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Landscapes “Я” Us

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When anthropologist Tim Ingold (1993) described ‘landscape’ as the ‘...totality of human experience’ he spoke to a definition of ‘landscape’ that is frankly unfamiliar to most people. For many of us the word ‘landscape’ is roughly analogous to ‘scenery’ or ‘vista’, to the pasturelands and countryside captured in 19th century landscape paintings. While happy to distinguish all manner of landscapes, rural, natural, urban, industrial and so on, Ingold evidently had in mind something a bit more all-embracing. Ingold, in fact, espouses the view that landscapes, even untouched wildernesses, are distinguished, ordered and assembled as such in the human mind. In short, landscape is the consequence of human engagement with the world. Put another way, landscape is the noise of George Berkeley’s tree as it falls in a forest, for as Berkeley (a Kilkenny man) says: ‘*esse est percipi (aut percipere)*...to be is to be perceived (or to perceive)’ (*Principles of Human Knowledge* §§22-3, in Luce and Jessop 1948-57). By ‘landscape’ is meant, therefore, the meaningful order that results from everything that human beings bring, consciously and unconsciously, to their perception of the physical environment (see also essays in Hannes Palang and Gary Fry’s 2003 edited volume *Landscape Interfaces: Cultural Heritage in Changing Landscapes*). It is space ordered, and the human mind is, ostensibly, the sole ordering agent, or at least the only one whose rationale can be fully known to us.

Commandeered thus by students of human behaviour, the word ‘landscape’ now supports two quite different meanings and has become a potential source of ambiguity and confusion. I would like to begin this paper, therefore, by examining a little further these two different meanings of the word ‘landscape’, and exploring, inter alia, their convergence.

The word ‘landscape’ comes to us from the Dutch *landschap* meaning an area of land of particular character. Although it can mean an area under specific ownership or jurisdiction, it principally refers to what is discernible, a vista with a demonstrably coherent character, a scene with a harmonious foreground, middleground and background. Landscape theorists like to use the analogy of a landscape painting to introduce and explain their concept of landscape because it provides access to both meanings of the word. As an artistic composition —a contrivance even— of various elements arranged purposefully on a canvas, landscape painting provides a good analogy for an unconscious trick we all perform which is to order and make sense of our surroundings by composing or arranging the constituent parts into coherent and integrated tableaux or compositions (e.g. Casey 1996). We are nature’s great composers.

Moreover, we compose or arrange things according only to what we already know and understand. Composition is thus an act of assertive comprehension. Projecting *our* knowledge, our understandings and our identities onto the outside world, we encounter it exclusively on our own terms, apprehending it through the prisms of our own emotional and intellectual biographies. Indeed, we invest landscapes with our *selves* to the extent that the two realities converge and meld: neither man nor bog can ever be fully separated

from one another because the meaning of one is bound together with the meaning of the other. Again, this aspect of the human condition finds an analogy in *commissioned* landscape paintings which typically record the commissioning family's definition and image of itself, its achievements and its place in the world, projected onto the landscape —from background to foreground, the family is framed against the great estate house, the formal gardens, the pastures, and finally the familiar and mostly tamed wilderness. In so far as such paintings reveal how hierarchies of civility are reflected in landscapes ordered according to approved value systems, these are nothing short of landscape-portraits.

Even though this style of landscape painting is no longer in vogue, and the world of the landed gentry is no more than a relic of history, theoreticians argue that the insights that such images provide on the human condition apply to all of humanity. They are universalisable: all human beings are, as it were, pre-programmed to assemble the world around them into a coherent composition. Such is an inescapable fact of human existence. To support this argument theoreticians have turned to metaphysics, a branch of philosophy concerned with the fundamental nature of being, in particular the work of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1977) who wrote in detail about how, and why, human beings order their worlds. Developing on Edmund Husserl's (1958) view that all consciousness is consciousness of *something*, Heidegger was of the view that abandoned to its own fate, human consciousness inherits the task of conferring meaning on the world, a task that each of us performs according to the sum of his or her experiences, contemporary and historical. This meaning-laden world is the only world that we know and inhabit; it is the reality into which we are born, the one we have shaped to our own liking. Because we participate in this enterprise with the whole of our being, it is inevitable that we mark out the world according to our needs and desires. We shape landscapes, not just with our minds but also with our hands. So doing, we inherit the works of past generations and create artefacts for the next. Landscapes are thus the canvasses and the repositories of human history, as well as touchstones for the transference of knowledge, of heritage, from generation to generation.

