

CONSUMING LANDSCAPES: THE VIEW FROM THE ROAD IN GERMANY AND THE UNITED STATES, 1910–1995

Thomas Zeller

Research Fellow, GHI

University of Maryland, College Park

This research project deals with cars, drivers, roads, and landscapes in the twentieth century. Out of these four, especially the category of landscape merits some discussion. Landscape, for decades something of a dirty word in the German academy, has recently received more scholarly attention. When a geographer surveyed the field of landscape studies in Germany in the early 1970s, he found that the number of books whose titles include “Landschaft” had been decreasing sharply after 1945.¹ Since the 1990s, however, the situation looks quite different. A once classic anthology edited by the writer Rudolf Borchardt has been reissued, and historians are among the scholars rediscovering landscape as a field of study. Unlike an earlier generation of scholarship that sought to identify attention to landscape and the environment as “romantic,” and, worse yet, a step on the slippery slope towards Nazism, today’s studies seek to understand landscapes as historically produced and contested spaces without a necessary goal.² At the same time, geography in the English-speaking world has redefined landscape and learned to embrace its methodological multitudes.³

For historians, the renewed interest in landscape has contributed to the relative rise of environmental history. This subdiscipline, which by now is firmly established in U.S. universities, is still a fledgling enterprise with little institutional backing in Germany. Given the country’s occasional elevation of environmental consciousness into the realm of the normative and the voting successes of the Green Party, this state of affairs appears somewhat odd. Recent developments such as the establishment of a European Society for Environmental History in 2001, however, are encouraging.⁴

In this respect, environmental history has the potential to reach a wider audience both inside and outside of the academy. Landscape history can contribute to this growth. It combines the study of physical changes in the land with the analysis of different historical ideas about landscape, thus making it attractive for a wide range of historical subdisciplines, ranging from economic to cultural history. On a different level, an important insight has been formulated by David Nye, who insists that incorporating the history of technology into landscape studies

is indeed indispensable: "Technology is not alien to nature, but integral to it." Landscapes, in other words, are meeting places for technology and nature, "changing sites where new meanings are constantly emerging."⁵ Landscape's complexity can thus be understood as a rewarding challenge for the historian.

What do these musings have to do with cars and roads? Landscape change in the last century was to a large degree connected with the advent of car transportation as the dominant form of mobility. Without the massive building of roads, highways, parking garages, and all the other spatial paraphernalia of car travel, the automobile's rise to prevalence would have been impossible. In post-1945 suburban America, massive malls, commercial strips, and uniform chain stores often confine the landscapes of mobility.⁶ In the interwar period, however, a coterie of landscape planners, civil engineers, and local boosters sought technological designs, cultural valorizations, and public support ensuring that roads would form a harmonic unity with the surrounding landscape. The promoters and practitioners of this ideal and idealistic road sought to cushion the nascent and, in their view, favorable system of car-road-transportation in the organic entity of landscape. Many roads in European countries as well as the United States were constructed according to these ideas. *Consuming Landscapes* aims at identifying, analyzing, and understanding the technological and environmental preconditions, decisions, and consequences of phenomena such as the constructed landscapes of the North American parkways and German pleasure roads. The scope of the project is comparative, looking at the reverberations of a set of techniques promoting landscape consumption in both the United States and Germany from 1910 to 1995. At the heart of this project is a comparison of the driving experiences on the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Deutsche Alpenstraße, two major tourist roads whose construction began in the 1930s.

These commodified, readily available and accessible landscapes signified the first major environmental change wrought by widespread use of the automobile; their politics and meanings are also quite specific to negotiations of modernity in the first half of the twentieth century. These landscapes groomed for transportation were not the result of an autonomous technology intruding upon unspoiled nature, but rather the outcome of human decisions based on desires, values, and professional status. These values were inscribed into the technology of the road and thus onto the landscape, leaving a cultural imprint on them. Far from offering a refuge from civilization, these sculpted landscapes reflected their cultures of origin quite vividly. At the heart of the analysis is the cultural meaning of these technologies, their rootedness in and effects on culture.

