Artialising the Vosges: Processes, Projections, Purposes

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Artialisation is a filter—something practical that people and communities can share to dream up place-spaces colloquialised, experienced, perceived, unnoticed or idealised. In its modern construct, coextensive with the models of active perception conceptualised by Charles Avocat (1982), artialisation tends to mobilize all the senses. It breathes some playful engagement into our approaches to landscape theory, culture and practice. This same ambition is supported by the territorial authorities (the new merged regions, departments, territorial collectivity agencies reconfigured under the ‘loi NOTRe’ territorial re-organization reform, regional nature parks) conscious of the need to compete by rebranding their territories and the poetics of place embodied in them.

Initially, aesthetising perception starts through painted scene, then narrative, or perhaps the association of landscape with a piece of music. Alain Roger theorized the image sparking aesthetic experience as the construct of pays-jardin, or ‘gardenscape’ (p. 82), which then followed into the new school of pastoral scenes depicted by the Flemish Primitives. Sketched this way, artialisation is alchemy—it can capture a place as experienced, approached, or only imagined, distant, inaccessible, virtual—why not paradise or Cockaigne? In the 16th-century, painting witnessed a move away from the medieval gold background coeval with the emergence of the word paysage, the French equivalent of ‘landscape’. Robert Estienne’s French-Latin dictionary (1549) recognizes this new term as sharing roots with pays [countryside] and paysan [peasant]—basically, as a vernacular construct, meaning forged, laboriously, by human endeavour to shape the natural land. The word landscape—paysage in French—is a word shared across European cultures. For centuries, it was practically boxed into a dominant narrow definition equating to a sort of imperialism of what scene is seen by the viewing subject. Ever since the Renaissance, we are culturally programmed to connect to the painting scene hung in a gallery and relegate the landscape itself to a visual object that we can admire but not get “mired in” (Jullien, 2014). A. Nadaï (2007) is equally critical of the classic artialised approach, singling out the logical gap due to the missing link between the landscape and its substratum, which Alain Roger terms degré zéro. More than just image of power,
aesthetic recognition, and frame of place, landscape has to articulate with a systemic-holistic understanding of place-spaces. There is now a host of new tools for reading and interpreting place-spaces to go higher than what had been left behind by the humanists. Landscape now extends beyond what is open to visual perception and reaches into other meaningful frames, including, today, the interpretations unlocked by LiDAR mapping. The senses and perceptions experiencing our surroundings and the materials and tools used widen the filter of artialisation out into new practices. Mountain heights offering a sweeping panorama in every direction imaginable are begging to be invested to open fresh new horizons and leave the shackles of classically-framed ‘landscape’ behind. These rude spaces, exposed to buffeting winds, long perceived as hostile, and even foreboding (Broc, 1991), offer a chance to enliven all of our senses and even escape relational reasoning to express our thoughts, moods and feelings, to develop imaginary worlds (Dupuy, Puyot, 2014).

This opening lead-in recasts artialisation in a new paradigm, no longer relegated to confines of an elitist, self-contained school of thought (Cauquelin, 1989; Roger, 1997)—Emile Zola already concurred when he situated landscape at the confluence of a mood, an atmosphere and a place. The short-cut bridging a geographic object to its literary or pictorial representations warrants object diversification and rejuvenation. This is what the actors competing for tourist income are asking for, particularly the departmental tourism promotion councils and the regional nature parks (here, the Ballons des Vosges and Vosges du Nord nature parks). What follows is our attempt to apply this principle to the variscan–hercynian Vosges massif defined by its twin north-south and west-east strike direction dissymmetry reflecting a complex orogeny. This geomorphological event has been sidelined by a rich recent history dominated by the episodes crystallizing the deep insult to French nationalism, with its borders changing hands several times in the theatre of war (Fusch, Stumpp, 2013). The massif’s theatre-of-dispute landscapes are still burned into palimpsestic memory (in 1915, fighting for control of the Vieil-Armand peak, in 1944, the Schützwall-West defensive line raised on the Vosges mountain peaks to defend the Colmar Pocket held by the Germans).

