

Afterness and Landscape After: exploration of loss in exploited landscapes

Abstract

In the contemporary world, many landscapes, structured around industrial exploitation, are now entering a phase of transition. Sites that were designed to extract and refine resources are being abandoned as infrastructures age and global economies shift towards sustainable alternatives. These post-industrial contexts are often framed as wounded and doomed to decay. This essay argues that, despite the narrative of loss feels true from a human-tempo perspective, we must acknowledge the value of the complexity of what remains and the long-term potential of what could rise from ashes. Landscape itself doesn't know loss, only change of entropy and perpetual fluctuations. This essay explores the narrative of loss tied to transitioning contexts through the concept of *Afterness*, asking what comes after exploitation and how this "after" becomes perceptible to humans through landscape.

Afterness and Landscape After

A post-industrial landscape is defined as a territory where industrial activities are no longer pursued, causing socio-economic instability⁽¹⁾. Those landscapes once exploited for an economic return are now left behind because no more profitable. They continue to evolve, to exist and to host life, but the system that supported their previous evolution, existence and richness is not present anymore. Other than tangible abandoned structures, the industry development leaves behind contaminated soil, damaged habitats and altered visual and spatial conditions. Socially, it is associated with problems such unemployment, depopulation and loss of human capital.

By definition, "*post-industrial*" implies a clear temporal breaking point that separates the productive before from the decadent after⁽²⁾. The definition I bring of *Afterness* is meant to represent a focus shift from what has been lost to what continues to live. It is an abstract concept, but it is deeply rooted in material reality. Hence, *Landscape After* function as the medium through which *Afterness* arrives to us as humans. *Landscape After* is not merely a condition that follows industrial activity, but the interface through which *Afterness* becomes perceptible. *Landscape After* translates temporal change into spatial and experiential terms. Altered soils, disrupted ecologies, abandoned infrastructures, and changing social rhythms become the language through which *Afterness* speaks. These two entities together form a transitional condition and a temporal space for new negotiations that take into consideration contemporary sensibilities (such as collective identity, environmental crisis awareness and economical sustainability) without forgetting nor denying its past. On the contrary, it keeps building upon and cherishing it. Rather than representing a void, *Landscape After* acts as a threshold space, where previous systems no longer function but new ones have

not yet stabilised. *Afterness* is therefore not an end state but a mode of becoming, continuously mediated by landscape.

Introduction to the site

The Cromarty Firth, located in the Scottish Highlands, has long been shaped by external economic forces. Its deep waters, geographic position, and relative access to shipping routes made it ideal for the development of oil fabrication and rig servicing facilities in the late 20th century. Towns like Invergordon, Alness, and Cromarty experienced significant influxes of labour and capital during the oil boom. However, due to the nature of non-renewable resources, the oil economy in Scotland was always extractive and temporary⁽⁴⁾. As global demand shifted and North Sea deposits became costly to maintain, offshore rigs began to be decommissioned. Today, the Cromarty Firth harbour rusting oil platforms, some of which waits to be dismantled⁽⁵⁾. At the same time, the region is positioning itself as a potential hub for wind energy fabrication and maintenance, suggesting that the region's industrial identity albeit fluctuant, remains the only possible source of richness. In this case, like in many other across the country and around the world, the *Afterness* is not simply abandonment, but a reorientation of purpose, not without un-addressed social implications.

The many faces of loss

The industrial activity has certainly produced multiple forms of loss that altogether contributes to the current situation. *Landscape After* holds these losses visibly, making them difficult to resolve quickly. It is possible to group them in four main categories: loss of employment and agency, loss of demographic continuity, loss of ecological stability and loss of narrative coherence about the future. They can be analysed separately but they are of course intercorrelated and a repercussion of one aspect affect inevitably all the others.

As industries close and don't need workforce in loco anymore⁽⁶⁾, people are left with three options. The most popular response among the young generation is to move in a different city or even abroad, running after other work opportunities, which forces them to deal with financial uncertainties and sense of guilt for leaving behind the people they love. A second option is to stay and settle with precarious locally available jobs. Both alternatives sound quite mortifying and imposed from much higher forces to which it is impossible to have individual control over. What is most striking is that loss is not only material but existential. The inability to choose for oneself becomes a quiet but profound deprivation. *Afterness* here reveals that loss is not simply the disappearance of something valuable, but the breakdown of continuity between past and imagined futures. The present is perceived like just an unfortunate limbo that this generation has to deal with. The loss of the right to decide for oneself is one of the biggest and most unspoken issue of the post-industrial aftermath landscape. In 2024 **Community Land Scotland** published a reality-crushing declaration titled "**Young people should have the right to live in the Community where they grew up**", where they advocate for affordable housing, a Scottish Community Wealth fund from renewable energy development and an enabling environment to generate high quality job positions. I believe the content of this manifesto offers a real, long term opportunity for future generation to generate, indeed, wealth from their motherland.

