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Published in:
Proximity and Distance in Northern Landscape Photography

DOI:
[10.14361/9783839449509-006](https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839449509-006)

Published: 07/07/2020

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please cite the original version:
Itälahti, M. (2020). Distanced visibility, embodied proximity? Literary and photographic images of Finnish travel landscapes from the premodern journey to the railway era. In D. White, & C. Goldie (Eds.), *Proximity and Distance in Northern Landscape Photography: Contemporary Criticism, Curation and Practice* (pp. 81–106). Transcript Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839449509-006>

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Distanced visibility, embodied proximity? Literary and photographic images of Finnish travel landscapes from the premodern journey to the railway era

Mikko Itälähti

Overview

This chapter investigates representations of the environmental experience of pre-modern road and early railway travel in literary descriptions, contrasting them with the aesthetic visions of the early railway in landscape photography. This historical material, from the 1880s to the 1930s, spans the eras before and after the construction of the Savo railway, Eastern Finland. The chapter situates this material in a temporal and geographical context, compiling it into an emotional heritage ‘atlas’ – necessarily partial but capable of evolving – of the travel landscape around the town of Kuopio.

This work is situated within a broadly materialist-realist ontology. Within such an approach, representations of places and landscapes, especially photographs, can be understood as mediums making a genuine and authentic connection with non-human material environments possible, through a capacity to evoke experience-based imagination through visual memories and encounters with similar environments. Thus, the idea of detached, disembodied visibility, also inherent in historically dominant models of representing the landscape, is challenged.

The exploration initially draws from the concept of proximity and the arguments of Finnish geographer J.G. Granö and German cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch, both of whom, within different disciplinary contexts, employ the concept to signify the centrality of spatial nearness, closeness or immediacy to a subject’s experience of the environment and as enabling the production of sensations of actuality, of truly ‘being there’. In this discussion the notion of proximity is used to explore, firstly, the transformation of landscape experience that occurred in the wake of the mobility revolution caused by the construction of the railway in Savo province, eastern Finland, drawing in particular on the writing of Finnish novelist Juhani Aho, whose reminiscences about premodern travel show

a world in which spatial immediacy was central to the apprehension of the environment. Secondly, the chapter discusses changes in the experience of space: the premodern traveller apprehended places through proximate sensations and through a necessarily active 'negotiation' with environmental conditions and various social situations, but this was no longer possible in the railway era.

In particular, Schivelbusch applies the concept of foreground to the changing experience of landscape brought about by the railway. Railway travel largely eradicated sensations borne of immediacy, effectively pictorializing the landscape: surroundings formerly experienced through all of the senses and active participation, were now increasingly encountered as 'external' visual impressions; for those who experienced premodern travel, landscape now involved existential distance with a corresponding reduction in the significance of the foreground. Yet, a widely accepted view maintains that landscape, as perceived within the popular imagination, was borne from movement and a sense of detachment from premodern, organic 'place', thus suggesting that railway effectively participated in the creation of landscape in this modern sense. Perception of the distant landscape from the train window is thus comparable to popular imagery, and the form of its aesthetic appreciation is influenced by models derived from the visual arts. Also in popular imagination, a canonical system of ideal landscape representations, with classicist roots, was dominant. This inclination towards scenic topographic variation and waterway views effectively diminished the aesthetic value of most of the 'in-between' landscape of modern travel. The images of the railway in the work of Finnish landscape photographers seem especially interesting against this background of pictorialization of landscape and the erosion of the foreground. The main argument developed in the latter part of the chapter is strongly inspired by Schivelbusch's claim that one reason for photography's historical success and miraculous sense of wonder was its ability to re-evoke the foreground eradicated by the industrial revolution.

Earliest, albeit aesthetically motivated, photographs of the Savo railway leaned towards the topographical documentation of technological structures. The photographic representations of the railway were not without contradiction and complexity, however. They reflect photographers' enthusiasm for their subjects, while also revealing the extent of the human-induced modification of pristine environments, uncovering structures normally invisible to the railway passenger, and drawing aesthetic and cognitive attention to the resources underpinning the railway passenger's experience (Barsokévitch). Some images attempted, with growing difficulty, to achieve, symbolically, a balance between the inherent value of the tranquility of the backwoods and a celebration of the industrial progress of the nation represented in the building of the railway (Inha). Although photographic representations of the railway as a landscape element took a plurality of new forms, they were all influenced by canonical models of landscape repre-

sensation. Probably the inclination of photographers towards the scenic in their representation of the railway as a spatial and material phenomenon reflects this convention; this type of pictorialism was prevalent in landscape representations more generally in the late 19th century.

Yet still, through their affective power, railway photographs suggest an adjustment and expansion of the canonical models of seeing and appreciating towards the inclusion of the modern everyday landscape. Each of these broadly pictorialist or picturesque photographic views reintroduced the foreground as a picturesque element of composition. Foreground composition constituted a familiar viewer's position, contributing to the visual affectivity of the images. And eventually, towards the end of 19th century, the railway itself become increasingly framed as a picturesque element, suggesting that the railway, too, could be a familiar, harmonious component of a modern cultural landscape. From around the turn of the 20th century, there was an increasing elevation of the railway itself to the foreground of the landscape, echoing the romantic trope of picturesque roadside views and evoking, visually, the proximity of the old premodern roadside.

In the imagery corpus of the Finnish railways a partial turn away from pictorialism can be identified in the interwar period. Especially in the 1930s there is a great expansion and thematic diversification of the imagery. In the work of industrial photographer Gustav Rafael Roos there is no longer any attempt to interpret the railway landscape through a pastoral lens, rather it emphasizes the modern machinery and technological equipment in the foreground, thus giving material, tangible and technological objects a very acute sense of presence through representation.

