

A critical review of cultural landscapes in French and Belgian mining basins

[00 Image of a slag heap]

Slag heaps are the result of the accumulation of mining waste from the exploitation of coal throughout the extractive history of Wallonia. A story that, as you know, came to an end at the late 20th century.

Today I will focus on the methods used to define and manage this material heritage from different points of view: landscape, industrial heritage and also ecological prospects.

Part 1: slag heaps

I'll start with a sketch of the material reality of the slag heaps in Wallonia.

[01 Image " Industrial Belgium with slag heap in the background]

Slag heaps began to appear in representations and written descriptions in the late 19th century. On maps, they multiply and gradually grow in size over the decades (here, in the Charleroi region).

[02 Passage of the four maps 1856, 1873, 1904, 1939, 2025?]

Here, we see the evolution between 1856 (eighteen fifty six), when the slag heaps did not yet appear on the map, and 1939 (nineteen thirty nine), when they reached a stage of maturity. The coal industry in Wallonia began to decline shortly after the Second World War. It finally closed in 1984.

[03 "Coal curse" in Belgium: coal, mines, urba, unemployment]

The geography of the slag heaps corresponds to the underground geography of coal. With coal extraction came industry, and with industry came populations and urbanization. Half a century after the shock of deindustrialization, this territorial pattern is still prevalent in Wallonia's social and material realities. The current unemployment map of Wallonia attests to this, and same with poverty. These maps illustrates the so called "Coal curse" phenomenon : the economic decline that broadly touches former coal regions.

[04 Graph explaining proportions]

To measure the territorial impact of waste accumulation resulting from extraction, here are a few numbers:

If we count only heaps larger than 50,000 m³ (fifty thousand cube meters), there are 543 (five hundred and forty three) in Wallonia's coalfields. If we count spoil heaps with a volume greater than the Kheops Pyramid, there are still 74 (seventy four).

Based on an average distribution over the surface area of the Walloon mining basins, this means that there is, on average, one slag heap every 3 square kilometer.

[Dessin]

Also, as we have seen, the slag heaps are concentrated in Wallonia's most densely populated and poorest regions. For these regions, they represent a spatial capital which, if it was properly identified, could meet needs of populations living nearby. This is already the case in some places, mainly thanks to spontaneous citizen action, but other sites suffer from a lack of attention or are being dismantled due to real estate pressure. This potential is especially relevant given the affective bonds that have formed between these sites and the local populations. These bonds also have memorial aspects.

[05 Hiercheuse image on a slag heap]

During the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, slag heaps were workplaces. Workers, mostly women, deposited mining waste there before mechanization automated the task. Until the Second World War, these sites were also glamping grounds, where working families (often women and children) went to collect coal for domestic use.

[06 texts by Camille Lemonnier and the 1911 law]

By this time, some abandoned slag heaps had already been recolonized by vegetation and identified as landscape assets. A few descriptions in the 19th century attest to this. At the same time, the Belgian parliament passed a law to preserve “the beauty of landscapes”. The report accompanying this law explicitly refers to slag heaps as sites to be replanted by operators.

[07 Images de Paul Meyer, Francis Pourcel, Georges Vercheval]

These places became also playgrounds for working class children. They left their mark on the childhood memories of inhabitants of the coalfields. These childhood memories are one of the elements that

later contributed to the attachment that developed in the mining regions towards these spaces. Even today, the slag heaps remain a favorite spot for local children.

[09 Image exploitation terril & résistances]

After closure of activities, many coal-mining sites were abandoned. Prospects for the economic conversion of the coal-mining regions then turned to the development of logistical infrastructures, mainly motorways. Mining of certain slag heaps for freeway foundations thus began in the early 1970s.

In 1973, the first oil crisis struck. Due to rising energy prices, the slag heaps also acquired value due to the residual coal they contained. This was another reason to mine into slag heaps.

A series of resistance movements then formed in the working-class neighborhoods surrounding the slag heaps to oppose their exploitation and “defend” them.

These movements succeeded in significantly blocking mining operations and led to a decree classifying the slag heaps in 1985.

