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THINKING LANDSCAPE IN ART

Abstract: The aim of the article is to analyse contemporary landscape painting as a form of landscape art. The analyses will be illustrated by a discussion of Grzegorz Sztabiński's oeuvre. Landscape art is defined as art which in any medium and in any way questions both the concept of landscape and real landscapes. The author claims that contemporary landscape painting may be treated as a theory or philosophy of landscape expressed in the painterly medium. It makes the invisible visible, i.e., it shows how the world becomes meaningful to people and does this not by representing views of certain places, but by provoking questions on the essence of landscape.

Keywords: art, landscape, painting, phenomenology, Sztabiński

If the essential character of landscape is that it combines these two views (objective and subjective), it is clear that the combination can take place only in the mind's eye.¹

Between earth and world is landscape.²

¹ Y. F. Tuan, *Thought and Landscape*, in: *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, eds. D.W. Meinig, J.B. Jackson, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1979, p. 90.

² E. S. Casey, *Representing Place. Landscape Paintings and Maps*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis 2002, p. 272.

1. Landscape: Eye and Mind

In *Eye and Mind*, one of the seminal works of 20th century aesthetics, Maurice Merleau-Ponty offers a famous interpretation of Paul Cézanne's paintings.³ In light of his own theory, the French philosopher presents the painter's works as pictures depicting the phenomenological dimension of the world. They offer their viewers a chance to experience the very moment in which the world starts appearing in someone's consciousness, i.e., begins to exist as given in someone's experience. Such an interpretation states that when one is looking at a picture of Mount Saint Victor painted by Cézanne, he or she does not so much see a more or less faithful representation of the highest peak in Provence, as experience how the painter saw it when he was painting it. Or, to put it differently: how the mountain was taking shape as a mountain in the painter's eye.

According to Merleau-Ponty, understanding the "world's instant"⁴ was the main objective that philosophy was supposed to achieve in the future. "Yet – he writes – this philosophy still to be done is that which animates the painter – not when he expresses his opinions about the world but in that instant when his vision becomes gesture, when, in Cézanne's words, he «thinks in painting»".⁵

It comes as little surprise that Merleau-Ponty refers to landscape painting. Of course, one reason is that Cézanne's fame as a post-impressionist was partly due to his landscape works, most notably the views of Mont Sainte-Victoire. Yet, the other is that, philosophically speaking, the landscape genre seems particularly fit for phenomenological interpretations, as it is traditionally defined as a genre of painting that represents views or panoramas, i.e., bits of the world seen from one's standpoint.

Given that the moment when the world starts to appear to us as the world around us usually remains invisible to us as we tend to focus on what is already "there", Cézanne's landscapes can be seen as making the invisible visible, to say it *a la* Merleau-Ponty. It is not, however, necessary to limit such an interpretation only to Cézanne's *oeuvre*. In fact, one can broaden the view of the author of *Phenomenology of Perception* and argue that all landscape painting may be interpreted this way and that differences between various painters' works derive from dissimilarities among numerous ways of experiencing the world. In other words, each landscape painting is an expression of a particular manner of "thinking in painting".

³ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, transl. by C. Dallery, in: M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. J. M. Edie, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1964, pp. 153-190.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178; Merleau-Ponty quotes B. Dorival.

In order to illustrate this point, two famous landscape paintings may be juxtaposed. One is Thomas Gainsborough's portrait of Mr and Mrs Andrews (ca. 1750), a picture representing a couple posing in the foreground – she is elegantly sitting on a bench, while he is upright and slightly leaning on the back of it – and a countryside landscape in the background. Gainsborough's work has often been interpreted as showing the perspective of the English nobility for whom the land was a source of 'pleasant prospects', to borrow Raymond Williams' term,⁶ or – to put it differently – for whom the land could be turned into landscape.