It is argued that the special significance of railway landscape photography was – following Schivelbusch – its capability to restore the material closeness of the environment in the field of vision, especially in the case of the foreground, which may evoke a strong sense of environmental closeness, involving an almost tactile and multisensory presence of objects. This is significant, because images thus possess a potential to challenge the limited scope of canonical models of seeing and appreciating the landscape, by affectively and performatively promoting an aesthetic sensibility in relation to the modern everyday landscape.

It may indeed be the case that certain historical views actually reflect a conscious 'therapeutic' attempt to constitute a revival of the spatial proximity photographers felt was lost in the era of industrial modernity. Historically, the performative potential of these images to challenge aesthetic conventions still remained largely unrealized, due, for example, to the limited public presence of these images. Yet, in the present, they still exhibit a distinctive affective power – independent of photographers' intentions – stemming from their material nature as a traces of environments that once were 'before the lens', but that are now lost as a consequence of transformational processes shaping the everyday landscape.

Premodern experience of proximity

The town of Iisalmi is located approximately 90 kilometres north of Kuopio, the capital of Savo Province, in the east of Finland. Both locations are connected by the extensive, interconnected system of navigable lake waterways, reaching out to most parts of the region. A network of steamship services had developed in the Kuopio area since the mid-19th century. However, roughly from November to May, the lakes are covered by thick ice, preventing ships from sailing. Before the railway from Kuopio to Iisalmi was opened in 1902, winter travel still relied extensively on horse-drawn sleigh.

In his novel *Kotipuoleni rautatie* (Aho 1929 [1917]), a prominent Finnish author Juhani Aho (1861–1921) reminisces about the wintry sleigh journeys from his home in Iisalmi to Kuopio. Juhani Aho – a priest’s son, from Iisalmi parsonage – probably first made this journey in 1872, when he had begun at the secondary school in Kuopio. As the one-way sleigh journey between Kuopio and Iisalmi took about one and a half days, he spent the whole term mainly in Kuopio, travelling back to his childhood home only for Christmas and summer holidays. That the experience of proximity was central to the geographical space of the journey is clearly established in his account of a sleigh journey:

The slow movement was optimal for impressing upon the mind all of the houses and the landscapes at the roadside; every bend, up or downhill, bridge, brook, lake, field, forest, pine stand, house and croft prompted memories and feelings from one’s own life, producing sensations of joy, sorrow, pleasure or disgust, depending on the weather and conditions, or whether the journey was bound to home or school... Most memorable of the horse-feeding places was the Honkaniemi house in Lapinlahti, where the winter road went through the yard, coming from the rugged pine heath, past the windmill of the house, whose whistling sails almost always frightened the horses (Aho 1929 [1917]: 330, translated by the author).

Aho’s description vividly evoking the details of the roadside close-by is comparable to Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s (1980 [1977]: 65) discussion of the foreground as “the range in which most of the experience of preindustrial travel was located”, a formulation bearing a striking resemblance to that of Finnish Geographer J.G. Granö, who writes that “proximity is a close, intimate world we always inhabit and the context in which we perceive our geographical object with all our senses” (Granö 1997[1929]: 18). According to the classic theory presented by Granö, objects are visually perceived more or less “life-size” and “in perspective” within this proximate field of vision (*ibid.*). Proximity is thus central to the subject’s experience of the environment, producing sensations of actuality, of truly ‘being there’. According to Granö a multisensory experience of proximity clearly surrounds us up to the

distance of 20 meters (65 ft.). Schivelbusch (1980 [1977]: 59) makes a very similar claim by adding that within the foreground the “Newtonian” qualities of discrete objects (like size, shape and quantity) can be appropriately and clearly perceived.

Embeddedness

For Aho, the immediacy of the spatial experience can be found in close sensations of the body: he especially laments waking up early in the dark, bitterly cold winter mornings and departures “in the glow of the pallid morning moon”. The sensations of winter coldness are, however, counterbalanced by pleasant warmth near the stoves of the roadside houses (Aho 1929 [1917]: 331-332). Aho pictures the pre-modern journey as a spatial event within which one is not an onlooker but definitely an active participant. The sensory experiences of proximity are intertwined with an existential condition of embeddedness in a regional socio-ecological system centred around travel. Roadside houses served as lunch shelters and feeding stops for horses, inhabited by friendly and close folks “who were like family members” (*ibid.*).

All his memories are far from being positive. For example, the overpass of the central Kallavesi straits, just north of Kuopio, was across potentially dangerous ice. Yet he still acknowledges the extent to which the successful completion of the journey required active negotiation with physical and social space and linked the individual passenger with regional socio-ecological space:

[A]ll this [difficulties and uncertainties related to sleigh travel] was pertinent, so closely associated with the ways of living and being, that it is difficult to think of it as changed. And yet it is just a memory, a turned page in the history of a community's everyday life. It is a whole world that is now gone, with its well-organized customs and practices, and I would like to add, with its ideas as well. For such external upheavals change much of life's content too (Aho 1929 [1917]: 333).

Landscape

Also for Granö, the actual landscape is now characterized by separation and distance. He argues that “[t]his arena of our lives and activities is surrounded by the distant environment, or landscape, nothing more than a field of vision more or less tinged with blue by the air”. (Granö 1997[1929]: 18). According to Granö, the landscape only begins beyond a fuzzy transitional zone separating it from the area of closer proximity, the inner boundary of which, in contrast to the more dis-

tant landscape, is hard to define, but as a general rule it is located at least at the distance of 100–200 meters from the observer (Granö 1997 [1929]: 52, 110–111).

