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AURORA LANDSCAPES: THE AFFECTS OF LIGHT AND DARK

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses upon tourism in Iceland to see the Aurora Borealis in order to investigate the experience of landscape in the light of recent theories. The aurora, or Northern Lights, are a diverse array of shards, veils, ribbons, curtains, cascades, flashes, beams and numerous other effusions that constitute an ever-shifting panoply of light in the Northern skies of the world. A widespread desire to witness them has given rise to an expanding tourist sector where visitors travel to an increasing number of destinations within or near to the Arctic Circle. Iceland is one of the most popular destinations, where aurora tourists either reside in urban centres and venture into rural settings at night on organised trips or stay in rural settings where the lights may be witnessed in situ. Sightings, however, cannot be guaranteed even if the ideal wintry conditions of clear skies prevail. The aurora have become an integral part of Iceland's tourist branding and they intersect with broader notions about the experience of its landscape, as we will see.

In tourism and more extensively, depictions of the aurora borealis revolve around rather prosaic scientific explanations. The lights are caused by great streams of electrically charged particles blown from the sun by the solar wind at enormous speed that are attracted to the earth's magnetic poles. These potentially devastating electrons are shielded from the earth by its magnetic field but glow when they collide with the gases in the ionosphere (that part of the earth's atmosphere that roughly extends from 60 to 600 kilometres above the surface). The dancing lights are caused by the magnetic field buckling as it is hit by high-velocity gusts of these particles.

However, technical depictions of the Aurora are usually regarded as insufficient by those who experience them, and this is acknowledged by the *Iceland on the Web* website: 'by all means don't let any scientific explanation spoil your appreciation of the beauty of the Northern Lights. They are a truly impressive spectacle, whatever their cause'. Savage similarly remarks that '(T)he aurora is not just a puzzle to solve; it is a mystery to experience' (2001: 129). Indeed, the magical qualities of the aurora typically shape appeals to those who might be tempted to come to the North to witness them:

Mystery and wonder shroud the northern lights, otherwise known as the aurora borealis. Mesmerizing, stunning, other-worldly are just a few words used to describe the experience of watching this spectacular phenomenon. When conditions are favourable this fantastical display lights up the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions, leaving all who catch a glimpse of this magical wonder (*Discover the World* website)

In what follows, I explore the ways in which representations of sites and recommended strategies in tourist literature highlight particular approaches to the

experience of landscape. After this, I investigate how a consideration of the much neglected relationship of light to landscape, and specifically the aurora, might add to broader understanding. This is followed by an examination of the more-than-visual, sensual, embodied apprehension of the aurora, before exploring how vitalist notions of landscape can be enhanced by considering the Lights. Next, I consider how these experiences might inform an appreciation of the relationship between landscape and affect, before concluding with a discussion of the excessive qualities of landscape and the limits of representation as exemplified by responses to the aurora.

TOURIST DOXA AND SENSUAL EXPERIENCE

Entry into any form of space or landscape is surrounded by a host of conventions about what that realm is *for*, what modes of comportment, communication and other forms of bodily practice are appropriate. For instance, it is frequently imagined that to walk in rural settings is to cast off the cloak of self-consciousness and expressive identity that may accompany urban pedestrianism (Edensor, 2000). These conventions of practice and performance also resound throughout tourism (Edensor, 2001; 2007), which might be conceived as a habitual way of being in the world, accompanied by a common-sense understanding that it is a cultural right and a normative leisure practice to go to other places in order to witness different cultures, historical sights, food, natural histories and landscapes. This doxa, with its focus on belonging (to the world) and becoming, with a high value placed on forms of self-development, is replete with unreflexive, practical, embedded codes of performance, and when collectively enacted, particular place ballets are produced whereby regular routes and stages of experiencing place are consolidated in tourist landscapes (Edensor, 1998). The specific practice of sightseeing is a tourist endeavour informed by doxic understandings about what kinds of social and somatic practices should be undertaken in the realm of 'nature' in order to consume landscape (Adler, 1989). In western tourism, Urry argues that such confrontations are conditioned by the imperative to enact a solitary, romantic gaze (1990), where the landscape is appraised according to particular aesthetic criteria, sites and scenes are photographed, noise minimised, and a sense of wonder and appreciation is communicated to fellow tourists.

