Terrain Vague and the Urban Imagery

by
Estefania Pineiros

A dissertation
presented to
the University of Nottingham

In partial fulfilment of requirements for
the degree of Master in Visual Culture

Nottingham, United Kingdom
August 2016

Wordcount: 13902
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Acknowledgments

The exploration of space and its link with the visual realm could not have happened without the support and ideas of the wonderful people I have encountered over the last year and the support of my sponsor Secretaría Nacional de Educación Superior, Ciencia, Tecnología e Inovación SENESCYT, Ecuador. Many thanks to Nicholas Alfrey, my advisor, for his encouragement and guidance, his various suggestions regarding film and other works have been a great source of inspiration that eventually became the keystone for this dissertation. Additionally, I am grateful to Lucy Bradnock, Lara Pucci, Ting Chang and Richard Wrigley, without their feedback this work may have succumbed to an amorphous exploration of the multiple applications of this widespread term. Many thanks to Andres Basantes for his on-going emotional support and willingness to listen to my long and sometimes too indefinite monologues, not only through this dissertation, but also through this entire MA. And to all the friends who have had to endure conversations filled with questions, frustration and laughs, thank you.
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**Terrain Vague and the Urban Imagery**

**Introduction**

A myriad social and economic factors have led to the ever-increasing expansion and transformation of the cities around the world. In particular, the urban landscape of the western capitals underwent drastic changes after the Second World War due to “post-war suburbanization” and deindustrialization, which shifted the paradigm from the modern concentrated metropolis to a more horizontal urban landscape, which left different patches of land marginalized, derelict and obsolete.¹ This change in the topography of the city has generated countless and relative new spaces that challenge the spatial conceptualization of the contemporary urban environment. Depending on each case, a variety of names have been attributed to these spaces: wastelands (Lynch & Carr, 1979/1990), superfluous landscapes (Nielsen, 2002), voids (Johnas & Rahmann), brownfields, in-between spaces, white areas, blank areas, dead zones, SLOAPs (Spaces Left Over After Planning) (Doron, 2007), lost space (Trancik, 1986), derelict land (Kivell & Hatfield, 1998), zero panorama (Smithson, 1996), drosscape (Berger, 2006), urban wilds and urban sinks (Lynch, 1990), vague spaces (Larsen, 2010), vacant land (Northman, 1971), urban wildscapes (Sheridan, 2012), no-man’s land (Leong, 1998), spaces of uncertainty (Cupers & Miessen, 2002), etc.

Among this vast amount of terms that seem to elude any type of classification, the French term *terrain vague* has increasingly gained popularity in the English language. Although the terms origin is uncertain, Matthew Gandy has traced its use to the late 1860s when it was used “to describe uncultivable ground in the Ardennes”; forty-two years later it “appears in Isabelle Eberhardt’s novel *Yasmina* (1902) to describe the location of a mosque on the outskirts of an Algerian city, in 1960 it was used “as the title of Marcel Carné’s film” and in “mid-1970s, the term was adopted by the French writer Jean-Michel Palmier for his *Berliner Requiem*”

From Gandy’s historic inquest the term appears to encompass empty land that is located at the outskirts of the urban sphere and that differs from conventional urban space. Nevertheless, the most well known use of the term is through its dissemination in the essay “Terrain Vague” of the historian and architect Ignasi de Solà-Morales that first appeared in Anyplace 1995.

Solà-Morales conception of the terrain vague has been widely applied across different fields like literature, architecture, design, urban landscape, urban studies, cultural geography, visual arts, and film studies. In its infancy the term was mostly associated with abandoned industrial areas, possibly contaminated with by-products, derelict transitory spaces like railway stations or ports, empty and unproductive land like vacant plots waiting for development and abandoned and inhabitable spaces like any type of construction that is in a state of deterioration or buildings and public spaces that have no use because they have been destroyed due to war or natural disasters. Nonetheless, because of the term’s ambiguous origin and nature it has been appropriated in different ways and expanded to include even more urban spaces. Apart from its most archetypical form as “areas of antiquated infrastructure and former industrial sites,” spaces that are “surrounded or run through by –and are, in part, a result of (…) ‘non-places’,” have being included. Also empty patches of land like islands or leftover and disposable areas called “superfluous landscape” and “un-activated” public spaces have been added.

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3 Anyplace 1995 is part of a collection of books has the purpose of understanding architecture in the context of general culture.
to the term.6 The main source that makes evident this continuous expansion and redefinition of the term is the book *Terrain vague: Interstices at the Edge of the Pale* edited by the architect Manuela Mariani and the English scholar Patrick Barron, the different essays link *terrain vague* with multiple types of spaces, such as small gaps in between the Victorian-era buildings in San Francisco and public spaces like a private plaza in New York and public memorial sites like the Lady Diana Memorial Fountain in London.7 Nonetheless, this continuous expansion and redefinition of an already complex term seems counter-productive, because its original meaning, since Solà-Morales appropriated it in 1995, appears to have got distorted.

Solà-Morales notes that mainly artists recognize the imaginative potential of these spaces and recognizes *terrain vague* in the imagery of the late twentieth century.8 Furthermore, this particular type of urban landscape is still present in the recent imagery of the twenty first century. Therefore, *terrain vague* is not a new concept that can be expanded and interpreted at will, because apparently it has been part of the western urban imaginary since the late twentieth century. The term has also been proposed as a conceptual basis for architecture and design.9 Nevertheless, I remain sceptical about the practical application of this concept, and interpret this concept as having more coherence when used at a level of visual representation than as a basis for a pragmatic endeavour such as architecture and urban design. My reason behind this is that *terrain vague* inherent characteristics only appear to work at a level of representation. This space does not seem to be able to operate in praxis and can’t be neither maintained nor developed physically without dissolving its own nature of being permanently in an in-between state of space. Moreover, *terrain vague* stimulates the imagination because it is empty and has no

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9 Ibid., n.p.
apparent function, meaning that the absence of architecture or an official use of the space actually enhances its essence. Therefore this type of space does not need to be physically intervened to engage the passenger in reverie. It only requires the person to sense and perceive the space differently.

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyse carefully the term *terrain vague* and determine its usefulness. Because it has been broadly used and redefined it appears to have lost its original value and purpose. Therefore it is necessary to return to its origin and delimit the term based on how it was initially conceived. The re-examination and delimitation of the term and its further implementation as a tool for visual analysis in the main body of this dissertation indicates that the term’s characteristics acquire more potency and coherence when the term is being used at a level of representation than as a building block for urban planning, architecture or design.

In order to outline the term’s inherent characteristics and analyse its usefulness as a tool for visual interpretation of a certain type of space and imagery, this dissertation will address the following questions:

- How was the *terrain vague* originally understood?
- What are the *terrain vague*’s defining characteristics and how do they work?
- What is lost when the *terrain vague* is subject to physical intervention?
- How does the *terrain vague* work at the level of representation?
- How does photography and film bring out the characteristics of *terrain vague*?
- How do the different aesthetic depictions of *terrain vague* impact its inherent characteristics?
- What is required in order for *terrain vague* imagery to reach its full potential?

In order to respond to these questions this dissertation has been divided into three chapters. Chapter one will re-examine the origin of the term *terrain vague* and identify its inherent characteristics. It will then narrow down the spaces it stands
for by comparing its current use, mainly through the essays in *Terrain vague: Interstices at the Edge of the Pale*, with its original conceptualization in Solà-Morales’s essay. In addition, it will disengage the spaces that have been linked to the term and as a result expanded and distorted it by comparing how the character of *terrain vague* changes when the concept is applied to a pragmatic field like architecture or urban landscape to when it is used at a level of representation. Finally, through Baudillard’s conceptualization of the *simulacrum* and its symbolic implications, *terrain vague* will be understood as a certain type of urban imagery, the essence and characteristics of which can be only perceived through a symbolic dialogue between the perception of the space and the way the space is represented.¹⁰

Chapters two and three will analyse *terrain vague* as an urban imagery through case studies of film and photography. Both chapters will illustrate the characteristics of *terrain vague* in the images using *compositional interpretation*.¹¹ Case studies of different time periods and genres have been selected in order to have a more comprehensive approach to *terrain vague* by showing that this spatial perception has been part of the western urban imaginary even before Solà-Morales essay disseminated the term. The comparison between the study cases indicates that although the social and historic context of each artist influences the way in which the image is composed and perceived, the character of *terrain vague* does not change substantially. More crucial for the understanding of *terrain vague* is the open symbolic exchange between the viewers and the imagery in which the viewer is expected to add their own perception of space. Therefore the theoretical understanding of *terrain vague* will be refined using Baudillard’s *seductive simulacrum*.

