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Geography is Everywhere: Culture and Symbolism in Human Landscapes

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MEANINGS AND LANDSCAPES

On Saturday mornings I am not, consciously, a geographer. I am, like so many other people of my age and lifestyle, to be found shopping with my family in my local town-centre precinct. It is not a very special place, artificially illuminated under the multi-storey car park, containing an entirely predictable collection of chain stores – W.H. Smith, Top Shop, Baxters, Boots, Safeway and others – fairly crowded with well-dressed, comfortable family consumers. The same scene could be found almost anywhere in England. Change the names of the stores and then the scene would be typical of much of western Europe and North America. Geographers might take an interest in the place because it occupies the peak rent location of the town, they might study the frontage widths or goods on offer as part of a retail study, or they might assess its impact on the pre-existing urban morphology. But I'm shopping.

Then I realise other things are also happening: I'm asked to contribute to a cause I don't approve of; I turn a corner and there is an ageing, evangelical Christian distributing tracts. The main open space is occupied by a display of

window panels to improve house insulation – or rather, in my opinion, t destroy the visual harmony of my street. Around the concrete base of th precinct's decorative tree a group of teenagers with vividly coloured Mohica haircuts and studded armbands cast the occasional scornful glance at middle aged consumers. I realise that, unemployed as they almost certainly are an of an age when home is the least comfortable environment, they will 'han around' here until this space is closed off by the steel barriers that enclose it a night.

The precinct, then, is a highly textured place, with multiple layers o meaning. Designed for the consumer, to be sure, and thus easily amenable t my retail geography study, nevertheless its geography stretches way beyon that narrow and restrictive perspective. The precinct is a symbolic plac where a number of cultures meet and perhaps clash. Even on Saturda morning I am still a geographer. Geography is everywhere.

Culture and symbolism are words that today do not slip easily or frequentl off the tongues of most human geographers in Britain. By and large we rathe pride ourselves on our down-to-earth practicality and relevance. We prefer t handle tangible, empirical materials, to interpret the world in the precise an measurable terms of practical necessity. Since the 1960s British huma geographers have tended to work with certain unstated assumptions abou how they should set about explaining patterns of human occupance an activity, assumptions which tend to exclude from consideration culture an symbol. These assumptions are:

(i) that the physical world, the natural environment, is the domain o scientific physical geography. It may set bounds to human conduct, but suc bounds are so broad as to render dangerous any appeal to them in huma geographical explanation. Ecologists rather than geographers have pre empted questions of environmental relations. However, both space an population serve as legitimate starting points for explanation in huma geography.

(ii) that humans behave in a rational, fairly predictable manner, whe viewed in aggregate, to achieve personal and social goals that are overwhelm ingly practical. Rationality is tacitly agreed to mean economic maximisatio or satisfaction. Other motivations are treated as 'irrational' and geogra phically interesting only as deviations from the model form.

(iii) that geographers should seek a practical or utilitarian outcome fro their studies. Human geography should be 'relevant', its results applied t some 'real world situation'. Human geographers display a strong mora commitment to bettering their world, one reason why human geograph remains popular in schools and colleges. This relevance must, apparently, b immediate and direct. Therefore human geographers, certainly in the las decade, have warmly embraced as issues for study socially laudable cause

like inner urban redevelopment, conservation of past landscapes, regional equality and third world development.

(iv) that human geography despite, or perhaps because of, its elevated moral purpose should as far as possible avoid overt and contentious political, ideological and even philosophical questions. It should strive for objectivity by analysing facts and ensuring that its statements are anchored securely to empirical warranty.

These assumptions are in no sense dishonourable. But they do result in excluding from our agenda much that human geography could potentially study in the realms of human spatial activity and its environmental expressions. Further, they produce a deep contradiction within the subject. If our intentions are morally founded and the outcome of our work supposedly of value to humankind, while our materials remain exclusively empirical and our interpretations of human motivation resolutely utilitarian, we deny ourselves a language for framing the very goals we seek: the making of a better human world. Some of the varied consequences of this dilemma are dealt with in other essays of the book. My intention here is to highlight two of them.

Firstly, lost on the tide of earnest practicality and among the shingles of demonstrable fact is the real magic of geography – the sense of wonderment at the human world, the joy of seeing and reflecting upon the richly variegated mosaic of human life and of understanding the elegance of its expressions in the human landscape. This is the experience that still makes the *National Geographic* one of the most popular journals in the world. Geography, after all, is everywhere. John Eyles shows how it is there in everyday life (see Chapter 2.1). One of the tasks of geographers is to show that geography is there to be enjoyed. Too often we have been more successful in dulling rather than enhancing that pleasure.

