



10-2010

Demon Landscapes, Sacrificial Architecture and Monumental Death

Neil Whitehead

University of Wisconsin - Madison, nlwhiteh@wisc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/lov>

Recommended Citation

Whitehead, Neil (2010) "Demon Landscapes, Sacrificial Architecture and Monumental Death," *Landscapes of Violence*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.7275/R5RF5RZD

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/lov/vol1/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Landscapes of Violence by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Demon Landscapes, Sacrificial Architecture and Monumental Death

Abstract

This paper examines some of the ways in which the memory and practice of violence becomes embedded in landscapes such that the landscape itself becomes a vehicle for meaning through time - landscapes materialize meaning and thereby give particular stability and significance to the kinds of cultural significance that landscapes evoke

Keywords

violence, architecture, landscape, sacrifice, memory

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will examine some of the ways in which the memory and practice of violence becomes embedded in landscapes such that the landscape itself becomes a vehicle for meaning through time - landscapes materialize meaning and thereby give particular stability and significance to the kinds of cultural significance that landscapes evoke. In fact landscapes are quite dynamic, both in an ecological and cultural sense, – cultural geo-forming, biotic management, architecture and marking with monuments, all evince imaginatively and subjectively cultural ideas of permanence and a transcendence of historical time.

The notion of “landscape” thus signifies not just material geo-forms and structures but also the way in which the cultural imagination occupies and signifies spatial and biological processes and relationships within discreet limits. Such spaces are discreet in the sense that the signifying landscape is like a palimpsest of the wider environment, occupying only certain nodes or regions of geographic space. But it is human signification that defines these discreet spaces and their connections, constantly erasing and overlaying meaning but without necessarily attempting an exhaustive cartography of geographic place.

The idea of geography and cartography for Euro-American culture thus emphasizes complete and exhaustive representation through an idiom of scientific understanding. However, this clearly nullifies other kinds of meaning that may be invested in the topographies that are cartographically revealed in maps or geological sections. In other words a landscape is created not just through the presence of human artifact but also through the way in which narration invests meaning in apparently “natural” earth-forms. This is precisely the case with the first category of landscape I want to mention that of “demon landscapes”.

DEMON LANDSCAPES

As colonial endeavors seek to occupy and control new territories the existing cultural and political configurations of space must be transformed to reflect those acts of possession. The term “demon landscape” reflects the way in which this process often configures the territory to be occupied as defended by numberless resistant and malevolent beings, evil spirits, savage humans, and monstrous animals. Such a “fear of the forest” seems to mark most agricultural complexes, necessarily committed economically to forest clearance, and obstacles to this civilizing process become the dark and malevolent forces which haunt the green hell. Werewolves, goblins, green-men and other unnamed cannibal creatures are just part of a whole slew of demonic beings whose forest haunt makes the boreal landscape a persistent source of fear and fantasy.

One of the more pertinent examples of this has been discussed by the historian Simon Schama in his work *Landscape and Memory* (1996). Schama follows the historical meanings of the Black Forest in Germany through time as it feeds the self-imagining of Germanic people from the traditions of the tribal Goths, through to the era of the Teutonic Knights and on to the 19th century and Nazi era re-inventions of the Teutonic. Not surprisingly landscape art played a significant part in this process, as in other European contexts, and Schama nicely shows how the power of the imagination of the landscape long outlasts its physical references, as pollutants and acid rain now destroy the naturalized space of the German imagination.

My personal research is more directed towards the colonial occupation of South America and here the “green hell” of the Amazon jungle has repeatedly been emphasized in the picturing and usage of Amazonian landscapes. Graham Burnett provides a nice discussion of the reactions of various nineteenth century travelers to the ‘demon landscape’ of the interior of Guyana, pointing out how the discovery and desecration of native spirit places, as well as their occasional defacement, served to enable the possession of that landscape through a mapping and surveying which exorcized the *genius locii* - spirit of the place. Indeed the very recognition of the hallucinatory power of the landscape placed the explorer at risk since it was a short step from cultural empathy to moral collapse - that is ‘going native’ or mad - which utterly disqualified the explorer as observational scientist

My own ethnographic research into sorcery among the Patamuna of Guyana suggests that the continuing presence and past actions of these violent ancestors and spirits are overtly manifest in the landscape. Some take the form of such archaeological features as such as petroglyphs, burial sites, megaliths and stone alignments, cave sites and ancestral villages. Others are also present in the living forest and savannas as spirit forces controlling the distribution of game animals, fish, and minerals (*totopu*), as well as constituting specific kinds of threat or obstacles to gardening and gathering (*atai-tai*).

The presence of jaguars, boas, anacondas, iguanas and their transformations as guardians or jealous owners of specific locales, called *esak* by the Patamuna, in turn guides the practical choices that Patamuna men and women make. Above all Kanaima, the most ancient of malevolent spirit forces, still lurks in the deep forest. So powerful has this idea been in regional history that Kanaima has been transculturated into the national imagination through the novels of Romulo Gallegos, past president of Venezuela, and the works a number of Caribbean writers. In this way the demon landscape offers a series of mnemonics for the recall of historical events, just as subsistence practices and resource management become tokens of Patamuna identity and use-rights in that environment.

The repeated violent intrusions of loggers, ranchers, miners, balata-bleeders and, most recently, eco-tourism, have therefore presented a number of challenges to Patamuna understanding of themselves, others and their past. However, Patamuna oral history of their aboriginal occupation of this region is structured around their own colonial intrusion and violent encounters with both the "First Beings" (totopu, atai-tai) and a non-agricultural people, the Kawaliyanas. This historiographical motif then provides the context for narrative of the origins and purposes of a distinctly "Patamuna-way", akin in this light to the "civilizing" mission of Europeans, in which productive agriculture supplants Kawaliyana gathering and hunting.