Chapter two will use *Alice in the Cities* (1974) of the German filmmaker Wim Wenders as case study. It will illustrate *terrain vague*’s character in the film by highlighting how its different characteristics work and are made tangible through an analysis of different creative devices, such as sound, character development and the overall film montage used by Wenders. Chapter three will use two exponents from recent photography as case studies. Through the photographic series *A Scape* (2003-2005) of Steffi Klenz and *Lost in Transition* (2007) of Peter Bialobrzeski, this chapter will show how the characteristics of *terrain vague* reach full potential in the selected images and also compare the different aesthetic approaches towards *terrain vague* between filmography and photography of the 70s, including *Alice in the Cities* and a recent type of urban landscape photography that initiated in the 90s in order to support the proposition of *terrain vague* being a type of urban imaginary.

Finally, after having illustrated through the selected case studies the different ways in which the characteristics of *terrain vague* are made visible, and after comparing the different ways in which this urban imagery can be experienced, this dissertation comes to the conclusion that *terrain vague* is a valuable visual discourse that furthers a more flexible and open outlook towards space.

**Chapter One: The limits of **terrain vague**

**Delimiting terrain vague**

In order to circumscribe the spaces that *terrain vague* stands for I will go back to Solà-Morales original text and outline the way in which the term came to be. First it is important to point out that Solà-Morales conceptualization of space in “Terrain Vague” is aligned with post-structuralist thinking, in particular with the aesthetics that Solà-Morales draws from Gilles Deluze’s thinking.12 His essay leans on “poststructuralist geography,” which is the result of the deconstruction of an inarticulated notion of space, time and place.13 His suggestion is to approach *terrain vague* as an opportunity to confront a structuralist vision of the city, an

increasingly regulated, totalitarian and homogenising urban environment that proclaims the promises of modernity.\textsuperscript{14} This dystopian vision of the city has the form of an “arborescent structuralism,” one that unfolds in a hierarchically and predictable manner from a central point. In contrast, Solà-Morales appears to favour a “rhizomatic-nomadic” form of the city, one of distribution, difference, immanence and articulation.\textsuperscript{15} This is made evident when he describes what kind of architecture he envisions as a response for terrain vague: “an architecture of dualism, of the difference of discontinuity installed within the continuity of time.”\textsuperscript{16}

Solà-Morales’s poststructuralist approach to space is also evident in his etymological description of terrain vague. First he explains that the word terrain stems from French and has more relation to an undefined piece of urban land, meaning that it is available and ready for exploitation, than the English word land that is more related to agriculture and geology. More insightful is Solà-Morales description of the French word vague that has Latin and Germanic origins and its “triple signification” as “woge” or wave indicating mobility and fluctuation, “vacuus” or vacant indicating emptiness and availability and “vagus” or vague meaning its condition of imprecision and uncertainty.\textsuperscript{17} This triple signification unravels the multiple meanings of the word vague and presents them as alternating components that are “ramified without a unifying frame of reference.”\textsuperscript{18}

Naturally, such a heterogeneous term that comes from an anti-reductive theoretical background seems able to accommodate an infinite amount of referents. This could be the reason why it has been used by Manuela Mariani and Patrick Barron as an overarching term for the group of essays that assemble a variety of different spaces. Nonetheless, their general reading of the term terrain vague seems to be too broad, sometimes relativizing the concept so far that it seems to dissolve its original meaning. Below I will use the essays of Karen A. Franck and Quentin

\textsuperscript{14} Solà-Morales, “Terrain Vague,” 123.
\textsuperscript{15} Marcus A. Doel, “Un-glunking geography,” 123.
\textsuperscript{16} Solà-Morales, “Terrain Vague,” 123.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 119–120.
\textsuperscript{18} Marcus A. Doel, “Un-glunking geography,” 126.
Stevens in *Terrain vague: Interstices at the Edge of the Pale* to exemplify how the understanding of *terrain vague* only though its triple signification appears to dissipate its original meaning.¹⁹

Both essays draw different similarities between different types of public space, contemporary memorials and *terrain vague*. One of the main characteristic that is used to compare these spaces and to respond the question if whether or not they could be acknowledged as *terrain vague* is their indeterminate use that is linked with the word *vagus* of the terms triple signification. Both authors consider that public spaces and memorial sites are vague because they are used differently form the way they were originally conceived. Franck uses as an example different appropriations of public space like the Occupy Wall Street manifestation that turned a public square into a space of protest that people inhabited for a long period of time, or the spontaneous public memorials on the side walks that turn a space of transition into a memorial site. Similarly, Stevens uses the playful attitudes that people exhibit in the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (MMJE) in Berlin as an example. He notes that instead of recognizing the intended sacredness and historical, social significance of this memorial people use the space as a playground or a place to rest, like a park.²⁰

Nevertheless if every space that is not used as it was intended to is understood as vague, almost every human constructed space would fit in the term, since most of the time the designed spaces and objects are not necessarily used the way they where conceived. Following this logic those people who rent a space in their homes to strangers via Internet through platforms like Air B and B for example, would be turning their private space indeterminate and therefore it could be conceptualized as *terrain vague*.

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Therefore I consider that it is more effective to understand *terrain vague* not only through its etymological roots, mainly its triple signification, but also to take into account other inherent characteristics of the term. In the following section, I will outline the complementary characteristics of *terrain vague* by comparing how Solà-Morales describes *terrain vague* with how different authors link public space, or contemporary memorials with the terms etymological roots and afterwards I will analyse the terms use a conceptual basis for pragmatic intervention in space.

Franck and Stevens suggest that public spaces and contemporary memorial share the characteristic of emptiness or availableness derived from the word *vaccus* with *terrain vague*. While in the case of public spaces their empty and available character is associated with the legal and physical openness of public spaces.\(^{21}\) In the case of the contemporary memorials their emptiness is read in different ways either through their semantically emptiness, meaning that the public isn´t able to identify right away the purpose and meaning of the memorial, or through spaces that are purposefully physical or visually left empty like the national police memorial in Canberra.\(^{22}\) Nonetheless Solà-Morales, apart from explaining the etymological roots of the word, highlights two defining aspects of *terrain vague*. One of these characteristics is that these spaces are “un-inhabited, un-safe, un-productive” from an economic point of view.\(^{23}\) Although I am aware that their productivity can be measured in other terms, for example through the value they have in people everyday lives and how these spaces get temporarily appropriated, as mentioned by Franck, I want to stress their unproductive character in an economic sense. This aspect underlines the *terrain vague* counter-normative character. These spaces are unofficial and unregulated, because of their non-apparent value and ownership. In a way they seem to reside outside of the realm of men, implying that they do not obey the social and spatial logics of civilization. Because of the fundamental unofficial and unregulated character of *terrain vague*, I consider that public spaces and memorial sites that are premeditated spaces with a defined and regulated use have no relation with the term.

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\(^{21}\) Franck, “Isn’t All Public Space Terrain Vague?” 153–170.  
\(^{22}\) Quentin, “Vague Recollections,” 235–236.  
\(^{23}\) Solà-Morales, “Terrain Vague,” 120.
Other type of spaces that are mentioned in *Terrain vague: Interstices at the Edge of the Pale* and that seem to broaden the conception of *terrain vague* too much are the empty spaces described in Barron’s introduction as “various subtypes of leftover land” that proliferate at the boundaries of the city or at “the edges of the pale.”24 Solà-Morales not only locates these spaces in the interior of the city but also in the “unincorporated margins” of the city. Nonetheless, this poses a question of where to locate the “unincorporated margins” of an ever-growing urban area.25 As it has been mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, due to the expansion and decentralization of cities since the late twentieth century it is increasingly getting harder to differentiate the countryside from the city. As a result the urban fringes become blurred borders of a never-ending cityscape.26 It appears that for Barron any space located in a sort of urban peripheral limbo between the city and the countryside that shares the emptiness derived from the word *vaccus* of the triple signification is *terrain vague*. Barron describes these places as “surrounded or run through by (...) freeways, shopping malls, railways, super- markets, and airports, (...) bands of land flanking railroads and highways, and small pockets of land, commonly where two forms of transportation meet,” and “median strips, parking lots, and corridors of land between industrial complexes and commercial buildings.”27 Nevertheless, I consider that not any available or empty space can be linked with *terrain vague*, since other equally important characteristics should be taken into account in order to understand a space as *terrain vague*. For example the complex temporality that appears to be inherent to the term.

