretician. At the end of the paragraph, the conjunction between “the appearance of appropriation” on the one hand and the “appearance of rape” on the other constitutes the subsequent concept of the utilitarian acceptance of photography. In reality, this rapprochement is somewhat risky, for on the one hand Sontag refers to the photographic gesture: “appearance of rape”, while on the other, she refers to the spectatorial aspect of perception: “a semblance of knowledge”. Since the two operations are not performed by the same actor, it seems difficult to confound them in this way. Especially since this would imply an identity of point of view between the two actors. This would leave little room for

second, as in English, it refers to “a phrase/concept/image that is overused and unoriginal”.

political criticism of the photographic object itself—political criticism that Sontag actually performs in her book.

Of course, Sontag's position with respect to what she identifies as a "semblance of knowledge" is the result of a photographer's choice of object. In other words, the spectatorial "knowledge" is always already vectorized by the photographic choices made by the artist. However, if the photographic gesture is indeed a personal choice, the "knowledge" that can be drawn from photography itself necessarily comes from an afterthought, even for the photographic actor. If the latter perceives that the observed object can constitute an interesting photographic subject, it is nonetheless true that it is only in the photographic after-photograph that a "knowledge" on the object can be developed. This is because all knowledge, whatever its origin, requires distance and a period of critical reflection in order to develop as "knowledge".

Considered only according to Sontag's cited terms, photography is thus received as a gesture amputated from a part of its aura. For it seems that the author superimposes, in spite of herself, a certain propagandist agenda of photography, with all the diverse uses of the medium. Consequently, it superimposes this particular use of photography with the photographic gesture in itself. Moreover, in order to proceed with the analysis of the aforementioned quotation, if the immediate reception of photography seems to offer only a "semblance of knowledge" or, worse, a "semblance of wisdom"; in reality, like any other artistic medium—visual or not—it does operate only as a support for the reflection it generates in the viewer/receiver. Henceforth, as with any other medium, it remains the responsibility of the observer/admirer to draw from it a knowledge more firmly anchored in a more informed reflection.

In fact, Susan Sontag's position seems strongly rooted in a pragmatic-philosophical American view of knowledge, since for the pragmatic school to understand—and therefore to know—is not a matter of seeing, but of action. A photograph being a spectatorial imprint of the world, it can thus only be difficult for the pragmatists, and Sontag following after them, to conceive such an object as a substratum of true knowledge. If, on the

other hand, we accept the understanding of vision as a phenomenological-cognitive act, then the object takes on quite a different ethical value, as aesthetic. As Anne Cauquelin's formula in her seminal work on the question of the aesthetics of the landscape explains:

A constant revolution agitates the pair understanding/seeing. I understand by what I see, and as much as I see, but I see only by and with the aid of what I understand of what it is necessary to see in what I see. (CAUQUELIN, 60, my translation)

This seeing, which opens up to understanding, is constantly modeled not only by the cultural achievements of the spectators but also, and perhaps most importantly, by the social origins of the spectators. It is therefore essential not to lose sight of the fact that the antecedent variables of each individual impact any form of reception of the photographic gesture—like that of the aesthetic works themselves—and thus constitute a marked point of singularity. Anne Cauquelin pursues her analysis by questioning the value of such a perceived image through the cultural prism of the viewer and not only that of the natural register of the given place seen in the landscape:

The image at the same time mocks and fills me, gives and withdraws a reality, the one I acknowledge to know. The image makes this thin line of knowledge falter. Seeing, path of knowledge beyond knowledge, the eye is that window through which I understand things. Is it the eve of reason, and the sleep of the senses? Or the contrary: the eye—obscurity where doubt comes from, watches over the dormant soul? (*Ibid.*, my translation)

The "knowledge" thus conceived does not intend to yield to a culturally marked injunction—understood as bourgeois—but rather to a subtle apprehension of the creative gesture as much as of the represented object.

Hence, given the pragmatic perspective of the photographic gesture envisioned by Sontag, it is not insignificant that landscape photography is literally overlooked by her approach. This is precisely because this particular use of the photograph enters into total contradiction with the critical positions formulated by the theoretician. Of course, it remains perfectly possible to make propagandist use of landscape photography—for instance as in the advertising of travel agencies for tourists in need of exoticism. Similarly it can be used in a State version of a defense of nature, thus subjecting the spectator to a moral obligation to choose a side between the destroyers of nature and protectors of nature.