It is clear that in this sense the landscape is not central to the premodern journey as described by Juhani Aho. His attention is directed to the distant landscape only occasionally. He, for example, mentions a special moment of pleasure when “we have arrived on top of a ridge, with a view to Nilsä’s [a neighbouring parish] bare-sloped hills gilded by the sunrise [...] and the road is downhill for several miles...” (Aho 1929[1917]: 332). Even such landscape observation is not a spatially ‘detached’ impression, as the premodern passenger was always embedded in proximity to his or her immediate vicinity. The foreground links him or her to the surrounding landscape through a sense of being ‘there’ at a certain location (Schivelbusch 1980[1977]: 65, 60–61). In similar vein, Timo Kalanti (2014: 43) writes of the experience of proximity as an “uncompromising massiveness of material presence”, that always surrounded the premodern traveller and contributed to the heightened sense of location.

Railway and the loss of proximity

Premodern and recent travel experience are often strongly contrasted in the early descriptions of the railway journey. The very earliest of these frequently lament the alienating ‘placelessness’ of railway spaces – i.e. stations and railway carriages – themselves, as well as the unsympathetic, alienating sense of ‘being transported’ during the passage. Early Finnish examples of the trope include Zachris Topelius’ *Mirabeau-täti* (Topelius 1910 [1863]) and Juhani Aho’s *Rautatie* (Aho 1884). Aho looks back to his first journey on the Iisalmi-Kuopio railway in around 1902:

I however must admit that the first ride on the Iisalmi railway gave me a strange, almost haunted impression.... [The station] does not have the slightest local colour, not a single old memory in those new rooms, everything just new. And the train compartment has the same universal atmosphere, the same sizzling warmth of the iron stove (Aho 1929 [1917]: 334).

It is well documented how many early passengers – unaccustomed to the new speed scale of the railway – could at first only see a blurred impression of a passing landscape (e.g. Solnit 2003: 9, 21). In contrast to many early descriptions of the train journey, Aho does not mention this problem, although the details he does give are clearly located further out in the landscape. As the railway in this section closely follows the old road, he is able to see the meaningful landmarks of the roadside; but they are out there, as if belonging to some other world:

But out *there* [emphasis added] is the old road that the train crosses all the while. Its every bend is familiar, every tree, every fence. The Koivikko house flashed by right there, there is the Kallio house, over there the Peltosalmi crossroad... There the old innkeeper stands at the platform [at Pöljä stop] and watches this new going... (Ibid).

Panoramic vision

The railway rendered the landscape in a new way. The difficulty in perceiving the near foreground resulted from the combination of the train's speed and the fact that a passenger typically only has a view sideways to the direction of movement. In order to see anything, passengers needed to learn to focus on slower moving objects further out (Schivelbusch 1980 [1977]: 59). Schivelbusch emphasizes that as soon as the early passengers learned to give up trying to perceive the foreground details, but instead focused on general impressions or on more distant objects, a new way of seeing the landscape called panoramic vision evolved (ibid: 63-66). Schivelbusch argues that a panoramic vision "choreographs the landscape" and displays a fleeting, cubist assemblage of "objects and pieces of scenery that in their original spatiality belonged to separate realms" (ibid: 66).

Aho was already an experienced train traveller at the time of writing *Kotipulenin rautatie*, the novel extensively quoted above (Aho 1929 [1917]). However, he deeply felt that the railway had caused a loss of the lived space of *his* roadside, personally meaningful through long-standing participation; he seemed reluctant to exchange existential embeddedness for a merely visual image of the landscape and his new position as a mere paying customer. Interestingly, he had already given a very aesthetic account of the panoramic vision as a young man in a much earlier novel, *Rautatiejunassa* first published in 1889:

The ugliness of landscapes along our railways has become proverbial... But all this ugliness, dullness and melancholy does not feel like what you would expect, when the spectator sits in a second-class coach, enjoying a sweet-smelling cigar. As each location only momentarily stays under the gaze, when they know that they don't have to stay there, but may keep flying forward, ugly seems beautiful and dull makes a refreshing effect. Instead of melancholy, it is as if a cloak of secure well-being is being wrapped around one's shoulders. (Aho 1929[1889]: 358-359, translated by the author.)

The difference with Aho's description of his first journey on the Iisalmi railway is obvious: in *Rautatiejunassa* he is enjoying impressions of landscapes with which he had no previous lived connection. Indeed, a 'disinterested' attitude or some kind of distancing from routine and the everyday flow of events has often been stressed

as the necessary condition for the paradigmatic aesthetic experience (Saito 2007: 244, Tuan 1993: 8-9). Arguably, the train passenger's condition of transported immobility – using the term proposed by Kalanti (2014: 40-41) – and a degree of isolation from the harsh conditions also affecting premodern road travel, may have provided favourable conditions for modes of reception and aesthetic enjoyment produced through the image-like impressions of panoramic vision.

Pictorialization of landscape

In the wake of industrialisation a mobility revolution pioneered by the railway occurred, leading to the democratization of travel. Following this it became commonplace for people to encounter regions as visual impressions. Modern spatial consciousness became increasingly formed through physical surfaces seen through the train window, and in the popular imagination these became effectively likened to and linked with pictorial representations of landscapes whose circulation was also booming (Häyrynen 2005: 59, 62-64, Wells 2013: 6). This process could be termed the modern transformation of land to landscape. Indeed, a certain existential distance, a sense of 'otherness', seems necessary for a landscape to be landscape (i.e. Sepänmaa 2000). Thus, movement, a departure from somewhere, is a necessary precondition for this distance and, therefore, for landscape. Thus, it appears that loosening of human bonds with the local soil and the mass-democratization of mobility facilitated by the railway, effectively promoted the creation of landscape in a modern sense. And yet the landscape of popular imagination was still impregnated with a nostalgic sense of loss and a misconceived desire to 'return' to premodern, organic 'place' (Wylie 2016).

