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# The Cultural Landscape & Heritage Paradox

LANDSCAPE & HERITAGE STUDIES  
PROCEEDINGS

*Protection and Development of the  
Dutch Archaeological-Historical Landscape  
and its European Dimension*

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## 8. Gazing at places we have never been. Landscape, heritage and identity

*A comment on Jörg Rekitke and Philip Paar: 'Past Pictures. Landscape visualization with digital tools'.*

*Rob van der Laarse<sup>1</sup>*

### ABSTRACT

Acknowledging the paradigmatic impact of new digital techniques, this contribution questions the depoliticized conceptualization of landscape in modern landscape visualizations from a theoretical and historical perspective. Long after the earlier periods of formal gardening and landscaping, the present-day heritage focus on landscapes is looked upon as the real shift in the perception of landscapes, representing an appropriation by tourists and other groups of people without any historical connection to their history and nature.

### KEY WORDS

*Landscape, heritage; memory, sites, visual culture; national identity, authenticity, taste, cultural biography*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Landscapes are markers of personal as well as national taste, memory and identity. Reflecting on the topic of landscape visualisation, such as presented in this volume by Rekitke and Paar 2008 (Ch. IV.7), 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. That landscapes are not simply there, but shaped and reshaped by human activities, has been well known since Marc Bloch (Bloch 1931) and Hoskins (Hoskins1955) introduced their constructivist views on the making of French and English landscapes. This was still the basic paradigm of the following interpretative methods of landscape-reading used by historical geographers such as Meinig (Meinig 1979) and Cosgrove (Cosgrove 1984). Yet, what we see today is a shift from visual analysis to virtual reality or, to put it differently, from semiotics to *experience*. Swapping 2D cartography for 3D computer simulations, new methods of landscape visualization are closely related to modern heritage practices and produce experiences by commodifying the past as *sites*. This might be demonstrated by catchwords like 'staged authenticity' (MacCannell 1976), 'tourist gazing' (Urry 1991, *idem* 2002), 'consumption of places' (Urry 1995; Ashworth 2005), '*lieux de mémoire*' (Nora 2002<sup>2</sup>), 'destinisation' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), '*Erinnerungsräume*' (Assmann 1999) and 'prosthetic memory' (Landsberg 2004). What we consume as heritage are brand new fabrications (Lowenthal 1998) which help us to experience 'our' culture rooted in nature and history, or more precisely in landscapes (Fig. 1).

### 2. LIVING AND VISUAL LANDSCAPES

Such a dynamic approach of both the production, consumption, making and experiencing of historical landscapes confronts us with at least two paradoxes. First, landscapes are cultural artefacts with many



Fig. 1  
Amsterdam heritage  
students gazing at  
the Netherland's only  
(reconstructed) Baroque  
garden from the roof of the  
Het Loo Royal Palace near  
Apeldoorn.  
(Photograph author, 2006)

pasts forgotten and remembered (Holtorf/Williams 2006). Second, there is probably nothing more local than a living landscape and nothing more global than European landscape identities (Agnew 1998). Provided that it is not used in a Hegelian way as a layering of stages, the metaphor of cultural biography (Samuels 1979; Kopytoff 1986; Kolen 2005) seems to me an ideal tool to deal with such contradictions. Landscapes are after all presentist constructions which use local stories and place memories for the fabrication of regional identities while applying universal meanings to stereotyped heritage-scapes such as 'the Alps', Tuscany or 'Holland'.

This is of fundamental importance for a better understanding of what we name a landscape because the idea of landscape (Johnson 2007) refers at the same time to the material (or godly) creation of a living landscape, as expressed in the Dutch and German notion of 'land-shaped', and to the mental perception of a visual landscape, as expressed in the English notion of 'land-scape'. While all land is man-made and owned, only the second meaning offers the possibility of external aesthetic representations and touristic appropriations. In other words, what we visualise as a landscape is not identical to the landscape as perceived by its makers and inhabitants. Although developed in a long-term process of generational path dependence, a landscape becomes decontextualised when commodified as a tourist experience. Reading an 'authentic' historical landscape is therefore quite the opposite of gazing at a heritage site.

