



A STUDY OF LANDSCAPE IN MOTION, FROM ANCIENT DYNASTIES TO MODERN ART

Ying Han¹, Sakon Phungamdee²

Academy of Arts and Philosophy, Shinawatra University¹⁻²
China,¹ Thailand²

Email: hanying1987512@126.com¹; sakon.p@siu.ac.th²

Received: May 11, 2025; **Revised:** May 11, 2025; **Accepted:** August 18, 2025

Abstract

Landscape is not a static entity but a dynamic and evolving space shaped by motion, time, and perception. Traditional Chinese landscape painting and modern land art alike reveal how human culture engages with the changing physical environment through visual and philosophical expression. This study aims to explore the dynamic nature of landscape as represented in visual art and design, particularly through the lenses of movement, time, and cultural symbolism. It focuses on how traditional Chinese landscape painting and modern land art embody the evolving relationship between humans and the environment. Using a qualitative visual analysis approach, this research examines selected works from key figures such as Ma Yuan, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Smithson. Supported by theories in cultural geography and landscape aesthetics, the study analyzes how artistic techniques and spatial composition reflect landscape dynamics across history and culture. **Results:** The findings reveal that landscape is experienced and represented as a dynamic phenomenon across three major dimensions: (1) fast and slow movements in natural and designed environments; (2) the cyclical passage of time and its inscription in physical space; and (3) the symbolic, cultural, and philosophical roles of landscape in art. These dimensions



collectively demonstrate that landscape serves as both an ecological system and a cultural narrative medium.

Keywords: Landscape design; Time and movement; Dynamic aesthetics; Chinese painting; Land art; Cultural symbolism; Spatial perception

Introduction

Landscape has never been merely a static visual composition—it is a dynamic medium shaped by time, movement, and perception. As Antrop (2018) points out in his historical overview of landscape research, the study of landscape has shifted from static topographic analysis to dynamic interpretations involving cultural, ecological, and experiential dimensions. This shift reflects a broader recognition that landscapes evolve not only through physical forces such as wind, water, and tectonics, but also through cultural memory, symbolic meaning, and embodied experience.

In the Chinese artistic tradition, particularly in classical shanshui (山水) painting, landscape has long been understood as animated by unseen forces such as qi (气) and dao (道)—natural rhythms that render the world fluid and interconnected. In modern scholarship, this understanding has expanded to include how design, visual arts, and film represent the flow of time and the transformation of space. Sculle and Jakle (2008) further describe landscape as a “sign in motion,” one that actively produces cultural meaning as it shifts under both natural cycles and human intervention.

This thesis investigates how the idea of “landscape in motion” serves as both a conceptual and aesthetic foundation in art across historical periods. By analyzing works ranging from Song Dynasty paintings to Jackson Pollock’s drip techniques and Robert Smithson’s land art, this research explores how motion—whether cyclical, linear, or fragmented—shapes the form, meaning, and emotional resonance of landscape. It argues that the perception of dynamic landscapes reflects broader philosophical and cultural concerns: the passage of time, ecological transformation, and the evolving human relationship with place.





Through this lens, landscape becomes not merely subject matter but an agent of narrative, emotion, and critical reflection across artistic practice.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how landscape embodies multi-dimensional dynamism—both fast and slow—and how these dynamic characteristics influence artistic expression and spatial experience.

2. To explore how temporal cycles and the passage of time shape the perception and transformation of landscape across natural, cultural, and cosmic scales.

3. To examine how landscape functions as a medium for cultural identity and philosophical reflection in both traditional Chinese painting and modern land art.

Literature Reviews

Antrop (2018) offers a concise yet comprehensive history of landscape research, tracing how the field has evolved from static, picturesque views to a multidimensional understanding of landscape as a process shaped by time, space, and human experience. He emphasizes that modern landscape studies focus increasingly on change—how motion, rhythm, and interaction define our perception of place. This theoretical foundation supports the core argument of this thesis: that landscape is not fixed but animated by visible and invisible dynamics.

Liu (2017), examining Suzhou landscape painting in the Ming dynasty, reveals how Chinese artists integrated concepts of pace and path into their visual compositions. Her analysis shows that traditional Chinese *shanshui* (山水) painting does not merely represent scenery, but encodes temporal and spatial experiences through visual cues. This reinforces the idea that landscape in





Chinese art has long served as a vehicle for expressing motion, philosophy, and cultural memory.

Pregill and Volkman (1999) contribute a comparative design perspective, analyzing how landscapes in Eastern and Western traditions reflect both aesthetic and functional dimensions. They argue that landscape design historically incorporates cyclical time and movement—through pilgrimage routes, seasonal patterns, and geomantic orientation. Their work lends architectural and historical support to the view that motion is embedded in the structure of landscapes, not merely in their representation.