The visualization of the world and the assimilation of landscape and imagery, however, also meant that popular ideas within which landscapes could be seen as worthy of aesthetic appreciation became increasingly informed by a more limited notion of the beautiful landscape. Yuriko Saito points towards the obvious problem that results:

The general public tends to be more attracted to the unfamiliar and spectacular... we tend to admire those landscapes which can be made into a nice picture, but remain indifferent to other parts of nature which do not lend themselves to a nice pictorial composition due to a lack of sufficient complexity, variety, harmony or eye-catching features (Saito 2007: 61).

Model images for Western Culture's admiration of landscape derive from South European landscapes and their traditional representations. Thus, a preference for clearly defined and easily image-able landscape spaces, comprised of large-scale

topographic variations of hills and valleys is evident (cf. Norberg-Schulz 1980 [1979]: 46–48). In Finnish landscape imagery, the 19th century European idea of the picturesque landscape, materialized in the form of the so-called “Topelian” landscape canon, first proposed by Zachris Topelius, publisher of an influential collection of lithographs, *Finland framställt I teckningar* (1845–1852) (cf. Häyrynen 2005, Linkola 2013, Vallius 2013). According to art historian Antti Vallius (2013), in its most fundamental form this ideal landscape is represented as a view from a prominent hilltop, looking over a mosaic of lakes and forests. In a later phase, more signs of cultural influence became incorporated into this model of ideal landscape, although the ‘pristine nature’ that frames and supports the ‘progress’ of human culture remains elementary. The model has been very popular in Finland, even though a traveller encounters wide, open vistas of large-scale variation only very occasionally in such predominantly forested countries where a closed proximate view – in Granö’s terms – of the forest interior prevails. In fact, in order to find views that would conform to the Topelian ideal, the 19th century artists had to intentionally climb onto hilltops to find carefully selected vantage points that would give them access to a wider view above the crowns of the trees.

Thus, effectively, the 19th century aesthetic-artistic landscape canon regarded most of the Finnish landscape as having little interest or aesthetic value, especially so for railway passengers, it could be argued. Due to geometrical demands and their designated purpose to connect larger settlements on a national scale, the Finnish railways were often aligned along previously little travelled watersheds that were often marginal areas for human settlement. These desolate forested hinterlands are characterized by relatively poor soils and penepplain topography, and therefore lack the large-scale variation and signs of historical human presence that are central to the Topelian model and other classical ideas of beautiful landscapes. Although for many railway passengers these backwoods may have inspired feelings of awe comparable to those Aho describes in *Rautatiejunassa* (Aho 1929[1889]), a preference towards scenic, spectacularly beautiful landscapes is nevertheless dominant within public imagery and probably constituted the taste of the majority of public.

A good example of this preference for scenic beauty and its inherent system of value is found in an account given by a prominent Finnish landscape photographer of the 19th century, I.K. Inha (1909: 85–86), writing on first arriving in Kuopio by train, probably in 1892. Inha first makes a note on the ‘retarded’ cultivation of the region, exemplified by a still thriving slash-and-burn cultivation practice, while also noting, albeit in a neutral tone, the long-term impact of such practices: an abundance of birch groves where naturally a spruce forest would prevail. Foremost, as a general verdict, he laments the lack of variation and a clear-cut structure to the landscape: “[N]ature near the railway is not so variable that it would give the traveller a proper idea of the natural beauty Savo is famous for. The beautiful landscapes of Savo are along the waterways that do not reach up to the

railway except near Suonenjoki (Ibid, 85)". Inha, however, makes a positive note on the character of the relief that changes when approaching the shores around central lake Kallavesi basin near Kuopio. For him, the aesthetic highlight is obvious:

Therefore, a traveller arrives in the Kuopio region a little unprepared; looking out of the window in the final part of the journey when the train passes the Vanuvuori hill, the experience is surprising and impressive. The train runs on a high embankment (see fig. 4), across a narrow lake, behind it a high coniferous hill rises unexpectedly above the broadleaf forest. Anyone who sees it will also pull the sleeve of his or her fellow passenger... From there on, the region becomes hillier, the forest more imposing, and occasionally the gulf of Kallavesi with its delicate shores, stretches towards the line, only to disappear in the next instant (Ibid 1909: 85-86, translated by the author).

In fact, the 'scenic' qualities of the landscapes surrounding Kuopio, with their watercourses and pronounced topographic variation were already well recognized in the Finnish landscape painting at the time of Inha's writing: an iconic painting by Ferdinand von Wright called *View from Haminalahti* (1853) – today belonging to the Finnish National Gallery and exhibited at the Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki – represents a view from Haminavuori hill overlooking lake Kallavesi to the north, over a mosaic of forested, hilly islands and capes (see nr. 6 in fig. 2). The glimpses onto Kallavesi from the railway Inha mentions in the above quotation (see nr. 5 in fig. 2), actually overlap the space depicted in the painting.

The town of Kuopio is located on a peninsula of the large Kallavesi lake, itself part of an extensive system of interconnected watercourses covering much of Eastern Finland. The marked topographic variation of Kuopio's surroundings is evident, with several hills higher than 100 meters (330 ft.). A view from one of these wooded hills over the fragmented shapes of water, that fill the deepest recesses between them, forms a paradigmatic example the canonical ideal landscape.