However, the expansion of tourism into ever more spaces and practices has produced numerous ways of experiencing the landscape alongside this distancing visual apprehension. For instance, the rise in adventure sports tourism means that the landscape in destinations such as New Zealand is appraised and experienced as a realm for physically intense escapades, of visceral plunges, immersive engagement and tactile enervation in which the visual senses are relegated to a subsidiary role. More broadly, we might question this over-emphasis on visual consumption by acknowledging the host of other sensations that are produced when tourists interact with space and landscape (Edensor, 2006). The graininess of sand and the swelter of sunbathing, the swash of the waves and sound of the seagulls foreground non-visual sensations in beach tourism. Accordingly, it is crucial to acknowledge the different forms of landscape that proliferate throughout an expanding tourism, recognise the conventions through which they are pleurably experienced, and take stock of the affordances within which tourists are enmeshed and that inculcate ways of being and sensing. For tourists, like other people, reproduce space through the reiteration of conventional performance but they also sense *with* the landscape. Emphatically then,

despite the unreflexive consistencies of tourist doxa, practical embodied conventions do not necessarily restrict phenomenological, sensual, social and imaginative experience, for they are always apt to be confounded by the excessive or ineffable qualities of landscape as I will later discuss. In order to explore these affordances in more depth, I now explore the unregarded energies of light and dark in conceptions of landscape.

LANDSCAPE AND LIGHT

Light is an integral part of space yet the very word landscape seems to exclude the celestial, focusing upon that which is of the earth, the realm that extends away before us, the landforms, contours and configurations, geomorphologies, natural histories, cultural inscriptions and distinctive features of particular kinds of *terra firma*. This absence becomes even more glaringly evident when we investigate notions of the landscape at night for as Jakle notes, 'landscape has been conceptualised primarily in terms of daytime use' (2001: vii). Despite the fact that most forms of familiar space are illuminated for much of the time, depending upon season, theories invariably focus upon that which is perceived during daylight, although the landscape at night, with its illuminated and dark areas, possesses enormously different qualities and is apprehended in very different ways to the daylit landscape. The lighting of modern cities has transformed nocturnal urban experience, the distribution of artificial illumination producing cityscapes of regulation, hierarchical selectiveness, consumption, fantasy and imagination (McQuire, 2005; Edensor and Millington, 2011), yet thus far, academic writing has focused upon the cityscape by day. Similarly, the luminescent qualities of the non-urban landscape have been wholly neglected although a brief consideration of landscape painting reveals that artists have expended much effort trying to 'capture' the effects of the light: for they 'know that to paint... a "landscape" is to paint both earth and sky, and that earth and sky blend in the perception of a world in continuous formation' (Ingold, 2005: 104)

Nevertheless, the relationship of the sun, moon and stars and more evanescent illuminations caused by lightning, rainbows, will o' the wisp, fireflies and a range of atmospheric phenomena are rarely discussed in conceptions of landscape. This is despite the ways in which sunsets and sunrises bathe landscapes in glowing hues, transforming the perception and feel of space, as exemplified in popular depictions of landscape in relation to the effects of the sun, where people talk of a pitiless glare, a rosy glow, or thin shafts of winter sunlight. Moreover, regions and nations acquire associations related to the qualities of the light with which they are suffused. Toxic but spectacular sunsets differentiate Los Angeles from the impassive sun beating down on the dunes of the Sahara or the ever changing panoply of cloud and sun in North-West Scotland's skies.

In conceiving of the intrinsic entanglement of landscape and light we can draw a parallel with Tim Ingold's discussion of forms of weather, elements which equally lack the solidity associated with illumination. Like light, wind, clouds and fog have frequently been ontologically conceived as the immaterial opposite of the concrete earthliness of the land, around and above which they swirl and float. Ingold draws attention to Gibson's notion that the features of the earth – as opposed to more evanescent qualities of the sky – are akin to 'furniture', as if the earth is always already

equipped, like a stage set, with its fixtures and fittings. However, he argues, this congealed, static understanding of earthly fixity misses entirely the state of flux in which the world is always enmeshed, the 'dynamic processes of world-formation in which both perceivers and the phenomena they perceive are necessarily immersed' (Ingold, 2007: s29). A refutation of the distinction between material and immaterial qualities foregrounds instead a conception of the landscape as a fluid and becoming entity, an indivisible field. Stars, cloud and sunsets, are not objects but

rather an incoherent, vaporous tumescence that swells and is carried along in the currents of the medium. To observe the clouds is not to view the furniture of the sky but to catch a fleeting glimpse of a sky-in-formation, never the same from one moment to the next (ibid: s28).

