

LANDSCAPE AND VISION

Dianne Harris and D. Fairchild Ruggles

LANDSCAPE HISTORIANS AND THEORISTS CAN BENEFIT FROM THE RICH developments that the field of visual theory has experienced in recent decades. These perspectives challenge existential beliefs about the world and our place within it, and thus it is a difficult task—and ultimately an unfinished one. Some historians of the built environment have been resistant to these new approaches, which they regard as intellectually elitist because highly technical language is often employed in the questioning of basic philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality, subjectivity, and authorship. The demand for meticulous and highly specialized reading in such fields as psychoanalysis and semiotics can be alienating, and yet, these same perspectives can be immensely productive for those who choose to engage with them.

How do we know landscape? For most human beings, the primary way of knowing the material world is through vision, the simple act of opening the eyes and looking at an object, a scene, a horizon. The physiological processes engaged when the lid retracts from the eye are, when not impeded by pathologies, universal among humans. Because vision is an embodied experience, it is altered by the infinite range of the possibilities presented by corporeal performance. The body moves in space—quickly or slowly, the head still or moving side to side, up or down—the eyes view a scene, and a cognitive process begins in which particles of light are assembled by the brain to create an ordered image. As W. J. T. Mitchell points out, this dimension of vision as a sensory mechanism “operates in animal organisms all the way from the flea to the elephant.”¹ But the act of looking is nevertheless far from simple. It results from a complex array of physical, psychological, and cultural conditions and is studied by scholars in an equally wide spectrum of disciplines. The landscape is similarly produced by physical and cultural conditions and exists on such a large scale that it can rarely be known or discerned through a single, simple glance but is instead perceived by an accumulation of observations in which not only optics but also memory come into play. These two complex phenomena—landscape and vision—are deeply connected since, as Denis Cosgrove has noted, “landscape is a way of seeing.”²

The etymological link between landscape and vision is ancient; the second part of the word “landscape” derives from the Greek verb *skopein*, which means “to behold, contemplate, examine, or inspect.”³ Visual theory has ancient origins beginning at least as early as the fourth century BCE with Plato and his story of the cave, but in art and architectural history the interest in vision (as distinct from structure and form) is generally attributed to the fourteenth century when architects such as Brunelleschi (1377–1446) and Alberti (1404–1472) began to analyze three-dimensional space perspectively. Later, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, architects and stage designers constructed not only built form but also the spaces between and beyond the buildings, especially in theaters and piazzas. They worked to control and manipulate visual axes and perception through the use of the stage niche, the scenery, and the organization of seating of the audience, and questioned how spatial illusions could enhance the perception of space without actually changing its dimensions. Moreover, designers experimented with axes of vision to articulate the social relations of the members of the audience, so that the most elite patron knew that s/he enjoyed

the most complete view of the stage and actors. In the built environment, the question of representation, in the sense of a picture that substitutes for or depicts a missing object, became less important than these articulations of positions in space and the perception of space by a human viewer.

The new emphasis on the object-viewer relationship occurred when art historians began to critique the term “art history” and to replace it with the more inclusive term “visual culture” in order to signal the shift in emphasis from the work of art to the humans that produced, received and interpreted it. But critical visual theory—like the “new art history”—is hardly new. The application of visual theory dates to classics like Erwin Panofsky’s *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927) and Ernst Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion* (1956). Even Norman Bryson’s influential *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* of 1983 is nearly a quarter of a century old; Martin Jay published his early works on visibility (such as “Scopic Regimes of Modernity”) in the 1980s; and Hubert Damisch’s *The Origin of Perspective* first appeared in France in 1987. These works dealt with pictorial space, mimetic representation, art objects, and viewers. But the role of actual three-dimensional space and its representation and perception has remained comparatively unexamined.

Scholars of visual culture interpreted the *meaning* of art differently too: it was understood not to reside uniquely in the work itself but rather to emerge from a complex range of cultural, political, and economic conditions. As a consequence, some historians rejected the producer/product model that had formerly kept the roles of artist, audience, and art distinct and asserted the autonomous existence of the object or image; they instead began to emphasize reception. Because the art object was no longer necessarily central to visual analysis, these scholars opened a door to admit many other kinds of received representations and objects, such as gardens, landscape, and space itself. Moreover when Derrida and others argued that there is no chronological or spatial causality between text and “context”—the very word is problematic—and that the frame that purportedly defines a field is as much a product of the field as of the space external to it, landscape and its attendant concepts of space suddenly became essential to the debate.⁴ This kind of scholarship presented an important opportunity to reconsider landscape as neither an object nor a contextual field but as always simultaneously both.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, art historians and scholars of

visual culture and media developed the themes of vision and visibility to sophisticated levels. Studies in visual culture changed significantly when scholars began to read the philosophy, literary theory, and semiotic analysis of French theorists such as Merleau Ponty, Lefebvre, Barthes, Foucault, de Certeau, and Derrida. Such influences prompted visual culture scholars to establish and debate new terms that demanded the deconstruction of the visual field and the analysis of it as a discursive system.⁵ According to the new theory, representation could not be regarded as a fixed and neutral relationship among artist, audience, and work of art: instead, those roles became defined as positions, all aspects of which were unstable, interdependent, and articulating political power. In the field of visual culture, the new theory primarily focused on representation and signage. However, to study the history of vision one must trace two paths: one in the pictorial field where representations and iconography are central, and the other in three-dimensional space where the distinction between fictive, created representations and real or natural entities can be hard to distinguish, even before one considers the deconstruction of those definitions and why they matter.

With the appearance of numerous texts during the 1980s and 1990s that focused on theories of vision and visibility, scholars in a range of fields began to question the notion that sight is simply a physiologically determined phenomenon and the world homogeneously perceived.⁶ One group of visual culture scholars treated vision as a cultural construction in which perception and reception are configured by aspects of the world that are culturally privileged by specific social groups at moments in time. From this perspective, vision is not innately given or innocent but must be learned, based on the assimilation and use of what Elizabeth Kryder-Reid calls “a visual vocabulary of perception” that may be used as a tool for seeing in a specific manner. According to this assessment, vision is culturally determined and serves as a device for creating connections between sight, space, and social order.⁷

Scholars of poststructuralist theory, in contrast, did not rely on contextual explanations but rather pursued the structure of discourse itself, regarding vision as a discursive system (like language). They examined the ways that discursive systems could produce the positions of image and frame, object and subject, and text and author, all of which are pertinent to the framing of the visual field. They showed that the positions are not fixed, but rather mutually constitutive, emerging from the play of dif-

ference in discourse. Although these positions seem to emerge naturally, to be already in place, as the existence of a building implies the prior existence of its architect, poststructuralist theory posits that every element of the discursive field is produced by the discursive system itself. Hence, instead of a socially contextualized vision, we can identify a discourse of vision.

