LANDSCAPE & IMAGINATION

*Towards a new baseline for education
in a changing world*

Conference, Paris 2 - 4 May 2013

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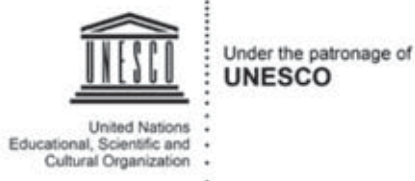Olivier Jeudy, Arnauld Laffage, Philippe Nys, Catherine Szanto

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Language, Learning, Literature, Landscape and the Law in Contemporary Ireland

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Abstract: This paper explores modes of writing landscape in contemporary Ireland. A consideration of the fictional oeuvre of the eminent Irish writer Colm Tóibín is presented as offering the opportunity to encourage a reconsideration of aspects of the 2011 Draft National Landscape Strategy for Ireland, and as a model for an approach to writing land within architectural education.

Keywords: landscape, coast, Ireland, Colm Tóibín, Draft National Landscape Strategy of Ireland 2011, architectural education, landscape studies, Wexford, Doneraile.

1. Introduction

In this paper I am concerned with modes of writing landscape in contemporary Ireland. I introduce the fictional oeuvre of the eminent Irish writer Colm Tóibín as a way to encourage a reconsideration of aspects of the 2011 Draft National Landscape Strategy for Ireland, and as a model for an approach to writing land within architectural education. With Uniscape's conference title being *Landscape and Imagination*, the consideration of the work of a fiction writer offers highly relevant insights on approaching the working with, study, and understanding of landscape via this theme.

The European Landscape Convention of 2000 attempted a definition of landscape as "an area as perceived by people." The Irish Draft National Landscape Strategy of 2011 proposed a definition of landscape as "an area as perceived by local people." This addition of '*local*' to the definition has been challenged by public expressions of interest by Irish groups such as An Taisce and the Irish Landscape Institute. That Tóibín's work offers a window onto a carefully observed, closely known local world perhaps offers some nuances to this debate of definition. In contrast to the concerns of other academic work considering Tóibín, I wish to concentrate solely on the geography and topography of his fiction and to present his *oeuvre* as an exemplar of spatial character assessment. This is to contrast with the generic language for landscape character assessment being proposed by the Draft National Landscape Strategy. To contribute to this debate, I also wish to introduce written work on Doneraile, Co. Cork by students of architecture as part of a module I teach in Limerick on landscape history (Figure 1).

2. Writing Wexford

Colm Tóibín is a prolific Irish author born in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford in 1955. I wish to introduce four of his novels, written and published over a span of three decades: *The South* published in 1990, *The Heather Blazing* in 1992, *The Blackwater Lightship* in 1999, and *Brooklyn* in 2009. All four of these novels site themselves, in full or in part, in an intimate terrain – an identifiable stretch of coast in Tóibín's Wexford on the eastern seaboard of Ireland.

Figure 1. Map showing locations in Ireland discussed in the paper

The four novels I am looking at all have a common type of character – the individual protagonist, at odds with the world; though involved in its actions, each main character presents him or herself as a cocoon of self-isolation, frequently suffering from this challenging, but largely, though unconsciously, self-maintained condition. Running as a common thread through these four individual narratives is a protagonist present in all: the stretch of Wexford coast, from Morristown in the north, to Wexford harbour in the south. Recurring locations – Cush, Ballyconnigar, Blackwater, Curracloe – meet the characters, again and again. Each of the protagonists walk, observe, talk about, and let themselves be embraced by these sites, their lives and bodies participating with each place, their

hands grabbing the same cliffs, their feet walking the same lanes and stretches of strand. This land is not background to their actions and thoughts. This land, as presented by Tóibín, is fully a character in itself, responding to and having a physical conversation with Eilis and Helen, Eamon and Katherine. By selecting, for short consideration here, the moment of arrival at this Wexford cliff-coastline, I will now introduce how Tóibín, as novelist, writes the land; how his language of its materiality and character delineates a local *landscape* along this stretch of soft sandy shore.