Similarly, the land is similarly continuously in formation, despite the illusion of stability. Moreover, the whole landscape is a heterogeneous medium of sensual, affective and emotional experience in which the light, the weather and the ground underfoot are not merely external objects available for inspection and perception, for the perceiver is inextricably entangled with that which is perceived:

(T)o inhabit the open world, then, is to be immersed in the fluxes of the medium: in sunshine, rain, and wind. This immersion, in turn, underwrites our capacities respectively – to see, hear, and touch. (ibid: s30)

These media thus condition the limits and possibilities of what can be apprehended and in this realm, light is a medium of perception productive of 'the experience of inhabiting the world of the visible, and its qualities – of brilliance and shade, tint and colour, and saturation (Ingold, 2005: 101). Light is thus 'immanent in the life and consciousness of the perceiver as it unfolds within the field of relations established by way of his or her presence within a certain environment' (ibid: 99). Crucially, the land is not 'an interface' separating earth and sky but is a 'vaguely defined zone of admixture and intermingling' (Ingold, 2007: s33). Similar to weather, the light continuously enfolds and is enfolded into the world to produce the ever-shifting qualities of landscape and provide the means through which it is perceived:

However, having discussed light, and insisted that it is an integral part of the landscape and not separate from it, we also need to explore its absence, for to see in and with the dark is to see otherwise, to apprehend space as an entity that lacks the complex configurations sensed by day, to not see certain features of the landscape at all, but to see others vividly.

The expansion of electric lighting across most spaces in the West has resulted in what is increasingly regarded as an over-illuminated world, where darkness is hard to find. For instance, the growing *Campaign for Dark Skies* points to an aesthetic loss as well as the environmental, social, health and economic problems produced by poor and excessive electric illumination. In the countries of Northern Europe, with their very short periods of wintry daylight and contrasting summers filled with 24 hours of daylight, light, or its lack, is central to seasonal experience. In winter, across sparsely populated tracts of land there is the promise of a kind of darkness that lies beyond the reddish glow of human settlement. This Northern darkness attracts those who wish to move away from over-illuminated landscapes, and to experience a denser darkness

against which the Northern Lights may be witnessed. Indeed, as is emphasised in promotional literature and by those who watch the Lights, the ideal conditions for viewing are when the land descends into a black darkness away from the glare of urban centres.

A striking feature of the aurora is the extent to which it dominates space, especially when there is little light cast by the moon. Where this is the case, the land is contrastingly a dark gathering of matter, with few features perceptible save for the marked horizon that seems to enclose this murky mass. The constant play of light above this shadowy earth rarely suffuses the land with a warm glow as with the sun but seems to constitute a separate realm that confirms the existence of two opposite realms: light and dark. The interpenetration of light and earth is minimal and the apparently quiescent, unilluminated land seems dormant in contrast to the dynamic, shifting panoply in the heavens. It is with this surrounding darkness in mind that we can interrogate Wylie's citation of Merleau-Ponty's point that the seeing subject is always also intertwined with a consciousness that one can be seen as part of the 'landscape of visible things' (Wylie, 2007: 152), as an observable as well as observing subject. This double consciousness, further emphasising the ways in which people are part of, and not apart from, the landscape is less evident for all that may be visually perceived are perhaps a few vague outlines of the self and others. However, the presence of others is not primarily signalled by a visual evidence but by the coos and murmurs which are uttered as the aurora is beheld, the breathing and sighs, and a sense of bodily warmth and tactile presence. Here, underlining the non-visual apprehensions of landscape, we sense the presence and energies of fellow humans and generate noises and tactilities of our own through which others sense us. I will return to the effects of these inter-human sensations shortly but firstly focus further upon the impacts of the lights on spectating bodies.

