



## ***Book Reviews***

### **Arntzen, S. and Brady, E. (eds.) 2008: *Humans in the land. The ethics and aesthetics of the cultural landscape.* Oslo: Unipub**

*by Edward H. Huijbens*

The book deals with the cultural landscape, as colloquially understood, and tries to outline underpinnings for philosophical, ethical and aesthetic engagements with it. What needs to be borne in mind from the outset is that the book is actually a collection of essays, each following a rather independent thought trajectory from the basic theme set out by the editors. The editors see the cultural landscape as the setting for human-nature interaction (p. 13) and see manifest values therein that guide this interaction. What is thus at stake is the utilitarian and functional value of reading the landscape in aesthetic and/or ethical ways, as these are permeated with practical engagements.

Following the introductory agenda-setting for the book by the editors are 10 chapters that, each in its own way, detail stories and politics of particular landscapes in order to highlight the values in landscape as something with which one has a working relationship (p. 34).

Following an excursion in the first chapter through the national parks and landscapes of the US and their history, the first editor produces a lengthy chapter on the term landscape and neologically describes it as internally complex.

The European Landscape Convention receives detailed attention in chapter three. The author argues for ways to introduce public participation in setting the landscape agenda of the convention, but simultaneously opening peoples eyes to landscape qualities often held only in the mind of experts or planners.

Next the English Lakes are visited with the eyes of Wainwright and notions of care explored in relation to landscapes, to reveal that caring is easily appropriable by sloganeering, but much more complex in practice.

Chapter five takes on agricultural landscapes on the British Isles, especially the practices of hedge-laying, stonewalling and coppicing and how, once harmonious with materials and nature, they have become objects of aesthetic appreciation.

Rural landscapes more generally receive attention too, as the sixth chapter argues for



a realist stance towards the past in order to unveil the historicity of landscapes and the necessity to pay heed to this.

In chapter seven, agriculture and the rural are still in focus, arguing that the farmer is the one most intimately involved with the land, anchored in its materiality (p. 170). The argument sustained is that practices of agriculture should be included in environmental education as the insights gained far supersede a detached analysis.

The following chapter is a quasi-philosophical literary excursion through landscape moving rather swiftly through some dense literature, arguing how a walker and driver express different spatialities and, a fortiori, experiences of the land.

Chapter nine takes the reader back to the New World, which was already the subject of chapter 1, this time to the majesty of the mountains in Western US, arguing for the tenability of the sublime.

Lastly the reader is introduced to the landscapes of Japan in comparison to those of the US, and their parallel historic construction in wholly different contexts. Thus the book ends with the argument that national landscapes are spectator-guided experiences privileging certain agendas and, with that, the book ends rather abruptly. On the whole, the book provides a valuable collection of essays to those keen on studying the issue of landscape. I would claim though that the focus is narrow and one-sided. The narrowness is manifest in a focus on the rural, as agricultural and artistic interpretations abound, with the possible exception of chapter 8. What I mean by one-sidedness is twofold. First and more simply, time and again through the book there are the same references and stories conjured up in the argument. Two examples serve to qualify this statement. One is the recurrence of the Lake District in England as a case in point and the second is the native-American landscape management practices as overlooked in the national landscapes of the US. Secondly and less simply, is that other ways and practices of engaging and unfolding in the landscape, e.g. through leisure, second-home dwelling, urbanite semi-rural agricultural practices (e.g. allotments), urban households and many other pertinent examples of popular activities by the many receive no attention. In this sense, the book's gaze is predominantly cast backwards and many of the chapters are more ruminations and expressions rather than thorough empirical engagements with certain cases the cover picture does sort of give this away.

As a more practical point of critique, I view the second chapter as an extension of the introduction and think that the editors should have joined the two in a detailed introductory chapter that could then set the scene for the vignettes, so to speak, produced in the rest of the book. As it is, chapter two sits rather uncomfortably. Therefore, I suggest the reader intending to take on the whole book to start with the introduction and chapter two.

As a collection of essays on rural landscapes and the way in which these yield insights into aesthetic and ethical ways of interpreting them, and the potential implications of

such interpretations, I do recommend the book.

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