

## THE POWER OF PLACE: FROM SEMIOTICS TO ETHNOGEOGRAPHY

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**ABSTRACT:** *At the heart of human geography lies a concern with how people relate to their environment, yet recent research in cultural geography suggests that the landscape remains conceptualized in a narrow way. James Duncan's equation of landscapes with texts inspired a generation of disciples who extended the semiotic approach inside cultural geography. While not hegemonic, nor lacking its share of critics, the conceptualization of landscapes as texts that communicate meaning enjoys widespread popularity. This essay argues that while semiotics is commonly understood as abetting our understanding of the reflexive relationship between people and their environment, its implicit assumptions relative to the landscape, agency, and power actually obscure the intricate, semi-conscious, and multitudinal processes through which we collectively "build" our environment and how it in turn "cultivates" certain values, mental dispositions, and patterns of behavior in us. My essay argues that to understand how the landscape molds social relations geographers need to survey how its diverse properties overlap, and introduces ethnogeography, the thick description of how we collectively dwell inside our world, as a practical alternative approach for studying the power of place.*

### THE LANDSCAPE OF CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

Two decades ago, James Duncan (1980 182-183) challenged the Berkeley School's "super organic" formulation of culture (Sauer, 1926), charging that their abstract depiction of the reciprocity between land and life reduced humans to culture's "passive carriers". Over the ensuing decade so called "new" cultural geographers (Cosgrove, 1984; Jackson, 1989; Duncan, 1992) explored the landscape not as some artifact, but as a construct that helped to invigorate the social order. Today, few (Hart, 1998) accept the once traditional formulation of landscapes as a mere outcome of material life or an "innocent" by-product of social life. Borrowing from comparative literature, art history, and linguistics, "new" cultural geographers (Lewis and Price, 1993) saw semiotics as an attractive method for investigating the power of place. Envisioning the landscape as a text, they argued that it was inscribed with different levels of meaning open to various readings. Enthusiastic reception of "new" cultural geography coincided with the increasing pluralism evident in our society and a growing disenchantment with the ability of science to objectively describe divergent interpretations of the landscape (Cresswell,

1996; Soja, 1996). Another attraction lay in its promise to integrate geography into social theory (Agnew and Duncan, 1989). Geographers had long toiled on an intellectual periphery. Rather than analyzing the spatial distribution of material artifacts, cultural geographers acquired new stature as students of the principal medium through which society perpetuated itself (Duncan, 1992 183). Last, but not least, semiotics enabled cultural geographers to assume the mantle of "social justice" and champion the victims of privileged landscapes (Harvey, 1979b; Jackson, 1989).

With the passage of twenty years much that once seemed new has become established. Wide spread acceptance of the analogy between landscapes and texts signals that the end of the revolution in cultural geography is close at hand (Barnes and Duncan, 1992). A fact also evident in the prevalence of social theory's key terms (Marcus and Fisher, 1986) in geographic discourse: ideology, power, and identity. Today precious few cultural geographers would identify themselves as "semioticians", yet the analogy between culture, landscape, and text is so widely accepted that it can be found in most branches of human geography, including historical geography, urban geography, and cartography (Williams, 1989; Bondi, 1992; Wood, 1993). At various times this model, has been invoked by Marxists, feminists, and

even cultural theorists outside of geography (Harvey 1979a, Hall et al., 1997; Hayden, 1998). Identifying semiotics as an orthodoxy, does not imply that its practitioners study landscapes in an identical manner. Cultural geography is a tree with many branches and individual scholars construe “semiotics” according to a scale that ranges from the quite mechanistic to the very metaphorical. On two things, however, most cultural geographers would agree: places have power and the landscape constitutes a text that communicates meaning. The central concern of this essay is to reconcile these assumptions with insights gleaned from phenomenology in order to sketch out an empirical approach for exploring the complex relationship between humans and their environment.