The consumption of landscapes was also crucial for the appeal of tourism, the identity of tourist regions, and the growth of the nascent tourist industries. The landscapes that could be experienced through the windshield were an integral part of the self-representation of tourist regions. Prospective tourists learned to recognize characteristic mountain peaks, distinguish one landscape from another, and anticipate the allure of the sea by exploring the scenery in guidebooks and brochures before they would set out and experience the landscapes themselves by driving through them. In a sense, tourism regions had to be invented, not least through the promise of consumable and accessible, car-ready landscapes.⁷

The project is based on the assumption that a given technology's design and usage reflects cultural and social practices and has the potential to reinforce or alter them. As the car encountered the landscape in the first half of the twentieth century, the meaning of roads changed decisively. Instead of serving several constituencies of pedestrians, equestrians, and bicyclists, some users thought that roadways should be reserved for the exclusive use of automobiles. This idea of controlled access was very popular with car drivers and their elite associations in Germany in the first decades of the century. While the *Herrenreiter*—the upper-middle class male automotive pioneers—also benefited from an economic discourse pointing to the comparative advantages of road transportation, the testimonies of their Sunday or summer outings bespoke their fascination for the hardy nature of their cranky automobiles and for the aesthetic gain of experiencing nature by driving a car through it. They were able to overcome the confines of the railway's panorama as seen from the compartment window.⁸ With the car under their control, the landscape was now open to their explorations in the absence of train schedules and railway lines. They celebrated this new quality of appropriating nature through recent means of technology. The consumption of landscapes was seen as an aesthetic experience of deliberate slowness, gainful deceleration, and culturally advanced exploration. These practitioners of travel set their own agenda of leisurely exploration. A set of viewing opportunities, in this respect, opened up nature and defined it anew. Through explorations, adventurous car trips, and the dissemination of these accounts of conquest, this set of techniques became increasingly popular. The analysis of this change in attitude will be based on contemporary journals, books, and exhibitions in both countries.

Concomitant with this change was the establishment of specific roads called parkways in the United States. Ever since the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted had called a path through Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York, a "parkway" in 1868, these green roads grew both in size and cultural importance in the United States. According to the

urban historian Clay McShane, these parkways were originally either roads to or through a park; in his eyes, the prohibition of common carrier traffic on the parkways assured class segregation as well as the appropriate natural feel. Social and environmental decisions were intertwined from the outset in the history of the parkway. McShane has calculated that, by 1916, 223 miles of parkways and 432 miles of park drives existed in the 15 largest US cities.⁹

Increasingly, the design features of urban parkways were also utilized for rural roads. Whether or not the National Parks should be made accessible for car drivers was a major bone of contention in the early twentieth century. The National Park Service at first banned cars in major parks such as Yosemite, but lifted the ban in 1913. Some conservationists were on the side of park administrators and embraced the car as the representative of a middle landscape, where technology was reconciled with nature. The vision that park officials created was, in the words of parkway historian David Louter, a “windshield wilderness.” On the other hand, this accommodation of the car spurred a major wave of opposition resulting in new organizations, which one author sees as the precursor of more recent environmental movements.¹⁰

The large rights-of-way of the park roads and parkways were used to physically separate and visually screen the roadway from surrounding areas. The road itself was adapted to land form through a curvilinear alignment that preserved scenic features, such as streams and hills. Also, parkways introduced the idea of limited points of access, separate alignment for lanes running in opposite directions, and amenities such as roadside parking lots, rest areas, and scenic overlooks.

