

Visual representation and the politics of memory

I

In this paper I want to examine some of the ways in which the French configured Switzerland as a site of Revolutionary fantasy in the 1790s and early 1800s, and some of the ways in which this configuration impacted on contemporary landscape representation.

The image of the Swiss landscape that featured so prominently in the Paris Salons throughout the nineteenth century – a naturally created, sublimely beautiful space peopled by a contented healthy peasantry – was, I suggest, largely constructed around the turn of the eighteenth century. And this construction can be explained, at least in part, in terms of the political fallout of the French Revolution, and the impact this fallout had on ways in which real and imagined spaces were understood. **(Slide)**

A wide constituency of French citizens held great hopes for political reform in 1789. Over the decade that followed, however, those hopes were variously dashed by the bloodshed of the Terror, the backlash of the right wing Directory; by civil war, by Bonaparte's authoritarian coup of 18 brumaire, and, still worse, by his transformation into an Emperor in 1805.

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Switzerland, or rather an imaginary projection of Switzerland – birth place Jean Jacques Rousseau and retirement home for Voltaire - became a site where the hopes of 1789 still held good, a place in which citizens had an intuitive grasp of the political freedoms that had been squandered by the French.

In short, Switzerland became a site for the memorialisation of a brand of politics the French found it impossible to realise.

III Aristocratic Space

In order to understand how this idealised vision of Switzerland came about, we need to look at the way in which the Revolution prompted the re-conceptualisation of space.

In the eighteenth century, the landscape was typically described as a sequestered space overseen by the gentleman courtier. **(Slide)** The influential writer Charles-Antoine Watelet, whose suburban estate *Le Moulin Joli*, provided a **benchmark** for informal gardening and landscape painting in the 1770s, insisted that nature was best seen from afar.

Here, nature's productive potential could be aestheticised into a picture where wheat might be appreciated for its 'colour' and oaks, for their 'artful sinuosity'. The aristocratic garden was a space apart in which the gentleman could escape from what Watelet called the 'prison of society' and indulge in the eroticised pursuit of capturing nature in her edenic form. By way of a footnote, it is worth noting that Boucher designed Watelet's mill.

This conceptualisation of space was inscribed within the power and class structures of the ancien regime. When in 1789 these power and class structures began to collapse, so too did the concepts of spatiality that gave these and numerous other descriptions of France expression.

In early 1792, the Société de l'économie rurale oversaw the confiscation and sale of aristocratic and clerical estates. The poor husbandry and profligacy of their owners – in essence, the use of land for pleasure rather than public utility - became the subject of numerous Republican pamphlets. So how exactly did aristocratic space unravel?

III Revolutionary Space

It is not possible to speak of a single, homogenised revolutionary space. Different constituencies responded to the newfound freedoms brought about by the Revolution in

different ways. In some cases there was an excitement but also trepidation at the prospect of entering the material and psychic spaces that until recently had been out of bounds.

The anonymous author of the 1790 edition of the *Diable boiteux à Paris* was so transfixed by the capital's transformation since the Revolution, that he called on the Devil to help him understand the city. Transported to the top of Nôtre Dame de Paris on a black cloud and equipped with the devil's magic eye glass, the author could suddenly see into the hearts and homes of his fellow citizens, not least the royal family oblivious to the 'thunderclouds that gathered above their heads'.

In this instance, the conceptualisation of space was based on a privileged and somewhat neurotic vision, **but it was on offer, however**, only through the medium of a diabolic pact.

This is a brisk history of the Revolution, Ill admit, but within the space of a decade we have moved from the sequestration of space and the constraint of vision, to its democratisation.

The constitutional monarchists that organised revolutionary festivals of the early 1790s also took a democratic view, in this instance the totalising view of the whole nation bound together by a tricolour ribbon and seen from the top of a tree of liberty. **(Slide)** We have here an image of the Fete de la Federation of 1790. It is quite rare, for example, to

have such fetes displayed in a way that does not provide a totalising, unifying and essentially democratic view.

