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The Making of Landscape in Modernity

James Koranyi and Tricia Cusack (eds)

Introduction

Two recent exhibitions at the British Museum and the Royal Academy of Arts in London showcased the most prominent eighteenth and nineteenth century landscape paintings from the German Lands and England respectively.¹ From Carl Wilhelm Kolbe and Wilhelm Tischbein during the turbulent demise of the Holy Roman Empire to John Constable, Thomas Gainsborough, and JMW Turner, both exhibitions emphasised the emergence of ‘sublime’ landscapes in a period of great economic and political uncertainty. The shattering of imperial certainty around 1800 called for new identities, and it is within this context that romanticism, and later romantic nationalism, took hold. War-torn and disembowelled as the German Lands were after the end of the Holy Roman Empire and the Napoleonic Wars, landscape painters attempted to (re)construct idylls that were deemed to be quintessentially German. English (or British) landscape painters, by contrast, were not salvaging the country from the ruins of war but from the processes of modernity. The effects of industrialisation and urbanisation found expression in the countryside idylls depicted by landscape artists where ruins often subtly disrupted the pastoral scene.

The two London exhibitions thus told a fairly conventional narrative of the making of landscapes in modernity. The English and German landscape artists make up the standard repertoire for the creation of a landscape, often sublime in its inception, from the late-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century. After that, however, the story stops. The multifarious settings, societies, and times in which landscapes were shaped, invented, reinvented are frequently neglected. Indeed, a cursory appreciation

of this discovery of landscape often fails to see beyond the mid-nineteenth century. Landscape also seems to be limited to English and German (and perhaps Dutch and French) settings. A more complex reading of the making of landscapes since the eighteenth century renders a very different picture.

W. G. Hoskins's famous study *The Making of the English Landscape* (Hoskins, 1955) still operated within this telescopic framework: pre-industrial England ceased to exist in the eighteenth century after which the English landscape was either ruined or interspersed with ruins of modernity, which in turn made it sublime. Human interventions were part of this palimpsest, yet it still rested on the assumption of a tension between pure landscape and human intervention. This essay collection broadens this scope considerably, as the individual contributions explore how various European landscapes over the space of over two centuries were constantly reconfigured. Far from seeing landscape and modernity as opposites, the contributors show in different ways how closely intertwined processes of modernity and the conjuring up of imagined idylls were.

This special issue emerged from a workshop at the University of St Andrews in the Centre for Transnational History in May 2012.² It is structured according to three main themes: 'Mythsapes and literary constructs', 'Tourism and travel', and 'Envisaging political landscapes'. This tripartite approach – nationalism, movement, transnationalism – also rests on the historical context of the emergence of and challenge to nationalism. Within these themes, therefore, the contributions consider landscapes as both markers of nationalism and as entities that transcended and even undermined the nationalist project, helping to create alternative 'transnational' identities. In this context, nationalism, developed and consolidated in Europe and the United States between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, constituted by

the late-twentieth century the most significant force for political and cultural organisation worldwide.³ Nationalism has transformed the way that political entities are imagined, since nation-formation has involved a process whereby ‘geographical territories were reinterpreted from their pre-modern identities as a collection of separate localities or regions with relatively permeable boundaries into the modern inviolate national homeland’ (Ely, 2002, 22). The establishment of the nation-state meant that a national homeland had to be envisaged, and this often found its expression in the quest for appropriate landscapes. Such landscapes might consist of actual scenery, or might feature in representations such as painting or travel-writing. Landscape also invokes a performative element as a viewer moves through it, either in reality, or imaginatively. These perceptions and experiences of landscape in turn influenced the shaping of ‘nature’. In a Foucauldian sense, we can think of all these landscape experiences as actively constituting identities and ideologies (Foucault, [1969] 1992).

Nationalism relies for its success on an ideological process of naturalisation, that is, the ‘national people’, the ‘national territory’, and the nation-form itself are claimed to be, and accepted as, ineluctable truths. It is not only according to modernist interpretations of nationalism that national entities pretend to continuity and to unity. In so doing, they are actually subject to constant change and to shifting definitions of national identity. Like all constructs, national identity has to be first built then maintained, and it needs persistent affirmation. Consequently, nationalist ideology rests on an enormous quantity of representational and performative labour. The abstract concepts of ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ have been attached to recognisable ‘national landscapes’, for example through tourist guides and travel writing, literary and visual art (Koshar, 1998). At the same time, the national

landscape is physically shaped to meet the ideas formed of it. Finally, it is conveyed or sold to others, for example as a tourist sight. In recent decades, such national sights have been extended to incorporate the products of what Robert Hewison (1987) dubbed the 'heritage industry'.

