

3-2. Comment on the different ways in which the "natural" was constructed in eighteenth and nineteenth century speculations on landscape.

Katherine James' response

Naturalization, the oxymoronic term describing a process that re-inscribes the essence of a subject to be natural, was widely applied in the eighteenth and nineteenth. Trends of designing the natural were found in politics, art, and landscape. Of course, all were parallels in a conversation about fundamental issues of nature and morality in the modern society. "The great revolution in science and technology we associate with Sir Isaac Newton was followed by a massive shift in prevailing ideas about man's relation to nature"(Marx, 74).

The French Revolution was a challenge to the pseudo-natural hierarchy of society, and embodied sharp ideas about individual identity and liberties across class lines. French principals of an ordered society were restaged as a result.

What was challenged in France in politics was challenged in landscape as well: the disparity between the representation of principals in an oversimplified, sterilized way and the less systemized, more organic realities. The new world, in its rawness and relative purity from human intervention, was the new ideal of Europeans. "If unimproved nature is the location of all that we desire, (as embodied by the new world) then civilization as Europeans have known it can only signify a fall or lowering of man's estate." (Marx, 76) With this, picturesque gardens abounded, meant to emulate this powerful natural abundance. Of course, the "wild," "overgrown" gardens were designed specifically so.

This naturalization of the garden parlayed into the visual representations of this subject. As Bermingham discusses at length, visual representation was on yet another parallel critical path. We see Hearne and others demonstrating a leap to picturesque representation, rebelling against a flattening of detail and instead representing individualities of natural elements. Issues of true versus constructed scenes were played out. Artists of the picturesque would add detail, complicate a drawing rather than simplify or abstract it.

"Naturalization denied the (visual) sign's arbitrary nature and made it appear to be a pure, immediate, and transparent reflection of the referent" (Bermingham, 88)." In all of these cases of naturalization, the product was troubled by its process. A subject was presented as organic when it was in fact many steps removed from the organic essence it was claiming to embody.

This debate finds another iteration in the field of architecture today. As the non-standard conference at MIT demonstrated, the use of the computer to program organic design events is a complicated proposition. Only through challenging the process and being hyper-aware of the level of naturalization in this design process can these works be justified.

Jimmy Shen's response

The construction of the “natural” in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was fundamentally a struggle with the artificial nature of the pursuit of designing landscapes. The two basic approaches can be characterized as one of simplifying and the other of preserving complexity of nature. In either case, because one can not deny the fact that designing and representing the “natural” landscape has always been a construction of man the contradiction gives an apt opportunity to ponder the relationship between control and freedom as ideological attitudes pertaining to politics and society. Landscape is therefore seen as a metaphor of society and the techniques of representation provide a visual and spatial expression of the prevailing ideologies of the time.

To the British the French Revolution embodied an attitude towards man that was too simplistic. The revolution produced an idea of government that was based on abstract principles that were seen to gloss over the intricacies of reality where people are much more complex and their habits unpredictable. Therefore a change can be seen in the development of the British attitude towards landscape where once the views were very much constructed and controlled an appreciation for the chaotic and the overgrown became a desired characteristic. An example of this change is the development of the appreciation for those small shrubby, untrimmed, gardens where nature appeared in its rough and offered small narrow views, moving away from the aesthetic of gardens by designers such as Lancelot Brown and Humphrey Repton which were typically characterized by panoramic views of rolling hills and well trimmed lawns. The picturesque garden is meant to narrow the view of the distance in order to enhance the appreciation of the diverse characteristics found in the intricate detail of the foreground. The tendency was to move away from the effect of generalization by placing all things into an all encompassing whole.

But the pursuit of what is truly natural never the less is still contaminated by the hand of the man, of the need to create and control. Despite the intention to be less heavy handed in the creation of the landscape, it is still designed and artificial. The effect is only one of disguising the construction and manipulation. It perhaps celebrates individual characteristics of the surrounding landscape and its parts but gardens are far from truly wild. Therefore the criticism from the British of the French Revolution can perhaps be seen as one that is only rhetorical but in any case represents a specific attitude during a volatile time in history.

Lilly Donohue's response

In the early 18th century, weary of the overt formality of French landscape design, the English celebrated a new concept in landscape which was driven both by a fascination of landscape painting and an idealization of the simplicity of country life. This picturesque style of gardening was viewed as a celebration of the “natural” beauty of landscape in opposition with the French desire to dominate over nature itself. However, the picturesque was no less artificial in its construct of the “natural” than the highly ordered French geometry it aimed to criticize.

This new style of gardening was originally pioneered (at least in part) by William Kent whose designs still clung to a sense of symmetry inspired by French and Italian gardens. “Capability” Brown was one of the first to attempt to reject these notions in favor of what appeared to be a “natural” attitude towards landscape. Brown condemned Kent’s use of water elements as “a disgusting display of art.” Instead he was inspired to create what he called “natural” lakes. Similarly he enjoyed carefully positioning clumps of trees to appear natural in the landscape. (“Paradise on Earth”, Gabrielle Van Zuylen, p.89) The desire was to create sweeping views of the surroundings which gave the impression of a vast and “natural” land to be appreciated. The fact that this gardening was no less contrived was somehow irrelevant as long as the effect of “nature” was conveyed.

In “English Landscape Around 1795”, Anne Bermingham writes of how the British political atmosphere began to dictate a shift from the panoramic views of “Capability” Brown to a more rugged and varied sense of “the natural”. Uvedale Price, another British gardener viewed Brown’s equalization of the landscape as a symbol of compliance with the tenets of the French revolution. In order to reflect the English politics favoring class distinction, he proposed a reading of nature that highlighted the aspect of individuality and variety, writing, “I own it does surprise me, that in an age and in a country where the arts are so highly cultivated, one single plan, and such a plan, should have been so generally adopted; and that even the love of peculiarity should not sometimes have checked this method of leveling all distinctions, of making all places alike...” (as quoted in “English Landscape Drawing Around 1795, Ann Bermingham, p. 80)

Despite the continued use of the landscape as a symbolic ploy, (in this case, by the French royalty to demonstrate domination, then by the English to romanticize philosophy and lifestyle, and subsequently to justify political agendas) it remains throughout an artificial construct. It is never “natural” or untouched by man, and consequently the repeated attempt to use this synthetic nature as evidence of an underlying proof that strengthens the given agenda is without foundation. Whether the garden can be perceived as false is irrelevant, it is in each case an equally careful manipulation of nature, and never truly natural.