

**7 JULY 2010*****Should we believe what we see?****By Pierre Donadieu*

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By defining landscape as "an area, as perceived by people", had the authors of the European Landscape Convention in mind what the use of the word *perception* implied? Historians of law will explain it certainly one day. The meaning of this term, however, could be today highlighted by the reflections of the English empiricist philosopher David Hume (1711-1776). Or more precisely by the analysis of the French philosopher Pierre Zaoui, in his book *Vivre c'est croire, portrait philosophique de David Hume* (2010) Paris, Bayard.

In his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), David Hume characterizes the human mind as a collection of self perceptions and of perceptions of the world: contemplative, atomized, singular perceptions, which are neither intentions nor representations. He divides them into two categories. The first refers to immediate, direct perceptions that come from sensations: some from external stimuli such as sensations of hot and cold, hard and soft, silence and noise, while others are internal emotions as pleasure and pain, desires and passions. Emotions and feelings are at the origin of "*vivid and intense*" experiences, which develop singular knowledge without recourse to concepts of knowledge.

The second category refers to indirect perceptions that are based on the memory of intensive experiences. They generate ideas and images "*copied*" on those of direct experiences, but mediatized and "*bland*". However, these "*impressions of reflection*" from the "*impressions of sensations*" allow to found the scientific knowledge, to the extent they relate harmoniously with them.

One example: Dip his hand in the water of a mountain lake gives an idea of its temperature. This is an immediate impression of sensations. Remembering this experience, the hike before, the present people, and the crossed landscapes refers to impressions of reflections from the first perceptual experience by association of ideas. Images of glaciers selected by memory, mental or real, are credible because they are compatible with the memory of the cold lake water. They can even replace it.

Because belief, wrote P. Zaoui, defined as a way to feel certain ideas, is precisely an impression of reflection. Believing, it is reflecting some ideas so that they naturally come to impress the mind with a new force (p. 207).

Hume said at his time, we believe more in science than in religion or metaphysics, because science makes life easier than other beliefs. More broadly, according to the philosopher, mind is imagination, but refers to rules of associations of ideas which are not those of the reason (the contradiction, the identity), but of the understanding. We believe by resemblance (the filiations between a mother and a daughter, for example), by contiguity (spatial or nature) and by the causality that makes the world real. We cannot believe and adhere to anything. But we also believe by habits (repeated experience) and custom (habit reiterated and incorporated into the culture).

Today, the Hume analyses are still relevant because they seem to escape many trends of thoughts (skepticism, positivism, empiricism, and constructivism). For a scientist, believing and making believe, it is going to the essential, to the evidence, to the rational demonstration (with the expertise and the second expertise for example). For those who are not scientist, it is the easy way to concede the "understanding."

Then, can we believe what we perceive on landscape? Certainly, because landscape is primarily a perception as recalled by the Convention. Not believing a perception of space would be refusing the sensible

world (not believing his eyes or his ears!). But a scientist such as a geographer, an agronomist, an ecologist or a historian will above all believe what can be explained (the relief, the fields, the vegetation, the historical facts); a literary person or a philosopher will believe in the interpretation of texts and images that describe it; a tourist, will believe in the emotions, sounds, smells and images he remember. And the landscaper will believe successively in all his impressions unless he wishes to limit himself to one more than others. Some prefer to believe on "what make the landscape or the atmosphere (the impressions of sensations), others on the understanding they have (the impressions of reflections). And no one can say, in a world of freedom, which beliefs are better than others.

According to Hume, it is all about to experience his beliefs: experimenting is immediately beginning to believe, raising a causality as probable, but believing is already knowing that his belief is not based on anything but a living and indescribable movement, an animal but forever improbable instinct. (See p. 301)

We cannot control our beliefs, but we can act on them. As shown by the action of lobbyists on public opinion in the United States. According to *Le Monde*, April 20, 2010, <sup>1</sup>, 46% of Americans attribute climate change to natural cycles, compared to only 35% in early 2007.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Foucart, « Le fossé se creuse entre chercheurs et opinion publique », *Le Monde* du 20 avril 2010, p. 7.