SACRIFICIAL ARCHITECTURES

Obviously enough the built environment also contributes directly to the idea of a violent landscape and underlines the way in which landscape is not just a natural but very much a cultural formation. Very clear examples of this would be the sacrificial architectures of the Aztec where the focus of design and aesthetic is on the moment of violence entailed in human sacrifice. Arguably the Aztec instance shows us a violent ritual moment infused with religious symbolism. The example of the Roman Coliseum, while not devoid of such allusions, expresses a different kind of idiom for violent death - that of agonistic contest or "games"

However it is not just the obvious link between symbolism, architecture and violence that seems important to note but also the way in which radically different meanings can emerge from the same spaces - the public and celebratory architectures of Rome and Tenochtitlan therefore contrast in just these ways with the architectures of 20th century genocide. Here the meanings of violence are different secrecy, depersonalized efficiency and degradation in killing seem prominent in the constitution of the architecture and landscape - gas ovens, barbed wire and fortress like guard blocks are deployed in a grim aesthetic of terror and extermination - while the notorious gates of Dachau with their slogan "Arbeit Macht Frei" emphasizes the purposes of aesthetic terror in the making of this monstrous landscape of death

A particular kind of landscape in this meta-ecological sense may therefore come to be associated with specific acts of violence - but in a wider sense certain kinds of landscape are seen as conducive to such acts. Here the association is derived from a cultural and political process rather than the nature of the land form or architecture in itself. I am thinking here of the way in which a wider cultural register for certain kinds of physical landscape over-determine the meanings of particular spaces

The city street, scene of excitement and danger, is a good example of this and the city street at night perfectly expresses this interaction between physical form and cultural meaning as a process of cultural negotiation not an empirical given. In this way the abandoned building as much as the trackless green hell of the tropical forest can inspire both fear and aggression. Famously the political campaign of New York's

Mayor Giuliani to clean up the city focused on the idea that broken windows, graffiti and others signs of human defacement were themselves threatening - not perhaps so much to individuals citizens as to the political and social order of the city government and there is here a grim echo of the Nazi's "kristallnacht" when Jewish shop in Berlin were vandalized as part of a legitimate public disorder

But this precisely reveals the cultural basis on which such ideas are constructed, both because everyone knows that fixing windows does not remove the reasons for crime, but also because urban landscapes in which windows are not broken might be construed as no less dangerous. Thus these streets, may well be considered the "most dangerous" in various countries and for various reasons but they hardly look it, they need the supporting narrative to affect our imaginations and behavior - but in aesthetic representation of the idea of "mean streets" such an imaginative reworking is already present. Paradoxically images like these show us how the same space may simultaneously been constituted as dangerous in different ways - as US forces patrol the Baghdad streets who is threatened here...the soldiers by insurgents ? or the civilians by the soldiers ?... the ambiguity of meaning is part of the aesthetic power of such images.

MONUMENTAL DEATH

Another kind of aesthetic power is involved in the construction of the public and civic landscape through acts of memorialization, as with war-monuments and museums. However, such acts of memory are apt to be at the same time a means to forget. Indeed monument building may often entail the physical erasure of the actual sites of mass-killing or brutal murder or its transformation into a museological space. In this way a kind of erasure or subjective encapsulation occurs such that the ineffable nature of killing is given a form and narration that allows us to make it intelligible, and perhaps also thereby more forgettable. As a result the search for such intellectual and emotional closure is now part of touristic educational aspirations. Trauma tourists take their vacations in sites of genocide or historic brutality, a redemptive holiday from hell. At the same time such processes are a part of individual and local group identity that may create a space of haunted memory and contested use-rights.

CONCLUSION

The aim here is not to be exhaustive but to begin to draw out the varieties of "violent landscapes", and in particular to note that it is not just the sites of battles, executions or murders that constitute violence through physical space but also the places where we live, work and even play. The legacies of Roman games in contemporary public spectacles of violent sport are no less worth pondering than the legacies of Auschwitz in the landscapes of Guantanamo bay.

In all these ways landscapes become part of the historical construction of polity, ethnicity and identity and so feed the imagination of violence as well as its physical enactment. Landscapes are a cultural resource for conflict and its memory, just as the re-signification of a violent landscape can also induce new forms of narration and forgetting. Our own recently constituted violent landscape of 9/11 thus has changed from being a site of horrific death through terrorism to one of possible government ineptitude - or even conspiracy - and failure to protect and anticipate attack, to become perhaps eventually a monument of national renewal and reinvigoration, as these architects envisage.

And so allowing a process of forgetting to begin and for memories to become memorabilia the fact that all of these narratives are still circulating shows how acts of violence come to mark a landscape and to constitute such landscapes as violent through cultural processes of memory. In reviewing some of the ways in which this happens it emerges that aesthetic values, moral imagination and acts of memory are key to the constitution of meaning in landscape, which can reveal an eerie and tragic stability through time. The relevance of anchoring such values and judgments in the physical character of landscape is that it simultaneously gives these cultural factors special significance, permanence and ontological force, since that is how we are apt to view the natural. In this way the cultural construction of a violent landscape is naturalized, and it is this which makes the meaning of violent landscapes so forceful in cultural terms.



WORKS CITED

Burnett, D.Graham.

2000 *Masters of All They Surveyed : Exploration, geography, and a British El Dorado*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Schama, Simon

1995 *Landscape and Memory*. New York: A.A. Knopf.