Landscapes Both Invite and Defy Definition

Nick Hutchinson
Retired geography educator

Abstract

This article examines various meanings of the term *landscape*. It advocates a deep engagement with the concept to enable high school students to carry out a range of thought-provoking geographical inquiries. Each aspect of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's definition of landscape, shown below, is examined by reference to more one-dimensional ideas of landscape such as "the visible features of the surface of the earth" to the more complex ideas expressed in critical geographies.

Landscape

> Visible appearance of an area, created by a combination of geological, geomorphological, biological and cultural layers that have evolved over time, and as perceived, portrayed and valued by people. A geomorphic landscape is the landscape without the biological and cultural layers (ACARA Glossary, n.d.)

Experiencing landscape

Geography teachers are rightly preoccupied with the agency of students, with young people's multiple ways of experiencing and seeing the landscape. But if the teacher's aim is to extend and enrich students' knowledge of the world then landscape, as an essential threshold concept, needs to be explored in more detail. A threshold concept opens up new ways of thinking. It unearths many different viewpoints on the concept (Brooks, 2013, p. 85). Students need to be familiar with the key geographical concepts and ideas: the grammar of geography (Lambert, 2011); the specialised knowledge produced within disciplinary communities (Maude, 2016); as well as the ability to think geographically (Morgan, 2013). These new understandings enable students to carry out a range of thought-provoking geographical inquiries, experience fieldwork with renewed enthusiasm, and perhaps be persuaded to turn to the more sensory and evocative sources of paintings, poems, novels, folk tales, music, film and song that also portray landscape.

The visual appearance of an area

Landscape is often referred to as one of the central concepts of Geography, one that has long engaged many geographers (Coones, 1992; Cresswell, 2013; Gray, 2009; Gregory, 1994; Holt-Jensen, 2009; Matthews & Herbert, 2008; McDowell, 1994; Minca, 2013; Mitchell, 2005; Morin, 2009; Olwig, 2012; Wylie, 2007). The concept is as old as geography is itself. Bonnett (2008, p. 7) revealed that some of oldest literature in the *Western canon* were exploration geographies of landscape – i.e. Ulysses' ten year trip home to Ithaca in *The Odyssey.* In more common usage, landscape refers to a rural scene, particularly one that is understood or perceived from a single vantage spot. Landscape is often conflated with landscape painting or landscape gardening. Wylie (2007, p. 7) explains that UK geography graduates associate the term with a picture or painting whereas US students were more prone to think of "land-shaping activities" such as gardening or architecture.

To Humboldt (1814, cited in Tress, Tress, Fry, & Opdam, 2006, p. 29), landscape is concerned about the total character of a region of the Earth. In this way, the concept landscape "is transformed, for the first time, from an aesthetic to a scientific concept" (Minca, 2013, p. 57). However, landscape is still very much concerned with the visual appearance of an area. Indeed, Gregory (1994, p. 16) explains how the origins of geography in classical antiquity were closely identified with visual practices of cartography and geometry: particular "ways of seeing" the landscape (Berger, 1972). French geographers, such as Vidal de la Blache (1922, 1926), emphasised the ways in which local communities organised the landscape, with the landscape itself being that part of the country that the eye embraces (Gregory, 1994, p. 39; Mitchell, 2000, p. 223). Envisioning the landscape was pivotal to humanistic geography in, for example, a love of landscape in *Topophilia* (Tuan, 1974) or experiencing landscape through *The beholding eye* (Meinig, 1979). Meinig demonstrated how ten different people could see the same landscape in essentially different ways. Moreover, some notable cultural geographers have promoted geography as a highly visual discipline (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988; Cosgrove, 2008).

This sense of the ocular was seen in the New South Wales Geography syllabuses (1966) at advanced, ordinary and modified levels, where the landscape was simply defined by a geography teacher as “the visible features of the surface of the earth”(Biddle & Shortle, 1969, p. 40). Another teacher even alluded to the painterly nature of landscape where the term “can be related to the pupil’s art work and develops naturally into work field sketches”(p. 55).

