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Optical instrumentation and earth moving in 17th c. French Gardens.
Craftsmanship, Site, and Historiographies

Abstract

From the 1950’ onwards, the historiography of French 17th century gardens starts addressing political and infrastructural issues through the framework of epistemology and its related technological apparatus (Bardet, Scully, Mariage, Benevolo, Mukerji). The influence of landscape architecture on large-scale spatial organizations is thought to be determined by the scientific and technological progress that accompanies the development of absolutism. Changes in optical instrumentation, initiated in astronomy by the Academy of Science and applied by its members to land survey, come at the forefront of this aggiornamento. Therefore, the Grand Canal at Versailles becomes a technological metonymy of the garden which in turn is thought to epitomize "territorial management". Concepts and means are fused and drifted, by our contemporaries, from sky description to earth-moving techniques. Earthwork, grading, or terracing in gardens are viewed as practical applications of advanced technology in cartography, land measurement, and survey.

The problem with this reading is that it relies almost exclusively on two contradictory sources: the Parallèle published by royal historiographer Perrault and his Mémoires. Now, if these sources are, 1st—compared one to another, 2nd—confronted to the site's physical reality, 3rd—reconsidered in light of the measurements that were taken in the surroundings, 4th—paralleled with the actual gardeners works at the Grand Canal (through quotes, contracts, and reports), and finally—related to professional practices as recorded in technical literature, then a completely different picture emerges opposed to both classical and modern historiographies. It not only appears that the measurement tools used to implement landscape designs in 1670-1700 remain essentially the same since the end of the 16th century. More importantly, innovation, within the complex relation between optics and earth-moving, proves to lie elsewhere within the framework of "topographic perspective": in the construction of anamorphic devices on the ground, operating a major technological transfer. Long sought-for by royal gardeners, this transfer was fully achieved by Le Nôtre and his collaborators.