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# 1

## Contextualizing Landscape History: Mainly with Respect to Eighteenth-Century England

[T]he history of the idea of landscape has to be traced in the works of poets and artists, for it is only in the present century that there has been any technical or academic discussion of the meaning of landscape as a concept.<sup>1</sup>

This begs the question of how to understand the historical meanings of works of art as they pertain to landscape. The quest for historical understanding has led to attempts to *contextualize* expressions relating to landscape. Contextualism will be taken in this chapter as the attempt to explain past statements, actions and events in terms of the social and intellectual categories which could have been invoked to explain them at the time, rather than in terms of subsequently created explanatory systems, a definition whose substance will be elaborated on in Chapter 2. The claim to be doing contextual research has powerful rhetorical appeal because it aims to tie an interpretation down to a clear body of historical data which is open to scrutiny in a way that criticism is not.

One of the features of landscape studies across a range of disciplines over the past fifteen years has been the convergence on claims to contextual sensitivity. I wish to assess these claims in the light of the definition of contextualism given above by dividing recent studies of landscape into two groups.<sup>2</sup> First, and in response to traditional humanistic work, there has been the joining of landscape studies to a broader (and largely Marxist) attempt to contextualize in terms of socio-economic history. Second, and more recently, there has been a more diffuse contextualization of the landscape as a text to be read or as a symbol.

## **The socio-economic contextualization of landscape studies**

The socio-economic contextualization of the history of landscape ideas is based upon the belief that only in this way can we understand that history:

it is possible and useful to trace the internal histories of landscape painting, landscape writing, landscape gardening and landscape architecture, but in any final analysis we must relate these histories to the common history of a land and society.<sup>3</sup>

This formulation was followed closely by Cosgrove, for whom 'landscape is a way of seeing that has its own history, but a history that can be understood only as part of a wider history of economy and society'.<sup>4</sup>

Implicit in both statements is the aspiration to tie together two narratives, the result being an historically grounded understanding of landscape ideas. Accepting that there is some need to connect the two narratives together, what is the nature of that linkage? Proponents of this form of contextualization move between the temptation to suggest a causal link and the tendency to speak of the two as simply being compatible. Cosgrove spoke of culture and landscape having to be 'homologous' with socio-economic conditions,<sup>5</sup> and argued that 'during that period [the Renaissance] many Europeans came to see nature in novel ways, ways that *corresponded* to new approaches to production on the land', speaking also of 'important historical *parallels*'.<sup>6</sup> It is unclear from the outset whether this linkage is a methodological demand or an empirical and historical hypothesis.<sup>7</sup>

If it is not simply to be assumed that the landscape narrative must be tied to a socio-economic one, two alternatives have been canvassed: either the chronology of the development of landscape representations has been tied to the development of the capitalist mode of production (an historical hypothesis); or the techniques of landscape representation have been taken to mean that it is necessarily implicated in the transition from feudalism to capitalism (an argument about the essence of landscape representation).

### **The empirical/historical hypothesis**

#### *The argument from chronological suggestiveness*

The suggestion of some chronological correlation between the history of socio-economic change in Europe and the history of landscape representations was made most starkly by Cosgrove. His treatment is understandably sketchy given a scope of half a millennium of European history, but his basic argument is that

the period of the capitalist transition in Europe is precisely one in which the status of land is uncertain. Its redefinition, from use value to exchange value, was a long and hard fought process... For a long period land was *the* arena for social struggle.<sup>8</sup>

It was in this period that landscape representation emerged, its birthplaces being in Northern Italy and Flanders, these two areas also being the first to experience the transition to capitalism. Cosgrove summarizes that

in this dual significance of land during the struggle to redefine it in terms of capitalist relations is the key to the modern landscape idea and its development.<sup>9</sup>

By 1900, the transition from use value to exchange value being complete, the tension between the conceptions of land was diffused, the same period seeing the 'atrophy' of landscape.<sup>10</sup>

What has been developed is an argument from chronological suggestiveness: given that the narratives of the two histories are so alike in their commencement, sites of origin and temporal span, is it not likely that the connection is less than accidental? This argument has been deployed in a number of ways. Fitter links landscape sensibilities to commercialization rather than capitalism *sensu stricto*, which allows him to explain the pictorial naturalism of the Greeks and to extend the time frame of the connection of economy and landscape to two millennia.<sup>11</sup> On a more restricted timescale and with a more specific linkage, Bermingham also employs such an argument: 'the emergence of rustic landscape painting as a major genre in England at the end of the eighteenth century coincided with the accelerated enclosure of the English countryside'. She then begins 'with the assumption that the parallelism of these events is not an accident but rather a manifestation of profound social change...'.<sup>12</sup> A third form of the argument links the narrative of landscape representations to a less rigidly economic context, as in Mitchell's attempt to point to a correlation between imperialism and landscape.<sup>13</sup> Yet the historical approach needs to specify the linkage between the two chronologies, rather than assuming it. Chronological similitude, regardless of time span and the narratives juxtaposed, can be no more than suggestive.<sup>14</sup>

Even accepting some chronological correspondence, what is the relationship between landscape discourse and socio-economic change? Cosgrove's argument tends to suggest that either landscape representations passively reflected the battle over the status of land or that by retaining the concept of use value during the transition to exchange value, landscape representations were active in the transition, obscuring the social realities of changing conceptions of land in the interest of the owning classes. The uncertainty is heightened, for the reader at least, by the use of the language of intention (which strongly suggests landscape representations were active in the transition) at

the same time as it is denied that the language of intention should be taken as such.<sup>15</sup>

A more detailed link is needed if the historical argument for the socio-economic contextualization of landscape studies is to be accepted.<sup>16</sup> There have been two ways in which the link has been further specified: by showing how landscape representations functioned in relation to socio-economic realities; and by taking a more limited period and showing that the putative connection still holds when examined in greater depth. I will look at the deployment of these arguments with particular reference to eighteenth-century England, which is seen as a crucial moment and case study in the transition to capitalism.<sup>17</sup>