The artialised reading of landscape goes beyond aesthetics alone to mobilize all of our senses. Here we attempt to apply this tenet to the Vosges massif in two phases—first, by mobilising, step-by-step, the artistic legacies stacked up over time in an effort to reach beyond the ingrained heritage of pictorial readings and connect pathways and music into our narrative; second, by looking at the measures taken to lend regional place brands a more intelligible identity by finding linkages between aesthetics and geography (Volvey, 2014).

A re-read of artialisation applied to low mountains

A re-read of the artialised approach to the massif is an engagement that hinges on a deep rethink of the models to create a whole new dialogue between all four dimensions of landscape (Sautter, 1991): material objectivist, anthropocentric utilitarian (such as the terrassing and vernacularly-termed peigné used to irrigate the upland grasslands), hedonistic, and lastly, symbolic). The cement holding it all together is the pleasure it affords. This is what led Jean-Paul Ferrier (2013) to talk quietly about geographic beauty, in relation to the ambition to provide for the planet. Re-visiting the landscape as a cursor of the quality of a space serves to pull four vectors of place brand together: signalling a
project to reclaim the landscape, planning action geared to achieve this objective, management to maintain and cultivate the output, and of course giving science and poetry their forum. F. Jullien, in citing how the Chinese point of departure into landscape is not the aesthetic dimension but the construct of water–mountain pair, signposts a fertile in-road that comfortably accommodates the example developed. In Chinese thought, the water–mountain dyad compresents opposites in dialectic dialogues: between vertical and horizontal, stable and fluid... in short, a whole series of polar partners. Jullien sees this way of conceiving landscape-as-subject as a new point of departure. He talks about a transition away from compositional thinking and towards “pairing”. The idea is to look at things as opposites that attract—not just contemplate the landscape scene but “invest it, imbed it, inhabit it”

First, escape the fateful image of 19th- and 20th-century warfare that the massif has partly been boxed into. To breathe in some fresh life and add a dose of magic, space has to integrate its epic past as a journey into the imagination. This gives body, substance and meaning to landscapes restaged as materials: deep-cut valleys, sources, glacial erratics, swirling mists and sunshine. Next, unshackle the analysis by thinking outside the aesthetics-only box. Landscape is effectively shaped by the interplay between the produced and the inhabited. This material, vernacular approach (Jackson, 2003) informs and engages the political landscapes (re)drawn by the powers that be. In the Vosges, this clash between series of stereotypes is articulated around three events. It starts with the hagiographies embellishing with tales of exploits and adventure the lives of the pioneering hermit settlers ground-clearing monks, chiefly Columban and his Irish monks who, in the 6th century, came in peregrination and chose territory in the lonely wilderness formed by the unchartered veil of Vosges forest. They went on to establish a ‘white mantle’ of abbeys and monasteries. It picks up in with the Golden Age in full swing (1578), when Thierry Alix (ducal secretary to the Chambre des Comptes, Lorraine’s board of auditors under regent Charles III) drew up the (oblique) cavalier projection of the massif

with its chains of mountaintops already monochromed in blues and greens (Garnier, 2002). It closes with the will left behind by Jules Ferry, which forged—and popularized—the expression “ligne bleue des Vosges” [the blue line of the Vosges]. The expression took hold as the wording resonated—this blue-hued line, drowned in the mist, is the stational space of beech–spruce forest, and the atmospheric substrate was heavily borrowed later on by art nouveau stained glass window artist Jacques Grüber.
These three episodes show how the mountain heights have stacked up a history of heroic deeds that go to make what Pierre Gentelle qualifies as *haut lieu* ['high place'] (Gentelle, 1995). Here, the ridges and peaks are outcropped with ruined or rebuilt settlements (Haut-Koenigsbourg castle was restored under German Emperor Wilhelm II). The region’s toponymal “ballons” (hillfort summits) are a space of condensation (Debarbieux, 1995). Their forest drapes interspersed with the upland pastures called ‘*chaumes*’ speak a language that is both real and perceived. Their landscapes are seen as “scape, veil, text” (Wylie, 2015) and continue to be staged. Today, the artialised reading of landscape as the intersection of art and geography is shifting ground, changing content, discourse and perception. Projected ideation lends itself well to approaching the question of territory by following the association of pathway and narrative.