Building of the Savo railway from Kouvola, on the Helsinki – St. Petersburg main line, to Kuopio was completed in 1889 (fig.1). In the last few miles, the relief posed many challenges for the railway builders and the engineering solutions that were needed to overcome them. Railway builders had to adhere to predetermined geometric parameters of the railway line: valleys and hollows had to be filled up by embankments and bridges, and the hills penetrated by cuttings or tunnels; or, as was often the case in 19th century Finland, circumvented through curving alignments (also visible on the map of Savo railway; see fig. 2.) This topographic variation, resulting in impressive structures as well as providing conventional scenic framing, likely explains why a definitive cluster of historical photographic imagery related to the Savo railway can be identified around Kuopio (See maps in figs. 2 and 3).

Figure 1: Map of the southwestern quarter of Finland

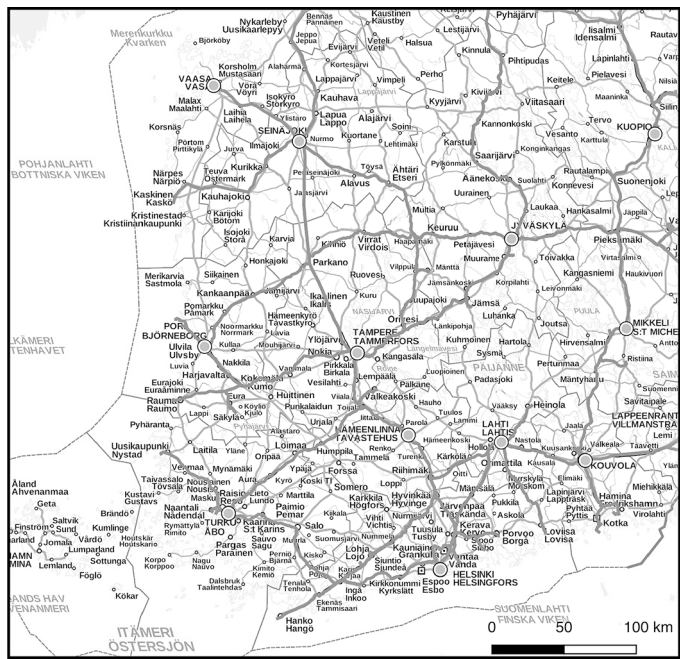


Figure 2: The area south from Kuopio on a topographic map (1938)

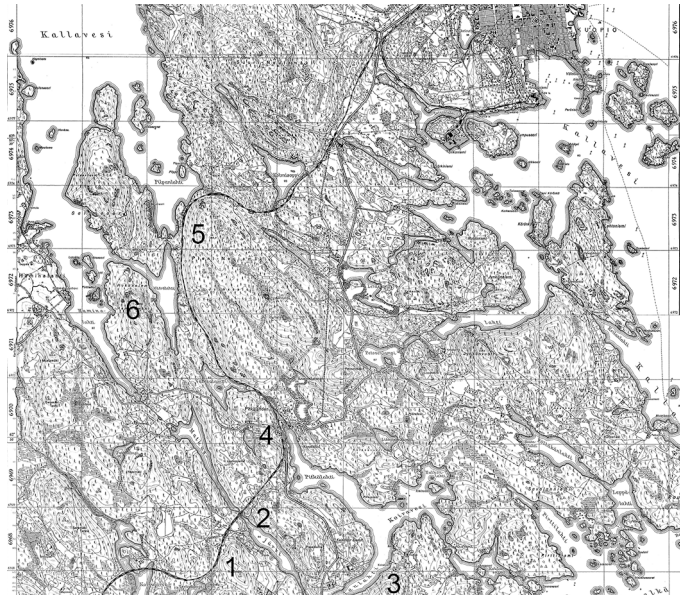


Figure 3: Historical railway imagery slightly north from Kuopio

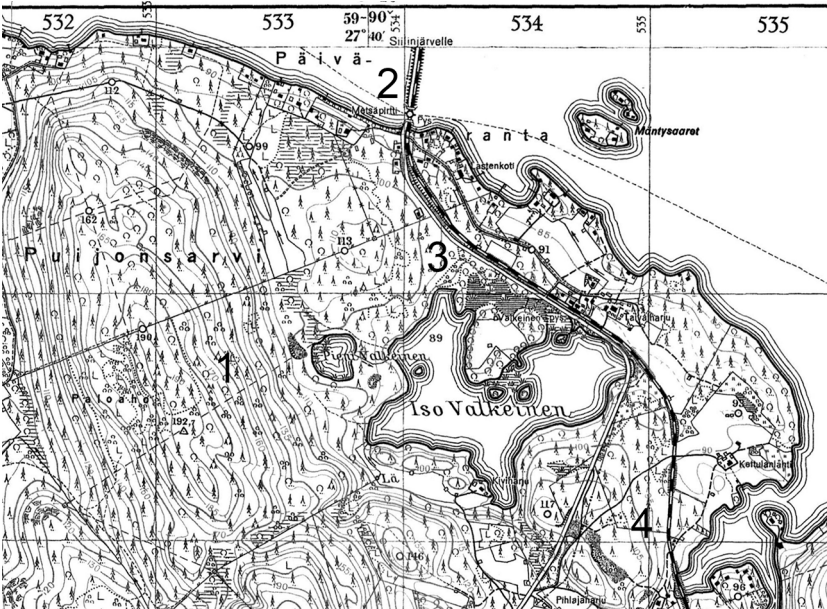


Figure 4: Lake Matkus embankment by Victor Barsokevitch



Victor Barsokevitsch was a prominent early Finnish photographer of Polish descent, born in Helsinki in 1863, who pursued an active career as a photographer in Kuopio from 1887. Alongside his principal occupation as a studio portraitist he also documented the landscapes in and around the town of Kuopio, especially traditional countryside landscapes affected by social and technological changes resulting from industrialization. On an early summer day, probably around 1890–1893, Barsokevitsch stood behind a large (most likely either 18x24 or 34x26 cm) plate camera on an abandoned fieldplot, overlooking a forest lake. In the background of the view his composition included towers and a massive railway embankment, structures effectively splitting the valley of lake Matkus in two halves while carrying the Savo railway across this recession in the landscape's relief (fig. 4). It is precisely this embankment that offered the scenic, fleeting view of Vanuvuori discussed by I.K. Inha (1909: 86). Barsokevitsch's view opens in almost the opposite direction, at an approximately 150° angle in relation to Inha's of Vanuvuori.

