

3. Landscape and Place

The recognition of these systems of inclusion and exclusion forming *spaces of the same* from which *the other* is excluded as well as broadening the interpretation of Marxist socio-spatial dialectic also became the stimulus for another dialectic, this time between *space* and *place* (Cresswell 2004).

3.1. The space/place dialectic

In Section 2.1 much of the discussion of absolute space made reference to spatial science and the *nomothetic* practice of seeking spatial laws such as the laws of perspective predicting spatial patterns over space. However, space is organised into **places**. Places are bounded settings within which social relations and identity are constituted. They are sites of intersecting social relations, meaning and collective memory. To describe them in terms of these specifics is in contrast an *idiographic* practice. Concepts of *place*, *sense of place* and *placelessness* all developed in the social sciences as a counter point to the positivism of spatial analysis and spatial science ... the translation of "*mere space*" into "*an intensely human place*" (Tuan 1976)

3.1.1. Phenomenology and the sense of place

To clarify what a sense of place might imply social scientist turned to *phenomenology*.¹ In particular they took the facts of a place and acknowledged that places were more than their surface appearance they involved human intentions as well, the notion of *intentionality* (Searle 1979, 1983). Even more they recognised that places possessed an *essence* of place, their essential quality. Both intentionality and essence have important implications for art and artists. There is a depth of meaning to places that goes beyond their physical and sensory properties. Accordingly it is to literature and the arts that people turn to express that depth of meaning and the spirit of place.

Lastly a phenomenological approach alerts us to the fact that as humans we are embedded in the world and our knowledge of places is not independent of how we come to possess that knowledge, ie it is embedded knowledge. So, the question arises: whose concept of place? Indeed, the notion of place allows different individuals (and groups) to conceive of places and experience them differently. By way of example let's consider a particular place: Balnakiel, a bay at the head of the Kyle of Durness, in northwest Sutherland.

3.1.2. Whose place?

The locale is known intimately to me for I lived in the area for twelve months in the mid 1960s and have visited it almost every summer since 1967. My embedded knowledge reflects this background

¹ Actually they developed Martin Heidegger's reworking of the German philosopher's Edmund Husserl's concept of phenomenology

and the academic purpose of many of those visits coupled with a deep and informed affection for and aesthetic appreciation of the place.

The video and installation artist Shona Illingworth grew up in Balnakiel, in the craft village now occupying the former wartime military base just to the west of the crofting township of Durness. It is close by Balnakiel House, a large building erected in the late eighteenth century on the site of a former summer palace of the Bishops of Caithness and now the centre of a large sheep farm. In 2009 Shona exhibited a commissioned video and sound installation at the John Hansard Gallery Southampton entitled Balnakiel. For her Balnakiel is a place of memory and the formation of identity in situations of social tension between locals and incomers, a place *brooding and melancholy, under siege from a hostile and threatening environment and the intermittent thunder of RAF and Royal Navy manoeuvres around this still active bombing range*². The *sense of place* that emerges from Shona's work in spite of some commonality is strikingly different from my own. For me it is the welcoming if eccentric folk of the craft village, camping by the magnificent sweep of the white sands of the bay, of carrying out ecological field sampling in the sand dunes under the early summer sun that contribute to my embedded knowledge and to my sense of place.

3.1.3. *Authenticity of place*

This question of *whose concept of place* leads to a wish to give those places authenticity by modifying them in particular but different ways something that can become a recipe for place centred conflict. Different perceptions and aspirations for the same places are most acute when there is an uneven ownership of knowledge and power, the individual and the corporate entity.

The Scottish Highlands and Islands provide a classic example in the 18th and 19th century clearances of conflicts of authenticity and instances of re-imagining the past through distorted memory and interpretation of the landscape that ensued.

A dual focus is needed for the understanding of '*sense of place*'. First there is the person who '*senses*', and second the place that he or she '*has a sense of*'. People vary in sensitivity and in attentiveness to places. Places themselves vary in the degree to which they have the distinctiveness, the individual character, the coherence and homogeneity which makes some of them memorable – whether congenial, lovable, or grimly sublime. Obviously, these two factors are linked: without accessible places of character to experience over time, it is unlikely that a person will develop the sensitivity and give the attention.