Secondly, what we also lose in the utilitarian functionalism of so much geographical explanation is the recognition of human motivation other than the narrowly practical. Banished from geography are those awkward, sometimes frighteningly powerful motivating passions of human action, among them moral, patriotic, religious, sexual and political. We all know how fundamentally these motivations influence our own daily behaviour, how much they inform our response to places and scenes, even the shopping precinct. Yet in human geography we seem to wilfully ignore or deny them, refusing to explore how such passions find expressions in the worlds we create and transform. Consequently our geography misses much of the meaning embedded in the human landscape, tending to reduce it to an impersonal expression of demographic and economic forces. The idea of applying to the human landscape some of the interpretative skills we deploy in studying a novel, a poem, a film or a painting, of treating it as an intentional human expression composed of many layers of meaning, is fairly alien to us. Yet this is what I propose to explore, and to suggest ways of treating geography as a *humanity* as much as a social science.

Such an approach has begun to emerge among a small number of human geographers since the early 1970s.[1] A brief guide to their work is offered at the end of the chapter. As with all shifts in the direction of geographical research, this change is related to broader social movements: protests against environmental exploitation and pollution, unease with megascale planning and the anonymous landscapes of urban redevelopment, the growing voice of organised women challenging the dominance of male culture and the failure of the post-war social and political consensus have all played their part in nudging human geography towards *humanistic* geography. But the idea of human geography as a *humanity* is scarcely a mature or fully developed one. So what follows must be a personal assessment of possibilities. I will approach this through a discussion of three terms – landscape, culture and symbolism – and lead on to some examples of interpreting the symbolism of cultural landscapes.

LANDSCAPE

Landscape has always been closely connected in human geography with culture, the idea of *visible* forms on the earth's surface and their composition. Landscape is in fact a 'way of seeing', a way of composing and harmonising the external world into a 'scene', a visual unity. The word landscape emerged in the Renaissance to denote a new relationship between humans and their environment.[2] At the same time cartography, astronomy, architecture, land surveying, painting and many other arts and sciences were being revolutionised by the application of formal mathematical and geometrical rules derived from Euclid. Such rules, it was believed, would return the arts and sciences to their classical perfection. Perhaps the most striking of all these 'mechanical arts' from the point of view of space relations was the invention of linear perspective. Perspective allows us to reproduce in two dimensions the realistic illusion of a rationally composed three-dimensional space. A consistent order and form can be imposed intellectually and practically across the external world. Little wonder that in the same period landscape painting appeared for the first time in Europe as a popular style, paralleled by a blossoming art of landscape in poetry, drama, garden and park design. This was also the age when terrestrial space was being mapped rationally onto the graticules of sophisticated map projections, while rational human landscapes were being constructed in capital cities like Rome, Petersburg and Paris, and written across newly-reclaimed lands in northern Italy, Holland and East Anglia, or on the enclosed estates of progressive landowners and over the vastnesses of overseas colonial territories.

Landscape is thus intimately linked with a new way of seeing the world as a rationally-ordered, designed and harmonious creation whose structure and mechanism are accessible to the human mind as well as to the eye, and act as guides to humans in their alteration and improvement of the environment. In this sense landscape is a complex concept of whose implications I want to

specify three: (i) a focus on the *visible* forms of our world, their composition and spatial structure; (ii) unity, coherence and rational order or design in the environment; (iii) the idea of human intervention and control of the forces that shape and reshape our world. Such intervention, it should be stressed, is not a mindless, exploitive or destructive relationship but one which should harmonise human life with the inherent order or pattern of nature itself. This point is crucial, for as we can see from even the merest acquaintance with landscape representation in painting, poetry or drama, the most powerful themes are those which comment on the ties between human life, love and feeling and the invariant rhythms of the natural world: the passage of the seasons, the cycle of birth, growth, reproduction, age, death, decay and rebirth; and the imagined reflection of human moods and emotions in the aspect of natural forms.

For these reasons landscape is a uniquely valuable concept for a humane geography. Unlike *place* it reminds us of our position in the scheme of nature. Unlike *environment* or *space* it reminds us that only through human consciousness and reason is that scheme known to us, and only through technique can we participate as humans in it. At the same time landscape reminds us that geography *is* everywhere, that it is a constant source of beauty and ugliness, of right and wrong and joy and suffering, as much as it is of profit and loss.

CULTURE

I claimed above that landscape in human geography has long been associated with culture. This is particularly so in American human geography, where Carl Sauer's teaching and writings gave birth to a school of landscape geography focusing on humans' role in transforming the face of the earth.[3] The emphasis was mainly on technologies: for example the use of fire, the domestication of plants and animals, hydraulics, but also to some extent on non-material culture (that is religious belief, legal and political systems and so on). Attention centred on pre-modern societies or their evidence in the contemporary landscape, for example the evidence in the American scene of the various Indian, African and European cultures that have shaped it.

