

Landscape archaeology



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Academia Research Victoria Gateworth December 2009 Through a rectangle, enlightenedly: A glance at the theories within landscape archaeology Julian Thomas, in his research paper *Archaeologies of Place and Landscape*, approaches the meanings that various disciplines have given to the English word landscape. Originally a Dutch word, it has been adopted and adapted to suit the purposes of ordinary people and scholars alike to give substance to arguments and visions, mainly about nature, culture and history. His scope is to study the way modern usage has placed different foci and implications on the word and stretched its semantic facility.

Thomas takes empirical and cultural archaeology, belief in God, landscape painting, cartography and human enterprise, among others, to illustrate how humans have usurped nature, superimposed sophisticated concepts over it, and bent it to their own purposes.

Using concepts fleshed out by such philosophers of science as Heidegger, Thomas moves on to explain human concepts of place and how ‘purpose’ is always superimposed thereon. ‘A place is always the place of something.’ (pp173) He also shows how landscapes seem to be contained within a frame: visual or conceptual, and of course monetary or pecuniary. Humans attach value to place, whether or not it is land, developed or otherwise. They also impose meanings of time, as evidence by the article itself; the value placed on findings from the past; as well as practical present-time use.

In addition, Thomas shows a connection between land and the cosmos, seen as early as Neolithic times. Tombs, houses and henges not only formed part of the land form, but had some sort of attachment or reference to the skies and astral bodies; so that the passing of time and seasons were understood to affect the land and places where people lived and died, even from such an

early time.

We are deluding ourselves, Thomas suggests, if we try and interpret archaeological findings within the landscape using our modern mindsets. (pp 180) We would always fail if we superimposed our way of seeing things over whatever remnant of early undertakings we find. We cannot ultimately gain access to the meanings given to, and the uses of, the environment by early civilisations. He gives the examples of evidence of large gatherings in long houses, discoveries of human remains, patterns of movements between and around monuments, and other details studied through visions and understandings that are necessarily limited (or overly expanded) by modern knowledge.

Thomas uses the literature, citing Gow, Frazer and Berger among many others, to extrapolate a theory of anthro-centrism: a superimposition (and imposition!) of the construct that the world and all its landscapes (whatever meaning is loaded on the word) exist solely for the use of humankind. It is very persuasive, because the reviewer is hard pressed to find any reasonable alternative. It seems that even if we extend our sights to other planets, it is impossible to give them any other shape or form outside the rectangular ‘landscape’, no matter what shape they are. I feel this tendency has given us the ‘Golden Ratio’ of which some artists are so fond, and from where we get our shape for pictures, postcards and even television screens and monitors. Perhaps this tendency is innate, and not acquired, since it has existed since humankind invented and developed windows.

Relationships between communities and landscapes as defined by Frederic Ratzel, (pp 170) were deeply influential in forming culture-historic archaeology, which is how it is mostly perceived today, Thomas maintains.

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Although I do not wholly agree with the author's entire theory, and find he 'doth protest too much', the basic thread in this argument cannot be negated: humans put a great weight of value and interest in place and landscape, and the results are amply evident in the practical and empirical findings of archaeology, as well as the semantics of the discipline, and how we have come to view it as a science.

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Works cited

Thomas, Julian (2001) Archaeologies of Place and Landscape Archaeological Theory Today