This fits a series of three objects in the Vosges. First, the theatre-of-dispute landscapes that have served as stage to artialisation of the massif. They now shuffle from lost-from-sight to quiet respect to new approaches to forms of memorial. Second, snowsports (skiing, sledding, snowshoes, etc.) that inspired poster artists and festival organisers. Third, and last, the efforts of today’s artists to re-read the massif and form a networked movement. Embracing the precepts of land art—which also took art outside its institutionalised gallery spaces—the new generation of creators favour materials that are...
found in on-site nature (ruiform sandstone, granite) and alive (fir trees, etc.). They stage nature as art to help spark a new form of territorial awareness (Guyot, 2015; Tiberghien, 2001). The open-air people’s theatre at Bussang, which opens out to the forest, is part of this movement. Orbey observatoire Belmont was initially strategically placed—with dominant views over the plain of Alsace, it would likely serve this type of window-out approach by lending a value offering to a panoramic viewpoint site that is already on the Great War remembrance trail organised by an Alsace hotels partnership network.

The Vosges mountains are calm and contemplative—and a popular subject for painters (Claude, 2003). Memories of conflict have now been relegated to a distant past, and the recent reunification under the newly-formed Grand Est region should iron out the mentally-represented frontier that hemmed the mountains in. Their rounded summits with dissymmetrical ridges and peaks remain a centrepiece. The massif’s skyline, outstandingly sculpted through orogenic history, yet ultimately modest in size—and cropping up in many other places across east-central Europe—, no longer lends it a stand-out identity. With local council backing, the massif is looking for new destination-target assets for tourism promotion. The morale-sapping decline of industry leaving brownfield sprawl from the early 1960s cast a grey shadow over the attractiveness of the Vosges, despite a handful of reconversion success stories like Bleuforêt. The climate is showing all the signs of oceanisation—snowy winters are getting rarer, which leaves little promise of a dreamscape destination (Flageollet, 2005). Today’s landscapes forge one big heterogeneous mosaic. On one hand, place and space still relatively populated and mostly well-served in the High Vosges. Further down, in the ‘sandstone’ Middle Vosges, too many valleys encased and underpopulated, with a very seal sentiment of enclavement (Labrue, 2009). The landscape degradation referred to above points to little chance of a turnaround, making it urgent to come up with new ideas to stay in the territorial ‘place race’ (Degron, 2014) now that territorial equality is sliding down the policy agenda (Estèbe, 2015). The axis-line drawn by long-distance footpaths GR 53 then 5 as they cross the Wissembourg massif at Belfort can serve as substrate to this rethink, as its footfall can build bridges between the three classical scales of landscape analysis. First, the finer scale of inventory analysis, then the median scale of situational diagnosis and finally the staging, allstorylined by narrative landscape and soundscape. In this context, the choices of poets and artists offer precious help, as they can serve both as diagnosis—or even therapy—and cure by emerging new value from discrete, ordinary, as-yet-unpurposed spaces. To draw an illustrative example, we only have to look back to the patronage policy led by Philippe Seguin when he was mayor of Epinal (1983-1997). He commissioned a number of high-profile artists to magnify the town’s reputation by hosting works that harnessed strong symbols connecting into the history of the Vosges. Bernard Venet forged one of his ‘Indeterminate Lines’ series (Figure 2).
From heroic staging to long-lost snowfall: what legacies are assets to operate what kind of turnaround?