"A working country is hardly ever a landscape – Williams writes – The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation".⁷ In fact, the Andrews are portrayed as an idle couple who, quite possibly located at the edge of their park, have just stopped to admire the countryside for its purely aesthetic qualities. They both embody that "kind of observer [who] must divide [his or her] observations into «practical» and «aesthetic»",⁸ an observer "who is not only looking at land but who is conscious that he is doing so".⁹ Williams underlines that such an experience was not only an 18th century invention, but also the fruit of a century-long tradition going back to Petrarch's trip to Mont Ventoux in Provence, a tradition that comprised, among other things, landscape painting and literary representations of nature.

In other words, Gainsborough work epitomizes the kind of experience of the world in which the latter is seen as a scenery, most preferably a picturesque one, that can and should be approached in a disinterested manner as an object of contemplation. Such an approach, heavily indebted to the genre of landscape painting and thought to be typical of modern European culture, is today reflected in representational theories of landscape, namely those which in one way or another define landscape as "a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing or symbolising surroundings".¹⁰

Gainsborough's landscape painting can be contrasted with Peter Breughel's *Harvesters* (1565), a picture that has been referred to by some proponents of non-representational theories of landscape (as they are, more often than not, inspired by phenomenology, including Merleau-Ponty). Tim Ingold, who offered a widely read interpretation of this picture, begins its description with these words:

⁶ R. Williams, *The Country and the City*, Oxford University Press, New York 1973, p. 120.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁰ S. Daniels, D. E. Cosgrove, *Introduction. Iconography and landscape*, in: *Iconography and Landscape. Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design, and Use of Past Environments*, eds. S. Daniels, D.E. Cosgrove, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 1.

"Rather than viewing the painting as a work of art, I would like to invite you - the reader - to imagine yourself set down in the very landscape depicted, on a sultry August day in 1565. Standing a little way off to the right of the group beneath the tree, you are a witness to the scene unfolding about you".¹¹

Then he goes on to describe at length such elements of the represented paintings as "the hills and the valley, the paths and tracks, the tree, the corn, the church, and the people",¹² focusing less on what they look like than on what they are, how they acquired their shape, what function they have, or how people in the picture relate to them. Ingold discusses Breughel's work as a depiction of what he terms *taskscape*, i.e., a concrete environment in which people act and which they interact with, which means that it is as material as it is full of meanings and values. A taskscape cannot be experienced by contemplation since this implies detachment and disengagement, whereas a taskscape exists only in so far as tasks are performed in it. Consequently, Ingold claims that "the landscape, in short, is not a totality that you or anyone else can look *at*, it is rather the worlds *in* which we stand in taking up a point of view on our surroundings".¹³

In other words, Breughel's work represents not a scenery to be appreciated for its aesthetic look, but the kind of experience which is inherent to people's dwelling in the world, i.e., their daily engagement with the world around them, an environment which they experience through their everyday practices as something that determines them and is also determined by them.

Both pictures, as different as they are, may be said to offer two different views of what it means to live "between pure physics and pure landscape".¹⁴ For Erwin Strauss, there is - on the one hand - the space of geography, close to but not identical with the physical space, and on the other - the space of subjective experiences of sensible, material reality. The former is a result of imposing order onto sensible reality, whereas the latter invites us to dissolve in a reality that has not been ordered yet. Strauss underlines that there is yet another important difference between geography and landscape. Geographical space, together with its objective system, is entirely visible, while landscape space, due to its subjective character, "is invisible, because the more we absorb it, the more we lose ourselves in it. To be fully in the landscape we must sacrifice, as far as possible, all temporal, spatial and objective precision".¹⁵ Nevertheless, he

¹¹ T. Ingold, *The Temporality of the Landscape*, „World Archaeology” 1993, vol. 25, no. 2, p. 165.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹⁴ E. Strauss, *The Primary World of Senses*, transl. by J. Needlman, Collier-MacMillan, London 1963, p.318.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

believes that there is a way to gain access to landscape, provided by nothing else than landscape painting which "does not depict what we see, i.e., what we notice when looking at a place, but – the paradox is unavoidable – it makes visible the invisible, although it be as something far removed".¹⁶ The above statements apply, however, only to what Strauss thinks to be successful landscape paintings, not "paintings of certain towns and places [which] are pictorial views, portraits, as it were, but not landscapes". He adds that "only rarely has an artist succeeded in painting as a landscape of a particular town which could easily be recognized from the painting. Some Venetian paintings of the eighteenth century (Guardi) belong to this rare class, as does, above all, the view of the city of Delft by Vermeer".¹⁷

One can assume with a great deal of certainty that Merleau-Ponty, whose perspective shows affinities with the Straussian approach, would add to this list Cézanne's views of Mont Saint Victor. Breughel and Gainsborough are good candidates, too.