## SYMBOLIC LANDSCAPES AND EXPERIENCE

Today many cultural geographers conceive the landscape as a text (See Figure 1); a signifying system comprised of multiple layers, projecting many meanings and open to divergent readings. Some question, however, whether we can legitimately conceptualize the landscape as “symbolic” (Schatzki, 1991 653). After all, such a definition directs scholarly attention towards the distinctive, legible, and expressive elements of a landscape. Traditionally, new cultural geographers placed particular emphasis upon the landscape’s iconography (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988). This “ocular-centricism” (Sui, 2000) can shortchange the olfactory, acoustic, and kinetic properties of the landscape (Tuan, 1977).

This visual prejudice can also translate into an uneven coverage of the landscape: an analysis of prominent landmarks, controversial monuments, and exemplars of fine architecture (Harvey, 1979a; Duncan, 1995; Cosgrove and Atkinson, 1998) at the expense of its inconspicuous, iconic, and mundane features. Neglect of the “vernacular” or “ordinary” landscape (Jackson, 1981; Groth and Bressi, 1997) is a logical outcome of the analogy between landscapes and written texts (Stock, 1995). If valid in some ways, pronounced differences separate these media. Not only does the “grammar” and “syntax” of architecture follow rules distinct from language (Bondi, 1992), literary texts, photographs, and

paintings (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988; Schwartz, 1997) convey meaning in a more focused way than human environments, since they are collective artifacts that embody the agency of generations and serve a medley of functions (Pearson and Richards, 1994). By associating “symbolism” with the most evocative, expressive, and visually distinctive elements of the landscape, cultural geographers can fall short of describing its “holistic” character, how its various levels of meaning overlap, reinforce, and contradict each other (Baker, 1990 1-2).

A second shortcoming of the semiotic model of landscape interpretation lies in how it depicts experience. Cultural geographers emphasize how an agent’s identity, typically equated with unique race, class, and gender characteristics, shapes their “reading” of the landscape (See Figure 1). Few would dispute this, yet reading a written text is a more formal, structured, and volitional operation than environmental perception (Stock, 1995). Reading a written text commands the application of an acquired skill, while the navigation of the landscape during daily life is less formally woven into a tapestry of social mandates, gender roles, and occupational tasks (Pred, 1983; De Certau, 1984). For those inhabiting familiar environments, memory and habit deeply influence our “reading” of the landscape. Brian Stock (1995 330) notes that “in the reading of a landscape, all is not read: a good deal is pre-read, as it is in the case of a text that one knows all or in part. The ‘reader’ is somewhat like the performer of memorized lines.” By privileging conscious readings of the landscape (Casey, 2001), new cultural geographers often obscure how the bulk of human experience is directed towards immediate goals and situated in familiar settings so that our sense of place is more intimate, fleeting, latent, and routinized than the semiotic model allows (Lowenthal, 1961 250). To clarify environmental cognition cultural geographers need to distinguish these diverse, overlapping, and potentially contradictory manners of “reading” our environment and examine how they crosscut and reinforce each other.

A final shortcoming of the semiotic model lies in the close association between meaning and ideology. Conventional wisdom holds that social, religious, and political discourses (See Figure 1) shape our reading of the landscape (Jackson, 1989 47). Few would dispute the role of culture in ordering the physical stimuli emanating from the

landscape, but we must not reduce the landscape's significance to a single affective field, disregarding how the landscape serves a multifaceted role as a "center of meaning, locus of emotional attachment, and situation for life-sustaining activities" (Buttimer, 1976 281). Many have also cautioned against extricating a transcendent ideological message from the landscape considering that in architecture

over the body, emotion, and thought as the pathway for transcending the social multitude (Fox-Gencvese, 1990). These Enlightenment assumptions overemphasize the landscape's "constructedness" at the expense of its "given-ness" (See Figure 2), how over time the "world" becomes objectified inside agents and constituent of the "self" (Casey, 2001). In contrast, phenomenologists stress the dual reality of