In special circumstances, the government graduated from trees to balloons. The Fête de la Federation also involved the launch of a manned hot air balloon, a trip that had scientific, political and religious associations. At one level, the balloon was seen as a sacrificial altar and the prospect that its passengers might well be lost on the journey became a quasi- pagan form of sacrifice to the achievements of science and rationalism.

At another level, flight was also associated with exporting liberty abroad. Another pamphlet written to announce the ascension, pondered on the moment when the craft finally disappeared from view enabling its crew to ascend skywards ‘to see if the men on the moon were free’. (If not, they should be presented with a copy of the *Declaration of the rights of man* to help liberate them from celestial tyrants.)

An aerial view had an appeal because distance enabled all the irregularities of revolutionary space – and revolutionary space was very irregular indeed - to be smoothed out. Back on the ground, space was harder to manage. Sebastien Mercier, one of the best read and most quoted commentators on city life around the time of the Revolution, described Paris as a space in as in a state of constant expansion, unknowable even to its own inhabitants.

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The city was a social and cultural stew. It defied totalisation, Mercier insisted, and each reader would have his own distinctive stories and images of the capital to add. Even if the author had a ‘hundred languages’, ‘a hundred mouths’ and the rhetorical power of Homer and Virgil combined, he would still be unable to do the capital justice.

Paris, it seems, was best encountered through a process of un-systematised wandering similar to those Michel de Certeau describes in his account of totalising capitalist spaces such as Chicago and New York City. For Mercier, to wander was to admit that the capital had no single point of focus or authority. This is not so much the act of the flâneur but of someone quite lost, pining for the kinds of totalisation offered by the government.

A riposte to Mercier’s account, the anonymous *La capital de Paris don son vrai point de vue* sketched freedom in darker terms, as a debauched satyr frightening the allegorical figure of the city with a burning image of the city with the advice to artists that they should darken their palettes when they paint her. **(Slide)**

Put simply, spatiality in the first years of the Revolution rested on the idea that anyone could go anywhere albeit at considerable psychological or personal cost. Post – 18 brumaire, we come across yet another kind of spatiality, one that attempted to impose order on the nation.

Following Bonaparte's coup of 1799, there was an impulse to document the nation, to measure the material benefits brought about by reform.

In a description of the department of the Oise, the government Prefect Jacques de Cambry showed how, under the First Consul's leadership, the region had liberated itself from the tyranny of the ancien regime and revolutionary extremism of the mid 1790s.

Writing on **this** experimental farm at Liancourt, (**Slide**) we see Cambry himself, looking at the landscape through an official eyeglass, verifying the new kinds of agricultural techniques sponsored by the state.

This is a totalising form of landscape representation in which the Consular Eye or its extension oversees the entire nation. In the same way that some artists feted the Republic by describing the victories in Egypt, so Cambry argued, he feted the nation's economic achievements by measuring the 'output of a windmill' or recording 'the value of a measure of wheat.' This vision was constructed, I suggest, **precisely** to acquire the uniformity of texture I mentioned above.

In this long preamble, then, we can identify a series of competing political views and a parallel series of competing conceptions of space. It is important to remember that forms of compromise and failure were invariably component parts of this spatial and political calculus.

Absent from the formula was the ideal of a Revolution **without** political process, the ideal of liberty and fraternity made real through feeling and instinct. Difficult to realise in practice, an idealised form of revolutionary politics could however, be imagined and projected onto an appropriate landscape. And this is where Switzerland comes in.

III Swiss Space

Switzerland exercised the imagination of the French in a variety of ways. Sometimes characterised as an **alien** landscape, Switzerland lay beyond the Alps. Its high mountain ranges and deep valleys meant that contact with its isolated communities was impossible.

So isolated were some districts that inbreeding among its communities was said to have led to a congenital tendency towards gout and cretinism. As far as the French Republic was concerned, the region – like all those hotbeds of Catholic superstition in the Vendée and the Jura - were ripe for political reform.

For some, Switzerland needed reason and order imposed upon it and this was the driving motive behind various political and military incursions in the late 1790s and early 1800s. Not least, this was the ideal behind the construction of the Simplon Pass, an example of French authority bored through the material fabric of countryside in order to bring the benefits of reform. **(Slide)**

We have on the screen a plate for the *Service de l'Empereur* made at the porcelain Sevres factory from 1809. Used for diplomatic dinners, the Service was a compendium of French technical and military achievements. Put together, with Napoleon centre stage at the dinner table, each plate constituted one of 208 radii of Imperial power.