Solà-Morales underlines repeatedly the inherent relationship of the term with the past. He refers to *terrain vague* as: “Empty, abandoned space in which a series of occurrences have taken place” and later he observes that in these “apparently forgotten places, the memory of the past seems to predominate over the

present.”28 Therefore, not any empty space at the urban periphery can be considered *terrain vague*, since the urban related past seems to be imperative for *terrain vague*. In fact those spaces with no apparent urban related past seem to share more similarities with Marc Augé’s concept of non-places 29 than with *terrain vague*. Moreover, the space transience from the word *woge* of the triple signification that indicates the ephemeral nature of *terrain vague* does not correspond with Barron’s description of leftover land at the edges of the pale, since, depending on each case, these spaces in general are not ephemeral or in an in-between state between past and present, because they are the outcome and serve as the surroundings of an established place like a freeway or a shopping mall.

**Terrain vague as a visual discourse**

Another debatable adaptation of *terrain vague* is its use as a basis for pragmatic intervention in space, like architectural projects, community based appropriation or urban landscape designs. Once again the reason for this appears to be the terms heterogeneous background. For example, the authors who argue for the appropriation of a vacant space for community participative actions (Stevens and Adhya 2014; Van Reusel 2014), seem to understand *terrain vague* in terms of De Certeau’s everyday urbanism, which proposes that the space is essentially malleable based on the everyday action of the people performing on the space.30 Nonetheless, by understanding a space as vague based on how the variability of actions in the space change its meaning, one comes back to the same logic behind the authors that argue that any public space can be considered *terrain vague*. Therefore the uncertainty of *terrain vague* gets lost when a space is used in an

29 Non-places from French *non-lieux* describes spaces of transit or commerce, like train stations, airports, hotels or shopping malls, designed solely for their practical use. These spaces usually discourage appropriation or any type of social engagement. According to Augé these spaces are the product of “supermodernity.” Augé, *Non-places*, 30–41.
official or repetitive manner. Any space that is regularly intervened and that gains a specific use through appropriation, like a community garden or a public recreational park looses its vagueness and therefore can’t be acknowledged as *terrain vague*. In addition, because Solà-Morales coined the term while also reflecting about a different type of architecture, it has been used as a “central concept for urban planning and design.”³¹ Therefore it is important to understand how Solà-Morales links his reflections of *terrain vague* with architecture. Does he actually propose this term as a concept for pragmatic intervention in ambiguous sites of the city, or does he rather conceive the term as a starting point to think and build the city differently?

Marieluise Jonas, Heike Rahmann and Matthew Gandy identify the term as strongly related with the visual realm. Both authors note that Solà-Morales first frames the term within photography by describing its aesthetic qualities.³² After having pointed out the *terrain vague* features in the images, Solà-Morales realizes their potential as alternative spaces for appropriation or development of the urban sphere. Nonetheless, he is aware of the challenge that *terrain vague* poses for architecture or urban design. He discusses the dilemma of having to shape these spaces and the fact that architecture would not seem able to avoid but introducing “violent transformations, changing estrangement into citizenship, and striving at all costs to dissolve the uncontaminated magic of the obsolete in the realism of efficacy.”³³ In general, Solà-Morales acknowledges the fact that architecture will inevitably transform *terrain vague* and is aware of its transitory state. Although in the last part of his essay Solà-Morales underlines the need for continuity in space, I must note that he is not arguing for a prolongation of *terrain vague* itself. He rather suggests thinking carefully about how to appropriate and develop these spaces in a less disruptive way. He is against architecture being used as “an aggressive instrument of power and abstract reason” and finishes his essay advocating for

architecture of dualism and difference that manages to be coherent with the past.\footnote{Ibid., 123.} Solà-Morales’\textsuperscript{34} \textit{terrain vague} is more likely a phenomenological impression of an ambiguous and therefore unnamed type of urban space than a building block for urban planning, architecture or design.

Furthermore, I must emphasise that the term was originally conceived through photographs of marginal and abandoned spaces. It is through these photographs that Solà-Morales manages to frame “the visual and aesthetic qualities” of \textit{terrain vague}.\footnote{Marieluise Jonas and Heike Rahmann, “Void in Density,” 24.} The image plays an important role in the conceptualization of \textit{terrain vague} because of different reasons. First, because of the temporary state of these spaces, their essence seems better preserved through the photographic image that is able to freeze their transient nature or to “embalm time.”\footnote{André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” \textit{in What is Cinema?}, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray, 15. Berkley: University of California Press, 1967.} Consequently, the images of \textit{terrain vague} can be kept to analyse and explore its traits and value. Second, because \textit{terrain vague} was first conceived through a photograph, which is a representation of the lived space, it has no direct relation with its physical referent. This is why the term acquires full meaning and is more comprehensible at the level of representation.

Solà-Morales description of \textit{terrain vague} photographs seems to be in line with Baudillard’s reflections around the \textit{simulacrum}. In the first half of his essay Solà-Morales refers to the capacity of photographs to simulate the lived space, in such way that its seems difficult to separate the mediation from the real. This simulation shapes our mental image of the space and how we experience and feel about it. Therefore Solà-Morales’\textsuperscript{35} \textit{terrain vague} photographs are able to capture the essence of the urban experience, since they “visualize the urban in some primordial way.”\footnote{Solà-Morales, “Terrain Vague,” 120.} I will approach Baudillard’s concept of the \textit{simulacrum} through William Merrin’s understanding of the concept, which acknowledges the \textit{simulacrum}'s historicity and does not understand it only as a “‘post- modern’
phenomenon.”

Merrin makes a distinction between Baudrillard’s early work before 1976, when he developed the concept of “simulacrum” and “simulation” on a semiotic base, where the “reality-effect” of the image overpowers “the lived symbolic,” implying that once the lived symbolic is being simulated it becomes a “neo-reality”; and his subsequent work, when Baudillard deconstructs his semiotic conception of the simulacrum as follows: “the signified as the content of thought and the referent as the content of perception (...) the referent – ‘reality’ – is not an external reality, but is a product of the sign and its reduction of that experiential relationship.” In the latter the referent is not given, it does not come from reality; it is rather the outcome of the sign being perceived. This reverse conceptualization of the semiotic relation between referent, sign and signifier seems to correspond with Solà-Morales’s conceptualization of terrain vague, since it is through the photographs of these abandoned and marginal spaces and their effect on Solà-Morales that the term is conceived. This could be the reason why terrain vague is so hard to typify or categorize, since it appears to have no “real” referent and why every type of pragmatic physical intervention in the site seems to distort the site’s original meaning. Therefore terrain vague is a perception of a real space that takes place at a representational level.

Solà-Morales architectural reflections rather than being about how to intervene in terrain vague, seem to be the founding blocks of an architecture of continuity, that is willing to preserve the past without making it totalitarian, reductivist or monotonous.

Here I draw a link between Solà-Morales reflections about architecture with some landscape designs that seem to share Solà-Morales architectural vision. The Landscape Park Duisburg-Nord in Germany 1994 of the firm Latz & Parter, the New York High Line in the U.S. 2009 of the firm James

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39 Ibid., 87.
40 Ibid., 89-91.
Corner Field Operations and the Park am Nordbahnhof in Germany 2009 of the firm Fugmann & Janotta are some examples of a group of emerging architecture projects relating wastelands or derelict industrial sites, which share the same aesthetics and the particular quality of balancing in a sensitive way the past and the present that Solà-Morales envisions. In his essay Solà-Morales advocates for a more subtle way of integrating the past of abandoned or destroyed places with architecture proposals. As an example he uses the Alexanderplatz of Berlin after bombs have destroyed it during the Second World War (fig.1). He indicates that a good reconstruction for this destroyed place would have been Mies van der Rohe’s photomontage of a project for Alexanderplatz of 1928 (fig.2). Although this photomontages pre dates the bombarded state of Alexanderplatz, he is very interested in the implications of Mies van der Rohe’s design in this devastated space. According to Solà-Morales in this case the photomontage discretely references the historical and topographical past of the place without completely erasing it or imitating it.