2. Art as a landscape theory

Cézanne is usually seen as one of the first avant-garde painters, one who introduced the cubist way of representing the world. Yet, not only was he a figure laying foundations for a new artistic tradition, but also one whose work belonged to the last phase of a tradition that lost its liveliness in the 20th century.

Even if landscape motifs were not totally eliminated in 20th century painting, they undoubtedly began playing a much inferior role than previously. As a result, landscape painting as a separate genre almost ceased to exist and the concept of landscape was largely taken over by other arts, such as installation or performance art, and by other genres such as eco, environmental, or land art. At the same time, it has to be underlined that in the 20th century, especially in its second half, landscape art really evolved.

What is more, if landscape art had been identified solely with painting and landscape architecture for several centuries, the 20th century witnessed constant broadening of the manner in which it was conceived of. Beata Frydryczak and the author of the paper once tried to characterize this process by suggesting a new definition of landscape art:

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 322.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 321.

“[It is] all forms of art (visual, conceptual, performative) which refer to all landscapes, problematizing them, i.e., subjecting them to artistic analysis, interpretation, and intervention, both in the formal and aesthetic sense, and in the critical sense. Landscape art understood in this way would not be a separate direction or trend in art and would not form a coherent artistic concept. Instead, its manifestations should be sought in various artistic areas, in individual works, actions or activities, which, revealing the landscape sensitivity of their authors, are aimed at a broadly understood discourse: from a position that problematizes landscape or its aspects to one that aestheticizes landscape. Thus, landscape art would not be a mere representation of landscape, aiming at its representation, but would constitute a kind of a critical reference to it, its aspects and issues, expressed in the language of art.”¹⁸

The above definition is based on the assumption that the essential feature of landscape art is not that it either represents real or imaginary landscapes, or it shapes real ones as it was the case before, but that it offers a sort of critical analysis or interpretation of the concept of landscape, as well as of all that is covered by it. In other words, what makes art landscape art is that it offers some sort of landscape theory or philosophy. Of course, such an approach does not exclude traditional, so to say, landscape paintings, but – as Strauss suggested – it sees them as landscape ones for a different reason than the simple fact that they are "pictorial views, portraits" of natural sceneries, countryside or cities. Conceiving of them as landscape artworks amounts to treating them as images that "make visible the invisible". This is the reason why – in light of the above definition – Breughel's and Gainsborough's works are landscape paintings, just as Cézannes'. It goes without saying that they all also offer views of particular places, yet figurativeness (or realism) is not prerequisite for landscape art.

3. Grzegorz Sztabiński's landscape paintings

An interesting example of how contemporary painting may be landscape art without figuratively representing places or sceneries may be found in the *oeuvre* of Grzegorz Sztabiński (1946-2020), a Polish painter, art historian and aesthetician.¹⁹

¹⁸ B. Frydryczak, M. Salwa, *Landscape Art - A New Definition And New Look*, „Art Inquiry” 2021, vol. XXIII (XXXXII), p. 117.

¹⁹ The following section is a shortened version of the chapter: M. Salwa, *Pejzaż w cudzośćwie - Grzegorza Sztabińskiego refleksja wizualna*, in: *Myslenie estetyczne*, eds. T. Pękała, R. Kubicki. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, pp. 189-200.

