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Experiencing contemporary ‘nature’: virtual and physical designed landscapes of the Blue Mountains, Australia

Abstract
Landscape is a cultural construct, a way of conceptualizing and experiencing place. If it is true that ‘our shaping perception […] makes the difference between raw matter and landscape’ (Scharma 1995: 10), how do designers and the technologies they use shape that perception? How do the various technologies and techniques that are used to represent landscape in the twenty-first century frame how we perceive ‘nature’ in our minds and how we sense it through our bodies? This article explores the way so-called natural landscapes are conceived, represented and designed by professionals within contemporary culture. By interrogating how experiences of place are constructed through three mediums – webcams, large-format cinema and landscape architectural design – an intertextual picture of contemporary landscape emerges that is simultaneously virtual, hybridized and ‘real’.

Concepts and images represented within contemporary media culture play a significant role in the cultural construction of landscape. Many people become familiar with distant landscapes through images and sounds on film or the...
web without ever inhabiting these physical landscapes first hand. As increasingly sophisticated and interactive technologies continue to emerge, how do these affect the meaning and experience of natural landscapes? How do the various technologies and techniques that are used to represent landscape in the twenty-first century frame how we perceive ‘nature’ in our minds and how we sense it through our bodies? Where does virtual, modified nature end and real nature begin?

To speak of any kind of landscape is to enter a discourse that has human values and practices at its core. Land is physical – rock, water, soil, terrain – but a landscape is a state of mind (Amiel, cited in Carli 1980: 9). It is therefore problematic to speak of ‘natural’ landscapes, since landscape is first and foremost a contrivance due to its culturally constructed character. A tract of land becomes landscape in the moment of our apprehension of it, and this apprehension is intractably associated with cultural conventions, for example notions of scenic beauty, natural ‘purity’, the picturesque, the pastoral and so on. Such conventions are perpetuated or challenged through a myriad of images and words we create when expressing ideas about landscape:

The way we produce our material culture – our parks and roads and movies – is derived from and in turn shapes our relationships with the physical environment. I call all of this activity landscape.

(Wilson 1992: 13–4)

It has been noted that the type of media we use when giving form to ideas about landscape is significant:

the aesthetic conventions of landscape have been continuously reinforced by developments in mechanical and prosthetic vision, which today dominates much of our waking lives through television, video, film and advertising images.

(Cosgrove 2003: 257)

Landscape conventions have, in different times and different cultures, found their expression in literature, visual arts, advertising and landscape design. As our capacity to represent landscapes in different forms has evolved – for example, from charcoal to oil paint or exclusive journals through to mass-produced books – so too have the narrative content and meanings associated with landscape evolved. In our time, concepts and images represented across the screens of contemporary media culture play a significant role in the economic and cultural construction of landscape.

THREE MEDIATED VERSIONS OF THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

The Blue Mountains have been represented through traditional media since they were first explored by colonial settlers over 200 years ago, and over time the dominant cultural attitudes to the landscape have shifted, along with the technologies used to express those attitudes. The Blue Mountains region, located 50 km west of Sydney, Australia, is a landscape dominated by dramatic sandstone cliffs and eucalyptus forests, whose ecological and aesthetic value was acknowledged by UNESCO World Heritage listing in 2000. Over a million hectares of scenic terrain are reserved as National Park, intersected along a main ridgeline by a series of mountain towns and villages.
These mountains embody ‘a double presence: semiotic and topographical’, as their imposing and beautiful geological formations have loomed large in Australia’s cultural imagination, first as an inhospitable wilderness and later as a sublime natural wonder (Thomas 2004: 13). The tourism industry has played an important role in this process, attracting visitors to the area by promoting the experience of nature as a rejuvenating ‘recreational haven’ (Hartig 1987). Like most tourist destinations, this landscape is ‘aesthetically managed’ through a ‘highly-self-conscious, self-reflective process’ of place representation involving various media (Hughes 1998: 20).

In the following three case studies, all of which are physically located within the Blue Mountains’ main tourist town of Katoomba (Figure 1), a range of media determine how we engage with Australian ‘nature’.

**SCENIC WORLD: VIRTUAL LANDSCAPES OF THE WEB**

Because what you’re seeing is the real thing, not only does CaptivEYE allow for an instant understanding of what’s there, it also allows for a greater emotional attachment – “I wish I was there!”


Webcam technology is used by tourism service provider ‘Scenic World’ as part of a marketing and branding strategy based on providing a virtual experience of the Blue Mountains landscape. Scenic World is a former mining site whose railway infrastructure has been converted into a ‘scenic railway’ descending into the Blue Mountains National Park, with new cable cars and walkways adding to the visitor experience. Visitors to the Scenic World website (www.scenicworld.com.au) can view a series of live and regularly updated...
Webcam images streaming directly from this tourist attraction, including scenic views and infrastructure.

