

Radical Landscapes – Radical Values?

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The exhibition *Radical Landscapes* at Tate Liverpool in May 2022 interrupts received perceptions of the land. It includes Peter Kennard's version of Constable's *Haywain* with a cartload of cruise missiles (as well as a landscape by Constable), Ruth Ewan's *Back to the Fields*, an installation of plant and animal life based on the French Revolutionary calendar, and a banner from the Women's Peace Camp, Greenham Common. This spread, from landscapes to the Greenham Common banner (and documentation of other protest campaigns) indicates a context which is not so much eco-art – of which there have been several major exhibitions, including *Natural Reality* in Aachen in 1999, *Radical Nature* in London in 2009, and *Eco-Visionaries* in Lisbon and Basel in 2018 – but *Radical Landscapes* seems more to follow *Disobedient Objects*, which brought the material culture of protest into the Victoria & Albert Museum, London in 2014. Both *Disobedient Objects* and *Radical Landscapes* bring a highly politicised content into the art museum; for *Radical Landscapes* this is essential because the land itself is increasingly a site of contested values: on one hand, those which have shaped it for half a millennium to produce the climate crisis, now urgently questioned; and on the other hand, the values of conservation and sustainability, but also of non-violent direct action and campaigning, from anti-roads protests in the 1990s to Extinction Rebellion today.

Perceptions and frames

How we see the land is the result of framing: aesthetically as landscape; economically as a means to wealth accumulation. Hence landscape – the countryside – compensates for the spread of urban industrialisation. What is not available is any pure or original sense of the land (which would be like pre-verbal experience). With human occupation, the land is *produced* through layers of cultivation and framed (and re-framed) in cultural perception. A view in Wiltshire (where I walk sometimes) shows Silbury Hill, an ancient monument used for observation of the stars; conserved NT grassland, currently with a host of yellow (and bee-friendly) dandelions; and the enclosures of agri-business in which what is grown, for whose gain, is determined by global economics, currently favouring oil seed rape, a crop which uses artificial fertilizers and regular anti-insect (bee-lethal) sprays. Two areas of the land are yellow from a distance, for opposite reasons and with opposite effects: two value systems.

Nearby, Stonehenge hosts solstice celebrations as licensed dissent but is fenced off as an asset in the tourist economy (entry £26 in summer). In 1975, New Age Travellers reclaimed the site as commonwealth, to be brutally suppressed – the Battle of the Beanfield – because their utopian vision, however flawed, challenged the values of privilege and money. Such departures from mainstream society look to imagined pasts of lost community, seeing the future as reclamation of that history. But while loss of access is real – 8% of land in England open to the public – the lost paradise is fantasy. Nonetheless, New Age travellers conjured a new Albion in the 1970s, merging William Blake's radical England with pre-industrial and non-European cultures. The future is the past re-made, and the more remote the past the easier to project onto it a vision shaped by present absence (in an absent present).

In doing so, if coincidentally, utopians and campaigners echoed a contradiction within Enlightenment: the new is reclamation of the old: new rights are described as old, and the old is described as natural, hence irrefutable. Tomorrow is yesterday revived; rural bliss is natural foil to industrialisation's artificiality.

Dualisms

The dualism Nature-Culture aligns the land to Natural origins, and Culture to progress. This fundamental split – all dualisms are also splits – informs, and is extended by, capitalism, in the linear time which replaces cyclic time. The repressed past returns in the cyclic clock except that, in the regulation of the working day, time is standardised as a universal norm.

An attitude to the land has also been instituted as a norm, entailing private ownership and, with industrialisation, the manufacture of food, water and leisure for urban dwellers. Land ownership always was a power-relation, and from around the sixteenth century knowledge is lent similar status: 'the human mind, which overcomes superstition, is to hold sway over a disenchanted nature. Knowledge, which is power, knows no obstacles.'¹ The counter-aim to return to a natural state or re-enchantment of the world – in Rousseau's Noble Savage – is a reaction to this imperative. Yet the dis-enchanted world was freed from superstition and the tyranny of mysterious Fate, enabling rational human agency. The contradiction is that *instrumental* rationality cultivates the power of knowledge and the private accumulation of wealth – in the eighteenth century the state was seen as a threat to private wealth, fuelling the bourgeois revolutions; only in 1793, with the Jacobins, does the state become the agent of universal ethics. Generally, as the new calendar shows, Reason claims a natural origin as return to innocence yet replaces one form of power-over with another.