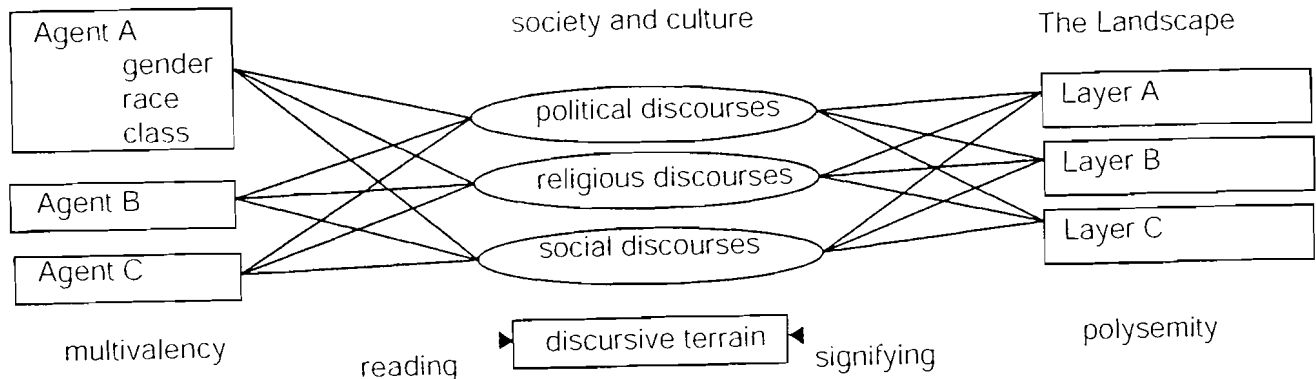


Figure 1. The Semiotic Model: Landscape As Text

"intention" is manifested over a considerable time interval, inside an existing environment, through a network of institutions, and directed towards multiple uses and users (Norberg-Schultz, 1965; Pearson and Richards, 1994). As a result, the landscape's "symbolism" is of such staggering complexity that no "meaning" is readily dissevered (Barthes, 1981). The landscape's multiple "meanings" are so ambiguous and vague that the extent to which they symbolize anything at all, such representations tend to be highly generalized, malleable to perspective, and uncontroversial (Miles, 1985).

Phenomenology offers an alternative model of how humans dwell in their environment (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). From a Heideggerian (1962 78-90) perspective humans have already been "thrown" into an extant "world" (society and culture), so that we never confront the landscape as strangers (See Figure 2).

From an existential perspective, the semiotic model privileges the visual over the tactile, the self-conscious thinking over habitual action, and the episode rather than experience over the *longue durée*. It echoes Descartes' *cogito sum* principle: the eye as the gateway for consciousness, the power of reason

human existence (Reyna, 1994), how agents are "embodied" in society and culture, so that their experience of the landscape derives not merely from their eyes, but from habit and memory, is structured not only by ideas, but social roles and rituals, is conditioned not only by conscious desires, but previous impressions garnered from these places (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Associating the landscape with prominent landmarks (Duncan, 1992 181), controversial monuments (Cosgrove and Atkinson, 1998), or episodes of dispute (Cresswell, 1996), obscures how the environment, literally that in which we squirm, envelopes humans in a more fundamental way. The landscape consists not merely of symbols, but of material surfaces, circumscribed places, fields of action, networks of locales, and localized practices that converge to bind agents to their "world".

## PLACES AND POWER

The power of place is a central theme in current geographical research, with the exploration of

interpretive differences, contested readings, and divisive social processes commanding particular attention. Peter Jackson (1989 3) speaks for many when he defines culture as a domain "where meanings are negotiated and relations of dominance and subordination are defined and contested". Antonio Gramsci's (1988) notion of hegemony serves as a point of departure for many cultural geographers. In contrast with Marx, Gramsci argued that ideologies are far from monolithic. As a stricture of concepts, values, and practices, agents are able to flexibly incorporate any "ideology" in accordance to their interests, publicly consenting to hegemonic discourses when necessary, while resisting and transforming them in a myriad of ways. Inspired by

Preoccupation with contested meanings can obscure the fact that difference is an intrinsic feature of all societies. What geographers need is a framework capable of distinguishing meaningful and socially insignificant differences, inward resistance from outward compliance, the submergence of sectional identities in shared values beyond question, and the potential of interpretive differences to mask irresolvable tensions.