Barsokevitsch's work bears no indication of having being externally commissioned, nor does it have the aim of technological documentation. His early work on the Savo railway was probably, therefore, aesthetically motivated although topographic in its approach; aiming at an informative and 'truthful' representation of the aesthetic appearance of railway structures. Barsokevitsch composed the image of Matkus embankment (fig. 4) at a perpendicular angle towards the railway, resulting in a strong visual effect, revealing the scale of the industrial modification of a pristine environment. The massive, still barren, unvegetated railway embankment with a rigorously straight planar top, contrasts sharply with the surrounding non-human environment dominated by vegetation, water and a topography composed entirely of free fractal shapes. I am, however, inclined to believe Barsokevitsch's view of the railway was more enthusiastic than critical. The meticulous care and planning – based on knowledge of local topography – that is evident in Barsokevitsch's images is, in any case, clear testimony to the kind of enthusiasm the photographer had for his subject. It is also useful to remember that the original Topelian canon of landscape representation, that was born around the mid-19th century, embraced 'nature' as a virtually limitless resource base for cultural progress.

Barsokevitsch's photograph, apart from its general symbolic meanings, still has a clear cognitive implication through its making visible of a piece of infrastructure that would normally remain invisible for the railway passenger. Schivelbusch writes how the physical structure of the railway line rendered the landscape for the passengers in a new way, emphasizing how views from the high embankments gave an impression of 'flying' over the terrain (Schivelbusch 1980[1977]: 62). Inha's (1909: 86) view reflected such aesthetic pleasure, derived from being transported in dance-like effortlessness across the embankment, while enjoying the

awe-inspiring vertical depth of the landscape. Thus, Barsokevitsch's image – and the topographical visual strategy exemplified by it – even has critical potential to draw aesthetic and cognitive attention to the resources underpinning the modern experience, but which increasingly remained invisible for the subject of that experience.

Figure 5: *Rock cutting at Nuolimäki* by Victor Barsokevitsch



Figure 6: *View from Puijo hill onto Kallansillat* by Victor Barsokevitsch



When the Savo railway was completed as far as Kuopio in 1889, planning of its continuation further north began immediately. Work on the Kuopio – Iisalmi stretch began in 1898 and was completed in 1902. By far the most expensive part of the Kuopio – Iisalmi railway project, which also involved enormous technical difficulty, was the overpass of Kallavesi straits just north of Kuopio. The chosen solution was a series of embankments using esker gravel across the 2.2 km wide and up to 18 meters deep strait (SVR 1916: 126-128). Three gaps were left and fitted with bridges to allow for the flow of water and passage of ships and boats.

For many Finnish artists and other cultural practitioners of the late 19th century, witnessing the fresh, violent traces of the railway being built in the landscape often evoked in their writing a direct and univocal critique of its cold, calculating technological rationality. The railway, as a symbol of industrializing ‘culture’, was sharply contrasted to the romantic ‘pristine nature’ through which the railway very insensitively and literally trod (cf. Suomalainen 1888[1885]; Inha 1909: 129). I.K. Inha’s assessment of the Kallavesi overpass was that it “undoubtedly [had] an undesirable impact on the landscape’s character” (Inha 1909: 123-124).

It seems, however, that Barsokevitsch was more optimistic about the railway, and might have aimed to create views suggesting that the railway could be a harmonious component of a modern cultural landscape. Barsokevitsch’s image (fig. 6) is again a distant view of this massive, linear railway structure: the wide landscape of lake Kallavesi as seen from the slope of the Puijo hill, just north of Kuopio. It is evident that the topographic variation of the surroundings again meant that the location of a technically impressive structure aligned with the scenic landscape. Again, in order to complete the image, the photographer – probably not Barsokevitsch himself, but an uncredited assistant named Ms. Hilma Miettinen (Kankkunen 2019) – was required to carry a large 18x24 cm camera to a hard-to-reach vantage point on the forested Puijo hill, signifying a clear determination to capture this view despite the considerable efforts involved.

Through a classic Topelian model celebrating progress combined with a romantic, wilderness vision of the late 19th century, the image strongly suggests a ‘conciliatory’ aesthetic; a view of the railway indicating a shift from a more direct if not uncritical emphasis on the railway structure towards a softer view in which technology and ‘nature’ are ‘reconciled’. This shift echoes the conventions of pictorialism, but possibly also environmentalist sentiments that were emerging in Finland in the late 19th century, a partial critical reaction to the destruction caused by industry and especially the impact of forestry (cf. Lintonen 2011: 111-123).

Proximity in photographs

The visual power of these photographs largely resides within their foreground compositions. As already discussed, following Granö (1997 [1929]) the emphasis on spatial proximity promotes an acute and multisensory landscape experience, an experience of being there. Similarly, the visual surfaces of the objects within the visual foreground of a landscape photograph – Granö's proximate view – may evoke a comparable, almost tactile sense of presence (cf. Tuan 1993: 43–44). According to Schivelbusch, the capacity of the image to re-evolve the foreground and thereby recall for its viewer the multisensory experience of spatial proximity was central to the miracle of photography in the 20th century:

Thus, the intensive experience of the sensuous world, terminated by the industrial revolution, undergoes a resurrection in the new institution of photography. Since immediacy, close-ups and foreground have been lost in reality, they appear particularly attractive in the new medium (Schivelbusch 1980 [1977]: 65).

