



HAL
open science

Book Review: The landscape of Stalinism: the art and ideology of Soviet space

Mark Bassin

► **To cite this version:**

Mark Bassin. Book Review: The landscape of Stalinism: the art and ideology of Soviet space. *cultural geographies*, 2005, 12 (2), pp.254-255. 10.1177/147447400501200210 . hal-00571985

HAL Id: hal-00571985

<https://hal.science/hal-00571985>

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

dissonances; more often, it renders cruising ahistorical. The epilogue recognizes how 'cruising the streets of our cities isn't what it used to be' (p. 162). Again, this is disengaged from what comes before: 'change' is equated with cyberspace. Sure, the internet has reconfigured sexual geographies, but what about the changing nature of the city itself? For Turner, the 'modern city' remains almost static over 150 years. But the city is an organic entity that changes over time – London 1885 isn't London 2005. To map those differences would also allow us to trace how the ways we walk the city – the stories we tell about our backward glances – have themselves changed over time. That's my challenge.

University of Liverpool

MATT HOULBROOK

The landscape of Stalinism: the art and ideology of Soviet space. Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 2003. 315 pp. \$50.00 (£38.00) cloth. ISBN 0 295 98333 7.

In the early 1940s, the cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin argued that each historical epoch created its own distinctive 'chronotype', or conception of space. In loose pursuit of this Bakhtinian inspiration, the collection of essays under review sets out to identify and explore the chronotype of the Stalin period of Soviet history, from the late 1920s to the early 1950s. The sort of generalized formula for the understanding and deployment of spatiality that might constitute a chronotype does not ultimately emerge, it must be said; but the essays do succeed quite brilliantly in illustrating the diversity, richness, and overall importance of space and the geographical landscape for the political aesthetics of Stalinist culture. And because culture, in the Nietzschean spirit of interwar European totalitarianism, constituted a carefully managed part of a larger project of political manipulation and control, the essays provide important insight into the political mind of Stalinism as well.

For the most part, they deal with representations of space and landscape in Soviet popular culture, including Socialist-Realist art and literature, songs, advertising, theatre, cinema, magazines and even postage stamps. The cohesiveness of the collection is unsettled by a certain ambivalent tension between the alternative kinds of spatiality under analysis, captured in the juxtaposition of 'space' and 'landscape' in the volume's title and subtitle. Although clearly related, these terms refer in fact to very different things: the abstract *space* of physics and geometry (the arrangement of figures in paintings, for example, or of buildings in architectural ensembles), as opposed to the real-existing *natural* and *cultural landscapes* of the physical-geographical world. Both alternatives form an integral part of the book's larger subject, to be sure, but the conceptual and material disjuncture between them might well have been more carefully problematized. Overall, the essays gathered in *The landscape of Stalinism* are well conceived, probing and stimulating, and demonstrate how successfully geographical concerns with the representation

and social signification of space and landscape have been taken over by other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

University College London

MARK BASSIN

Art of the garden: the garden in British art, 1800 to the present day. Edited by Nicholas Alfrey, Stephen Daniels and Martin Postle. London: Tate. 2004. 256pp. £40.00 cloth; £29.99 paper. ISBN 1 85437 544 X cloth; 1 85437 502 4 paper.

The key to this exhibition (Tate Britain 3 June–30 August 2004, followed by Belfast and Manchester) and its catalogue, is in the title: it's about art, as well as about gardens. This at once presents a tension for both viewer and reader, because art and gardens are practices that require different modes of engagement and interpretation, different 'ways of seeing'.

The editors observe that gardening is currently the most popular leisure activity in the UK, and suggest that England is a 'quintessential' nation of gardeners. This claim for gardening greatness is often made for England, and the editors/curators work hard to substantiate it, while recognizing that gardening cultures extend across the British Isles, particularly to Scotland. Largely, however, they work with a very particular variety of Englishness. Their achievement is to successfully disturb the idea of green pleasantness that the English garden is popularly supposed to convey.

For example, although parts of the exhibition speak to notions of innocence, purity and the pastoral, many of the pictures subtly upset such notions. One such upset is provided by Peter Rabbit. In a tiny watercolour by Beatrix Potter a pair of ears point out of a watering can, invoking memories of childhood, and the right of animals to live in gardens too, along with plants and other non-human forms. This was the cleverness of the show, to demonstrate the ambiguity of garden spaces in witty and sharply observed ways, but I fear that the curators may have been too knowing for their visitors. *Art of the garden* is pleasing – or perhaps 'patriotic and polite', as Humphrey Repton once described the English garden landscape – but notwithstanding such a popular theme, it was an intellectual show.

In their introduction the editors anticipate the tension produced by their title. They suggest that they wanted to present the artworks as 'imaginative constructs in their own right' – a justifiable aim, given the English predilection for gardening, and arguably a function of public display. Yet because these were pictures of gardens, themselves imaginative constructs, there was a paradox at the heart of the exhibition, a problem of representation. In the catalogue this is less troubling, but the show was full of double representations and extraordinary ambiguities, such as Helen Allingham's watercolour of Gertrude Jekyll's garden, or Anya Gallacio's *Red on green*. The strength of the catalogue is that it addresses those ambiguities in ways that exhibition captions alone could not (in spite of some perhaps over-explicit captions). For this reason, readers of the catalogue may be better satisfied.

Queen Mary, University of London

AMANDA CLAREMONT