### *The function of landscape representations*

A complex of ideas has been suggested whereby landscape representations 'cover up' socio-economic realities, yet at the same time admit these realities in the form of characteristic absences in modes of representation. The starting point for such an analysis is given by Barrell, who sees his work as

an attempt to study the image of rural life in the painting of the period 1730–1840, not exactly in the light of this new historiography [of E.P. Thompson *et al.*], ... but taking advantage of the new freedom that Thompson's works have given us to compare ideology in the eighteenth century, as it finds expression in the arts of the period, with what we may now suspect to have been the actuality of eighteenth-century life.<sup>18</sup>

It is the gap between reality and representation which demonstrates the complicity of landscape representation in socio-economic change. Landscape was an idea under tension due to this gap: it was a 'realistic' portrayal of landscape, yet was so far from reality as to beggar belief. This tension provides a dynamic for the stylistic development of landscape painting: Barrell sees a whole sequence of forms of representation of the rural poor, each replacing the last 'when that image would serve no longer', due to its unbelievable representational conventions. Landscape painting was forced to shift to a discernibly English (as opposed to Arcadian) representation, and this

committed the poets and painters to a continual struggle, at once to reveal more and more of the actuality of the life of the poor, and to find more effective ways of concealing that actuality.<sup>19</sup>

Given this function in a social formation, 'landscape is an ideology, a sophisticated "visual ideology" which obscures not only the forces and relations of production but also more plebeian, less pictorial experiences of nature'.<sup>20</sup>

Closely related is the idea that the very absence of socio-economic realities from landscape representations testifies to the interdependence of landscape representation and socio-economic transition:

it is not often intended or explicit meanings that I shall be pointing to...but meanings that emerge as we study what can *not* be represented in the landscape art of the period.<sup>21</sup>

Solkin made a similar point in reference to Richard Wilson's work:

we can only sense the discontent of the poor in the crevices of elite culture... Any serious attempt to comprehend Wilson's happy landscapes must take into account not only what they show but also what they leave out...<sup>22</sup>

The class-specific nature of landscape representation is thus reinforced by absences, and this establishes the linkage with the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

As a complex of arguments, this group fails to tie the two chronologies together. It is assumed that making *realistic* landscape representations demanded that they reflect or represent the *actual*. Whilst this could have been the case, it does not appear to have been so: all landscape painting and poetry were clearly recognised to belong to certain genres with their own conventions.<sup>23</sup> As a consequence, there need not be a 'tension' created by a gap between image and reality 'forcing' a sequence of representational changes. The gap is a broken rule, as representations were not primarily compared with social actualities. To picture a dramatic tension in landscape portrayal is to ignore the function of art in eighteenth-century England. The period saw only the beginnings of an appreciation of the possibility of using images as historical evidence for social conditions,<sup>24</sup> which strongly suggests that the tension found in landscape imagery is the product of an approach to history and art history not clearly articulated in the eighteenth century. Also 'many English buyers of landscapes tended to value them primarily as decorative objects, and only secondarily, if indeed at all, for their subject matter'.<sup>25</sup> Given this, it appears unlikely that purchasers of landscape art would demand that it represent social actualities. Or, if purchasers did desire a realistic picture, this was a demand for something which looked plausibly like the English countryside, rather than something representing social conditions in the actual countryside. Just as the purchasers' demands were vague, so any tension was unlikely to be pressing.<sup>26</sup>

Barrell himself in earlier work recognized the functional demands and nature of eighteenth-century landscape representations: the eighteenth-century eye looked 'over' not 'at' the landscape,

and the phrase indicates how little...the eye could be engaged by its object. It indicates how much the impression made upon the eye was a general one.

This in itself would suggest that the actual conditions of the countryside would have created little tension for those buying landscape representations or looking at the actual countryside around them, a suggestion strengthened by Barrell's comment that

they [the landowning classes] gave little evidence of caring that the topography of a landscape was a representation of the needs of the people who had created it.<sup>27</sup>

However reprehensible this may now be found, it invalidates as contextual arguments the views about the social functions of landscape imagery canvassed so far. The self-understandings of eighteenth-century elites, unlike those of twentieth-century academics, did not necessarily generate the tension alleged to drive the changing representations of the landscape.

A similar argument applies to 'absences' in landscape representations: they are in the main testimony to the fact that landscape representation was not intending to represent social 'realities'. Of course, it can still be said that such realities are absent, but from a contextual perspective the crucial yardstick is what the author, work and genre could be expected to represent, given the state of the landscape discourse. In any case, the existence of rural poverty was not simply masked but discussed by eighteenth-century writers on the landscape.<sup>28</sup>

### *The eighteenth-century context of landscape studies*

For the plausibility of the account given of a gap between reality and representation, socio-economic contextualizations of landscape history all rely upon a limited range of authors, the result being a coherent view of the realities of eighteenth-century English society.<sup>29</sup>

There are three main elements to this view. First, the existence of something akin to Marxist classes is assumed.

