Manifestations of Ideational Landscapes: Heaven, Hell and Film

By Hillary Christopher

There is a place where you walk upon the clouds. Before entering, you must go through a golden gate of sorts. Once passed, all of your loved ones smile and greet you. There might be a flock of doves flying someplace in the distance. Somewhere else is another place constructed not of clouds, but of jagged rocks. This place is dark and full of fire. You feel alone, full of dread and fear.

These two places should be familiar despite a simple description. Hopefully you identified them as Heaven and Hell, respectively. They are classified as one of the three landscapes, which Knapp and Ashmore (1990) define as constructed, conceptualized, and ideational (1990:10-13). A constructed landscape is a set of meanings imposed on a built feature. Conceptualized landscapes place meaning on natural features. A mountain, for example, might have cultural significance despite not having any man-made alterations done to it. Finally, an ideational landscape is something that can be experienced within the mind and thought of, rather than experienced physically. It can also be termed as an imagined place. In this paper I discuss ideational landscapes using Heaven and Hell as main examples. I argue that the general concept of ideational landscapes can give insight on how humans have the ability to create a communal place; more specifically, ideational landscapes can be a collective set of thoughts, desires, and social manifestations.

By examining such landscapes, it is possible to determine what humans consider important, attainable, or simply in existence. It is important to remember that someone (an individual or a group) or something can dictate ideational processes. The resulting manifested landscape can only represent the ideational one in a material sense. The relevance here is that if ideational landscapes are significant enough to be collective and hold common attributes among individuals, the material landscapes might be incomplete or non-comprehendible to anyone outside of the community, such as an archaeologist.

I demonstrate the use of ideational landscapes and phenomenology in archaeological perspectives by using examples of Heaven and Hell. The very concept of Heaven and Hell has been
persistent for thousands of years. As a result, even non-believers, or those for whom Heaven and Hell are not real, are probably familiar with the description (like the one above). I was born and raised Catholic; I am biased. Thus, the Heaven and Hell discussed in this paper will refer primarily to the Western Christian standards. Heaven and Hell are present in Judaism, Islam, and other religions. Because of my unfamiliarity with possibly different variation of these places within different contexts, and because of the scope of this paper, the Christian versions will have to suffice. By no means I want to promote religion, Christianity, or related ideologies. Rather my purpose is to discuss and stress the significance and power of ideational landscapes in general, while grounding this argument in these well-known places. This paper is also not necessarily grounded in theology or philosophy. The use of Heaven and Hell is deliberate because of the fact that regardless of belief and variation, almost every single person in the West at least knows about these places. The use of capitalization is also notable due to the assumption that we are discussing the specific places and not allusive ones (such as in vernacular speech as mentioned below).

The communal sense and understanding of what Heaven and Hell and such ideational landscapes are is also reflected in pop culture. Ideational landscapes are not always connected to Heaven and Hell specifically, but commonly appear in fantasy and sci-fi genres. I focus on this matter in the second part of this paper. A trend in cinema is to explore the possibility of actually going to and visiting an ideational landscape. While there are countless films that do this, I use Alice in Wonderland, Thor, and Tron: Legacy as basic examples. Each of these films has a varying degree of ideationality. Alice in Wonderland is based on an individual’s imagined world; Thor has roots in what we now consider a mythical realm; and Tron: Legacy is exciting because it explores the virtual world as real.

Human society and the ideational

Any human society must hold ethos of a shared experience in order for it to exist and be defined as such. For example, Heaven and Hell in Western cultures reflect normative behavior, while normative behavior is reflected on the ideational construction of the descriptions of Heaven and Hell. The binary of the two places is particularly interesting. Heaven is good and Hell is bad; likewise, those who do (and are) good go to Heaven and those who do (and are) bad go to Hell. We are able to distinguish and define good and bad qualities in a social context.
This binary has also set up all political systems. Hierarchies are typically built and maintained by leaders who care for the masses. If the leaders are destructive or negligent, a revolt of sorts will take place to institute a new head or order. More egalitarian societies adhere to accepted behaviors while expecting that everyone support the group. Either way, there is a communal sense of right and wrong and of good and bad.