Trends in metaphysics, however rarefied, have a way of eventually influencing contemporary society and collective knowledge and consciousness. The thinking of philosophers like Heidegger and, later, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, has been disseminated through all sorts of contemporary media, including art, literature and the performing arts, as well as in more academic writing. It has had a direct bearing on the definition of 'landscape' used in the European Landscape Convention (Florence 2000): '...an area, *as perceived by people*, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors' (emphasis my own). How this definition predicates the intellectual and ethical framework of the research, management and care of landscapes will be explored more fully later.

Like opening a Russian doll, we perceive and encounter the world at various scales, moving seamlessly between them along the strands of an existential and cultural web of our own making. While each of us has a sense of the whole world and our place in it, individually we occupy or inhabit only small parts of it. That with which we are most familiar, which bears most of our fingerprints, is the local, and it is the local, therefore,

that reflects most faithfully who we are as individuals because this is where we call 'home'. And if our homes are reflections or extensions of ourselves, our landscapes are extensions of the communities and societies to which we belong, they mirror what is collectively us. As human biography, landscapes are not, therefore, confined to the aesthetically and morally beautiful, the edifying, they are also capable of charting what is least attractive about our species.

The moment must not be let pass without acknowledging also the myriad of different landscapes that arise from the mosaic of cultural and intellectual traditions evident throughout the world. It is as well to remember that ours is a decidedly Western perspective. It is not the only one, and it has no claim on being the superior perspective. One artefact of Western epistemology, for example, is the nature-culture dichotomy (see Descola 1996), a dissociation that has encouraged us not to take responsibility for our environment. Sadly, if there is one lesson that history teaches us it is how seldom different cultures learn from one another. Mutual respect is a principle that all too often falls foul of the rough and tumble of international commerce.

A measure of mental agility is required in order to move between these two applications of the word 'landscape'. Researchers struggle to apply the metaphysics to live case studies, particularly because it demands thorough-going interdisciplinarity and pushes interpretations beyond their usual, empirical comfort zones. Such challenges notwithstanding, on a practical level social scientists study landscapes at a 'human' scale, *i.e.* landscapes conceived of, occupied and usually owned by individuals, families, tribes, communities and so on. The intimacy of such private and communal worlds is not always well served, however, by the word 'landscape' which seems to carry with it a sense of dispassionate observation of the sort one might bring to the contemplation of a landscape painting. Thus the analogy with landscape painting is finally exhausted as the unavoidable sense of detachment associated with the word 'landscape' is anathema to those who would see the world through the eyes of others. Consequently, to evoke and preserve the intimacy and embeddedness of everyday, lived experiences, writers are now using the word 'place' much more often. As Finbarr Bradley and James Kennelly put it:

A sense of place represents an emotional and complex attachment to a particular and cultural space, a connection embedded in social networks and feelings. It is also rich in tacit knowledge. Such knowledge embodies aesthetics, meaning and emotions that can often be critical motivators of creativity and hence innovation. Tacit knowledge is informed by people's sense of identity and place. A sense of place broadly encompasses elements of natural, social and built environments, and a shared experience of history and community. (Bradley and Kennelly 2008, 6)

The importance of this theoretical framework for those of us who try to study places and landscapes of the past, landscapes composed in minds other than our own, is that it allows us to start from the principle that such landscapes were/are ordered and made meaningful according to complex cultural rubrics; histories *and* projections. That these governing principles are encoded and preserved, however incompletely, in surviving

vestiges of the past, in monuments, artefacts, oral and written histories, placenames, myths, legends, etc, is what tasks landscape archaeologists to examine and narrate, in so far as is possible, how such syntheses played out in the past. The archaeological jigsaw may be seriously incomplete but this should not blind us to the thoroughness with which places are invested with meaning and wisdom. In so far as the landscape is constructed in, and according to, our likeness, it is capable therefore of being a classroom, a storehouse of personal, tribal and communal knowledge (e.g. Basso 1996). Disregard for and loss of access to this knowledge is one of the greatest tragedies of modern life because it literally dis-locates us.

The recent financial boom contributed significantly to social and spiritual dislocation, casting us adrift from historical cultural identifiers and behavioural and ethical norms, yet offering nothing in their place except vacuous exercises in what anthropologists call 'conspicuous consumption'. Ireland became unfamiliar and unrecognisable, not just to those who visited here but to those of us who live here. Apologists read this as progress, arguing that modernity meant being able to shed the past. While off-loading the shackles of history may be liberating, dislocating ourselves into the bargain by jettisoning the anchor that is history has proven to have been reckless. Clearly, governance is about addressing all of the needs of society, including the need for cultural sustenance.