The immediate impact of both forms of this poststructuralist turn was more profound in the study of painting, prints, and photography than in the study of the built environment. Vision and representation became the subject of serious inquiry in fields such as art history, geography, cinema, feminist studies, psychology, and, to a lesser degree, architecture. As a means for apprehending space, visual theory should also serve as a productive tool of analysis within the field of landscape studies, and yet it has been virtually ignored.⁸ This is surprising considering the existence of such well-known mediating devices for vision as the Claude Glass (a handheld framed glass, sometimes tinted) and the stereoscope. Dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively, these devices were intended to manipulate vision in order to generate a specific experience for the viewer. The Claude Glass was produced for viewing landscape, creating both a frame and an atmosphere for particular landscape settings that could be manipulated by the individual holding the device. The stereoscope facilitated views of a range of subjects (including pornography, a practice which may have been responsible for the devaluation of the stereoscope) but made landscape views into arresting experiences for observers who would frequently jump back from the mechanism after a first glance revealed a startling depth of perspective. It blinded the viewer's peripheral vision and controlled perspective in order to create dramatic illusions of a landscape that appeared real.⁹ Implicit in the use of both instruments was the assumption that landscapes require or are improved by mediation for visual comprehension. In each case, devices guide the eye to see in a culturally privileged manner. Much like the twentieth-century mirror projects of the environmental artist Robert Smithson, these devices made the viewer aware that visual experiences such as retinal fusion are the result of prior conditioning.¹⁰ Mechanisms such as the Claude Glass and stereoscope can be understood to perform the task that W. J. T. Mitchell has called "showing seeing . . . they make seeing show itself, put it on display, and make it accessible to analysis."¹¹

In vernacular landscape studies, there is a strong tradition of careful observation —the method advocated and most skillfully practiced by John Brinkerhoff Jackson. But historical research based on the use and application of critical visual theory remains scarce. Although reading the landscape is a useful analytical tool, it is an essentially descriptive technique that often reveals only partial and even misleading information.¹² Furthermore, such readings ignore the fact that all looking is motivated from the outset by intellectual or political investments. Just as the idea of the sightseer assumes that a location will be consumed in a uniform manner (by any viewer or tourist, since most tourism is predicated on this assumption), so too this method assumes that all readers will view and understand a landscape in the same way. But such readings are undermined by a fundamental flaw because both location and viewer are contingent upon each other. Vision is neither universal nor neutral in its motivations and operations.

Some scholars, such as Jay Appleton, have used studies of specific types of vision as a foundation for their research into environment and behavior. Appleton's prospect-refuge theory is based on the notion that landscape aesthetic preferences stem from universally held and evolutionarily determined desires for sites that provide an unobstructed view over surrounding territory (to search for prey or observe a predator's approach) while simultaneously fulfilling the desire to retreat into a protected realm.¹³ More recently, landscape architects and environmental planners have used computer simulations and human focus groups in visual assessment studies that predict the aesthetic impact of environmental change in specific regions. Environmental psychophysicists use landscape representations (paintings and photographs) to measure human physiological responses to images of specific settings. Both of these modes of scholarship link landscape and optics. But they treat landscapes as primarily a visual and therefore aesthetic entity, and they regard vision as a physiological and universal phenomenon. Their methods therefore turn a blind eye to cultural conditioning and political motivation.

Vision is a powerful sense. Humans have the ability to control vision and therefore feel empowered in ways that are less available with the other senses. Sounds and smells can, for example, pervade spaces in uncontrollable manners, crossing architectural boundaries in ways that images cannot. To avoid a scent or noise in a room,

one leaves the space, but to avoid a view, one can simply close one's eyes.¹⁴ Views can be created, controlled, manipulated, and even eliminated with the blink of an eye, and this ease privileges the eye as an organ for analysis since we "own" it more consciously than we do our other senses.

Vision remains an essential tool for understanding and analyzing the built environment, but it does not operate in isolation from the other senses. Sight, by virtue of its location in the body, is mobile and occurs in consonance with touch, hearing, and smell. The tradition that equates observation with scholarship, together with studies that privilege landscape as an aesthetic entity, occasionally have provoked claims that vision receives too much attention in scholarly publications. Indeed, some scholars complain that examinations of the haptic, auditory, and mobile aspects of landscape have received little scholarly attention.¹⁵ The criticism is just, but the problem is not the privilege accorded to vision but rather the simplistic way in which the visual and the descriptive are conflated.

Because vision is understood as an embodied sense, the study of sight should be a study of bodily movement and sensation. Sunlight and shade are visual effects, felt in the body as heat and cold (not to mention their role in circadian rhythms, depression, and the production of vitamin D). In this volume, vision is explored in multifaceted and historical forms, because the complex relationship between landscape and vision demands extended critical inquiry. This does not entail removing vision from the other senses or denying their impact. The study of landscape may be, as some have claimed, ocularcentric; however, visual theory itself remains little explored and underutilized in the field. As Dell Upton has noted, "If vision is indeed so privileged, then scholars are lamentably incompetent in making use of it. Vision's great power to frame and to define seems to be lost between eye and pen. Consequently, scholarly analysis of visual evidence remains curiously descriptive and inarticulate."¹⁶ Moreover, Kate Soper has argued that privileging the gaze does not detract from studying other sensory responses. Yet she also cautions that a more sensorially inclusive approach to landscape analysis is not necessarily more universal or democratic.¹⁷

In the studies of visuality and visual theory that emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century, landscape was rarely the object of inquiry. Nonetheless, there is an abundance of theoretical material on vision relevant to scholars of landscape.