A widely used design vocabulary for parkways was formulated in the Northeastern United States, especially in New York’s Westchester County, which spent over \$80 million to complete a system of parks and parkways in the interwar years. Robert Moses’ work as the chairman of the Long Island State Park Commission and subsequently as commissioner of parks for the city of New York is both famous and notorious.¹¹ For the purposes of this paper, it suffices to note that Moses popularized and massively sponsored this idea of exclusive access to nature. The federal government sponsored the construction of the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, leading from the capital to George Washington’s birthplace and built to commemorate the 200th birthday of America’s first president in 1932. The Bureau of Public Roads employed the same landscape architects who had worked in Westchester County. Thomas McDonald, head of the Bureau, proudly exclaimed: “Our intention is not to make a formal parkway of the boulevard at any point. It is to be as close an approach to nature as can be managed, with planting directed toward the end of maximum beauty.”¹² The Mount Vernon road, despite its

rather limited size, became quite influential because of numerous publications celebrating its design and cultural significance. Another road combining modern technology and beauty was the Merritt Parkway, opened to traffic in 1940 and 38 miles long. It became an object of preservation itself in the 1980s, and the view from the road has changed little since the 1940s.¹³

The most extensive project of the time was the Blue Ridge Parkway, spanning 469 miles in the southeastern Appalachians of Virginia and North Carolina, which introduced drivers to breathtaking views and pastoral ideals. This project was overseen by the National Park Service, which was headed by a landscape architect and became the largest employer of landscape architects at the time.¹⁴ The Blue Ridge Parkway, whose construction began in 1935 and was not completed until 1987, is still one of the most heavily traveled tourist roads in the United States. It receives about 20 million tourists annually. Guidebooks extoll its natural beauty and pastoral qualities. From ridgetop overlooks, tourists enjoy the scenery as much as when traveling at maximum speeds of 45 miles per hour. No commercial traffic is allowed on this elongated parkway and would have a hard time navigating the hairpin curves and narrow roadbeds anyway.

In other words, the landscaping of the parkway has made every effort to hide its efforts. Unless they immerse themselves in the literature, travelers today will know little about the landscaping that created the parkway. Even a local newspaper recently found it newsworthy to inform its readers that even though the road looks “as if it simply happened,” it was the deliberate creation of landscape architects.¹⁵

While older publications have celebrated the landscaping and the road itself as a boon to the economy and a masterful piece of engineering, the Blue Ridge Parkway has recently been analyzed as a politically contested tool to promote tourism which did not always benefit local communities. The Park Service sought to acquire wide swaths of land as right-of-way in order to control the scenery adjacent to the road. This led to the displacement of locals and a skewed portrayal of mountain life.¹⁶

The landscape of the Blue Ridge Parkway was aligned to express these particular notions of an agricultural life in the mountains in harmony with nature, even if it included screening what the planners thought were inappropriate views of “unkept” homesteads. Parkway designers sought and achieved total control of the roadside. Under the tutelage of the Park Service, grazing cows displaced residents and abandoned homesteads were displaced with native succession species. Even today, commercial activity is almost nowhere to be seen from the roadway. In this respect, the Parkway is a “prototypical environment of instruction”; it was meant to educate both the local inhabitants and the car

drivers and passengers about the virtues of the bucolic life.¹⁷ Yet, the tension between the pre-industrial landscape exhibits of the Blue Ridge Parkway and the vehicles which allowed them to be seen—the cars and the road—was so eminent that it was difficult to explain away even for the promoters of the parkway. The question, then, is how contemporary travelers perceived of this nature, which experience it provided for them, and whether this experience contributed to a conceptual reshaping of the road. This complex will be at the core of further research.

Additionally, this project aims at a comparative history of the driving experience on inter-war roads in both Germany and the United States. Before and during the period of parkway building in the U.S., the European Alps saw many efforts at tourist appropriation, of which the building of mountain roads for car tourism is but one. A few historical studies have examined the politics of landscape production in this respect. In the case of the Sustenpaß, a mountain pass road in Switzerland built from 1938 to 1946, the cultural values and interests of tourism promoters, conservationists, and advocates of individual car ownership coalesced in advocating this road. Similar studies have been written about a weekend-getaway road in the vicinity of Vienna and a picturesque roadway to the Großglockner peak. Both roads were built to incorporate the highest degree possible of “Austrian” values as reflected in the cultural modernity of the road and its vernacular landscape.¹⁸

In the Swiss and Austrian cases, landscape, car driving, and road building were to be conjoined in a decidedly national mode. Rates of car ownership and the beauty of the natural landscape were both seen as specific national achievements, thus imbuing car-driven mobility with a sense of modernity resting on state-sponsored road building. The fact that civil engineers extolled these roads as landscape-friendly and opening up the features of the landscape only reinforced the idea of a conciliatory triad of roads, cars, and landscapes.

