

Landscape

Landscape is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "all the visible features of an area of countryside or land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal", or more simply in the French Robert dictionary as "a portion of countryside of which an observer has a view". Landscape is a fundamental notion in geographical approaches, in the same way as space, environment, «territory» or «region». Although other disciplines make use of this notion, such as agronomy, architecture or archaeology for the study of the phenomenon, and aesthetics or literary and cultural history for the study of «representations» attached to it, it is nevertheless an emblematic theme in geography, despite the various manners of approaching the issue in this discipline. Landscape developed in the Western world from the Renaissance, as a genre in the representation of nature, and it only became an ordinary category of perception when it emerged as an iconographic practice and a type of aesthetic representation, and later as a value, ranging from intimations of the "sublime" when confronting Nature among the Romantics to present-day conservation policies, not forgetting the development of tourism. With the weight of its history, this word has many connotations and generally remains ambiguous, referring at once to the phenomenon and to its representations, that is to say, in metonymic manner, to the codes defining what is a "beautiful landscape", and the laws of its composition.

In regional descriptive geography, which was an aspect of the discipline into the 1960s, reference to landscape is omnipresent, even if not all work was in this vein. The reasoned descriptions of what were generally natural regions, defined by relief or climate, assessed phenomena in their historical depth, and attempted to establish relationships among them, with particular attention to the uses made of the areas concerned and the way in which these methods exploited the potential of the environment, also noting the marks of human societies on the landscape. For each space studied, a regionalisation was proposed (both an aim of the study and a presentation requirement) identifying homogenous regions, each defined by a landscape. This was an intellectual reconstruction, "an average situation, in a sense more real than that which might be provided by a particular example, since it avoids the exceptional and the non-representative" (Paul Claval, *Géographie humaine et économique contemporaine*, 1984, p.329 – it can be added that the art of the geographer consisted in noting what was significant in the form of landscape notes to support his generalisations). While geography thus studied landscape as a phenomenon, classic regional geography also approached landscape as a type of representation, affected by certain biases, such as emphasis on relief forms resulting from the fact that homogeneous regions correspond widely to relief units, and from the fact that geomorphology had a strong institutional backing at the time when this regional approach was dominant.

While studies in human and economic geography ceased placing preferential emphasis on landscape from the 1950s, the approach to landscape has been considerably reappraised since. Paradoxically, in recent decades, there has been some methodological reflection, which the regional geographers had not developed. It is true that they to some extent were looking "through" the landscape, selecting parts of it (the landscape notes mentioned above) without really apprehending it as a whole, and without giving consideration to the form of perception that a landscape amounts to (a totalising form), or questioning the "filters" and the familiarity (or foreignness) of the way we look at a landscape.

Two fields of study that have developed in recent decades illustrate the new relevance of landscape: one envisages the landscape-phenomenon, and the other the landscape-representation. Study of landscape as a phenomenon, with its links to the natural sciences, is the study of the spatial dimension of ecosystems by bio-geographers, which has become a fully-fledged "landscape ecology" (where tele-detection provides a valuable source of homogenised information in time and space, enabling the study of vegetative cover over spans of time). Landscape seen as a representation is more closely allied to literary and cultural history, and is the study of representations of landscape and sensitivity towards landscape in a cultural geography approach.

In the contemporary period, the work by Philippe Pinchemel has provided an advocacy of geography as a global approach enabling landscapes to be read: far from being a vague invocation of landscape, his work encourages systematic perusal of landscape, aiming to assimilate forms to the processes that shape them, to date the moment when they became established, to assess the way in which each has evolved, and to evaluate the interplay of different forces in the present-day dynamic.

Bibliographie

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