In return, landscape scholars can make a significant contribution to the field, for what they investigate is how vision occurs in environments so huge, enveloping, and elusive that they can be “seen” only as remembered images linked sequentially in time. The existing literature on vision is useful, but it should be understood only as a starting point for scholarship that will lead in new and fruitful directions. In particular, the interdisciplinary nature of the study of visual theory allows students of landscape to pose questions based, not on direct observation alone, but instead on apparatus that engenders more profound analysis.¹⁸

In mapping and representing the earth, geographers and historians have asked: Where do we situate ourselves in the perception and conceptualization of place and space? In defining a center and its margins (or infinity), what values are expressed, implicitly or explicitly? What are the political ramifications of such relationships? How are human perception or perceptual modes reflected in the built environment?¹⁹ The fields of semiotics and psychoanalysis take a different approach, examining the positions of subject and object in the visual field and the way that each is constituted: How then does identity—in the elemental senses of self-consciousness and autonomy—emerge from the act of seeing?

Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau have taught us to give great weight to the institutions that govern our modes of seeing and produce subjectivity.²⁰ How, they have asked, is the power entailed in vision institutionally regulated? How have individuals, political forces, and social groups controlled or attempted to shape the visual field? Can we identify moments of disruption or subversion in which power relations are altered by manipulating the positions of viewer and viewed within the visual field?²¹ On one hand, these institutions are seen to be inscribed spatially in specific places, so that we can interrogate the relationship between vision and location. On the other hand, they are effective because of a *dislocation* that allows them to operate not as places but as spaces that are neither here nor there but everywhere.²² Vision, too, is both precisely located and broadly spatial. It is in the eye but encompasses specific objects in the foreground and swathes of background too extensive to be captured by a single glance. More importantly, because vision engages knowledge and memory, it shifts rapidly, even imperceptibly, between specific moments and places, present and past experiences; the way one sees a landscape now is deeply af-

fectured by the memory of seeing it in the past or by prior knowledge brought by the viewer even before the first encounter with that landscape.

The question of nature, illusion, and “the real” should be at the center of landscape inquiry.²³ However, “the real” is particularly problematic. It entails far more than questioning the notion of objective reality as distinct from the viewer’s own subjectivity. According to that understanding, “the real” is not visible in a pure sense because it is filtered through perception, comprehension, interpretation, and the viewer’s own identity and desire. The world is knowable but only in terms negotiated by the subject.²⁴ However, visual theorists influenced by semiotics regard “the real” as beyond reach, not because of the vagaries of personal perspective but because the subject has no direct access to reality, only to the signs that represent it (themselves formed not as absolutes with resident meaning but rather as plays of difference and social coding). For theorists following the psychoanalytic work of Jacques Lacan, “the real” is utterly unknowable and inextricably tied to the question of subjectivity. Lacanians argue that the subject, ever separated from the world, only realizes the existence of that objective world, that thing which is not him/herself, through the act of vision. Vision does not unite subject with object so much as it discloses the eternal chasm between them. According to John Tagg:

In relation to Lacan’s discussion of vision . . . it is clear that the Real is what cannot be encountered. It is what the eye must shield itself against and, indeed, it is in the recoil from this unwelcome, scorching encounter that the split occurs from which the subject emerges, separated from the world as object, but hanging on its loss, for which the elusive object of the look’s desire will henceforth stand. It is not, therefore, a matter of a filter through which the Real is subjectively known. The Real is radically unknowable and the product of this loss is the subject for whom the Real will only be traced in its interruptions, paraproxes and other returns of the repressed.²⁵

The frame becomes an important element in this respect. It *appears* to make a distinction between “the real” (nature) and the representational (art), and thus appears to determine positions within the spatial field and to establish the very categories of “real” and representation. But what is the spatial location of the frame? Does the

frame belong to the represented object (the view), or to its exterior (the outside that defines an inside), or to the viewer (shaping our ability to see)?²⁶ Derrida wrote that the frame, or “parergon,” separates the object from the non-object (or in our case, between landscape and everything that is not the landscape). Yet inasmuch as it produces an object *qua* object (or work of art *qua* art), it also belongs properly to the object. The object could not exist without its frame.²⁷ How does the apparent naturalism of the frame, both defining the view and emerging from it, lend authority to these spatial relations?

Like the frame, authorship is often regarded as natural and as external to the work. Consideration of author and audience can be useful in investigations that examine the role of the designer and patron in shaping a landscape.²⁸ Does either the architect or patron produce the built landscape that then generates a receiving audience? Or, does the very category, “built landscape,” generate the categories of both architect and audience so that the work itself precedes its supposed author? To what extent does the audience contribute to or control the construction of meaning? Is meaning already in place before the artist/author expresses him or herself? Barthes famously argued that writing is the absent author’s trace and, once released in the form of written (alienated) marks, becomes an artifact external to the author’s person. He argued that with the liberation of the text, authorial intention is lost so that the text depends entirely upon context and the reader for comprehension. However, the context and the reader are similarly dependent, unstable, and infinite.²⁹ According to Foucault, the text is not simply detached from author, but, rather, discourse constitutes text, author, and reader (for which we may substitute landscape, architect, and viewer).

Dell Upton has asserted that whatever meaning is ascribed to landscape is to be treated with caution: “Seeing is not always believing. . . . [B]ecause the meaning and experience of landscape are fragmented and debated, the political and economic processes that shape landscape are not the final word on its meaning.”³⁰ Visual theory combined with deep archival and interdisciplinary historical research brings the seen and the unseen together to uncover a range of experiences that delve beyond the “landscape’s pretenses” and aesthetic veil.³¹ Much as with the question of nature and “the real,” there is in the question of meaning an insistent tension between an empirical model of cause and effect on one hand, and on the other, the discursive model

that posits a field in which each position is contingent, an effect of the internal and external rules of the discourse itself. Landscape may have an enduring physical presence independent of culture, but it is unlikely that human beings have access to it except through the mediation of signs. In other words, there is a philosophical quandary: Lacanian theory insists that the viewing subject is constituted by a discursive field in which neither the subject nor the object (world) precedes one another, yet like no other object, landscape seems always to already exist.