The revolutionary calendar introduced in 1793 (back-dated to the Autumn *equinox* of 1792) returned to the cyclic movements of the constellations. Months were named according to the seasons of the agricultural year (and the weather), replacing religious holidays with references to the rural economy. Meanwhile, metric space was a division of the Earth's circumference. Time and space are made new, and are, literally, as old as the hills or the stars. Sanja Perovic writes, 'by calling into question the very existence of a single time frame ... the calendar reveals how imaginary ... constructions of time contribute to the experience of history.'² Ewan's *Back to the Fields* re-sites all this in the art museum, a place of cultural detachment in which to ponder the progressions of time or the times of progress.

Enclosures and parks

Before the English and French Revolutions, time and space are re-framed in the reinvention of Arcadia in Elizabethan England, in the Earl of Pembroke's estate at Wilton, as remodelled after Phillip Sydney's poem *Arcadia*. Sydney relays the sweet air and well-tempered people of Arcadia on whom the Muses bestow perfection: a world apart from court intrigues and plots. For villagers, a precariously viable agriculture was upended by enclosures of grazing land and woods to create the park. In 1549 they tore down the fences. The Earl brought in his soldiers to hunt them down like animals. Adam Nicholson remarks, Wilton is, 'a stretch of landscape in which the people who claimed some rights over it were murdered so that an aesthetic vision of an otherworldly calm could be imposed in their place.'³

Fast-forward to the eighteenth-century landscaped park, a non-productive enclosure paid for by rents, artificially high grain prices, and colonial profits. Ruins in various styles hinted at mortality and the demise of empires, informed by Virgil's Latin verse amid foreign wars and bread riots, open only to a privileged audience. Fast forward again to Victorian England

and Myles Birket Foster's landscapes with rosy-cheeked children and blue skies: rural bliss compensates for the dis-ease of industrialisation for middle-class publics in cities swelled by forced migration from the land. Present absences and deficiencies are projected onto a suitably remote time or place, as in Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur*,

Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard-lawns
And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound.⁴

The Victorian literary public sought refuge from conflict and doubt in a world already falling apart. But the unhealing wound today is capitalism, bound by intentionally unsatisfying and compensatory consumerism.

Is the land ours?

There was a song in the 'sixties, 'This land is our land' It wasn't; it isn't. In 1996 The Land Is Ours squatted the redundant Guinness brewery site in Wandsworth, re-naming it Pure Genius and building shelters from recycled materials. There were difficulties, in part through mental health issues, and instigator George Monbiot withdrew. Eviction followed. The site is now a wildlife conservation area.

As this brief example shows, alternative societies are ephemeral and flawed, yet this does not detract from a cumulative history of alternative living according to alternative values;

and if experimental departures encounter difficulties, the norm produces widening wealth division and the climate crisis despite centuries of development.

There are two overlapping histories within efforts to take back the land: one of reassertions of land rights in a twentieth-century claim to leisure and fresh air; another, more radical, of direct enactment of a new society.

At Kinder Scout on 24 April 1932, 400 working people from Manchester and Sheffield met on this fenced-off moorland plateau, organised by the British Workers' Sports Federation (a Communist organisation for cyclists and ramblers). The police were diverted by a notice of a fictional rally but the trespassers were confronted by gamekeepers. They broke through. Six were arrested, five imprisoned for riot. They said: 'we ramblers, after a hard week's work in smoky towns and cities go out rambling for relaxation and fresh air. And we find the finest rambling country is closed to us ... access to all peaks and uncultivated moorland is nothing unreasonable.'⁵ The site became the Peak District National Park in 1951, within the post-war Welfare State.