Landscape themes are featured in his works either explicitly, as mentioned in their titles, or as readily recognizable elements, even if the latter hardly ever acquire a fully literal form. Landscape themes are sometimes also implied by certain motifs that provoke associations with landscapes or by a general compositional structure that resembles perspective schemes, so important for landscape paintings of old masters.²⁰

In fact, showing landscapes as filtered through geometry makes Sztabiński's paintings far from paradigmatic for two utterly different reasons. On the one hand, geometry is usually associated with abstraction, idealisation and apriorism – in other words, all that which contradicts sensual, material and concrete reality. Indeed, it is hard to find two painting genres more distanced from each other than landscape painting and geometrical abstraction. On the other hand, not only did Sztabiński devote part of his artistic efforts to a genre which seems rather undervalued in contemporary painting, but also decided to practice it by making references to artistic trends which interested him the most, such as constructivism, conceptualism, post-conceptualism or geometrical abstraction. It hardly needs underlying that these trends have never been particularly interested in landscape themes.

One could argue that the fact that geometry is so important for Sztabiński's landscape works should not surprise anyone. This does not mean that it is obvious, though. History of landscape painting – from the Renaissance until the 19th century – proves that the influence of geometry on this genre became constantly less and less obvious: at first, landscapes were representations of places created on the surfaces of pictures, but they finally became records of visual impressions. If we consider that, etymologically speaking, geometry amounts to measuring the world, i.e., to a practice which is supposed to allow for making its representations (not only maps but also landscapes) and if we, additionally, take into account that a landscape painting is an image of the world, then we may claim that landscape painting is the most geometrical artistic genre, at least within the limits of figurative art. This aspect of landscape painting seems to have been usually overlooked and Sztabiński makes us – his viewers – aware of this fact by his artistic decision to put geometry to the foreground.

An explanation of his choice may be found in his theoretical works in which he raises the question "why geometry?"²¹ When answering it, he points out several functions that geometrical forms had in art from the prehistoric

²⁰ His *oeuvre* has been presented in a number of catalogues, e.g., G. Sztabiński, *Retrospekcja*, exh. cat., Miejska Galeria Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 2007.

²¹ G. Sztabiński, *Dlaczego geometria? Problemy współczesnej sztuki geometrycznej*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2004.

times until the 20th century. According to him, they enabled people to domesticate the world by taming their fear caused by its strangeness. They also allowed one to impose order onto sensual reality, which made the world comprehensible and unveiled its universal truth. Put differently, the use of geometry in art was an expression of both a need for order and a way to organize the world around humans. What is more, geometry offered a specific medium of symbolical consciousness (that treated geometrical forms as significant), paradigmatic consciousness (that used geometry as a means to comprehend the world) and syntagmatic consciousness (that used geometry as a compositional tool). Sztabiński also contends that geometry may communicate intentional meanings and at the same time express thoughts which one is unaware of but which are universal.

In his writings, Sztabiński assumes a double perspective. As an art historian, he describes the historical significance of geometry in art without formulating any judgments, whereas as an art theoretician he appreciates the use of geometry as a still fruitful means of artistic expression. Thus, he seems to claim not only that geometry in art could once have an emancipatory and/or reformatory function, but that it still has it. In light of his theory, landscape motifs in his paintings may be interpreted as depicting different "bits" of the world but, more importantly, due to the fact that they are subject to such a strong geometrical framework, they show that landscape as a painterly genre has a particular function: it is a way to domesticate the sensual reality around us, gain access to what we believe to be its essence, order and compose it. Sztabiński's landscapes, then, show that what we call a landscape – as in painting, or outside the realm of art – is nothing else than the world made meaningful and organized by ourselves.

As an art historian, Sztabiński devoted much of his attention to conceptual art which still was, according to him, a lively source of inspiration for many contemporary artists.²² He notices, however, that contrary to conceptualists of the mid 20th century, they are not interested in tautologies. He, instead, believes that the issue of tautologies is interesting not only from a historical point of view, but also from a theoretical one, since it is still artistically fruitful.

