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THE EUROPEAN DIMENSION

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Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research
Humanities

***IMAGINATION: FACTS & CONSTRUCTIONS: PLANNING AND VISUALISING
LANDSCAPES.*** COMMENT ON JÖRG REKITTKE & PHILIP PAAR: DESCRIPTIVE LANDSCAPE
VISUALISATION

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Landscapes are markers of personal as well as national taste, memory and identity. Commenting the topic of landscape visualisation from the perspective of heritage studies, I find it fascinating to see how the visual and spatial turns in cultural sciences are radiating into the field of landscape studies. Of course, this should not surprise us, since visualisation has always been pivotal to landscape planning and design. What Rekittke and Paar describe as a transition from 2D cartography to 3D models, however, shows a tendency from visual analysis to virtual reality experience. From this angle visualisation might be closely related to the experience paradigm in modern archaeology, heritage and tourism studies. That landscapes are not simply there, but shaped and reshaped by human activities is, of course, well known since Marc Bloch and Hoskins introduced their constructivist views on the making of French and English landscapes, further explored from the 1970s onwards by historical geographers such as Meinig, Lowenthal and Cosgrove. Yet, the experience paradigm also focuses on present-day modes of representation, commodification, medialisisation, and memorialisation of historical landscapes, as demonstrated by catchwords like ‘staged authenticity’ (MacCannell 1976), ‘tourist gazing’ (Urry 1990), ‘consumption of places’ (Urry 1995, Ashworth 2005), ‘lieux de mémoire’ (Nora 1984-92), ‘destinisation’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), and ‘heritage tourism experience’ (Prentice 2001).

Such a dynamic, constructivist approach of both the production and consumption of landscape in past and present confronts us with at least two paradoxes: First, landscapes are cultural artefacts, with many pasts, forgotten and remembered (Holtorf & Williams 2006), and, secondly, there’s probably nothing more local than a living landscape, and nothing more footloose and global than European landscape identities (Agnew 1998). Although landscapes don’t have a life cycle, like human beings, as long as we don’t use it in a Hegelian way (as a layering of stages) the metaphor of cultural biography (Samuels 1979; Kopytoff 1986; Kolen 2005) seems to me a handsome tool to deal with these contradictions. Unfortunately however, Rekittke and Paar don’t contextualise the idea of visualisation. Not offering a dynamic interpretation of landscape as permanently gazed, framed, mapped and staged by acts of signification, they don’t pay much attention to contested visual narratives (Gross 1985; Sahlins 1985; Bender 1998). I have to admit that I found their descriptive visualisation technically interesting, though

from a heritage point of view a bit disappointing, as it ends up in a cultural vacuum with the politics left out.

Nevertheless, Rekittke and Paar have a point when referring to Humphrey Repton's Red Books as a forerunner of both the modern slide-show (or PowerPoint) and the modern packaging of the past by means of flyers, drawings and illustrations. Such a historical contextualisation of (post) modern landscape representation demonstrates the intangible quality of landscapes as deep-seated mindscapes (Löfgren 1999). For, not only is the concept of landscape itself a hybrid; historically referring to manmade environments as well as to their religious and aesthetic representations – biased up to the present by the opposed worldviews of scholasticism, Cartesianism, physicotheology, and the enlightenment cult of sensitivity (Whyte 2002; Bakker 2004). But there's also an element of hyper-reality in the idea of landscape **gardening**. The way wild landscapes were designed at the drawing table during the picturesque decade at about 1800, is well illustrated by the engraving of Repton with his Theodolit or *Kippregel*. Yet, landscaping was more than only a technique of visualisation. We seldom see landscape gardens represented by prints of power, such as the 2D bird's eye views of formal baroque gardens (Mukerji 1997). They were designed for the 3D experience of walking, as living watercolour painting in which visitors moved from one scene to another, appealing to different emotions or sentiments (Van der Laarse 2005; 2007).

Therefore I don't agree with the suggestion that present-day digital landscape visualisations could be seen as old wine in new skins. Picturesque gardening was not primarily a product of new visual techniques, but should be regarded as an ideological project, aimed at the aesthetical appropriation of 'picturesque' environments by new national elites, acting as self-proclaimed connoisseurs by birthright (Bermingham 1994). Although our ideas of landscape owe much to Burke, Kant, Payne Knight, Gilpin and others, modern designers, archaeologists, historians, and heritage specialists, don't have that 'natural' bond or attachment with 'their' sites. At best they may act as protectors, though most of their interventions opt for reconstruction and development. As such we have to deal with conflicting notions of authenticity and identity. Thus, on the one hand, place-bound experience asks for an intimate encounter with the past, characterized by the cult of the original, while on the other, sites – as icons - are always 'under construction'. And when not in reality, than virtually by the use of digital techniques.

To conclude, let me emphasize that the idea of a heritage experience was completely unfamiliar to the cult of the picturesque. What Repton was opting for was an elitist invention of an upper class hunting paradise by radically **breaking** with the past. What heritage does is **re-inventing** a cleaned and canonized past, to be used for touristic consumption and identity construction. In this sense the questions posed by Rekittke and Paar - 'what is to be shown?', 'what is really

important?', and 'what is less relevant?' - are pivotal in my opinion, since heritage is always biased by ethics and politics. Instead of mourning about what is lost in present-day landscapes, we might therefore better question the fetish of the original, and ask: 'who owns and **dis**owns the place?' As heritage is by definition about loss and appropriation (Van der Laarse 2005), 3D models seem to me a perfect demonstration of this virtual identification with the appropriated heritage of others, allowing more and more people to experience a past of what they shall have been (Preziosi 2003). Yet, how beautiful and impressive Google Earth might be, we should not trust too much on technique, and accept that heritage is always using the past for the presence (Smith 2006). In other words, what's on the map is just as important as what's left out.

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