A third option, mostly only available for older generations, is to simply retire early, taking advantage of the remunerative working salaries in the well exploited industry's gold times.

This system leads to depopulation, skill drain and breakage of intergenerational continuity. Another ring of the chain is the economic instability: local shops close, wealth imbalance increases, funds and investments decrease. The feeling of uncertainty is both material and psychological. The late-stage exploitation of non-renewable resources impoverishes all the other local economies and affect the quality of the environment, left to deal with destabilizing results. The leveraged land can't host autochthon flora and fauna anymore, because the soil is contaminated. Some machineries still operates and their noise scares mating species away. The decommissioning iter itself is quite disruptive and polluting. Together, these dynamics contribute to a broader loss of identity.

Is it really a landscape of loss?

The concept of *Afterness* leans on the concept of '*Genius Loci*'. I find particularly interesting **C. Norberg-Schulz's** definition of "spirit of the place", as an "opponent" with which men must come to terms in order to acquire the possibility of inhabiting. The link between the inborn tendency to create homes (I am thinking of the archetypes of the cave and the hut) and the acknowledgement that it is essential to establish a dialogue with places we want to live in (and with) is made well explicit in his definition. In most cases, industrial activities are perceived as super-impositions by locals who remember when that piece of land was once something else, often greener and freer⁽³⁾. This external act of violence over the landscape breaks the mutual agreement between men and their opponent. The *Genius Loci* feels under attack by the plutocracy. It is, reduced to its essence, a very human fight. This spirit of the place is never truly lost. It continues to exist because it has existed at some point in time. It has shaped many lives, humans and non, so it intrinsically held this transforming power in itself.

To label the overall landscape situation simply as lost means imposing an external narrative, even if based on solid data, that is very limiting and impoverish the complex beauty of reality. It reduces a whole set of human and non-human actors to one ugly label and freeze the judgment in a single interpretive moment. Outsiders often assume authority in declaring a landscape "ruined" or "damaged". This supposes that value is judged economically or aesthetically rather than experientially or by any other less visible or exploitable values. It is also easy to forget that humans are incredibly good at adapting to new environments and especially great at domesticating. For whom was born during the black oil rush, industrial infrastructures are part of personal memory, even affection. The view on oil rigs in the darkness of the harbour is promptly domesticated and described as housy Christmas trees by a local in Cromarty. What an outsider reads as decay may be experienced as familiarity, safety, or even comforting beauty. Human copying mechanism is to be considered an incredibly fruitful skill and by no means someone's heritage is to be considered less valuable than others. The spirit of place is not erased by exploitation; it can be overwritten but never fully removed. *Landscape After* reveals this persistence through everyday adaptation. Industrial structures may dominate the view, but they are gradually absorbed into lived experience. *Afterness* insists that value is not universal nor static, but relational and situated. This reframing does not deny damage. It refuses the simplification of damage into final judgment.

The myth of the "better before"

Human beings do not own the right to erase the past of any place, even if they are moved by good intentions. It is essential to acknowledge it and implement it in future plans. This is well described by the continuum of events in time in the concept of *Afterness*. The myth of a "better before" is true in the case where only wealth and productivity are the parameters considered. Industrial systems accelerate extraction and economic growth, while ecological and cultural systems operate more slowly. When extraction stops,

the sudden absence of speed is often misread as decline. Oil is a finite resource, and therefore the oil economy was intrinsically designed to end.

This condition reflects “planned obsolescence”, a principle whereby systems are designed with limited lifespans to sustain continuous production of new supply. Planned obsolescence is not a phenomenon that applies only to technologic devices, but also to industrial landscapes. Nostalgia risks idealising a past growth boost that was always meant to last temporarily or never considered in its full complexity. In this sense, nostalgia emerges as a coping mechanism, idealising a past moment of apparent prosperity⁽⁷⁾. As **B. Milligan** describes in “**Accelerated and Decelerated Landscapes**” (2022), industrial activity distorts the tempo of landscapes, speeding up extraction and socio-economic change while ecological and cultural processes unfold slowly. When acceleration stops, the discrepancy in pace becomes visible, but this is not decline, it is temporal realignment. *Afterness* reframes the pause not as failure, but as this kind of realignment, allowing other processes to surface. Critical examples of these processes are ecological recovery and social reorganisation. *Landscape After* becomes the factual register of this temporal negotiation.