According to Sztabiński, the tautological character of art entails treating artistic forms as similar to analytic propositions, i.e. involves a belief that art not so much represents extraartistic reality, expresses emotions or offers sensory experiences, as it refers to itself. In other words, art is supposed to offer a theory of itself, while artworks are supposed to be similar to new definitions of the concept of art. Even if Sztabiński himself was probably eager to agree

²² G. Sztabiński, *Tautologie konceptualistyczne*, „Sztuka i Dokumentacja” 2012, no. 6, pp. 89-95.

with the formula "art as an idea as idea", he did not accept the consequences drawn from it by, for example, Joseph Kosuth. He was reluctant to recognize the necessity of resigning from traditional means of artistic practices as means that made new definitions of art impossible. Sztabiński contends that such an approach is a radical simplification – viewing art as tautological does not imply, he claims, excluding painting or sculpture, since there is a deep difference between logical tautologies and artistic ones: the former are semantically empty since they use pure variables, whereas the latter are based on concrete objects and, as a result, they are meaningful. This characteristic makes them interesting – if not in terms of their denotation, then in terms of what they connote.

Following Sztabiński's remarks, landscape paintings may be seen as nothing less than artistic "tautologies" presenting landscape as a landscape, i.e., juxtaposing a well known and recognizable *definiendum* with the *definiens* suggested by the painter. In light of what has just been said, the meta-landscape character of Sztabiński's painting consists in broadening or modifying the definition of landscape painting as an artistic genre. Yet, this does not amount to defining landscape painting in an unprecedented manner and thus presenting a completely new way of understanding landscape in art. It rather means showing new connotations of landscape painting without negating its tradition.

In his studies on conceptual art, Sztabiński focuses on, among other things, what he called a "documentary turn".²³ His contention was that 20th century artists abandoned a "vertical" model of an image, one that implied conceiving of it as of a window through which one could see a scene or gain access to the inner world of the artist. Following Hal Foster, he calls such a paradigm "a paradigm of an image as a framed landscape" and interprets it as an obligation to think of images as separated from reality and illusory. This model, Sztabiński claims, has been replaced by a 'horizontal' model that presents images as texts documenting observations of the world made by artists. Creating artistic documents may serve different purposes: showing certain phenomena, providing information about them, witnessing them. Sztabiński underlines that it is important that these phenomena are located beyond art and artworks themselves. Hence, artworks as documents are transparent and they refer viewers to objects or ideas that are beyond the works. A different documentation strategy may, however, be found in post-conceptual art. According to Sztabiński, it is based on the idea of "transdocumentation": even if what really counts is artistic actions that, as such, are prior to and more important than the works that document them, they are designed and performed in a way determined

²³ G. Sztabiński, *Dokumentacja a horyzontalny sposób pojmowania twórczości artystycznej*, „Sztuka i Dokumentacja” 2011, no. 5, pp. 6-15.

by the fact that they are going to be documented. As a result, it is not possible to clearly distinguish an artistic fact which is to be documented from its documentation.

If we push forward the interpretation of Sztabiński's works as images that use geometry in order to tautologically define landscape, we may state that they also play a transdocumentary function. Sztabiński's theory of landscape is not a purely conceptual fruit of research that he did as an art historian or theoretician, and that he, as a painter, only later decided to illustrate in his art. In other words, what viewers see while looking at his paintings, is not simply signs referring to their purely conceptual meaning, i.e., to some sort of extra-artistic landscape theory, but visual forms which are inherent to landscape thinking ingrained in his art.

3. Conclusions

Edward S. Casey entitled a collection of his essays on contemporary artists interested in landscape issues "artists reshaping landscape".²⁴ He devoted much of it to painters who perform what he terms "earth-mapping". He begins his analyses by stating that contemporary painting has parted ways with cartography (Strauss would say: geography), as it is no longer interested in offering realistic images of the surface of the earth. Yet, it does not mean that contemporary artists are not interested in representing the land. On the contrary, Casey writes, using the formula quoted above, they are "engaged in letting the *invisible become visible*", i.e. mapping the world but in a way that makes it less recognizable than intelligible.²⁵ Such a strategy has little to do with the European cartographic tradition, or with a majority of landscape painting. "Mapping the land [...] means showing how it feels and looks to be on or in the land, being part of it [...]".²⁶ Casey, who draws on Merleau-Ponty, among others, interprets being in the land as bodily presence involving direct sensual contact with the surroundings and all that which adds to how one dwells in the world, being thrown in it.