2.1 Approach

The Wexford coast has a particular topography. Similar to McGahern in Leitrim, Tóibín's Wexford presents a structure of laneways, perpendicular and parallel to the sea. In *The Blackwater Lightship*, Helen's experience of driving south from Dublin to Wexford to tell her mother and grandmother of her brother Declan's illness, passing through the village of Blackwater, and arriving to the most frequented site of these novels, Cush, describes this topographical condition of laneway in relation to cliff: "[w]hen she turned at the ball alley, she felt she was entering a new realm. For the first mile or so there were no houses, and then a new bungalow appeared on a corner just after the turn into the forest....The sudden rise in the road and then the first view of the sea glinting in the slanted summer light made it easier." (Tóibín 1999, 45-46).

In *The Heather Blazing*, Tóibín presents Eamon Redmond as experiencing the approach to this coast in a similar way as he drives his wife, daughter and grandson from Dublin to their holiday house at Cush: "[t]hey drove towards the sea at Ballyconnigar and then turned at the hand-ball alley to Cush....There was always that moment when he saw the sea clearly, when it took up the whole horizon, its blue and green colours frail in the afternoon light. The road was downhill from then on. He drove along the sandy road" (Tóibín 1992, 95). It is a transitional experience of movement, from the village of Blackwater, along laneways – spaces enclosed by their narrowness and foliage – through to the openness offered by the sea, beyond and below. The nature of the land, fused in this way by Tóibín with the characters' thoughts at those given moments, is presenting these two characters with a site of both physical and emotional transition. The characters' encounter with this spatially shifting site becomes actively part of offering them an alternative, a place for a new experience.

The sandy laneway, sometimes "muddy with the previous week's rain" (1992, 149), stops abruptly at the top of the cliff. The suddenness and sheerness of the cliff, its height above the strand and sea, engages the novels' characters in various ways. In *Brooklyn*, "[w]hen they came to the bottom of the lane," Eilis and Jim "peered over the edge of the cliff" (2009, 220). There is a sense of the body tilting, in slight danger above a drop. The cliff is also a moment of pause in the journey to the strand. The form of the cliff, and the negotiation of its descent, demands a certain change in pace from the walkers. Tóibín recounts Eamon's recollection of a summer visit to the beach to swim with his father: "[t]hey found the gap in the cliff. Steps had been cut into the moist clay, which made some of the descent easier, but for the last stretch there was nothing except banked sand and they both had to run down." (1992, 52). There is a precision to the description of the changing materiality of the land immediately visible.

Indeed, Paul Delaney presents how Tóibín "pares descriptions and observations down to bare essentials", resulting in a prose "pains-

takingly exact" and "sounding so restrained and concise" (Delaney 2008, 17). The make-up of the cliff itself is presented in such a manner. In *The Blackwater Lightship*, Tóibín writes of "the marl and the mud and the dry clay of the cliff that were eaten away by the weather, washed away by the sea", (1999, 260) while in *The Heather Blazing*, it is "the soft edge of the cliff, the damp, marly soil which was eaten away each year." (1992, 13). Despite the terseness of the prose, there is a poetics to this presentation of materiality of the cliff. Tóibín shows Helen noting that, "[t]he erosion had stopped, but when she watched now she noticed fine grains of sand pouring down each layer of cliff, as though an invisible wind were blowing or there was a slow, measured loosening of the earth" (1999, 51). This ongoing movement of the physical material of the coast, visible at detailed and more dramatic scales, is a constant of this place, and hence, given his care of description, is a constant in Tóibín's presentation of it. These presentations of coastal erosion are presented, not as detached from the characters, not as setting the scene for their actions, but are presented as observations made by the characters themselves.

2.2 Challenging the 'proper' reading

Paul Delaney notes that "[r]eaders of Tóibín will recall that the topic of coastal erosion plays an important part in his Wexford-based fiction...that it provides one of the most significant tropes and metaphors across his *oeuvre*." (Delaney 2008, 4-5). Liam Harte (2010), in particular, has written specifically on Tóibín's "marine imaginary." Harte writes of Tóibín's "revisionist sensibility", arguing that the "unstable, flux-filled" (2010, 339) coastal spaces in Tóibín's novels offer him the opportunity to suggest his alternative futures for Ireland: "the marine spaces of these novels are properly read as enabling metaphors for the transitional state of contemporary Irish society, which may yet figure forth a future freed from the constraining myth of national territory and its attendant calcified ideologies, as perceived by the novelist." (Harte 2010, 339). Land and sea become metaphors in Harte's analysis. Harte maintains that the "long-standing assumption of Irish literature" is that place stands for nation, that the permanence of place and land has always offered visions of stability and timelessness; however, in writing of the erosion of the land along the Wexford coast, Harte believes that this is Tóibín offering "postnational versions of how a more inclusive and positively liberal society might evolve in twenty-first-century Ireland, a society founded upon the acceptance of difference and diversity" (Harte 2010, 348).