However, it may be asked how this “moral obligation”, which is another problematic expression, would in itself be negative or constitute a handicap to the apprehension of things in themselves and not only through an ideological bias. To repeat a formula of the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, it is essential that:

Further, associated bodies must be revived along with my body—“others”, not merely as my congeners, as the zoologist says, but others who haunt me and whom I haunt; “others” along with whom I haunt a single, present, and actual Being as no animal ever haunted those of his own species, territories, or habitat. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 122-123, quotes in the text)

This awakening of the “bodies associated” with the spectator’s body, that they “haunt” and that it “haunts” in return, clearly indicates that the apprehension of the image seen is no longer confined to a purely intellectual understanding of the world presented in and by the image—whether photographic or otherwise (painting, sculpture, landscape, portraits). Indeed, the phenomenology promoted by Merleau-Ponty intends to emphasize that “the eye” and “the mind/spirit”, far from being separate entities—as the classical Cartesian philosophy understood it from the “soul” and the “body”—, in reality constitute a thinking and sentient unity. The phenomenology of the 20th century thus joins, perhaps unknowingly,

classical Chinese Taoist thought, for which the seen object and the seeing subject form one inseparable entity. The poet and theorist Michel Collot translated this concept in the Western world by the formula “thought-landscape” in his eponymous work⁴.

The invention of the landscape

If the invention of landscape in painting goes back to around the 14th century in Europe, and if this creative medium, as Kenneth Clark formulates it, proceeds from a “symbolic vision” towards a “realistic vision” of landscape representation, photography, it could be said, takes a reversed path, starting from a form of realistic, even naturalistic, representation of the landscape presented in the photographic framework, towards a search for abstraction of the landscape in order to offer a more symbolic, or metaphoric vision of its object.

Thus, when the notion of landscape appears in the 16th century—two centuries after its artistic emergence—the pictorial relationship of the image on the canvas tends to be reversed. What had hitherto constituted the surroundings, and even the background, now became the foreground. What initially constituted the support for the action—historical, religious, symbolic and/or mythological narrative paintings—now flips and becomes a plastic event in itself: landscape painting becomes a narrative denotation in itself. Of course, it is not insignificant that the empowerment of the landscape object is concomitant with the appearance of its definition and a syntagme that gives it a body.

Indeed, contrary to the title that Clark gives to the part on Impressionists’ landscapes paintings in his book—the “natural vision” of painting, according to him—it is certainly these Impressionist artists, and those who were close to them, that have truly given their letters of nobility to the landscape, even as they already tended to derealize the places they offered to the spectator view. For example, Renoir, Monet, Friedrich, Turner, and

4) Michel COLLOT, *La Pensée-paysage*, Actes Sud/ENSP, « Paysage », 2011.

Constable paint the irises of lights of the places they seek to transpose on their canvases, rather than a strictly realistic representation of them.

The Sea near Brighton (1826) by Constable, Turner's *Sun Setting Over a Lake* (c.1840), Monet's *Coquelicots* (1873), or Renoir's *In the Woods* (1880) are all representative works of a form of *abstractisation* initiated by these artists in their work. Moreover, without their title, certain canvases, like those of Constable or Turner, would leave the spectator in expectation as to the object that they intend to give him to see.

These artists are not mentioned here without reason. For it is indeed the same gesture of landscape abstraction that is at work in the works of Sophie de Roumanie⁵). Whether it is clouds, waves or even some pictures shot inland, the photographic connection between the artist and the landscape intends to give full meaning to the Greek roots of the word photography: "drawing/writing the light". As the artist puts it herself in the interview we had: "Without light, there is no image. That is how the camera works" (see her answer to question No. 4). It is thus the contrast ratio between the colors, as well as that of the dynamics involved in the composition of the pictured views, that are emphasized, than the simple landscapes that are supposed to be *represented* on the photographic plate.

Thus, to take the example of a recent photograph—*Dans les cieux* (*In the Skies*), February 2017—of course the identification of the various clouds, and the different strata that they occupy in the image, is easily visually visible. However, the contrast between the different shades of gray, which range from intense black in the foreground to the various light gray horizontal bands in the background, offers visual counterpoint with the gold, ocher, pastel blue and white colours that occupy the rest of the pictorial space. In this case, it is indeed a sort of pictorial gesture that, through color, the orchestrated composition intends to reproduce in the photography. The contrasts mentioned, moreover, do not necessarily suggest a naturalising vision of the depth of field thus staged in photography.

5) As for the princess' artwork discussed in this article, see the photos in "Frontispiece 2", pp. ii-v.

On the contrary, they seem to support the fact that it is on a set of colored strata that the relation to the photographic image is established. In other words, *Dans les cieux* offers to the spectator an artwork working at the interface between, on the one hand, the vision of a landscape to be recognized through the colors and the overall configuration involved, and, on the other hand, a form of *derealisation* of the landscape by means of a concerted work of abstraction of the same colors which tend to cause a kind of flattening of the image produced. The shallow depth of field used by the photographer, obtained by the large aperture of the diaphragm of the camera, causes a flattening of the different fields of vision in the image thus produced.