'Modernist' theorists of nationalism like Ernest Gellner (1983) argued that the nation-state depended upon the processes of modernisation. Modernisation not only entailed large social-economic changes such as industrialisation and commodification; it also created the conditions for the centralised government, education and communication systems needed for the operation of the nation-state and the propagation and dissemination of nationalism. 'Modernity', a pivotal term in the current essay collection, may be understood as the sum of social-cultural conditions arising out of the processes of modernisation: 'Modernity is both a stage or phase in history, and something that some phenomena can possess: people live in modernity and their lives are characterized by modernity' (Fornäs, 1995, 39). Modernity implies in particular a sense of rapid and radical social change, in conjunction with experiences of what David Harvey (1990) called 'time-space compression'. 'Modernism', a further significant term for the present collection, refers to the plethora of philosophical and creative responses to living in modernity; as Johan Fornäs succinctly put it: 'Modernization is the process, modernity the state, and modernisms are movements of response to that state' (1995, 39).

Although the emergence of the nation might depend on the conditions of a modernised state, in nationalist discourse this process is generally overlaid by a myth of folk origins and the notion of a past golden age or ages. The nation, 'Janus-faced', forges a modern aspect for itself, yet simultaneously looks back to a putative historical identity or to a golden age to justify the collective. There seems to be a need

for a single, simple national narrative of identity formation, yet this is dependent upon processes of myth-making, ‘forgetting’, and ‘remembrance’ for which the powerful symbolism of the land is invoked. The ethno-cultural content of national identities includes tales of origins and folk heroes which contribute to narratives of the ‘homeland’. In the present collection for example, Simon Halink in his essay on Icelandic Sagas shows how a mythic landscape was constructed and experienced as a touristic object and a vital part of the national landscape.

Yet as this collection demonstrates, landscape constructions were not merely a product of a classical modernist interpretation of nationalism, but were also subject to other human experiences and perceptions of landscape. Often, the interaction between top-down attempts at creating something national was countered by other tendencies some of which articulated a different ‘national’ conception of landscape or simply offered something that transcended the national paradigm. As such, many instances of landscape construction can also be read through a transnational lens. As recent work in transnational history has demonstrated (Werner and Zimmermann, 2002, 607-639), one of the hallmarks of modern history has been the growth of entanglements that have bridged political entities such as the nation-state (Núñez, 2010, 669-684). According to this, ideas, images, and systems often work across conventional boundaries. Therefore, borrowing and exchange has played a crucial role in the period where nationalism has emerged and established itself as a force, and this has both shaped and challenged the processes of nationalism. Furthermore, actors operate within, against, and outside the national framework and are thus rather disparate with multiple identities (Struck, Ferris, and Revel, 2011, 573-584). The contributions in this special issue highlight this dialogue and, in different ways, accentuate the interplay between nationalism on the one hand and transnationalism on the other.

Halink's essay, as mentioned above, also demonstrates this entanglement, as he stresses the interaction of various forces in (re)creating certain features of landscape as trademark Icelandic settings. Leaning on and rejecting Danish influences, Halink shows in meticulous detail the often contradictory forces at play in shaping Iceland's 'national' landscape. Caught between national landscape and transnational skies, Anne-Marie Millim's essay analyses modernist writings in the early twentieth century Luxembourg press. She maps out their use of the sky as a sign of both national industry and of democratic connections between societies. Her case study therefore addresses 'national constructions' of Luxembourgish landscape while emphasising the strong transnational element to the Luxembourgish skyscape and the ambiguous meaning of industrial air pollution to the issues of tradition and progress.

