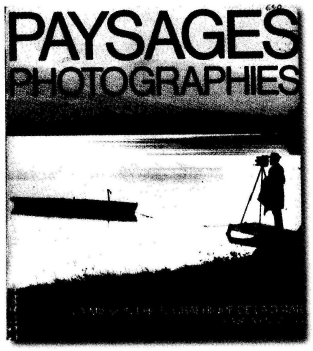




1976–1992, in the margins of the 'French' landscape years

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How, and more specifically by what means, can the abundant French production of intellectual debate about landscape and material landscape projects during the 1980s be concisely accounted for? This production, both chaotic and prolific, has neither a current nor a complete bibliography, as other disciplines have, making a set list almost impossible to establish.

There are a number of explanations for this quandary, the first of which is related to the inherent complexities of the 'landscape theme', the fluid meaning of the term 'landscape', and its contrasting interpretations by opposing groups. In a distinctly French paradox, the debate—or even the conflict—between environmentalists and ecologists and the main theoreticians and landscape historians has been a spirited one. The former's weak concern for society and support of environmental landscape management diverges drastically from the latter's academic pursuit of aesthetic or theoretical positions. The abyss separating environmental issues from aesthetic values unbound by scientific parameters, as just, noble, or necessary as they may be, is apparent. In my view, the dichotomy between ecology and aesthetics, in relation to landscape discourse, is an artificial one that is the result of deeper philosophical, cultural, and political factors. These factors date back to specific understandings and critiques of 'modernity' that lead initially to contrasting interpretations of the modernization of France since the 1960s, moving on to the '*dégâts du progrès*', [1] and eventually a critique of the technical innovations that transformed the world and thus, agriculture. It is from the formation of this theoretical 'base', and not the ground itself, that landscape has come to be considered in France.

Two collective works appeared in the title list of Champ Vallon, a publishing house that was to play a decisive role in stimulating the dynamic of French landscape analysis, both of them striking the reader through their politically provocative titles and subtitles: *Mort des paysages? Philosophie et esthétique du paysage* ('The Death of Landscape? Philosophy and Aesthetics of Landscape'), published in 1982, and, following it, *Composer le paysage. Constructions et crises de l'espace, 1789–1992* ('Composing Landscapes. Constructions and Crises of Space, 1789–1992'), published in 1989. These two books characterize the ardent position of advocates of the legitimacy of technology in transforming the materiality of the world, as long as this transformation is conducted under the auspices of philosophical ideals and aesthetics. The first publication is a call for the definition of a social ideal in face of the degradation and destruction of the *trentes glorieuses*; the second answers this call in its defence of ideals analogous to those of the Enlightenment, to be protected through strong state authority, which in the modern context found itself threatened by the opening of national borders at the European level.

Equally important in explaining the abundance and diversity of productions are the teaching and research institutions in which landscape studies figure as core programmes: the *École nationale supérieure du paysage* (ENSP) in Versailles, associated with the Ministry of Agriculture; the Ministry of Culture, in charge of the schools of architecture; and the study of geography and the humanities, as established by Ministry of National Education. Yet, it is at the heart of the *Grande École—École des hautes études en sciences sociales* (EHESS)—that one of the most emblematic theoretical positions about landscape was developed through the work of geographer Augustin Berque. Through the deployment of an elaborate and complex conceptual apparatus, Berque insists on what he calls the *trajection* (trajectory), or the *médiance* (mediation) between the material elements of the environment and their symbolization in language, figurative representations, and gardens in situ, all of which are founded on a science of the milieu or, as it is has been termed, *mésologie* (Berque 1990).

In this emerging context, the influence of publishing and distribution houses must be taken into account, whether for the general public or for specialists (the republication of classics, initiated by Michael Conan in the 1980s, of the garden treatises by such authors as Salomon de Caus or André Mollet, as well as key texts on landscape and the picturesque by the Marquis de Girardin), as must be the numerous interactions between theory and practice. In following the French perspective, or rather following its significant margins, an inaugural act must be brought to light, as it has

not sufficiently been considered in theoretical writings about, and practices of, landscape. This act marks a critical step away from regional geography, or rather the regionalist geography of Vidal de la Blanche—which erased the internationalist geographer Elisée Reclus' personality, works, and engagement in anarchist movements—and the Annales school's emphasis on 'French identity' (*Braudel 1979*), including the theoretical ambitions that were to follow (*Berque 1986; Roger 1995*). This event is none other than the founding of the journal *Hérodote* in 1976 by a politically engaged geographer, Yves Lacoste, professor at Paris 8 University. This journal is framed by the political and cultural climate of *mai 68*, which profoundly marked the history of the French state and social structures without significantly questioning the fundamental idea, both historical and national, of France.