[A]n acquaintance with eighteenth-century writing, whether with the imaginative literature or with the literature concerned more directly with the discussion of social problems, will reveal that the 'poor' were indeed coming to be thought of as a class.<sup>30</sup>

Related to this, and secondly, is the notion of the poor or proletariat as a threat to the elite classes such that their discontent forced itself upon upper-class consciousness and culture. It is only for this reason that the tension Barrell speaks of as driving change in the depiction of the rural poor makes

sense. He attacks the nostalgic view of the eighteenth century as an age of stability, drawing on the social history of E.P. Thompson *et al.*, focusing on riots and criminal law, and sees one of his aims as to 'look beneath the surface of the painting, and to discover there evidence of the very conflict it seems to deny'.<sup>31</sup> Thirdly, the eighteenth century is seen as a period of rapid commercialization and the development of 'capitalist' property rights. Thus,

the Palladian country house and its enclosed parkland... represent the victory of a new concept of landownership, best identified by that favourite eighteenth-century word *property*.<sup>32</sup>

In sum, then, landscape studies of this variety have found a highly agreeable context within which to place themselves. Eighteenth-century English society is portrayed as class based and class conscious, with the seething discontent of the lower classes being either obscured or suppressed by draconian property laws eroding a moral economy. The English aristocracy is portrayed as simultaneously confident and fearful of a 'proletariat' which posed a structural threat to it. Within such a context the ideological function of landscape representations makes considerable sense: landscape representations betray the concerns and projects of elite groups, and can thus be expected to serve the needs of those groups in relation to class, suppression of conflict and the promotion of private property.

Yet this portrayal of eighteenth-century society is itself contentious and one aim of revisionist contextual history has been to undermine it. This is of considerable importance to socio-economic contextualizations of landscape history, yet it seems to have gone all but unnoticed. If it can be shown that the prevailing image of eighteenth-century society is distorted, then the foundation upon which previous landscape contextualizations have been built will appear less than stable, suggesting the validity of a project to reformulate the aims of contextual landscape history to focus on the concepts contemporaries could have held, rather than the social conditions under which they held them.

First, with respect to the transition from feudalism to capitalism, this is of course a highly controversial concept. Whilst this should not prevent its being used as the broad context for shifting attitudes towards the landscape, it does call for caution. Above all, the language of intention should not be invoked in relation to the transition as it has been by several authors writing on landscape:

the success of the 'glorious revolution' provided the political conditions under which landowning and mercantile groups could, through the control of the Lords and Commons, jointly direct the English (soon British) social formation towards full market capitalism.<sup>33</sup>

The problem with such characterizations is that work on economic discourse in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England<sup>34</sup> has suggested that there was no clear understanding of the economic system as separate from moral and political concerns until at least the time of Ricardo.<sup>35</sup> This work suggests eighteenth-century social theorists still grappling with manifest changes in the economy in the moral language of 'the passions and the interests'. As such the language of intention is inappropriate from a contextual perspective: how could people or classes consort to bring about that which could have no meaning in their self-understandings? Economics was part of a different division of knowledge in the period: debates over its legitimation were closely tied to denominational politics,<sup>36</sup> its language was one derived in good part from classical debates,<sup>37</sup> and the Tory view of the period was strongly opposed to the human calculus political economy was said to involve thanks to its Christian paternalism.<sup>38</sup>

Class should be a more concrete historical concept around which contextualization of landscape studies can occur, yet in fact, it turns out to be an equally contentious issue for eighteenth-century English history. When landscape historians refer to 'class', they allude generally to the Marxist sense of the term, which can be taken minimally to mean a group defined by a similar position in relation to the means of production and conscious of that position.<sup>39</sup> A tripartite division in the language of orders only emerged as a concept in the 1750s and 1760s, and the language of ranks and orders coexisted with that of class for a considerable time.<sup>40</sup> If the language of class does have meaning, it is only late in the century, and its continuing fluidity strongly suggests it is not an adequate organizing concept for our understanding of the function of landscape representations, at least as cognized by the actors of the period. Therefore the notion of the suppression of the proletariat is not an adequate explanation for the development of landscape representations in the eighteenth century, at least as this development could have been understood at the time.

With respect to the law, this has been seen as giving powerful support to the view of an eighteenth-century England where the ruling classes were engaged in a vicious suppression of workers: 'the law was one of their [the ruling classes'] chief ideological instruments'.<sup>41</sup> Such a view was important to the socio-economic contextualization of landscape studies, supporting the general view of a ruling class project to suppress and sublimate threats to their supremacy. Just as the law was one gauge of this, so the unreality of landscape representations was another. Yet this interpretation of the role of eighteenth-century law has come under increasing pressure in the light of regional studies.<sup>42</sup> These have shown that all groups had recourse to the law to settle grievances, and that the previous emphasis upon a limited range of criminal law had led to a misleading picture of eighteenth-century legal practice as it affected people's lives *in toto*.

New work suggests an aristocratic and gentry attitude towards the poor far different from that of fearful suppression. As Hirschman said of Burke, his 'primary emotion toward the "lower orders" was not so much class antagonism and fear of revolt as utter contempt and feelings of total separateness'.<sup>43</sup> Barrell admits as much when he says: 'it seems in fact that the polite classes of the eighteenth century had no fear of such [egalitarian] notions making headway among the poor until the 1790s'.<sup>44</sup> This was a period when many of the most widely accepted conceptions of social organization were based on hierarchy.<sup>45</sup> As such, status differentials and occasional unrest did not demand the sort of sublimation so important to socio-economic contextualizations of landscape. The postulated class 'realities' behind the history of landscape representations betray more about twentieth-century assumptions than those of the eighteenth-century elite who bought the representations, the painters, poets and writers who created them, or indeed, of the poor who were or were not represented.