Almost 60 years ago, the President of the UK Geographical Association could happily assert that landscape meant “the surface of the earth with all the things we see in it” (Bryan, 1958, p. 1). Humanistic geographer Relph (1981, p. 22) regarded the landscape as “anything I see and sense when I am out of doors”. Cultural geographer Sauer (1963, p. 393 [1925]) explained what he meant by “the ‘morphological eye’, a spontaneous and critical visual attention to form and pattern” where “geography is always a reading of the face of the earth.”

Geography teachers have long been cognisant of the visual affordances of landscape with the promotion of line drawings of landscapes and the annotation of landscape photographs, to see patterns, recognise interconnections and, more generally, exercise the geographical imagination. The second clause in the definition of landscape, presented in the ACARA glossary, provides a specific methodology, an evolutionary view of landscape, a palimpsest, and an imbrication of layers that inform fundamental geographical thinking.

A series of layers

Landscapes created by a combination of geological, geomorphological, biological and cultural layers that have evolved over time appears to be a straightforward idea. Nonetheless, it is a rather deterministic one. Geology, the earth’s internal structure and composition, its dynamics, from plate tectonics to vulcanism, clearly affects the face of the earth. Geomorphic landscapes are also relatively easy to comprehend where landscapes consist of assemblages of fluvial, hillslope, lacustrine, coastal and tectonic features and elements. A physical geography text by Gallagher and Peterson (1987, p. 3) then describes landscapes as being made up of different combinations of landforms with the science that studies landforms called geomorphology.

Gray (2009), a physical geographer, would go further with his construct of landscapes. He divides landscapes into three primary layers each made up of a number of components. At the base is the physical layer consisting rocks, soils, sediments, physical processes and landforms. The trees, shrubs and grasses, the wildlife habitats and various ecosystems overlie this layer. The final layer consists of the built environment, the agricultural modifications, as well as historical modifications and human experiences of landscape.

A scientific definition of landscape maintains, “landscape comprises the visible features of an area of land, including physical elements such as landforms, soils, plants and animals, the weather conditions, and it also includes any human elements, such as the presence of agriculture or the built environment” (Gregory, Simmons, Brazel, Day, Keller, Sylvester, & Yáñez-Arancibia, 2009).

Many geography teachers would accept the empiricist assumption that the world exists independently of the human subject (Morgan, 2013, p. 276) and that students are encouraged to experience the landscape “through the soles of their boots”. The meanings of landscapes are there to be revealed by careful observation and study. This is an objective view of landscape, where there is an ideal correspondence between the world and its image (Cosgrove, 1999, p. 3). This is a way of seeing and knowing that distances itself from subjective views of landscape. It assumes that landscapes can be consumed and understood from a prominent vantage point, in effect, a god-like view from nowhere.

Perception of landscapes

This view of landscape becomes more complicated when particular features are carefully selected for study and where other details are omitted or obliterated from view. The cultural layers are particularly pertinent here.

Postmodern geographer Soja, paraphrases Marx:

> We make our own history and geography, but not just as we please; we do not make them under circumstances chosen by ourselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the historical geographies produced in the past (1989, p. 129).

An unpacking of these circumstances has allowed geographers to focus on class struggles operating within the landscape as well as those connected with race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

Mitchell maintains that we can see this idea of landscape, as a ‘vortex’ within which swirl all manner of contests – between classes, over gender structures, around issues of race and

ethnicity, over meaning and representation, and over built form and social use (2000, p. 139).

There are many different avenues opened here for classroom study of the various struggles over landscape. In academic geography, Duncan and Duncan (2003) studied the manicured landscape of a New York suburb to illustrate that this landscape carried markers of inclusion (of Anglo Americans) and exclusion (ever-present labouring Latino Americans). Sibley (1995, p. 108) demonstrated how Romany people were portrayed as a "polluting presence" in the English countryside because of the assumption that the landscape belonged to the privileged.

