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**Mental landscape. Landscape as idea and concept /  
Paysage mental. Le paysage comme idée et concept**

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Landscape, often with the addition of “cultural” or “natural”, has become a most popular word or slogan during the last 10 years. Who ever visits the internet and types in “cultural landscape” or “natural landscape” into a research engine will be rewarded with tens of thousands of sites. Many of these are tourist sites, using those terms as a brand mark for the outstanding quality of their particular region. But what is landscape, what defines a landscape? Even this basic term is often understood in quite different ways or no thought into its true meaning has been invested at all.

About two centuries ago Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), the great researcher, scientist and diplomat, defined landscape as the “totality of all aspects of a region, as perceived by man”. This, abbreviated, definition still is the best and telling one can find. It describes landscape as the sum of all aspects, natural, cultural, geographic, geologic, biologic, artistic, whatever one can think of and it stresses the human perception as a defining element of the landscape. When we define a cultural landscape, as any landscape that has been changed and formed by man (intentionally or unintentionally), then Humboldt’s definition carries the thought even further: just the fact that a human being perceives a landscape and forms his ideas about his environ turns the environment into a landscape. Therefore any landscape study, and in consequence any landscape management, has to start with the human ideas and concepts of a certain landscape. Otherwise one should speak about environment or use any other terms, but landscape implies the human as its key element.

This definition is not only holistic, but it also stresses, how important it is, to understand the human perception of a landscape to understand the landscape itself. How people think has a great influence on the shaping of a landscape, on the way man treats the landscape and how he reacts on the landscape. These facts shall be shown on a few examples.

Architecture and monuments define the picture of a landscape and inhabitants like visitors tend to specially acknowledge them. Their appearance and their character depend on natural resources, like local building materials, the economic power of a region in certain *époques*, social structures and ideas. For example wayside shrines with the plastic image of the crucified Christ play an important role in catholic regions, while you will not find them in protestant areas. In Trentino in Northern Italy, a forested region with a long tradition of wood works, they are mostly made from wood, while in the Spessart in Southern Germany, they are built from the typical local coloured sandstone. In Southwest England one will find highly decorated churches dominating the villages and the surrounding landscape. Not far away in Northern Wales the nonconformist Methodist church became most powerful during the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its barn like chapels. This was the great period of slate quarrying in the area, with slate as the dominating building material. The grey colour of the slate strengthens the bleak appearance of the buildings, which due to the

ascetic streak of the Methodist church, are often not painted or painted in grey. On the English side of the border the houses are painted in bright white, the doors coloured in red, blue or green. A quite similar landscape nevertheless does appear quite different to the observer.

The social and economic situation of the Welsh quarry men also started the squatter movement, with quarry men occupying the uncultivated heather and marshlands, building their small houses, miles and miles of field walls to enclose the land, which could just sustain a few goats or a cow. Today many of these houses are abandoned and are bought by English tourists, who change them into holiday cottages – painting them white and introducing their beloved colourful doors and window frames to the Welsh landscape.

If we go back in history a few centuries, we can find in Northern Wales another movement towards landscape change. The noble families ruling the country built their halls into the fertile valleys, changing them completely to their taste and wishes. So the Oakeley family built their manor house Plas Tan y Bwlch on the slope of the valley of the River Dwyryd, changing this slope into a garden and planting the opposite slope with a forest. The river, originally flowing straight through the valley, used for transporting wood, was artificially shaped into meanders, as it looked nicer this way. An interesting example of reverse canalisation, compared to later common use. A village was erected at the valleys end, in the same materials and style as the manor house, but situated in a way, that it only could be seen from the manor house by standing at specific points, while otherwise it did not disturb the view. A complete valley so was remodelled according to the will and needs of the owner.

Another example of socially and economically induced landscape one can find in Southern Bohemia. This area was owned by a number of aristocratic families in Medieval times, giving rise to a great number of monastery foundations. The monks and nuns were subdue to very strict regulations, specially concerning their diet. The many periods of Lent and the regular days of fasting, where all consumption of meet was forbidden, led to a great need for fresh fish supplies. So many fishponds were created, the density of brooks allowing to feed them. Carp was the main fish bred, but here were also invented the first fresh water ponds, allowing for a crop of trout and other fresh water fish. Still today the ponds dominate the landscape and give it its typical appearance. The idyllic water landscape was forcefully disturbed by the great flood in autumn 2002, when the tranquil ponds and brooks changed into a huge lake, drowning the land. For the inhabitants this was a great shock, which also goes to show, that the way we treat the landscape is only really reflected when it backfires on us.