Cultural geography in this tradition concentrated on the visible forms of landscape – farmhouses, barns, field patterns and town squares – although in Britain a similar tradition examined such non-visible phenomena as place names for evidence of past cultural influences. Culture itself was regarded as a relatively unproblematic concept: a set of shared practices common to a particular human group, practices that were learned and passed down the generations. Culture seemed to work *through* people to achieve ends of which they seemed but dimly aware. Critics have called this 'cultural determinism', and have stressed the need for a more nuanced cultural theory in geography, particularly if we are to treat contemporary landscapes and sophisticated modern culture.[4]

A revived cultural geography seeks to overcome some of these weaknesses with a stronger cultural theory. It would still read the landscape as a cultural text, but recognises that texts are multi-layered, offering the possibility of simultaneous and equally valid different readings. There follows an outline of three main ways in which modern cultural geography moves theoretically beyond former approaches.

Culture and consciousness

Culture is not something that works through human beings, rather it has to be constantly reproduced by them in their actions, most of these being the routine unreflexive actions of daily life examined in Eyles's chapter. A religion, for example, or a political creed can only survive if people practice them. Most of us will speak in a low, respectful voice on entering a church without thinking consciously why we are doing so. We do the same in an art gallery and would be hard put to say why. A suburban householder may well be equally unaware when mowing the lawn of maintaining a cultural sign of propriety in a proprietory landscape, so mundane has the practice become. If asked to examine what we are doing most of us find the meaning of our activities difficult to articulate. But without such practices cultural expressions like church, gallery and lawn would disappear from our landscapes. Change in cultures comes from changes, rapid or slow, in their practice, in the act of cultural reproduction. But culture is always *potentially* able to be brought to the level of conscious reflection and communication. This is in fact what we do when we examine cultural expression in studying the humanities. So culture is at once determined by and determinative of human consciousness and human practices.

Culture and nature

Any human intervention in nature involves its transformation to culture, although that transformation may not always be visible, especially to an outsider. The different constructional materials and techniques of farmhouses may be obvious landscape indicators. Such things have been much studied by geographers. But often the most meaningful cultural events are less obvious. The tomato, a natural object, is removed from the vine, it is cut and 'dressed' and presented as human food. The natural object has become a cultural object, it has been layered with meaning. Cultural meaning is locked into the object and may also lock the object to others apparently unrelated to it in nature. That the tomato is a cultural product does not mean that its natural properties are lost. Its colour and weight are unaltered, a chemical analysis would yield the same results before or after the cultural event. But to these properties have been added cultural attributes which we may identify and discuss.

To do so requires that we enter the cultural consciousness of others. In the landscape, the sacred grove or holy spring, the site of the battle that founded

or saved a nation are locations of intense cultural significance which the uninitiated pass by. To reveal the meanings in the cultural landscape requires the imaginative skill to enter the world of others in a self-conscious way and then *re*-present that landscape at a level where its meanings can be exposed and reflected upon. One advantage we have in treating landscape in this way is that many of its meanings are 'naturally' found in the sense that their point of departure is something common to our experience as ourselves part of nature – for example when associating the spring meadow with the surge of new life, or the autumn orchard with melancholy.

Culture and power

Most humans live in societies that are divided – by class, caste, gender, age or ethnicity. Such divisions generally correspond to the division of labour (see Massey and Meegan, Chapter 4.1). Obviously a different position in society implies a different experience and consciousness, a different culture to some extent. The degree of such difference varies enormously. A society may include cultures so radically different that they appear incompatible, as do Catholic and Protestant cultures in Northern Ireland. Here power is contested between groups of relatively equal strength, reproducing their cultures at a high level of consciousness. In such cases the visible evidence in the landscape of each is considerable, although even here the graffiti, churches, lodge halls and flags are but the most superficial expressions of a world of different meanings in daily life. Semblance of social unity is maintained only through the threat and exercise of external military force. More frequently we are dealing with subcultures within a dominant culture. The games, language and symbols of a school playground in a Durham mining village are different in terms of class and region from those of a similar playground in Esher, as is the age of those of the local working mens' club and of conduct from those of the cathedral close in Durham City. The State, however, as representative of a 'national interest', seeks to introduce at least the rudiments of a common culture across every schoolroom.