Most contemporary architectural theorists seem unaware that vision functions so as to establish the subject's position in a field of relations.³² Perhaps the aggressive "thing-ness" of a building has distracted them from the debate that has raged among scholars of painting, prints, and film. Be that as it may, at various places and times, designers, patrons, and others have sought to direct the gaze and the visual experiences of known and imagined viewers in landscapes. In all such instances, vision is neither simply a phenomenon of the eye and the mind, nor is it a pictorial representation created to mimic or analyze visual experience. Vision is instead a three-part entity in which viewer, viewed, and space together constitute the visual field existing always in a state of tension. The principal tools for analyzing and interpreting the relationships among viewer, viewed, and space include examination of the science of optics, culturally produced habits of perception, scopic regimes, psychoanalysis, and iconographies.³³

Although finding evidence of an audience's reception of the visual world is difficult, some aspects of intention and perception are clear.³⁴ Fundamentally, landscapes, like paintings, are subject to the discriminating eye of the beholder, which is to say, we see in them not only what we want to see, but also what we are trained and directed to see. The art historian Michael Baxandall addressed the latter with his concept of the "period eye," meaning that in particular historical moments and locales, the viewer's response to art reveals the "culturally relative pressures of perception" from which specific "cognitive styles" develop.³⁵ Conceived for Baxandall's study of *quattrocento* Florentine painting, the notion was adapted and applied again recently in Marvin Trachtenberg's study of medieval urban open space on the Italian peninsula.³⁶ Our own application of those concepts to landscape history therefore has an important precedent in architectural history. What is more, Denis Cosgrove

asserted nearly twenty years ago that landscape is a learned way of seeing that is “visual ideology made hegemonic.”³⁷ But it is not monolithically construed, and an important contribution of this volume is the exploration of variable modes of landscape seeing that have been learned or taught in specific cultural and physical contexts.

We may not be certain about the ways specific individuals or groups actually saw the landscape at a given moment in history, but examining various types of evidence and embracing a range of approaches allows us to reconstruct and imagine the practices for viewing implicit in both sites and artifacts. Although some aspects of the subject’s experience as s/he looked through the frame, the screen, within the boundary, beyond the wall, or in the drawing must remain unknown, we can nonetheless make informed scholarly assertions about the intended subject and underlying rationales. Baxandall’s models provided a means for drawing the particular toward an understanding of something more general—of linking the case study to a broader understanding of cultural history in particular places and times.

Pliny the Elder wrote that having rosemary in a garden “sharpens the eyesight.” According to Indra Kagis McEwen, “sharp” eyesight in this case referred to the accuracy of remembered images.³⁸ Good memory conferred status and cultural authority to those who possessed it. Much like the members of the Lincean Academy of the seventeenth century (who called themselves “the sharp-sighted ones”), Pliny valued visual precision and equated scopic virtuosity—for example, the ability to see across long distances or microscopically—with intellectual authority.³⁹

Contemporary environmental artists, such as Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt, Robert Irwin, and James Turrell, have approached landscape as a medium for experiments in modulating vision, by making some feature of landscape and/or its natural processes more visible.⁴⁰ Many landscape architects understand their task in parallel fashion. They manipulate landscape forms to induce ordered spatial and visual experiences of significance. For them, this process is an assumed aspect of their profession, and manipulation of the eye is taken for granted. Yet landscapes are often regarded by both scholars and the general public as transparent or even “invisible.” The designed landscape seems common enough to go virtually unnoticed in everyday life. For example, on a typical architect’s plan drawing, the buildings are figural while the landscape is “ground”; the architecture emerges as solid, material, and sub-

stantive, while landscape, if it appears as anything other than a white void, seems soft, formless.

Our tendency to regard landscape as neutral ground may be enhanced through architectural means to make the viewer adopt a preferred view. The result is what might be called “spaces of constructed visibility,” in which forms are masked or revealed so as to render “things seeable in a specific way.”⁴¹ If design can enhance vision, it can also hinder it, making spaces of constructed invisibility. In the Islamic world, such invisibility historically maintained the divide between the sexes and between public and private space. In antebellum America, rows of trees separated the plantation manor from the slave quarters, hiding from view slaves whose sweat and toil produced the wealth that supported the owners.⁴²

If landscape is less frequently noticed and harder to discern than architecture, it is by that very fact more persuasive. Landscape is “always already there” and thus seems not to have been created but simply to *be*, not a constructed form but rather a preexisting or even primordial one. It appears above all “natural” because it is composed of plants, soil, geological formations, sunlight, and water and because it seems to exist in the absence of human management or design. Even human interventions such as topographical leveling, deforestation, and drainage appear natural when landscape and nature are thus conflated. From an analytical perspective, this association is deeply problematic. Hiding human agency naturalizes cultural processes that are by no means spontaneous or innate. Even more importantly, ideologies and social constructs are rendered invisible, or at the very least, made to appear equally inherent. Scholars of the English landscape and its textual and visual representations have demonstrated that the rural and garden scenery of the eighteenth century masked the political, economic, and social hegemony of an elite landed class.⁴³ With verdant rolling hills, shade trees, serpentine waterways, and distant vistas, the so-called picturesque landscape gave the appearance *par excellence* of a benign Arcadia, justly given in disproportionate amounts to a powerful landed minority. The distribution thus seemed morally right, an inherent characteristic of the land itself, ordained by heavenly powers. The frequent presumption that landscapes are God-given and natural has led with equal frequency to the notion that what we believe we see in the landscape must be so. When one combines this premise with scientific assumptions

about the physiology of vision (“seeing is believing”), it becomes easy to imagine nature, landscape, and vision as a powerful trio for conveying ideology.

Herein lies one of the perplexing ironies of landscape: it is regarded as natural and eternally present, and yet it is also ignored as if it did not matter. How then can the study of landscape and vision illuminate cultural discourses that are essentially spatial, yet normalized to the point of invisibility? How does one study such an elusive, unstable object? One strategy entails focusing on mechanisms that are not easily seen, such as the frame, the controlling perspective, illusionism, the lens or screen through which we are induced to look, and the wall or landform that intentionally conceals. Spatially determined, vision can support the construction of “difference” through what is revealed and what remains concealed—marking class, race, and gender. What we see, and the manner in which the built world directs our gaze, contributes to our daily instruction about insiders and outsiders, privilege and denial, domination, submission, and, in some cases, resistance.

