Political Landscape

The Art History of Nature

Martin Warnke

ESSAYS IN ART AND CULTURE

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Contents

Preface 7

1 The Occupation of the Plain 9

2 Hills and Castles 39

3 From Battlefield to War Landscape 53

4 Nature's Freedom as Political Freedom 75

5 Natural Forces and Natural Forms 89

6 Political Nature Imagery 115

Conclusion 145

References 147

List of Illustrations 159

Preface

The title of this essay seemed unproblematic until the question of the *origin* of the phrase 'political landscape' arose. In response to my enquiry, the editors of the Duden Dictionary in Mannheim stated that it appeared to have been coined by Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Propaganda, who remarked that Veidt Harlan's film *Kolberg* 'did not fit into the political landscape'. It then seemed that the title would have to be abandoned. The archive of the *Wörterbuch der Gegenwartssprache* (Dictionary of present-day German), published by the Academy of Science in the former German Democratic Republic, could provide no comfort, but only the additional information that 'political landscape' was 'an expression favoured by Willy Brandt and not attested in GDR journalism until 1972', before which time it had been customary to speak of the 'political climate'.

Fortunately a solitary justification for the title turned up in a context relating purely to art. In the *Kunstblatt* for 26 March 1849 Ernst Förster wrote:

> One of the most interesting pictures we have recently seen at the *Kunstverein* is a political landscape by Bernhard Stange. A political landscape! Yes, so far has the spirit of the age advanced! We are at the summit of a high mountain. Mountain tops all around. The tallest is bathed in the afterglow of the sunset; on all the others are flames of fire, which on the more distant peaks look like twinkling stars; in the foreground a German tricolor, planted by mountain-dwellers, blown by the wind and fluttering high in the air. It is a celebration of German unity, anticipated by art and soon, let us hope, to be matched by reality. A beautiful picture, executed with a fine sense of form and colour, in which not one jot of artistic interest is sacrificed to the political. – Yet another political landscape! No, a historical landscape. The battlefield of Marathon by Carl Rottmann. . . .

Art experts, slow to rediscover a religious and a moral landscape,[1] have totally eliminated the political element from

landscape painting, being understandably drawn to the less encumbered 'feelings for nature'.

It is not intended here to confine the familar phrase once more to painting, but to retain its wider application, which also embraces the shaping of the real landscape.

I hope the essay that follows will show that political pointers need not impair our appreciation and perception of the landscape, but can actually sharpen them. It was written at the Cultural Institute in Essen-Heisingen. There I was helped in particular by Brigitte Blockhaus, Martina Langsch, Gesine Worm and Michael Diers, but I benefited also from discussions with all my colleagues, members of staff and guests of the Institute. Finally, I had valuable advice from Johannes Hartau on both the text and illustrations.

1 The Occupation of the Plain

The calendar scene showing the landscape below the castle of Lusignan (illus. 1), one of the illuminations by the Limbourg brothers in the Duke of Berry's *Très Riches Heures* (*c.* 1415), contains a number of simple devices that convey more or less overt political signals.

The roads that quarter the land into neat rectangles are geometrically disposed, like the boundaries on a colonial map. At the intersection stands an ornate Gothic montjoy, carved from stone, indicating the duke's patronage.[2] A similar roadside monument, dating from the early 1390s and known as the 'Spinnerin am Kreuz', stands near Vienna (illus. 2); this is a pointed column donated by the city's mayor and set like a monstrance beside the highway to Hungary.[3] The monument at Lusignan, however, stands not at a public crossroads, but within the duke's private domain. The workers faithfully go about their tasks within a strictly prescribed framework; the ploughman in the foreground furrows a triangular field as if in accordance with a fixed pattern.

The shepherd in the background, entering the picture from the left with a basket of leaves, has to use his sheep to keep a strip of ground around the castle clear of all vegetation, as this would provide cover for attackers. The empty strip ensures that no one can approach the ruler unseen. The adjacent fields must, however, be protected from the grazing sheep. The plastered walls, together with the tower on the left of the picture, the monument at the intersection and the modest gatehouse, form the castle's front line of defence; it was perhaps not fortuitous that a later hand, of *c.* 1500, emphasized these additions to the landscape by retouching them in white.

Such calendar pictures from court workshops, which count among the incunabula of early landscape painting, bear witness not to a new feeling for nature, but to the ruler's hold over his territory; they are political tableaux that register rights and duties, dispositions and functions.