There are the outstanding events, the “century” or even “millennia” floods of the last years, or this years astonishing drought in Europe, which add flesh and blood to the great terms like “climatic change” or global warming” for the average news customer. Simple truths are presented as fleshy new insights, like the importance of canalising brooks and rivers, deforesting the mountains or sealing the surface for the great effect such events can have. We often are proud about the growth of knowledge during the last two centuries, but sometimes one might wonder, if we should not be even more astonished about the knowledge we could easily forget. As early as in the 8<sup>th</sup> century Charles the Great issued an edict to protect the high mountain forests, threatening with sever punishment those who would cut them down. He even issued an explanation for those harsh punishments: because the high mountain forests prevented avalanches and protected the settlements on lower ground. In the year 1300 a Dominican friar in the Alsatian city of Colmar wrote, how many people were wondering about the increased number of floods, their severity and horrible results. He continues, while looking around, he would see the hills denuded of forests, which a century ago had still covered them, and that therefore the water

would not be kept in the hills anymore but flow straight into the river, making the floods more devastating.

So we can see, how human ideas influence and shape the landscape. Religious beliefs, economic wealth, social structures all are reflected in architecture as well as in the traces left in the landscape. Technology has a great influence on the way we treat the landscape. Not just because it defines our abilities to change the landscape, but also because it influences the way we think and react towards our environment. If we look at the paintings of Dutch artists of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, providing us with wonderful pictures of landscape and daily life, we can see harvesters cutting wheat with their sickles. The wheat is as tall as the men, raised intentionally so high, because the straw was a valuable source, covering the floors of the stables and cow sheds just as the roofs of barns and houses. A man cutting those towering stems by hand has got a very different perspective in any sense, then a farmer sitting high in his modern air conditioned harvester with built in navigation system, automatically cutting the short stemmed wheat bred today for the only purpose of rich crops. The influence our own ideas and sentiments have on the landscape was well perceived by many in the past. The senators of Siena had the famous painter Pietro Lorenzetti decorate their main assembly chamber in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century depicting the consequences of good and bad government to both, the city and the surrounding landscape. The big holes left by surface mining in the coal areas might serve as a symbol for the destroying capacity of money driven exploitation.

Since the industrialisation the change of the landscape has increased and become ever faster. What has been a landscape of industrialisation a century ago can become a natural resort today. The slate mining areas of North Wales were the stage for bone braking and dangerous labour, for people slaving in the mines for 12 hours a day with only a break on Sunday to attend the service in the Chapel. The vast spoil heaps, flooded holes and abandoned mines today are a tourist resort and even a UNESCO world heritage site. Perspective changes with the change of technology and the course of history.

Today windmill farms belong to the most controversially discussed features in our landscape. They are a big business for some, not the least because of politically initiated funding schemes, an ecological revolution for others, stressing the importance of sustainable energy production, when the emission from coal fuelled power plants adds to global warming, but they are also a changing factor in our landscape. The ever higher towers and wings of the wind mills, clustering in wind farms on the flat coast lands and more and more in off shore farms in the sea, change the character of the landscape. The towers of village churches, wide visible landmarks in the flat lands of Northern Germany e.g., are covered by the many windmills even higher than the old towers. For many people their picture of the landscape is destroyed. Even stronger debates rise, as the windmills move more and more inland, new types of windmills allowing wind farms even under the much less stable conditions in alpine regions.

At least windmills were a common feature in Northern Europe centuries ago. When the Dutch engineers developed highly efficient types in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to drain the fields and help to win new arable land, windmills spread far over Northern Europe, moving water as well as grinding corn. People were proud about the new technology, which allowed them to harness the wind, this uncontrollable natural power, and use it for their own good. So windmills feature prominently in many contemporary Dutch paintings, not only as metaphors and symbols, but also because they were an important and valued feature in the landscape. Windmills were not only standing alone, but could cluster to real wind farms. On the island of Saaremaa in Estonia many farmhouses had their own windmills in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and often more than one. In a small village there could be up to 24 windmills working at the same time. Only one of these clusters has survived, at least in

parts, until today. The skeletons of many small windmills can be seen scattered over the landscape. But some are built in stone as heavy towers, their remains looking more like ruined fortifications than civil buildings. When restored they are major tourist attractions, around which restaurants and bars develop.

The industrialisation of transport accelerated the rate of change in the landscape. Canalisation of rivers, the new railway systems and the new types of roads intersected the landscape and powered the change through exploitation, new industries, urbanisation and sub-urbanisation of the countryside. Again people were quite proud of the new technologies, when they emerged. Even in the delicate paintings of French Impressionists one can see railway bridges and trains under full steam. Others painted industrial plants like cathedrals and showed cities with every single chimney billowing smoke as a symbol of growing wealth and progress. Today we are much more reluctant to celebrate such developments, as they have gained such a speed, that changes have become frightening to many people.

As we can observe the change of perception of change and progress, we can also state that image is one of the most powerful forces. This is also true for landscapes. The image a landscape has determines very much the way it is perceived, observed and treated. Many landscapes are viewed as purely natural landscapes, the average observer not realising the great impact of human activities on these landscapes. The Bowland Forest and Lune Valley in Lancashire can serve as a good example. The Lune Valley is a fertile area with green meadows, villages, churches and castles, everybody concedes of great value and worth protecting. The adjoining Bowland Forest is mostly seen as a bleak moor land, only good for grouse hunting. But the many field walls as well as its heather show the influence gracing once had on this land, which as a Royal forest has a most fascinating history of its own.