Hence, are the intense ochres of the top of the cloud on the same plane, in front or in the background of the black mass that forms the base of the image? Are the white, gray and blue bands extending over several planes or just one? The frontality of all visual art; whether it be painting or, as here, photographic art, inevitably causes such distortions of vision, because the colors are solicited in order to open the viewer's gaze to what he perceives without necessarily seeing it, in the full sense of the word.

An attentive look, confronted with such a sunset in Nature, will undoubtedly notice the amazing force of such a color relationship; however, the act of photographic taking has the merit of isolating the moment and to produce a pictorial version of it which then induces the spectator to analyze the said relations. In the same way, these colored correlations, established within the framework of this image, impose, through the same gesture, a contrast ratio in the very *forms* which are then imposed on the eye: the left-right diagonal of the cloud mass illuminated from the right is opposed, on the one hand, to the two right-left diagonal lines sketched by the two parallel cloudy arms which almost split the image into three equal parts. Moreover, this left-right diagonal is opposed to the horizontal lines drawn by the colored strips of the background that streak the rest of the image. These are the lines of force that give meaning to this work: colors and dynamics offering a visual composition that oscillates between *representation* and *abstraction* of forms thus organized for the eye.

Finally, it will have been noted that the photographs commented on by Sophie de Roumanie can also be considered as a form of homage to the works of the painters mentioned above, since the marines and landscapes of Constable, Turner, or others still find here a particularly striking echo in the colored matter of the photograph as well as in the relations they propose to the viewer. Consequently, we can affirm with Jean-Claude Pinson, to evoke the works of Sophie de Roumanie, and to insist on the phenomenological dimension of her work, that:

Before being an aesthetic thing, [color] is an “aesthetic” thing: it concerns our sensible apprehension (*aisthesis*) of the world. As such, however, it is not only the eye that it implies, nor the only perception it engages; It is the whole being, insofar as it is affected (subject to a suffering, to a pathos) and not only capable of percepts. (PINSON, 21, quotes and italics in the text, my translation)

It should be noted immediately that the notion of affect/pathos mentioned here by the poet philosopher is in no way negative in his statement and therefore the term is actually understood in a almost opposite meaning to that which Susan Sontag grants it in her own book. Undoubtedly, one understands that here lies an opposition of conceptions between a pragmatic vision on the one hand and a phenomenological one involving sensory-motor perception on the other.

To return to the landscape aspect of photography, it remains to point out, as Anne Cauquelin recalls in the work already quoted, that landscape can only be understood as a creative gesture. For a long time, the landscape and its reception were confused with the very idea of nature and the reception one could have of it⁶⁾. In reality, nature and landscape must not be confused and remain incompatible between them. Indeed, two essential facts must

6) On these questions, and the amalgams too often made between the two, as well as between the landscape-nature on the one hand and the landscape-painting on the other hand, see the introduction of the collective work *Les Inventions photographiques du paysage*, *op. cit.*

not be omitted in the comparison of the two notions. In a way, Nature exists in-itself and for-itself and has no need of the human eye to exist, whereas the landscape is a creation of man for man. It is therefore an artifact that involves fabrication and composition, and therefore no longer belongs to the natural domain.

What attracts attention in the art of Sophie de Roumanie is that she manages the photographic composition in such a way that if the first look can be caught in the trap of what it takes for the photographic rendering of a quasi *on the spot* of a *natural background*—wave, cloud, branch, mist, stone, etc.—in truth, a second more minute look can not fail to single out that without the artist's extreme attention to the *structuring* device of photographic staging, these landscapes can not take shape.

To take the example of a work that offers a reminiscence of Monet's canvas—*Coquelicots n° 5* (June 2016)—if, at first glance, it only seems to offer a close-up view of a field of poppies in spring, in reality what underlies the photography proceeds more of the *tensioning device* that is established between the two complementary green and red colors. Consequently, this device causes a form of *derealization* of the poppies themselves—and therefore their *de-naturalization*—by the focal length used by the artist in order to suspend any effect of depth, and thus reinforcing the vertical flatness of the picture; which is hence contrary to the usages that such photographs usually suggest.

The gaze is no longer simply requested to recognize a poppy field, but rather, and above all, to let oneself literally be enveloped by the composition in green and red, in order to get caught up in the compositional play between the dominant verticals of the green and the diagonals that the red flowers draw on the surface of the image. The frontality thus proposed in the composition of *Coquelicots n° 5* presupposes that the viewer, deprived of his referential habits and the contingency of the field of flowers, literally re-elaborates the colored composition and the organizational photographic rhythm, at work in the image. Where, finally, the gaze is confronted with a sort of abstract canvas consisting of green vertical lines, on which spots of intense red, distributed randomly but in a horizontal orientation, break

the uniform regularity.