Webcam technology is increasing in popularity (Timothy and Groves 2001: 395), with provider Captivaction® claiming on its website that its CaptivEYE® ‘is a proven way of increasing traffic to a website’. With the click of a button visitors to the website can ‘take control of the camera’ in real time, operating commands including tilt, zoom and pan to select what they wish to see (Figure 2). The interactive experience of controlling the camera is promoted as an effective means of creating emotional attachment in consumers. Critics of branding culture have noted that this kind of commercial communication provides ‘indeterminacy within limits’ (Lury 2004: 151); the appearance of consumer ‘control’ is given; however, the limits of this control are determined in advance. In this case, the camera is fixed at a given spot, thus limiting the range of sights that are visible, and the resolution makes certain details unattainable. We can zoom in on nature but not enter it.

This technology reinforces the dominance of the visual – a conventional characteristic of landscape representation – although having a movable vantage point in real time does differentiate this type of landscape viewing from static pictorial imagery. The resulting ‘experience’ is one that is virtual, highly regulated, framed and distant (one can be viewing the Blue Mountains from anywhere in the world), yet easily accessible and immediate.

THE EDGE: HYPERREAL CINEMATIC LANDSCAPES

No visit to the Blue Mountains is complete without experiencing The Edge Giant Screen movie on the six story high screen. Share every spine-tingling moment on the cliff face as climbers risk their lives for adventure. The Edge will open your eyes to the Blue Mountains. Fly through mist filled valleys and feel like you’re actually there! [...] This ancient and spiritual wilderness will give you a true Australian sense of place.

(The Edge Cinema promotional flyer 2005)

The Edge (1996) is a documentary film that uses technology and cinematographic techniques to create the ‘illusion of participation’ (Skinner 1996: 27) in nature. The commercial large format Maxvision™ film is screened to tourists at the custom-built Edge Cinema, several times a day, every day. (Maxvision™ is a similar film product to IMAX®, following the principle of using a large film area to produce high-resolution images suited to projection on very large screens.) The Edge is a combination of history documentary, wildlife film and extreme sports clip. It describes geomorphology, vegetation, aboriginal occupation, European exploration and exploitation, settlement and conservation efforts within the Blue Mountains landscape, all in 38 minutes screen duration (Figure 3).

As a typical example of large-format cinema, The Edge seeks to affect not only the emotional and cognitive but also the physical responses of audiences. Large film formats trigger neutral activity such that despite knowing we are only viewing a movie, ‘enough of our original response tendencies will shine through in our automatic, unconscious responding’, so much so that it is claimed we can respond to the ‘mediated stimuli’ of IMAX® and virtual reality ‘in much the same way as we would to similar, unmediated stimuli’ (Ilsselsteijn 2002: 255). By filling the viewer’s peripheral vision entirely, Maxvision™ technology tricks human perception into responding to the cinematic image as real. Our hearts race as we watch abseiling experts cling to sheer cliff-faces, an effect heightened by editing that shows views from the abseiler’s point of view.

The film is promoted as an ‘experience’ that in many respects is superior to the real-time experience of actually being in nature. Several technological and cinematographic conventions are used to include a variety of themes and seasons in one convenient and action-filled package. Camera movement, for example, enables the viewer to plummet over the edge of vertiginous waterfalls and fly through sweeping valleys. Numerous narrative and cinematic devices, including metaphor, montage, historical association and voice-over narration, compress the wealth of potential material into the given screen duration. In one typical sequence, a montage of five time-lapse shots depicts the wilderness at dawn, through rising cloud, during rain, receding mist, and finally full sun, alluding to the dawn of a new day, an entire seasonal cycle or the dawn of the landscape itself. Thanks to cinematic technology, climatic processes that would normally be too gradual to perceive are compressed and their effect heightened, evoking a number of narrative possibilities in the process. This conforms to the established wildlife film convention of depicting nature ‘close-up, speeded-up, and set to music, with reality’s most exciting moments highlighted, and its “boring” bits cut out’ (Bouse 2000: 3).

It has been suggested that authentic nature, with its relative slowness and stillness, may be anticlimactic when compared to the excitement and action of
the cinematic version (Bouse 2000; Baudrillard 1994). Film creates rather than imitates experience, since the camera technologies and editing techniques used to capture and manipulate images render them unlike the views obtained from the unmediated human eye, for example by magnifying landscape objects. Indeed,

although wildlife films may show us things we might really have been able to see, they typically do so in ways we could never see them, and in which nobody has ever seen them directly, including the people who film them.