Informed by the ideas of these mountain roads and by a reception of the American parkway, the National Socialist dictatorship chose the autobahn as one of their preferred icons of technological modernity and imbued it with design features of the aforementioned roads while presenting it as a token model of an essentialist, German technology. However, the rhetorical support given to landscape architects who became part of the autobahn project did not translate into a coherent parkway design. Rather, civil engineers and landscape architects were given competing roles in a project whose basic premise was speed of construction, not homogeneity of style. Landscape became the focus of altercation: In the final analysis, civil engineers were inclined to use it as the ultimate symbol of a technologically mitigated aesthetic climax, while landscape architects tapped landscape as a rhetorical resource in trying to overcome

their insecure status. The results of these ideological and political conflicts were mixed. While some stretches of the autobahn offered scenic qualities and enabled the consumption of landscapes, most early roads lacked the qualities so vividly described by Nazi propaganda. In a sense, the Nazi autobahn incorporated both the model of a leisurely drive in a commodified landscape and the idea of a road network as a route to spatial domination and as a means of securing territoriality.¹⁹

Besides the autobahn, engineers and landscape architects also began work on tourist roads. The Deutsche Alpenstraße, a road extending 450 kilometers on the northern mountain crest of the Alps, had been envisioned as a tourism road since the 1920s and received a major boost in the mid-1930s. Contemporaneous publications praised the road as a boon for the economic development of the region and as a new way for urbanites to enjoy the scenery.²⁰ Like the Blue Ridge Parkway, the extensive plans for the Alpenstraße were not fully realized; building continued after the war. In 1960, a motorist complained about occasional bumpy driving and having to drive in second gear on stretches of the Alpenstraße.²¹ Again, my research will concentrate on the experience of the Alpenstraße both before and after the war, as it was expressed by drivers and passengers.

Lastly, *Consuming Landscapes* examines the withering of the politics of panoramic production in both postwar West Germany and the United States. Both countries chose to build vast networks of utilitarian interstate highways that presented a departure from both the ideology and the architectural style of the parkway's mode of landscape consumption. The United States witnessed the first full-fledged version of the utilitarian transportation machine, the Pennsylvania Turnpike, in 1940. These "superhighways" incorporated another ideology, one of the uninhibited flow of commodities as a vital part of a market economy; circulation thus was seen as the precondition to production and economic growth. Instead of consuming landscapes themselves, the drivers on these new networks became part of a sphere of rapid flow for freight and humans. American civil engineers, while impressed with the speed of construction and the dictatorial right-of-way exhibited by the autobahn, generally cited its lack of proper planning and its aesthetic efforts as undemocratic and unsuitable for a massive infrastructure effort.²² Both the U.S. Interstate System and the postwar German autobahn came to signify this approach to roads as concrete embodiments of market ideologies. At the same time, the old parkway idea did not simply die. Parkway specifications were and are still chosen in the United States for specific tourist roads or as public urban monuments, for example, the Jimmy Carter Parkway built in Atlanta in 1994. For European mountain roads, the politics of landscape production are still valid guidelines. However, the sheer number of driv-

ers and cars has made access to these panoramas a scarce resource during the tourist season.

In conclusion, the research project is concerned with three major objectives. Firstly, far from being a transient moment in the history of motorization, the technology of landscape appropriation from the roadway offers a unique insight into one of the ways in which Western societies have tried to solve the conundrum of nature and technology. By consuming landscape, major elites in the first half of the twentieth century aimed at bringing nature back to the technologically advanced societies of the West. In retrospect, this might seem like the opening of a Pandora's box of nature destruction. However, the claim of the designers that they had found the means to embellish nature must be taken seriously and analyzed historically. With such a study, it is possible to place these roads in the respective cultures of which they were a part. Rather than trying to fit these historical phenomena into procrustean models of modernity and anti-modernity, I understand them as variegated answers to modernity.