THE STILL SENSING OF THE LANDSCAPES OF THE AURORA

As Ingold insists:

our experience of the weather, when out of doors, is invariably multisensory. It is just as much auditory, haptic and olfactory as it is visual; indeed in most practical circumstances these sensory modalities cooperate so closely that it is impossible to disentangle their respective contributions (2005: 97)

Of course, the tourist conventions of consuming the aurora persist in that it is primarily consumed visually, the eyes fixated on the swirling lights, and this usually occurs as a solitary practice in the presence of other fellow tourists involving little talk, although with non-linguistic verbal communication as I have mentioned. Yet while the visual consumption of the aurora predominates, non-visual apprehension of the lights and the broader landscape of which they are part emerges. For in addition to the non-visual sensations produced by other people, the landscape is surrounded by the effects of weather, the particular temperature, the wind, the sounds of rivers and streams, the levels of moisture in the atmosphere, all of which contribute to a wider sensual apprehension, though largely unreflexive.

Another sensual dimension is produced through the ground upon which one stands. While consuming the cascades of light in the skies, stance is dependent on the textures underfoot but primarily the feet remain rooted: 'For the aurora watcher, the experience is mesmerising' (Akasofu, 2009: 7). Although the experience of the aurora involves movement from a light to dark place via mechanised transport, once the sights are beheld outside the standing stillness of the observer contrasts with the whirling illuminations overhead. Falck-Yattr quotes Norwegian polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen: 'I went on deck this evening in a rather gloomy frame of mind but was nailed to the spot the moment I got outside (and saw the aurora)' (1999: 10). This motionlessness testifies to the immersion of bodies in a landscape in which they are stilled, spellbound by the flows of light. The eye moves, the pulse races. This is a stillness that is not epitomised by fatigue or lethargy (Bissell, 2009) but by being transfixed by another (heavenly) body. In contradistinction to the often hyperbolic depictions of travel and tourism as synonymous with mobility and flow, animation and flux, we might consider this stillness to be a touristic 'attunement' (Bissell and Fuller, 2009) through which the body's ability to sense landscape is enhanced. Peter Adey (2009) contends that the adoption of stillness might be conceived as a sensibility and a technique through which bodies become 'finely attuned to their exteriors... apprehending and anticipating spaces and events in ways that sees the body enveloped within the movement of the environment around it' to produce 'a heightened and contemplative sense of the moment'. In response to the capacities that inhere in this space of light and dark, a lack of self-consciousness evolves through absorption in the scene, sense-making recedes and onlookers become detached from ordinary rhythms, compulsions and anticipations, as the aurora become a moment in the flow of events. Yet connected to the huge dark land that stretches beyond the immediate spot, there is a further sense of the mass of the earth to which we are tethered by gravity. And these feelings of stillness, of connection to earth and landscape, combined with an awareness of the sounds and touch of other humans, and the shared absorption through which the tour party collectively beholds the aurora, can heighten a particularly human shared sense of *communitas* (Cocker, 2009).

Finally, there are numerous accounts, mostly dismissed by scientific research, that the Northern Lights also emit a sound as well as illumination. Whether this sense is identifiable seems dubious although some experienced observers swear that the noise is clear and audible. However, this may be an example of synaesthesia whereby the overwhelming visual impact of the lights, the pulsing and flowing, provokes deceptive sensations of noise, highlighting just how the landscape is experienced in a multi-sensory manner (see Savage, 2001). Other forms of agency are also attributed to the lights, notably that they carry a physical potential to threaten, that they might catch you and enfold you into the sky, a sensation particularly remembered by those who experienced the aurora as children. Why, Akasofu writes, 'does it seem at times that the aurora is reaching down?' (2009: 8). This is perhaps unsurprising given the force of the uninterrupted energy emitted when the lights are in full flow, as well as their otherworldliness, and these sensations are both informed by and inform the production of myths discussed shortly. It is to the extraordinary and vital energies of the aurora that I now turn in the light of recent vitalist conceptions of landscape.