The trespassers prefigured a wider right to roam; but a more radical departure occurred in April 1649 when the Diggers occupied vacant land at St George's Hill, Weybridge. A report states, 'These new-fangled people that begin to dig ... say they are like Adam, they expect a general restauration of the Earth to its first condition ... this great work which will shortly go through the whole Earth.'⁶ This is historical leap as return: new rights are natural rights from time immemorial. For the Diggers, 'True religion and undefiled is this, to make restitution of the Earth which has been taken ... from the common people by the power of Conquests.'⁷

The claim was renewed by the Hyde Park Diggers in 1969, who went on to found Tipi Valley,

an eco-settlement in rural West Wales (now integrated to an extent in, and largely accepted by, the local community).

Like the Diggers, anti-roads campaigners created an ephemeral new society. In 1992 they occupied Twyford Down, assuming the name Dongas. Donga Alex recalls, 'most of us were already keen environmentalists, craftworkers and herbalists [but] living full-time outdoors in a communal situation, cooking on fires, and building simple but snug shelters was new.'⁸

The Dongas created their own culture, including verbal language, within a voluntary way of life. Some later became New Age Travellers.

The cumulative effects of anti-roads protests produced a reduction in road proposals (due to security costs); but more to my point here is that the Dongas directly enacted a new society of community and cooperation in a radical interruption of capitalist routine. The same can be said of Climate Camps in the 1990s-2000s, and Extinction Rebellion today.

Globalisation / instrumentalism

Capitalism today is synonymous with globalisation: the land and its creatures are reduced to resource, to be used – or used up – for profit. But globalisation begins in 1492 with the first geographer's globe, the Behaim Globe, when Columbus sailed the ocean blue to colonise the Americas. Peter Slotterdijk writes, 'The new image of the Earth, the terrestrial globe, rose to become the central icon of the modern world picture.'⁹ He continues,

These new entrepreneurs from the pilot nations of European expansion are no longer rooted in their native country ... they have learned to carry out their projects in ... the outermost and abstract place. In future, their location will be the map ... the knowledgeably printed paper ... that tells them where they are.¹⁰

Values and methods of charting human life converge in the representation of the Earth as objectified sphere. This distancing – which mirrors the vital critical distancing of rationality, but minus its meaning – imposes measures of quantity, not experiences of quality, use not value, separating the subject who observes from the object-world subjected to observation: a relation not of I-You but of I-it.¹¹

The alternative to the destructive notion of Progress, with its instrumentalism and linearity, is what Herbert Marcuse called a transvaluation of values: more than elaboration of an alternative value-set but an action in the present: values are not taken as mere signposts to an *imminent* future but are enacted, here and now in pervasive, *immanent* revolt. This has no telos. Its effects are not predicted but the point is that the values which shape all effects are consciously evolved in a humane and empowering rationality.

But, as seen above, within Enlightenment, searches for new values are contradictory: new time is old time reinstated, validated by a Nature beyond human consciousness (yet that consciousness is itself natural in the sense of somatic); claims for new rights are framed by myths of lost pasts.

Enlightenment instantiates a freedom from superstition but the repressed Other returns in institutionalised routines and secularised, democratised rites of identity. Is history terminal today, the triumph of a totally destructive instrumentalism?

A trans-valuation of values requires an alternative to knowledge as power-over. Adorno and Horkheimer state,

For Enlightenment is as totalitarian as any system. Its truth does not consist in what its romantic enemies have always reproached it for: analytical method, return to elements,

dissolution through reflective thought; but instead in the fact that for Enlightenment the process is always decided from the start.

...

Thinking objectifies itself to become an automatic, self-activating process; an impersonation of the machine that it produces itself so that ultimately the machine can replace it. ... [turning] thought into a thing, an instrument.¹²

Their response is not to junk the project but to revise it from within, which, again, implies an empowering rationality. Beside direct action, art has a capacity to provoke such refiguration by interrupting routine. An example is *Fracking Futures*, by HeHe, at FACT, Liverpool in 2013.

