

Zeitschrift: Pamphlet
Herausgeber: Professur für Landschaftsarchitektur, Christophe Girot, ETH Zürich
Band: - (2005)
Heft: 4: Landschaft und Szenografie = Paysage et scénographie =
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Vorwort: Preface
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Landscape and Scenography

PREFACE

by Ákos Moravánszky

The proverb “to be able to discern the forest from the trees”, eloquently illustrates the difficulty of a landscape to contemplate itself. We can describe a landscape’s individual elements, but when we attempt to pass from these rather easily ascertained information to a more global image, we have to either ignore these informations or accept that we will come to contradiction with them. Instead of contenting ourselves with our first impressions, we prefer to adopt established forms of narration, thereby exchanging the ‘real’ landscape that we contemplate for a portrait of the landscape that is already present in our understanding.

In rhetoric and literature, this exchange is known since Antiquity, as tropus and should not in any way be understood as simply an unreliable deviation from the truth. They are in fact indispensable means, which permit one to shift away from a preconceived understanding towards various possible interpretations. It is the creative possibilities provided by this distancing, that Christophe Girot demonstrates in this book, a result of a lecture he gave in conjunction to my seminar in architectural theory at the ETH Zurich.

In order to interpret the landscape as a ‘pure product of art’, the author proposes to base our interpretation on three modes of reading that “allow us to grasp the wealth and complexity of the relation between a landscape and its scenographic mode”. Behind the ‘scenographic modes’ one can easily recognize the tropus described above in the theory of rhetoric. These ‘scenographic modes’ are not merely modes of reading. Rather they contain much more implicit properties, that already in the planning and conceptual stage of a given land-

scape project exert a significant influence.

“We are far from a garden art in which the mastered expression of our plant world presents a unique and exclusive viewpoint. What these three distinct scenographic genres reveal is a significant lessening of the act of landscaping upon nature...” writes the author in the conclusion. The psychologist Jean Piaget proposed an ontogenetic explanation of this process of accruing distance. In his analysis of a child’s cognitive development, the first natural and metaphorical phase of his relationship to the world, develops towards an ‘ironic’ manipulation of these phenomena. This evolution signifies an increased ‘coordination’ of the child’s surrounding objects and events, which in the first developmental phase remain unorganized. For Piaget, the most developed phase would comprise of a space hierarchically organized for all these objects in which the body of the child would hold a dominant position.

Upon reading this text, it can be deduced that this copernician overturn has taken place as well in the theory of landscape: the landscape as object of a scenographic contemplation and analysis becomes unavoidably the object of a scenographic approach.

Irony is the mode of enlightened reason, which in regard to the ‘natural’ relationship to the exterior world holds no more illusions. The consequences of this overturn become here evident: the ‘scenographic modes’ the possibility, one may even say the necessity, of a ‘mise-en-scène’ imposes the designer to take important conscious decisions, all the while not liberating him from the references of an objective ‘nature’.

“To imagine the obvious, the diversion of meaning, the honest dissimulation: these terms have served to describe a few central themes, orientations in contemporary research based on another rhetoric nourished of abstraction and essentials. A rhetoric which refuses all aesthetic emphasis and which plays on paradox, seeking to appear at once singular and ordinary...”

Bruno Marchand¹