Beyond Resourceship

“Resourceship”⁽⁹⁾ is a term used in economics to describe a theory that emphasizes human ingenuity and entrepreneurship as the primary drivers of resource availability, rather than physical scarcity. The theory posits that “resources are not, they become”. A material in the earth, and therefore land itself, is just “neutral stuff” until human knowledge and technology identify it as a mean to satisfy a need. This perspective remains rooted in an extractive worldview. The only possible value of land emerges through human use. In post-industrial landscapes, this logic proves to be at least questionable. *Landscape After* reveals the consequences of seeing land primarily as a resource: when extraction ends, value appears to vanish. *Afterness* challenges this assumption by asserting that landscapes continue to be meaningful outside economic exploitation, and by treating land not as a stock of future resources but as a living system with its own rhythms. *Landscape After* is again the medium through which the change happens and become visible, where non-market values take form. Here, Merleau-Ponty’s⁽⁹⁾ notion of the importance of the “*lived body*” and the embodied self’s relationship with the world becomes relevant. Human relationships with landscape are not purely instrumental or opportunistic. The starting point for understanding reality emerges through movement in space and through human senses. Merleau-Ponty argued against the modern tendency to separate the mind from the body and the self from the world. He claimed that a rationalistic and disembodied point of view leads to alienation, and instead, advocates for the reconnection of our personal experience with the structures of the social and natural world. Treating land solely as a resource produces alienation, while embodied experience positions landscape as a co-constitutive partner of the human existence.

Refusing the pessimist tendency

The end of industrial exploitation does not mean emptiness; it leaves space for ecological recovery. It is a great opportunity for nature to reclaim not only space but also agency. This process is assisted by the local community, now strengthened by non-market forms of value. Landscapes can be profitable for the ecosystem even if not economically lucrative. At the same time, new economies based on cooperation model have plenty of chances to arise, such as community-owned renewable energy cooperatives, shared land trusts, participatory processes, stewardship models...

This scenario happens to share some viewpoints to what is called “Solarpunk”, a literary, artistic, and social contemporary movement that imagines futures grounded in ecological regeneration, community governance, and ethical coexistence between technology and nature⁽⁸⁾. *Afterness* shares this orientation by treating the future as deeply relational and shaped through care rather than control.

Afterness does not offer comfort in the form of clear answers or ready-made solutions. What it offers instead is a way of staying with uncertainty without immediately turning it into failure. In landscapes shaped by exploitation, loss feels urgent and the human instinct is to demand closure. Yet this essay has argued that such urgency often flattens complexity and excludes other ways of seeing and relating to the territory. *Afterness* invites a slower reading of landscape, a kind of relationship that accepts incompleteness as a temporary condition. *Landscape After* becomes the space where this reading is possible. It holds together traces of the past without forcing them into a single narrative, but instead letting each one individual to choose their own version of the story that suits oneself the most. It makes visible the fact that landscapes do not simply end when extraction stops, nor do they automatically recover according to linear expectations. They continue to change, often unpredictably, shaped by ecological processes and everyday practices. In this sense, *Landscape After* is not a passive outcome of industrial decline but an active medium through which new forms of attachment emerge.

Reframing post-industrial contexts through *Afterness* also shifts responsibility. Rather than asking how landscapes can once again become productive in economic terms, it encourages asking how they can be lived with and cared for over time. This does not mean denying damage or romanticising abandonment. It means recognising that value does not disappear when profitability ends. It relocates value in relationships, embodied experience, and shared stewardship. The refusal of purely extractive logics opens space for other forms of richness to surface, even if they are harder to measure.

Conclusion: Staying with the After

Ultimately, *Afterness* is not just about reaching a better future or restoring a lost past. It is about learning how to live in the in-between: moments when old systems are breaking down and new ones have not yet fully formed, when climates are shifting and when different generations hold different expectations about what lies ahead. In a world increasingly marked by environmental and social instability, this condition is becoming common. All living beings live in a continuous shifting present that is difficult to grasp, and all life cycles are about constant transitions of matter, some bigger some smaller. As said in the abstract, landscape itself doesn't know loss, only change of entropy and perpetual fluctuations. Experiencing the *Landscape After* teaches us that living with change, rather than constantly trying to overcome it, may be one of the most important skills all beings need to develop.

Sources:

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- 5- [Invergordon Service Base Phase 5 Development](#), Environmental Impact Assessment Report Volume 1 Non-Technical Summary January 2025.
- 6- [Highlands and Islands Workforce Summit report](#), Skills Development Scotland, 2025.
- 7- Overview of the work of Svetlana Boym, "The Future of Nostalgia", Basic Books, New York, 2001.
- 8- Online review of Solarpunk.
- 9- Overview of work of E. Zimmermann on 'Resourship' and on the work on M. Merleau-Ponty on 'ghost in machine' view of human experience.

In addition to secondary literature, the essay is informed by informal, situated interviews carried out by the author on site, treated as qualitative, non-representative material that supports the interpretation of landscape experience and local perceptions.