VITALIST LANDSCAPES

In 2003, in his history of the ways in which landscape has been conceptualised within geography, from the Sauerian interpretations of cultural landscapes, to humanist readings of subjective meanings projected onto landscape, to the understanding of landscape as a power-laden realm that is textually read and a material expression of dominant, but precarious ideological meanings, Tim Cresswell sceptically critiques the notion that landscape retains utility as a concept. Since it is presented as a 'text already written' (ibid: 270), he contends that landscape 'does not have much space for temporality, for movement and flux, and mundane practice' and lacks an appreciated that space is processual (ibid: 269). Yet though he rightly laments the ways in which landscape is conceived as being visually apprehended, as 'an image... as fixed form of 'framing' (ibid: 275), he subsequently suggests that it might be retrievable through being conceived through a more fluid understanding that also foregrounds how it is subject to multi-sensual apprehension. In the light of this critique, it is notable that landscape has indeed recently been rescued from such immobile, visual framings, with the emergence of vitalist ideas that emphasise the processual, immanent and emergent (Wylie, 2007). In these conceptions, landscape is alive with energies, eternally fluid, its rocks, earth, vegetation and climate continually undergoing change as elements from near and far, and from different times, are entangled and folded together in a continual making. This re-vitalisation of landscape thus moves away from sedentarist, static, visually apprehended notions of landscape that suggest being and permanence.

Strikingly, such vitalist conceptions resound in the representation of Iceland's landscape, a brand identified by an appeal to non-human energies that secures a specialist niche in the global tourist supermarket. Accordingly, the lure of the Northern Lights chimes with the special emphasis placed upon the wild landscapes of Iceland, as epitomised by the following claim by the Iceland Tourist Board: 'the youthful exuberance of the land boldly greets travellers. The landscape is alive with the restless play of nature's forces'. Within this vitalist conception, the aurora further supplement the image of Iceland, the 'land of fire and ice', as a site for a more visceral engagement with landscape. With its glaciers, geysers, volcanic eruptions, rocky peaks and geothermal pools available for physical encounter or immersion, this is a wildscape that can be traversed by means of canoe and raft, crampons and ice-picks, swimming costume and backpack, a great outdoors in which bodily immersion and exertion are required. This young landscape, seething with geothermal, volcanic and climatic energies at an earthly level, is complemented by the unearthly energies which churn above the earth.

As I have emphasised, as we apprehend landscape we are immersed in the currents and energies of a world-in-formation. Plunged into light, weather and earthliness, bodies are situated in the continuous and generative becoming of the world, and any sense of a discrete embodied condition separate from this realm is deceptive. However, illusory sedentarist and reified apprehensions of landscape are produced through the persistence of dense cultural histories of representation and practical conventions about the proper disposition to adopt towards particular kinds of space. Moreover, besides these social and cultural conventions about how to read and practice landscape, the ontological conditions of human existence also curtail the ability to perceive the vital seething of certain (elements of) landscapes. Many agencies are invisible or overlooked – consider the constant recreation of the soil and the movements of bacteria and fungal spores - and numerous processes of change are

too slow for human perception. They can only be apprehended over longer periods than that of the short visit or even the human life span. Because the appearance of nature seems to be constituted by particular *discrete* agencies - the cascading of rivers, the bending of trees in the wind and the flights of birds – the connections through which *all* elements within the landscape are reproduced and transformed is imperceptible. Yet the seething animal, plant, geological, chemical and climatic energies that are in constant occurrence often only become apparent when, for instance, time-lapse photography reveals the dynamic (but slower) processes through which a flower blooms and fades, corpses decay and fungus grows. Such human limitations thus foster representations of landscape as a passive realm available to the gaze, an inert surface upon which human action takes place.

Ben Anderson (2009: 78) points to how certain features such as clouds, winds and rainbows are ‘associated with the uncertain, disordered, shifting and contingent – that which never quite achieves the stability of form’. The same is apparent in the ever-changing configurations of waves and curtains of the Northern Lights. These profoundly visible phenomena echo the less evident energies that suffuse all elements of landscapes. With the aurora therefore, the contrasting darkness and the relative seeming quiescence of the land produce the illusion that the heavens are alive whilst the earth lies dormant. The earthly topologies embedded in the relationalities, flows and networks through which the world is continually (re)produced seem absent. While the aurora emerge out of the relationality between sun, atmosphere and the earth’s gravitational pull, these forces all seem far removed from more grounded connections that make space, place and landscape. In other words, it is difficult to conceive of the aurora as being enfolded within earthly networks. This sense of disconnection contributes to the affective power of the aurora, which I now discuss.