Sculle and Jakle (2008) propose the concept of “signs in motion,” arguing that modern landscapes are both shaped by and symbolic of mobility—especially in an era defined by automobiles, signage, and constant transition. Their cultural geographic lens highlights how landscape functions as a dynamic communicative surface, aligning with this thesis’s emphasis on landscapes as living, changing texts.

Merriman and Webster (2009) further develop the relationship between travel and landscape, emphasizing that motion is not simply a theme within landscape representation but a way of experiencing and producing it. Through their interdisciplinary approach—blending cultural geography and art history—they affirm that landscapes emerge through movement, whether bodily, environmental, or representational. Their insight strengthens the theoretical grounding for analyzing both ancient paintings and modern artworks as reflections of lived motion through space and time.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, integrating visual analysis, art history, and philosophical inquiry to investigate the concept of motion within landscape art. The methodology is designed to address the research objectives through an examination of both historical and contemporary works,





drawing connections between visual strategies and cultural meanings embedded in dynamic landscapes.

Visual and Formal Analysis: The primary method employed in this research is close visual analysis of selected artworks. These include traditional Chinese *shanshui* paintings, modern landscape interpretations, and key Western examples such as Jackson Pollock's *Convergence* and Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. Through formal analysis, the study decodes visual elements such as composition, brushwork, texture, spatial orientation, and the depiction of movement. Particular attention is given to the temporal layering of landscape imagery—how artists convey motion, change, and the passage of time through static media.

Contextual and Historical Research: To situate the selected works within broader cultural and historical frameworks, this study draws upon primary and secondary sources related to landscape design, art history, and environmental philosophy. For example, the evolution of Chinese landscape aesthetics from the Song dynasty to contemporary ecological art is examined through the lens of cultural values such as *qi*, *dao*, and harmony with nature. At the same time, references to Western traditions—particularly land art and phenomenological aesthetics—enable cross-cultural comparison and enrichment.

Theoretical Framework: The research is anchored in theories of landscape and movement, drawing on foundational scholars such as Antrop (2018), Merriman and Webster (2009), and Liu (2017). These works provide a conceptual vocabulary for understanding landscape not as a static entity, but as a field of interaction, transformation, and perception. Phenomenological theories, especially those of Merleau-Ponty and later cultural geographers, support the reading of landscape as lived experience—where meaning emerges from bodily motion, temporal flow, and spatial engagement.





Case Study Approach: A case study design is used to conduct in-depth analysis of specific artworks and design projects across historical periods. These include Ma Yuan's Song dynasty scrolls, Yasujiro Ozu's cinematic landscapes, and environmental interventions by Robert Smithson. Each case is selected for its ability to demonstrate the dynamic qualities of landscape—whether through natural forces, human interaction, or temporal cycles. This approach allows for comparative insight into how movement is represented and conceptualized in different cultural and temporal contexts.

Interpretive Synthesis: Finally, the findings from visual analysis and contextual research are synthesized through interpretive critique, seeking not only to describe the dynamic nature of landscape but also to articulate its philosophical and emotional significance. By integrating visual evidence with cultural theory, the study moves beyond iconographic description to reveal the symbolic, temporal, and affective dimensions of landscape art.

Results

This study reveals the dynamic essence of landscape as a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by motion, time, and perception. The findings are organized into three overarching categories: the dynamic nature of landscape, the temporality embedded in landscape transformation, and the cultural-philosophical significance of landscape in artistic expression.

The dynamic nature of landscape: Landscape is not static; it embodies a continual interplay of forces, movements, and transformations. This dynamism manifests across both fast and slow temporalities and influences how humans perceive and interact with the environment.

In visual art, dynamism is often portrayed through rhythm, line, and gestural abstraction. Jackson Pollock's *Convergence* (1952) exemplifies this with its energetic drip technique, creating a canvas charged with kinetic emotion and movement. The layering of lines and splashes suspends the viewer in a visual field where motion is not just suggested but enacted.





Figure 1: Convergence, 1952, Jackson Pollock, 1100 x 660 cm, huile sur toile, Allbright Knox Gallery – Buffalo NY USA.

Pollock's painting is emblematic of motion captured in process—a landscape not of land, but of gesture, time, and emotion. His dynamic methodology parallels concepts in landscape design where shape, direction, color, and texture all contribute to a space that evolves with light, wind, and human movement. In urban parks and interactive installations, dynamic points, surfaces, and volumes engage the viewer's body, echoing the micro-kinetics of natural systems.