There are, of course, a number of different ways in which landscape is used within and outside geography. The adjectival landscapes can be never-ending from political landscapes, literary and media landscapes and even to the landscapes of the urinary tract. As a catchall term in geography, there are geomorphic landscapes, landscapes of consumption, landscapes as spectacle, landscapes as theatre or stage sets, landscapes as texts, vernacular landscapes, postmodern landscapes, as well as the materiality of landscape and embodied acts of landscaping.

Head (1993) brought together perspectives from both physical and cultural geography to examine prehistoric cultural landscapes in Australia. Head structured her observation around four themes:

- landscape as transformed by human action;
- landscape as a social expression, landscape as structured by the needs of the social system;
- symbolic and textual readings looking at the ways Aboriginal people read the landscapes;
- contestation of landscape images, e.g. wilderness vs. home for Aboriginal people for thousands of generations, World Heritage vs. Aboriginal Land, the Dreaming vs. the "scientific" story of Australia's past.

Gosden and Head (1994) sought to introduce the term "social landscape" to archaeologists in order to open up their ways of thinking about landscapes. Both authors acknowledged the work of Denis Cosgrove on landscape "where verbal, visual and built landscapes have an interwoven history" (p. 114).

Cosgrove was a preeminent figure in the conception of landscape in cultural geography. When he delivered the Hettner Lectures in 2005 at the Department of Geography, University of Heidelberg, he was then the Alexander von Humboldt Professor of Geography at the University of California, Los Angeles. All three men have had important roles in the construction of the landscape idea. It was Hettner, in 1905, who wrote of the duality between people and environment (Stoddart, 1986, p. 231) and the intrinsic worth of this duality to the particular character of landscapes. It was Humboldt who stressed fieldwork, whose

> coat pockets, one of his guides noted, were like those of a little boy – full of plants, rocks and scraps of paper. Nothing was too small or insignificant to investigate because everything had its place in the great tapestry of nature (Wulf, 2015, pp. 91–92).

It was the picturesque landscape that was important to Humboldt because scenic description should draw its vitality from the scene itself, and not from what he called the "adornment of diction" (Darby, 1962, p. 2). Cosgrove sought to examine the essence of the landscape in a particular historical context, its origins and development as a cultural concept in the West since the European Renaissance. In the end, he developed a sophisticated perception of landscape. These perceptions should not be beyond high school students in the geography classroom.

Cosgrove (2006) describes an evening walk up the steep hills that surround the Los Angeles Basin. He depicted the panoramic view over the commercial boulevards, red roofs and palm trees from the Hollywood Hills to Pacific beaches and offshore islands. He mused about the city as a locus of global popular culture and a constellation of diverse ethnic groups and lifestyles, an automobile-dependant existence with distinctive urban patterns.

> In these opening lines, I have used the word landscape in three distinct, if overlapping ways: to describe extended, pictorial views from the Hollywood Hills; as an 'idea' that played a significant role in shaping California's modernity; and as a shorthand for a blend of land and life, of physical and social morphologies, that constitutes a distinct region and community (Cosgrove, 2006, p. 3).

In his lectures, Cosgrove referred to Olwig's work on landscape. Rather than concentrate on the visual or painterly aspect of landscape, Olwig regarded the *landskab* of parts of Frisia and Schleswig-Holstein in northwest Europe as localities where customary law and culture defined the landscape, customary law determined by those living and working in an area (Cosgrove, 2003, p. 9; Olwig, 2002, p. 17, 1996, p. 631). These heathlands, low-lying marshlands and offshore islands had escaped the suzerainty of kings and queens, lords and ladies and the dictates of the mercantile establishment. Olwig's

research opened up landscape as *landskab* to new ways of thinking about landscape, perceptions of landscape that moved away from the aesthetics of landscape towards those of community, locality and customary law (Wylie, 2007, p. 97).