Art as interruption

According to *The Echo*, 'FACT carries out tests to extract shale gas in mission to finance arts centre an unnamed member of staff ... commented, "We have all been told to wear hard hats to work. This is not the reason I came to work in the arts."' ¹³ HeHe (Helen Evans and Heiko Hansen) state,

The environment of the gallery is transformed into an industrial landscape where boreholes are drilled and waste chemicals are treated.

HeHe have begun experimental tests to extract shale gas ... great care has been taken to ensure this process is safe ... the 1200 sq m licence area ... might hold at least 20 trillion cubic feet of gas.'¹⁴

Of course, it was art., its unreality creating its critical distancing, a refraction of reality which renders the real as if unreal, or banal. Samuel Beckett does this through drama in a post-war society haunted by the Holocaust and threat of nuclear war.

For Adorno, 'the need for progress is inextricable from its impossibility.'¹⁵ He reads this in the gesture of walking in place at the end of Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Adorno is characteristically negative, advancing a construct only to withdraw it. But in the process, a trace remains; in the gap between impossibilities a glimpse of another kind of time, neither linear nor cyclic, neither progress nor origin, appears. This is, too, Walter Benjamin's Now-time (*Jetztzeit*), a really-existing present, an open-ended process of undetermined becoming.¹⁶ Ewan writes of another project, *Another Time* (in which a field is planted with a variety of seeds), as an autonomous clock: 'an exercise in hit-and-miss gardening, some species may not appear in the first year, some may be eaten by rabbits, some may not appear at all.'¹⁷ Perhaps something like Now-time appears there, and, in a performative way, in the Red Rebel Brigade's interventions in support of Extinction Rebellion.

Red Rebel Brigade describe themselves as, 'an international performance activist troupe dedicated to illuminating the global environmental crisis,'¹⁸ I give them the last word, from their website,

Red Rebel Brigade symbolises the common blood we share with all species,

That unifies us and makes us one.

... We are unity and we empathise with our surroundings, we are forgiving,

We are sympathetic and humble, compassionate and understanding,

We divert, distract. Delight and inspire the people who watch us,

... We are who the people have forgotten to be.¹⁹

¹ Adorno, T. W. and Horkheimer, M., [1944] 1997, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London, Verso, p. 4

² Perovic, S., 2012, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France*, Cambridge, CUP, p. 14

³ Nicholson, A., 2008, *Arcadia*, London, Harper, p. 68

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- ⁴ Tennyson, A., n.d. *The Poetical Works*, London, Collins, p. 141
- ⁵ www.peakdistrict.gov.uk/learning-about/news/70-years-of-the-peak-district-national-park/the-mass-trespass [accessed 4 May 2022]
- ⁶ Quoted, Petegorsky, D.W., [1940] 1999, *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War*, London, Sandpiper, p. 164
- ⁷ Quoted, Petegorsky, p. 179
- ⁸ Quoted, McKay, G., 1969, *Senseless Acts of Beauty*, London, Verso. P. 136
- ⁹ Slotterdijk, P., 2013, *In the World Interior of Capital*, Cambridge, Polity, p. 21
- ¹⁰ Slotterdijk, p. 28
- ¹¹ See Buber, M., 1970, *I and Thou*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark
- ¹² Adorno and Horkheimer, pp. 24-25
- ¹³ HeHe, 2016, *Man Made Clouds*, Paris, Hyx, p 308
- ¹⁴ HeHe, p. 303
- ¹⁵ Adorno, T.W., [1969] 1997, *Aesthetic Theory*, London, Athlone, p. 30
- ¹⁶ See Buci-Glucksmann, C., 1994, *Baroque Reason*, London, Sage, pp. 82-89
- ¹⁷ Ewan, R., 2016, *Another Time*, Cambridge, R Ewan, p. 10
- ¹⁸ www.redrebelbrigade.com
- ¹⁹ *ibid*