In their studies of race, Owen Dwyer and John Paul Jones have pointed out that sociospatial epistemologies are largely visually determined.⁴⁴ Single-point perspective and its close corollary, the Cartesian mode of viewing, which is predicated on space that is at once infinite and centered,⁴⁵ assigns subjects to a specific social space. Moreover, the privileged vantage point assumed in surveillance typically belongs to a white male “secure in his position as a surveyor of the social terrain.” Sociospatial boundaries of race, Dwyer and Jones contend, derive in part from the mode of vision now widely known as “the Western gaze.”⁴⁶ In the United States, subjects are literally mapped into zones that imply hierarchies often related to racial privilege and exclusion. Belonging is understood through cues designed into and reinforced by the built world. The ghetto, the barrio, the reservation, and the suburb are defined by clear boundaries in which individuals are firmly placed through categories of difference. Although these can be breached, social identities too often depend on the observance of these boundaries.

The ability to “see race” and, vice versa, the inability to see individuals in another race, can demonstrate the way vision, as a cultural construction, becomes spatially embodied. In the antebellum South, for instance, fugitive slaves sometimes traveled between plantations at night without being discovered because plantation

overseers could not distinguish one slave from another and believed that blacks actually bore few traits of individual distinction. Ironically, the fact that overseers literally could not see the differences among slaves provided an opportunity for resistance as slaves took advantage of white myopia in making their way toward freedom.⁴⁷

The built environment is where we encounter the ironic simultaneity of both the visibility and invisibility of whiteness in the United States, where whites are everywhere presumed to be the dominant and majority culture. Whites are always portrayed as typical Americans, even as the authentic Americans. Similarly, persons are presumed male unless specifically marked as female, so that male forms neutral ground against which the female can be perceived only as different and other-than-male. Gender and race have many parallels. Just as blackness appears as a measure of racial difference from the perceived neutral ground of whiteness, when “woman” is produced as a generic category that supplements “man,” her marginality is ensured. This strategy of addition leaves the initial structure (of patriarchy, of history, of architecture as a field) intact, homogenous, and replete with authority. Until the 1980s, for example, women were excluded from the canons affirmed in art history survey books, which then provided proof that they did not create art. If acknowledged as producers of art and architecture, women were treated as a monolithic category that existed only by virtue of a binary relationship to the dominant category “man.” Even today in texts meant to be inclusive, the term “women” appears in the index, which has, of course, no listing for “men.” The very selection of them as an object of study produces the effect of marginalization.⁴⁸ Continually reinforced by the sociopolitical and economic constructs of American life, white and male privilege and their correlated notions of race, gender, and minority status have become, like the landscape in which they appear, naturalized and impossible to see until they are revealed through social activism.⁴⁹ Race, gender, and vision are all social and cultural constructs. The special power of vision lies in its inherent ability to persuade (seeing is believing) and in its ongoing collusion with systems and practices of authority.

The apparent naturalness of vision makes it seem to occur without agency. Whether or not we want to see a landscape as created through human endeavor, or simply arising from climate, geography, and ecology, most humans retain an image of an Edenic world, “pure” and “natural.” An ideal of a primordial world anchors the

three major Western religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In all three, the earth, oceans, plants, and animals are created prior to the appearance of humankind, but the appearance of Adam and Eve initiates a declensionist narrative. Placed in a garden they are enjoined to use creation, to subdue nature.⁵⁰ The Bible gives humankind “dominion” over the fish, birds, and animals of the earth, as well as the plants and trees, with the directive to “be fruitful and multiply.” The Islamic narrative is strikingly similar to that of the Old Testament. After creating nature, God appoints the human being as the trustee who controls it: and thus a Qur’anic verse (2:29) enjoins: “He made for you all that lies within the earth.” The idea of the world as a manifestation of God is extended in the Qur’an so that natural phenomena such as lightning, rain, and the change from day to night are identified as “signs for those who believe” (30: 20–25).

In granting humankind the responsibility and power of possession, God gives the right—even the mandate—of domination, a dominance that always threatens danger because of the ease with which it accommodates violence. The violence may be explicit, as in the battles waged between communities over territory and resources. Alternatively it may occur through the subjugation of the laboring class (or sex), as in slavery and medieval serfdom. It may also take the less noticeable forms of a “tyranny of vision” and of a “violence to the land for aesthetic effect,” as when pleasing vistas are produced through the violence of hard physical labor (as Martin Jay’s essay in this volume proposes). In all these cases, power and authority operate not by persuasion, but by coercion. The troubling connection between aesthetic delight in landscape and the toil of producing that landscape has passed virtually without comment in the scholarly literature, perhaps because its mechanisms—like those of the landscape itself—have been hidden from view so as not to interrupt the experience of pleasure with harsh realities. The suppression of references to labor and production is not only a historical phenomenon: in gardens visited by tourists today, such as the missions of California and Mexico, the history of toil and oppression has been denied for the sake of modern delight in gardens bursting with colorful bloom.

Pleasure is as important as the issues of control, authority, and motivation in assessing the powers of vision. To look at a landscape, whether it is a garden, park, wilderness, or even an urban panorama, is to activate the visual senses. Color, motion,

form, and light combine to create scenes that can be deeply moving in their aesthetic content and that provoke judgments of preference. Most obviously, preference can be a tool humans use to assess and “read” the landscape in order to survive. Recent work in the field of landscape perception explores human visual preferences and the sense of well-being that certain kinds of landscape can provide.⁵¹ Vision and its pleasures then, present both cultural and environmental strategies for critically assessing the benefits provided by landscape.

Visual pleasure is deeply political. The feminist geographer Gillian Rose links the “pleasure of looking” with the gender politics of the development of the field of human geography. The geographer’s gaze, she contends, is male; he sees the landscape as female, and therefore mysterious and elusive. Repressing the aesthetic pleasure of viewing landscape was central to the male geographer’s mission since the emotive pleasure of that which was seen was not considered scientific. What Rose calls the “analytic look” has been essential for the discipline of landscape history, yet she claims it has become an ambivalent pleasure for those scholars in a range of disciplines devoted to understanding landscape beyond its aesthetic dimensions.⁵² This insistence upon a quasi-scientific rigor received considerable reinforcement from the field’s art historical heritage. The field, having grown largely from art history, has long employed its analyses of form, typology, iconography, and style.⁵³ Even today, as landscape historians adopt more interdisciplinary methodologies, they remain reluctant to engage visual desire and its attendant psychoanalytic questions.

