

2. Landscape and Space

The exploration and deconstruction of notions of space, particularly as used in the social sciences and the arts is central to one of the principal research questions. With the realisation that space is a complex and diverse construct, comes a need to identify other interwoven concepts conflating its conceptualisation (scale, place, land, locality, nature). Indeed, social scientists have distinguished several categories of space and some of these have particular resonance for the visual arts viz. *absolute space, relative space, imagined space, symbolic space, hybrid space, space-time*.

2.1. Absolute Space

Absolute space is to do with fixing the location of events, places, phenomena at the surface of the Earth: mapping *sensu lato*. It regards space, like time as a universal of human existence, the external coordinates of reality, an empty grid of mutually exclusive points; an unchanging box within which objects exist and events occur.

These absolute geometries of existence have parallels in the visual arts, but here these geometries create the illusion of absolute space within the confines of a bounded universe. Traditionally this was the picture plane, framed and finite, but can also be envisaged to include the delineated stage set, the computer or film screen, the mass, volume and placement of sculpture, and the relational viewing space of the gallery. Edward Casey in the third volume of his epic project of reinterpreting conceptions of space in western thought (Casey 2002) identifies what he calls the material conditions of representing places. These too include the *place-of-exhibition*, the *place-of-the-surface*¹ and lying between these the *quasi-place-of-the-frame*. Nonetheless these notions of formal space in the visual arts are still mapping *sensu lato* and like spatial science follow rules and conventions to generate the coordinates of a suspended reality, within which objects appear to exist and events appear to occur.

2.1.1. Rules and Conventions

This illusion of space is created using linear and atmospheric perspective whereby points, lines and planes follow rules that produce perspective and the illusion of distance. However, the prospect view of landscape, governed by these rules, and manifest in the traditional genre of landscape painting is only a partial realisation of the full spatial meaning of landscape. Fortunately rules exist to be broken, or at least to be bent and stretched by creative minds. Indeed, much of the more

¹ By *place-of-the-surface* Casey means both the contribution of the support, the extent to which it is concealed or used as an integral part of the work, and the fracture of the painted surface and its consequent visual, tactile and kinesthetic properties. Both impact on the construction of spatial illusion

recent engagement with landscape in the visual arts has concerned itself precisely with distorting or abandoning these rules of perspective.

The principal shortcoming of the traditional formal perspective approach to landscape composition is that it fails to acknowledge the full meaning of the *mapping* of absolute space. In other words, there is a discontinuity between this approach to landscape and the aerial overview implicit in definitions of the word such as: the aspect (as if viewed vertically or obliquely from above) of the land. More particularly, it ignores mapping *sensu stricto* as embodied in the cartographic tradition (Casey 2002). In representations of the Highland landscapes in landscape painting the picturesque and the sublime have tended to dominate with works following the conventional perspective rules of the genre (see Sections 1.3.1 and 4.1.3). Arguably the discovery of linear and atmospheric perspective have constrained and fettered landscape painters.

Here topographic and cartographic traditions as well as spatial science offer alternative approaches. This is so notwithstanding Duncan and Ley's dismissal of such approaches as characterised by:

“a drive to produce abstract, reductionist descriptions of the world with little room for the differences between places produced by cultural variation” (Duncan & Ley 1993)

and as having the goal of constructing spatial theory and achieving mimesis.

2.1.2. *Elevated oblique and vertical view points.*

Several artists have used cartographic convention to explore the literal mapping of landscape in two dimensions eschewing perspective entirely. Mapping and cartographic convention introduces symbolisation and further scope for a kind of abstraction in the sense of removal from the reality of form.