Surely, the idea that photography's affective power lies in the sense of nearness to the objects represented, is not new – Susan Sontag (1977: 183), for example, quotes a letter by Elizabeth Barrett, dating back to 1843, in which she already identifies this “sense of nearness” as a special affective quality of the photographic image. Mikael Pettersson (2011: 185–186) talks of the “proximity aspect” that has echoed in various writings through the history of photography. However, Schivelbusch importantly connects this power of the photographic foreground to evoke a sense of nearness with the discussion of actual modern spatial experience.

As visual proximity has the most acute presence, or weight, in the image, it has great importance for the overall composition of the landscape and the atmosphere of the image. Barsokevitch's view of the Matkus embankment (fig. 4) virtually embeds the viewer into the premodern cultural landscape of the trackside, situating him or her next to a fresh slash-and-burn clearing on an abandoned fieldplot already overgrown with birch seedlings, constructing a familiar viewer's position within the premodern foreground. It is arguable that this sense of an embedded viewer's position in a ‘natural’ place, amidst the birch seedlings, renders the encounter between the human and non-human in this particular environment so affectively powerful, in all its contradictoriness. The foreground thus provides the context for the interpretation of the rest of the image; while the perspective distance necessary to accommodate a wide horizontal structure downplays the perception of the aesthetic impact caused by the railway structure.

The image of the Kallavesi overpass (fig. 6.), in turn, virtually embeds the viewer within proximity of the forest. The partially enclosed forest interior in Barsokevitch's image has such a visual presence as to evoke a sense of the intimacy of

'being surrounded', of the comfort of shelter, feelings familiar to anyone with experience of a boreal spruce forest. To illustrate this point: from his sleigh journeys from Iisalmi down south to Kuopio, Juhani Aho remembers with delight how – having finally crossed the iced, windy expanses of Kallavesi straits – they reached the solid land and “the coniferous shelter” of the spruce forests at the foot of Puijo hill (Aho 1929 [1917]: 332). Something similar can be experienced through the prosthetic capability of the image and especially its foreground. In contrast, the distant landscape in Barsokevitsch's image, containing the railway and the expanse of water mirroring the sky, appears as merely a visual mirage, lacking a sense of presence and is insufficient in information capable of evoking tactile sensations.

It is very interesting to note that from around the turn of the 20th century, landscape photographs increasingly focus on the composition of foreground, in other words, on visual proximity. They increasingly elevate the railway itself and its proximity to its foreground, into the position of the old premodern roadside. Already Barsokevitsh' composition in his image of Nuolimäki cutting (fig. 5) emphasizes the small-scale details of the built railway environment; it gives a lot of weight to the recovering grass vegetation and curving patterns of the slope's stabilizing granite-laid walls in the foreground, as well as wooden roundpole fences – intended to keep the free-grazing cattle off of the railway – framing the view. I believe it is precisely the weight the composition gives to the foreground – with a lot of hand-built, small scale details – that actually creates a strangely picturesque, even pastoral, mood for the image. Indeed, Barsokevitsch's image of Nuolimäki cutting was published in a book celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Finnish State Railways, indicating that the railway organization also considered this view as contributing to its desired image (SVR 1916: 68).

I.K. Inha himself returned to the Kuopio railway with his camera most likely around 1894-1895, a few years after writing the travel description cited above. At that time, he was compiling a collection of photographs – *Suomi kuvissa / Finland i Bilder / La Finlande pittoresque* – that also included views of industrializing Finland (Inha 1896). In this collection, Inha decided to include a photograph of the minor railway station at Pitkälähti, located some 10 kilometres (6 miles) south of Kuopio (fig. 7). In his caption text, he emphasizes the idyllic character of the station milieu and also mentions the adjacent forest surrounding the railway line. Although his advocacy of the progress inherent in Topelian landscape symbolism is still evident, his caption also echoes the late 19th romantic ideas of romantic wilderness as well as environmentalist sentiments. The caption also reflects the difficulty he had in achieving a balance between the inherent value of the tranquility of the backwoods and the industrial progress of the nation represented in the building of the railway:

Because of its idyllic nature, one could mistake that apartment for a villa built in the middle of the woods, if the cap and the flag of the station master did not indicate its function. It is the last station on the railway to Kuopio, opened in 1889. A high forest borders the station and the railway so that the passenger thinks he is in the gloomiest backwoods and not approaching the Savo capital. Our railways cross the heartlands and in vain the locomotive greets many stations. But these stations are seeds sown in the wilderness, through which cultivation will clear its way into the woods (Inha 1896, translated by the author).

Figure 7: *Pitkälähti Station* by I.K. Inha



In choosing Pitkälähti station (fig. 7) as his subject, Inha had probably been struck not only by the appearance of the wooden station building but by the effect of the station park, created by preserving pre-existing trees around the station building; apparently a relatively rare solution applied in Pitkälähti and some other minor stations, contributing to a matured, wooded sense of place soon after the completion of the railway. Inha's choice of the word "villa" to describe the station building amidst the woods is indeed apt, for the Italian renaissance villa had been purposefully mimicked in the design of station buildings across Europe since 1840s. Although much of the original decoration was dropped towards the end of the century, picturesque impression was purposefully aimed at, probably in order to make the stations more approachable in the eyes of the travelling public (cf. Valanto 1982: 13). Inha probably did not want the track to lend too much industrial character to his view, either. The foreground in his composition is quite empty, with only a fragment of steel rail and a corner of granite platform edging visible

in the close foreground. The station park, however, beginning at the distance of approximately 15-20 meters, delivers a great impression of proximity, in creating the mood of a rather small-scale, 'soft', woodland place.