### 3. REPRESENTATIONS

Landscape is thus a hybrid concept which historically refers to both human environments and specific religious and aesthetic representations. Whether idealised as an Arcadian paradise, propagated as a cradle of picturesque patriotism or feared as a sublime, inhospitable place, landscapes have for centuries been attributed with meanings. However, there is also an element of hyper reality in the perception of environments as landscapes.

The idea of landscape goes back to Renaissance art and scholarly tradition in which nature has been conceptualised as *ordo et varietas*, a twofold representation of God's harmonic order and the infinite multiplicity of His Creation (Whyte 2002; Bakker 2004). In the early modern period, in particular in Italy,

France and the Netherlands, the idea of cultivating nature by order and symmetry played an important role in the creation of courtly gardens (Fig. 2; De Jong 2001; Bezemer Sellers 2003) in which political power was represented by impressive sculptures, vistas and waterworks visualised in bird's eye views (Mukerji 1997; Cosgrove 2008). With the Enlightenment's focus on sensitivity, however, these Italianising French or Dutch Baroque gardens gave way to English landscape gardens designed according to the laws of nature. As these natural gardens were made for walking, the gaze from above gave way to an experience from below.

Because the modern idea of landscape goes back to this revolution of taste at about 1800, it is tempting to see William Gilpin's *Cult of the picturesque* or Humphrey Repton's *Red Books* as forerunners to the modern packaging of the past. No doubt their landscape visualisations by way of 3D scenic compositions, perceived as living landscape paintings, lay the foundation for contemporary landscape design and experiential heritage tourism (Prentice 2001). Surely one could even find parallels with present-day experience economy in which work is regarded as theatre and business as stage (Gilmore/Pine 1999). Yet, such parallels overlook that landscapes are always representations of specific mindscapes (Löfgren 1999). Just as landscaping in the past was more than merely a technique of visualisation, present-day digital landscape visualisations should not be simply regarded as the repackaging of old ideas. The Rousseauian mindset expressed a longing for a purity (van der Laarse/Labrie/Melching 1998) that is completely absent in both the seventeenth century formal gaze of Cartesianism as well as that of present-day tourists.

To be sure, wild landscapes during the picturesque decade were no less designed at the drawing table than pre-modern Baroque gardens or postmodern heritage-scapes, as might be illustrated by the well-known engraving of Repton with his theodolite or *Kippregel*. We seldom see landscape gardens, however, represented by 'imperialist' bird's eye views or other imprints of power. Instead of copper engravings and oil paintings or film and photography in our period, watercolours were the usual medium for the representation of landscape gardens. This fast technique belonged to a world of picturesque tours in

Fig. 2  
Reconstructed vista of  
the Dutch Oranienbaum  
garden in Kulturstiftung  
Dessau-Wörlitz, Germany.  
(Photograph author, 2006)



which visitors moved from scenery to scenery appealing to different emotions or sentiments (Fig. 3; Van der Laarse 2005a; *idem* 2007). And this movement across the landscape was precisely what Repton's *Red books* showed in their sequential designs of estate properties (Roger 2007).

#### 4. HERITAGE AND IDENTITY

Unfortunately, heritage designers are not trained in historical contextualisation and hardly pay attention to conflicting visual narratives (Gross 1985). Transformed into sites, the cultural biography of places is often reduced to an iconic period, such as the Dutch Golden Age and the Second World War. Though offering fascinating possibilities for interactive museum experiences, this also holds true for most 3D computer models of historical buildings and landscapes. Every spatial staging of the past needs framing. By singling out one period, existing traces of other periods may even be wiped out by heritage visualisations of *invisible* pasts, e.g. simulacrums of Celtic fields, the Roman *limes* (Fig. 4), Baroque gardens or battlefields.