What is contained within the descriptions of both Heaven and Hell hold a structural foundation but may be conceptualized slightly differently between individuals (Dewsbury and Cloke 2009; Hart 2007; Everden 1981; Anschuetz et al. 2001; Lowenthal 1961; Schein 1997). This is understandable. Heaven and Hell are not always talked about directly and definitely during someone’s regular interaction with others. The fact is that

…peoples’ intimate relationships with incidental properties of certain worldly phenomena allow them to understand and describe accurately the essence of the things they experience…Although vernacular knowledge is not a singular manifestation between cultures or even within specific cultures, certain cross-cultural regularities occur in classificatory systems upon which common-sense beliefs are imposed (Anschuetz et al. 2001:183-184).

In other words, we are able to mutually understand each other because of this vernacular knowledge, which is especially applicable to the descriptions of ideational Heaven and Hell. But this is on a structural and basic function only. Individuals inherently do have their own specific details of what these places looks like and entail. Everden (1981) uses an example of two people of different philosophies, backgrounds, and perspectives describing the same tree,

Each observer would probably consider his interpretation accurate and the other's viewpoint trivial, nonsensical, or unrealistic. Each would be correct, as far as he goes. Each illuminates one aspect of how the tree appears. Neither describes the way a tree is, but each describes why the tree is important to him and is real to him. However, a description of the tree acceptable to both observers would be difficult to achieve, unless there were an explicit recognition of the various ways a tree can be and an attempt to describe as many of these ways as possible in the hopes of discerning the common or
essential features. Without this clearly defined intention, each viewer will see only his

But because Heaven and Hell are communal in nature and manifested with societal expectations, the
varying "realities" are negligible. What matters most of these two arguments is that the vernacular
knowledge and the proverbial tree exist simultaneously. Therefore it is valid to say that the vast amount
of variations based on individual versions of ideational landscapes commit to a conglomeration and
collective, singular ideational landscape. To attain placement in either Heaven or in Hell, one must act as
an individual according to communal expectations.

If there is a widespread communicable vernacular knowledge of Heaven and Hell, there must be
an ideational landscape of them despite disbelief. Those who take Heaven and Hell to be unreal places
are still aware of them, can describe a simple phenomenology, and are familiar with the behaviors
associated with each. Non-believers can at least acknowledge what the ideational aspect can contain
(Dewsbury and Cloke 2009:704). The reasons for both belief and disbelief are, thus, irrelevant because
these ideational landscapes are stubbornly resilient. Those who see Heaven and Hell as real places
know that these places are directly inaccessible and intangible until death (literally!). Thus these places
can exist, for now, within individual mind only as ideational landscapes. It can be argued then that since
Heaven and Hell are ideational only, and that they transcend individual belief, they do indeed exist within
the mind and not necessarily in reality, but can be considered real in the sense that at far minimum,
individual thoughts about these places exist.

The phenomenology of an ideational landscape such as Heaven or Hell is also important. Such a
concept “exists on two levels, a material and corporeal one and an immaterial and incorporeal one; both
equally real" (Dewsbury and Cloke 2009:707). One cannot actually physically go to an ideational
landscape, such as Heaven or Hell, because it is located in the mind. Because Heaven and Hell are
divine landscapes, there is a limitation to how humans can perceive them. Tilley (1994) claims that “this
results in the creation of a gap, a distance in space. To be human is both to create this distance between
the self and that which is beyond and to attempt to bridge this distance,” and therefore the
phenomenology of such places are inherently limited despite our greatest efforts (1994:12).
It is also important to note that the ideational landscapes of Heaven and Hell might have found a loophole. That is, there is the perception that they don’t exist on or really near Earth at all. No one can then visit them besides their mental construction. Regardless, Heaven is typically seen as above Earth or in the sky; Hell is likewise viewed as beneath/underground/deep. The location of these placements can reflect existing ideals about good and bad. Good Heaven is higher than bad Hell.

