

URBAN LANDSCAPE AND POPULAR CULTURE

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I have described some features of change in theatrical entertainment in nineteenth-century Britain. I have argued that these changes can be understood as interdependent with other processes of change in forms of social order. The reorganisation of dramatic space in the development of the theatre was inscribed in a more general restructuring of the cultural landscape – the organisation of space through which social forms are articulated. Both public and drama are modes of inscription: ‘besides its single sites, the public exists as a shared social horizon for the members of a society’ (Bommes and Wright 1982 p. 260). The notion of cultural landscape is therefore a composite of ways of seeing and the contours of what is recognisable and seeable (where seeing is itself a metaphor for use). In this part of the chapter I will describe some features of the changing urban landscape.

The idea of landscape, although most commonly pastoral, can easily be adapted to an urban setting particularly when the majority of the population comes to live in cities that dwarf any previous sense of human scale. In the first fifty years of the century the total population roughly doubled and although the rate of increase slowed the population at the end of the century was three-and-a-half times as big as at the beginning. This population was increasingly concentrated in towns. A third of the population were urban residents in 1801; by the year of the Great Exhibition (1851), this had risen to one in two and by the end of the century around 80 per cent were town dwellers. Although what is to count as a town necessarily varies, there is a clear trend of concentration of the populace in larger towns:

in 1851 30.6% of population of England and Wales inhabited towns of over 50,000 people and, using the same town boundaries, about 45% in 1901. Using the revised boundaries current in 1901, we find

the tendency to agglomerate in towns of over 50,000 people stronger still for then the proportion was 51.1%.

(Waller 1983 pp. 8–9)

The consequences of rapid urbanisation, even metropolitanisation have, rightly, dominated sociological accounts of modernity. I do not intend at this stage to engage with the literature on the nature and significance of changes in community. This will necessarily form an implicit theme throughout the book. All I wish to stress at this point is that urbanisation creates a world of strangers, if only in the ways that Simmel first explored (1971; see also Barth 1980), that interaction with strangers becomes a routine feature of everyday experience. Cities of this size generate a metropolitan imagination – an assumption of mundane anonymity – and in the nineteenth century none more so than London which sprawled from its size in 1800: ‘From the Thames a 2-mile journey, either north or south, would bring one to the periphery’ (Wohl 1971 p. 15), a journey which had by the end of the century become 18 miles in total.

The other side of anonymity is of course freedom. ‘Town air’ is ‘free air’ because the stranger may lack the supports of established social networks but will also escape the crushing weight of habitual obligations. (I do not wish to imply that there are no extensive social networks in urban communities but that they are harder to sustain through generations and, more importantly, are the networks of lifestyles and thus identity in the settings they generate becomes more like a role.) Freedom promises excitement both because the quotidian is thereby possibly less predictable and possibly more amenable to choice and because it is staged against a backdrop of magnificence. The attraction of urban culture is always therefore the promise of possibility, the magnetism is not lessened by however often promises are not kept. And even the presence of magnificence can give a surrogate glamour and significance to the mundane round (Olsen 1986 discusses very well some of the ways that the city as ‘a work of art’ structures everyday interaction). These features can be detected as core themes in the swirling discourses of urban life in the nineteenth century – the city was more palpably out of control and therefore culture, and more particularly popular culture, came to be seen as a suitable topic for policy (cf. Lees 1985).

The lineaments of social order have to be more clearly asserted when the nature of order itself cannot be taken for granted. This then is the connection within a concept of landscape as it used here between the built environment and forms of popular entertainment. The discourse of the popular as the ways of constituting urban life was and is inscribed in ways of using the environment; contradictions within the discourse bespeak different projects of use.

Even when peddled in the countryside the popular is a piece of the town that is being bought (Burke 1978). In this early modern sense the popular is

another name for vernacular or demotic speech. It is what is said unself-consciously by ordinary people in unmarked settings, and by extension how they dress, how they dance and sing, how they decorate their homes, how they celebrate marked points in the communal calendar and, importantly, how they organise the world of work and the rights and obligations of social contract. Pre-modern, this sense of popular can be presumed to be local but the popular has been increasingly supplied by national distribution agencies. There is therefore an easy elision between the popular as widely endorsed and popular as working class taste or culture. Working people are in some definitions at least a majority of the population so that the popular is a class culture.