Advocating re-admission into the vision of Irish society of a philosophical, or spiritual, perspective that acknowledges the importance of cultural identity, Bradley and Kennelly recognise that such is embedded in people *and* place. Such relationships should never be sundered because not only are they affirmative and vital to our spiritual well-being but in fact they also offer a sustainable economic alternative to what has gone before. Suggesting a remedy to the situation we now find ourselves in, Bradley and Kennelly observe that:

...culture, tradition and identity are powerful resources that lead to innovation, creativity, entrepreneurship and global advantage. Such qualities, founded on meaning, rooted in place, and catalysed by a forward-looking public policy, can create conditions necessary for creation of the vaunted knowledge or learning society.

While tangible resources such as financial, natural and technological are certainly necessary, these are not sufficient to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. Intangibles, such as human, cultural and social capital are crucial. Such resources are rooted in individuals and in the social and economic fabric of the local communities in which they live. In other words, they are deeply embedded historically in the people, places and dynamic of a culture that constitutes a shared identity. (Bradley and Kennelly 2008, 4)

Central to any vision of a sustainable future is landscape. To quote directly from the European Landscape Convention: 'landscape has an important public interest role in the cultural, ecological, environmental and social fields, and constitutes a resource

favourable to economic activity and whose protection, management and planning can contribute to job creation’.

At different ends of the Irish spectrum are busy, rapidly changing landscapes —the heavily-populated engine rooms of commerce, industry and governance—, and less densely populated, rural landscapes, where the vestiges of older, historical orders are more easily found and nature is to hand. At whatever pace it may be occurring, however, our landscapes are in constant flux. And while it may be desirable to reverse some trends, to check pollution and re-establish ecosystems, landscape management is mostly concerned with the management of change, addressing the needs and ambitions of current and future generations without needlessly destroying the great storehouses of human history and nature that landscapes represent.

Landscape management does not just refer to iconic landscapes but refers to the principle of participation in informed decisions that affect quality of life of all on this island, a democratisation of spatial planning that is by the people and for the people. Initiatives like the Village Design Statements and the Landscape Characterisation projects being contemplated or undertaken by local authorities throughout Ireland should have the affect of making people more attentive to their’s and history’s role in the shaping of the landscapes and places that they call home, knowledge that will, in turn, attune them to the erosive affects of careless planning.

That the evocation and exploration of landscapes generally have the propensity to contribute positively to self-understanding and quality of life is, by now I hope, self-evident. The realisation of this potential, however, depends on the quality and depth of knowledge —which is itself an on-going process—, and on access to both knowledge and the landscape. Axiomatic to the experience of landscape is how natural and cultural phenomena combine to produce places of unique character. The capacity of places to inform and educate is lost when such dynamics are sundered and setting (i.e. the space occupied by both natural and cultural elementa) is irrevocably changed or destroyed.

Deeply inscribed by natural and cultural history, iconic landscapes require special attention for these are places that define all of us. Here history can be traced, and in the management of these areas conservation of the legibility of the historical processes that have shaped them is paramount. The draft new National Monuments Act contains provisions for the designation of historic landscapes and provides a comprehensive list of qualities enjoyed by them, ranging from their association with events, persons or ideas of importance in history, to associative values, public esteem, and the potential of such landscapes to provide knowledge. The provision is being sought because the conservation of these landscapes is important to all of us and is indicative of good, holistic governance.

The built environment is what we have added; the canvas is nature itself. There are no habitats or ecosystems in Ireland that are not directly or indirectly affected by those of us who live on this island. Our well-being, including the quality of the food that we produce and the water that we drink, depends, therefore, not just on stewardship of the cultural dimensions of our landscapes but of nature as well. Sustainability means striking that

balance, keeping the human dream alive without exhausting our natural resources or upsetting the ecosystems that we participate in and rely upon. Whether you consider it divine providence or a happenstance of evolution, we hold the future of nature in Ireland in the palms of our hands because human activity is the dominant agency of change on this island. The Green Infrastructure philosophy has much to offer in this regard, referring, as it does, to the maintenance of ecosystems, nature's infrastructure, in the face of the built environment. Though the first image that may spring to mind is a heavily built-up suburban area, ecosystems in rural and wilderness areas are also vulnerable to human impact.

The seamless convergence of culture and nature in Ireland is what makes us who we are, and behoves us to manage our landscapes in a commensurably integrated fashion. Now is the time to begin that process.

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