THE FANTASTIC AND AFFECTIVE QUALITIES OF AURORA LANDSCAPES

In the promotional literature that advertises the charms of the aurora to tourists, a series of phrases and words recur: the aurora is magical’, ‘spectacular’ and ‘mystical’. It is striking that such accounts have drawn upon fantastic, supernatural and mythic explanations and these continue to resound through contemporary narratives. The oneiric qualities of the Lights are characterised by mystical tales of how they ethereally reflect the ghosts of virgins or the murdered, constitute human spirits playing with walrus skulls, are the dancing spirits of the deceased, the energies released by celestial and supernatural wars (see Akasofu, 2009; Falck-Ytter, 1999; Savage, 2001)

These myths contribute to stories of the aurora that are related and consumed prior to a period under their spell. Yet though such ideas feed into the immersive experience of the aurora landscape, they tend to be rather swamped by an immanent *affective field* in which only shreds of representation may interweave with other, stronger intensities and feelings about landscape. Dominant here is ‘the emergent and fluid dimension of how place is sensed and experienced’ (Adey, 2007: 5). The notion of affect is useful here because it highlights the transpersonal relations between elements within particular contexts and provides a broader, more-than-human concept of the social. In decentring the individual from analysis, it prompts us to think about how

different configurations of objects, technologies, energies, non-human life forms, spaces, forms of knowledge and information combine to form 'affective fields' that are distributed across particular geographical settings (Conradson and Latham, 2007).

These affective fields can also be depicted as 'temporary configurations of energy and feeling' (ibid). They are characterised by affective atmospheres, which McCormack describes as being 'something distributed yet palpable, a quality of environmental immersion that registers in and through sensing bodies whilst also remaining diffuse, in the air, ethereal' (2008: 413). Such atmospheres, as Böhme suggests, 'seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze' (1993: 114). Affect is thus generated by immersion in an atmospheric environment that folds subject and space together, occurring 'before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and in-between subject/object distinctions' (Anderson, 2009: 78). Such notions summon up the effects of the weather and the qualities of light (and dark) as they pervade space and the bodies that perceive them. Clearly, light and weather can be powerful contributory elements within these affective atmospheres. Lam (1977) asserts that electric lighting possess unique power to intentionally and unintentionally produce mood affecting qualities, from feelings of safety to urban liveliness, but the affective power of sun, stars, moon and aurora surely transcends these human-produced illuminations.

In the confrontation with the Northern Lights, the affective realm is constituted out of the elements already identified, above all, the swirling aurora, but also the pervasive dark, the black mass of the land, the temperature, the quiet, and the sounds and gestures of human bodies. This affective landscape provides an environment of energies and capacities, a context within which a body feels and acts. As Brennan notes, the transmission of affect alters the biochemistry of the subject so that the "atmosphere" or environment literally gets into the individual' (2004: 1). These sensual and biological responses to the landscape are thus further productive of the affective atmosphere. The affects generated by the coalescence of aurora, dark, temperature, silence and closeness to others thus *penetrate* the body, enfolding it into the field.

As I have described, the disposition of most visitors is to assemble and watch the heavenly dancers in stillness, and largely in silence apart from the odd expression or sigh. Such conventional tourist procedures and habits and the immersion in an affective atmosphere generate an attunement to space. The expression of such an engagement further promotes a kind of affective contagion. The gestures of bodies, their postures, and especially their stillness, set the tone for the experience and practice of the landscape, acting upon other bodies to maintain the collective disposition. As Sarah Ahmed insists, affects and emotions 'are also *about* attachments, about what connects us to this or that' (2004: 27) and to other people. They also prevent a sense of detachment from others. Bound together with the landscape, the affective sense of *communitas* mentioned above is engendered through a connectivity to the landscape and to others under the spell of the aurora

THE INEFFABLE, SUBLIME LANDSCAPES OF AURORA

I have highlighted the perceived disconnection between the numerous scientific explanations of the Northern Lights, and the experience of them and the tendency to seek recourse in mythological accounts. The aurora is thus an excellent example of the ways in which the experience of the excessive qualities of landscape confounds attempts to represent it. Encountering the Northern Lights dramatises the ineptitude of words to capture the apprehension of their affective and sensual qualities, although mythical interpretations symbolise their powerful impact upon observers.