The study of culture is thus closely connected with the study of power. A dominant group will seek to establish its own experience of the world, its own taken-for-granted assumptions, as the objective and valid culture of all people. Power is expressed and sustained in the reproduction of culture. This is most successful when least apparent, when the cultural assumptions of the dominant group appear simply as common sense. This is sometimes referred to as cultural *hegemony*. There are therefore dominant and subdominant, or alternative, cultures, not merely in the political sense (although I will concentrate on that) but also in such terms as gender, age and ethnicity.

British culture is dominantly English in region, bourgeois in class, male in gender, white in colour, middle-aged and Anglican in religion. It has a characteristic landscape, observable at all scales from house interiors to the arrangement of whole regions. It is typified daily in TV advertising. Subdominant cultures may be divided not only in the terms already listed but also historically, as residual (which remain from the past), emergent (which anticipate the future) and excluded (which are actively or passively suppressed) like the cultures of crime, drugs or fringe religious groups. Each of these subcultures finds some landscape expression, even if only in a fantasy landscape.

SYMBOL

To understand the expressions written by a culture into its landscape we require a knowledge of the 'language' employed: the symbols and their meaning within that culture. All landscapes are symbolic,[5] although the link between the symbol and what it stands for (its referrent) may appear very tenuous. A dominating slab of white marble inscribed with names, surmounted by a cross and decorated with wreaths and flags standing at the heart of a city is a powerful symbol of national mourning for fallen soldiers, although there is no link between the two phenomena outside the particular code of military remembrance. The birthplace of a great national figure may be an ordinary house, yet it bears enormous symbolic meaning for the initiated.

Much of the symbolism of landscape is far less apparent than either of these examples. But it still serves the purpose of reproducing cultural norms and establishing the values of dominant groups across all of a society. Take for example the municipal park of an English provincial town. Normally it occupies ten to fifteen acres in the Victorian inner suburbs, accessible on foot from the town centre. Surrounded by green or black painted railings, it still maintains its nineteenth-century design of mown lawns, carefully edged, serpentine paths winding past herbaceous borders, chromatic summer beds and shrub plantations with perhaps a small lake and scattered deciduous trees. In one corner is a childrens' playground, carefully fenced off.

Anyone entering the park knows instinctively the boundaries of behaviour, the appropriate codes of conduct. In general one should walk or rather stroll along the paths. Running is only for children and the grass for sitting on or picnics. Ducks may be fed, but the pool neither paddled nor fished in. Trees should not be climbed, nor should music be played except by the uniformed brass band on the wrought iron bandstand. In sum, behaviour should be decorous and restrained. When these codes are transgressed, and they are, by music centres, BMX bikers, over-amorous couples or bottle-toting tramps, then the fact is observed, and disapproval clearly registered by those who, although perhaps numerically a minority, nevertheless have the moral symbolism of the whole designed landscape on their side. There is little need for signs, although the unread printed park regulations peeling at the entrance would confirm the interpretation of the righteous guarantors of propriety.

Despite the enormous social changes that have occurred since its Victorian origins, the codes of behaviour still have legitimacy in the park because the landscape itself, the organisation of space, the selection of plants, the use of colour and the mode of maintenance will remain largely unchanged. They communicate a specific set of values. If we trace the history of such parks we find that the declared aim of their founders was moral and social control. With the intention of improving the physical and spiritual welfare of the labouring classes (whose dissolution cut into profits) the Victorian middle class actively discouraged traditional pastimes: tavern drinking, cockfighting and common-land festivals or fairs. They substituted the public park, writing the rules of conduct within it most precisely. Despite the passage of time, these characteristic slices of English urban landscape still symbolise ideals of decency and propriety held by the Victorian bourgeoisie.

All landscapes carry symbolic meaning because all are products of the human appropriation and transformation of the environment. Symbolism is most easily read in the most highly-designed landscapes – the city, the park and the garden – and through the representation of landscape in painting, poetry and other arts. But it is there to be read in rural landscapes and even in the most apparently unhumanised of natural environments. These last are often powerful symbols in themselves. Take for example the polar landscape, whose cultural significance derives precisely from its apparent savage unconquerability by humans. During the period of the great polar expeditions at the turn of the century the landscape of ice, crevice, snowstorm, polar bear and green seas became the very paradigm of a *Boys' Own* world, the setting for a British upper-class male cultural fantasy. Scott's death in 1912 made a corner of Antarctica 'forever England'. Imperial themes of military heroism taking strength from a barren and hostile environmental setting were revived in 1982, as British troops 'yomped' across the South Atlantic islands during the Falklands–Malvinas war.