Inside cultural geography there are two main traditions for investigating the power of place. Duncan in his study of Kandy argues that the British transformation of the landscape enabled them to manifest a view of the world that legitimated their "power to command" (Duncan, 1992 195). The

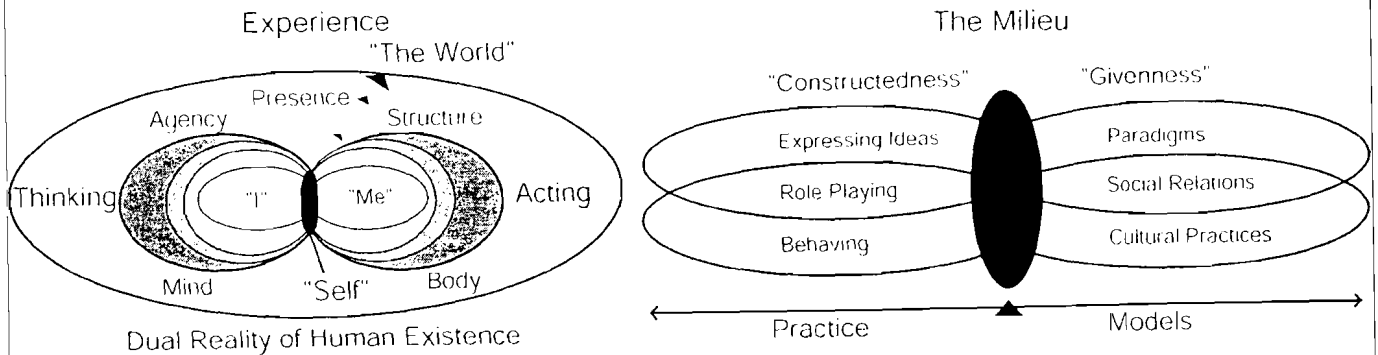


Figure 2. Phenomenological Model of Experience and The Milieu

Gramsci's formulation of cultural politics, much research in geography has focused upon examining the landscape's role in communicating "hegemonic" discourses and how such meanings are negotiated among competing groups. Two tensions, however, have inhibited our understanding of how places invigorate power. First, multifarious definitions of place can obscure the importance of scale. "Place" is a relatively abstract term (Smith, 1996) that can refer to a chair, a room, a house, a neighborhood, city, or region. We must remain conscious that "power" will vary according to one's scale of analysis (Sack, 1993), and that such scales overlap to define the power of places (Agnew, 1997). Second, if the malleability of the landscape's symbolism make its meanings "contested and unstable" (Bondi, 1992 161) it raises the question of how they can effectively invigorate the social order in the first place?

symbolic capital approach (Harvey, 1978; Cosgrove, 1984) often associates the landscape's ideology with prominent landmarks comprising the "built environment" (Duncan, 1995). Such a definition, however, reduces signification to a narrow band and short-circuits an investigation of how the landscape's representations are consumed during the course of social life. Recent work has sought to explore place making on a broader scale connecting the landscape's iconography not only to ideologies, but the realm of practice (LeFebvre, 1991). Another tradition in cultural geography can be termed symbolic interactionism (Peirce, 1991) in that it analyzes the "link between the world of ideas and beliefs and the world of material interests" at a more micro-scale (Jackson, 1989 47). For this tradition meaning is not simply inscribed by the author, but ascribed by the reader. The gap between the two represents a