Secondly, the comparative outlook of this project should yield conclusions on the management of the environment in these two major countries with quite different political systems. The parkway ideal was one of total management of the land in the hand of a powerful public agency. While the National Park Service's agenda for the Blue Ridge Parkway was more discreet than Nazi Germany's blunt nationalism, in both instances the power of the state was meant to be visible, albeit to differing degrees. Interestingly, the statism of the parkway approach of consuming landscapes corresponded to a static understanding of nature: The landscapes designed were ideologically charged moments frozen in time, which required even more careful management in order to avoid natural dynamics. While *Consuming Landscapes* can be read as a tale of reversible Americanization and Germanization, as efforts to imbue technologies with specific national valorizations, it also makes landscape a central part of the narrative. Exactly because of its ambiguity, this concept became the central tenet of the parkway ideology. The fruition of the field of landscape studies in the United States calls for studies of specific landscapes embedded in social processes of ideological conflict and professional collaboration; the meaning of landscape for work and play is a historical product.

Lastly, by understanding landscapes as consumable items, this project aims at enriching our understanding of the history of consumer societies in the twentieth century. By analyzing publicly created landscapes as loci of consumption, this study seeks to extend the scope of the history of consumption which is increasingly becoming an important field of research.²³ In a way, the landscapes that car drivers and their passengers

experienced were as mass-produced and calibrated as the cars that helped them to see these landscapes. At the same time, this kind of consuming activity was circumscribed by the powerful hand of the nation-state, whether in totalitarian or Cold War contexts.

Notes

¹ Gerhard Hard, *Die "Landschaft" der Sprache und die "Landschaft" der Geographen: Semantische und forschungslogische Studien zu einigen zentralen Denkfiguren in der deutschen geographischen Literatur* (Bonn, 1970), 22–3. Whether or not this decline is a direct reaction to the perception of the National Socialist dictatorship as an era of "Blood and Soil," remains to be seen.

² Rudolf Borchardt, *Der Deutsche in der Landschaft* (Frankfurt, 1925, 1989); Klaus Bergmann, *Agrarromantik und Großstadtfeindschaft* (Meisenheim, 1970); Nobert Fischer, "Der neue Blick auf die Landschaft," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 36 (1996): 434–442; Gerhard Lenz, *Verlusterfahrung Landschaft: Über die Herstellung von Raum und Umwelt im mitteldeutschen Industriegebiet seit der Mitte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt/New York, 1999); David Gugerli, ed., *Vermessene Landschaften: Kulturgeschichte und technische Praxis im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Zurich, 1999).

³ Daniel E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Madison, Wisc., 2nd ed. 1997); Richard Muir, *Approaches to Landscape* (Lanham, Md., 1999); W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago, 1994).

⁴ The homepage of the European Society for Environmental History can be found at www.eseh.org

⁵ For an example of this confluence of environmental history and the history of technology, see Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York, 1996).

⁶ John Jakle, "Landscapes Redesigned for the Automobile," in *The Making of the American Landscape*: Michael Conzen, ed. (Boston, 1990), 293–310; Jakle, *The Visual Elements of Landscape* (Amherst, Mass., 1987); John Brinckerhoff Jackson, "Roads Belong in the Landscape," in idem., *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven/London, 1994), 187–205; Dirk van Laak, "Infra-Strukturgeschichte," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 27 (2001): 367–393.

⁷ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London, 1990); John Jakle, *The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth-Century America* (Lincoln, 1985); Marguerite S. Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940* (Washington, D.C., 2001).