It should be noted that this classification is poorly detailed, and is not followed up by a specific administration. The prevailing attitude about this heritage in Wallonia is generally *laissez-faire*. One important point is that a significant proportion of slag heaps are privately owned, and are now considered as land assets by their owners.

[11 Bois du Cazier site]

However, a few particular sites were specifically characterized as industrial heritage, such as the Bois du Cazier site, which was registered in the UNESCO World Heritage list.

[12 map of the NPC mining basin]

On the subject of UNESCO, it's important to note that the whole Nord-Pas-de-Calais coalfield, which is an extension of the Belgian coalfield, was also added to UNESCO's World Heritage List, in the *Cultural Landscapes* category. We'll come to this later on.

[13 Extract from the slag heap management notice]

The slag heaps of the French basin are of course included as elements of this *cultural landscape*, and are subject to ongoing management, aimed in particular at preserving their visual appearance as former

industrial products. In France, the categories of landscape and heritage are used extensively in the classification, resulting in a close visual control. This involves, for example, preventing the reforestation of slag heaps to preserve the specific open ecosystems and also the historical image of slag heaps.

There's also much discussion about the notion of *Monument*, with a category of *terril-monument*, a category associated with heritage studies; and also an extensive use of the criteria of *picturesque*, which is a category associated with landscape studies.

This synthesis between landscape and heritage is crystallized in the UNESCO's category of *cultural landscapes*. We'll come back to this later.

[14 Activities on Belgian Slag Heaps]

Since the 2010s, the situation in Belgium has not changed much. However, the chain of slag heaps has been the subject of a number of citizen initiatives and uses. One notable example is the famous Boucle Noire in Charleroi, created in 2013 and has become a local institution. Many community, social, and festive projects regularly take place. More institutional projects, particularly in the field of tourism, have also been developed.

Today, French and Belgian slag heaps are also explicitly recognized as "biodiversity reserves" because of the specific ecosystems that have developed spontaneously there since they were abandoned. In France, as we have seen, it is the subject of highly targeted prescriptions. But in Belgium, the identification of this "biodiversity" varies from one site to another. No general framework prevails.

[Schéma des reminiscences paysagères]

One of the aspects I'm investigating is the part of human experience that tends to "haunt" the landscape and permeate through a mixture of memories, stories, reminiscences, and material traces.

These ghosts of the landscape experience are constitutive of attachments to the land and were particularly active in the mobilizations to defend slag heaps in the 1970s.

Part 2: epistemologies of heritage and landscape

[14 Diagram comparing the Belgian and French situations with regard to heritage and landscape policies concerning slag heaps].

Through the lens of slag heaps, I'm seeking to list and question the conceptual and operational tools dedicated to heritage and landscape. These questions are multi-layered. I only have space here to give a brief outline of some orientations of my research in the form of a few bulletpoints, questioning heritage and landscape frameworks.

[15 Virginie Maris]

Culture/Nature/Wildlife

The opposition between control of "nature" and a relationship with the "wild" are today a point of discussion in ecological thinking. There is a dilemma between the active management of a chosen biodiversity (as is the case on the NPC slag heaps, as we have seen) and a *laissez-faire* attitude that opens up the spontaneous play of the wild (like in Belgium). The debate between these two trends has its origins in distant historical roots. In the 19th century, it fed into the notion of *wilderness*, which played an ambiguous role in partly sustaining European colonization of America. French philosopher Virginie Maris recently reclarified the terms of this debate, identifying the potential contradictions within approaches of nature conservation, making it depend on human care, but also on human control, questioning the place that remains (or not) for wilderness as alterity. This debate also reflects in the presentation of H  l  ne Collin yesterday about deep sea mining as challenging an unknown and however important space.

[16 Diagram]

An anti-colonial approach to heritage

Anti-colonial thinking in the field of heritage is embodied in the category of *cultural landscapes* in the World Heritage List, a category that directly concerns the French coalfield, as we've seen. The debates that led to this category began with criticisms of the definition of heritage forged in first UNESCO's Convention. They focused on the distinction between natural and cultural heritages, which reflected a nature-culture dichotomy attached to European modernity. The category of *cultural landscapes* has made it possible to diversify the objects worthy of preservation, valuating also intangible links between territories and

communities. But these criticisms and debates are still alive today within ICOMOS, and consequently in the broader field of heritage.