We have seen how artialisation has changed approach to the question of territory and how the Vosges massif, short of a place brand strategy\(^\text{10}\)\(^\text{10}\), has to change with it. Now, taking our argument forward, we turn to look at some enduring identity assets that pass the test of time. These assets concern geographies where the time–spaces cross-impact matrix holds promise, with representations that have long been left stuttering. Space is a far more dependable value than time. Time is irretrievable, it escapes, it flows. But space stays around, it lasts, it just ‘is’ (Collot, 2011). With the high Vosges as focus, image and imagined world pair well, find value in the vast panorama, the distant (you can see the Alps, on a clear day), the unfettered horizon, swirling skies bringing stormy weather fronts in from the west, heavy with thick anvil-shaped rainclouds. Orographic precipitation deposits over 2 m of rainfall and snowfall where the forest ecotone starts to splinter (beech forest tree line at around 1050–1150 m altitude) and give way to upland pastures. In the illustrations accompanying the portrait work of wildlife photographer Vincent Munier, Pierre Pelot writes: “Ici est un pays qui ne dit pas facilement son nom. D’humides turbulences dans les sillages du silence embrumé” [This pays, our land, will not speak its name. Eddies of air gush swathed in misted silence]\(^{11}\).
All this taps into the idea of the personality, invention, and spirit of the places. The wide-open space acts as a facilitative vector of time. Successive layers of artialisation overlap, stacking up and starting to blur the lines, which is what has created today's staged construct of the massif. First, the foundation, an essentially heroic representation with roots embedded deep and far into the past. This first point stutteringly juggles two elements that do not sit well together: on one side, the poetry breathed in the place-spaces, but on the other, waves of hard history—the medieval hermit-settlers, mobilisation at the frontier, the horrors of war. Next, a shift, dating essentially to the end of the 19th century, towards opening out to tourism, with a whole catalogue of posters commissioned by the railway operators. Finally, today's representations, which mark a split away from these earlier philosophies, as they advocate a brand new image—fresh, natural, and ecosystemic. This is where artialisation comes in, divesting heroic-epic poetry or manufactured staging to invest objects that prompt an overhaul in tourism policy, with, for instance, the grouse and its habitats, the ancient forests that may have been home to the legendary dahu, maintaining the upland pastures to keep them expansive, or events organized to stage roleplay. To round of the process, there is still the stacking of legacies and stilted forms to address, where we have to gauge how far the changing artialisation process can help. Where does it stand in communication strategy on the destination-target territories? Does it influence the images we have of them? Is the territorial reform process reconfiguring the map of the regions (upscaled EPCI [inter-communal bodies], SCoT [territorial zoning and development policy] or even getting the Pays d’Art et d’Histoire [PAH: Pays of historic and artistic heritage] seal) going to drive this approach forward, particularly inside mapped landscapes devised to articulate natural, social, and even hierotopic features?

Place branding in the Vosges involves a cross-fertilisation of storytelling, hagiographic narrative, biodiversity in the now-nurtured but formerly hostile-natured sites: the fens colonised by peat mosses, the peatland bogs with their floating mats, the domed, ombrotrophic, transitional bogs, where pioneering species are taking hold. Narrations of myth of legend will set episodes in life of Saint Hydulphe of Moyenmouier against today’s ancient forests, in parts of the massif that were abandoned over a century ago (like Wildenstein communal forest), where litter is piling up as trees fall down. This type of organisation resonates with, for the 7th-century “rocky-cragged mountaintops plummeting down into deep and desolate valleys”, with wolves, bears, and aurochs, against a backdrop of Charlemagne’s mythical hunts. Gustave Doré’s illustrations could serve as bridge into the imagined world—as could re-readings of the illustrated works of Erckmann–Chatrian. Artialisation and a dose of magic bring that extra meaning to further appreciate the many and varied protected spaces inside the two Vosges regional nature parks. The many local toponymal features that add to this fabled magic are narrative waymarks signposting on the trails followed.
An outstanding environment in which to interweave sporting exploits with rare biodiversity, postglacial landform legacies, the presence of grouse, and tales of legend into a narrative that gives a new form of place-space artscape.

Photo by Jean-Pierre Husson.

11 Thierry Alix’s map (1578) is a bridge connecting the geohistories and the poetics of the places. This map of the vast high-pasture grassland expanses—the “Grand Pâturage des Hautes-Chaumes”—is a bird’s-eye view map coeval with its age of history, drawn with the same pictorial license as that used to depict the Renaissance cities, and sparking the imagination. The high point inspiring the depiction simply cannot embrace the whole real-word picture. Going back to the very same place, with a commanding view over Gérardmer, the idea is to set the real picture against the map and mobilise a series of texts that speak of the Hohneck summit and the three-lakes valleys, with Théophile Gautier, Élisée Reclus, friends of the Club vosgien rambling organisation and the 19th-century botanist excursionists, the pre-1914 postcard publishers, and similar sources (Alexandre, 2013; Laperche-Fournel, 2013). These connections mobilise sound, smell, and colour. Going back to Thierry Alix is a good opening route for reifying perceived portraits of the Vosges while at the same time integrating the vast array of details that can be found in the map to authentify how Charles III, Duke of Lorraine took control of the summits (especially the surveys of extractable ores).