One mystery contributing to their ineffability concerns the perceived location of the aurora. Are they part of the world or otherworldly? And how far are they from the earth? The stars are regarded as being unfathomably remote from the earth and part of a borderless immensity, and our own star, the sun, is understood to be a great distance from the earth, though it gives it life. The moon, although now reachable, is conceived as being outside the orbit of the earth, although phenomena of illumination that are enclosed within the earth's atmosphere, such as rainbows and clouds, are apprehended as much closer at hand. The perception of the distance of the aurora is informed by their seemingly minimal impact on the earth, unlike the weather with which the earth is inextricably entangled. They neither heat the earth nor bestow much light on it like the sun, but seem disconnected from all else, impassively aloof from earthly immediacies. The impression is that the aurora belongs to a space to which we do not belong, and it thus has no relationship to the endless production of the landscape. Similarly, it belongs to a temporality that transcends human history and the formation of the landscape, blurring notions of past, present and future.

This impression of the aurora seems to disavow the conception of the landscape as a congeries of relationalities, endlessly reproduced through a vitalist, dynamic materiality, as discussed above. The notion of landscape as constituted out of manifold, earthly connections that are intertwined in continuous and dynamic production can acknowledge the connective tissue that connects sun and earth, the sun being a part of the landscape whose every feature has depended and continues to depend upon it. The gaze of the observer, which has a propensity to follow the contours of land, the windings routes or distinctive features of the landscape, might look upwards and consider how the landscape is not bounded by the earth but is partly produced by the connective flows between solar system and earth. With the aurora, such connection seems obscure, cannot be perceived or understood..

In a different vein, the consumer of landscape frequently imagines the histories and lives of those who have forged the land and continue to dwell within it. Apprehension is intimately related to the attempts of humans to identify evidence of the social and cultural processes that have produced a lived landscape. However, the emergent landscapes of Iceland lack such signs of human agency. Yet despite this, the observer may empathise with other aspects, for eye might try to recoup what it might be like to feel the texture of rocky land underneath, the visceral force of the raging torrent or the splash of icy water. But the evanescent spectacle of the aurora allow for no such apprehension, since there are no recognisable forms of matter into which the body might imaginatively insert itself. Unlike weather, the aurora suggest no wind, heat or cold, wetness or dryness. Its ever-changing configurations are the embodiment only of distant light, lacking any phenomenological grasp.

Nevertheless, as I have emphasised throughout this chapter, despite these sensations of utter disconnection, the aurora are part of the landscape, which cannot be contained or bordered by what merely lies upon the earth. And I have drawn attention to the multisensory apprehension of aurora landscapes and the peculiar qualities of light as a medium for perception. Despite the ways in which we can understand responses to these landscapes of illumination as evocative and interrogative of conceptions and perceptions of landscape, the numinous qualities of the Northern Lights are responsible for the confounding of modes of representation. We are here in the landscape of the ineffable. The other-worldly, uncanny effects of the aurora devoid of tethering landmarks save the horizon of the earth, provokes a conscious struggle for words and an awareness of their limitations. Overwhelmingly, accounts of the aurora discuss being overawed and unable to depict the phenomena. Akasofu avers that 'published accounts, then and now, seem unequal to the subject matter' (2009: 7). He cites polar explorer William Hooper from 1853 who reports 'language is in vain in the attempt to describe its ever varying and gorgeous phases', and he similarly points to the limitations of pen or pencil' (ibid: 12). Words can't suffice and it seems as if we have entered the realm of the sublime, which according to McHugh 'is an experience that exceeds our imaginative powers to comprehend in sensible form. The sublime is an aesthetic of immensity and excess that disrupts and disturbs' (2009: 215). Ben Anderson emphasises these excessive qualities of affective atmospheres, and this particularly applies to those atmospheres generated in the experience of viewing the aurora foreground. There is an inability to contain such immersion in thought or express it through language, since it is always lies beyond as a 'kind of indeterminate, affective excess' (2009: 80). More broadly, landscape in general resists such representation and we can see how the conventional representations and performances of tourist doxa are transcended by the plenitude of the aurora landscape.

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