LANDSCAPE AESTHETICS – THE POLITICS (CONTINUED)



A conversation in the Dun Cow, Durham.

To continue with the concern that I shared yesterday – the ideology of land, property and labor transformed into aesthetic form – landscape.

Images that disguise history?

(guilty pleasures of the sublime picturesque) [Link]

It is not difficult to identify various components of this aesthetic. (I recall dealing with a lot of this in a couple of classes I ran on landscape [Link])

Consider Turner's Norham (1798) – [Link]



Key concepts

pastoral | bucolic | the idyll | picturesque | sublime | beauty

Psychology

Ask – What are the pleasures/gratifications of these landscapes?

Ask – How are they connected to people’s sense of identity? National, personal, ethnic?

Emplotment

Some narratives/scenarios embedded in landscape – return and retreat into repose (nostos) | adventure | the frisson of risk, looking over the precipice | escape into melancholy | the walk to eden | sporting pleasures | agricultural labor

Components of a landscape aesthetic

Techniques for mobilizing this ideological field:

- The figure in a setting – person | monument | ruin | artifact

(see my blog category – figure in a landscape [Link])

- Contrast/tension/justaposition/transition – in tone or tonal range (eg shadow and highlight) | in scale | in form (horizontal/vertical, textures/smooth, natural/cultural eg ruin, town, bridge)
- Formalization – making aesthetic through: framing (the proscenium arch) | abstraction | mannerism (especially over-stylization and in the use of color)
- Composition – framing | perspective (linear and atmospheric) | layered planes, stratigraphy, viewpoint (the viewer set back and up from the composition, as audience, never fully involved)

So Turner's compositions are framed windows or proscenium arches with staged dramaturgies – backdrop, three side flats (two on the right), stage forming the river winding into the distance.

The tensions and contradictions

Past and present | city and country | real and ideal | celebration and regret | melancholy and comedy (the bucolic) | distance and intimacy | alienation and redemption | the everyday and the allegorical

Ask – How is the artist working with and against a set of media conventions and constraints?

Temporality

References to an indeterminate historical time | to a lost golden age | nostalgia | a celebration of the saturated present moment (the sublime moment of controlled shock, and/or of calm repose)| memory as actuality – the juxtaposition of different times in the now

The politics

An absence of any working community in landscape | the status of the observer (usually abstracted from what is being represented) | an escapism (from social reality) | a contrast between the viewer and the anonymous (sublime) popular

masses — vernacular human detail.



Watercolor from 1823 (Scotland is on the left bank)



Norham sunrise – oil 1845 (an exercise in form)

The cultural politics of this aesthetic have long fascinated me. This is not just a new elite aesthetic. Turner was very aware of the politics, manipulating the well-established theatrical scenography to organize his landscapes, staging vernacular dramaturgies of rural life and sporting pursuits, combining both with an experimental and rationalist realism. Like many in Romanticism, he was working with new conceptions of place, time, and relationships between the viewing visitor and the land and its objects, manifested in how travel is organized, where one stops to look at a view, how one looks at the land, what is brought to bear on this apprehension, how one builds landscapes.

The allure, the ideology, the challenge to avoid cliché.

How do we deal with archaeological landscapes today?

I will take up this question in another post [Link]



One of the images that is concerning me – a landscape in the central section of Hadrian’s Wall – largely the work of John Clayton’s conservation efforts in the mid nineteenth century, continued currently by the National Trust