The pleasurable aspects of looking at the landscape deserve greater attention. Landscapes are visually and intellectually compelling not just because they are complex and replete with visual subtleties, but also because they are in many cases quite beautiful. When not conventionally so, they are at least aesthetically intriguing, and there is pleasure to be gleaned in the visual examination of a complex setting or its representations. Historians are often drawn to the visual by the beauty of the subjects, whether drawings, paintings, maps, photographs, buildings, gardens, or landscapes. Arguably, without the pleasure of viewing, we might never have given our subjects a second look, let alone the prolonged scrutiny required by scholarly analysis. Yet, the very power of vision to provide pleasure is another dimension of its strength as a tool for enforcing dominant cultural constructs. Aesthetic beauty can seduce powerfully

as it acts as a veil that masks other possible readings⁵⁴ and sometimes it is necessary to disregard questions of beauty to see how else a landscape matters. The pleasure of viewing can be acknowledged without allowing it to limit the analytical format and prevent alternative landscape narratives from emerging.

Scholars have seldom addressed the range of devices used to control or manipulate vision in space. These include perspectival manipulation, optical illusion, panopticism, screening, selective presentation, framing, masking, re-presentation, and positioning the viewer. In the case of the stupas of Buddhist religious precincts, the control is overt. The faithful follow a sacred path (*pradakshina patha*) where enclosing walls restrict vision in order to enhance prayer and inward spiritual experience. Similarly, the medieval labyrinth offered the pilgrim both a real and a symbolic path, leading forward and backward until reaching the goal. Many picturesque or irregular gardens of the eighteenth century, such as Stourhead (fig. 1.1), were carefully designed to provide a sequence of movement and vision, controlled through screens of plants and topographic variation, according to intricate iconographic programs. These are explicit examples of intentionality. By contrast, other landscapes, such as the quadrangle of a college campus with its paths that can be used or bypassed, guide the viewer through a sequence that shapes experience, yet may also be ignored or overlooked. The built environment is not rigidly deterministic: it usually suggests rather than controls, and patterns of use frequently depend on a range of unpredictable variables, including human volition.⁵⁵

The most famed of such site engineering is found in the seventeenth-century gardens at Vaux-le-Vicomte and Versailles. F. Hamilton Hazelhurst's precise analysis of both sites reveals the existence of a series of optical illusions (fig. 1.2).⁵⁶ Garden axes might appear either foreshortened or longer than they actually are, and changes in grade are masked from specific viewpoints to first hide and then reveal the spectacular waterworks, terraces, and other landscape elements. The control of vision and perception through the manipulation of landforms allows revelation of the garden's features to occur in a specific sequence and enhances its drama and iconographic program. Similar techniques are evident in courtly, noble, and aristocratic gardens throughout Europe. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a veritable explosion of such formal gardens at the country seats of European aristocracy from



Figure 1.1. Henry Hoare, Stourhead, c. 1741–1765. Photo: D. Harris.

Great Britain to Russia. Directing the gaze became a form of staging; looking and performance were choreographed simultaneously. Estate boundaries are screened through tree plantations or the ha-ha fence (a wall sunken from view that kept grazing animals from entering the manicured grounds), which makes the grounds of the estate seem more extensive than they actually are. Manipulations of ground plane, terrace walls, and planting allows directed “views” of overt theatricality.⁵⁷ This garden culture is by no means an exclusively Western phenomenon of any specific age. Illusions of expansiveness also became a part of Japanese garden design. By masking middle-ground features with hedges and walls, a distant view, known as borrowed scenery, could be incorporated into the garden.

The all-seeing eye facilitated by the bird’s-eye view, the elevated perspective or panorama, the map, or the axonometric drawing all overlook spatial boundaries. Studies of aerial views, such as those of airplane pilots, and axonometric drawings of

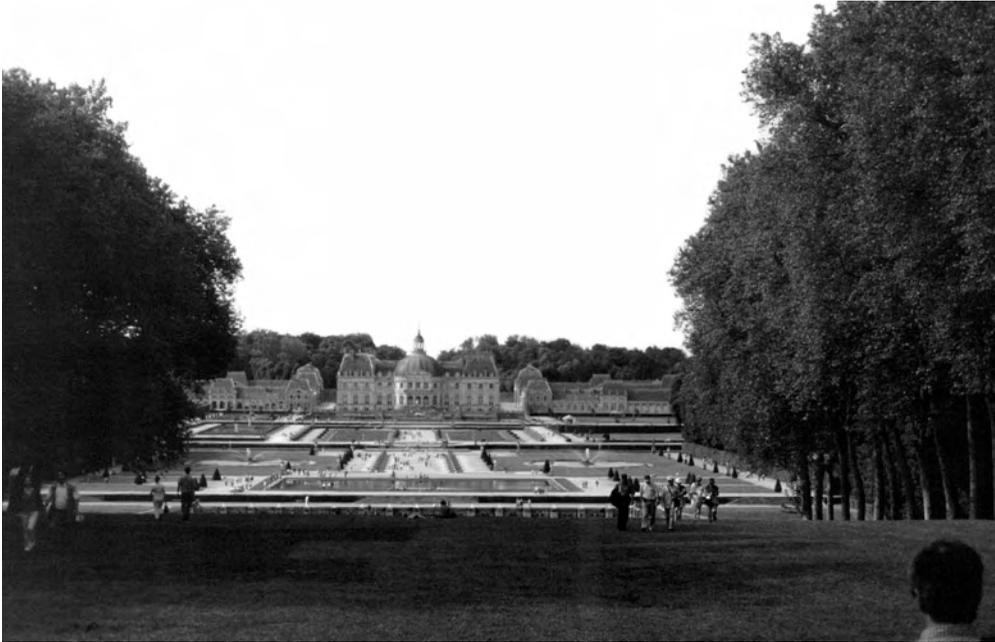


Figure 1.2. André Le Nôtre, garden, Vaux-le-Vicomte, c. 1658–1661. Photo: D. F. Ruggles.

garden views demonstrate the ideological power inherent in representational forms that allow the perception of visual control from above.⁵⁸ In panoptic vistas, the viewer brings a landscape into being but remains unseen, and therefore is imbued with a globalizing sense of totality and with an imperial and even divine power. Such techniques give the spectator the guise of neutrality, but, in fact, they serve as powerful tools for the conveyance of specific points of view and specific hierarchies of information. Consider the selective nature of maps, aerial views, and perspective drawings: certain features can be eliminated or downplayed, while others are highlighted or even exaggerated, a technique Raymond Williams referred to as “selective erasure.”⁵⁹