As an architect and cultural geographer, and not as a literary critic, Harte's analysis appears to me too sudden, too certain, too single-minded for my approach to and interest in Tóibín's work. Rather than focus on its "signifying potential" (Delaney 2008, 5), I argue that the presentation of the erosion of this coast should be more importantly considered as the writing of the land – the writing of this place, Tóibín's "tiny stretch of childhood territory very clearly fixed in the memory." (Tóibín in Canning, 2003: 192 in Delaney 2008, 3). That the critics and academic discussants of Tóibín immediately jump to the signifying potential of Tóibín's presentation of the coast is, to me, a leap of faith – *their* desire to read for metaphor, to find a particular meaning for which they are searching. The physical becomes immediately metaphorical, and, once that reading has been made, it is then left unquestioned. This analytical jump overlooks the importance of presenting the place itself spatially, as Tóibín has done. It overlooks understanding the meeting of land

and sea itself as a character – a character that Tóibín has written through these four novels, a character that goes beyond the human; a character that weaves together the differing narratives. Tóibín clearly takes pleasure and care in noting how this knowledge is embedded into daily life – the intertwining of the spatial and the social. Harte could argue that I am not "properly read[ing]" the metaphors he proposes. Yet I maintain that Tóibín's meticulous care in repeatedly writing the precise and progressive shifts along this stretch of shore goes further than the Wexford coast acting as metaphor. Tóibín is allowing the land room to breathe – to write itself; to write the changes that are physically occurring to it; at no point in the novels does Tóibín overtly present the land and sea as being veiled with additional meanings or readings. Sea, sand, cliff, and grass exist alongside Katherine, Eamon, Helen, Eilis. The land writes its own presence.

3. Architecture students writing land

In considering landscape and education, I wish to discuss now how Tóibín's work of writing land – of writing (a part of) Ireland's land – offers a model practice for those studying landscape. I will discuss one part of a History and Theory of Architecture module that I teach to second year students of Architecture at the School of Architecture, Limerick.

Architecture students the world over are and encouraged to develop both their observational and their propositional skills through drawing and model-making. Yet, as I have written elsewhere, writing, too, offers a very useful and critical design tool (Ryan 2012b). Developing writing skills in a school of architecture is not generally the norm. However it is a practice I have been working on with students in Limerick, predominantly in the first, second and fifth years of architecture, exploring varying modes of writing styles and genres, from standard academic essay writing, to more exploratory modes of writing. What I have come to notice is that oftentimes, in the development of an academic argument through writing, students, for whom writing is not their central medium of communication, can forget that an engaged, careful description can regularly offer much of the basis of an argument, and that so much potential exists to strengthen the argument in this way. Thus, in the Autumn semester of 2012 with second year students, I have given close attention to this.

The semester-long module consisted of a weekly lecture and reading course following the changing nature and taste and construction of the designed landscape across Italy, the Netherlands, England, America and Ireland from the 16th to the 20th Century. Our considerations moved through various mediums of representation and action: through art, literature, geography, landscape architecture and so on. In historically exploring the concept of landscape, we were thus implicitly and explicitly considering the relationship between the social and the physical; the relationship between idea, representation, and reality.