Examples of this more or less direct adoption of a cartographic position exist in the work of Tina Bird Wallbridge, Albert Irvin (Forge 1990)² in his earlier pieces such as *Moving Through* 1960 and in the *Square Mile* 2009 by Stuart Robertson in the recent BA show at Portsmouth. Such works specifically 'map' urban spaces, but in principal the approach is equally applicable to rural landscapes. Irvin, once an RAF navigator, in particular recognised the relevance of cartographic symbols to his artistic aims:

“maps employ a visual language to denote areas of the landscape ... Irvin appropriated these cartographic forms directly using irregular shapes and twisting lines of urban locations to suggest ... a connecting network of streets and roads.” (Moorhouse 1998)

² Exhibition: Serpentine Gallery Paintings 1960-1989 (visited), Kings Place Gallery London 2008/9 (visited)

Other artists have appropriated the graticule or grid, sometimes explicitly from cartography; the coordinates of location on the earth's surface whether derived from latitude and longitude, the science of map projection, or from an arbitrarily imposed spatial reference system such as the British Ordnance Survey's National Grid.

Some pieces in the original work supporting this project use this national grid as a starting point.³ However, two of the works are three dimensional constructions which preserve the relative relief of each grid square as an average of the actual surface height within it. In effect they are stylised relief models. Here the imposition of the regularity of the grid moves the works towards abstraction, but one informed by landscape knowledge⁴ and coded in the nature the surface of each grid square. The third piece lies somewhere between the cartographically inspired grid of absolute space and the symbolic use of mathematical regularity.

Not all examples of the use of the grid in art make reference to geographical coordinates. In many instances grid based works are rooted in mathematics, knowingly or unknowingly, rather than cartography. Of course the grid is a device that is well established in modernist approaches (Kraus 1979) to art and may have no relationship at all to the cartographic coordinates of location, being simply a strategy for the division and structuring of the picture plane.

“ In the early part of this (20th) century there began to appear, first in France and then in Russia and Holland a structure that has remained emblematic of the modernist ambition in the visual arts ever since.” (Kraus 1979).

Rosalind Kraus also goes on to say that the grid “is anti-natural, anti-mimetic, anti-real”.

Examples abound from it's use by the de Stijl movement, particularly by Piet Mondrian (though even here in works like *boogy woogy* there is reference to a real, New York townscape), Georges Vantongerloo, Theo van Doesburg, Jean Arp, and Paul Klee.

One artist who uses the convention of the grid today is Paul Hackett who suffers from *diplopia*, double vision or stereo-blindness.⁵ It has been suggested (Livingstone and Conway 2004) that Rembrandt too may have been stereo-blind leading to a flattening of his perception of reality. Hackett's work seeks to communicate the resulting distortion of his vision. He is particularly

³ See Cat. Nos. Paintings 2, Conceptual 5 & 9 here No. Conceptual 9 makes direct reference albeit generalised to the landscape it references, while No. Conceptual 5 is more removed from overt landscape reference as is No. Paintings 2

⁴ This is a particularly valuable concept because it enables abstract work typically viewed as non-representational to function as representation informed by knowledge of the world, representing that world in an abstract way, generalising, idealising, distilling, abstracting in a manner akin to scientific model building.

⁵ Diplopia is a condition where the two ocular images are not successfully merged, impeding stereo cues and producing distorted vision. Though termed stereo-blindness much depth perception remains functional.

pertinent to this project for he has had residencies in both the Hebrides and Iceland, has produced work inspired by both landscapes and has exhibited in both localities.⁶

“My diplopia creates an unusual, effortful and enigmatically imprecise visual world. In these paintings I explore the use of a grid structure to shape and present the world as a two dimensional surface that implies a third dimension along with my distorted visual field.” (Hackett 2009)

Some of his pieces retain some mapped representation of the real world such as the indistinct shape of Iceland, partially over painted and subordinate to the dominant grid in his work 8056, but most of his work appears truly abstract. Nonetheless, he regards these apparently abstract works as *landscape paintings*.

“I create landscape paintings not as scenic panoramas, but rather as depictions of the experience of actively seeing places” ... “my work is primarily concerned with the cognitive neuroscientific processes associated with human understanding of the visual field.” (Hackett 2009)

For Paul Hackett the experience of actively seeing places is a subconscious assemblage of all the sensations and interpretations that together form the visual field to conjure an internal panorama. Again, the work is an abstract informed by landscape ‘knowledge’.