If it is true that 'practically every change in the countryside introduced by human hand (walls, ditches, posts, etc.) is

virtually indestructible and can be rediscovered under the right conditions',[4] then we have hardly any chance, at least in Europe, of finding a single stretch of untouched landscape, unless it has been protected from the beginning as a 'natural monument'. Any normal landscape probably always presents 'a physiognomy shaped by man'.[5] But then, even the biblical Garden of Eden 'was already an orchard'.[6]

Even the simplest topographical features are the results of political decisions. The size and disposition of the fields, the crops that are grown in them and the locations of the farms are determined by re-allocations, 'green plans', agricultural subsidies and control of the market. Fields, patches of woodland, dykes, pastures and meadows are all the outcome of agrarian policies. The different configurations of arable land – laid out in blocks or strips, running in parallel or at right-angles to one another – reflect an ideal scheme under which collective land-use, directed by the local landlord, led to 'regular forms', whereas 'irregular forms' arose when a group of peasants developed the land themselves, largely uninfluenced by higher authority (illus. 3);[7] older forms of cultivation could shape the countryside and so provide a striking historical record of settlement and husbandry.[8] The proportion of arable land to woodland, land-use, enclosures, hunting grounds and commons have always engendered the fiercest local conflicts; in 1793 a 'Karl stone' (illus. 4) was set up at Weinstadt-Endersbach to commemorate Duke Karl Eugen's success in settling protracted disputes between two communities over the local woodlands.[9]

Among the simplest political features of any landscape are the boundaries that separate private, regional or national territories, ecclesiastical or secular domains, and spheres of influence.

Usually a simple embankment, a ditch, a hedge or some other visible indicator will suffice for interpersonal dealings. The keener the sense of private or public ownership, the stronger the need for irremovable, or at least conspicuous, boundaries. Fences, walls and barbed-wire barriers usually indicate nothing more than a personal need for security: they protect private property in real, not just symbolic, terms. If such means are used to secure state frontiers, they suggest usurpation, and neighbouring states often find it hard to accept such frontiers (illus. 5).

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In northern Europe it was only relatively recently that borders between nations or states were reduced to mere lines. This form of frontier presupposes that cultivated landscapes have converged, encroaching on the undeveloped land between them, and that peaceful coexistence appears possible.[10] Einhard reveals the extent to which such circumstances could affect relations between the Franks and the Saxons *c.* 800: 'The borders between our territory and theirs ran for the most part through the plain. Only in a few places did large woods or hills form clear boundaries. Hence endless murder, robbery and arson was committed on both sides'.[11]

Linguistically too, the reduction of the state frontier to symbolic indicators was a late phenomenon. The German word for 'frontier', *Grenze*, is a thirteenth-century loan from Polish *granica*, and until well into the sixteenth century the old word *Landmarke* (whose second element is cognate with the English *march*, as in 'the Welsh Marches'), remained much commoner. Borders were thus constituted by marches – woods, mountain crests, wildernesses, steppes, swamps, moors, lakes or rivers. The primeval landscape was often confined to borderlands,[12] which were wild, exotic tracts. The seemingly outlandish mountain and forest landscapes painted by Roelandt Savery for Emperor Rudolf II (illus. 6) do not necessarily indicate a pathological aversion to nature: they may be faithful depictions of border regions. The spectacular wildness of these border forests could assure a ruler that his frontiers were secure and impassable; other rulers might be convinced of their own security by means of pictures of their frontier castles.[13] To describe such boundaries, including rivers, as 'natural frontiers' tends to obscure the fact that nature was left artificially intact so that it could function as a boundary and so serve a cultural purpose.

The normal need for territorial demarcation was met by the ceremonial erection of a stone whose base was embedded deep in the ground: 'For the most part carved stones and columns are used to mark out the ruler's territory, and accordingly they bear his coat of arms'.[14] It was important, however, that the boundary stone should be not just any natural stone, but one that showed traces of having been specially dressed; otherwise it would not convey the necessary message, as it might be assumed to have always lain there by chance. Nor could a tree indicate a boundary unless it was

specially marked, say with a cross. If a patch of shrubbery was to serve as a boundary-marker, it too had to be shaped; without a recognizable form it could not legitimate the border. As evidence of an agreement between contracting parties, the boundary marker had to be seen to be deliberately shaped.