Finally, with respect to property in eighteenth-century England, Cosgrove says

we know from the writers of social history how fierce were the battles to establish the notion of untrammelled personal property in land over the still-powerful conception of common ownership and access to it, for example in England in the eighteenth century.<sup>46</sup>

Obviously, the notion of a transition from use value to exchange value is important to this particular approach's notion of the function of landscape ideas. Yet the chronology given is problematic in several senses. In the legal realm, the right to alienate property freely as an individual was established by the fourteenth century; as such, the use value of land was not of paramount concern to English land law from its earliest development.<sup>47</sup> Equally, notions of common rights and common land remained far more vibrant in the eighteenth century than has traditionally been thought, and, as Neeson shows, were defended by sections of the ruling orders until the 1790s.<sup>48</sup> In the realm of ideas of property, Cosgrove's reference to the 'notion' of untrammelled personal property opens up the issue of the Macpherson thesis, which supported the socio-economic contextualization of landscape by suggesting that the bourgeois revolution had been backed up by characteristically capitalist theorizations of land as property. Yet the Macpherson argument has been questioned by detailed work which suggests that in Locke's theory 'private and common ownership are not mutually exclusive but mutually related'.<sup>49</sup> Moving into the eighteenth century, further research suggests that no one defended a notion of untrammelled private property until the last decades of the century, largely because their thoughts, like Locke's, derived from a natural rights discourse.<sup>50</sup> All this means that it is not clear that the struggle to establish private property rights in land is a helpful

context within which to locate the discourse of landscape representation in the eighteenth century. Until the end of the period, a coherent strand in debates about landscape imagery continued to defend a paternalistic ideal of the landscape which was built on customary rights and the notions of self-sufficiency which drove the defence of common land.<sup>51</sup> It is clear that just as the interactions between notions of common land and private property were complicated in the legal and the conceptual realm, and as the positions adopted about these matters cannot be mapped in any simple way onto the socio-economic situations of those engaged in debating these issues, so the connections between these debates and landscape imagery were complex, landscape by no means only having the potential to legitimate one of the two poles simply because it was primarily a discourse of interest to the wealthy. The function of landscape representations *vis-à-vis* notions of property was not monolithic, and this is not surprising, given the manifest complexity of the arguments about the status of property and land in eighteenth-century England.

The conclusion must be that whatever socio-economic context students of landscape history attempt to take as foundational proves unsettlingly mobile and contentious. In the light of these difficulties in connecting the history of the landscape idea to a socio-economic history, it is worth now investigating the attempts to show the two to be linked by their very nature.

### **The essential/necessary linkage hypothesis**

There have been two related arguments put forward to suggest that landscape representations, by the very nature of their construction, are consonant with capitalist society. The first centres upon the perspectival techniques central to seeing the land as an ordered assemblage or landscape. The second focuses upon the existential categories of 'insider' and 'outsider', suggesting that landscape's attachment to the latter makes it an alienated and alienating vision, this being the product of capitalism.

#### *Perspective, partiality and tendentiousness*

In the first argument, as well as being a visual term, 'landscape was, over much of its history, closely bound up with the practical appropriation of space'.<sup>52</sup> Realist representation by perspective 'gives the eye absolute mastery over space... Visually space is rendered the property of the individual detached observer'.<sup>53</sup> Perspective itself helps to reinforce capitalist notions of private (individual) property, which are also naturalized by realist art. Moreover, the link between the appropriation of space visually and physically is more than metaphorical, the same perspectival techniques being used in the physical control and delimitation of territory, notably in the elevated prospect of the battlefield from which many of the techniques of landscape representation derive.<sup>54</sup>

It is suggested that the claims to 'realism' made by landscape representations produced according to the rules of linear perspective are in fact ideological for two reasons. First, linear perspective can only display one moment in time, and can only suggest the passage of time by certain conventional subject matters. Secondly, perspective is directed towards a single spectator:

the claim of realism is in fact ideological. It offers a view of the world directed at the experience of one individual at a given moment in time... it then represents this view as universally valid by claiming for it the status of reality.<sup>55</sup>

This is bolstered by a form of the argument from chronological suggestiveness:

it is significant that the landscape idea and the techniques of linear perspective emerge in a particular historical period as conventions that reinforce ideas of individualism, subjective control of an objective environment and the separation of personal experience from the flux of collective historical experience.<sup>56</sup>

If we accept this argument, painted landscape representations become part of an individualist, bourgeois and capitalist way of seeing, such that there is no need to link the chronology of representations to that of a transition from feudalism to capitalism, or to the history of a specific social formation. The structure of the picture space ties it to capitalism. This argument can be extended to verbal representations of the landscape, since the entire idea of a prospect, controlling and organizing objects in the landscape, creates an 'idea' of landscape built upon the same perspectival assumptions.<sup>57</sup>

The argument given above should not, however, be accepted at face value, for it relies upon a number of inferences and analogies. First, whilst it is quite accurate to say that perspective was important to the appropriation and control of physical space, it is less clear why such control should be so closely connected with capitalist notions of space, for the attempt to accurately delimit space and property does not begin with the advent of capitalism, but is a far older demand.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, there is a *non-sequitur* being employed: even if perspective were crucial to the appropriation of space, and this was to be deemed peculiarly capitalist, it does not follow that any employment of perspectival techniques would be implicated in capitalism (to argue thus is to deploy the genetic fallacy).<sup>59</sup> Even the genetic fallacy does not work satisfactorily, because the origins of perspective are in Greek mathematics, which reinforces the point that perspective in and of itself is not inextricably intertwined with capitalism.<sup>60</sup>

Secondly, it is true that perspective focuses itself upon the individual who can then appropriate the scene. Space can thus be said to be the 'property'

of the individual, but this form of property and appropriation of the land is categorically distinct from the physical appropriation of the land. Perspective was regarded as having its origin in the eye itself 'thus confirming its sovereignty at the centre of the visual world'.<sup>61</sup> As such, appropriation by one person would not prevent appropriation by another such that the property enjoyed by the sovereign eye would be quite different from that enjoyed over physical space. There is an analogy between perspectival and physical control of space, but it is only an analogy.<sup>62</sup>

Thirdly, the claims of perspective to be 'realistic' must be examined: perspective does not address all modes of experiencing the land, and is as such 'partial'. Yet the resultant portrayals are partial in the sense of being 'less than the whole', rather than 'tendentious'. Moreover, this does not amount to an ideology for the eighteenth century in the sense of a false consciousness, as the partiality of perspective was widely understood: a number of aestheticians pointed to the fact that a painting could only capture one moment in time, and the multiple perspectives of individuals were recognized.<sup>63</sup>

The claim that perspective renders representation fused with a capitalist way of seeing appears to be questionable, as it relies upon equivocation over the meaning of key terms in its argument. Once these issues are clarified, the resultant argument appears to be one of analogy, not synonymy. In this case, the argument is forced back to an attempt to render this link to capitalism more concrete by an appeal to history, an appeal we have already found to be unsatisfactory.