[17 Quotes Vincent Veschambre (2005, p.2) and Marco d'Eramo (Unescocide, p.51)]

These anti-colonial considerations may seem far from the issues raised by the slag heaps in the heart of Europe. But they make sense because they highlight the social and cultural domination at play in the uses of heritage. In this respect, Vincent Veschambre's work on the symbolic struggles between social groups around industrial heritage are to be considered. And the criticism of heritage as a vector for commodification of urban space and its reappropriation by the dominant classes, should be seen in the continuity of anti-colonial critiques of heritage.

On their own scale, the slag heaps of Wallonia are not exempt from these tensions. Their development as a tourist attraction, currently underway, could raise these issues more sharply, particularly in competition with other, less institutional appropriations.

[18 Quote Tim Ingold]

The slag heap as monument and anti-monument

These reflections on the political aspects of heritage also invite to a reflection on the interpretation of the slag heap as a *monument*. This interpretation is regularly mobilized in the narrative of valorization of the French slag heap chain, notably via the *terril-monument* label applied to some of them.

This reading can be challenged on the basis of Tim Ingold's ontological interpretation of *tumuli*. For Ingold the *tumulus* is an object that is not *placed* on the ground, but rather physically forms a whole with it and, as such, is reshaped by an interplay of organic forces. This puts it in direct contradiction with one of the parameters that characterizes a monument in classical heritage epistemology : the integrity of its shape (see UNESCO's Operational Guidelines, version 2024, art. 87 et seq.).

[19 Alberti + quote from Price (p. IV) + quote NPC terrils]

Critique of the landscape as an optical device

In this respect, it is worth noting the mobilization of the "picturesque" character as a main parameter for the enhancement of slag heaps within the framework of the French classification as a *cultural landscape*. The picturesque is linked to a 18th century tradition which defines landscape essentially as a visual device. For its original thinkers, the value of real landscapes is judged by the impression they are likely to generate when captured by a pictorial image.

[20 quote from Cosgrove]

This school of thought on landscape as image, has been criticized from Anglo-Saxon radical geography, notably through the work of Denis Cosgrove. He showed how the landscape as image was used by the landowning bourgeoisie to equip and enhance its conquest of geographical space. The landscape-image served as a tool for idealizing and culturally legitimizing these social and spatial conquests. The picturesque criteria applied to landscape management is therefore potentially a device for reframing the social conflicts that can inhabit a landscape, and this is particularly noticeable in the case of post-industrial landscapes, where memorial competitions between social classes are usually active.

[21 quote from Olwig]

Geographer Kenneth Olwig offers a different kind of critique of the epistemology of landscape as an optical device. He underlines that the word *landschaft*, which means *landscape*, was used long before the Renaissance to designate communities in Northern Europe, as well as the land to which they were linked. A much broader definition, then, than the "pictorial representation of a country" that has replaced it for the past five centuries. Olwig sees this approach as a rediscovery of *the substantive nature of landscape*, a more 'materialist' idea which links lands and communities in a single destiny, putting forward the attachments to land as playing a key role in social cohesion and emancipation.

Conclusion

Other avenues are still being explored in this work, which cannot be described here. What remains to be emphasized is that this issue is relevant to current events, insofar as Europe, in 2024, has invited its various member countries to consider reopening mines on their soil, in

a geopolitical context where autonomy over certain rare materials is considered strategic.

The Walloon region has translated this directive into a reform of the regional mining code, which was voted last year, in April 2024.

[23 CADTM website]

Former mining lands are designated as potential candidates for future exploration, and numerous citizens' groups have already voiced their concern about the lack of public debate surrounding this new mining code.

Slag heaps in Wallonia also represent a significant land asset, which could be reactivated in the perspective of zero artificialization of land, as seen in the presentation of Kristel and Marie yesterday. Some are already being considered as a resource for real estate developments, albeit their status of "high biological quality".

[24 Boubier]

This is yet another ambiguity in the status of these spaces and another reason to try to clarify the tools used to identify, interpret, and manage them in the future.