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Impressive landscapes: Entanglements of nature and culture.

Challenging the modern divide between culture and nature, this study focuses on the multiple ways in which a supposedly passive nature – cut through by roads and railways, ordered and laid out for the eye of the traveler – develops an agency of its own; interacting with the people who build, experience, and perceive the landscape.¹ Treating what is presented as nature and what is construed as culture symmetrically, it becomes obvious that both can be the sources of change and adaptation. The materiality of things (rocks, plants, architecture, artifacts, animals, and human bodies) is in a constant process of change. Mountains erode, travelers tire, storms make trees crash onto rails, dead animals rot at the side of the road, and roadwork change the path of rivers. These processes influence the perceptions of those using and experiencing the landscape, establishing an “aesthetic” realm which conditions our conceptions of the landscape’s aesthetic quality. The experience of the sublime is a good example of this. The experience of awe when confronted with the horrible and incomprehensible in nature is related, both in Burke’ian and Kantian aesthetics, to the experience of an unbounded power unfolding itself beyond the reach of our senses.² Using the sublime as an “aesthetic” category, this study explores how the experience of the road is impacted by its diverse, dynamic, and often incomprehensible materiality.

Two processes come to the centre of attention here, both indicating ways in which landscapes and roads develop aesthetic and cultural agency. (a) Erosion: The slow deterioration and change of paths, landscapes, things, and people (in a biographical as well as an every-day perspective, as aging and fatigue). (b) Sudden discontinuities: Fires, floods, storm damage, ice rain etc. have a distinct impact on nature and architecture as well as on the way they are experienced. They interrupt and reorder supposedly stable settings and accelerate change. To deal with these challenging phenomena, the project employs a set of innovative methodological strategies serving to give full credit to the material aspect of its subject matter. Video-ethnography, photography and the quasi-archeological examination of places and artifacts will offer new perspectives on landscape and the way it encompasses very peculiar dynamics that constantly re-order and re-configure the aesthetic as well as the material.³

¹ This perspective is inspired by among others B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press 1993.

² E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford U P 1990, and I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Frankfurt a M: Suhrkamp 1977.

³ C. Goodwin, and U. Kissmann, (eds.) *Video Interaction Analysis: And How to Do it*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag 2008, and J. Collier and M. Collier. *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press 1986.