Beyond perceptible motion, landscapes change imperceptibly over time. Tectonic shifts, the slow growth of vegetation, and sedimentary deposition all contribute to a long temporal view of transformation. This macro-level dynamism reinforces the landscape as an archive of change. Artists who incorporate geological time, such as land artists using erosion or entropy, highlight these gradual processes as aesthetic experiences.

The viewer's sensory and emotional experience is inherently shaped by the movement of the landscape. For instance, the inclusion of kinetic water features or wind-sensitive materials in public space alters the spatial rhythm. This movement invites a multi-sensory perception of place, where sound, light, and temperature fluctuate and create a participatory atmosphere.



The cyclical and cosmic nature of time: Temporal rhythms and natural cycles are foundational to how landscapes are formed and perceived. The study finds that repetition and flux play key roles in shaping both visual form and human consciousness. Seasons, tides, and lunar phases provide recurring structures that imbue landscapes with rhythm. The repetition of natural events does not produce identical outcomes but rather unique variations within a consistent framework. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus's idea—that one cannot step into the same river twice—aptly encapsulates this paradox.

Cultural narratives and built environments bear the traces of time. Weathered monuments, eroded cities, and adaptive reuse projects reveal both decay and resilience. Yasujiro Ozu's *A Trip to Tokyo* (1953) presents a domestic landscape shaped by personal and temporal movement (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Yasujiro Ozu's film *A Trip to Tokyo* (1953).

In Ozu's cinematic narrative, the gradual passage of time is metaphorically represented through daily rituals and emotional transformations. The cyclical nature of life parallels the evolving topography of landscape, where each season or structural shift carries both memory and potential. The perception of landscape is inseparable from temporal experience. Urban parks that change across seasons—through color, soundscape, or function—serve as living calendars. Designers increasingly use phenological rhythms to structure space,



such as flowering cycles or migratory patterns, encouraging deeper temporal awareness.

Landscape as cultural and philosophical expression: Landscape art reflects not just ecological systems but symbolic and ethical systems as well. Artists across cultures have used landscape to express philosophical ideals, cultural identity, and metaphysical beliefs. In Chinese *shanshui* painting, landscape is a conduit for spiritual reflection. Song Dynasty painter Ma Yuan's works, such as *The Yellow River Rapids* and *Cold River Fishing Alone*, portray movement through composition and brushwork rather than literal realism. These landscapes express principles of harmony, transience, and the Taoist flow of *qi* (Figure 3; Figure 4).



Figure 3: Ma Yuan, Rapides sur le fleuve Jaune, Encre sur soie, Musée du Palais Pékin.



Figure 4: Ma Yuan, *Pêcheur solitaire sur le fleuve en hiver*, 1195,
Musée national de Tokyo.

The use of negative space (*liubai*) and asymmetry foregrounds the metaphysical dimension of landscape. The artist does not depict an actual place but constructs a symbolic field through which the viewer meditates on impermanence and selfhood.

Artists such as Robert Smithson explore landscape as a dynamic site of entropy and cultural intervention. In *Broken Circle and Spiral Hill* (1971), Smithson physically reshapes terrain to expose geological layers and temporal disjunctions (Figure 5).



Figure 4: *Broken Circle and Spiral Hill* (1971),
Robert Smithson Emmen Hollande.

This integration of art and nature dismantles the boundary between observer and environment. The movement of the viewer within the site becomes



part of the artwork, reflecting how modern land art redefines the experience of landscape from contemplative to immersive.

Traditional Chinese aesthetics emphasizes *qi* (energy) and *dao* (the way), suggesting that landscapes are not passive scenery but living expressions of cosmic order. In both Romantic and ruin-based art, the absence of human figures can still convey a deep presence—what cultural geographers call "resonant absence."

Landscape becomes a stage for the interaction between human and natural forces. As Engels noted in *Dialectics of Nature*, humans and nature are not opposites but participants in a shared dynamic system. This insight reinforces the role of landscape in representing ecological ethics and cultural memory.

Discussions

This study provides a nuanced understanding of landscape not merely as a backdrop to human activity, but as an active, dynamic, and culturally charged construct. By examining the interplay between movement, time, and human perception, the findings affirm that landscapes—whether natural, built, or imagined—serve as both agents and products of temporal and cultural forces.

Firstly, the concept of landscape as dynamic, presented through both rapid and imperceptibly slow processes, aligns with Antrop's (2018) assertion that landscape is not a fixed physical entity but a temporal palimpsest continually rewritten by natural forces and human interaction. From Pollock's energetic abstraction to Smithson's entropic interventions, this research confirms that motion—both gestural and geological—is a core design and expressive principle.