With the particularity that Herodotus was an historian, and that to the subtitle 'geography' the journal's founders added 'geopolitics', two specificities of the review emerge: its opposition to a geography in line with the notoriously centralizing force of state interests, and its promotion of geography as a science able to guarantee territorial identity. Accordingly, if there is a 'discipline', and not a theory, upon which landscape can be founded, it is geography in its literal translation of writing the earth. The journal assumed internationalist dimensions. The first issue included an interview with Michel Foucault, then in charge of creating the philosophy department at Paris 8 to address interrogations of space. This heralded the spatial turn that we are still in the process of negotiating today, as evidenced by the production and reception of numerous interdisciplinary publications (literature, geography and cartography, history, philosophy...) and the frenzy of urban design projects world-wide. As early as 1977, the seventh issue was titled *A quoi sert le paysage?* ('What is Landscape For?'), questioning the function and the usage of the term. The cover manifests a precocious interest for the relationship between cinema and landscape, which has remained oddly marginal until now, given that both feature film and documentary are important sources in the staging of landscapes. Ten years later, in 1987, issue number 44, *Paysages en action* ('Landscapes in Action') brought together geographers, writers, poets, painters, and draftsmen to reflect on landscape. Developing the scope of what can be understood as an 'action', the issue considers writing and / or drawing as thoughtful actions in the construction of knowledge. The issue included Lacoste's notable article on the novel *Le rivage des Syrtes* ('The Opposing Shore') by Julien Gracq, in which he argues that landscape is not only an 'expanse of land that nature offers us to see,' to appreciate or ignore according to aesthetic criteria, but rather a place of expression that is itself expressive, one which constructs reality by making it habitable and amiable.

The 1980s are marked by a great historical enterprise, the publication of *Les Lieux de mémoire* ('Realms of Memory'), under the direction of Pierre Nora, historian and professor at the EHESS. He is also the founder of the journal *Le Débat* ('The Debate'), of which issue number 65, the only one on landscape, was consecrated to a discussion of what lies above and beyond the modern landscape (*Le Débat 1991*). The spaces of memory in Nora's work allow us to glean the publication's intellectual and political strategies. In the first edition of 1984, the term 'landscape' clearly emerges in the various contributions. Reflecting on the medium of painting, art historian Françoise Cachin accentuates the diversity of the physical geography of France, which has become an obstacle to the emergence of landscape consciousness in comparison to other European countries. As an immaterial, centralized construct of the nation, the State requires (mental) representation to 'cement' the nation. State organs, not local ones, are therefore chosen, explaining to some extent the non-dialectic conflict between defenders of the local (considered localist and fundamentalist by their adversaries), and supporters of a theory (not a science) of the singular (not plural) landscape, whose aim is universalist and universalizing. A 'theory of landscape' arises here from the necessity to fasten and shape the nation's identity within the landscape, which, in turn, acts as the support and incarnation of the nation.

A fundamental role in shaping the French consideration of landscape was (and still is) played by the photographic mission of the *Délégation interministérielle à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'attractivité régionale* ([Datar], Inter-ministerial Delegation for the Promotion of Territorial Development and Regional Attractivity). [2] The mission, whose mandate was to show the diversity of French landscapes and sharpen the focus on its modern transformations, was organized following the success of the great photographic missions of the second half of the nineteenth century, such as those commissioned for French Heritage, the geological surveys of the United States, or the Farm Security Administration, also in the U.S.A. with its ties to the crisis and catastrophe of 1929 (as ecological as it was economic), as well as the long-term survey on heritage, or even the work on Frederick Law Olmstead initiated by the CCA in Montreal. The publications that resulted from the mission—*Paysages photographies, travaux en cours 1984 / 1985* (1985) and entitled *Paysages photographies* (1989)—have been vital in both 'un-founding' the classical and idyllic view of landscape and 'founding' a new way of looking at landscape. While previous ways of conceiving landscape focused mostly on agricultural, historical, or touristic sites, the Datar mission looked forward, embracing the 'disasters of progress'. If we can identify a catastrophist outlook, to which many publications with alarmist titles also attest today, there was nonetheless a pioneering audaciousness in the photographic protocol, notably in the trust given to twenty-nine European photographers, most early-career 'artists', to 'document' the transformations of French territories (*Datar 1985*). With 1,200 photographic images, its definitive paper edition (*Datar 1989*) obtained quasi-mythical proportions and is today unobtainable. The photographs have since been placed online (2013), underscoring the central question of the image in thinking the landscape. Their point of view is classic: an upright view of the landscape, seized along a horizontal perspective. In comparison, more recent explorations of aerial photography, used today in relation to archaeology and urban planning, have radically altered how landscape is seen, read, decrypted, and understood. In France, excluding the pioneering work of Antoine Poidebard and others such as Chombart de Lauwe, it is Roger Agache's aerial photographic work that offered a clear understanding of the agrarian Gallo-Roman structures of Picardie. Following his approach, the work of the so-called Besançon School, with researchers like F. Favory, R. Chevallier, and above all G. Chouquer (1991), has been fundamental. Here, sight and knowledge become both archaeological, in the sense that the long-term, historical depth of 3,000 years of land-use appears through the photographs. They also become ante- or proto-geographical, in the sense that the hermeneutical work on such traces and