Each lecture was highly visual, via the presentation and discussion of paintings, drawings, plans, photographs, and maps – from Lorenzetti in Siena, to *poesia* and Palladio around Venice; with van Eyck, Breugel and Ruisdael in the Netherlands; from Kent to Capability Brown, Gilpin to Repton; Turner and Ruskin; and Nash, Loudon, Paxton in England. We looked at Irish monastic gardens, the Earl of Boyle at Youghal and Lismore, Kilruddery and the Brabazons, Dro-

moland and the O'Briens, and Castletown and Lady Louisa Connoly. We considered cartography, language and placenames with the Ordnance Survey of Ireland, and also through the work of Thomas Jefferson and the American grid. Each week the students were asked to privately engage in a close reading of two specific texts and to discuss their responses with their classmates in the following week's class. The texts the students were asked to read ranged across four centuries and included letters from Joseph Heely and newspaper articles from Joseph Addison of the eighteenth century; Edmund Burke's "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful" of 1757; texts by John Ruskin and J.C. Loudon from the 19th Century; 20th Century master of the landscape vernacular J.B. Jackson; and more contemporary texts by historian and writer John Stilgoe, cartographer and writer Tim Robinson, landscape historian John Dixon-Hunt, cultural geographer John Wylie, landscape architect James Corner, landscape theorist Charles Waldheim, academic of landscape aesthetics Malcolm Andrews, architect Katja Grillner, and a chapter from my own book (Ryan 2012a). I deliberately chose texts that varied in period, intent and purpose in their consideration of and writing of, through and about landscape. The content, vocabulary and approach to writing differ – from the more 'traditional' type of academic argument (such as Andrews and Waldheim), to the exploratively descriptive (such as Ruskin and Heely), to contemporary experimental writing (such as Grillner and Robinson), to projective and propositional writing (such as Loudon and Corner). Though I did not explicitly draw attention to these differences in advance with the students, they themselves picked up on this range of approaches, and used their growing understanding of these writing strategies to their advantage in their own writing of and through landscape – as I will discuss later.

Thus armed with an expansive visual exposure to a series of designed landscapes through the lectures, and armed with a studied sense of how people of multiple disciplines and backgrounds wrote and write about and on landscape, the 17 second year students

Figure 2: View of Doneraile Court and Park, North Cork, Ireland

of architecture then visited Doneraile Park, a demesne landscape in North Cork, Ireland (Figure 2). At Doneraile, 17th, 18th and 19th Century garden designs lie *alongside* one another – not as a palimpsest, as so often is the case – thus an evolution of elite designed landscapes can be perceived. Following the day-long visit (Figure 3), students were asked to write a 1000 word letter to a friend describing the experience of their time at Doneraile. In effect, this was a request to write the site – to present the physical and spatial and experiential qualities of the landscapes using words, to write what

they see and experience of the landscapes they have spent time in; in other words, a visceral three-dimensional bringing-to-life of the concepts of landscape they had engaged with theoretically through the lectures and readings.

3.1 Writing Doneraile

I offer now a short selection from their texts to demonstrate their writing of the land(scape). What follows gives a sense of the place and their writing of it. William Haire noted that "[as] you approach Doneraile Park you arrive via the 18th century cut limestone entrance gate, approximately 10 meters in height suggesting a long established and powerful estate…A specimen tree standing alone in direct view draws the eye along the hill top, a second in the distance accentuates the horizon, which is framed by mature beech trees in the foreground." Eoin Horgan's text continues a similar set of observations on the tree planting strategies: "[t]echniques such as using narrow trees like firs to the front and wider oaks to the rear of the clusters give an exaggerated perception of depth when viewed in the distance. The boundaries of the demesne are marked with thick plantations of deciduous trees which claim the viewer's eye and block views of the neighbouring land." Most of the students then describe the promenade that follows, the orchestrated opening and closing of spaces via the manipulation of trees and topography, framing views of the estate house along the circuit approach towards it. As Jessica Berney wrote, "I was not overwhelmed with signs to direct a way but instead gentle trees subtly controlled my passage."

In his text, Wojciech Kumik pauses to describe the moment of arrival at the house: "[t]he focus of the whole estate is the house standing on top of the hill, with the surrounding landscape designed to be viewed from there, much like it is done in case of villas. Standing on top of the hill with the Doneraile Court behind you, an extraordinary view is to be seen. A valley with the River Awbeg at the bottom, an artificial small waterfall in the central axis of the view, further up a single tree standing on a grass hill. This creates harmony and is pleasant to the eye of a connoisseur that is willing to appreciate it. As one walks down the hill, he gets closer, or 'into' the view he just has seen as if he entered onto the canvas of a painting. At the bottom, there are two bridges that need to be crossed as the river was diverted to create the waterfall, thus creating a small island. The first bridge brings you onto the island. There, you can take a break and enjoy the sound and view of the waterfall at a stone bench, just under a tree. The second bridge, made out of stone, lets you escape the island, and brings you to completely new scenery. From that point, one is standing at the bottom of the previously described grass hill." Through his writing, Wojciech has presented the central spatial aspect of the eighteenth century part of the demesne at Doneraile. This direct observation, the careful writing of one's movement through the directly experienced space, is the kind of task I am encouraging. I like to call this work spatial writing, a way of writing the land. Though of course with different intent and focus than Colm Tóibín's fiction, his writing of the land as critical to his narrative, the parallel with careful description is what is important.