Symbols

The absence of Heaven and Hell on Earth but their presence in the mind creates an interesting manifestation. “Physical alterations of spaces that correspond to astronomical or cosmological phenomena are some of the most testable aspects of ritual use of landscape” (Anschuetz et al. 2001:179). We have built gateways such as churches, temples, mosques, and other places of worship, essentially to assist individual feelings about ideational landscapes. These gateways resemble and become a part of physical landscapes. Yet, these are only the means of getting closer and not the means of true transportation, in a sense that the gateways can only represent, by material manifestation and construction, the “actual” ideational places, which are not to be present on Earth. Because our imagination is unlimited and yet because we can make only representations, our physical manifestations and our perceived details of ideational landscapes must draw from what we have seen and know; what we are familiar with intimately. This might be a fatal flaw. As Lowenthal (1961) argues,

mankind’s best conceivable world view is at most a partial picture of the world—a picture centered on man. We inevitably see the universe from a human point of view and communicate in terms shaped by the exigencies of human life (1961:246).

We are then unable to comprehend anything than our own. This is particularly troubling when discussing any ideational landscape—we are trapped within our own minds. What we do to alleviate this is to distort and transform examples from reality (Lowenthal 1961:249). In other words, we make adaptations to the familiar to suit what we are able—and what can be made—to manifest the ideational, the unknown.

These distortions are embodied as symbols. Symbols also manifest meaning within a landscape. We can glean other social concepts based on the descriptions of Heaven and Hell. Clouds, gates, individuals who we love, airiness, and light are associated with Heaven. There is a certain ethereal quality about these things when grouped together. Contrastingly Hell’s symbols include fire, caverns,
sharp and pointy objects, heat, and the color red. A hellish picture is formed to make someone fearful and to reflect (or create) a sense of utter despair. A simple Internet image search for both landscapes will produce the respective symbols and images. Each place’s symbols can be representative of the previously discussed qualities. There is however a subtle trend in these symbols and their associations. Light, air, and clouds (water producers) are the very basic necessities of life on Earth. Good is associated with order and progress and solidarity, as is Heaven. Likewise, symbols of Hell like fire, lifeless caverns, and stabbing tools are things that can cause death. Interestingly, this death is both corporeal and social. An individual who does something bad or wrong—according to social laws—essentially dies socially by being marginalized. All of these symbols are familiar and their concepts are applied to ideational factors of Heaven and Hell.

All of these symbols mean something to their constituents, but what do they mean in terms of archaeology and symbolic artifacts? A truly good way for an outsider to gain insight to an ideational landscape is through material symbols. Gould (1978) argues for a materialistic method of understanding such symbols archaeologically,

That is, instead of assuming beforehand that symbolic and social variables are somehow to be seen as epiphenomena in explaining behavior when compared with variables of a materialist nature, we use the materialist approach to confront the totality of variables that may account for the observed patterns of material remains. Human beings do manipulate symbols, and their symbolic behavior can affect the total pattern of material residues in any society (1978:825).
Take art, for example. Whatever the medium, ideas can be transcribed without always following logical norms—they can be abstract. Artistic depictions use representative symbols to project the visual aspect of the landscape, at least initially. Interestingly though is how symbolic artifacts are biased and incomplete. For instance, we have buildings of worship, which are representative of Heaven. These buildings are commonly seen as houses of God. There are virtually no manifestations of places or buildings of Hell specifically, save for disputable cultic practices. Be it buildings or pilgrimage destinations, these places are communal. Symbols however are not bound to this trend. They can be manipulated, utilized, and interpreted on any scale. Christians have the ultimate symbol of the cross and crucifixion. These can be carried around as pendants (jewelry) or displayed in a town square or on a high mountain. Relics work in this same fashion too. This allows these symbolic artifacts to be as public or as private as desired.