Once again, it is doubtless Merleau-Ponty who, through his analyses on painting, offers a possible reading of the work of Sophie de Roumanie here evoked:

The painter's vision is not a view upon the *outside*, a merely "physical-optical" relation with the world. The world no longer stands before him through representation; rather, it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible. Ultimately the painting relates to nothing at all among experienced things unless it is first of all "autofigurative." It is a spectacle of something only by being a "spectacle of nothing," by breaking the "skin of things" to show how the things become things, how the world becomes world. (MERLEAU-PONTY, 141, emphasis and quotes in the text)

In the context of certain photographic works—to which, I would say, Sophie de Roumanie's belongs—it is possible to say that they are related to this "autofigurative" vision of a "spectacle of nothing", given that the world is no longer only perceived as the sole "representation" of an "outside" but a "coming-to-itself of the visible" through the artist's doing, "to whom the things of the world give birth" through his creative gesture.

Moreover, this relation to the photographic composition, in its doing, contradicts in its own way one of Roland Barthes' leading ideas on photography. The semiologist, like Susan Sontag, seems to reduce photography to its contingencies, forgetting in passing any form of distinction between the various possible photographic uses. Photographic art thus does not exist in his eyes, except in the eye of the "spectator" and almost never in that of the "operator"⁷⁾. Thus, Barthes considers that:

7) Roland Barthes defines *Operator* and *Spectator* as two of the "three practices" that constitute photography: "to do, to undergo, to look". He then adds that "The *Operator* is the Photographer. The *Spectator* is ourselves, all of us who glance through collections of photographs—in magazines and news papers, in books,

A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not *immediately* or *generally* distinguished from its referent [...]. By nature, the Photograph (for convenience's sake, let us accept this universal, which for the moment refers only to the tireless repetition of contingency) has something tautological about it: a pipe, here, is always and intractably a pipe. (BARTHES, 5, emphases in the translation)

Yet very early on, through his paradoxical paintings “This is not a pipe”⁸⁾, Magritte had succeeded in highlighting that a pipe's representation—like any object—offers only an image of the said pipe, and never provides the object itself. And the transition from painting to photography does not change the inherent distance that the creative gesture establishes between the object and its representation. Consequently, as we have seen with *Coquelicots n° 5*, the photographic gesture, no less, allows a detachment from the contingency, which allows us to avoid, even to subvert, all tautology through the creative gesture that Barthes has particularly underestimated in his text.

To go further, one could probably say that the essence of photography—if one has to find one—is always to be already a mock of reference. Photography is thus deliberately established at the interface between the object to be represented and its representation itself. A kind of filter is established immediately in the moment of the photographic taking; which is incarnated through the photographic gesture itself, and which is therefore intrinsic to it. In other words, to regard photography as indistinct from its referent is, in a way, to be *transfixed* by the referential illusion of its gesture, and it amounts to erasing the creative gesture.

albums, archives...” (BARTHES, 9, emphasis in the text)

8) Known under this generic title by the general public, the two paintings referred to here were painted in 1929 for the first one: *The Treachery of Images*; and in 1966 for the second: *The Two Mysteries*.

Ethics of color

The difficulty of not being paralyzed by the contingency of the photographic object is itself intrinsically reinforced by the fact that the notion of landscape turns out to be twice as double: *outside* and *inside* the canvas, the landscape oscillates no less, to put it quickly, between objectivity and subjectivity. This effect of definitional hybridity is itself multiplied tenfold when it comes to landscape color photography, since, similarly, the definition of color—from Locke’s first work on the issue published in 1689 (LOCKE, 1972), reveals itself to be heterogeneous. Difficult, therefore, not to be caught up in the mimetic play of *plastic reproduction*—in the most agreed sense of the term and its aesthetic effects.

To take up the definition of landscape, in reality it is no less than three definitions that must be confronted in order to form an idea of what the word means. *Le Littré* gives the following definitions: “1. Scope of the country seen from a single aspect”, “2. Kind of painting whose object is the representation of rural sites”, “3. Picture which represents a landscape”. In other words, the landscape is instituted as, and at the same time establishes, the *represented* place, but also the *representation* of this place and even the *aesthetic genre* that gives substance to the artistic object—whether one speaks of painting and/or photography. From then on, one can only follow the question raised by Pierre-Henry Frangne and Patricia Limido in the introduction to their collective work on landscape photography: “The dictionary does not tell us how we move from the country to its pictorial representation, nor from the painting to the perception of reality...” (FRANGNE and LIMIDO, 9, my translation). We can add to this thought the fact that nowhere, no less, the link between the *represented* object, its *representation* and the *aesthetic genre* that gives it body is dully explained. The definition is, to say the least, nebulous.