READING SYMBOLIC LANDSCAPES

The many-layered meanings of symbolic landscapes await geographical decoding. The methods available for this task are rigorous and demanding, but not fundamentally esoteric or difficult to grasp. Essentially they are those employed in all the humanities. A prerequisite is the close, detailed reading of the text, for us the landscape itself in all its expressions. Geographers have always recognised, at least by lip service, the centrality of a deep and intimate knowledge of the area under study. The two principal routes to this are via fieldwork, map-making and interpretation. In developing such personal knowledge a highly individual response is inevitably generated. This is a response, or responses, of which we need to be conscious, not in order to discount them in the search for 'objectivity', but rather so that they may be reflected upon and honestly acknowledged in the writing of our geography.

At the same time we seek 'critical distance', a disinterested search for evidence and a presentation of that evidence free from conscious distortion. By evidence I mean any source that can inform us of the meanings contained in the landscape, for those who made it, altered it, sustain it, visit it and so on, and evidence that may challenge our predelictions and theories just as its very collection will be informed by those predelictions and theories. It is important to realise that what is proposed here does not presuppose profound or specialised knowledge, only a willingness to look, to ask the unexpected question and be open to challenges to taken-for-granted assumptions. Very often it is children, so much less acculturated into conventional meanings, who can be the best stimulus to recovering the meanings encoded into landscape.

The kind of evidence that geographers now use for interpreting the symbolism of cultural landscapes is much broader than it has been in the past. Material evidence in the field and cartographic, oral, archival and other documentary sources all remain valuable. But often we find the evidence of cultural products themselves – paintings, poems, novels, folk tales, music, film and song can provide as firm a handle on the meanings that places and landscapes possess, express and evoke as do more conventional 'factual' sources.[6] All such sources present their own advantages and limitations, each requires techniques to be learned if it is to be handled proficiently. Above all, a historical and contextual sensitivity on the part of the geographer is essential. We must resist the temptation to wrench the landscape out of its context of time and space, while yet cultivating our imaginative ability to get 'under its skin' to see it, as it were, from the inside. Finally, in such a geography *language* is crucial. The results of our study are communicated primarily through the texts that we ourselves produce. The text of a geographical landscape interpretation is the means through which we convey its symbolic meaning, through which we *re-present* those meanings. Inevitably our understanding is informed by our own values, beliefs and theories, but it is grounded in the pursuit of evidence according to the acknowledged rules of disinterested scholarship. In the act of representing a landscape written words and maps, themselves symbolic codes, are the principal tools of our trade.

DECODING SYMBOLIC LANDSCAPES: SOME EXAMPLES

I suggested earlier that from the perspective of culture as power we could speak of dominant, residual, emergent and excluded cultures, each of which will have a different impact on the human landscape. I will use that threefold typology as the framework for exemplifying the approach to landscape that a 'humane' geography might adopt. I make no claim for the inclusiveness or objective validity of the classification. It serves as a useful organising device, no more.

Landscapes of dominant culture

By definition dominant culture is that of a group with power over others. By power I do not mean only the limited sense of a particular executive or governing body, rather the group or class whose dominance over others is grounded objectively in control of the means of life: land, capital, raw materials and labour power. In the final analysis it is they who determine, according to their own values, the allocation of the social surplus produced by the whole community. Their power is sustained and reproduced to a considerable extent by their ability to project and communicate, by whatever media are available and across all other social levels and divisions, an image of the world consonant with their own experience, and to have that image accepted as a true reflection of everyone's reality. This is the meaning of ideology.

To take a specific example: during the years immediately following the French Revolution there was considerable fear among the English ruling class, still dominated by landed interests, that English agricultural labourers, the largest single group of workers, might become 'infected' by the revolutionary spirit of liberty, equality and fraternity. From the perspective of an English squire such an outcome would be disastrous for the whole social order, because the harmonious balance which it suited him to believe existed between all classes in his justly-governed realm would be shattered and anarchy would take its place. All sorts of appeals to patriotism and the ancient liberties of freeborn, well-fed English yeomen appeared, together with caricatures of emaciated French peasants starving in their liberty.

Another, probably only dimly conscious, response was the popularity among connoisseurs of painting – themselves landowners and ruling class members – of painted landscapes showing peaceful rural scenes with contented labourers gathering abundant harvests or resting with their families at the cottage door. Such scenes, however distant from rural realities, were recognisably English in topography and reassuringly peaceful socially. Only by looking at such landscape images in their context can we begin to uncover one of their key cultural meanings: that for the English squirearchy God was in his heaven and all was well with the world. They also give us a purchase on one of the most enduring images of English landscape, an image still reproduced today in the landscapes we seek to conserve in picturesque villages and well-regulated fields of hay and corn, as well as on our postscards and tourist posters.