The link between vision and dominance is important. The role of power relations in space, representation, and performativity has been examined with keen interest not only by scholars but also artists and the public. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault proposed panopticism as a system of coercion that is simultaneously

particular and immense, and that serves as an instrument for a power structure that appears “natural” and therefore unassailable.⁶⁰ Foucault used the term “natural” not in the sense of an ideology, but in the sense of a set of internalized relations accepted by self-regulating subjects who do not fully perceive the system to which they submit. The force necessary to maintain the system is not exerted from outside through overt violence but emerges from within as a persuasive and pervasive system of coercion that is not seen because the system of power is indistinguishable from the objects that are regulated and subdued by it. Thus, it appears to be natural.⁶¹ As John Tagg has shown, this regime of truth gains exceptional power in photographs used as evidence in courts of law.⁶²

The concepts of “the real,” “truth,” and “the natural” are of crucial importance for landscape studies. The landscape is often perceived and represented as a natural and therefore unconstructed entity that is uninflected by relations of power. Contemporary artists such as Bill Brown, Denis Beaubois, and the Surveillance Camera Players reveal the links between vision and power in acts of seemingly innocent watching (fig. 1.3). The Surveillance Camera Players have staged performances in the public streets of New York, Sydney, and other cities in which they face one of the ubiquitous surveillance cameras on a street corner or shopping district, addressing it with placards that state “You are watching me” and “Who am I? What’s my name?”⁶³ Instead of being everywhere and nowhere, the camera is suddenly engaged as a specifically located instrument whose purpose is to document and control human presence. In the garden, despite its claim to innocence, surveillance is no less present. As Martin Jay points out in this volume, supervision and surveillance are common activities for gardeners who maintain a vigilant eye for weeds, mildew, and pest invasions.

Screening and framing create powerful devices for the selective presentation of landscape elements. In the palaces of Islamic Spain, for example, *miradors* (literally viewing places) not only formalized the vista and drew attention to its pleasures, they also enhanced sovereign authority over the land.⁶⁴ Similarly, in Mughal palaces of South Asia, window frames called *jharokas* played an important role in producing the public image of the emperor, framing his figure as he appeared for view and providing a ceremonial locus similar to that of a throne or hall of audience (fig. 1.4). In the landscape itself, carefully placed vegetation affects the visual experience. Leaves and

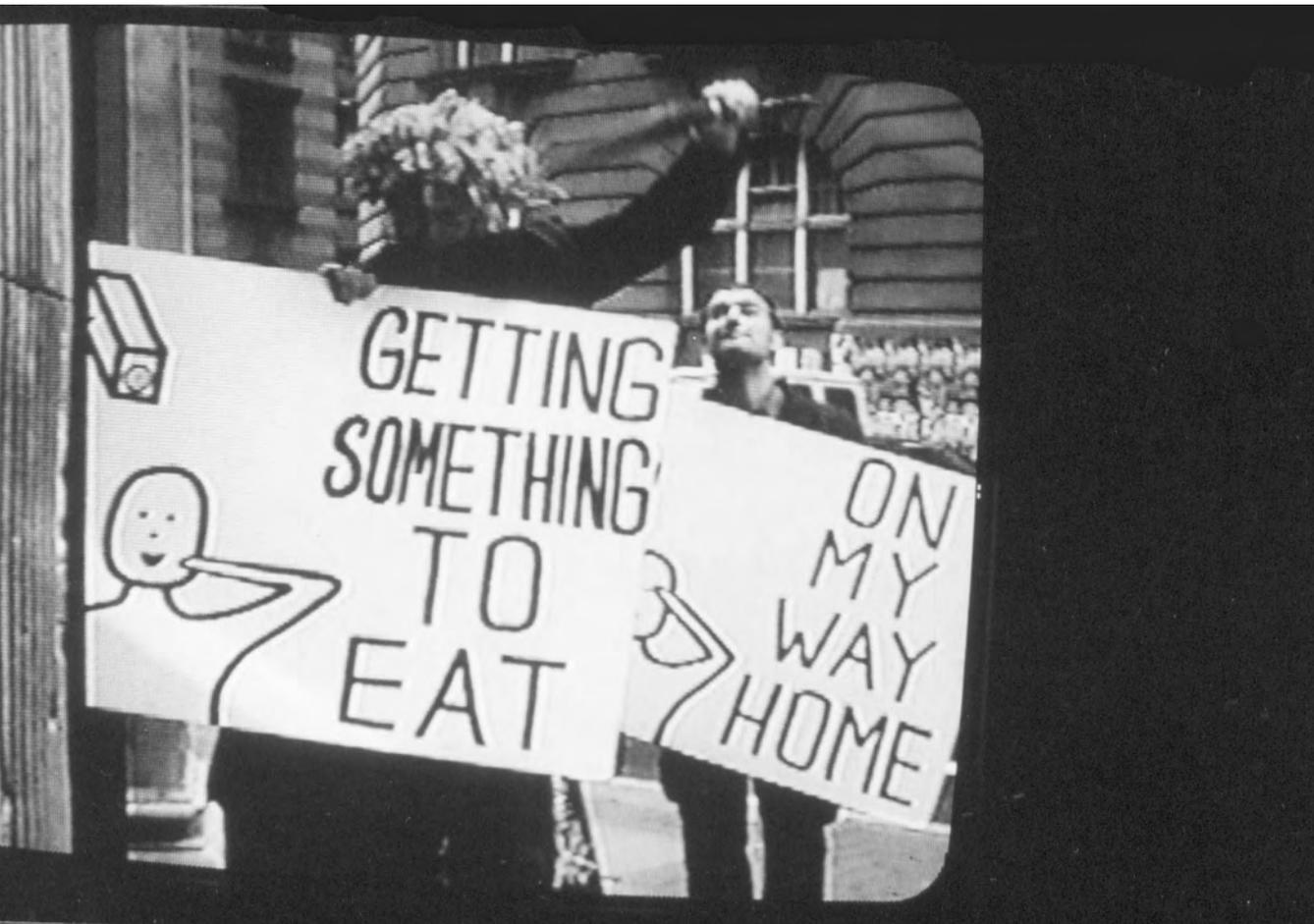


Figure 1.3. Surveillance Camera Players and Denis Beaubois, *Amnesia*, c. 2002. Photo: Surveillance Camera Players.