The aerial, vertical or oblique view removes the problem of intervisibility for the artist seeking to portray the complexity and underlying structure of the landscape. Such once unusual perspectives are now owned and accessible since the advent of air travel, and familiarity with air, and satellite imagery and the widespread use of maps (Cosgrove 1994). In the landscapes of the Highlands of Scotland the representation of spatial pattern in the construction of the work allows for a level of abstraction that nonetheless remains ‘grounded’ and constrained by the contours of a ‘real’ surface. This pattern may be natural such as the striated glacial outwash sheets or anthropogenic, such as the linear runrig or lazy bed cropping systems in the Highlands and Islands.

Recently Carol Rhodes has used an elevated and oblique view point to construct enigmatic and somehow unsettling images of the Earth’s surface while preserving perspective albeit removed from the Palladian vista:

“Carol Rhodes paints imaginary landscapes. Maybe they are not strictly landscapes, if that word implies a grounded vantage point. Maybe they are not imaginary in the fullest sense, either. Fictional views or fictional topographies might be better terms for these scenes, seen from above, set somewhere in the middle of nowhere.” (Lubbock 2007)

The *nowhere* referred to by Tom Lubbock resonates well with Marion Shoard’s concept of the edgelands (Shoard 2002), a concept that can be extended to cover the marginal nature of Highland

⁶ Taigh Chearsabhagh, North Uist, 2003, 2009 and University of Reykjavik, 2006

crofting townships (see Cat. No. Paper 7.). Perhaps one of the most obvious successes in changing the perspective on landscape whilst moving towards (or in a biographical sense back from) abstraction is the work of Peter Lanyon .

“We conclude that Lanyon’s perspective (as a glider pilot) departs from the surveying gaze of traditional landscape representation and from the autonomous aesthetic common to abstract expressionists” (Crouch & Toogood 1999)

“the whole purpose of gliding was to get a more complete knowledge of the landscape and combine land sea and sky – earth air and water. I have always watched birds in flight moving more freely than man, but in a glider I have the same freedom.” (Peter Lanyon from the text of a lecture given for the British Council 1962)

2.1.3 *Bending the rules: multiple view points*

Of course, parallels with modernist and constructivist painting exist here. Indeed, there are many examples of artists attempting to resolve this quest for the full spatial meaning of landscape from cubist landscapes such as George Braque’s *Chateau de la Roche Guyon* (1909), to the marriage of representation with abstraction in the Cornish pictures of Ben Nicholson (Stephens 2008), such as *St Ives Oval and Steeple* 1951, and his painted relief of the 1950s such as *Granite* 1956 (Koroche 2008), and David Hockney’s affair with Chinese art, with reverse perspective and with photo montage (Melia 1996). Ivon Hitchens, by adopting his preferred three-times-longer-than-high landscape is permitted two or even three perspectival vanishing points as in *Hazel Wood* 1944 (Warman and Collier 1989)⁷.

However, absolute but illusory space is capable of almost infinite manipulation within the visual arts, so that the same points, lines and planes subvert and distort the intuitive perspective of empirical experience.

“rational abstraction ... (which) ... isolates significant elements of the world that have some unity and autonomous force ... and allows the construction of an abstract space ‘one sided and incomplete’, but the dominant spatial condition of modernity” (Lefebvre 1971)

Absolute space is invaded too by the buildings and structures that communities, architects, civil engineers and planners erect. The creation and manipulation of built, architectural space creates the lived in space of (particularly, but not exclusively) the urban built environment that includes both newly defined internal spaces within buildings and external spaces defined and contained by those same buildings.

⁷ Exhibition: Ivon Hitchens: forty-five paintings, Serpentine Gallery, 1989 (visited)

It should be noted too that these spaces are charged with differential distribution of knowledge and power leading to differential inclusion and exclusion, but such issues will be examined when considering the cultural construction of landscape.

