What's up Elsewhere?

The Landscape Inside Us

We all have a conscious and unconscious relationship with the landscape. If you ponder for a moment what the Scottish landscape means to you, what might come to mind?

We can perceive the landscape as a wilderness, an idyll or a place of cruel expulsions. It is a source of food, but equally somewhere for fun, play and quiet contemplation. The countryside is a frequent setting for films, TV, drama and advertising, and as such is part of our everyday visual language. Mythologies of the land and landscape are an essential part of 'Scottishness'. Why is this connection so strong?

The way we use language begins to reveal the answer. We describe the 'brow' of a hill, a 'neck' of land, a finger, foot or mouth. Jura has 'Paps'. Parks are lungs. Rivers and roads are arteries. In the pre-Enlightenment era, areas of upland were known as warts, boils and excrescences. And much of the Gaelic language arises from the landscape itself – for example, the name of Strontian on the Ardnamurchan Peninsular comes from the Gaelic 'Sron an t-Sithein', which means 'nose of the fairies'.

The psychoanalytic perspective is that we can unconsciously relate to the countryside and landscape as an extension of our bodies. It is our primary attachment to and then loss of our mother's breast that is formative in our individual and collective psyches. Our experience of being utterly dependent on and then having to break free from our parents deeply affects our emotional lives. This primitive relationship is played out, consciously and unconsciously, in our relationship with the land and the landscape.

The countryside is perhaps most often perceived as being 'female' (Richards, 19941). The symbolism of mother nature and the bountiful, nurturing, life-giving land are common perceptions that still hold true. Rob Hinshelwood even describes the concept of the 'rape' of the 'female' countryside by the 'masculine' town/city[2]. But we can also perceive rugged and powerful mountain landscapes as a more masculine entity.

Through these unconscious connections, we project our internal relationships onto the landscape. Sometimes these relationships are light and creative, such as expressed in Sir Walter Scott's romantic poetry, and sometimes they are darker and 'destructive', as expressed in the sinister moors of Wuthering Heights. Both are valid and important aspects of ourselves.

But there is more to our emotional relationship with the landscape and countryside. Collectively, we socialise our relationships with the land in particular ways. In Scotland, the countryside has become a focus for exploitation and social conflict in which an elite had / have control over this fundamental resource. But it also came to represent a post-Enlightenment idyll. The landscape holds these contradictions, just like the conflicts in our inner worlds. Socially and psychologically, it is no coincidence that land reform was one of the first tasks of the Scottish parliament.

The landscape also contains many layers of human interaction and influence, laid down over centuries of settlement and land use. The visual clues of the past in the landscape can connect us with our pre-industrial selves.

These are all ways in which we relate to the landscape and countryside, and they can come into play when we and our audience visit the countryside. What might this mean for interpretation?

Firstly, it is enlightening to become aware of our internal relationship with the land, and to let this awareness filter into our work. As this happens, the more emotionally engaging our interpretation might become. Secondly, interpretation should support our relationship with the landscape and make the countryside more accessible. But, it should not seek to mediate this relationship, either through intrusive over-interpreting or being too prescriptive about 'authorised' messages about what the landscape means.

David Masters, Editor. Thanks to Dr Rachel Hirschfeld for her assistance with this brief review.

A fantasy guided tour

Try this simple exercise to explore your personal connection with the landscape:

Think of a photo, picture or imaginary piece of landscape.
Remember it and close your eyes.
Enter into the landscape in your imagination.
Where are you – on a hill, in a valley, beside a field or stream?
What can you see – are you looking up or down, or all around?
What can you hear – the wind, people, dogs, tractors, birds?
What can you feel – the sun or rain, earth, heather or turf?
What are you doing – are you sitting or standing, lying, walking or even flying?
Ponder for a moment on what this place means to you...
When its time to go - how do you leave, and what does this make you feel?

When you've finished, think about how you 'interpreted' this landscape. What might this say about your own personal connection with the land?

[1] *B. Richards, 1994, The Body of the Nation, in Disciplines of Delight – The Psychoanalysis of Popular Culture*

[2] *R. Hinshelwood, 1993, The Countryside, British Journal of Psychotherapy 10(2)*

"Tell me about your mother."
Sigmund Freud, father of psychoanalysis, (1856-1939)