Boundary stones became common only in the fifteenth century; they were then numbered and engraved with the rulers' coats of arms and official devices, like the one dating from 1787 that marked the boundary of the principality of Mannheim (illus. 7).[15] Buried beneath the stones were the 'boundary witnesses', stone fragments marked with a sign; these provided the ultimate clue to the boundary if the stone itself was destroyed, displaced or disputed. Rituals were enacted around the stones – processions in which children took part and were subjected to mildly painful experiences such as having their ears tweaked (the ear being supposedly the seat of memory) so that they could pass on their knowledge to later generations. This mnemonic strategy guaranteed that a particular stone was not taken to be a natural topographical feature, but recognized and acknowledged as having been set up by consent. If rulers or landowners could afford it, folk memory was aided by architectural elaboration. For instance, the boundary column at Rain on the Lech, set up *c.* 1600 (illus. 8), is a conspicuously tall monitory structure, variously ornamented at each stage.[16] The relief panels on the older column at Burghausen-Raitenhaslach (illus. 9) record the history of salvation.[17] In 1792 Goethe worked such 'edification at the frontier' into a drawing (illus. 10). This drawing shows a stake topped by the cap of freedom, proclaiming the promised land, while in the background on the left 'the sun, with the Bourbon lily, goes down behind a castle, and on the right the moon, with the imperial double eagle, is darkened by a rain-shower. The symbol of republican victory triumphs over the heavenly bodies of monarchy'.[18] Here it becomes clear that the boundary now also 'determines allegiance to certain norms and the areas in which they are recognized'.[19]

Alertness to marked frontiers and respect for boundary monuments and borderlands must once have been much greater than they are today, for until recent times there were neither land registries nor maps recording local boundaries; boundary marks carried ultimate authority and required no

confirmation by a third party. The landscape itself testified to ownership and authority far more directly than was later the case, when it became possible to sue over territorial claims.

Were we to consider all the landscape features that testify to political intentions, the result would be a compendium of political topography.[20] But for the present we will confine ourselves to roads. Since ancient times roads have been not only international channels of communication and commerce, at points along which merchants exchanged their goods, but means of conquest and occupation, along which armies marched.[21] Napoleon's *routes nationales* run in straight lines across every geographic feature and indicate their destination overtly; this was entirely in keeping with the spirit of the absolutist schools of highways and bridges. The German motorways, by contrast, follow the lie of the land (in such a sophisticated manner that Fritz Todt, Hitler's Inspector-General of Roads, wished them to be acknowledged as 'national art monuments'), and conceal their destinations through their sensitivity to the landscape (illus. 11).[22] At an early date rail networks were planned and built partly with a view to military needs.[23] However, roads too have often been routed in such a way as to convey a political message:

> The highway runs in a straight line to the boundary column between Ochsenfurt and Uffenheim. The roads from Ansbach to Triesdorf also run in straight lines and then become avenues where this is possible and necessary. In this connection we still have to consider why the highway from Bad Kissingen to Würzburg always runs straight towards the towers of the village churches, then turns off just before each village, to align itself with the next church tower.'[24]

A road may have a number of features whose political aspects are not always obvious, although when we learn that in the first half of the nineteenth century King Ludwig I had milestones set along all Bavaria's military highways 'in the Roman manner',[25] it is clear that he wished to demonstrate his hold over his territory.

Road-building initiatives have often been political in origin, and in modern times they therefore tend to be marked by monuments. Back in 1492, for instance, the royal bridleway to Italy through the Tyrol was converted 'under Duke Albrecht IV of Bavaria into a solid road between the Kochelsee and the

Walchensee'.[26] In 1543, to commemorate the re-routing of the highway at the head of the pass by the Kaplanhaus, King Ferdinand I had a bronze tablet set up (illus. 12); this bears an inscription stating that the road was built 'for the common good', together with reliefs of the King and Emperor Charles V.[27] Waterways too often serve purposes other than those dictated by purely economic considerations: in 1834, for instance, Ludwig I of Bavaria was inspired to begin work on the Danube–Main canal partly because Charlemagne had conceived the idea before him.[28]

These striking human additions to the natural scene often figure as motifs in landscape painting, especially that of the seventeenth century; this must be connected with actual trends in transport policy. The special attention paid to bridges was certainly due also to their technical fascination. Bridges across waterways not only provide harmless links between two banks. They are often focuses of military and economic interests; probably no other physical structure has been subject to as much political controversy as the bridge.[29]

It was probably in the Danube School that the bridge first became a special motif in landscape painting. In a drawing of 1540 Augustin Hirschvogel builds up a wild mountain scene with towns and castles inserted into it (illus. 13). Bridges are introduced as conspicuous links: on the left is a simple arched bridge, and from the middle ground on the right a timber bridge, leading to the toll-house at the town wall, describes an elegant curve over the swampy waters. Two years later Wolf Huber took up the theme of masterly bridge-design and to some extent monumentalized it by enclosing the whole of the foreground within the curve of a pile bridge (illus. 14). The emphasis on this triumph over nature is heightened by the sun, which rises at the point where the bridge ends at the city gate.[30] It is hard to imagine that the artist was concerned simply with an interesting motif. For his scene of the parting of Abraham and Lot, Tobias Verhaeght broke up the natural scenery with chasms and ravines, but clearly only in order to make it passable by means of skilfully devised crossings (illus. 15); all sorts of bridges – the scaffolded timber one, the log, the double-arched hump bridge, the distant viaduct by the town – are crossed by people, dogs, oxen, cows and sheep, as though they were to be tested for future load-bearing.[31]