According to Casey, there are "four ways to map". First, "mapping of" - creating a cartographic image of a territory, which implies surveying the land by imposing geographical coordinates onto it. Second, "mapping for" - creating an image of a land aimed at serving a purpose, e.g., enabling someone to move quickly from one place to another. Third, "mapping with/in" - contrary to the

²⁴ E. S. Casey, *Earth-Mapping. Artists Reshaping Landscape*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2005.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. XV (emphasis in original).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. XVI.

two previous ways implying a sort of detachment or disengagement, this one amounts to showing how one experiences his or her world, "how it feels to be there, with/in that very place or region"; in other words, it is about representing what it means to be in a landscape. Finally, "mapping out" - giving one's experience of being in a landscape a form that makes this experience possible to share with others.²⁷

The four ways discussed by Casey are, however, much more than various ways of creating representations of the earth or world. In fact, they reflect essential ways in which one may think of and experience his or her surroundings - are there, after all, any other ways than approaching or experiencing them as space to be ordered and/or used, and/or lived in, and/or shared with others? This is also the reason why "earth-mapping" artists go far beyond the cartographic or landscape tradition, and may be said to make the invisible visible.

All four manners of mapping can be found in Sztabiński's landscape *oeuvre*, too. Given that none of his works represent a landscape in an easily recognizable manner, they all provoke the question: is it a landscape? If so, then what is a landscape, what does it consist of? What does it mean to represent one? Confronting such questions is implied in interpreting or appreciating Sztabiński's landscape works and this necessity makes it possible to see them as a sort of landscape "thinking in painting".

It is precisely this that landscape art, defined as above, is all about. Indeed, its main characteristic is that it makes the invisible visible, as it provokes people to focus in one way or another, experientially or conceptually, on what they take for granted and believe to be obvious to the extent of being unworthy of paying attention to.

Today's significance of landscape art does not stem solely from the fact that is an important "section" of contemporary art, but also from the fact that the concept of landscape started to play an important role in many fields within the academia, as well as outside of it, in the past two or three decades. It has been recently discovered by the humanities and social sciences as a key idea for understanding how people relate to their worlds, which resulted in putting it more and more to practice by applying it in cultural, social and environmental policies. In a sense, today is an era of "omni-landscape".²⁸

Even if contemporary landscape painting is not the mainstream of landscape art, one cannot deny its weight. This is due to the fact that it is distinguished by a unique feature. As painting, it belongs to the artistic tradition

²⁷ Ibid., pp. XX-XXII.

²⁸ M. Jakob, *Il paesaggio*, il Mulino, Bologna 2009, p. 7.

that influenced the concept of landscape so deeply in the past, whereas the rediscovery of the concept of landscape amounts to going far beyond its traditional associations with beauty, the picturesque, the sublime and the like. Contemporary landscape painting – in as much as it is landscape art and not creating mere "portraits" of certain places – questions the painterly approach to landscapes and does this using the very same medium. This is how painters may contribute to today's landscape philosophy. This is also Grzegorz Sztabiński's input to it, too; input that is an expression of how he "thinks in painting" at the same time.

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MYŚLENIE KRAJOBRAZU W SZTUCE (streszczenie)

Celem artykułu jest analiza współczesnego malarstwa pejzażowego jako odmiany sztuki krajobrazowej na przykładzie twórczości Grzegorza Sztabińskiego. Sztuka pejzażowa jest zdefiniowana jako sztuka, która w dowolnym medium i w dowolny sposób problematyzuje ideę krajobrazu jak również rzeczywiste krajobrazy. Autor twierdzi, że współczesne malarstwo krajobrazowe może być potraktowane jako teoria czy też filozofia krajobrazu wyrażona w malarskim medium. Współczesne malarstwo krajobrazowe czyni bowiem widzialnym to, co niewidzialne, czyli pokazuje, w jaki sposób świat konstituuje się jako znaczący dla ludzi. Czyni zaś to nie tyle ukazując widoki konkretnych miejsc, ile raczej prowokując pytania, każące się zastanowić nad tym, czym jest krajobraz.

Słowa kluczowe: fenomenologia, krajobraz, malarstwo, sztuka, Sztabiński

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