This offers up further opportunities for students to explore landscapes. As (Mitchell, 2003, p. 792) put it a landscape is a "substantive reality, a place lived, a world produced and transformed, a commingling of nature and society that is struggled over and in." Students could examine the territorial meaning of landscape. Olwig argues that even when landscape is connected with landscape painting, from where it emerged in Europe in the 16th century, it was not solely concerned with natural scenery. "These paintings usually depicted life in countries filled with culture . . . . The subject matter of such paintings is thus closer to the meaning of landscape as a polity's area of activity, as in the term 'political landscapes'" (Olwig, 2002, p. xxv). There is scope here for students to study Australian landscape paintings such as those of Roberts, Drysdale and Nolan to uncover the substantive reality of lived places.

Portrayal of landscapes

Daniels (1989), who worked closely with Cosgrove, explores some of the metaphorical concepts connected with landscape as portrayed in a number of texts including paintings and novels. He sought out symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of landscape as well as the workings of the economy, the material way of life of people living in the landscape. Daniels examined the tension between an elitist, painterly or aesthetic vision and a vernacular and realistic "way of life" (1989, p. 206). The sensual unity with nature identified by Daniels is enhanced by a deep sense of the past, historic, prehistoric, geological and mythical, which tends to both overwhelm and enrich the ordinary lives of people (p. 210). However, a preoccupation with the visual obscures many of these spiritual endowments.

Mitchell (1996, 2001, 2003,) took up Daniels' notion that landscapes are duplicitous in his analysis of industrial agricultural production in California. Again, the scenery or apparent naturalness of the California strawberry groves obscures and conceals the social and economic conditions that go into the making of this landscape. The strawberries that he washed in his kitchen concealed a network of violence, "real, bodily, physical violence: farmworkers' hands mangled by machinery, the gun and knife fights in the cities and the labor camps are often part of the farmworkers everyday lives" (2003, p. 243). The strawberry pickers lived in barns and sheds, "sleeping among machinery, tools, and canisters of pesticides" (2003, p. 233).

An example of fieldwork activities for geography students that looks at the symbolic landscape is found in the AGTA publication *Keys to fieldwork* (2008). The section on war memorials, drawn from Waitt et al. (2000), Rose (2007) and Inglis (2008), brings together the perspectives of Australian cultural geographers on gendered landscapes and war memorials, the contributions of a Professor of Cultural Geography at The Open University in the UK on the interpretation of visual materials, and a notable historian writing about *War memorials in the Australian landscape.*

Students who are interested in delving more deeply into the symbolic meaning of landscapes could also develop interests in gendered aspects of landscapes. Whereas Mitchell (1996) was concerned with *The lie of the land,* Kolodny (1975) wrote *The lay of the land*, a literary examination of the land-as-woman in North America. In an Australian context, Cathcart (2009) explained that European explorers "habitually represented the country as if it were a woman they had set out to ravish and possess" (2009, p. 139). Kolodny (p. 139) presented the virgin soil of the prairies as "begging to be ploughed, fertilised, cropped and possessed."

Feminist geographers who have contributed to a deeper understanding of landscape include Norwood and Monk's (1987) edited work *The desert is no lady* which showed how "Hispanic, Native American and Anglo women imagined the American Southwest in a way that was both different from men's and also from each other's" (Morin, 2009, p. 294).

Landscapes valued by people

Cosgrove (in Gregory & Walford, 1989, p. 127) explained that although traditional sources of geographic data are useful in interpreting the symbolism of landscape, paintings, poems, novels, folk tales, music, film and song "can provide a firm handle on the meanings that places and landscapes possess, express and evoke as do more conventional 'factual' sources."

For some geographers, the novel is a most important vehicle. Landscapes are evoked by the novel's characters, the narrative and by the reader. As Daniels and Rycroft (1994, p. 395) explain, "Any one novel may present a field of different, sometimes competing, forms of geographical knowledge, from sensuous awareness of place to an educated idea of region and nation."

Humanistic geographers saw descriptions of cultural imprints on the landscape as important. Lowenthal (2015, p. 104) wrote about Henry

James' visit to Europe in 1877, "A day in a thirteenth century English house, his own tread hollowing the floors and his own touch polishing the oak, let James share its six living centuries." Other humanistic geographers wrote fine descriptions of landscapes (Meinig, 1983; Tuan, 1974), as have historical geographers such as Darby (1962) and Jeans (1979). Cultural geographer Sauer was able to combine fine description with deep geographical insights into landscape, writing about heathland in Northern Europe, citing expanses of heathland, heather, furze and bracken; sheep tracks and cart traces (Sauer, 1996, pp. 301–302 [1925]).