layers of the past, made to reach the surface of knowledge, occurs through the representation of the aerial photograph. For these reasons, this perspective is undoubtedly one of the richest that exists in the contemporary French intellectual and scholarly landscape.

As far as periodicals are concerned, there have been no specific journals dedicated to landscape. A notable exception was the luxurious *Pages paysages* offering a balance between theoretical or literary texts and projects. *Pages paysages* could be seen, in a certain sense, as a precursor of the magazine *Topos*, which favours projects over aesthetic, theoretical, and critical approaches to landscape and landscape architecture. Anthologies, as well as numerous theme issues of magazines related to landscape architecture, have compensated for a lack of specific journals. In 1991 the journal *Etudes rurales* ('Rural Studies') published a special issue eloquently entitled *De l'agriculture au paysage* ('From Agriculture to Landscape'). A quadruple issue (!), its publication marked an important transition in a country that has remained one of the most agricultural in Europe, which could explain, in part, the virulence of certain practical and theoretical debates. This state of affairs distinguishes, in the first place, landscape from certain of its quasi-synonyms such as site, milieu, space, nature, countryside, and environment. It also recalls the different analytical frameworks, essentially geographical and scientific, that have been produced over the years to allow for the consideration of landscape as a lived space, or experienced as a mental space. Representation and aesthetics therefore become decisive, or even fundamental for certain theoreticians who consider them the sole criteria.

The beginning of the 1990s marks, in the end, a series of institutional shifts with the creation of specific study programmes, such as the *Diplôme d'études approfondies* (DEA) [3] associated with the research laboratory *Jardin, Paysage, Territoire* (JPT, Garden, Landscape, Territory), now renamed *Architecture, Milieu, Paysage* (AMP, Architecture, Environment, Landscape), at the *École nationale supérieure d'architecture de Paris-La Villette* (School of Architecture at Paris-La Villette) established in 2004; a postgraduate degree in *Jardins et patrimoines historiques* (Gardens and Heritage) at the *École d'architeture de Versailles* (School of Architecture at Versailles); a continuing education programme at Versailles–ENSP. Of further importance in bringing landscape architecture to a broader public was the garden festival of Chaumont-sur-Loire.

Finally, in terms of projects, the international response to the design competition for the Parc de la Villette (more than 800 submissions), and Bernard Tschumi's response have marked what can be considered a postmodern turn for parks and gardens across the world. In spite of the park's aura and its genuine success in terms of usage, the French theoretical reception of the project was, and remains, not only severe, but also predictable. The sophisticated large-format book accompanying the delivery of the project was followed by a scathing—and rather surprising—critique by Jean Baudrillard. An exhaustive analysis and presentation of the project from a design-theory point of view has only occurred in the form of a doctoral thesis by Lodwijk Baljon, written at a Dutch university and published in the Netherlands (*Baljon 1992*). Though the thesis as we know it today was then no extant in research structures in France, we must still consider it too embryonic in its present form to fully embrace fundamental questions of landscape and gardens, and, even more so, of architecture.

NOTES

1 'Disasters of progress' draws on the title of a 1977 publication by the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CDT).

2 Created under General de Gaulle in 1963 as an interministerial delegation to address post-war territorial inequality.

3 DEA, *Diplôme d'études approfondies*, is a Certificate for Further Education. It has since been replaced with the more standardized undergraduate / graduate university model (Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, and doctorate).

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