12 On the massif, the link between artialisation and theatre-of-dispute landscapes has not yet emerged a viable alternative form of remembrancing of the front-line battles and maquis resistance efforts—a priori, nothing like the kind of initiatives found on the Chemin des Dames, where they have made the bold move to host nighttime festivals on the former battlefields, or in Verdun, where artists from the Association Mono Mono have soundscaped Zone Rouge areas. The Vosges massif, which served as a theatre of fierce
combat during World Wars I and II, especially during the terribly hard winter of 1945, is still divided between relative non-remembrance or even pushing the combat zones aside, and respectful commemoration, chiefly at the Struthof concentration camp. There are few initiatives that do not fit one of these two scenarios. However, worth citing is research surrounding the obsidional plants, an ode to how life can resist the ravages of war, and a vector with promising potential leverage. Site-reading through LIDaR maps is also expected to add an extra original substrate for whoever can upswell a movement around the images.

Finally, first the Belle Époque and then the 1960s put the Vosges on the map as a ‘high place’ of skiing that has played host to World Cup races. Snowsports were a major theme of rail-company poster art (Gauchet, 2001). However, these images belong to the past, as totally out of sync with the current picture: irregular seasonal snow cover, sometimes failing to aligning to peak demand driven by French winter-term holiday schedules, plus a lack of altitude and groomed hills, trails and pistes that, despite investment in snow cannons, still suffer in comparison with the Alps and the Pyrenees. We have come a long way since the Little Ice Age where the High-Vosges herdsmen claimed they had to dig tunnels to get from one farm to another.

The stacked strata of pasts gone by mix visible, blurred and invisible landscapes (Lowenthal, 2008). The flow of time cascading through our place-spaces lends the Vosges an original flavour—possibly even a soul. This narrative is to be read as the thread weaving these three stages together—stages that history has not left unspared. Inventing new approaches is the only way forward.

**New artialising images need creating to better communicate on the massif**

Bussang open-air theatre’s unique backdrop window dates from 1895. The concept started out an audacious gamble by Maurice Pottecher, but is every bit as popular today, 120 years later. Plays are acted out against the same decor, with an open-air backdrop of forest stretching into the distance. This new formula opened up a new chapter in the story of artialising the massif. It has helped make the transition from a cultural heritage landscape born out of aesthetic contemplation to a landscape of intention, mediation, even phenomenology—i.e. pure entry into the landscape, without distinction between place and being. This landscape is carried by signs and traces. It accounts for the thickness of palimpsestic strata and the fingerprints of time conserved unadulterated in the ground; the Pagan Wall at Mont Sainte Odile or the “first”, the rocky crest outcrop summit that separates Alsace from Lorraine. Few films have helped bring this shift in image, as most have essentially typcasted tales of folklore, with for example Les Grandes Gueules [‘The Wise Guys’] directed by Robert Enrico (1965), or war, with Indigènes [‘Days of Glory’] directed by Rachid Bouchareb (2006). Looking across to writers and poet side, Pierre Pelot and Richard Rognet have depicted the massif in their very colours and perceptions, where the landscape is both object of history and object for story—historied and storied. These artists use the massif as a scenic substrate, with no effort yet to mobilise new fictions, outside the Fantastic’Arts science fiction film festival that brings international colour to winters in Gérardmer every year but is not really connected to the Vosges territory. The route into an artialised massif is signposted in terms of its stones, veteran trees whose seeds are in demand for their exceptional pure genetic value and
merit, deep cold valleys niching ancient forests, or possibly even hiding grouse in its home habitat of thin woods carpeted with bilberries (called ‘brimbelles’ in Vosges dialect). All of these objects are vectors for inspiration, invitations to play with art and lend operativity to the alchemy talked up by Grison (2002) for whom art is the creative writing of space. Initiatives engaged by artists, art collectives and the regional nature parks themselves have flourished and blossomed on the Internet. Many initiatives are short-lived, sometimes happenings or ephemeral performances. The village of Voivres (near Bains-les-Bains) and the association Eaudici have created artists’ residencies. The artists-in-residence are asked to lead initiatives surrounding the Étang Lallemand that has conservation designation as a biological site of special interest. Here, artscape meets environmental education. Initiatives like this are starting to pop up all over the area—like with ‘Artsentier’ sited at Lac Blanc or on the Sentier des Passeurs path at Moussey. The precursors include the citizens of Mandray, who gave substance to a generous idea when, saddened by the devastation left behind by European windstorms of 26 December 1999, they pulled together to help create wood sculptures posted on the summit that bears their commune’s name. The legacy today is that they have been largely reclaimed by the young saplings quietly reclaiming the land. Of today’s generation of artists that have given the Vosges resonance, painter Olivier Claudon has helped bring the Vosgienne cattle breed back into the spotlight by making it the subject for a suite of paintings, and photographer Vincent Ganaye has envalued the macro-landscapes.