Cronon (1992, p. 1349) saw landscapes as a "place for stories" where all the understandings gleaned from historical geographies are evident in the labels that North Americans have attached to the Great Plains since 1800 such as "the Land of the Buffalo" or, "the Land Where the Sky Begins" (Cronon, 1992, pp. 1375–1376). Crang (1998) saw literary landscapes as a melange of literature and landscape rather than seeing literature as a mirror through which landscape is reflected.

In an Australian context, Borschmann mused about the symbolic landscape of the bush, a landscape that is no longer materially important to most Australians but one that remains "so firmly rooted in our hearts and imaginings"(1999, p. vii). Watson (2014) saw the bush as both real and imaginary.

> Real, in that it grows in various unmistakable bush-like ways, and dies, rots, burns and grows into the bush again; real in harbouring life. Imaginary in that among the life it harbours is the life of the Australian mind (Watson, 2014, p. 66).

Some interpreters of Australian culture, such as Patrick White, Alan Moorehead and Manning Clark, detected a spiritual darkness in this imaginary landscape, an interior landscape hung out to dry. Winton (2015) maintains that it is still not uncommon in the twenty-first century to hear of the interior still being referred to as the "dead heart".

The ways that people value landscapes depend on our hopes and dreams, our sense of the enchanted and the poetic. In 1554, Phillip II of Spain, King of England from 1554 to 1558, was travelling up through Hampshire from Southampton for his marriage ceremony with Queen Mary in Winchester Cathedral. All along the journey he saw the green, fertile landscape through the "eyes" of Amadis de Gaula (Edwards, 2016, p. 62), a character from a popular 16th century Spanish chivalric novel set in Britain. It was a magical, dream-like landscape, a setting for contemporary soap operas, the place of fantastical imagery.

Similarly, Thomas Hardy in his preface to *Far from the madding crowd* explained his fictional Wessex was "partly real, partly dream-country" (Bullen, 2013, p. 18). Bullen (p. 237) sees Wessex as a dream place, "a tessellation of locations varying from novel to novel, rarely overlapping, and where the parts though close geographically, are remote in terms of atmosphere, climate and ethos."

The landscape can literally be sung into being. Chatwin spoke of "a labyrinth of invisible pathways that meander all over Australia" (1987, p. 2). These "songlines" conjoined landscape and music thus providing, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, a means of navigating the landscape, a sense of individual identity and a way of relating to other tribal groups (Connell & Gibson, 2003, p. 280). Dreaming Tracks were much more than "singing the world into existence". They facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, art, technology, and, marriage partners. They connected clans from one side of the country to the other (Pascoe, 2014, p. 129) and they still continue to connect distant groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today (Taçon, 2005). Rose refers to the songs as "song-poems" (1996, p. 1). To substantiate their claim to portions of the Simpson Desert, under the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976, the Arrernte people described how they followed the rivers through the desert singing the song-poems of the country and the Dreaming. "They sang of flowers, colours and butterflies, of love and desire, and of all the sudden joyful life" (Rose, 1996, p. 52).

Landscape geographies can be exposed in the material and symbolic landscapes of post-industrial cities such as Newcastle in New South Wales (Dunn, McGuirk, & Winchester, 1995). Landscapes can be illuminated in emergent postmodern cityscapes. Consider these "six geographies of restructuring"(Hall & Barrett, 2012, p. 49; Soja, 1995, pp. 129–137) listed below. These geographies have been rephrased with references to contemporary Sydney. They offer opportunities for an in-depth examination of Sydney's urban landscapes by senior geography students:

- restructuring of the economic structure of the city with emerging "high tech" enterprises, a profusion of jobs in finance, insurance, and real estate offices – producer services referred to as FIRE by Sassen (2012, p. 133), jobs in creative industries such as design, architecture, filmmaking and fashion (O'Neill & Gahan, 2014), a shift away from the production of physical goods to service

industries focused on knowledge and innovation (Moretti, 2012);

- part of a global system of world cities (Baker & Ruming, 2015; New South Wales Department of Planning, 2014; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2010);
- the emergence of "edge cities" (Connell, 2000) or the "exopolis" without facilities or a civic centre (Bailey et al., 2015);
- changing social structures within the urban landscape with increasing disparities of income, access to housing and facilities – these inequities are expressed in new patterns of segregation and polarisation (Muscat, 2014a, 2014b; Latham, 1998);
- the rise of "paranoid" or "carceral" (Davis, 1992) architecture with cities enmeshed in networks of surveillance (Waitt *et al.*, 2000, p. 416) with closed circuit television cameras, locked apartment and office blocks and exclusion zones such as gated communities (Quintall, 2006; Waitt et al., 2000, pp. 414–417);
- a radical change in urban imagery from drab urban cityscapes to festival marketplaces (Waitt *et al.*, 2000, pp. 417–418), shopping malls as miniature cities (Daylight, 2008, p. 8) and other trappings of postmodern style (Waitt et al., 2000, p. 93; Barkham, 2001).

J. B. Jackson valued the vernacular North American landscape. He wrote, as editor of the US journal, *Landscape*:

> As I travel about the country, I am often bewildered by the proliferation of spaces and the uses of spaces that had no counterpart in the traditional landscape: parking lots, landing fields, shopping centres, trailer courts, high-rise condominiums, wildlife shelters, Disneyland. (Jackson, 1996, p. 326).

This opens an avenue for a more current take on landscape, one that traces the threads of phenomenology, vision, performativity and bodily practice. Cresswell (2003) re-examines Jackson's contributions in terms of lived practice and provides a valuable contribution to the current examination of landscape through phenomenology, approaches that "often stress direct bodily contact, with, and experience of, landscape" (Wylie, 2007, p. 141); experiences that include not only seeing but touching, hearing, believing, remembering, imagining, getting excited or angry, evaluating and even lifting up or pushing things (Peet, 1998, p. 37). The phenomenological landscape is thought of "as a space of practice and performance, as a multi-sensorial experience of the living environment" (Minca, 2013, p. 54).

Students are invited to immerse themselves in landscape. Cresswell contrasts the notion of fixity in landscape, a text that is already written, with the fluidity, flow and repetition that is implied by immersing oneself in the landscape. This group of social theories is sometimes referred to as non-representational because they want to be seen as "an antidote to the representational"(2003, p. 270), and a move away from *Geography and vision* (Cosgrove, 2008). Non-representational theory is popular with geographers who "seek an alternative to conceptualizations of landscape which they consider too cognitive, alienated, arrogant, expert, critical and concerned with vision at the expense of other senses" (Duncan & Duncan, 2009). For example, Bull (2008) explored landscape as an aural entity using what we would now refer to as a smart phone, (then called a Walkman), to interact with other digital music player users in the city, to connect with others, experience place and the sensory landscape. This kind of sensory experience of landscapes offers alternative forms of sensory urban fieldwork for geography students.

Conclusion

Landscape, like many terms frequently used in geography, is full of rich meanings – we do more than sketch the landscape; and landscape geographers are more engaged with the concept than are landscape gardeners. Landscape opens up ideas concerning geographical explanations, thinking and imaginations. Rather than confine our ideas to a tacit acceptance of the ACARA definition of landscape, we should endeavour to encourage student research projects and fieldwork that embrace landscape in its polysemy and geographical heritage. Landscapes, whether geomorphological, biological or cultural, are amenable to fieldwork. Such fieldwork does not have to be confined to a landscape sketch from a convenient vantage point but can engage students at street level to explore personal geographies that extend well beyond the ocular. The more that students engage with geography's rich vocabulary and scholarship the better they are equipped to engage with the complexities of the world around us.

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