

Changing views?

Nicolas Laruelle

IAU île-de-France

Recent technological advances have brought us new experiences of real, virtual or hybrid landscapes. By turns, they sharpen or dull, but always change our perception of landscapes. Time for a closer look.

In his work *Paysages en mouvement, Transports et perception de l'espace, XVIII^e-XX^e siècle (Landscapes in motion, Transport and the perception of space, 18th-20th centuries)*, Marc Desportes demonstrated how technology, and especially transport technology, played a role at least as important as painting in the formation of the Western landscape: how each new transport mode suggested and often imposed on the traveller new ways of doing, seeing, feeling and finding ones bearings – a new take on the landscape. For example, in the middle of the 19th century, rail travel forced the traveller to look ahead into the distance. The dizzying new speed made it impossible to take in the sights whizzing past next to the tracks. The railway landscape with all its variation was born.

Real landscapes

Over recent years, transport technology has progressed hand in hand with paradoxical urban changes. In the centres of major cities, new glass-panelled tramways and cycle lanes are a break with the staccato rhythm and ultra-low view of cars. Users experience a more laid-back, almost aerial view of the world, no doubt idealised by some “urbanophile” thinking¹ as a city finally at one with itself.

¹ See the reading note on *Antiurbain, Origine et conséquences de l'urbanophobie*, by Joëlle Salomon Cavin and Bernard Marchand, 2010,

Further out, the increasing number of bypass ring-roads has, in rare cases, afforded a more sweeping view of the city. Mostly, however, they have brought an exponential rise in the number of roundabouts that blot the motorist's horizon propelling him like a spinning top, disoriented, into the ever-expanding near suburbs.

But, rather than these vehicle and infrastructure changes, it has been more so the explosion in mobility that has changed our view of the landscape. The increase in daily travel, both in frequency and distance has broadened the extent of landscapes encountered everyday, often out of necessity, blurring our ability to get a fix on the changes as they happen. At the same time, increasing access to air travel has perhaps afforded us a new take on everyday landscapes: “viewed from high above, who can say a vast suburban area isn't as captivating to the eye as the most picturesque alpine valley?²”. We can see the school recently build beyond the road that, until now, had marked the edge of the urban area, or the electricity pylon that contrasts so sharply with the patchwork farmland.

Virtual landscapes

The chance to float freely over the landscape was the key to the success of *Google Maps* or *Google Earth* that is now equipped with a

in this issue of *Les Cahiers de l'IAU*, Sept. 2011, p. 92.

² Serge Briffaud, « Le monde vu d'en haut. Une histoire de la vision panoramique » (“The world viewed from above. A history of panoramic vision”), *Paysage et aménagement (Landscape and planning)*, no.31, June 1995. Quoted by Laurent Perrin, « La ville panoramique, Évolution des regards aériens sur Paris et sa banlieue » (“The panomarcic city, Changing aerial views of Paris and its suburbs), *Les Cahiers de l'IAURIF*, no.120, January 1998.

flight simulator. These online platforms offer multiple and contrasting viewpoints and even allows us to take a virtual stroll down an urban street or a country road with *Google Street View* (and in 3D for some areas). Here is perhaps something remarkable about recent technological advances: virtual worlds are seen less often as alternatives or substitutes for the real world, but rather as tools that enhance our ability to look upon this real world.

Advances in the representation of real landscapes have been impressive. For example, children travelling through a town for the first time with their parents are quite able to give them directions as they have already been there in video games such as *Midtown Madness*. The views of Paris in the game are incredibly realistic, with its Haussmanian buildings, RATP buses and characteristic green and grey building site fences! A video-game reviewer was so impressed by how Manhattan was rendered in the latest *Spiderman* game that he recommended his readers take a break from the game and enjoy a stroll along its streets as a taster for their next weekend trip to New York – a trip enhanced rather than replaced the virtual New York. Developments in video games also seem to be moving more and more towards *serious games*, which are primarily educational and offer virtual situations that allow gamers to understand real situations better.

Against that, *Second Life*, an entirely virtual world, has been on the decline since 2009 with its main continent even beginning to empty – this despite the absence of a competing platform. The use of images from *Second Life* in the film *The Dubai in me* has an interesting resonance here: by overlaying virtual landscapes, promotional property videos and real landscapes, the German documentary film-maker Christian von Borries seeks to condemn the dehumanising of the real world in the emirate state.

Augmented reality

Fifteen years ago, Paul Virilio envisioned a dangerous separation of the world of the senses into real and virtual. However, it now seems we are witnessing a blending of the real and the virtual in an *augmented reality*. This new reality heightens our perception of the landscape while at the same time limiting the impact of signposts, “you-are-here” maps and interpretive billboards on the landscape. It calls to mind the quote from Paul Éluard: “There is another world, but it is within this one”.

The explosion in the use of *smartphones* has led to the development of themed audioguides (e. g. *ZeVisit*), the ideal accompaniment to a visit to the landscapes of Mont Blanc or to a wine-tasting trip around Bordeaux. The invention of the accelerometer that detects a screen’s orientation has recently spawned new applications that show information superimposed on the screen when it is pointed towards a landscape (*Layar*) or even towards the sky (*Skypix*). We can access information on how an historic building was constructed, on the history of an ancient tree or on how far away a star is.

We will soon be seeing this information on the lenses of a pair of glasses or on a car’s windscreen, a project under development at General Motors. The car manufacturer plans to integrate not only SatNav information into the windscreen (via a virtual cable the driver can follow) but also, for example, the equivalent of our so-called “brown signposts” with cultural and tourist information, customised to each person’s individual tastes: major jazz artists, industrial heritage, etc.

That said, Paul Virilio’s prediction is not without resonance: in the future, holograms will be developed that can hide a power line or make a castle destroyed many centuries ago reappear: an over-augmented reality that could reignite the tensions between the real and virtual worlds.