In a way Solà-Morales architectural approach towards terrain vague resonates with the aesthetics of ruins, due to its insistence on maintaining the form of a construction of the past without completely renovating it. This is even more evidently in the above-mentioned landscape designs involving derelict spaces that integrate the industrial ruin. After a closer observation of these transformed terrain vagues I was able to identify one of the last characteristics of the terrain

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44 The ruin is approached as a portal into the present, past and future, therefore similar to terrain vague modern ruins have a paradoxical relationship with time. I approach modern ruins from Robert Smithson’s work, which equates the post-industrial landscape to the classical ruin. The difference he notes is that while the classical ruin mourns over a lost grandiose past, the modern ruin envisions the ruin before it has reached its full ruinous state. Dillon, “Ruins,” Talk, np.
vague, its complex relation with nature. It is interesting to compare the above-mentioned landscapes with photographs of *terrain vague*. In order to explain myself better I will use two examples: Four pictures of the Park Duisburg-Nord in Germany (fig. 3) and Manonlo Languillos\(^{45}\) photographs of an abandoned factory next to the Besós river in Spain (fig. 4). In general, the way nature unfolds in both spaces is different. While in the pictures of Park Duisburg-Nord we see a tamed but thriving nature and green spaces pleasantly cohabiting with the industrial ruins of an iron work company. The pictures of the factory next to the Besós River depict small patches of plants patiently reclaiming space in a disorderly and wild manner. The way nature unfolds in the designed spaces brings me back to a picturesque ruin aesthetic of the 19\(^{th}\) century, which searches for an artificial and harmoniously crafted decay of the ruined landscape.\(^{46}\) By contrast, the untouched *terrain vague* that is caught in an in-between stat of “fragile equilibrium between persistence and decay,”\(^{47}\) appears to have a rather ambiguous relation with nature, while nature is being subjugated by industry, contamination, and man-made constructions, it is also wildly and chaotically reclaiming space.

After a thorough analysis of the *terrain vague*’s provenance, six main characteristics have been found. Three of these characteristics stem from the term’s triple signification of the French word *vague*:

- *Vacuus*, meaning empty and available.
- *Vagus*, meaning indeterminacy, uncertainty.
- *Woge*, meaning mobility, fluctuation and also indicating its state of being in-between time and space.

The other three have been recognized after comparing how Solà-Morales understands the term and how it has been redefined and used by other authors, therefore *terrain vague* appears to be essentially:

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\(^{45}\) Manonlo Languillo is one of the photographers that Solà-Morales takes as a referent to talk about *terrain vague*.


• Unregulated and unofficial.
• Timeless, it seems to contain the past and the future at the same time.
• It has an ambiguous relationship with nature, it seems to be thriving and withering at the same time.

Because of the term’s post-structuralist origin, these characteristics work without a unifying base and in a non-hierarchical way, meaning that they are not subordinate to each other and may influence one another. Another implication is that not all characteristics have to be perceived in order to understand a space as terrain vague. Nevertheless, I argue that at least three characteristics should be perceivable and that at least one of these should be from the term’s triple signification of the word vague in order to avoid the expansion and misappropriation of the term through its multiple variations.

In all, chapter one has served to rule out many places that have been linked with terrain vague. This has helped to delimit the term and identify its main characteristics. Moreover, through Baudillard’s deconstruction of the simulacrum’s semiotic plane, terrain vague is being conceptualized mainly through its imagery, which lets the viewer appreciate the terrain vague’s character without distorting its original conception. Since the term appears to acquire more coherence at a level of representation it seems more useful as a tool for visual interpretation of the urban imaginary. In the next two chapters the visual discourse of terrain vague will be analysed through case studies from film and photography.

Finally, I wish to make clear that I do not deny the necessity for social and ecological good that the contemporary urban spaces have and I support those projects that advocate for alternative urban spaces through participatory design, conceptual urban innovation and restoration, or appropriation for community good. My reason for making a distinction between terrain vague and its application in architecture, landscape design and various appropriations, that tangibly change the inherit in-between state of the terrain vague, is only to delimit and understand the term’s usefulness.

**Chapter Two, terrain vague through Alice’s eyes**

As I have briefly mentioned in the introduction, before the term terrain vague was
attributed to Solà-Morales it has been used in different contexts. One of these is Marcel Carné’s film *Terrain Vague* (1960), which focuses on the social problems of young gangs in the suburbs of Paris. Nonetheless, it is not until the 70s that *terrain vague* appears to gain ground in film. A group of film directors of this period like Andrei Tarkovsky, Wim Wenders and Chris Petit begin to show interest in the structure of the city and its outskirts. While Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979) is staged in a supernatural wasteland at the fringes of civilization. Chris Petit’s *Radio On* (1979) and Wim Wender’s *Alice in the Cities* (1974) are concerned with the structure transformation of the cities through the road movie genre. I have chosen Wim Wenders’s *Alice in the Cities* as a case study because of the way he approaches landscape. In his films he does not consider it a mere background, but another character of the film with its own history and personality.48 According to Wenders, his movies have a particular fascination with empty spaces of the city like empty plots or construction sites. In his works he seems indirectly to point out the importance of these spaces as a pause or a window in the constructed landscape of the city.49 *Alice in the Cities* can be read through the lens of *terrain vague* since Wenders nuanced treatment of the space highlights the characteristics of *terrain vague* mentioned in chapter one and paves the path for symbolic reciprocity between the landscape and the viewers.

Chapter one made the connection between *terrain vague* and Baudrillard’s concept of *simulacrum* through the photographs that Solà-Morales uses to talk about *terrain vague*. I chose the *simulacrum* as a tool to examine *terrain vague* not only because it abstracts the referent from the “lived symbolic” realm but also because it performs in a dual manner. The *simulacrum* appears to work in two oppositional modes of simulation one linked to the production of signs and the other to the seduction through signs.50 The *simulacrum’s* production mode renders the sign in a “hypervisible” way, it comprehends a “‘pure and simple exhibition’ in which

50 Merrin, “To play with phantoms,” 99.
everything is immediately given and completed for you.”51 This unilateral symbolic production makes visible the sign without entering in a symbolic relation with the viewer. In general, this mode of production is the most known form of Baudrillard’s *simulacrum*.52

The understanding of visual material through *terrain vague* seems an adequate opportunity to approach the seductive mode of Baudrillard’s *simulacrum*. This mode is involved with the “mastering of the realm of appearances” through symbolic reciprocity with “other participants or witnesses, to the order of appearances, or to the world itself.”53 In this play of veils the truth-value of the image is turned against itself, meaning that while it creates the illusion of reality, it also exposes its artifice.54 This seductive mode of semiotic exchange seems crucial for the identification of *terrain vague*, since it is required an effort from the one experiencing *terrain vague* to understand it as such. In this sense not every empty urban space is *terrain vague*, since a sort of visual tools that put forth the characteristics of *terrain vague* are involved with the interpretation of this particular urban imaginary. This is one of the main reasons why I have chosen one of Wenders’s works as a case study. In different interviews with Wenders it is suggested that for him the communicational nuances of the film are valuable. He notes that his films appear to acquire more presence and richness when they engage the public’s sensibilities and leave space for “openness and interpretation.”55

**Differing perceptions**

The protagonist of Alice in the Cities, Philip Winter, is a German journalist who’s task is to do reportage about the American countryside. Nonetheless he fails, since...
he appears to be frustrated with the “banality of American highway culture.” He seems annoyed by the monotonous landscape and consumer lifestyle that he encounters at the outskirts of the cities in the United States. When he returns to New York he meets Alice and her mother, who leaves Alice with him to resolve her private problems, while promising Philip to encounter them later at the Amsterdam’s airport. Nonetheless, Alice’s mother does not meet them at the airport and as a result Philip and Alice take on a road trip through the German urban landscape in search of her grandmother’s house.