Isolated from the world outside, the local communities around the pass knew little of commerce. But why should they? Modern commerce may have been an alien concept to the Swiss, but this was due to the fecundity of a region in which all human needs were supplied.

The fecundity of the region, moreover, largely explained the tranquil brand of local politics based on a representative democracy, a brand that came pretty close to the ideals Jean-Jacques Rousseau described. As the author notes, the lucky traveller might catch the odd glimpse of the countryside as if taken straight from the pages of Rousseau's *Emile* or *La nouvelle Heloise*.

Already, then, we have a contradiction in the discursive formation of the Swiss landscape around 1800. Seen from the vantage point of republican reason inflected with the realpolitik of actually implementing reform, Switzerland needed to be called to order like the rest of France. Seen from the vantage point of a revolution gone wrong, Switzerland was a locus of an intuited brand of political plenitude. There are

numerous references to a glimpse of such plenitude but total gratification in the form of a totalised description of the landscape was exceptionally rare.

In another passage in the same book, the author steals a line from Watelet about a sexualised Nature who reveals herself to the onlooker only partial form. This is not a moment of quasi-sexual plenitude that is on offer, but a chance for aesthetic and political fulfilment. Within the text, then, there is the idea that a beautiful landscape is a cipher beautiful politics, a theme picked up by numerous disaffected moderates.

Thus, when around 1800 moderate Federalists and Girondists commentators turned their attention to Switzerland they were forced to pick their way through a very complex terrain.

The solution to this complexity was the making of heterotopic and **also an heterochronic** Switzerland whose deal image unfolded at a moment before the Revolution turned sour, a moment that was recollected from a point where the Revolution attained a degree of stability.

This fragmented vision of Switzerland, a Switzerland located in another space and another time - featured in the work of two widely read, pro-Girondist authors, Marie-Jeanne Roland de la Platière and Helen Maria Williams. And, not least, in the work Jacques de Cambry after he was sacked as a prefect.

The posthumous publication of Roland de la Platière's *Voyages faites en Suisse dans l'année mille sept cent quatre vingt sept* of 1799 – note the 11 year gap - celebrated the liberal instincts of the Swiss and their capacity to intuit freedom. Those instincts were shared by Roland and her husband before their respective execution and exile at the hands of the Jacobins in 1793.

The publication of the *Voyages* at the moment 'moderation' and 'order' returned to France' was seen as a latter-day vindication of precisely the Girondist policies they had both originally espoused back in the early 1790s. Here, Roland had cleverly referenced a set of historical touch stones whereby her own brand of moderation – vindicated by the Terror – could be retrospectively validated by grounding it in a time and place before or beyond the Revolution in France.

Helen-Maria Williams escaped the same Girondist purge by taking refuge in Switzerland. She returned to France and published *A tour of Switzerland or a view of the present state of the governments and manners of the Cantons with comparative sketches of the present state of Paris* in 1798.

Williams saw Switzerland as a repository of moderate politics and, again, a corrective for French political life. She spoke of the enduring rural traditions in Switzerland, 'a cradle of liberty' where even the humblest peasant was comfortable.

Once more, the idealised vision of Switzerland pre-1789 was stitched to an idealised model of France and Switzerland post-18 brumaire. And it was at this moment, Williams explained, that ‘the French peasantry need no longer look on the Swiss with the glance of envy. And while her position is not easy to defend, it was almost as if Napoleon’s reforms had put the revolution back on the course that Rousseau and the rest of the Swiss had intuited.

Williams was seduced not only by the culture, piety, manners, dress and sobriety of the Swiss but also by the **appearance** of the landscape. Williams explained how the picturesque beauty of the district became a solace for a heart made despondent by Revolutionary bloodshed.

I am going to repose my wearied spirit on those sublime objects - to sooth my desponding heart with the hope that the moral disorder I have witnessed shall be rectified, while I gaze on nature in all her admirable perfections; and how delightful a transition shall I find in the picture of social happiness which Switzerland presents!