Some students spent close time examining the 18th Century map and comparing it directly with their 21st Century on-site observations (Figure 3, 4). Commenting on the 17th Century walled garden, Seán Murphy notes "[f]rom studying the 1728 estate maps one can see that the walled garden spread down to the river in three

Figure 3 Second Year students of architecture from the University of Limerick on visit to Doneraile Park, October 2012.

Figure 4 Second Year students of architecture from the University of Limerick on visit to Doneraile Park, October 2012.

terraces…The walls around the area are still there today and the three terraces are clearly noticeable. Although shown on the 1728 estate map a straight path which led through bowed walls on the top terrace travelled eastwards to further rectangle patches outside is no longer present today. This is an extension of the walled inner garden, and reflects the ambitions of the residents to extend the garden into the surrounding farming landscape when times were more secure than previous eras."

3.2 Reflecting on learning

Including in an undergraduate architecture degree the study of varying landscape strategies over time (the formal designed landscape as one part) allows for many important lessons for architects. Documents of the land's past – period texts and maps – can be brought into conversation with the traces of that past that remain embedded within the land itself. Similar to Seán's careful engaging with the map, Declan Macken noted that "[v]isiting the Special Collections in the library and engaging with the texts on Doneraile from the 18th century was also very helpful in giving some insight as to what Doneraile was like at the time of its occupation. It also gave me a good idea of what the culture at the time was like and how functional Doneraile was to the economy." Beyond this special assignment on Doneraile, the impact of the weekly reading was broad, in terms of enhancing everyday engagements with one's physical surroundings. Maeve Curley comments that "[t]he content of the course was interesting. I have never studied one idea in such depth. Ideas like J.C Loudon's Hints for Breathing Places for the Metropolis, John Dixon Hunt's text describing ways we move through

the landscape and John Ruskin's discussion of ways we look at the landscape were very engaging. As I move through a landscape now I will be thinking am I rambling or am I strolling. From this module I am taking away a new way of looking at the landscape. I no longer dismiss a group of trees as natural growth. I now look around and try to find signs that the landscape was man made."

Studying these texts also went beyond their content. As Declan Macken reflected, "[t]he texts that we have covered showed me different types and styles of writing styles that I could possibly utilize when writing in the future." Students responded very well to the experiential writing of the land. In his reflection, Adam Boardman goes further in his consideration of the role writing played in his experience of the module: "I think my writing style has developed. Originally, I would have leaned towards writing factually, with concise, to the point information – nearly in the form of bullet points. But now I can appreciate more freestyle creative writing. I think that when writing about landscapes and architecture generally, it is important to use evocative language, to describe emotional experiences, feelings and to write subjectively while still getting the facts across. I also find that instead of being concise, it is more important to pay attention to detail especially as you may have noticed something unique that nobody else has. I now look at different texts and take inspiration from different writing styles e.g. the stream of consciousness style of writing in *Ulysses* and the attention to detail. Also, I am now getting used to writing in more interesting ways about places, for example, using letters, diaries and newspaper article formatting or again, as in *Ulysses*, describing sites or mapping out places through description of people's journeys or day-to-day activities." Adam is clearly showing an understanding here of the ways in which different modes of writing can function in the study of landscape.

In their reflections, a number of students commented on their initial concerns with the content of the module. As Jessica Berney wrote, "I didn't think architecture would have such a major link to the landscape. It is evident now I couldn't have been more wrong." In the course of an architect's education around landscape, this module's approach via history is one facet within a much wider strategy held by the School of Architecture at UL, where emphasis is on the future, on action, on responding through design projects to pressing contemporary issues of the land.