In Dowris in Ireland we can see a flat landscape of peat bog, which partly has been stripped recently for the production of peat fuelling a nearby power plant. This is a landscape which nobody would call beautiful and many see as natural. But in fact the growing of the peat itself was instigated by human activities, albeit unintentionally, and the stripping of the peat is a human activity, which is not sustainable and not even economic any more, but still is done for – cultural and social reasons. Because after Ireland became politically independent the 1920s it tried to become independent economically as well, substituting British coal by Irish turf. Burning peat is therefore seen as part of the Irish tradition and identity.

The Spessart, a large woodland in the heart of Germany, has the image of poverty, like many other upland regions in Europe. Poverty often is associated in peoples mind with a lack of history. Although this landscape has been settled by men since the beginning of the Neolithic about 8 millennia ago, and had times of great prosperity as well as times of trouble, the more recent history of poverty in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century dominates the memory. Therefore many historic structures and buildings are still erased, even during a time of growing interest in ones cultural heritage, because they are viewed as mere testimonies of poverty. Poverty is experienced as shameful and modern wealth shall be shown to the public. Even more important new developments of settlement structures influence the way people feel about their landscape. During the last decades many people from the surrounding urban centres settled in the Spessart, sometimes buying old farm houses, more often building new houses in new “suburbs”. Today many villages consist of about 50% indigenous inhabitants and 50% new settlers. These still make their living in the cities, spend most of their money in the cities where they consume entertainment and culture, while they raise their children in the “healthy, green and natural” environment far from sex, drugs and violence. An idyllic picture of the landscape is created, which is far from real, but serves the needs and interests of the people who decided to live here.

It therefore is most important to know the concepts of people about the landscape they live in, but as well the concepts of people who visit the landscape to seek recreation. If one wants to influence the process of change, then peoples ideas and visions are crucial. Not understanding them will ruin every scheme of landscape management. Of course we live in times of rapid change – and therefore also of rapid change of the landscape. Saying that, one has as well to state, that landscape in itself is never static. Landscape is a living canvas, and just as nature will change even without any human influence, every landscape will always change and develop. Having both natural and cultural components this is even more true for the landscape as for the mere environment. Landscape therefore is a process. To manage landscape one has also to understand the process, because again, otherwise every clever plan of management will go astray. Therefore it is important to view the landscape not only as 3-dimensional, but as 4-dimensional. It is important to understand its history and how it developed, not just during the last decades, but during a longer span of time. For landscape as such it is important to understand the interaction between nature and man, how man reacts on nature, influences his environment and reacts on the emerging changes. Therefore landscape management should not only be left to developers, planners, engineers and landscape architects, but must as well include historians and archaeologists. Ecological features are well integrated into landscape planning, but cultural features still are underestimated.

But why is it so important to understand the process and manage the landscape when it is changing anyway and permanently, as stated above? One answer lies in the speed and track of change we observe at present. We are in danger to loose all the specific character of different landscapes, move towards a uniformity of landscapes. We see many devastated landscapes, which have lost all attraction to their inhabitants – and to people from outside. Economic and social problems are the inevitable consequence. Rich and divers landscapes have a great social value. The different character of landscapes make them valuable for tourists, because only the differences make them interesting to visit and experiencing the differences is a great part of the recreational factor of holidays. A positive identification with the local landscape is an important factor for social well being. So we can state, that the diversity of landscapes and their proper management have a great socio-economic value. Neglect or wrong management, destroying the positive identification with ones landscape, can lead to economic decline of an area, increased violence, alcoholism and criminality and so cause higher costs in the long line than an intelligent management would have cost in short terms.

The importance of biodiversity has been well accepted during the last years. This is not only because of the good lobbying of ecological pressure groups, but also because powerful companies have realised the enormous value of biodiversity. It is a never ending source of new patents, biotechnology or pharmacy are just two branches, which make great profit out of this rich pool – which provides substances as well as ideas. Since aircrafts save petrol by using a “shark-skin” or hard cash is saved on cleaning windows through specific surfaces derived from certain blossoms nobody can doubt the economic value of natures treasure house any more. The same understanding needs to be raised for the cultural diversity as a similarly rich source which needs the same close interest. Its socio-economic importance has to be stressed and it has to be much more closely studied. The setting in which this diversity takes place is the landscape – where natural and cultural factors meet and unite.

So the main tasks for future landscape management, to my opinion, are:

- to better understand the process forming the present landscape, so we can model the future changes and what results can be expected from specific actions ;

- to involve the people, the civic society, into the process, not just at a late stage, but from the beginning, including their ideas and concepts into the process of managing the landscape and make them wardens of the landscape ;
- to better evaluate the true value of the diversity of landscapes, biodiversity as well as cultural diversity, to make it easier to argue for an intelligent and sustainable management.

And most important: to allow for individual strategies for individual landscapes. This is difficult to achieve in a time of pressing need for standardisation and easy to apply methods in a globalising world and enlarging European Union, but diversity needs diverse methods – or it will inevitably change to uniformity.