“discursive terrain” where individuals and groups “negotiate” “contest”, or “resist” the landscape’s hegemonic ideology and their place in society (Cresswell, 1996; Soja, 1996; Hayden, 1998; Cosgrove and Atkinson, 1998). While all individuals are unique, we must remain conscious that different layers of the landscape’s meaning are more negotiable than others. Moreover, if we identify agency with consciousness and the pursuit of clearly defined interests, we can overlook the intricate immersion of individuals inside their environment, how they wield multiple identities, simultaneously pursue various potentially conflictual interests, and how they must continually negotiate between competing obligations to kin, ethnic group, and neighborhood. Michel Foucault (1977) warned against “essentializing” power by locating it in dominant social groups abstracted from the social institutions, roles, and rules constituting society. Power lies embedded in agency itself, through an individual’s internalization of cultural paradigms and practices. For this reason Foucault (1977) locates power in disciplining the body. This is “not a question of treating the body en masse, ‘wholesale’, as if it were an indissociable unity, but of working it ‘retail’, individually; of exercising upon it a subtle coercion, . . . movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity” (Foucault, 1977 137). The landscape’s power lies less in coercing individual behavior during specific situations, than constituting agency by defining action relative to an environment. Catherine Bell (1992 206) defines ritual as “the orchestration of schemes by which the body defines an environment and is defined in turn by it”. If our experience of place is ritualized, shaped less by conscious desires than by daily routines, than the landscape’s iconography becomes more “cacophony” than “rhetoric” (Duncan, 1992). Margaret Miles (1985 33) argues precisely this, that visual images are so intrinsically multivalent that their contemplation “is not translatable into action to correct social injustice; an image does not direct the viewer either to love his neighbor or to kill his enemies”. In fact, the multivalency of the landscape’s iconography can promote social cohesion by accommodating difference, commanding the “external consent of participants while simultaneously tolerating a fair degree of internal resistance” (Bell, 1992 216). Another feature making landscapes uncontentious is that they are composed not merely of symbols but of

stones. In their brute materiality, relative immobility, and predictable regularity the material surface of our environment presents itself as a given. For “insiders” the network of streets, familiar landmarks, and the organization of places that constitute their lifeworld remains constant with the setting sun. This constancy anchors human experience, guarding us from the anxiety of constant change (Tuan, 1977; Giddens, 1984), while also enchaining us to society.

Examining the convergence of the landscape’s multiple layers of meaning yields a subtler notion of “power” and gives “place” a less conspicuous role in invigorating it. The ritualization of social life, the malleability of the landscape’s iconography, and the fixity of its material form, work together to shape collective life. Clifford Geertz (1973 39-45) has argued that “symbols” do not so much “represent” social values as “induce” them by tying diverse myths, taboos, and rituals into a comprehensive ethos: a total way of living. So too the power of place appears to lie less in the articulation of hegemonic values, than in invigorating them by linking agents to standards of decorum and ritual gestures, constraining their fields of action by incorporating their behavior in a matrix of larger institutional projects and a range of minimally acceptable behaviors. In this respect the landscape is less a text open to negotiation, than a veneer: it projects a fixed iconic surface we accept as our world, it channels and situates our activity in socially desirable ways, while it presents us a forest of shared symbols that signify highly generalized cultural values (Turner, 1969).

To investigate the power of place cultural geographers would benefit from reconceptualizing the landscape as a milieu (Buttimer, 1971), a venerable term that emphasizes the envelopment properties of the environment at the expense of its appearance. The incorporation of phenomenology into geographic research has long been handicapped by its idiographic focus upon how the mind apprehends its world. Consequently, Heidegger’s (1962) concept of *mitdasein*, or dwelling together, remains theoretically underdeveloped. Humanistic pioneers (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977) who tried to translate phenomenological insights into their analysis were criticized for ignoring the structural conditions shaping experience (Ley, 1981). The “spirit” of a place, however, need not refer to either idiosyncratic perceptions of place, or to some essence

that exists outside of the observable laws of nature. Denis Cosgrove (1984 19) observed that experience of the landscape is “integrated and inclusive with the diurnal course of life’s events-with birth, death, festival, and tragedy-all the occurrences that lock together human time and place”. The spirit of collective dwelling derives its substance from what Raymond Williams (1973 131) termed “structures of feeling”, a tapestry of ideas, institutions, and practices that texture individual experience and give shape to collective life. Deciphering the power of place requires not only a more holistic approach to the landscape, but one capable of empirically discerning such structures of feeling.