### *Outsiders, alienation and individualism*

While socio-economic contextualizations have attempted to overcome an earlier humanistic view of landscape, existential notions of insiders and outsiders in the land have been retained. Landscape is seen as an ideology not simply because it claims the status of reality, but also because

the experience of the insider, the landscape as subject, and the collective life within it are all implicitly denied. Subjectivity is rendered the property of the artist and the viewer – those who control the landscape – not those who belong to it.<sup>64</sup>

The aesthetic and perspectival cognition of landscape is seen by its very nature as the view of the outsider<sup>65</sup> because 'linear perspective directs the external world towards the individual located outside that space'.<sup>66</sup> Such a view is not open to the man who works on and in the land. The most extended treatment built upon these notions comes from Barrell's study of Clare's 'sense of place'. Barrell contrasts this form of knowledge which is only valid within a certain place with the bulk of eighteenth-century

topographical poetry which sought to control and command the land and manipulate it into a landscape.

The argument, then, takes a similar form to that dealing with perspective: inasmuch as landscape must be a detached and organized view of a scene, it must be the view of an outsider, the alienated individual of a capitalist society, regardless of its content. It is by its structure part of the worldview, or way of seeing the land, of capitalism.

There are, however, difficulties with this argument. Any representation of the land will have to be detached and organized in some fashion. The attempt to capture the view of the insider will always be riddled with contradictions, precisely because that view is an unarticulated one.<sup>67</sup> As such, while the landscape way of seeing may be that of an outsider, it is not clear precisely what form of expression it is being contrasted with. And if any form of expression is that of an outsider, it is hard to see why landscape representation is peculiarly linked to capitalism.

Another assumption is that landscape by being an exclusively visual way of organizing and understanding the landscape, denies non-visual, less pictorial experiences of nature.<sup>68</sup> Yet this is to ignore many instances of non-visual landscapes. In John Clark, who wrote the first Board of Agriculture report for Herefordshire, 'the idea of [agricultural] richness is rather prevalent, and apt to overawe the mind by that self-sufficiency. . . what Clark finds oppressive is what he apprehends by taste and smell'.<sup>69</sup> Handel's soundscapes set 'him high among those artists of all time who have made Nature an important part of their subject matter'.<sup>70</sup> These examples suggest that landscape was not an exclusively visual concept, even in its periods of most rigid formulation, and that the argument based upon landscape's suppression of the non-visual is at best partial.<sup>71</sup> This is not surprising, given the generic traditions of landscape description derived from antiquity: the charms of landscape in standard exercises were 'distributed first among the five senses and then among the four elements'.<sup>72</sup>

If it is claimed that landscape as a way of seeing has tended to denigrate other understandings of the land, this evaluative hierarchy has been reversed in most discussions of insiders and outsiders. It is often intimated that the workers' view of the land is more 'real' than the distancing view of the aesthetic. Yet such a suggestion rests upon moral and ideological assumptions which are far from universally agreed upon.<sup>73</sup> This second attempt to show landscape representations to be intrinsically capitalist is also unconvincing.

### **Some historiographical issues relating to the socio-economic contextualization of landscape studies**

The aim of a socio-economic contextualization of landscape is to ground representation in another chronology. Thus we move beyond enumerating the twists and turns of the landscape discourse to understand it as implicated in,

and explained by reference to, something far broader. Yet it should be apparent that for this to hold, the two chronologies must have some reasonable degree of independence in their initial construction. If the chronological similarities are due to the application of some overarching theory of history, they will be a product of the historical method through which they have been organized, not of actual correspondences between the two histories being linked.<sup>74</sup> This problem arises when conjoining the history of landscape ideas with the history of socio-economic change. The socio-economic contextualization of landscape studies has been primarily a Marxist-inspired project.<sup>75</sup> As shown above, the context on which these Marxist readings of landscape history have drawn has been that established by Marxist historiography, creating the danger of historiographical self-confirmation replacing the empirical connection of landscape and society. This should not lead to the abandonment of contextual work in landscape studies, but suggests that instead of subordinating the history of landscape ideas to another history, landscape might be viewed initially as a relatively autonomous discourse, influenced by many others and yet forming a coherent object of study, in order to discover which discourses were connected with it. If the history of the landscape idea is recognized to be underdetermined by socio-economic context or indeed by any other context, then a space has been cleared for its study *sui generis*. Cosgrove argued that 'closing cultural history within the boundaries of its own discourse simply mystifies it'.<sup>76</sup> It would appear that its connection to another discourse can have a similar effect unless the worth of the connection is empirically demonstrated.

Another element of historiographical self-confirmation is to be found in the manner in which the history of the landscape idea has been constructed. It would appear that a basic chronology of the development of landscape ideas is accepted as an assumption, and then items which do not fit into this scheme are either ignored or reduced to regressive elements or anomalies. Thus Rosenthal makes the claim that 'British landscape painting is a product of the Restoration. It did, however have medieval origins'.<sup>77</sup> For some reason, these origins are removed to the status of precursors to a predeveloped notion of the correct chronology.<sup>78</sup> Anomalies in the tradition receive a similar treatment: Solkin speaks of six 'exceptional' works by Richard Wilson, because they are outside the tradition in which he wishes to categorize Wilson, while Rosenthal speaks of 'anticipations' and 'prefigurations' in the narrative of landscape he constructs, simply because pictures come at chronologically inconvenient times.<sup>79</sup> The clearest theorization is Hemmingway's: justifying his focus on certain landscape images he says

underlying this... is a concept of value which appraises art objects in terms of their cognitive effects. Value is measured in terms both of the acuity and depth with which objects engage with the historical development of

the forms of representation involved, and with contemporary beliefs and social phenomena.<sup>80</sup>

This clearly suggests images being selected by virtue of the ease with which they can be connected with social issues: it can hardly be surprising if the theory of a parallelism of art and society is then confirmed!