In general, the spatial fluidness of the different urban landscapes in the film can be linked with the *woge* characteristic of *terrain vague*. The locations in the different countries that appear in the film: United States, Holland and Germany of the film take place at the periphery of the big cities. Andrew Light notes that these sights seem overall unimpressive, flat and monotonous and that this sense of homogeneity is enhanced through the likewise repetitive and melancholic guitar tune that accompanies the characters through their road trip. Nonetheless, this dense experience of space is broken up at different moments through the different ways in which the characters experience the place. Light suggests that through Alice’s child like and enchanting perception of space Philip is able to see with different eyes the monotonous landscape, nonetheless Light points out that from then onwards the film does not simply become a rose-coloured tinted experience. The exchange of perceptions between Alice and Philip is slowly and difficult, sometimes they share the same spatial experience of the road trip they are on and sometimes their opposite viewpoints are shown. Furthermore, the free engagement of the audience is not only recognisable in how the various characters of *Alice in the Cities* experience space and how the resulting perspectives are left open for the audience to share. Along the film, the viewer encounters various *tracking shots* in *third person* of the camera panning across the landscape. These

57 Ibid., 221–224.
58 Ibid., 222.
types of shots permit the viewer to build their own experience of space since they are not viewing the space through the eyes of the characters. 59

It is common for Wenders’ work to explore the aesthetic of urban landscape through the development and movement of the city. 60 In the film, this fluid spatial experience is reinforced through the continuous change of scenery. From the first shot, a plane that is crossing the sky, till the last shot, Philip and Alice continuing their quest for Alice’s family in a train, the audience is exposed to a permanent moving scenery. This fleeting spatial perception also enhances the transient character of the different empty or abandoned spaces that the viewer encounters along the film (fig.5-8, 10-12, 15-18). Sometimes the spaces are accompanied by background information, for example, there is one sequence when Philip and Alice are driving around the Ruhr District and where we find out that a settlement of houses is going to be demolished in order to make space for a future hospital. This sequence is an example of how the urban space is in continuous transformation. In addition, the transient nature of this type of spaces is reinforced through different tracking shots of the landscape that the viewer sees passing by.

The vague characteristic of terrain vague is also present in the film through the multiple points of view that are made available for the audience. In the previous mentioned sequence when Philip and Alice are driving around the Ruhr District the audience encounters different stand points towards the space. First, there is the point of view of the elderly couple that explains the context around the landscape, we learn from them that in a near future the settlement they are currently in is going to be torn down in order to build a Hospital of the Frim Krupp (fig.9). Then there is a cut and the next scene is a shot in third person of the camera

panning across a settlement of old houses, some of them are derelict and in state of decay, others are still standing and between them we are shown various vacant spaces (fig.10-12). Here the *montage* of the film leaves enough space for the audience to experience the landscape in their own terms, by being detached of the main characters and the repetitive music.\(^\text{61}\) Afterwards different shots are being alternated between the camera adopting the points of view of Alice and Philip while they talk or accompanied by the previously mentioned melancholic guitar tune and the camera showing the characters looking at the landscape (fig.13). While Alice engages with these surroundings in a more subjective and sentimental way, she feels “sad that these beautiful old houses are going to be torn down,” Philip expresses a more detached and practical approach towards the vanishing environment, he explains that “they don´t make enough rent.” \(^\text{62}\) In the following shots we see Phillip being more interested in the authoritarian and restrictive atmosphere of the space, implied by a sign he is photographing, which states the prohibition of the presence of vehicles, dealers and play of outdoor games like football by the Reinische Housing Joint-stock Company (fig.14) and then Alice again more interested in the poetics of the space, which are visually implied by a shot of Alice in reverse-angle contemplating the old houses and the vacant plots while a kid is riding his bicycle along the movement of the camera and accompanied by the same guitar tune (fig.15).\(^\text{63}\)

The different ways, in which the audience is made able to approach the space, supports the uncertain character of *terrain vague*, since each individual person will engage differently with the space they are viewing. Moreover, across the film Wenders highlights the essential complexity of spatial perception through the problem that Philip has with his camera. At the beginning of the film Philip is troubled because he feels unable to capture his experience of the American countryside in a photograph. He is annoyed because the image does not do justice

\(^{61}\) The montage is the way in which “the shots of a film are put together.” Gillian Rose, “‘the good eye,’” 50.

\(^{62}\) Alice in the Cities, DVD.

\(^{63}\) A reverse-angle shot is when the camera takes the point of view of one of the characters. Gillian Rose, “‘the good eye,’” 49.
to his experience of reality. Although he compulsively keeps making pictures, he does not find gratification in them and is not able to accomplish his work, which entails writing about the American countryside. Later, when he meets Alice, he starts to find other type of meaning in the pictures. Like the part when Alice takes a picture of the scenery outside of the airplane window and then states that she finds the image beautiful because it is empty.\(^6^4\) In a way Wenders uses Philip’s dilemma with photography to indicate his position as a filmmaker. Wenders seems aware of the limitations and possibilities of an image. In general, a representation is never going to be an exact copy of the original; nonetheless this is not the point of a photograph or a film. The image aids the filmmaker to explore the scenery in different ways and the richness of the film lies in its uncertain structure, which permits the viewer to engage with the represented space in multiple ways. For example, in some scenes of *Alice in the Cities* the viewer can relate to how Philip’s perception of space is expanded through Alice’s eyes.

**Lingering over the past**

The interest that Wenders shows in the historic context of the space in which his movie takes place, also adds to the character of *terrain vague*. For the filmmaker the empty spaces of the cityscape are more than a visual pause from the excessive build landscape, through these “gaps” we can also “see through time.”\(^6^5\) In this sense one can interpret the empty or *vacuus* characteristic of *terrain vague* linked to the timeless characteristic of the term. Although he is referring to Berlin I find that this statement is also applicable to the empty spaces that the characters of *Alice in the Cities* encounter. When Philip and Alice are driving around the Ruhr District looking for Alice’s grandmother’s house, Alice expresses her subjective approach towards the derelict houses that make up the landscape: “I feel sad that these beautiful old houses are going to be torn down.”\(^6^6\) Although the housed are in an abandoned and decaying state and will eventually fall apart and become part of the past, Alice finds aesthetic value in them and expresses her discontent regarding their termination. For her, even the vacant plots have value, since they

\(^6^4\) *Alice in the Cities*, DVD.

\(^6^5\) Ibid., 99.

\(^6^6\) *Alice in the Cities*, DVD.
are imbued with past, she expresses: “The empty spaces look like graves, like house graves.” This mournful metaphor turns the negative space, or the void, into a memorial that serves to keep the past of the empty space present. Therefore Alice’s temporal approach towards this specific place values more the past than the present. Nonetheless, as I have noted before, the viewer is not tied to a specific perception of space. While the viewer is able to share this mournful temporal approach with Alice, at the same time he or she is aware of the imminent future of the place, namely the construction of the Hospital mentioned by the elderly man at the beginning of the sequence. Furthermore, after Alice’s metaphor the viewer is subtly confronted with the eminent future of the settlement of houses and the green spaces in general. This is implied by a shot in third person that shows a thriving industrial complex in the background of the landscape that seems to predict an ongoing industrial expansion (fig.16). Therefore, this sequence tacitly exposes the audience to another characteristic of terrain vague, a complex temporality where past and future appear to coexist in the same place.

The threat of the modern metropolis

The ambiguous relationship of terrain vague with nature is also present in Alice in the Cities. In the urban landscape of the different cities that the main characters traverse, the viewer encounters fleeting spaces were nature would seem to wither and thrive at the same time (fig.5-8, 10-12, 15-18). The different empty or abandoned spaces in the film show these spaces full of grass, trees and bushes that appear to be retaking the space (fig.5, 7, 10, 11, 15, 17, 18), while at the same time these spaces appear to be in danger of being taken over by industry and modernity. In the background of these sites there is usually an element associated with industry or modernity like an industrial complex with a big chimney expelling smoke in the background (fig.16), a railway (fig.17) or a big hotel (fig.6). In combination with the repetitive guitar tune, these momentary landscapes presage the end of the idyllic countryside.