### ETHNOGEOGRAPHY OF THE MILIEU

Clifford Geertz (1973 3-7), the tireless champion of ethnography, proposes analyzing foreign cultures by means of “thick description”. This calls upon scholars to systematically reconstruct the conceptual structures providing significance to alien experience. Scholars (Geertz, 1981 58) analyze symbolic behavior, the “words, images, institutions, behaviors-in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another”. Geography’s potential contribution to social theory derives less from developing our expertise of the landscape, than from recognizing the embeddedness of culture, social life, and experience. Cultural paradigms are always manifested in symbols and ritual behavior. Symbolic behavior is not free-floating, but performed inside an environment

(Geertz, 1981). Interaction is never random, but situated inside an institutional framework that lends shape to collective activity (Giddens, 1984). Experience is governed not merely by conscious desires, but constituted in cultural practices and encapsulated inside a habitual network of places (Bourdieu, 1977). Ethnogeography focuses upon collective dwelling, the thick description of how people build, use, and conceptualize their environment and how this in turn cultivates certain ideas, relations, and ritual actions in humans. The milieu constitutes the nexus where diverse ideological paradigms, social relations, and cultural practices converge into a shared world of experience (See Figure 2). In any community the structures of feeling that bind individuals to their world are intricate, multitudinous, and dynamic (Tuan, 1991). Since all societies contain multiple potentially contradictory myths, overlapping institutions that compel agents to balance conflicting obligations to community, family, and neighborhood, diverse roles and rituals, as well as many unique interpretations of them, no final accounting of the milieu is possible (Heidegger, 1962 107-114). Gadamer colorfully describes interpretation as a fusion of horizons, translating the lineaments of a foreign world into our own categories (Weinsheimer, 1985). The validity of such description lies in the extent to which a researcher’s generalizations draw upon empirically observed behavior in such a way as to explain structures of feeling in a comprehensive and convincing manner (Geertz, 1973). Ethnogeographical thick description succeeds when it achieves holism (Dreyfus, 1991), when it reconciles a community’s *mentalité* with their patterns of life, their stated values with actual behavior, the network

Scale	Layer of Lifeworld	Structure	Power Dynamic	Medium and Analysis
Macro	Canopy of meaning (cosmos)	Ideological Schemes	Represent/Internalize	Significations of the landscape in song, myth, architecture, ritual
Meso	Interaction chains (life)	Social Relations	Coerce/Enable	Distribution of social encounters in network of institutions and relations
Micro	Fields of action (hearth)	Cultural Practices	Root/Subvert	Segmentation of daily life in place, action, people

Figure 3. Ethnogeography of the Milieu

of locales that situate daily life with their mode of living, and exposes how these levels of experience are stitched into a *grande ensemble*. If one conceives a milieu in schematic terms, one could say that it has three levels (See Figure 3). At the macro-level, one has the dynamic of representation/internalization. All communities inhabit a cosmos, an intricate constellation of paradigms, moral precepts, and values that provides a canopy for collective life (Berger, 1967). Such ideas, principles, and morals are manifested through various media, not only in architecture and town form, but also through books, dress, and song (Baker, 1990). Ethnogeographers study these multivalent manifestations of the cosmos and their diverse internalization during collective rituals and daily life (Turner, 1977). At the meso-scale, one has the dynamic of coercion/enabling, the panoply of roles, places, and practices that define social life. Agents perform inside fields of action, a hierarchical network of places, inside circumscribed locales, and respond to codes of behavior (Bourdieu, 1977). This lived environment provides a framework through which individuals and groups plot and realize their multiple goals, ambitions, and desires. Finally, at the micro-scale, one has the dynamic of rooting/subverting, how agents establish hearths inside their community (Tuan, 1996). All humans nest inside the environment, building an intimate lifeworld whose textures lend security and structure to life, and which both integrate and segregate the agent from others.

Conceiving the milieu as comprised of three layers, serves as a useful schematic for studying communities. These scales are not real in themselves, but theoretical constructs that can guide geographical research. While analytically separated here, the paradigms, relations, and practices that define social life overlap in experience. If no study of the milieu could capture all facets of collective experience, the power of any description lies in its ability to make meaningful linkages between salient ideas, prominent social institutions, and influential cultural practices. By examining the dialectic between communal life and environment at multiple scales, and by identifying the overlap and convergence of these levels of meaning, human geographers can offer thicker descriptions of the power of place. As outlined here, ethnogeography falls short of a formal method. It is an interpretive

framework, a few general principles that can be applied and adapted to study any lifeworld. I invite other human geographers to draw upon and extend ethnogeography to explore the power of place.

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