The confusion is growing, and reflection becomes even more difficult when one tries to confront this definition with the theory of colors that still today largely resides in the works of predecessors like Descartes, Locke, Goethe or Newton on perception. Thus, if one takes up the remarks of the phenomenologist Claude Romano on color, we can see that any attempting

of theorization of the question is confronted with a constitutive aporia of the same level as with regard to the landscape. Indeed, a philosopher of sciences could still declare in 1995, that:

Despite the remarkable advance made in the study of colour vision in this century, the issue of the ontology of colour is not only undecided, but remains basically within the problem-space of objectivism versus subjectivism inherited from Newton and Locke. (THOMPSON, 105)

And for good reason, since Newton and Locke, the theory of colors, both in its scientific and philosophical aspects, has not been able to resolve the question of its nature⁹). Objective—emanating from the objects themselves—or subjective—resulting from the observer’s perception of colors—neither of the two options seem to provide an adequate or definitive solution to the question. Perhaps, quite simply, because the theory of color can only depend on both at the same time. If one refers to the debates that these questions have caused over the centuries, it seems that a fundamental oversight remains from one research to another. The blind point, around which these theories are elaborated, thus engenders a fundamental lack of seeing¹⁰.

In a certain way, two ideas seem perfectly neglected through these different reasonings about color. On the one hand, it exists only as long as it is identified as such. As Anne Cauquelin recalls in her book, the Greeks do not seem to have had a word to describe the blue color, so they never refer to it in their writings. Similarly, some contemporary peoples—such as the Himbas of Namibia—do not necessarily recognize it, even though they may possess a very rich vocabulary to designate different shades of other colors—the Himbas, to continue with the same example, are able to identify

9) Recent scientific studies on the nature of light, from Christian Huygens’ original works published in 1690 (*Treatise on Light*), confirm that in reality light works on a wave/corpuscle duality. However, it seems that, for scientists, this dual theory does not explain the color relationship satisfactorily.

10) For a critical reading of the different theories on color since Descartes see: ROMANO, *De la couleur*, Chatou, Éditions de La Transparence, 2010.

a vast spectrum of greens, for which Westerners do not necessarily have as much subtlety.

On the other hand, this linguistic ability to identify these colors is systematically accompanied by a symbolic-moral valuation independent of the colors themselves; but which nonetheless reinforces the aesthetic value which can then be conferred upon them¹¹). To take a well-known example, the notion of mourning was frequently associated with a particular color in different dominant cultures, but it can vary drastically. Black was adopted in Europe around the 16th/17th centuries, whereas white was the favorite in the countries of the Far East, such as India, China or Japan.

To return to our initial questions, the ambivalence of colors, oscillating between objectivity and subjectivity, from the point of view of their perception as well as their meaning, can therefore only generate an ambiguity in their confrontation with that of the notion of landscape. Consequently, the contingency which seems to be the basis for the practice of landscape photography also rests, in fact, on the preconception that color is, on the one hand, intrinsic to the photographic object itself and, likewise, on the other hand, to the landscape image itself.

In other words, color would bring nothing more to the produced photographic work, inasmuch as color would in fact be intrinsic to its photographic reproduction. Moreover, the fact that one can take photographs in black and white does not change much to this initial preconception. In fact, black and white photography—even at the time when color did not yet exist—had long had the ambition of translating—as far as possible, and as clearly as possible for the viewer—the tonalities of colors, that the photographer had under his eyes, through the varied shades of blacks and whites that he was likely to transpose into his shots. And it somewhat was in this transliteration of colors towards black and white that the technical skill of the artist was then recognized.

11) Here, among other things, one thinks of the division which has been established in the West between warm and cold colors; Beneficial and evil colors, etc.

This preconception, tying into a single movement the act of photography and colors of the landscape, at the same time dismisses the color photography as a creative act. By putting under erasure any inventive poetic act in the gesture. In a way, one could say that—work on color through black and white photography having been replaced by color photography itself—it is considered nowadays that any work on color would operate a form of redundancy of the photographic gesture itself, since it would have the sole ambition of showing only the colors of the landscape. In other words, this relationship between photography and colors joins, according to another bias, the preconceived idea enunciated by Roland Barthes on the contingency of photography in its relation to the represented object.

The works of Sophie de Roumanie, among others, highlight, *per contra*, through their elaboration, that the relationships between colors and shapes do not just intend to display how the colors of nature are seen by the photographer, but rather that these can have a *pictorial* aspect for the eye. Once they have been reworked by the artist. It has been partly seen through the works evoked—*Dans les cieux* and *Coquelicots n° 5*—it is possible though to put it even more prominently with the works *Voyage* (January 2015) and *Carnac dans la brume* (June 2015).