Language

Briefly and on the more anthropological track, language concerning Heaven and Hell permeates our culture. We are all familiar with the following phrases, statements, and sayings:

What the hell?
Put through hell
A devilish smile
All hell breaks loose
A match made in Heaven
I’m in heave
All of them demonstrate the commonness of ideational landscapes in practice. Most sayings regarding Hell or a hellish concept are most often curses or damnations (quite literally, and actually case-in-point). While expressions of Hell are more common, symbolic artifacts of Heaven are more frequent. Either way, mentioning either Heaven or Hell directly, or by allusive speech, can have more weight than initially thought. Keith Basso (1996) stresses how place-naming can make people “live right” because of the associations of specific places. Referring to social/communal norms by using the name of a place only is extremely powerful in its own right.

Because one cannot physically go to a landscape that is ideational, symbols are the only connection to them. They are also the only way to visually express the landscape’s details. This in turn becomes the gateway, if only mentally, for visitation. Even the material manifestations of buildings are but mere symbols themselves. In essence, they represent gateways. The symbols are derived from the communal vernacular knowledge, and thus foster a sense of community among those who share an ideational landscape and its image. The symbols that manifest themselves within material culture are relatively durable against time. Generations to follow will see these manifestations in art, architecture, language, and manifest the ideas themselves, ultimately perpetuating the existence of ideational landscapes (Rowntree and Conkey 1980:469). To be clear, the act of manifestation through materiality does indeed shift towards constructed landscapes, especially in the sense of buildings of worship.

**Popular culture**

The idea about individual inability to travel to an ideational landscape is extremely important. Despite this setback, humans have found ways of generally exploring ideational landscapes and ideas about doing that. Cinema and pop culture assumes ideational landscapes as actual and travelable places. This is important; this assumption supports my idea that ideational landscapes actually exist in reality, if only by representation. Whether or not we believe that we can physically visit an imagined place, we desire to, as evident in many films’ plots. They all share the notion that when the characters visit the places, they eventually want to return home to reality. The characters in *Alice in Wonderland*, *Thor*, and *Tron: Legacy* all are somehow shipped off to an ideational landscape which they either did not know existed or they thought only existed within the boundaries of ideational theory.
Each of the films’ definition of an ideational landscape is slightly different. For Alice, Wonderland is completely her own imagination. The viewer is showed Alice’s customized ideational landscape from her point of view, although it does depict her reactions to her very own world. As I have discussed previously, although Wonderland is quite fantastical, its details are derived from examples in reality. The reasons for confusion, issues of power and authority, and the concept of feeling lonely in society are all familiar and grounded in reality. Alice simply manipulates these ideas to suit her perception of Wonderland.

Thor’s ideational landscape is even more individualized. The plot is roughly based on Marvel’s version of Norse mythology and characters. Thor’s character is banished from Asgard after he loses his temper and inadvertently starts a war. His destination is naturally Earth. To the viewer, Asgard is the ideational landscape. Yet, since Thor is the main character, the viewers are forced to consider this ideational landscape as objective and that Earth is nothing special and has the potential to be an imaginary place itself. Nevertheless, in the film humans do not consider Thor’s world real, but they are able to acknowledge it. The connection between the two realms is called the Bifröst or “a rainbow bridge”. This is a very appropriate concept; rainbows are ephemeral and transparent. One cannot stand on or in a rainbow, but only observe it.

On a more modern note, Tron: Legacy takes place inside a computer-driven virtual world. This explores a fairly new concept that digital technology can replicate social structure and human behavior. Sam must find and rescue his father, who has been trapped in the Grid for most of Sam’s life. The Grid is a complex computer-based world that eventually had the ability to spawn its own form of life (in human image, of course). The Grid is an ideational landscape in that it is the actuality of program code. For now, this might be the best possible way to sensually experience such a landscape—there is much work being done on virtual realities as it is.