16 Re-engaging landscape spaces through a fresh new approach to artialisation, in other words staging the poetics of the places, offers a number of key assets for territorial recovery and attractiveness for tourism. First, it is a way to mobilize our contemporaries and scaffold a sharing community through the vector of festival leveraging the approach. It is also a way to suffuse a territory with extra meaning and reconnect it with bottom-up projects generating forms of governance. Lastly, it is a valuable process for lifting and rebuilding community confidence in a territory bagged down with an image deficit. Ultimately, recasting space as art is probably a positive way to drive participatory democracy and generate community wellbeing. A fresh re-staging is vital if we want to escape the image deficit affecting a lot of hercynian mountain ranges—and particularly the Vosges massif—all too often typecast into the narrow cliché of easy walks but hard times.

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NOTES

1. J.-M. Besse (2009) says landscape “is complex experiential process-in-space”.
2. In the late 18th century, Goethe had to cross the Vosges, and spoke of “grime-faced mountains”.
3. “All landscape is a born of art”.
4. The verb ‘provide for’, here, is meant in both its senses: to provide for households by meeting their needs, and provide for landscapes by preserving them, leaving them in peace, and even leaving their scars to heal.
7. Local term used to name the erosion of the massif that has sculpted low-lying mountain tops into rounded summits.
8. Bleufôret—literally ‘blue forest’—is a brandname deliberately chosen to articulate the image of the Vosges with its blue-hued ideation.
9. The area’s is still haunted by the ‘affaire du petit Grégory’ —the killing of four-year-old Grégory Villemin (1984), one of France’s most reported murder mysteries, that took place just as the massif was struggling to recover from a deep economic recession. In 2014, Nicolas Mathieu’s detective novel disconcertingly titled Aux animaux la guerre [referencing animals in combat], which stirs up this anxiety-ridden rust-belt atmosphere, won the Lorraine’s Erckmann-Chatrian literary award.
10. In 2015, the departmental council commissioned the archives départementales [departmental archives and records office] to organise an exhibition on the image of the Vosges, which led into a one-day conference held in late 2016.
12. Imagined-world animal of local lore, and a theme of jokes, spoofs, and pranks.
13. The Meurthe-et-Moselle département, for example, put its landscapes atlas online in 2015: see http://vivreslespaysages.cg54.fr
15. Obsidional plants that have been imported by travelling armies and learned to thrive in the areas trampled down by war.
17. On the upper Moselle valley, niched at the foot of the Ballon d’Alsace summit (1247 m a.s.l.) where he lives, Pierre Pelot writes: “This is our pays, the land of stories that forge the lives of people, and that I am here to tell”.
18. Activities, for example, hosted at the Grange aux Paysages, lodged in the remodelled outbuildings in the castle grounds at Lorentzen, near Sarre-Union.
19. See the landscape festival organised at Nonville (Vosges), at the edge of the sandstone Vôge plateau.
ABSTRACTS

Artialisation results from a worldview of landscape perceived through real, emotive and poetic identities. Artialisation carries an operativity that we should be remobilizing to frame a place brand strategy with local government backing. Here we attempt an operationalization applied to the Vosges mountains, a massif struggling with net-negative brand image. The paper articulates a three-point argument. After underlining the need to rethink artialisation outside the aesthetising box, we move on to show that legacies of the past can be repurposed to refresh the massif’s image through playful narratives, and that nature has to be ideated to bring greater brand legitimacy to this hercynian fold belt.

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