2.2. Relative Space

The approach of spatial analysis and spatial science came in for a subsequent critique in the social sciences. The question became not what is space, but how is it that different human practices make use of distinctive conceptualisations of space. Considerations such as these led to the notion of **relative space**.

Relative space is a relational concept of space in which space is folded into social relations through practical activities. So, the focus is now NOT just the spatial relationships between points, lines and planes in space, but the spatial relationships between objects and events that transcend Euclidian geometry. Such relationships are made with reference to, or relative to the objects and events that constitute a spatial system or structure. Such a notion of **relative space** allows a duality between the study of *concrete material spaces* and *imagined symbolic spaces* and as such subsumes those concepts of **imagined space** and **symbolic space**.

Further, a notion of **relative space** allows the 'socialisation of spatial analysis' and the 'spatialisation of social analysis'. In the social sciences, formative attempts to re-conceptualise space ensued and allowed the cultural reconstruction of the way knowledge is conveyed visually through spaces of constructed visibility (**visuality**).

In this context the Scottish Highlands and Islands, can be considered not only as concrete material spaces with distinctive geologies and environmental histories and character, but as imagined symbolic spaces constructed and endowed with selective but contested cultural meaning and significance: Britain's last wilderness remote and romantic. Indeed we have already considered briefly the constructed cultural meaning of the remote empty Highland landscape of abandoned and ruined crofts and their symbolic meaning but often misplaced resonance for the descendants of Highland émigrés in the new world; the Gael diaspora .

Social scientists began to recognise constellations of knowledge and power, acknowledging the role of political positions, gender, and sexuality/desire in conditioning visual appropriations of the world. These constellations of knowledge and power are typically elaborated through systems of inclusion and exclusion forming 'spaces of the same' from which 'the other' is excluded. The Marxist concept of the political economy of socialism depended on a space-economy that was re-theorised as a socio-spatial dialectic between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the mode of production.

Such systems of inclusion and exclusion and a Marxist economic interpretation has currency for the central focus of this research project in that the indigenous gaelic population of the Highlands and Islands was effectively excluded from participating in the benefits of 18th and 19th century agricultural improvement and excluded from their ancestral lands by the spatial reconfiguration of the landscape and relocated to marginal less fertile sites or forced to emigrate. They became by such exclusion a victim of internal colonisation and a marginalised subaltern population in postcolonial terms (Hechter 1975).

Postcolonial theory, founded largely by Edward Said (Said 1992) and influenced by the work of Foucault and Derrida, and by poststructuralism is also germane to the deconstruction of the relationships between power and knowledge in the landscapes of the Highlands and Islands. Both can be viewed as having emerged to varying degrees from a 'colonial state: the Highlands and Islands from colonisation by an English and Lowland Scots economic elite. In the case of the British Isles this was a process of internal colonisation⁸ (Hechter 1975).

⁸ Simultaneous to the overseas expansion of European states from the 17th century onwards were similar thrusts into the peripheral hinterlands within those states. This process was not coincidental but had the same social and economic cause: the search for more resources, food and commodities, the quest for "little Americas".

Section 2. **Landscape and Space: Conclusions.**

It is clear that the traditional genre of landscape painting as it emerged in Europe and through its development in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries fell short of adequately representing absolute space.

This was largely due to the convention of single point perspective or the mimetic-perspectual approach in which the artist and hence the observer is static, rooted to a single real point in space and with a single view of the landscape from that point.

This approach to representation continued to be a restrictive influence throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, but from the late nineteenth century onward artists began to break free of such restrictions and explore other aspects of our perception of absolute space.

These movements can be broadly summarised as:

- a flattening of perspective coupled with a renewed focus on the picture plane and the painted surface;
- the use of multiple, but still terrestrial or grounded viewpoints and hence the use of multiple perspectives;
- freeing the artist/observer to adopt a changing viewpoint introducing the illusion of movement through changing perspectives
- embracing the two dimensional conventions of cartography and mapping with an overt vertical view point with its non-perspective conventions
- some combination of these