Also common is the claim only to be studying certain historical 'moments' in a broader tradition. This is most clearly stated by Barrell:

although I shall suggest that these painters I discuss may be seen in terms of a tradition, I have not tried to study that tradition as a whole, and have been content to discuss what I shall argue are its most important moments.<sup>81</sup>

Yet the highlighting of moments can go with the ignoring of the spans of time in between, such that simple linear histories are drawn up, these serving to lend justification to a distorted narrative.

Labelling work 'contextual' is desirable because of the rhetorical force thus acquired by alignment with the practice of history. Yet this appeal carries with it a commitment not to conflate moral or interpretative statements with statements about the past.<sup>82</sup> Partly because landscape studies relies so heavily upon images and literary representations, the traditional fare of criticism, it has been tempted to conflate the two.

One form of conflation is that of the moral with the historical, a good example being given by Cosgrove's description of Blenheim:

entering it even today one is overwhelmed by the arrogant assertion of total control in the vulgar classicism of the house and the subjection of the valley floor to a lord's parkland. There is a military feel to this scale and ordering of nature.<sup>83</sup>

Whether we agree with such a statement is strictly irrelevant; what matters is that it is a different category of statement from an historical one. The other prevalent conflation of moral with historical statements is class based and has already been discussed. It is the idea of an 'authentic' working lifestyle which is opposed to the 'cultural mediocrity' of the eighteenth-century English polite classes.<sup>84</sup> Many contextual landscape historians deride traditional art history for its moral assertiveness,<sup>85</sup> and yet they practice the same sort of criticism.

More prevalent is the confusion of critical interpretation of a landscape representation with a statement of historical fact. Solkin's reading of the enclosure scene, *Moor Park, Hertfordshire*, is a good example: he says that

the picture also transmutes the building of a fence, together with all its potent implications, into an act of nature. Instead of imposing itself

upon the scene, the fence seems almost to have sprung out of the landscape itself, confirming a territorial division already inherent in the disposition of water and foliage.<sup>86</sup>

Again, the value of such statements as criticism is not the issue; the problem is the juxtaposition of contextual work with interpretation, giving a rhetorical power to the latter by the overtly historical nature of the surrounding text.

The outcome of criticism being confused with contextual history is a certain arbitrariness of interpretation. To give an example, Barrell suggests that the pastoral imagery of the English landscape had to be increasingly 'inoculated' with the georgic imagery of hard work in the face of rural realities and rising tension in the mid-1760s.<sup>87</sup> Yet in the same decade Rosenthal suggests that a secure English ruling class was confident enough to take up a concern with the landscape 'as such', with georgic conventions petering out.<sup>88</sup> At the same time, Solkin has the sensual replacing the intellectual in landscape art, a response in part to the rise of individualism and the power and self-consciousness of the middle class, but also to the volatility of the first decade of George III's reign.<sup>89</sup> Of course, none of these claims are directly incompatible with each other (they are probably too vague for that to be the case), yet they do suggest considerable disagreements about the interpretation of what was occurring in the history of landscape representations and what to relate this to. Their only point of agreement seems to be the attempt to map this history straight back onto socio-economic change. The landscape discourse itself becomes secondary, a metatheory about the nature and causes of cultural production driving any interpretation and historical reconstruction of specific instances of cultural production. This appears to be an exercise in what Ricoeur has termed the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', 'an obsessive hunt for the "power" and "oppression" which lie concealed in traditional discourse'.<sup>90</sup> While this approach has its own rationale, its aims and methods are distinct from those of contextual historical research into the mentalities of past actors.

## Conclusion

The notion of linking the narrative of landscape to a narrative of socio-economic transition is seductive. It seems to lend to landscape studies an aura of respectability by tying it in to a broader theory about the nature of socio-economic change and of cultural production. 'We can offer structure and coherence to historical understanding and place our detailed knowledge within a wider perspective'.<sup>91</sup> Yet the attempt to specify an empirical linkage between the two narratives has been largely unsuccessful. The failure of the project derives from the basic assertion made by advocates of this form of contextualization. To revert to the beginning of this discussion, Williams argued: 'in any final analysis we must relate these histories [of landscape] to

the common history of a land and society'. That a final analysis would have to relate back to socio-economic history is an assumption for which no justification has been found in its use as a working hypothesis.

### **The symbolic contextualization of landscape studies**

In the last decade a new approach to contextualization has emerged in landscape studies. There is no rigid distinction between socio-economic and symbolic approaches to contextualizing landscape studies, the difference being a shift of emphasis. A concern for the symbolic element was always present in the project of socio-economic contextualization but has now come to predominate.<sup>92</sup> The shift towards viewing landscape as a symbol has also been carried out largely by those students of landscape history who had previously engaged in socio-economic contextualization. In the attempt to analyze some of the elements of this more recent work on landscape, I shall try to highlight the ways in which it is different from and similar to the previous socio-economic contextualizations from which it has grown.

### **The duplicity of landscape**

Perhaps the most obvious way in which more recent work on the history of landscape representations sets itself apart from the writings discussed under the heading of socio-economic contextualization is by its greater willingness to recognize that the debates about landscape have at least a relative autonomy from socio-economic history. The physical nature of a landscape is now recognized to influence ideological strategies of representation in a reciprocal or 'duplicitous' interaction. Daniels chronicles this change, and argues

it is both possible and desirable to conserve both an ideological and an ontological interpretation [of landscape] . . . and to bring each critically to bear upon the other.<sup>93</sup>

Daniels gives a clear statement of the shift in emphasis:

the project of combining the aesthetic with the social has often amounted to fixing images to literal conditions, translating them into concepts, reducing them to 'signifiers' of social forces and relations . . . I have attended to the social history of landscape images to unfold their range and subtlety, to amplify their eloquence. It is not so much a procedure of unmasking images, to disclose their real identity, as one of revisioning images, of showing their many faces, from many, shifting, perspectives.<sup>94</sup>

While social history is still attended to, its connection to landscape representations is a far less mechanical process. Socio-economic material may

amplify our understanding of images, but it will not be invoked so casually (and causally) as explaining them.