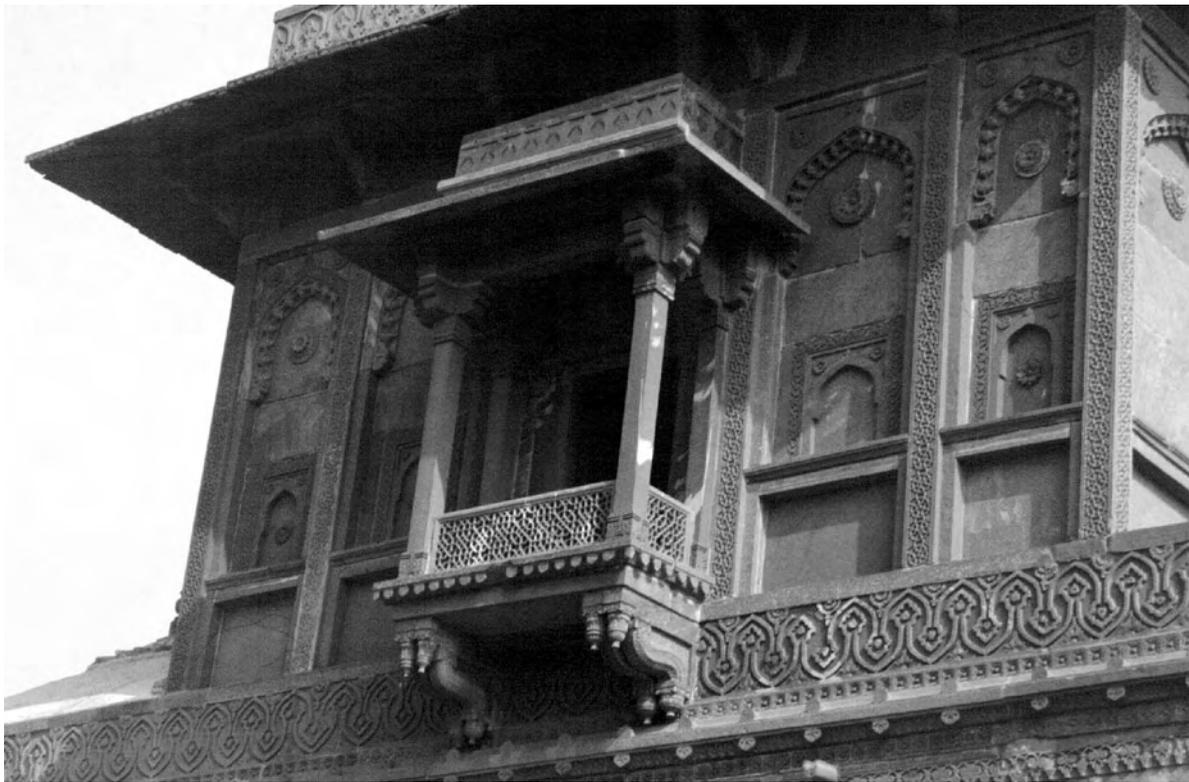


Figure 1.4. *Jharoka* window, Fatehpur-Sikri, India, c. 1570s. Photo: D. F. Ruggles.

branches may partially occlude sight, and water can duplicate a view through reflection or serve as a device for veiling. The Taj Mahal famously has a setting in which the white marble memorial shimmers in bright sunlight or looms through a veil of “bright water,” to borrow James Wescoat’s apt phrase.⁶⁵

As windows between architecture and the landscape, frames frequently serve the pragmatics of lighting and thermal modification. But they also “capture” a piece of space, ordering the gaze with a degree of precision rarely found with other viewing devices. The frame conjures a positioned observer who complies within specific constraints (looking up, down, left, and right) with its imperatives. From royal thrones

that allowed a specific, authoritative view over the court and its territories, to baroque churches with their perspectival ceiling frescos intended to be viewed from a specific location demarcated on the floor below, controlled vision depends on the location of the eye. In the expanded scale of landscape where the viewer is usually mobile, control of vision is always difficult, and the frame plays a crucial role in helping the viewer to read and interpret what s/he sees.

If some walls reveal landscape elements, others can hide them. At Monticello the framing is so selective, it might be better termed a masking. A colonial technique, masking can be seen as another form of the selective erasure mentioned above. Thomas Jefferson located the service wings of his compound at Monticello below grade so that they would be hidden from the primary facades and gardens of the house. Moreover, the hilltop location of the house provided Jefferson with a commanding, nearly panoptic view over the surrounding countryside, while the rural and elevated location simultaneously allowed him a refuge from the prying eyes of outsiders. Monticello was an ideal setting for both prospect and refuge: the president could see without being seen, the apparent master of all he surveyed.⁶⁶ Similarly, the enclosing walls of nineteenth-century California mission complexes served to control the vision of Native Americans, directing their gazes inward toward a landscape designed to inculcate them with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Isolated from the California landscape they knew and had inhabited, they were coerced day by day to find refuge in the mission landscape that taught European notions of piety and citizenship.

Vision is a prism for understanding (and misunderstanding) space. Study of the ways people see is as important as studying the objects of the view. Historians have long approached architecture and landscape as entities apprehended with eyes endowed with perfect clarity, objectivity, and control. But sight is not autonomous; nor is it universal. Like the built environment that is viewed, vision is itself a construction. Thus it can be analyzed as having its own mode, style, or habit in which framing, occlusion, illusion, and the place of the viewer play as important a role in perception as the object itself. The intense interest in visual theory among art historians and scholars of “visual culture” in recent decades may inspire historians of architecture

and landscape to make similar theoretical inquiries, although the scale and dimensionality of such spatial studies will surely lead to different conclusions. If landscape studies are to move forward, scholars must begin to explore the variously mediated modes of embodied experience that continuously shape and reshape our understanding of the spaces we inhabit. Such investigations can be politically provocative, disturbing, and even angering, but they ultimately lead us outside the confines of a field long constrained by connoisseurship and devotion to “the beautiful.”