Secondly, the incorporation of time, especially in its cyclical and cosmic forms, adds depth to the phenomenological reading of landscape. The seasonal shifts, erosion, and memory-laden ruins reflect not only physical decay but also





the endurance of cultural meaning. As Merriman and Webster (2009) argue, movement across and within landscapes activates spatial narratives and aesthetic interpretation. The example of Ozu's film illustrates how temporality is visually embedded in landscape experiences and offers emotional resonance through repetition and change.

Thirdly, this research highlights the enduring philosophical value of landscape across traditions. The traditional Chinese *shanshui* painting, with its symbolic voids and spiritual orientation, reinforces Liu's (2017) view that landscape in Chinese art is not a site of representation but of meditation and cosmological alignment. In contrast, modern land art shifts the landscape from a contemplative image to an embodied spatial event, where the viewer becomes an active participant. This evolution mirrors the changing function of landscape art from image to environment.

Furthermore, the research supports Sun's (2013) perspective on integrating ecological and cultural consciousness into contemporary landscape practice. As environmental crises challenge conventional design, the idea of landscape as process rather than product becomes increasingly urgent. The artworks analyzed here—especially those incorporating natural change, decay, or cycles—model a form of artistic ecological literacy, where aesthetics and sustainability are intertwined.

Lastly, the study suggests that landscape art, when conceived through motion, memory, and metaphor, serves not only as an aesthetic reflection but also as a cultural text. It encodes historical experience, social values, and philosophical worldviews in visual and spatial terms. Whether through calligraphic brushwork or geological sculpture, the landscape becomes a living archive of collective identity and an evolving canvas of human-nature relationships.





New Knowledges

This study offers a new perspective by positioning landscape not as a static visual object but as a dynamic medium shaped by motion, time, and perception. By integrating artistic analysis with cultural theory, it reveals how landscapes—through both natural cycles and human expression—embody emotional, temporal, and philosophical depth. The findings enrich current discourse by demonstrating that landscape is not merely observed but experienced, evolving with each viewer's interaction and cultural context.

Conclusions

The study of landscape in motion reveals that landscape is not a static container of natural or artistic elements, but a dynamic convergence of physical processes, cultural narratives, and temporal rhythms. Through the analysis of artworks ranging from traditional Chinese *shanshui* to contemporary land art, this research demonstrates that motion—whether literal, symbolic, or perceptual—is central to the construction and interpretation of landscape. The findings show that artists and designers employ motion across multiple scales and speeds, from Jackson Pollock's abstract energy to the slow unfolding of geological time in Smithson's interventions. The temporal layering of landscape, reinforced by seasonal cycles and cultural memory, fosters a deeper engagement with the environment as a living system. In Chinese painting, negative space and symbolic forms evoke movement as spiritual flow; in modern land art, the viewer's bodily movement completes the spatial narrative. By reframing landscape through the lens of motion and time, this study expands the theoretical foundation for landscape design, environmental humanities, and visual culture. It emphasizes that to understand and design landscapes today requires not only ecological knowledge or aesthetic training, but also an awareness of temporal dynamics, cultural symbolism, and perceptual fluidity. In conclusion, landscape in motion is more than a visual theme—it is a conceptual and experiential framework that bridges art, nature, and culture. It offers a compelling model for how we see, feel, and shape the world in an era marked by change.





Suggestions and Recommendations

Future research can further explore the intersection of landscape dynamics and digital media particularly how virtual environments simulate or reinterpret motion in landscape art. Comparative studies across cultures—such as between Eastern philosophies of nature and Western ecological aesthetics—may also deepen our understanding of landscape as a cultural construct. Additionally, interdisciplinary collaborations between artists, landscape architects, and environmental theorists are encouraged to develop more holistic approaches to dynamic landscape representation in both art and public space.



References

- Antrop, M. (2018). **A brief history of landscape research**. In *The Routledge companion to landscape studies*, Routledge, pp. 1–15.
- Jackson, P. (1952). **Convergence**. Allbright Knox Gallery. Buffalo, NY, USA.
- Liu, L. (2017). **Path, place, and pace in mid-Ming Suzhou landscape painting**. *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 67(1), pp. 207–224.
- Merriman, P., & Webster, C. (2009). **Travel projects: Landscape, art, movement**. *Cultural Geographies*, 16(4), pp. 525–535.
- Ozu, Y. (1953). **A trip to Tokyo** [Film]. Shochiku.
- Pregill, P., & Volkman, N. (1999). **Landscapes in history: Design and planning in the Eastern and Western traditions**. John Wiley & Sons.
- Sculle, K. A., & Jakle, J. A. (2008). **Signs in motion: A dynamic agent in landscape and place**. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 25(1), pp. 57–85.
- Smithson, R. (1971). **Broken circle and spiral hill**. Emmen, Netherlands.
- Sun, Y. (2013). **Principles for contemporary Chinese landscape design practice**.