In terms of existing landscapes, of course, we are most likely to see the clearest expression of dominant culture at the geographical centre of power. In class societies, just as the surplus is concentrated socially so it is concentrated spatially, in country houses and their parks for example,[7] but above all in the city. It is instructive to observe how historically consistent has been the use of rational, geometrical forms in the design of cities: the circle, square and axial orthogonal or grid-iron road system all recur. Such geometry

is radically different from the curves and undulations of natural landscape. It represents human reason, the *power* of intellect. Euclidian geometry as the foundation of urban form is to be found in ancient Greek, Roman, Renaissance, Baroque and Victorian city plans, even in the apparently benevolent landscape of Ebenezer Howard's garden city design, as well as in Chinese, Indian and Mayan urban form. Modernist city landscapes are equally exercises in applied geometry, whether we are considering Le Corbusier's Radiant City or the cubes of Manhattan or Dallas skylines.

To take on specific example of this theme of power and geometrical landscape, consider the capital city of the USA. Built upon 'virgin land' handed to the federal government by Virginia and Maryland and named after the first President, Washington DC was to be the seat of power for the first new nation of modern times and the centre of a territory larger than all of Europe. In its Declaration of Independence and Constitution the white, Europeanised, patrician founders of the United States had declared their vision of a new and perfect society and democracy. It was their cultural ideals that were celebrated in the designed landscape of Washington DC. The French architect L'Enfant composed the plan (Figure 2.2.1) of two simple geometrical designs: the orthogonal radiating pattern traditionally favoured by European monarchs exercising an absolute power which radiated from their persons and their courts, and the infinitely repeatable grid pattern which had become the basis for every colonial town, a democratic and egalitarian form that gives no single location a privileged status.

Here, inscribed in the very street pattern of the nation's capital, is the American resolution of European centralism and colonial localism, of federalism and states' rights. Observe the plan more closely and we see how it produces fifteen nodes, one for each existing state of the Union (thirteen former colonies plus Kentucky and Tennessee), and how the central symbolic buildings are located. The White House and Capitol, the two balanced powers of executive and legislature under the American Constitution, stand at the ends of a great L at whose corner rises the Washington Monument commemorating the founding hero of the revolution, located on the bank of the Potomac river where nature and culture meet. White House and Capitol are joined directly by the line of Pennsylvania Avenue, named after the 'keystone state'. Washington's urban landscape can thus be 'read' as a declaration of American political culture written in space.

Such symbolic landscapes are not merely static, formal statements. The cultural values they celebrate need to be actively reproduced if they are to continue to have meaning. In large measure this is achieved in daily life by the simple recognition of buildings, place names and the like. But frequently the values inscribed in the landscape are reinforced by public ritual during major or minor ceremonies. Each year the British monarch 'opens' Parliament, an occasion of elaborate ritual at the Palace of Westminster. Much of the ritual is highly public and employs London's landscape. The monarch in a state coach accompanied by a retinue of the military and civil establishment processes

