Chan-fai Cheung’s time at the university reminds me 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 in philosophy is phenomenology. Phenomenology tries to describe things as they show themselves to an unprejudiced human eye and mind. A phenomenologist is interested neither in 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 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 landscape “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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Landscape paintings and earthscape photographs 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 but they present all areas in more or less the same standard daylight. They succeed to convey the objective, physical aspects of an area. 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 but they present all areas in more or less the same standard daylight. You never see any clouds, any mist or anything mystifying. Their producers are not eager for special effects thanks to a particular or even a unique atmospheric event that would be the delight of an artist-photographer. On the contrary, they avoid them and, if unavoidable, eliminate them afterwards. There is no dawning or twilight at the horizon, no night view of a mountain range or of an urban agglomeration on Google maps. There is no subtle sense to savour.

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”: ἐν τῷ ζῷῳ ἡ ζωή ἐν τῷ καιρῷ αὐτῷ) and 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 urged “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 Guanglong Emperor (r. 1373–1396) 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 use of the Chinese word qi is comparable to many of the multifarious images of the ancient Chinese landscape painters. In a photograph, Chan-fai empirically records what is “there” on earthscapes, how they appear to him. In a painting, Guo Xi empirically recreates what is “there” on earthscapes, how they appear to him. In 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 urged “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’s earthscapes are not as many of the multifarious
meanings of the word “spirit” in European languages. There is no need for any trees at all to embellish Chan-fai’s earthscapes. There are just two or three more traditional landscape photos on which we clearly see individual trees. On a couple of others slender wind turbines and pylons are their present-day substitutions. These pictures are the exception that confirms us the dominant impression of his photos.

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Anybody familiar with contemporary air travel will have a sense of the strange and various visions that the earth presents when seen from an aircraft flying above—especially when seen from the cruising altitude of a commercial passenger airplane. Occasionally some of us may have both the inclination and the opportunity to record those visions photographically. Yet it seems that only a very few are likely to be as organised and committed as is surely necessary to enable such a large and impressive collection of images as Chan-fai Cheung presents us with here. It is presumably not just a matter of having the eye for a striking and well-composed picture, nor even of having one’s photographic equipment ready-to-hand in the confined space of an airline seat, but also of spending enough time in the air to have access to a suitable window (preferably not one grimed, scratched, or over the aircraft’s wing) at the same time as one remains constantly attentive to what passes outside and below. The range of images that appear to be in this book is quite astounding, and their diversity is matched by their often breathtaking beauty. Some images have a quality akin to works of abstract painting—swifts of light and colour that burn like the fires of a forge or shine like slices of opalised rock; others have the delicacy and ambiguity of Chinese landscape paintings—and some could almost be said; yet others look like the work of an obsessive realist eager to cram as much detail as possible onto the canvas so that the reality of the image, like the visions that appear in surrealist painting, becomes a source of seeming unreality.

Cheung himself talks of these images as earthscapes, and in doing so he draws on Edward S. Casey’s definition of a “scape” as something like land/space, landscapes, earthscapes or earthscape and topography themselves designate the study of earth and place. In this respect, these images can also be said to constitute a form of geography or better of topography—in the sense that geography and topography themselves designate the study of earth and place. As the use of “topography” to name the work that Cheung presents here is doubly significant. The Greek term τοπογραφία is embedded in topography, and that is itself often translated as “place” (and is sometimes taken almost as a synonym for “place” in English), can also mean surfacē. It is this sense of topography that is at work in the now more common meaning of topography as the study of the surface of the earth. It is also a sense that is evident in Aristotle’s famous definition of the term (in Physics θέρμη) as the “innermost boundary” of that which contains, and that carries over into the idea, not only of topography but of the surface of the earth. It is also a sense that is evident in the phrase “place” (and is sometimes taken almost as a synonym for “place” in English), can also mean surfacē. It is this sense of topography that is at work in the now more common meaning of topography as the study of the surface of the earth. It is also a sense that is evident in Aristotle’s famous definition of the term (in Physics θέρμη) as the “innermost boundary” of that which contains, and that carries over into the idea, not only of topography but of the surface of the earth.

From the outset, it is important to note that these are not mere recordings of views, but precisely as views—as bounded views—they also enable a particular manner of appearing of that which is represented. In this respect, the act of photography, like any act of representation, and precisely in virtue of its character as representation, always operates to reveal aspects of the world that might otherwise go unremarked or un-noticed. When the character of representation as representational is itself thematised, as it is in Cheung’s work, then representation also becomes investigative—it becomes itself a mode of inquiry, of experimentation, of questioning, and, so too, of attending. Consequently, and inasmuch as the images that are presented here are indeed earthscapes or placescapes, so those images, those “bounded views”, can be seen as together constituting a “study” of earth and place. In this respect, these images can also be said to constitute a form of “geography” or better of topography—in the sense that geography and topography themselves designate the study of earth and place. In this respect, these images can also be said to constitute a form of geography or better of topography—in the sense that geography and topography themselves designate the study of earth and place. In this respect, these images can also be said to constitute a form of geography or better of topography—in the sense that geography and topography themselves designate the study of earth and place.