As such at every heritage site we have to deal with conflicting notions of authenticity and identity. On the one hand a nostalgic longing for authenticity ask for timeless, place-bound experiences in a post-modern consumer society (Gilmore/Pine 2007), while on the other hand sites are permanently 'under construction'. In spite of the common Dutch metaphor of history frozen under the cheese cover, heritage landscapes are continuously transformed in form and meaning by repeating appropriations of competing inheritors. Instead of offering such a dynamic interpretation of landscapes as permanently gazed, framed, mapped and staged by acts of signification, however, most heritage reconstructions end up in a cultural vacuum with the exclusion of politics. In fact, this apparent depolitisation marks the difference between earlier garden and landscape architecture and postmodern heritage design.

Propagating the power or taste of their creators, gardens in the past were above all political landscapes (Warnke 1994). While this was obvious in the Baroque era, it also applies to the picturesque. Although our idea of landscape owes much to the sentimental taste of the landlords of this later period who

Fig. 3  
Landscaping of the coastal estate of Bergen (province North Holland) with the Zeeweg designed by Leonard Springer who was commissioned by the Van Reenen family.  
(From Van der Laarse 2001)





Fig. 4.  
Roman watchtower at Vechten, the Netherlands.

literally owned the land, modern heritage experts and landscape designers, however, lack a natural bond or attachment with their sites. While landscaping was primarily an active ideological project aimed at the material and aesthetic appropriation of 'picturesque' environments by self-proclaimed national elites (Bermingham 1994; Van der Laarse/Kuiper 2005c), heritage experts may be regarded no more than protectors of the former creations of these connoisseurs by pedigree.

However, in practice heritage-scapes are also political. Instead of protection and conservation most heritage interventions opt for new reconstructions and developments. The politics of heritage could therefore be very useful in periods of war and nation building. By far the most radical appropriation of this sort was the German *Ostplanung* of 1939-1945, which transformed Polish landscapes and Jewish *shtetls* into 'age-old' Teutonic 'Heimat'-landscapes (Wolschke-Bulmahn 2003; Van der Laarse 2009). In the Israeli occupied territories nowadays it is striking to notice a similar coalition of ideologists, colonists and planners legitimating a Zionist mapping of Palestinian land by historical claims on the Holy Land supported by archaeological excavations of ancient Jewish palaces in the Jordan valley in the West Bank. Less contested, however, comparable politics of identity might be found in many countries. Thus in the Netherlands, recently shook to its foundations by a wave of populism, the government has singled out nine highway panoramas, chosen by 'the people' in Internet polls, for protection as national landscapes (Van der Laarse 2008). Just as landscape has been regarded as a pivotal marker of national identity in Europe since early nineteenth century Romanticism, the nationalisation of the masses (Mosse 1975) has been reinforced almost everywhere by a nationalisation of history and nature.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The tensions exposed between living and visible landscapes, contrasting representations of order and experience and the longing for authenticity and identity make clear that landscapes cannot be reduced to fixed forms and meanings. Extrinsic similarities may conceal intrinsic differences. This also applies to landscape visualisations. Therefore, the present-day idea of a heritage experience is completely unfamiliar with the cult of the picturesque. What landscaping was opting for was an elitist invention of an upper class hunting paradise by radically *breaking* with the past, while heritage management in the present is opting for the *reinvention* of a purified and canonised past, packaged for touristic consumption and identity politics. If landscapes are mindscapes then postmodernity is not represented in traditional ordinary landscapes but in sites referring to them in the form of heritage-scapes. 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 *disowns* the place. As heritage is always about loss and appropriation and biased by ethics and politics, it is by definition using the past for the present (Van der Laarse 2005b; Smith

2006). In other words, what is on the map is just as important as what is left out. The growing popularity of Google Earth, computer games and 3D models of historical environments seems to me a perfect demonstration of this virtual identification with the appropriated heritage of others, allowing more and more people to experience 'their' past by gazing at places they have never been.

## NOTES

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