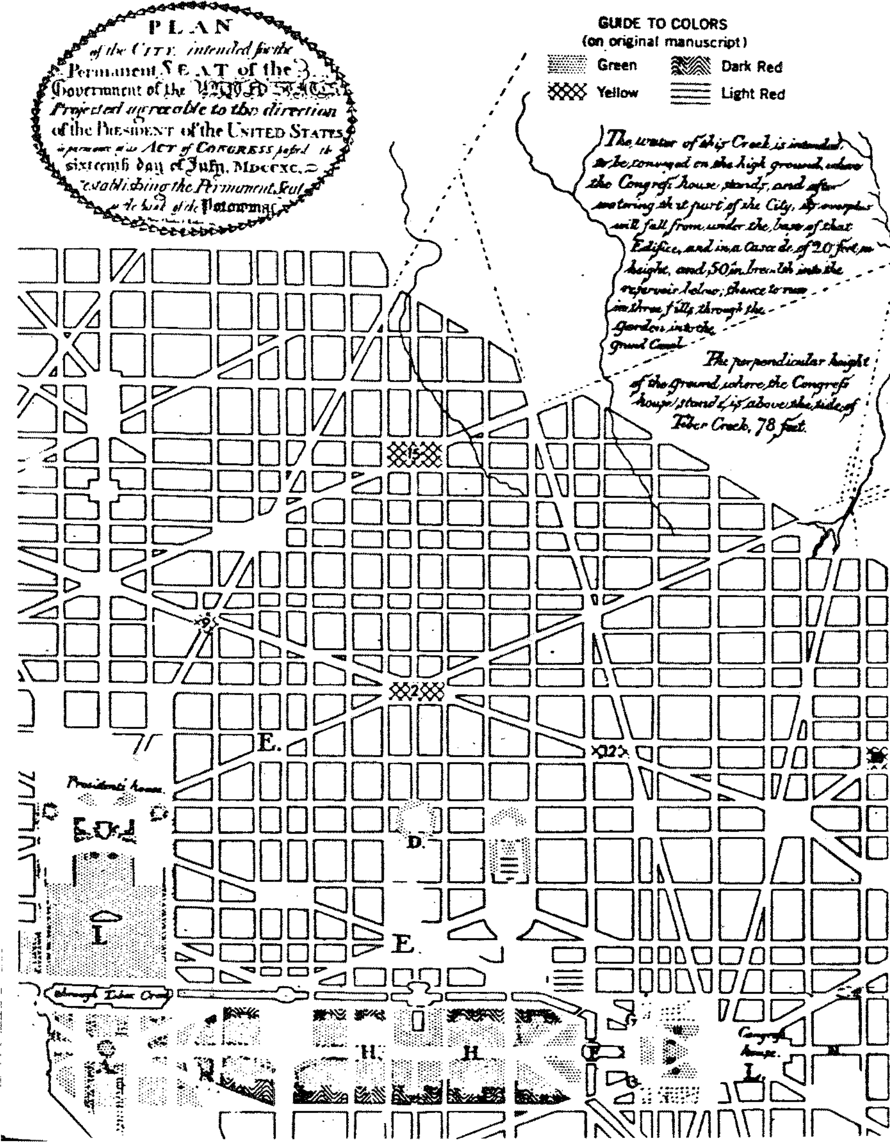

FIGURE 2.2.1 *The design of Washington DC composed by P. C. L'Enfant*

from Buckingham Palace down the Mall and through Admiralty Arch – through a gate opened only for the passage of the Crown – passing Trafalgar Square with its monuments to British military victories and down Whitehall to Parliament. Crown and Parliament are thus conjoined via a ceremonial route and the passage marked by elaborate and impressive public ritual. Here, and at other such rituals, such as Trooping the Colour, State visits, royal weddings and victory parades, urban space combines with (often invented) tradition and patriotic references in order to celebrate 'national' values and present them as the common heritage of all citizens. It is instructive to compare the routes taken by such official cultural events with those followed by other ceremonial users of the urban landscape: trades union processions, nuclear protesters or West Indian carnivals for example. A similar analysis could be applied at different scales to the design and use of space in any community from the largest city to the smallest village with its symbolic locations of war memorial, church, square, British Legion Hall of working men's club. Each of these landscapes has its ritual uses as well as its symbolic design. To examine and decode them allows us to reflect upon our own roles in reproducing the culture and human geography of our daily world.

Alternative landscapes

By their nature alternative cultures are less visible in the landscape than dominant ones, although with a change in the scale of observation a subordinate or alternative culture may appear dominant. Thus most English cities today have areas which are dominated by ethnic groups whose culture differs markedly from the prevailing white culture. This can produce a disjuncture between the formal built environment of inner city residential areas, constructed before the post-war wave of immigration from former imperial territories and still bearing the symbols appropriate to that time, and the informal uses and new meanings and attachments now introduced in a plural society. The former tram depot may be a mosque, bright paintwork, reggae rhythms and evangelical posters may be layered over a street of Victorian bye-law terraces. But however locally dominant an alternative culture may be it remains subdominant to the official national culture. At this latter scale I divide alternative cultures into residual, emergent and excluded.

Residual Many landscape elements have little of their original meaning left. Some may be devoid of any meaning whatsoever to large numbers, as for example the concrete pyramids that can still be found near British coasts scattered over flat terrain and half overgrown – relics of symbolic wartime protection against invading German tanks. Geographers have long taken an interest in relict landscapes, generally using them as clues for the reconstruction of former geographies. But as with all historical documents, the meaning of such features for those who produced them is difficult to recover, and

indeed the interpretations we make of them tell us as much about ourselves and our cultural assumptions as about their original significance.

A case in point is Stonehenge. Set starkly on the Wiltshire downs it is a dominating symbol, not merely because of its size and age but because its original cultural meaning lies beyond reasonable hope of recovery. Inigo Jones, the seventeenth-century architect, believed it was the ruin of a Roman theatre, discounting existing theories that it had been a Druid temple or the magic setting for Arthurian deeds created by Merlin's wand. Later theorists have claimed it as a giant observatory, a calendar device and the focal point of a sacred ley-line system whose influence still exists. Each of these interpretations indicates the role of residual landscape symbols in revealing contemporary alternative cultures.