67 Alice in the Cities, DVD.
In particular, this is made evident when Philip and Alice are driving through the Ruhr District, because since the 18th century the Ruhr District’s industry has been an important centre for Europe’s coal and steel industry, which also led to its heavy environmental pollution.\footnote{Danish Architecture Centre, 2016. Emscher Park: From Dereliction to Scenic Landscapes [online], available from: http://www.dac.dk/en/dac-cities/sustainable-cities/all-cases/green-city/emscher-park-from-dereliction-to-scenic-landscapes/ [Accessed 16 July 2016].} In this part of the film the viewer encounters more industrial buildings as backgrounds of the different shots. In this sense Wenders interest in showing the landscape of the Ruhr District seems to be in line with the artists of the 70s that “saw the outer city in terms of condemnation,” because the film tends to emphasize in a tragic tone the menace that the expansion of the cities and heavy industrialization processes are to nature.\footnote{Emiliano Gandolfi, “The Image and Its Double,” in Spectacular City: Photographing the Future, ed. Emiliano Gandolfi, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers 2006, 8.}

This negative approach towards expansion and industrialization of the cities is also perceptible in the first part of the film, when Philip is frustrated and feels unable to write about the American countryside. In a conversation he has with a friend, he states that he is concerned because after having experienced New York City he feels unable to be impressed by the more natural or unimposing landscapes of the outskirts of New York.\footnote{Alice in the Cities, DVD.} Nevertheless, after Philip meets Alice and goes on a road trip with her, he appears to change his disposition towards the common and unimpressive everyday landscape. Alice’s more spontaneous and sensible perception of life does not only influence Philips’s spatial experience, it is given more weight in the overall \textit{montage} of the film. For example, in the sequence when Philip and Alice are driving through the Ruhr District and come across a group of the derelict houses and the vacant spaces Alice’s perception of the landscape is effectively supported through long shots of her in \textit{reversed-angle} that take more screen time than the other shots of the sequence, like her looking at the countryside against the industrial complex (fig.16) and the empty spaces between the
houses and a little kid riding his bicycle along the car Alice is in (fig.15).\(^71\)

Moreover her perception gains rhetoric not only because her shots are longer, but also because they are backed with her poetic verbal reflections and the repetitive guitar tune.

Wenders sees children as "models for seeing, thinking and feeling."\(^72\) This is why although he offers the audience different points of view of the space he favours Alice spatial perception. Therefore, Alice’s perception is being presented as a model to follow, one that brings out the positive value of the past, as it has been noted in the segment “Lingering over the past” of this chapter, and one that sees industrialization as a threat to natural spaces. Therefore, in alignment with Solà-Morales conception of the term, Wenders uses *terrain vague* as a counter normative spatial discourse, which is opposed to the city’s regulatory homogeneity and oppression of nature.\(^73\) Moreover, Wenders’s aesthetic approach of *terrain vague* shares some of the features that Tim Edensor attributes to industrial ruins, which seem to be potential spaces of resistance that function as remainders of the “depredations wrought by a destructive capitalism,” whose symbolic presence “can cause us to question the normative ways of organizing the city and urban life.”\(^74\) In addition, the importance given to nature and its imminent threat in Wenders’s *terrain vague* like Edensor’s ruins are remainders that the urban sphere is not only inhabited by humans but also by plant and animal life.\(^75\) Also, through the sequence of the derelict houses and Alice’s metaphor Wenders’s *terrain vague* engages in a nostalgic remembrance of the urban past, which is also linked with the aesthetics of modern ruins.\(^76\)

\(^71\) The montage is the way in which “the shots of a film are put together.” Gillian Rose, “‘the good eye,’” 50.
\(^75\) Ibid., 168.
\(^76\) Dillon, “Ruins,” Talk, np.
In all, chapter two has illustrated how the sound, the spatial experience of the characters and the overall *montage* of *Alice in the Cities* evokes the different characteristics of *terrain vague*. Apart from using *terrain vague* as a visual tool for understanding the aesthetic approach of the filmmaker it is important to underline the symbolic reciprocity that is involved with the usage of the term. The various landscapes in the film can be understood as *terrain vague* because of the way the film is made, which stimulates the audience to engage with the landscape at a deeper level and not only see vacant lots and derelict houses. The viewer is encouraged to acknowledge the landscape as another main character of the film with whom Philip, Alice and the viewer itself form different symbolic relations.

**Chapter 3, *terrain vague* a spectacular approach**

**Post-Doc Photography**

Chapter three will focus on a recent strand of photography that dates from the 90s and is current subject of different discussions regarding the aesthetics of contemporary urban landscape photography. Steven Jacobs determines the historical context of new strand of photography by drawing a link between the history of urban and landscape photography and the history of urban planning. According to him by the late twentieth century street photography started to decline because the expansion of the modern metropolis caused the fading of the boundaries between city and countryside. As a result, urban photography and landscape photography started to merge, since photographers had no more interest in the people and actions they found in public spaces and turned to a more “topographical approach.”

In addition, due to the disappearance of photojournalism in the 60s, the inclusion of this new type of photography in museums and galleries and the rapid digitalization of photography that granted access to everyone, this new type of urban photography lost interest in documenting the everyday life of the city. Based on Jacobs’s thoughts, Emiliano Gandolfi names this new type of photography “Post-Doc Photography” since the

78 Ibid., 171.
main subject of these photographs is “the new development of the cities, the new conurbations, the business centres of infrastructures seen as intriguing sculptures.” Interestingly, like the group of filmmakers of the 70s that were mentioned at the beginning of chapter two, this Post-Doc Photography exhibits the same interest for the structure of the city and its experience. Nonetheless, their aesthetics are very different from the artists of the 70s that according to Solà-Morales and Gandolfi saw these changes in the urban landscape in “terms of condemnation” and used their art as means of reclaiming space or as form of protest. In contrast, Post-Doc Photography accepts the spatial outcomes of the decentralization of the metropolis as a fact and brings out its aesthetic qualities.

I have decided to include two case studies from the genre of Post-Doc Photography because their aesthetic contrast with Wenders´s previous analysed work will enrich the formal qualities of terrain vague. This also helps to understand the way in which terrain vague can be used as a tool for visual interpretation; since it is made clear that the term is not linked to a specific style or appearance. Through the selected case studies the characteristics of terrain vague are going to be illustrated. These cases comprehend the photographic series of two German photographers, A Scape (2004-2005) of Steffi Klenz and Lost in Transition (2007) of Peter Bialobrzeski. Like chapter two, this chapter will emphasise Baudrillard´s symbolic reciprocity in relation with the imagery of terrain vague. Since Klenz and Bialobrzeski use modern image making equipment in their photographic process it could be argued that their work is more linked with Baudrillard´s productive simulacrum, because high fidelity imaging technology is mostly linked with the over exposition of reality by making the “close up or the copy be imperative to the real.” Nevertheless, in general the Pot-Doc Photographers are not concerned with a precise or life-like representation of space. Klenz and Bialobrzeski and are not centred in showing empty or derelict spaces at the outskirts of the cities in high

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80 Ibid., 8; Solà-Morales, “Terrain Vague,” 118-122.
82 Merrin, “To play with phantoms,” 99.
fidelity. They rather have a more conceptual approach towards representation, since through different photographic manoeuvres like changes in scale, use of light and elusive subject matter, they manage to engage the viewer in an open symbolic exchange.

**Homogenous sceneries and unspecified locations**

Klenz’s *A Scape* series consists of nine photographs (fig.19-27) and Bialobrzeski’s *Lost in Transition*, comprehends fifty-two photographs, nonetheless I will only use fifteen photographs of this series as case studies (fig.28-42). Both artists manage to keep the photographed sites uncertain and vague by rendering the images in a homogenous way. All the images in each series are not very different from one another and as a consequence it is difficult for the viewer to identify them as part of a specific urban location. This sense of uncertainty is increased in Klenz’s series through the undetermined locations given by the author in combination with the heaps of unidentified materials that suggest being something other than what they actually are. Although each title mentions an area in the periphery of London like *Pudding Mill Lane* (fig.19) or *Beacontree* (fig.22), the sites depicted in the photographs differ greatly from its real visual urban context, because at first sight these images appear to be something other than what they really are, like sand dunes (fig.21) or mines (fig.24), even lakes (fig.25). Not even a person that lives in the mentioned locations would relate the image with its title. In addition, the only way in which the viewer is able to identify what he or she is looking at is through Klenz’s artist statement, which clarifies that the sites in the images are composed of “heaps of raw materials made of remains of demolished buildings.”

As a whole, the uncertain character of *terrain vague* is greater in *A Scape*, due to the straightforward indefinable subject matter of the photographs.