I shall no longer see liberty profaned and violated; here she smiles upon the hills, and decorates the vallies, and finds, in the uncorrupted simplicity of this people, a firmer barrier than in the cragginess of their rocks, or the snows of their Glaciers!" with the hope that the moral disorder I have witnessed [the Terror] shall be rectified.’

For Williams, then, the sensibility required for an appreciation of the sublimely beautiful landscape was an indication of what she described as the ‘higher qualities of mind’ required to restore the Revolution to its proper (moderate) course. The very

capacity to recognise the beauty of Switzerland, was to hold out hope that the ideal of liberty it cradled might one day be fully realised.

Cambry – the ousted official who had held out against Jacobin vandalism in the Finistere and who had now turned to travel writing – wrote at length about Switzerland in the *Voyage pittoresque en Suisse et en Italie* of 1800.

Cambry wrote about Swiss sobriety and decorum, its social organisation and citizens' longstanding political independence. In cantons where liberal governments were found, they were celebrated as social and political models; in districts where authoritarian regimes were in place, he noted the first rumblings of an interest in liberty.

Unlike the over-sophisticated, 'well-powdered' French, the Swiss were characterised as tolerant, freethinkers, immune from the vagaries of fashion. (I'm interested in the idea of powdering because few people would have been powdered in France at the actual time he is writing, but many would have been if we spirit ourselves back in time a bit, to 1787.)

Written in the form of a diary, the *Voyage* documented Cambry's encounters with various men of letters, collectors and painters, descriptions of palaces, gardens

and buildings, among them Voltaire's retreat at Ferney and Rousseau's residence at Neufchatel.

These observations, moreover, were a wholly accurate and disinterested account, written in a 'simple and direct' manner, unlike the excesses of some novelists and painters, he insisted. In this respect, then, the aestheticising rhetoric of the picturesque is held at arm's-length. But the *Voyage* also took a highly imaginary turn that enabled Cambry to access another, quite different Switzerland.

The events in the book took place not in the year in which it was published, - 1800 - but were recounted in the form of an **imaginary diary** written over ten years earlier in the summer of 1788. Thus, all of Cambry's responses to the social and political life of the region occurred in the period **before** the Revolution, that period in which the French were 'still-powdered' but untouched by Revolutionary excess.

Cambry's imaginary journey also took place by chance rather than design, and this too legitimised a highly distinctive response to the Swiss landscape. About to return to France after a grand tour in the company of a party of noblemen and women, Cambry decided to cast caution aside and continue with two women travellers who had been distracted by the beauty of the landscape. 'If I could be persuaded to travel in a simple fashion,' he said, 'I would open myself up to that **old devil chance** who would serve me quite as well as an instructed gentleman.'

In one passage Cambry spoke about the delicious pleasures of being cast adrift on a boat on Lake Geneva in the company of women and how he caught a momentary glimpse of a girl reading what, he says, **must have been** *La nouvelle Heloise*. 'It was impossible to describe the effects of the movement of the boat and how it made the landscape appear and disappear, how this movement delighted the eye and the imagination.' The landscape, with its natural fecundity, with its citizens and its fauna in a state of natural happiness, prompted a physical regeneration that had been denied to him for so long.

So, isolated and cast adrift in another period, in the company of women with a well-established track record for a sensualised appreciation of the landscape and whose credentials were further confirmed by the books they read, Cambry, entered into not into the concrete spaces of the revolution but into illusory spaces that could only be perceived in fragmentary form. This was a psychic boundary separating an intellectual from a sensual engagement.

Aspects of this heterotopic vision have been examined by Christine Montalbetti. Writing on the tropes of romantic literature. Montalbetti also notes how the tendency to see the landscape from a distance (be it social, temporal or spatial) and the inability to describe this heightened level of aesthetic experience led writers to use the fragmented glimpse as a cipher for a moment of plenitude that cannot be sustained.ⁱ

In Cambry's case we are able to identify some of the devices Montalbetti describes and give them a historical location and a purpose. The rhetoric of the

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picturesque provided a glimpse into a landscape whose sublime beauty promised momentary access into a social and political ideal.