Indeed, the static picture of landscapes simply fulfilling a role is challenged by a number of contributors who incorporate movement and performance within landscapes. Tourism, for instance, was a typical feature of modernity,⁴ and often conterminous with the development of modern nationalisms. The objects of tourism - sites of myth, of 'natural beauty', and historical sites, including industrial relics - were those very landscapes and monuments that functioned as signs of national identity. What John Urry identified as the 'tourist gaze' is formed by a network of professional organisations and individuals including government tourist agencies and travel-writers (1990, 1). The tourist gaze constituted a new way of looking at landscape, an 'Olympian' viewing of landscape as 'scenery', and one that distanced the viewer from any practical engagement (Smith, 1993, 78-79). The absence of critical evaluation of landscape, aside from aesthetic judgement, made the tourist site an excellent carrier of nationalist ideology.

Several contributors add a further layer to this interpretation of travellers, tourists, and writers. Martin Walter examines travel-writing in interwar Britain and Weimar Germany, focusing on the ‘home tour’ and how the domestic production of industrialised landscape was negotiated. What emerges is an ambivalent picture of attitudes towards signs of modernity in the ‘national’ landscape. The three travel writers in question (Henry Morton, J. B. Priestly, and Heinrich Hauser) oscillated between mythologising a pre-modern past and making sense of traces of industrialisation. Bernd Kreuzer’s essay on the *Salzkammergut* takes the long view on the making of this distinct tourist region. In Kreuzer’s case study, it was precisely the inroads made by modern transport that transformed this region into a national treasure. The salt economy, the demand for better transport links, and the resulting boom in tourism were all crucial processes for embedding the *Salzkammergut* as a natural gem in the public consciousness of tourists in the Habsburg Empire and, in particular, the Austrian Republic after 1918. Attempts to accommodate industrialised or modernised landscapes as part of the national landscape and issues of landscape preservation are thus addressed in a number of articles.⁵

The final section of the special issue comprises papers that transcend the national paradigm. Axel Zutz discusses the principle of ‘scenic embedding’ as applied to the design of the German *Autobahn* in the 1930s and early 1940s. Here, Zutz demonstrates the uncertain position of National Socialism toward nature and modernity. Far from advocating a naïve interpretation of landscape as pure and pristine, the Nazis, with the help of so-called landscape advocates (*Landschaftsanwälte*), used the modern contraptions of the *Autobahn* to shape German landscapes in their image. A comparable dilemma was faced by the new socialist state of Poland after World War II, as Bianca Hoenig reveals in her article on

the High Tatras. Despite attempts to render the Tatra Mountains unmistakably socialist, the ambiguous stance towards nature meant that the mountains were used and presented in a manner reminiscent of previous eras. While Lenin statues adorned the Tatras, they remained largely untamed by the efforts of the government to transform them into an ideological landscape.

As this special issue demonstrates, landscape has never been static or subjected to one set of ideas only. What transpires from these six essays is a dynamic and complex picture. Within the framework of nationalism, movement, and transnationalism, the contributions to this collection of essays offer a nuanced reading of an aspect of modernity. Using landscape as a canvass on which debates about modernity can be presented, they manage to unite a set of scholarly approaches (nationalism, movement, transnationalism) in novel ways.

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¹ 'Landscape, heroes, and folktales: German Romantic prints and drawings' at the British Museum, 29 September 2011 – 01 April 2012
<http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/press_releases/2011/landscape_heroes_folktales.aspx> [accessed: 31 May 2014] and 'Constable, Gainsborough, Turner and the Making of Landscape' at the Royal Academy of Arts 08 December 2012 – 17 February 2013
<<http://static.royalacademy.org.uk/files/press-release-2-1471.pdf>> [accessed: 31 May 2014].

² The editors would like to thank the School of History and the Centre for Transnational History at the University of St Andrews for their generous support. See <<http://standrewstransnational.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/events/landscapesmodernity2012/>> and <<https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/history/research/transnat/The%20Making%20of%20Landscapes%20in%20Modernity%20-%20programme.docx>> [accessed: 31 May 2014].

³ Other nations, such as India, or post-colonial states, obtained national independence later in the twentieth century, in a fresh phase of nationalism and nation-formation (Cusack, 2010).

⁴ Dennison Nash states that ‘tourism is not totally confined to industrial or modern society; but it also is true that only in such a society does it become a pervasive social phenomenon’ (1989, 39).

⁵ David Matless argues that in England in the 1920s and 1930s, the preservation of landscape was associated with national progress, modernity, and orderliness (1998, 14).