(Bouse 2000: 8)

**ECHO POINT LOOKOUT: ‘REAL’ SPACE/MEDIATED LANDSCAPE**

The aesthetic management of place (Hughes 1998: 20) is not limited to the realm of webcam or films; landscape design also frames the way we see and experience the landscape. The physical landscape continuously
undergoes modification. Echo Point Lookout is one such space, evolving from a small clearing at the edge of a cliff into a multi-million dollar scenic lookout attracting millions of visitors every year. It is the main vantage point from which to view the Three Sisters, an iconic geological sandstone formation.

In 2000, Echo Point Lookout underwent a ‘revitalization’ designed by landscape architects Tract Consultants, consisting of various lookout terraces, the integration of an existing visitor information centre, and the provision of new toilets, lighting, plantings, car parking and signage (Figure 4). The dominant element of the design is the large open plaza, an area of sandstone pavement that gradually slopes down to a main viewing area.

Figure 4: Echo Point Revitalization Masterplan, Tract Consultants (2000).
Echo Point is a window onto nature, where the frame is designed not to be seen:

A subtle and generally unexpressed code will govern the construction and maintenance of the lookout, preventing its overt conspicuousness […] Since the tendency within this visual order is to see the vista and not the cultural artifice that shapes it, the lookout plays a special role in mediating the vision of an apparently unmediated nature

(Thomas 2004: 223)

At Echo Point, materials are used selectively to express the nature of the landscape in a subtle way. Local sandstone, an attractive, longwearing and neutral-coloured material, is utilized throughout the landscape to reflect the geological character of the region. Signage is minimal, and attention-grabbing elements (iconic structures, bright colours) are avoided.

Although subtle, this designed landscape nevertheless mediates between people and environment in controlled ways. Just as web designers and film-makers mediate the landscape through a range of devices, landscape architects also compose the experience of landscapes on the ground through a range of design strategies. For example, at Echo Point the movement of visitors is choreographed according to a typical ‘Sequential Experience’ (Tract 2000): Spatial arrangements and cues direct people through approach areas → arrival → entry → build-up → before reaching the ‘climax’ or main destination. This is achieved such that tourists who have limited time at the site can ‘arrive, walk through and leave’ quickly. Another mediating element is the presence of seating, which is carefully sited to encourage people to pause and take in a particular view.

The experience of ‘real’ space that is facilitated by designed landscapes is no less composed than webcams or cinemascapes. There are no simple binary oppositions between virtual space/real space or mediated landscape/unmediated landscape, but a hybrid of all these.

CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND BEYOND

It is apparent that numerous creative media have the capacity to determine how the landscape is seen and interacted with; in short, the ‘natural landscape’ is anything but natural. The media discussed here share some characteristics and conventions, but also have unique properties. To summarize, common characteristics include an emphasis on:

- Interactivity and ‘experience’;
- Condensing space and time;
- Communicating narratives;
- Rendering nature accessible and convenient;
- Creating expectations; and
- Allowing the mediated viewer/participant to feel they are ‘discovering’ nature for themselves.

Differences include:

- The technical capacities associated with each medium (i.e. virtual, pre-recorded, 3D etc);
- Levels of interactivity; and
- Levels of physical effects (remote/simulated/actual).
Professionals working in different media can learn from each other by studying and comparing the kinds of ‘nature’ experiences they create and the narrative and technological devices they employ when creating them.

Having acknowledged the mediated character of landscape, the final word may yet belong to the land and what remains ‘more-than-representational’ (Lorimer 2005). Although our experience of nature is being continuously mediated and transformed, a designer’s ability to control or predetermine experience remains partial, regardless of the medium. The final word belongs to physical space and time, which can produce unexpected effects such as vision-obscuring mist (Figure 5). The bodily sensation of being in space, with its changes in climate, activity and sound, means that mediating technologies and designs will always capture moments but never fix them. Ultimately, it is this richness of landscape as a culturally significant artefact and an individually and subjectively experienced phenomenon in real time that ensures that a variety of ever-changing experiences, both intended and unexpected, continue to evolve.

REFERENCES


SUGGESTED CITATION


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Nicole Porter is a Lecturer in Landscape Architecture at the University of Canberra, Australia, where she teaches the theoretical and professional aspects of landscape and urban design. Her Ph.D. thesis, *The promotion and production of contemporary landscape*, interrogates the cultural construction of landscape as practiced by contemporary creative industries, including landscape architecture, place branding and new media communications. She is also working within government as an urban designer.

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