In both cases, the artist favored tints with light contrasts. Not only because she prefers to work at times when the light is soft, but also, and above all, because these attenuated contrasts allow her to induce an atmosphere—and thus transmit a state of mind to the viewer. Thus, to quote again our interview:

I had a project a few years ago to photograph the megaliths of Carnac in the mist. I watched the weather predictions for a good week before getting a time frame in which to work. I needed warm conditions during the day, then a cold night to follow which would allow for the mist to shroud the standing stones at dawn, a time that would provide the mood I was after which would hopefully create the ethereal, mysterious, close to mystical atmosphere that I had in mind for the final images. When the time seemed right, I traveled down to

the location and got the photographs I had been after.

In a similar way, in *Voyage*, for a moment, the spectator is seized with a very slight dizziness. The organization of the photographic space, as well as the work on the nuances of colors, tends to suspend the vision of the viewer a fraction of a second, when the latter thinks he is confronted, in the lower part of the photograph, with an ocean and not a cloudy mass—as in its upper part in reality. For a second, when the gaze arises on the image, the sheep shapes of the clouds below take the appearance of small waves. Now, from the following second, the sight of the spectator's eye is restored to its right. Nevertheless, after this first disturbance, the floating of the gaze, between the two visions, remains operational in the apprehension of the image.

The other interest of the photography, when one has the chance to see it in the proper format (42x59.4cm), is that it then reveals almost in its middle an intruder that a reduced format does not allow to grasp. This double folded interpretation of the picture thus not only works on the idea of travel, oscillating between sky and sea, but it also works on a *mise en abyme* of the said journey. As a matter of fact, an airplane, almost imperceptible in size, reveals itself. Lost between the different gray shades of the shadows of the cloud mass, the plane almost drowns itself in the painting. It is of course the eye of the photographer who managed to grasp this dimension of nesting trips into each other—sky; sea; Photographer taking a plane from another plane, etc.—and which consequently seizes the gaze of the spectator. Now, the work on the grays and golds that irradiate the work tend, in the same gesture, to make forget the evanescent presence of the plane thus virtually retracted from the eyesight. From then on, this work offers a kind of game of track to the spectator, enjoined to stay attentive to the least visual, and literally pictorial, detail of the photography.

In the case of *Carnac dans la brume*, it is the play on transparency/opacity that allows the operation of the mist rising from the ground—and which in its own way replays the principle of the *sfumato* dear to Leonardo da Vinci—, which offers a vision no longer *derealizing* but *unrealising* the place.

The nuance is important. The landscape is here literally elaborated not only by the quality of the ambient atmosphere at the time of the shooting, but also by the variations brought afterward by the artist. The site, already known for its somewhat “esoteric”—or “mystical” spirit, to use Sophie de Roumanie’s expression—, is here reinforced in its archetype by the work done on the mist; which seems not only to rise from the ground, but to envelop and circumvent it. As thus as announcing some magic event. In a certain way, the stones of Carnac take on a somewhat Gothic aspect of abandoned tombs, from which resurrected bodies could arise.

In other words, in this case, the viewer finds himself confronted with an *unreal* world—fantastic, “which does not appear real”¹²—and no longer *derealizing*, “which breaks relations with the real”¹³, meaning drawing objects to a form of abstraction. Even if, of course, this second option remains no less conceivable here.

To conclude, this work on color and light in landscape photography, cleverly elaborated in the work of Sophie de Roumanie, is also accompanied by an “*aesthetic*” relationship (PINSON) between the photographer and his/her environment—and not “Nature”—and, consequently, with the viewer, as the artist explains in the interview she kindly granted me:

my depiction and choice in what to show is to bring forth the beauty, the perfection of nature defined, so we can protect it, nurture it, care for it, and preserve it. Aside from an intellectual thought process, and the technicalities of how to take a given image, it is also an emotional one in this respect.

The aesthetic stakes of photographic creation are thus reinforced by the desire to require the spectator’s reflection on what will become of these

12) See: <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/irréel>

13) See: <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/déréalisant>

landscapes in the near future. Here we could reinvest in part a quotation already mentioned above, taken from the *Invention of landscape* by Anne Cauquelin, where the philosopher explains that:

The image at the same time mocks and fills me, gives and withdraws a reality, the one I acknowledge to know. The image makes this thin line of knowledge falter. Seeing, path of knowledge beyond knowledge, the eye is that window through which I understand things. (CAUQUELIN, 60, my translation)

Moving from an aesthetic point of view to the deontological's one on the environment, this statement remains nonetheless relevant to the scope of landscape photography. What is given as "known" to be landscape is almost virtually retracted as such in the same gesture—the image "withdraws a reality". Overall, global warming, the melting of the poles—and consequently the rise in the level of the sea that accompanies it—as well as all the forms of natural disasters that are bound to multiply due to rising temperatures, somehow announce that these landscapes are destined to disappear as we know them, or as we believe we know them. So, in these pictures, we see what will soon be no more, knowing it—or trying to forget that we know it. These photos would then be called upon to become the ghostly clues of what these landscapes had been.