Cosgrove has also moved away from the simple connection of the socio-economic to landscape representations in his recent work, his stress on the duplicity of landscape focusing more upon human ideals and imagination. This is not a new theme for him,<sup>95</sup> yet it has become more pronounced in both his theorization and practice. Recent work 'has changed the questions asked of the evidence, redirecting them towards symbolic rather than purely instrumental interpretation'.<sup>96</sup> Cosgrove always argued that in studying the landscape he was investigating the history of an idea. The shift has been from studying and usually explaining that idea in socio-economic terms, to relating landscape ideas to other ideas:

here the geographer enters fields of study traditionally tilled by the humanities, because it is in philosophy, religious belief and practice, literature and the arts that cultures most directly express ideas and values about nature, the world, human life and how it is to be lived.<sup>97</sup>

The duplicity of landscape has led back, then, to a recognition of the specificity of landscape, that it forms its own discourse.

### **The contextualization of the landscape discourse**

Given that landscape is granted a higher degree of specificity and autonomy, it follows that the process of its contextualization will be far more arduous than it was previously. Indeed, in socio-economic contextualizations, the question of what context to place landscape representations in could not arise. This assumption not holding for those who have accepted the duplicity of landscape, contextualization becomes a matter related to the specific image or representation under discussion, and the number of possible contexts for any given work multiplies.

There have been two main responses in the light of the far wider linkages between landscape representations and other discourses. First, Barrell has moved towards linkage to a broad discourse of eighteenth-century intellectual life, linking the theory of aesthetics to what Pocock has termed the discourse of civic humanism, a set of framing assumptions and terminology for eighteenth-century English discussion.<sup>98</sup> He has shown how in a number of specific cases the discourse of civic humanism and its interaction with an emergent language of commerce was relevant to understanding the pictorial conventions adopted by eighteenth-century artists. This approach, built upon a growing awareness of the autonomy of the history of landscape ideas, tends, then, to subsume them once more, this time under a broader intellectual structure. This is perhaps a more satisfactory approach than the cruder forms of socio-economic contextualization, acknowledging as it

does the degree to which representations of landscape were ideas to be struggled over and fitted into an individual's intellectual world. And yet, the discourse of civic humanism underdetermines the discourse of landscape. There is a danger of returning to a process of linking landscape representations to another factor, that factor simply changing to civic humanism.<sup>99</sup>

The second option is that taken by Daniels, who summarizes his approach as the belief that 'running through many of the images I discuss are a variety of discourses and practices'.<sup>100</sup> Where Barrell links landscape representations to one broad discourse, Daniels links them to a variety of more specific fields of knowledge and beliefs.<sup>101</sup> As such, Daniels's procedure is perhaps better able to respect the specificity of the various moments in the history of landscape it chooses to focus on. His studies of Wright of Derby and Loutherbouurg are good examples of this method, linking both to the consumer culture of the eighteenth century, to the scientific developments of the period and to the more mystical elements of the Enlightenment.<sup>102</sup> This does not mean that all individuals producing landscape images in this period have to be contextualized in the same manner: depending upon their range of intellectual interests, the elements relevant to placing a work may be totally different.

This approach, however, does run the risk of being drawn into overinterpretation. Eco argues that overinterpretation occurs where a suggestion transgresses the lexical-historical repertoire an individual could have drawn on.<sup>103</sup> Overinterpretation is a possibility, given the sheer range of discursive practices existent at any one time and the implausibility of the creator of a landscape representation attending to more than a limited number of these practices. Thus overinterpretation would take the form of an arcane science of cultural 'echoes' to numerous contemporary practices for which there was no evidence that the creator was aware. It is unclear, for example, whether the image of *Rain, Steam, and Speed – the Great Western Railway* offers 'a commentary on the ambition, financial as well as technological, it [Maidenhead bridge] represented', because no evidence has been brought to show Turner's concern for the issues he is supposed to be commenting on.<sup>104</sup> Daniels's approach is at its most effective as historical contextualism where his subject is shown to have been concerned for the subject he is said to be alluding to.

One other problem for landscape studies arises from Daniels's approach to contextualization. While his aim may be 'to show how landscape intersects with other forms of representation, verbal as well as visual, and other subject matter',<sup>105</sup> the danger is of following this process to the extent that the specificity of landscape is diffused in the welter of other discourses to which it is connected. Whilst there is no doubt that landscape does relate to numerous other issues, it is itself a point of concentration for these issues and recognizably its own coherent object of inquiry.