Unlike Klenz, Bialobrzeski gives no small hint of geographical location in the titles of his series. All of the photographs have the same title: *Transition* followed by a

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Moreover this geographical indetermination is reinforced by the unsettling sameness of the images, although in his acknowledgments Bialobrzeski mentions that these photographs have been taken in more than twenty-eight cities and fourteen countries, like Dubai, Bremen, Singapore, New York, Calcutta, etc., none of them can be easily identified as belonging to a specific location, they all seem to depict a generic space, endemic to the global urban metropolis.\(^{84}\)

According to Michael Glasmeier, who introduces the photographic book of the series *Lost in Transition*, the lack of location of these images reinforces their self-sufficiency as “diffuse urban spaces.” This implies that Glasmeier also identifies the vagueness of these places as a fundamental part of their essence.\(^{85}\)

The vague characteristic of *terrain vague* is also identifiable in *Lost in Transition 2007* through Bialobrzeski’s anachronistic approach of the sites. In a sort of documentary way, Bialobrzeski comments that the intention of this series was to “examine the transformation of urban wastelands, many of them located on the peripheries of cities.”\(^{86}\) His pictures seem to depict the different stages of transformation of these places, like the wasteland before it is intervened (fig.28), the wasteland during its intervention (fig.29) and the wasteland after its intervention (fig.30). Nonetheless, these three stages are not always so easy to differentiate. For example, in figure 31 it is hard to distinguish if the site is a wasteland or has already been intervened. This is due to the reluctance of the photographer to depict the three stages of the same site and in a comprehensible timeline. This also contributes to the uncertain identity of each photograph, since it is made hard for the viewer to distinguish the before and after stage of each site. Therefore, the series seems to inhabit a temporal limbo.

\(^{84}\) Peter Bialobrzeski, “Acknowledgments,” in *Peter Bialobrzeski: Lost in Transition*, Peter Bialobrzeski, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz 2007, unpaginated.


Peeking into the future: empty plots, tracks and heaps

This sense of timelessness is also recognizable in each of Bialobrzeski’s photographs, since past and future seem to collide in the same space. Most photographs of Lost in Transition depict the background and the foreground in a contrasting way. Figures 32, 33 and 34 depict in the foreground vast empty, flattened areas of earth, while shiny and modern buildings compose the background. This is also the case of figures 35-38 that instead of having empty spaces as foregrounds, depict derelict or precarious human constructions. In all these photographs a tension between past and future is apparent. Like Alice in the Cities the empty spaces and the decaying and precarious constructions stand for a past that is about to come to an end. Nevertheless, the way in which these sites are visually linked with the past differ significantly from Wenders’s film. While Alice’s reflection about the vacant spaces and old houses is more sentimentally attached to a nostalgic remembrance of a beautiful past, the empty spaces in Figures 32, 33 and 34 of Bialobrzeski aren’t depicted with that same personal longing for the past. The only referent to the past is the empty, naked ground that in these images has already been marked with tracks of heavy-duty machinery that imply its imminent future. Furthermore, in comparison with Wenders’s film, these pictures are more emotionally detached due to the avoidance of human subjects in the photographs. Although in figures 35, 36 and 38 people are depicted in the image, their presence is made invisible through fading the people with their backgrounds by utilizing the same colour scheme (fig.35 and 36) and through long exposures captures the fading silhouette of the person (fig. 38).

This emotionless depiction of the sites makes harsh contrast between past and future. The abandoned and precarious constructions in figures 35-38 are not like the nice, small, neighbourhood houses that in Alice in the Cities have an historic and cultural value. Bialobrzeski’s approach is more crude and detached from the remembrance of a nicer past. The juxtaposition of the precarious and poor constructions in the foregrounds of figures 35-38 and the huge glowing skyscrapers and commercial buildings, expose the spatial and social paradoxes of the big cities. Here the viewer is not confronted with a great past that is about to come to and end, but with a social problem that in a near future is going to be build
over and therefore forgotten. The gloomy foregrounds of figures 32-38 stand for a present that is doomed to be forgotten, when they are depicted against the sparkling ever-growing metropolis that tacitly represents the near future of these terrain vagues. Moreover, while in Alice in the Cities the terrain vague’s woge or transient existence seems to last longer, because of Alice’s apprehension of the past, which permits the viewer to take distance from the future. The woge characteristic of Bialobrzeski’s pictures is more linked with the imminent future of these sites, because of the overwhelming metropolis that in the background seems ready to take over the abandoned or empty spaces at any time.

Different to Bialobrzeski’s series, Kleinz’s A Scape handles the timeless and woge characteristics of terrain vague in a more conceptual way. Key for understanding these characteristics in relation to the photographs is Kleinz’s artist statement. As I have mentioned before at first sight these pictures resemble natural landscapes and therefore, their transient character and complex temporality seem to go unnoticed. After a closer look at figures 19, 20, 22 and 23 tracks of heavy-duty machinery can be distinguished, which would imply that the hills are being moved and changed. Nevertheless, due to the strange use of scale the viewer is always kept doubtful about what exactly the tracks are. Only after reading the artist statement and becoming aware that these landscapes are depictions of heaps of raw materials of demolished buildings, their complex temporality starts to unfold. These heaps of materials have a symbolic importance since they contain past and future at the same time. On one hand, they are made of demolished buildings and therefore carry in them an urban related past. On the other hand, Klenz disclosures that these heaps will be recycled as road surfing materials, this implies that they have an already prescribed future. Moreover, after knowing that these landscapes are actually heaps of demolished buildings the viewer is able to identify the in between state of these sites, which is linked with the woge characteristic of terrain vague.

Man and Nature, a troubling conjuncture

Jacobs and Gandolfi have traced the origins of this new type of photography back to a group of photographers that took part of an exhibition that defined a change in American landscape photography called *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975-1976), among the exponents where Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, Stephen Shore, Bernd und Hilla Becher. Like the *Post-Doc Photography* the *New Topographics* focused on the banal and the everyday spaces like office towers, parking lots, suburban houses and in general in “amorphous peripheral areas.” Nonetheless unlike the sophisticated, expressionless and general Black and White colour scheme of the *New Topographics*, the *Post-Doc Photography* has “a strong aesthetic attraction to the new developments in the metropolis” and as a result renders the homogenous and seemingly boring parts of the city in “highly spectacular ways.” Since this new type of photography has not much interest “in elucidating reality, or protesting the direction it is now taking,” its interest revolves around the fictional representation of the everyday, in creating imagery out of the mix between utopia and dystopia that is “capable of embodying a new aesthetic parameter and undermining earlier ones.”

At first sight, this detached and a political approach towards space, who’s only objective would seem to be an eternal aesthetic search of amazing urban sights, could be interpreted as an ode to the ever expanding metropolis. In *A Scape* and *Lost in Transition* an ambivalent relationship between man and nature would not seem to exist, since the high buildings, the cranes, the heaps of demolished buildings, etc. are centre stage of these photographs. This could convey that both series have already assumed the defeat of nature against the urban expansion. Nonetheless, the problematic between man-made space and nature seems to go unnoticed at first sight, because it is less explicit than in Wender’s *Alice in the Cities*, and due to the attractive way in which *Post-Doc Photographers* represent

89 Ibid., 171; Ibid.,8.
these spaces.

According to Aaron Betsky and Gandolfi these sceneries are a mix of dystopia and utopia, the photographers are not only amazed and overwhelmed with the contemporary urban landscape but also show awe and fear in their pictures.\textsuperscript{91} Therefore these series are not only naïve celebrations of the imposing urban landscape, they were made attractive and, at the same time, unsettling for a reason. By fictionalizing their work, in addition of making statements about the transformation of urban space, these photographers reflect about "photography itself and on its documentary and representational values."\textsuperscript{92} Therefore they enter in the realm of Baudrillard’s seductive \textit{simulacrum}, which unveils the real through making the tools of simulation apparent.\textsuperscript{93} When looking at Klenz and Bialobrzeski series the artificiality of these representations are immediately recognisable. The strange use of angle and scale in \textit{A Scape} leaves the viewer guessing what they are looking at. For example, is the space in figure 26 a shot inside a huge trench or is this a macro view of the marks left by a bicycle in the mud? In the case of \textit{Lost in Transition} the use of the natural light at dusk, which is uncommon for the photographic standard, results in a exaggerated glowing effect that renders the images in an artificial way and leaves the viewer doubting whether or not the images have been digitally manipulated, because that type of light is never present in real life.\textsuperscript{94}