During my research on the landscape imagery of the Finnish Railways I have identified the emergence of the railway itself as an increasingly picturesque landscape element around the turn of the 19th and 20th century. This visual trope, however, was already well-established: the railway was effectively incorporated into the tradition of picturesque roadside views (cf. Vallius 2013: 371-375). This shift in representational strategy seems to reflect increasing cultural familiarity with, and acceptance of, the railway; it seems clear that photographs in general worked towards that end. Victor Barsokevitsh's image of Villa Granit-Ilmoniemi, Kettulanlahti, Kuopio (c. 1902, Fig. 8) is a good example. The photograph is a view from the countryside in the vicinity of Kuopio, featuring the Iisalmi railway, opened 1902, in its foreground, and the actual Villa Granit-Ilmoniemi, an urbanite countryside villa, in the background. The railway track bed is still brand new, lacking the softening impact of vegetation favoured by the picturesque. Still, it is a rather small-scale feature, built from sandy esker gravel, and seems not to cause any greater disturbance to the summery idyll of the landscape it passes through than the old country road. The soft evening light and glowing highlights (albeit an effect probably viewed undesirable at the time; cf. Lintonen 2011: 47) further contribute to the idyllic mood in this representation, suggesting that the railway is no longer a threat, rather it is now a humanized technology with a liberating promise of access to the increasingly leisurely rural landscape.

Figure 8: *Villa Granit-Ilmoniemi, Kettulanlahti, Kuopio* by Victor Barsokevitsch



Although it has been shown that from the turn of the 20th century railway photography tended to elevate the railway to their foreground, it is notable that picturesque-influenced pictorialism put an increasing emphasis on the idyllic, organic, small-scale, traditionalist elements of the railway landscape, while seeking to avoid the coldness attributable to their industrial aspects.

In the imagery corpus of the Finnish railways a partial turn away from pictorialism can be identified in the interwar period. Especially in the 1930s a great expansion and thematic diversification of the imagery occurs with the introduction of the new trope of the technological close-up image, as well as landscape images produced for marketing purposes. The work of industrial photographer Gustav Rafael Roos (1895 – 1972) – who fulfilled several commissions for the Finnish railways in the interwar decades – is especially noticeable. Although this work was undoubtedly produced to serve the practical and technological interests of the State Railways, it still reflects a photographic vision that could be categorized as modernist in the spirit of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (Heikka 2014: 52–53).

Figure 9: *Kallavesi overpass, new road and swing bridge arrangements, Päiväranta, Kuopio* by Gustav Rafael Roos



Figure 10: *Kallansillat swing bridge, opened for the lake steamer “S/S Maaninka” to pass through by Gustav Rafael Roos*



Figure 11: *A semaphore main signal preceding the Kallavesi swing bridge from the south by Gustav Rafael Roos*



Roos' photographs no longer attempt to interpret the railway landscape through a pastoral lens, rather they emphasize the modern machinery and technological equipment in their foreground, thus giving them a very acute, almost tactile, sense of presence. In its attitude towards the landscape, Roos' photography is clearly topographic. His glass negatives contain neutral, rich tone-scale and often great sharpness though the depth-of field. He often uses flat daylight and he appears generally to have aimed at 'neutral', high-fidelity rendition of his objects. Yet, it is evident that Roos has composed his wider views with a delicate eye on the totality of landscape; in his photographs, the technological world appears familiar, natural and settled, suggesting that modernity, at that date, had already inscribed itself into daily life, albeit with a distinctive aesthetic ambience.

Conclusion

The railway was initially perceived by Aho and many 19th century authors as alienating and 'placeless', but images produced by Finnish landscape photographers, eventually, for their part, fostered cultural acceptance and familiarity with the railway. Early railway photography was produced under the influence of the scenic landscape canon – a mixture of Topelian, romantic wilderness and picturesque influences with their associated aesthetic value systems; and yet they still possess a performative potential to expand the scope of a popular landscape aesthetic through affective representations of the modern everyday landscapes. This is particularly evident in the case of railway infrastructure, lying as it does in the background of the modern experience.

The power of railway imagery to achieve this, however, stems from the (partly convention-related, partly optical) tendency of photographs to recover the foreground and to reduce the significance of the scenic distant view. This lends photographs a power of affect that is achieved through an evocation of the spatial proximity and sense of immediacy in the everyday landscapes, similar to the affective capacities of premodern travel before the era of industrial modernity. Indeed, the original underlying purpose of picturesque foreground compositions may have been to mitigate the effects of industrialisation by representing the railway as a harmonious component of the modern cultural landscape. Historically, the performative potential of these images to challenge aesthetic conventions of landscape appreciation were largely unrealized.

Yet, in the present, these photographs still exhibit a distinctive power to evoke a sense of closeness to past human environments. For a viewer embedded within the 21st century horizon, the sense of closeness to these environments – with their rich variety of detail, spatial arrangements at a human scale, building materials of largely recognizable 'natural' origin and evidence of skilled manual handicraft

– is very affective. Ultimately, this affective power stems from the material nature of photographs as traces of environments that once were ‘before the lens’. We of course are aware of the actual absence of these environments, that they have been subject to profound material-ecological transformation, and that such processes continue to shape the landscape of the everyday.

Figure 12: *Pitkälähti transportation landscape, May 2017, a re-photograph after I.K. Inha's Pitkälähti station by Mikko Itälähti*



Acknowledgements

For the identification of Barsokevitsch's authorship in previously unidentified prints (figs. 4 and 5), I wish heartily to thank Jukka Kukkonen, a photo-historian specialized in Barsokevitsch, from the Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki.

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