Jeff Malpas
Views from a Plane: Surface, Place, and Image

Elmar Holenstein
Photographs

Chan-fai Cheung
Re-presenting Earthscape: Kwok-ying Lau

Beyond the Beautiful-Sublime Distinction: TowARDS a PHEnomenology of Arial Photographic Art

Foreword: Photos of Skyborne Earthscapes—Chan-fai’s Kairos

Elmar Holenstein

Chan-fai Cheung’s time at the university reminds us of the first sentence of Kant’s “Transcendental Aesthetics”, the idealistic theory of experience in his great work Critique of Pure Reason. The towering German philosopher states there in his typically complicated language that visual perception (Anschauung, literally “looking at”) is both the unmediated beginning of cognition and the proper end of all thinking, its true aim. Chan-fai started his years at the university as a student of architecture, a visual art. Soon he turned to philosophy, the most demanding discipline of thought. Now, towards the end of his academic career he returns to a visual art—photography.

His chosen field of specialty is philosophy in phenomenology. Phenomenology tries to describe things as they show themselves to an unprejudiced human eye and mind. A phenomenologist is interested in neither how things should be apprehended from a scientific point of view nor how they might best be arranged to serve a practical purpose. He looks at a section of the earth, not as a geographer who plans to render all measurable aspects of it as accurately as possible, nor as a traffic engineer who aims to present it in a way most suitable for a driver or a pilot to swiftly navigate through or over it. These are, of course, useful and honourable undertakings. A phenomenological philosopher tries to see it more like an artist who paints it. For a painter a section of the surface of the earth is not an area but a landscape. Chan-fai appropriately calls his photos of wide expanses of the earth from far above earthscapes.

Landscape painters and earthscape photographers depict more than the objective, physical aspects of an area. They succeed to convey to us an area’s subjectively experienced effects. They surprise us by capturing what we humans experience as beautiful, sublime, fascinating, charming, or dreadful, repulsive, shocking, and the like. To grasp and evaluate the difference, compare Google satellite photos with Chan-fai’s photos! The Google photos can also look picturesque and fascinating, charming, or dreadful, repulsive, shocking, and the like. Landscape painters and earthscape photographers for the most demanding discipline of thought. Now, towards the end of their intellectual career they return to a visual art—photography.

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Chan-fai, we can appreciate soon, is not an ordinary phenomenologically trained photographer. His brand of phenomenology is marked by its affinity with existential philosophy. Existential philosophers are sensitive to the right time of a decision. Life is finite and the right moment an instant only. The Greek word for the right moment is kairos, made famous both by an aphorism of Hippocrates the physician ("life is short, the right moment acute": ho ho de kairos axios, the time conscious Bible. Chan-fai has fittingly chosen this term for his first volume of photos in 2009. The kairos of a photographer is rarely a deliberately grasped one. It is more the sudden result of his talent and decade-long training. A photographer usually feels urge "as of itself" to make dozens of snapshots of the same sight hastily one after the other. Only afterwards when he looks at his pictures he hits upon the one unique shot from the right angle at the right instant.

Chan-fai is a phenomenologist with a background in Chinese culture. Chinese landscape painters are rightly famous for their rendering of the "spirit" of the land they were painting. When they saw European paintings for the first time they were astonished about their "verismo", their dedication to allegedly "true" depictions of trees, meadows, rivers and mountains. Their plain realism did not correspond to the Chinese perception of things. Chan-fai’s earthscapes remind me of an inscription of the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735–1796) on the landscape painting Early Spring, a masterpiece by the famous Song dynasty artist Guo Xi (c. 1023–1085): "No need for willow and peach trees to embellish the space, / in spring mountains, morning sees qi rising like steam." The literal as well as the metaphorical and philosophical affinity with existential philosophy. Existential philosophers are sensitive to the right time of a decision. Life is finite and the right moment an instant only. The Greek word for the right moment is kairos, made famous both by an aphorism of Hippocrates the physician ("life is short, the right moment acute": ho ho de kairos axios, the time conscious Bible. Chan-fai has fittingly chosen this term for his first volume of photos in 2009. The kairos of a photographer is rarely a deliberately grasped one. It is more the sudden result of his talent and decade-long training. A photographer usually feels urge "as of itself" to make dozens of snapshots of the same sight hastily one after the other. Only afterwards when he looks at his pictures he hits upon the one unique shot from the right angle at the right instant.

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