According to Alexandra Stara these photographic manoeuvres are effective “techniques of estrangement” that are used by the photographers to “rethink the familiar and everyday through its partial distortion and unsettlement.”\textsuperscript{95} In this sense, although Klenz and Bialobrzeski series are visually attractive they also accomplish to disorient and perturb the viewer through an uncommon, unfamiliar and strange depiction of space. Beside the used of angle, scale and light the general

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\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 10; Ibid., 5.  
\textsuperscript{92} Steven Jacobs, “Photographing Posturban Space,” 171.  
\textsuperscript{93} Merrin, “To play with phantoms,” 85–111.  
\textsuperscript{94} Michael Glasmeier, “The Presentness,” unpaginated.  
lack of persons in both series triggers unsettlement in the viewer. InLost in Transition the human aspect of these places is being undermined through the invisibilization of people in figures 35, 36 and 38. In comparison, once again, A Scape leaves the viewer stranded between doubt and probability. Similar to the uncertainty of whether or not the photographs are natural landscapes, figures 24, 26 and 27 make the viewer hesitate about whether or not little persons are part of the scenery. Through the right angle and a slight blur at the beginning of the vanishing point’s vision lines, the viewer is not able to identify scale, this is why the heaps of materials seem imposing, like mountains or sand dunes. In addition, because of this, the little pieces of material that stand out of the background, for example, the red dot in figure 24 or the white and grey spot in figure 26, look like people traversing the landscape. Nonetheless, after knowing that these landscapes are heaps of demolished building it becomes clear that these spots are just unidentified materials that make part of the heaps.

Therefore, through the previous mentioned visual devices that estrange both series from the everyday, A Scape and Lost in Transition reveal an underlying troubled approach regarding the conjunction of man and nature. In an ironic way A Scape lures the viewer into projecting their desire of natural landscapes onto ordinary heaps of urban materials that are actually more common than valleys or mountains in a metropolis like London. Lost in Transition highlights the paradox of a magnificent and attractive city that at the same time wipes out nature or domesticates it to fit the prevailing urban aesthetic. This is accomplished by the exaggerated contrast between the sparkling and dream-like quality of the human constructions and the gloomy and vulnerable green spaces (fig. 28, 31, 37 and 40), and by the notorious lack of wild nature in the aftermath of the developed sites (fig. 30, 41 and 42).

96 The visual devices used by Bialobrzeski for this purpose have been commented in the section “Peeking into the future: empty plots, tracks and heaps” of this chapter.

97 The vanishing point is the dot in the horizontal eye line “at which the rays of vision converge.” Gillian Rose, “the good eye,” 40.
In all, through the works of Klenz and Bialobrzeski chapter three has explored how Post-Doc Photography envisions terrain vague. Apart from having illustrated the different characteristics of terrain vague, chapter three has outlined the aesthetic differences between the urban imagery of the 70s, through Wim Wenders’ Alice in the Cities, the group of photographers of the New Topographics of 1975, and the more recent photographic works of Klenz’s and Bialobrzeski. Since the found differences do not affect the main characteristics of terrain vague, the term is not attached to a specific aesthetic and therefore can be considered as a visual discourse applicable to imagery of different times and genres. In addition, the found differences indicate that the outstanding vague characteristic of A Scape and Lost in Transition significantly enhances the symbolic reciprocity between viewer and images, which insinuates that the vague character is essential for terrain vague to be understood as such.

Finally, the aesthetic comparison between the artists of the 70s and recent photography also serves to consider the potential ethical dilemma of Post-Doc Photography. While the imagery of the 70s still showed concern over the transformation of the city, recent photography has accepted the urban expansion and has moved towards a highly aesthetic fictionalization of terrain vague. Glasmeier and Stara suggest that despite of the dominant fascination with the aesthetic of the metropolis there is an underlying critical posture towards the depredatory metropolis. Although I agree and have exposed in the last section of this chapter the visual devises used by the photographers to do so, the potential negative repercussions of such an artistic approach should not be neglected. In general, a detached search for a new aesthetic in the spatial and social after-effects of a growing capitalization and an overwhelming urban expansion could lead to the marketable consumption of these photographs in a decontextualized form and only for its aesthetic value.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation has set out to delimit the term *terrain vague*, exemplify and support its use as a visual discourse. It started with the supposition that the widespread use of the term has distorted its original meaning and expanded its application too far, so that *terrain vague* has become distorted and unproductive. Chapter one has shown how the different interpretations and applications of *terrain vague* have made the term too relative to be useful, and has compared these diverse uses with how Solà-Morales originally conceived it in order to delimit the term. Moreover, through this comparison and consideration of the etymological and conceptual roots of the term, chapter one was able to identify six main characteristics that are necessary for a space to be considered *terrain vague*.

These characteristics, nevertheless, are only perceivable at a level of representation, since they get lost or transformed when the term is used as a basis for praxis-based interventions in space like urban planning and design. Besides, after considering that Solà-Morales first conceived the term through photographs of empty and derelict spaces of the urban landscape, chapter one reached the conclusion that *terrain vague* has more potential as a tool for visual interpretation. In order to sustain this premise, chapter one introduced the conceptualization of *terrain vague* through Baudillard’s thoughts regarding the *simulacrum*. This approach to representation understands the referent as an already abstract idea, meaning that *terrain vague* does not acquire meaning through its physical manifestation, but through how it is perceived.

Chapter two and three refined the conceptual use of *terrain vague* through Baudillard’s *seductive simulacrum*, which requires a symbolic reciprocity between the viewers and the images. After having illustrated how the different characteristics of *terrain vague* can be interpreted in *Alice in the Cities*, *A Scape* and *Lost in Transition* it was made clear that the way in which the *terrain vague* is represented and how the viewer engages with the visual material are equally important for *terrain vague* to exist. On one side, a nuanced treatment of the space is required by the artist, one that leaves enough space for the viewer to engage in a symbolic dialogue with the multiple layers of meaning, including their own
perception of space. On the other side, the viewer has to be willing to engage in this symbolic dialogue and take different positions to interpret a space as *terrain vague*.

The comparison between the case studies of chapters two and three and the historical contextualization of *Post-Doc Photography* indicates that *terrain vague* has been part of the western collective urban imaginary since the 70s. Furthermore, the case studies of chapter two and three have demonstrated how to interpret the main characteristics of *terrain vague*, while taking into account that none of the characteristics are subordinate to one another, but can influence each other or work together to acquire meaning. In addition, the aesthetic differences between *Alice in the Cities* of chapter two and *A Scape* and *Lost in Transition* of chapter three suggest the versatility of *terrain vague* as tool for visual interpretation, since the terms character is not defined by a particular aesthetic or form. For example, the elusive character of *A Scape* and *Lost in Transition* significantly enhance the symbolic reciprocity between viewer and images, since these photographs challenge the viewer to engage with them without much guidance. In contrast, although the viewer in *Alice in the Cities* is given different points of view of the landscape, the montage favours Alice’s perception of the landscape and this predisposes the audience to share her experience of the space.

Another example is the way in which *Alice in the Cities, A Scape* and *Lost in Transition* approach the ambiguous relationship between nature and the city. *Alice in the Cities* has a more emotional approach towards the expansion of the city and the destruction of *terrain vague*, which could induce the audience to think carefully regarding the expansion of the metropolis. The case studies of chapter three confront the urban extension derived from the continuous post-war suburbanization in a highly aestheticized way and appear to avoid direct confrontation with the negative outcomes of an ever-growing urban expansion, which could lead the viewer to overlook this underlying problematic and only value the photographs based on their formal qualities. These type’s of aesthetic discrepancies also indicate *terrain vague*’s potential to be used as a critical concept.
Finally, besides being a tool for visual interpretation *terrain vague* is a process of reflexion about everyday spaces that usually go unnoticed. I agree with Solà-Morales, who claimed that these spaces are breeding grounds for creative endeavour that prompt others to see space from a different perspective. This approach towards space reminds us of the importance of keeping the meanings and forms of our man-made environment dynamic and open.
Bibliography


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