However a close studying of the landscape's past can have very meaningful impacts on speculations and propositions for its future. As Aran Healy, in his reflection on this history module noted, "I think the reason why I enjoyed doing the writing on Doneraile so much is because I thought that the visit to the demesne was very exciting. It made me think about architecture in a different view. My design studio project [in Limerick city] was based on linking levels of a landscape that incorporated a canal, train track and a rugby grounds. The knowledge I acquired during the [History and Theory] module helped me a lot with the project." Aran is describing the ideal fusion of learning achieved across modules, across courses with different contents and intent. That this history of landscape module impacted in the Design Studio is one of its successes. Actively encouraging this synthesis between different modes of learning and different contents of modules, between reading, writing and design, can be encouraged through the relationship between teacher and student in a school of architecture – emphasising the importance of taking responsibility for the direction of one's own learning.

Through developing and teaching this module, I have found that paying attention to writing and language in the learning of landscape can have great impact for students of architecture – the designers of our future landscapes.

4. Conclusion: writing landscape policy

In considering ways of writing land, I now wish to consider the contemporary situation in Ireland, in particular, the Draft National Landscape Strategy for Ireland which was developed as a result of Ireland's signing and ratification of the European Landscape Convention in 2000. I specifically wish to consider the implicit leaning of the National Landscape Strategy on words to present the Irish landscape qualities. As noted in the document, "[a] major role of the Strategy will be to coordinate and improve how landscape character assessment is carried out in Ireland" (2011, 9). A major part of this 'improvement' is suggested to be via uniformity, a grouping or gathering of similarity. Throughout the Strategy, this point is repeated a number of times. One early statement to this end reads, "The National Landscape Strategy will facilitate the development of: a. landscape character assessment within a national landscape framework, which will provide objective and consistent descriptions of Ireland's landscapes within a standardised format" (2011, 10). The Strategy's desire for one authority on landscape in Ireland is palpable: a set of hierarchical character groupings into which different places, different counties, different areas, can be placed. Language – words – are proposed to hold a central role in such assessment of 'character'. It is proposed to develop "[a] set of descriptors of names – and characteristics – that would be used as the referencing standards for all sub-regional descriptions and related policies and actions." (2011, 25). Examples are given, such as, "*The North Midland Drumlin Belt* or *The South Munster Folded Valley System*" (2011, 25).

Whilst admirable in ambition to desire to bring together the entire country into one approach to landscape (perhaps akin in ambition to the British Ordnance Survey mapping of Ireland in the 1830s and 1840s), my concern is that the desire for objectivity and consistency of the Draft National Landscape Strategy of Ireland will gloss over the particular, specific and intimate, in favour of a language of determinacy. I ask whether it is at all possible, or even worthwhile, to standardize our physical surroundings into descriptions in words? What does this offer, beyond another tool to generalize and to pre-determine a particular way of looking – a new gaze – a new 'landscape', for the 21st Century. In relation to our concern with the pressures on our land today and our concern with developing strategies for its management, how do we bring some of the nuance and understanding of Tóibín's careful writing of the land into our political world of strategies and assessments into our search to define and rank the characters of our land?

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LANDSCAPE & IMAGINATION:
towards a new baseline for education in a changing world

PAYSAGE ET INVENTION :
évolution des enseignements dans un monde en transition

This book is about imagination, quite simply because responsible management of the ensemble of natural and cultural phenomena surrounding us, which we call landscape, requires imagination. Landscape – unlike land – cannot be owned, unless it is by all of us commonly. This requires us to come to terms with each other for its proper management. Landscape, however, is not just a physical object that can be described and measured; landscape exists because we experience it, we participate in it. In fact, we shape the landscape with our hands and in our minds. To communicate about this landscape we need imagination, both in everyday life and in education.

In its huge diversity, landscape is one of the main characteristics of Europe. This book offers a wealth of viewpoints, concepts, methods and practical examples that show how landscape education can contribute to scientific communication about landscape, for the sake of its sustainable future in a rapidly changing world.

The book is a collection of 141 peer-reviewed short papers, distributed over six themes: Epistemology, History, Art, Process, Science and Governance, which were presented at the International Conference held in Paris, 2 - 4 May 2013.