### The claims of symbolic contextualization

Barrell has attempted to sketch the aims and methods being adopted by 'a new kind of approach . . . to the history of art'. Characterizing a collection of essays, he says they 'do not seem to me to belong within any established discipline' and that

I would describe this kind of work as 'cultural criticism', except that as that term is more and more exclusively applied to the analysis of the modern and post-modern, it seems to leave out of account the concern with history exemplified in these essays.<sup>106</sup>

This summary suggests a certain ambiguity of aims which Barrell addresses directly in a collection of his own essays, where he says

they are preoccupied with questions of cultural history, but they are not attempts to write a history of ideas, still less a history of real events, but rather of discursive representations. To say that is to say that they are necessarily as concerned with questions of meaning as of history . . . I try therefore to be a historian among literary critics, and a literary critic among historians.<sup>107</sup>

This ambiguity as to the nature of the project stems from its attempt to yoke together symbolic and contextual reasoning. The aim of calling something a symbol is to say that it stands for or represents a larger entity. Thus Daniels sees landscapes as symbols for broader myths of national identity such that 'they picture the nation'.<sup>108</sup> Yet the aim of recent contextualism has been almost the reverse: to build up a body of information about the intellectual and discursive milieu into which a specific text can be placed. The aim is to move away from having classic texts stand for an entire period and to understand them in the light of a more continuously evolving discursive formation. As such, there will always be conflicting pressures when symbolism and contextualism are put together. Cosgrove says:

in seeking to describe and understand the cultural transformation of a part of the Venetian land empire in the middle years of the sixteenth century, I have found it helpful to use the undoubted genius of Palladio as an entry into the various discourses through which the transformation was effected and represented in landscape . . . I shall keep the architect firmly in context, using his work as a *leitmotif* for the cultural world in which he operated and which his designs so brilliantly articulated.<sup>109</sup>

But to the extent that Palladio is used as a *leitmotif*, he will become a bearer of attitudes and issues he was unconcerned with. To the extent that his genius

is studied in its context it will be unable to bear the historical load that being a symbol would demand.

Related to this conflation of interpretation and contextualization is an uncertainty over whether to describe symbolic contextualism as distinctively historical. This expresses itself in simultaneous declarations that work stems from present-day concerns and that it takes into account historical discourses and practices. Both Daniels and Barrell stress that their work emerges from 'that very coherent decade' the 1980s.<sup>110</sup> The suggestion is clearly that the present is implicated in our study of the past. Yet at the same time, both assert the distinctively historical character of their work. Thus Barrell writes of the complexity of eighteenth-century discourses

that mobility . . . is not at all the same thing as historical indeterminacy; each change of allegiance or identification is an anticipation of, or a response to, another, and takes its course according to a recoverable trajectory and logic.<sup>111</sup>

I have spoken in relation to socio-economic contextualizations of the problems resulting from the conflation of intellectual categories, but this approach appears to revel in this confusion (and in this sense does link with postmodernism). To the extent that interpretative work has different standards of practice from historical work, this confusion is problematic. These different standards are not merely limiting factors to be transcended, but they are characteristic 'forms of attention' within which structured argument and explanation can occur.<sup>112</sup>

### **Historical and historiographical reflections on symbolic contextualization**

Implicit in newer writings on landscape history has been acceptance of the need for a broader approach to the use of historical sources. There has been some widening of the canon of writers and painters addressed. This is a move away from men standing as symbols for their age and of representations as 'anticipations' and 'exceptions' to predetermined trends which was so common. An example of widening the canon comes in Daniels's article on Louthborough. As he says,

when *Coalbrookdale by night* does appear in texts in English art history, it is usually as a freak. In its style as well as its subject-matter, the painting does disrupt the conventionally rustic genealogies of English landscape art.<sup>113</sup>

By 'revisioning' the image in relation to a variety of eighteenth-century discourses, Daniels is able to rescue the picture from being an exception and contextualize it with respect to aspects of the eighteenth century outside the scope of the social history appealed to by socio-economic contextualization.

The broadening of the canon, coupled with the diversification of contexts appealed to mark a move to dissolve stereotypes about a period and can be seen as part of a dissatisfaction with taking 'culture' as an entity capable of characterization (and action).

Symbolic contextualization has exhibited a concern for the instability of interpretation of landscape representations over time. This history has emphasized 'the diversity, the incoherence, the loose ends, the unstable excess in the images it examines'.<sup>114</sup> Whilst the concern for the continuities and changes in perception and expression in landscape representations is not new,<sup>115</sup> the deconstructive tone is. In practice, this approach (as exemplified by Daniels's work on St Paul's and John Constable) has reinforced the idea that landscape images are not tied down to a specific political or socio-economic stance. It has also emphasized the contextual recoverability of the meanings ascribed to an image at any one time.

It would appear, then, that symbolic contextualization has moved a considerable distance towards a more nuanced view of history and a less whiggish historiographical model. Yet there are still valid reservations about certain commonly held historiographical assumptions which have been carried over from socio-economic contextualization. There has been a continuation of the belief in certain 'moments' standing as symbols for broader issues. Daniels characterises this as

realising the historical momentum of images . . . specifying those episodes when pictures, texts or designs condense a range of social forces and relations, when images assume a high specific gravity.<sup>116</sup>

While such moments may indeed exist, to focus exclusively upon them will tend to give a somewhat distorted view of the degree to which landscape imagery is charged with social significance, and thus underplay the fact that landscape imagery also forms its own discourse with meanings beyond those of social condensation.

Due to their ambiguous fusion of history and meaning, the practitioners of symbolic contextualization still shift between moral and historical modes of argument. This attitude is demonstrated most clearly by Barrell who criticizes the discourse of civic humanism as

a discourse which defined "man" – not man in general, as it is sometimes pretended, but man as opposed to women and even most men – as a "political animal".<sup>117</sup>

Whilst a twentieth-century perspective may agree with such statements, the transhistorical language of class and sexual politics is not useful: that men were trying to justify their actions coherently is the mainspring of Pocock's work on the discourse of civic humanism on which Barrell draws. This is part

of an inability to countenance the ability of past discourses to accept inequality and related structures. Howkins is unable to treat the idea of paternalism as anything more than oppression which is contestable, and also believes that people could not honestly have believed such notions in the past (which seems ahistorical).<sup>118</sup> This failure means that a certain whiggishness remains, for all the historiographical improvements in contextual landscape studies:

much greater ingenuity and a higher imaginative endeavour have been brought into play upon the whigs, progressives and even revolutionaries of the past, than have been exercised upon the elucidation of tories, conservatives and reactionaries. The whig historian withdraws the effort in the case of the men who are most in need of it.<sup>119</sup>

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