This slides more contentiously, however, into more embattled positions. If it is a culture of a class then it must relate to that class consciousness of itself, a criterion is introduced by which something is or can be judged inauthentic – or even validly authentic even if not particularly ‘popular’ with large numbers of people. There may be cultural forms which are seen as appropriate for popular taste but in their acceptance function as hegemonic modes of incorporation (Bennett 1986). Alternatively, the intractability of working-class culture to norms of respectability may be celebrated by middle-class observers as glorious vulgarity (Nuttall and Carmichael 1977); or be seen to be acting as images of licensed naughtiness for normally respectable voyeurs (cf. Clark’s 1985 interpretation of Parisian urban entertainments, particularly Chapter 4). The popular here is explicitly normative, and clearly presupposes socio-structural organisation in class terms.

Possibly the principal novelty of the nineteenth century is that men and women began to use the language of class to describe and explain social order (Stedman Jones 1983; Joyce 1991). Social classes implied both new modes of production to generate distinctive types of social identity and new forms of association, solidarity and conflict within and between social levels. It is not, however, self-evident that either of these types of change preceded the language of class as a dramatic resource which by mid-century had become ubiquitous:

At almost every turn the English divided up their social and economic life by class; at work, at home, on the trains, in their cemeteries, and even in the ideology that was embedded in a great deal of contemporary literature. The English had come to view social class as normal and proper.

(Walvin 1984 p. 195)

It is precisely because the language of class became so thoroughly entrenched as a popular resource for describing and interpreting social behaviour that it is extremely difficult to use class as an analytic resource to explicate the meanings of cultural performance.

The paradox of this claim is that as perceptions of social difference came to dominate cultural expectations so it seemed more important to contemporaries that class distinctions were not dissipated by heterogeneous mixing in public places. On the one hand there were certain sorts of activities and entertainments which by commanding a particular type of audience marked off cultural fractions within a particular class. On the other side when a cultural form commanded a broader social spectrum the activity had to be so organised that the members of different social strata could participate as segregated from each other as possible. Class and culture therefore interpenetrated each other so thoroughly that the latter was continuously available as a resource to make further fine discriminations within the former. The popular cannot therefore be reserved as the form of proletarian life. Within the increasingly complex battery of social discrimination the popular is generalised as a vaguer referent for any type of taste which does not strive to display its own exclusivity.

This process can be seen to be operating in worlds which are far removed from the bawdy vulgarity of working-class entertainment. In Weber's (1975) study of the development of musical concerts as a cultural form he finds it necessary to distinguish within a middle class audience with a notion of taste publics. The more spectacular virtuosity of, for example, Liszt or Chopin had a romantic appeal to quite different social groups than those who constituted the audience for more classical chamber works. As well as this there are many other themes in this work which are relevant to the present discussion, but in particular one should mention how conventions for appropriate audience behaviour gradually develop, taking the same form as but slightly preceding equivalent conventions in the theatre.

The dramatic force of categories of discrimination and segregation lay in the ways in which they came to symbolise an emergent social order. The lack of physical segregation in the pre-modern city was more than merely puzzling to those seeking to re-shape the urban fabric; it amounted to forms of intrusiveness that could seem polluting or destabilising. British custom from early in the nineteenth century decreed that building design should work so that each bedroom had a single and independent entrance which 'was in contrast to the frequent continental situation in which it was necessary to pass through one bedroom to reach the second, a state of affairs that confirmed the worst English suspicions about continental morals' (Olsen 1986 p. 108). The dangers of heterogeneous mixing with its potential for disorder was also a strong element in the condemnation of the spectacle of public discipline. In contrast, the rationalisation of control and punishment behind the walls of new institutional monoliths of prisons, hospitals, asylums and later schools of the nineteenth century can therefore be seen as integral to the inscription of new forms of order into the public sphere (Markus 1982; Evans 1982).