It would therefore be no less pertinent to question the art of landscape photography from the point of view of ecocriticism, which aims to put environmental issues at the heart of both the aesthetic and the ethical points of view.

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Sophie de Roumanie
Interview by Olivier Ammour-Mayeur

1/ To begin, could you explain in as much detail as possible how you relate your work with environmental issues?

So many facets of Nature have been damaged or destroyed. We have provoked climate change to accelerate, causing all sorts of problems, social and economic, species extinction etc. Other emerging issues will cause more migration, imbalance, strife, war, etc. It is all connected and forms a new and dangerous whole in which we will have to adapt. This has greatly influenced my photography.

Through my work, I try to convey a sense of Nature. Our busy lives have in many cases taken us away from the essence of nature itself. We have schedules and we have time frames to respect, places to go, deadlines to keep.

A lot of the time we miss what is right in front of us, like the way the light hits a stalk of grass, renders a flower petal translucent, the way the evening breeze affects a wheat field, and the little things of life that are soothing, calming, meditative, things that we tend to sometimes feel immune to, even on an unconscious level, in our modern way of life.

I attempt to translate a sense of slowing down to a more “natural” rhythm, and a chance to bring to the forefront what is often missed, and maybe in some cases unattainable. I hope to trigger a sense of belonging in the purest sense, because we are part of the whole, and we need to remember this.

The beauty of Nature is all around us, and by bringing to people images of natural elements in my landscapes and seascapes I hope to give rise to some peacefulness and harmony to the viewer, a reminder of the importance of the natural world, where we are kinder and more gentle, more caring.

I use my camera to convey the perception of what I am feeling and the vision I have of any given scene for this purpose.

2/ For you, how does the aesthetic work of photography support the idea of preserving the environment?

I live in the country, so I am naturally aware of it.

As far as I am concerned in my photographic field, our job is, of course, to convey something visually. I personally try to convey the beauty of nature, and therefore the environment through my images. I could very well show images of pollution, of chemical waste, birds covered in oil from a spill, etc. But this is not how I've been working up until now.

Each artist has a way of depicting a given scene, and my depiction and choice in what to show is to bring forth the beauty, the perfection of nature defined, so we can protect it, nurture it, care for it, and preserve it. Aside from an intellectual thought process, and the technicalities of how to take a given image, it is also an emotional one in this respect.

Showing destruction might trigger a more violent and negative emotion, but I prefer to stay at the other end of the scale.

I'd like to mention that Ansel Adams, the renowned American photographer whom I greatly admire, was also a fierce environmentalist, and his compulsion to photograph the wonders of Yosemite, contributed to creating several national parks in America. This helped me to understand how landscape—and seascape—photography can be put to use to be helpful, to bring awareness, to protect, to raise money, and lobby etc., as far as Nature is concerned.

3/ Is there a deliberate spiritual dimension in your work? And if so, could you expand on that?

There is no deliberate spiritual purpose to my photography per se. However, the experience in front of breathtaking scenes, or how the light hits the subject in a certain way, how the composition works, say with dramatic clouds, or when all the elements come together to create what I can only describe as God winking at us, is extraordinary!

At moments such as these, I feel the magic, the wonder of it all, and it is very moving. To me these are spiritual moments. When a moment, a glimpse into perfection suddenly presents itself, in the way only Nature can. It is truly humbling!

The feeling of the magic operating is physical, I can feel it in my fingers as I manipulate my camera. It is a generous gift from what I'd like to think comes from the Universe itself, the power beyond. That to me is profoundly spiritual. Each time I set out for a shoot, I secretly hope that it will happen.

4/ What is immediately striking in your photographs is the intense use you make of light. Could you explain where the inspiration for this technique comes from?

Without light, there is no image. That is how the camera works. It's as simple as that. And so the photographer uses the light, whether artificial or natural to create a given image. I like dramatic scenes, where the light hits a given subject a certain way. I prefer to work in the early morning or in the evening, when the light is gentle, with long shadows etc. Photographing at midday in the bright summer sun for example is the time of day I avoid if I can help it. The light is too harsh, the contrast too pronounced, at that time of day.

5/ To continue talking about light, is it your years spent in the United States, in particular, that fed this fascination? Or does it also come from other experiences?

There are of course, some amazing light situations in America, but that goes for everywhere else as well. I simply use the light that is available to me when it becomes special, noticeably beautiful, out of the ordinary, anywhere I am.