There are varying degrees of possibility of visiting landscapes similar to the ones represented in these films. Undoubtedly everyone has an imagination and can create his or her own fantasy. The existing research of digital realities can transport the mind only, which is still more conceivable than moving the body through computer space. Lastly, Asgard is very similar to Heaven and Hell. By looking at religious foundations, mythical histories, individual ability, and technological advances, it is valid to ask
if the desire to physically experience ideational landscapes is universal if subconscious. We often want what is unattainable. Are ideational landscapes not a perfect example of that? This aspiration has leached into pop culture and has done rather well (regardless of opinions of the three examples of movies). Considering all three levels of attainability, all three main characters ultimately want and do return home or to “reality” in the end. Once the desire is fulfilled and the ideational landscape is explored, there is no need to remain there. All Hollywood climaxes, explosions, and pathos aside, this desire is at the center of these (and other) films. The characters come back to their realities as somewhat enlightened and have added experience. As a result of the cinematic flow, we do not always know if the characters apply this new knowledge and perspective onto their phenomenology of their home landscape. There are some films that leave the viewer in a different mindset than before they saw the film (take Inception as a recent example). There are times though, that the viewer is struck with a (temporary) different phenomenology of their own landscape. For instance, one might feel more aware of their surroundings after a particularly frightening film. Shadows might move suspiciously, or the creaking of a door may indicate an unwanted presence. Cinema and pop culture explore and exploit these ideas as entertainment.

The use of cinema also allows the masses to formulate ideas about exploring ideational places and spaces. In a sense, we can experience all sorts of ideational landscapes simply by viewing a film; the focus is on the visual story that invokes the mind. In other words, films explore ideational landscapes and the ideas about them. We all are aware of the fact that physical travel is impossible—arguably—so we have created a means to address that issue. Still, film is only film. The movie ends and everyone goes home. Is the desire for a movie character to eventually return home an emulation of what happens at the movie theater? Is this the only acceptable action? It could be a fear of the unknown and leaving everything behind with no chance of return. Yet cinema perpetuates ideas about ideational landscapes in a variety of plots and methods. As useful and powerful tools ideational landscapes and ideas about them are important social structures.

Conclusion

Looking at the examples of Heaven, Hell, and film while speaking of general ideas about ideational landscapes, the feasibility of doing their archaeology comes into question. Since ideational
landscapes exist—wholly—only in the mind but are manifested in representations through symbols and symbolic artifacts, will an archaeologist be able to truly get a sense of the communal vernacular knowledge at least? The material remains would probably be incomplete, as with any archaeological site. The biggest obstacle might be that, as we have seen with the films, if it is possible to travel to an ideational place, it is very temporary and something usually only a few individuals (movie characters or the deceased) get the chance to experience. The second important obstacle is the factor of disbelief. Not everyone believes that ideational landscapes actually exist, although many may be familiar with their descriptions. Such landscapes are only partially manifested, more so within the mind than in materials. Only a massive data set could provide such information. Thus no definitive conclusions can be made with the archaeological evidence. This conundrum is a theoretical one. If a phenomenology is going to provide only a fraction of the actual truth, what does this say about landscape theory overall? On the reverse, it might be the only method of understanding such landscapes. We might only be able to glimpse what the ideational landscapes might be like through the material gateways, but never truly understand the depth of the vernacular knowledge. This is not unique to landscape archaeology though; most often the informants are long gone and are unable to flesh out all of the *emic* (from their point of view) components of their lives.

Ideational landscapes can easily be either overestimated and/or underestimated. What is intriguing about these mental landscapes is how they reflect onto the material record and within society. Because they exist primarily within the mind, their outward expression is inherently subjective and collective; yet they stand the test of time through generations and social significance. The examples of Heaven and Hell—whether they are real yet intangible places for some, they are equally unreal to others (while still containing the prescribed qualities)—do not have necessary presence on Earth. People have, however, imposed these mental images onto other types of landscapes such as in the films and in language. Therefore, it might be possible for ideational landscapes to hold more weight than others. The human imagination is limitless until we imagine something that is limitless itself. The cyclical nature is what creates durability against time. Significant ideational landscapes are so deeply manifested in today’s culture that we must address and hence must be studied more thoroughly. The archaeology of
an ideational landscape is difficult but must be done to further the depth of the understanding of human behavior.

*The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Anthropology and University of New Hampshire.*
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