The most ubiquitous residual landscape element in Britain is the medieval church building. From great gothic cathedral to village steeple, nearly every settlement has its ancient church, however altered by later accretions and renovations. In location, architecture and scale these are still powerful symbolic statements in our landscape, and their surrounding graveyards trace the cultural history of their community in layout, headstone design, lettering and funerary inscription. A gothic pointed arch is still recognised by the least religious of us as a sacred symbol. Yet the role of the church in contemporary English life cannot in any sense be called dominant. Indeed, one indication of its residual status is the difficulty architects have in finding a style appropriate to the cultural role of the church in modern life. Ancient church buildings *become* discotheques and cheap supermarkets while new church buildings *look* like discos and cheap supermarkets! There is much interesting work to be undertaken on landscapes of the past and their contemporary meanings, and their apparent re-creation in museums and theme parks is a good point of departure.

Emergent Emergent cultures are of many kinds, some being very transient and having relatively little permanent impact on the landscape as, for example, the hippie culture of the late 1960s with its associated communes, alternative foodshops and organic smallholdings. Yet they all have their own geography and their own symbolic systems. It is in the nature of an emergent culture to offer a challenge to the existing dominant culture, a vision of alternative possible futures. Thus their landscapes often have a futuristic and utopian aspect to them, as for example the geodesic domes so favoured by commune dwellers in America during the 1970s.[8] But precisely because of this utopian strain emergent cultures very often deal in blueprints – paper landscapes. They are no less interesting or relevant to geographical study for that, because every utopia is as much an environmental as a social vision. There *is* a geography of 1984, of Brave New World and of Things To Come, as well as of every science fiction book, comic or film.[9] To study that geography tells us much about the links between human society and environment.

We should not scorn the study of imaginative geographies, nor the use of real landscapes to anticipate future cultures and social relations. The New York skyline, for example, has been used since the days of King Kong and Superman to present an image of future urban society and its sophisticated yet precarious culture, tottering always on the edge of destruction by overwhelming forces of evil. There is also the landscape of sport, particularly international and Olympic sport, which remains a utopian vision of human concord even though its landscape expression has consistently been subverted by nationalistic culture, from Nuremburg in 1936 to Los Angeles in 1984. Contrasting landscape symbols of the future are rarely as poignantly juxtaposed as they are in the few hundred yards that separate the grey, regimented nuclear silos and the sprawling domestic anarchy of the Peace Camp at Greenham Common.

Excluded By the time this essay appears in print one of those two emergent landscapes may well have disappeared. The particular culture promoted in the womens' Peace Camp may have been officially excluded. In general women represent the largest single excluded culture, at least as far as impact on the public landscape is concerned. Female culture is evident in the home, perhaps in the domestic garden. But the domestic landscape is one that geographers, significantly, have avoided studying. The organisation and use of space by women presupposes a very different set of symbolic meanings than by men, and in the past decade some important beginnings have been made in revealing the significance of gender in the attribution and reproduction of landscape symbolism.[10] This has largely been the work of anthropologists. The maleness and femaleness of public landscape remains largely an excluded subject for geographical investigation, for no other reason than that the questions have never been put (see McDowell, Chapter 2.3).

The same is very largely true for other excluded cultures, apart from the occasional study, itself usually treated as either of marginal interest or mildly suspicious. But the human landscape is replete with the symbols of, and symbolic meaning for, excluded groups. The symbolic space of childrens' games and their imaginative use of everyday places to create fantasy landscapes, the gypsy caravan site,[11] the marks left by tramps to indicate the character of a neighbourhood as a source of charity, the graffiti of street gangs, the discreet notices and landscape indicators of such varied groups as gays or freemasons or prostitutes, are all coded into the landscape of daily life and await geographical study. It is fascinating to compare the official landscape meanings of the public park discussed earlier with its symbolic geography for various excluded cultures.

The taken-for-granted landscapes of our daily lives are full of meaning. Much of the most interesting geography lies in decoding them. It is a task that can be undertaken by anyone at the level of sophistication appropriate to them. Because geography *is* everywhere, reproduced daily by each one of us,

the recovery of meaning in our ordinary landscapes tells us much about ourselves. A humane geography is a critical and relevant human geography, one that can contribute to the very heart of a humanist education: a better knowledge and understanding of ourselves, others and the world we share.

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FURTHER READING

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I have provided a theoretical discussion and a series of detailed studies at odds with some of the orthodoxes of humanistic geography in Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London: Croom Helm, 1984). A spirited critique of humanism from a somewhat different perspective will be found in Edward Relph, *Rational Landscapes and Humanistic Geography* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), and S. Daniels 'Arguments for a humanist geography', in R. J. Johnston (ed.) *The Future of Geography* (London: Methuen, 1985).