

A word...

Cinematographic

BY TIM WATERMAN



The music swells, the heartstrings quiver, the camera pans and zooms. A painting may hold us transfixed, but a film transports us.

For much of its history, landscape design has been the art of scenography, often the creation of a framed image – the vista. Modernity brought us, among other marvels, trains, planes, automobiles and cinema, which together caused a profound shift in our ways of seeing.

They also effectively shrank the globe and allowed foreign lands to come into focus out of a fog of obscurity and myth.

They also brought a new way of engaging with time, space and motion for landscape architects.

One of the great unsung heroes of landscape architecture is Stanley Abbott, who in his early thirties during the Great Depression showed energy and grit worthy of his hero, Frederick Law Olmsted, in championing the building of the Blue Ridge Parkway, still one of the world's greatest landscape works.

The parkway served as a model for many scenic byways that came after, and it was based on a simple idea with immense range and power.

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Abbott conceived of the parkway as a museum of rural life revealed by the course of the road as it traversed the majestic topography of the Shenandoah National Park and the Great Smoky Mountains. A car's windscreen served as a filmic frame to reveal a cinematographic narrative of life and landscape, providing a movie-like drive that had beauty both transcendent and dynamic.

Preserving the experience of the road necessitates preserving all of the landscape that lies within its viewshed. Much of the parkway's infrastructure, such as the elegant S-curves of the Linn Cove Viaduct (pictured), allows ecological corridors to flow beneath or across, while adding to the beauty of the journey.

We tend now to see transportation in a purely negative light. Cars choke our urban spaces, rail corridors sever connections in the countryside. All of this is true, but it is equally possible to rekindle the romance of the road and build transportation corridors that enhance, preserve and illuminate our landscapes.

In the UK, HS2, which will penetrate the Chilterns AONB, should not waste the chance to create beautiful infrastructure, to reveal local lives, culture and landscape, to protect, celebrate and narrate all of the land within its viewshed. If it does not, then it will justify the vehement opposition to it and perpetuate the creation of transportation infrastructure that is merely a technical exercise, rather than a cinematographic work of art. ●