⁸ Rudy Koshar, *German Travel Cultures* (Oxford/New York, 2000); Koshar, "Germans at the Wheel: Cars and Leisure Travel in Interwar Germany," in *Histories of Leisure*, idem, ed. (Oxford/New York, 2002), 215–230; Martin Scharfe, "Ungebundene Circulation der Individuen. Aspekte des Automobilfahrens in der Frühzeit," *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 86 (1990): 216–243; Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley, 1986); Christoph Maria Merki, *Der holprige Siegeszug des Automobils, 1895–1930: Zur Motorisierung des Straßenverkehrs in Frankreich, Deutschland und der Schweiz* (Vienna, 2002).

⁹ Clay McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City* (New York, 1994), 31–40.

¹⁰ David Louter, "Glaciers and Gasoline: The Making of a Windshield Wilderness, 1900–1915," in *Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West*, David Wrobel, ed. (Lawrence, Kan., 2001), 240–270; Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle/London, 2002).

¹¹ Gilmore D. Clarke, "The Parkway Idea," in *The Highway and the Landscape*, W. Brewster Snow, ed. (New Brunswick, 1959), 33–39; Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and*

the Fall of New York (New York, 1975), 318; Langdon A. Winner, "Do Artifacts Have Politics," *Daedalus* 109 (1980): 121–136; Steve Woolgar/Geoff Cooper, "Do Artifacts Have Ambivalence? Moses' Bridges, Winner's Bridges and other Urban Legends in S&TS," *Social Studies of Science* 29 (1999): 433–449; Bernward Joerges, "Do Politics Have Artefacts?," *Social Studies of Science* 29 (1999): 411–431.

¹² Timothy F. Davis, "Mount Vernon Memorial Highway: Changing Conceptions of an American Commemorative Landscape," in *Places of Commemoration: Search for Identity and Landscape Design*, Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, ed. (Washington, D.C., 2001), 123–177.

¹³ Bruce Radde, *The Merritt Parkway* (New Haven, 1993).

¹⁴ Environmental historians have not yet paid sufficient attention to the transformationist visions of landscape architects. For first intrusions, see Linda Flint McClelland, *Presenting Nature: The Historic Landscape Design of the National Park Service, 1916 to 1942* (Washington, D.C., 1993).

¹⁵ *The Citizen Times* (Asheville, NC), October 10, 2002.

¹⁶ Harley E. Jolley, *The Blue Ridge Parkway* (Knoxville, 1969); Anne Virginia Mitchell, *Parkway Politics: Class, Culture, and Tourism in the Blue Ridge* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1997).

¹⁷ Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 35.

¹⁸ Walter Zschokke, *Die Strasse in der vergessenen Landschaft: Der Sustenpass* (Zürich, 1997); Georg Rigele, *Die Wiener Höhenstraße: Autos, Landschaft und Politik in den dreißiger Jahren* (Vienna, 1993); idem., *Die Grossglockner-Hochalpenstraße: Zur Geschichte eines österreichischen Monuments* (Vienna, 1998).

¹⁹ For an extended discussion, see Thomas Zeller, *Straße, Bahn, Panorama. Verkehrswege und Landschaftsveränderung in Deutschland von 1930 bis 1990* (Frankfurt/New York, 2002), 41–209.

²⁰ Hans Schmithals, *Die Deutsche Alpenstraße* (Berlin, 1936); Wolf Strache, *Die Queralpenstraße* (Stuttgart, 5th ed., 1963).

²¹ H. Bachmann, "Deutsche Alpenstraße. Vom Bodensee zum Watzmann," *ADAC-Motorwelt* 6 (1960): 398–9.

²² Bruce Seely, "Der amerikanische Blick auf die deutschen Autobahnen. Deutsche und amerikanische Autobahnbauer 1930–1965," *WerkstattGeschichte* vol. 7, no. 21 (1998): 11–28.

²³ Susan Strasser/Charles McGovern/Matthias Judt, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1998). For a recent overview of the expanding literature, see Susan Strasser, "Making Consumption Conspicuous. Transgressive Topics Go Mainstream," *Technology and Culture* 43 (2002): 755–770.