² Phraseology derived from exhibition brochure, John Hansard Gallery February 2009

Specific and unique places are localities (*locale*) in social science parlance. There is often a wish to give those places authenticity by modifying them so that the uniqueness of particular localities is enhanced by the location of equally unique objects in those localities. For the arts this may mean the placing of a three dimensional (usually) work of some kind at that locality to enrich the sense of place (public art) but may equal entail the elevation of some natural or man made object to iconographic status. An example of enhancing the sense of place in this way is seen in the Road Ends Community Sculpture Project sponsored by the Scottish Arts Council in the Hebrides (Fiona and Mackenzie. 2006)

3.2. Sensibility to place and art.

Examples of such sensitivity abound in both literature and visual art. The St Ives school for example displays in the work of many of its artists (Ben Nicholson (Stephens 2008), Margot Maekelburghe, and Wilhemina Barnes-Graham (Gooding 2005)) a sensitivity to the Cornish landscape as place. Peter Lanyon (Causey 2006) has already been referred to in this context. He was acutely aware of Cornwall's geography and many of his paintings and constructions capture place through the projection of the physical experience of specific elements of the Cornish landscape on to the picture plane. His fellow St Ives artist, Terry Frost during his sojourn at Leeds in the 1950s though mainly concerned with painting itself, in a similar fashion caught the spirit of a new landscape that of the Yorkshire moorland. However, both Lanyon and Frost illustrate in their work the fact that deep meaning can be conveyed by images that though derived from the sense of a place are not faithful representations of that place.

However, for me two women artists exemplify the ability to absorb and convey a deep and subtle sense of place. They can both be categorised as landscape artists, but it is their sensitivity and loyalty to 'place' that sets their work apart. Sheila Fell (Lessore 1990) with her understated but subtly powerful evocation of Aspatria in Cumbria³, and Joan Eardley's (Pearson 2007, Oliver 1988) painterly engagement with the sea and coastline at Catterline⁴ near Stonehaven in Aberdeenshire both encapsulate what is special and precious about their chosen 'places' at all seasons.

³ See for example *Snowscape with Clouds* 1958, oil on canvas, 125 x 100 cm; *Cumberland* 1959-60, oil on canvas, 125 x 204 cm; *Snowscape* 1960-61, oil on canvas, 100 x 76 cm. ... Sheila Fell became one of the most outstanding landscape artists of her generation, blending native and European influences into a vision that ranges from the dark and fiercely oppressive to the tender and elegiac. (Drew 1990) Exhibition: Sheila Fell, South Bank Centre 1990 (visited)

⁴ See *The Wave* 1961, oil and grit on board, 118 x 188 cm; *The Sea*, 1959, oil on board, 97 x 155 cm; and *Winter Sea III*, oil on board, 93 x 154 cm as examples of Eardley's powerful seascapes. However, she also captured the village itself and the fields around it in equally powerful paintings such as *Catterline in Winter* 1963, oil on board, 120 x 130 cm; *Summer Fields* 1961, oil and grasses on board, 105 x 106 cm, and *Harvest* 1960-1, oil and grit on board. Latest exhibitions: Joan Eardley, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh 2007 (visited) and Joan Eardley: paintings and drawings The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh 2007 (visited)

Section 3. **Landscape and Place: Conclusions**

Here it is contended that landscape artists have displayed some success when it comes to the representation of place. This is true whether conveying directly the actual character of a place or perhaps even more so when capturing indirectly the spirit of place.

Nonetheless, it should be remembered that the ability of an artist to convey the depth of meaning inherent in place is limited by the variation in sensitivity and in attentiveness to places that any particular viewer will possess. It is further limited by the embedded knowledges of both the artist and the viewer relative to that place.

In a contemporary context it should be remembered too that the embedded knowledge of most urban dwelling viewers will be seriously flawed by often erroneous and naive preconceptions when considering the representation of rural landscape places in art.