Like Wolf Huber, Altdorfer introduced an element of

unease into the view of a bridge from beneath, as if to draw attention to the often risky labour of bridge-building (illus. 16).[32] An obvious further step was to introduce a moral dimension. This possibly occurs in an engraving by Aegidius Sadeler (illus. 17), in which a wild gorge is spanned by enormous tree-trunks placed beside and across one another to allow human beings to pass over them, as if sleepwalking, with their beasts of burden.[33] In Carl Blechen's *Building of the Devil's Bridge* (illus. 18) all our attention is concentrated on the perfect but perilous triumph over mountain chasms as the new link between the rocky banks of the Reuss is illuminated like a golden bracelet.[34] Such shining bridges reflect the optimism engendered by victory over nature, an optimism that repeatedly inspired the construction of grandiose bridge-heads such those of the Schwabelweis rail bridge of 1859 near Regensburg (illus. 19) and the Elbe Bridge in Hamburg.

In landscape painting prominence was clearly given to motifs whose objective purpose was gaining in political importance; painters became aware of roads as means of conquest, trade, communication and economic development. A drawing by Jacob de Gheyn II from 1598 shows a bridge over a canal (illus. 20). In the foreground the canal takes up the whole width of the sheet; it is then projected into the depth of the picture, where an arched bridge encloses it like a conduit. This bridge is made the dominant motif by the perspectival alignment of the canal and by the sunlight that falls on it.

Well before 1600 the Dutch had taken to planting trees along canals and highways. This was an everyday adaptation of the grand princely avenues that always formed the approaches to stately homes. In the Prater near Vienna an avenue of chestnuts, leading to the 'green pleasure house', was planted as early as 1537. About 1580 Duke August I, Elector of Saxony, no doubt advised by his Dutch gardener, had all the approach roads to Dresden lined with fruit-trees. In Paris various queens laid out the *cours de reine*. After 1647 Maurice of Nassau-Siegen, who was to inspire the promenade 'Unter den Linden' in Berlin, had extensive avenues planted at Cleves and boasted that 'many Dutch people, of high and low estate', came 'simply and solely to see this place'.[35] The few avenues recorded in paintings reflect the socio-political status of the landowners. One picture, attributed to the Flemish artist Sebastiaen Vrancx (illus. 21), relates the avenue to the house

and is careful to show how the rows of trees separate the courtiers strolling at leisure from the peasants at work in the adjacent fields.[36] About 1800 the landscape gardener Sckell observed that only avenues, 'by virtue of their uniquely majestic character, can express the greatness of princes'.[37] Thus Jan van Kessel places the avenue *within* the castle grounds (illus. 22), as the roadside benches indicate. The space taken up by the road in this painting admittedly acquires an importance of its own for various reasons: it is shaded by trees and, in the foreground, the road is blocked by a felled tree; it runs past the castle of Meerdervoort and appears to penetrate into the depth of the picture as if to create a tunnel perspective.[38] Twenty-five years later, van Kessel's friend Meindert Hobbema went a stage further and painted the avenue at Middelharnis (probably at the behest of the town council, which had it planted in 1664) as an autonomous entity (illus. 23).[39] Unlike his precursors, Hobbema frees the avenue from any link with a stately home and does not even relate it to the local church. The avenue, now emancipated, becomes the main theme of a picture. Hobbema's rows of trees, unlike van Kessel's, are an independent formation, to which even the clouds seem to defer. At ground level they divide the wild nature on the left from the enclosed nature on the right; their exceedingly slim trunks project the outline of the avenue into the clouds, which present a peaceful aspect on the left of this dividing line but gather up restlessly on the right. Proudly erect and freed from courtly subservience, the trees line up as witnesses to a cultural achievement of the Dutch republic that has often been emulated.

While the road comes to symbolize the omnipresence of the state, by the twentieth century it seems to have become more threatening to the individual. In 1892 Ferdinand Hodler painted a road strewn with golden leaves that forces its way relentlessly to the evening horizon, where the clouds seem to form a gateway to the inferno (illus. 24). Somewhat later, Munch was to depict a group of girls embraced by the road, the bridge and the riverbank as if by serpents. The road becomes an oppressive place, beset by hostile forces.

Boundaries, bridges and roads are 'land monuments' that are there mainly for practical reasons; they have a function and only indirectly serve a political purpose. This is not true of the monument proper. There are various reasons for placing a

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