For me, light is like a tool, and with my other tool that is my camera, I can bring an image to the viewer that is worth sharing. There are light situations that are unique, and in different seasons and periods of the year, and of course different times of day. Each can be incredibly special. That, combined with the elements such as skies, mist, waves, vistas, etc., can bring forth something unique.

I look forward to each season for the magic of the specific light that each provide. Knowing which kind of light will emerge from a given situation in a specific time of year comes with experience, so one knows what to look for as time goes by. I find this really exciting.

6/ On your website you quote the great American landscape photographer Ansel Adams (1902-1984), who explains: "A great photograph is one that fully expresses what one feels, in the deepest sense, about what is being photographed". First of all, did you have a chance to meet him personally? And was it this photographer that instilled your desire to become one yourself?

I had never met Ansel Adams. I only really discovered his work while I was studying photography, so no, he was not decisive in my choosing photography. However, he was an important reference during my studies being one of the pioneers of modern photography. His photographs

are masterpieces, and have influenced my own work. The beauty of his compositions, among other things, gives his images a balance that I find more than attractive, and this has helped train my eye. I have the utmost respect for his work, and how he got to creating his masterpieces.

7/ As a follow-up to the previous question, is it possible to say that working on color is for you a sort of tribute to Adams' work in black and white, while at the same time detaching itself from it?

Digital photography is somewhat different from film photography, so my photographs are very different from his. Ansel Adams has indeed influenced me, if only by the remarkableness of his body of work, and skills in the darkroom.

However, he is not the only photographer I admire, I admire other photographers work. There are a lot of brilliant photographers out there today!

I try to create images that reflect my personal take on a given subject, while learning from the others on simply improving my work continuously. I try to use their examples of excellence, notably Ansel Adams' in order to create the best images that I can, on my own, in order to be the best "image maker" that I can be.

8/ Finally, could you explain your work flow and process? What is your "photographic mode of operation"? Do you "hunt" everyday, or only some days? And how does the question of weather figure into this schedule. You are obviously attentive to it, but how much do you consider meteorology in your work as a landscape photographer?

One would expect me to take my camera wherever I go, always. But this is

not necessarily the case. I plan my shoots, with a specific project in mind, and go from there. I am dependent on the weather of course, so if it rains, the light might not correspond to what I have in mind, so I wait until the conditions allow me to follow through what I intended to do.

I had a project a few years ago to photograph the megaliths of Carnac in the mist. I watched the weather predictions for a good week before getting a time frame in which to work. I needed warm conditions during the day, then a cold night to follow which would allow for the mist to shroud the standing stones at dawn, a time that would provide the mood I was after which would hopefully create the ethereal, mysterious, close to mystical atmosphere that I had in mind for the final images. When the time seemed right, I traveled down to the location and got the photographs I had been after.

I plan my shoots, and work with the elements to bring the project to fruition. It is not regular due to the weather factor. At times it doesn't work out, and one has to go back to the drawing board, and plan again, go back to the location, sometimes several times in order to be successful.

I usually have a vision in my mind of what I want to obtain, like to the megaliths of Carnac project. The secret is patience, and then there is the time in the "digital darkroom" to create the images of the initial vision.

There are some purists who feel that creating an image this way is artificial, but if they only knew the tricks I learnt from Ansel Adams! His photographs didn't just appear the way we see them. There were hours and hours in the darkroom to create the gems that are exhibited all over the world today.

I had already developed my own tricks in the university darkroom years before digital photography was invented, and I've had to learn to translate the same techniques digitally. I still have a lot to learn.

Résumé

Si l'on fait le bilan, en 2017 encore, la photographie de paysage reste la mal aimée de l'analyse esthétique. Bien que les monographies, individuelles ou collectives, d'une grande qualité se soient multipliées du côté des ouvrages portant sur les photographes de paysages, les études théoriques sur le genre, elles, restent rares. À moins qu'il ne s'agisse de livres portant sur les techniques photographiques paysagères. Un peu comme si le paysage nécessitait un apprentissage particulier, sans pour autant atteindre à une esthétique singulière digne d'attention.

En s'intéressant aux œuvres de Sophie de Roumanie, cet article entend porter un regard critique et théorique sur la question du paysage en photographie, en montrant en quoi ce genre, jusqu'à présent plutôt négligé, n'a rien d'un plat « exercice de style » pour photographe amateur, ni d'un simple succédané de la peinture de paysage qui dominait avant l'apparition de l'appareil photographique. S'il est établi depuis plusieurs décennies maintenant que la photographie représente bien un art en soi, il convient maintenant de regarder le genre paysager au plus près, afin d'en analyser les tenants esthétiques et poétiques.