

The Low Countries' connection: landscape and the struggle over representation around 1600

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Abstract

In Anglophone geography, the concept of landscape is often defined in visual terms as the expression of a spatial rationality. Historically, the strongly visual qualities of landscape tend to be related to early capitalist developments in Italy and the Low Countries. Yet, recent scholarly interventions have asserted that landscape in early modern Europe also animated so-called 'platial' (or place-oriented) practices and ideologies of political representation, justice, and custom. This paper seeks to bring these diverging platial and spatial approaches together through an examination of political and visual representation of landscape in the northern Low Countries around 1600. It is argued that the tensions between platial notions of landscape and spatial rationality were unceasingly pertinent to the protracted struggles over political representation in the Low Countries during the revolt against Spain. Visual representations of landscape provided ways to take in, reflect upon, and codify those struggles. The Dutch landscape remained entangled in a double dialectic in which spatial and platial modes of political and visual representation mutually shaped each other.

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Perhaps it is by now a truism that the Dutch, together with Italian humanists, bear an important responsibility for a semantic shift of the concept of landscape from 'an enclosed area identifiable with a people' to 'a scene, projecting into infinity, defined by a given individual viewpoint'.¹ Alternatively, this has been described as an 'axial shift' in which the vertical cosmos of medieval society yielded to an increasingly secular way of representing landscape as 'a window through which a person can penetrate the vertical plane and direct his [sic] gaze outward to the horizon'.² These shifts articulated contemporary societal transformations in the Low

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Countries, i.e. the early modern complex of lands lying athwart the lower reaches of the rivers Rhine, Meuse, and Scheldt. The Low Countries redefined landscape in ways that, according to Denis Cosgrove's account, would link distanced ways of seeing to commercial relations to land.³ Taken together, these shifts in meaning, perspective and social formation encompass the transition from an understanding of landscape as essentially place-oriented (or 'platial') to a spatial meaning of landscape.

In using the terms 'platial' and 'spatial' in this context, I draw upon the work of Kenneth Olwig. As will be explained shortly, Olwig uses the term 'platial' as a shorthand for a kind of *relative* space: a spatiality in which a polity and its material fabric are constituted through ongoing social practices, including customary law. Olwig contrasts this platial meaning to a spatial one, in which landscape transcends and eventually annihilates the place-bound context of a polity, and is understood as an *absolute* space, ruled through 'natural' law and the universal logic of, for instance, modern capitalism, central state administration, and positivist spatial science.⁴

It is the argument of this paper that a platial notion of landscape played a persistent and important role in the Dutch revolt against the absolutist Spanish empire and the articulation of political ideals of popular sovereignty. While the work of Denis Cosgrove and Kenneth Olwig in particular has provided vital insights into the conceptual and material shifts of landscape, ultimately both are more concerned with the Low Countries as the conveyor of changes occurring elsewhere, in Great Britain and America. Furthermore, despite important points of agreement, the two theorists also draw diverging conclusions. Cosgrove by and large considers landscape from the standpoint of a theory of vision and image-making as a space which in broad lines mirrors the capitalist social formation of the Dutch Republic.⁵ Departing from this view, Olwig suggests that the Low Countries' landscape was not merely spatial, visual, and pictorial, but a substantive platial polity. As a consequence, in order to understand the full meaning of landscape imagery, Olwig claims it is necessary to tease out the wider context of visual as well as a *political* representation.⁶

What I will try to do in this essay is to bring together Cosgrove's and Olwig's insights on representation in a case study of landscape in the Low Countries around 1600. I will show how both spatial and platial ideas of landscape were deeply entangled in one of the core political issues in sixteenth-century Europe: the nature of the state.⁷ This political issue was mediated through a range of cultural modes of representation, combining historical and geographical descriptions into a multimedia record of texts, maps, and pictorial art.

The essay is organized as follows. I shall first attempt to locate the case study more firmly in the current debate on early modern landscape and representation in English-language historical geography, focusing on the work of Olwig and Cosgrove. This is then followed by a series of readings of the Dutch landscape, divided in two main sections. The first section examines landscape and political representation. It starts with a general outline of the Dutch spatio-political order, with a particular attention to landscape as the contested place of a polity. The second section interprets early modern Netherlandish landscape as a mode of visual representation within a wider context of a culture which, as Svetlana Alpers claims, above all rested in a spatial organization of knowledge and memory.⁸ I trust it is clear that the paper offers no more than a basic sketch of what remains a highly complex field, but I hope to show that visual landscape representation helped articulate the struggle over contemporary spatio-political developments in the Netherlands.

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