Another dimension to the changing delineation of public space into increasingly distinct spaces is provided by the discourses of sexuality and

death – increasingly segregated from everyday experience and confined to specialised settings and increasingly elaborate euphemisms in public discourse. Even in those works which argue for a revisionist thesis that the repression of sexual desire amongst Victorian women was not as thorough as popular history would suggest (Gay 1984), there is sufficient testimony to the highly formalised character of sexual behaviour in anything other than the most private settings. An illustration of the ordering of death is provided by the number of new cemeteries, at first commercial and later municipal enterprises, founded on what were at first the edges of expanding cities. These cemeteries were to some extent generated by the pressures of increasing urban populations and the toll exacted by inadequate health and sanitary arrangements, but they more importantly mark moves from the casual intermingling of everyday life and artefacts of the dead in eighteenth century church yards to solemnified segregation in rational individualised order. The ubiquitousness of social order and hierarchical segregation was more clearly displayed in the dramatic intensification of respectability after life.

The family home became the physical and symbolic site of boundaries between social worlds so that order could be more explicitly visualised both within the home and between the home and public places. Such has been the success of the norm that a home is the house of a single family that:

It is difficult imagine today what life was like in the urban houses of pre-industrial Britain. There was a far greater mixture of people and activities: the extended family, friends, servants, apprentices; private sphere, work, recreation, the care of the sick: all co-existed and overlapped.

(Muthesius 1982 p. 39)

Change was gradual and involved a series of changes in physical layout within the house, in particular the specialisation of room by function and increasingly rigid segregation of the sexes; between the relative significance of the front and the back of the house; and an increasing cultivation of a garden as a private space. A major preoccupation in house design was to clearly demarcate public rooms where members of the outside world could be entertained from more private areas typically under the control of women.

If the home is to be seen as a distinct type of cultural space in which a private world both created by and for women can be enforced and protected from the potential disorder of public life, then its exclusivity can be more radically displayed the more thorough the distinction between home and work:

The romantic imagination indelibly fixed the image of a rose-covered cottage in a garden where Womanhood waited and from which

Manhood ventured abroad: to work, to war and to the Empire. So powerful was this dual conception that even the radical fringe subscribed.

(Davidoff and Hall 1987 p. 28)

The gendered equivalences between male and female spheres, public and private spaces and city and suburb have remained powerful cultural frames. Stilgoe introduces his book on the origins of the American suburb by noting that: 'I have encountered for the first time male colleagues and students who dismiss the research subject as a "woman's topic" who see the borderlands as infinitely less important than "the city"' (Stilgoe 1988 p. 16). Studies of popular culture have reproduced these biases leading to a fashionable over-emphasis upon the popular as 'working' class culture.

The flight from the city to the suburb was the main engine of urban growth. The motive force was an intermixture of privatisation, pastoralism and social differentiation (on pastoralism see Stilgoe op. cit. and King 1984). For those who could afford to, moving to the borders of urban space created new cultural enclaves in which drama was set on a stage elsewhere – they could either visit it or purchase a version adapted for suburban scale. The city as theatre had become something for which there was an ever-increasing audience.

Suburbanism did not dissipate the grandiloquence of an urban landscape, indeed the reverse as the centre became increasingly reserved as a theatrical enclave, but rather fractured audiences through the twin strands of class segregation and domestic isolation. House values were increasingly determined by exclusivity, not through upper and middle classes wishing to be distanced from the contaminating presence of lower orders – as servants and trades people they could be contained within exclusive districts – but increasingly fine discriminations were made so that each social fraction could live in a neighbourhood with a distinct and dominant identity. As pretensions to exclusivity became more difficult to sustain so the social orthodoxy of individual streets was more enthusiastically sought. Such exclusivity entailed a high degree of mobility as the class character of districts changed and as individual family circumstances altered.

Suburbanism also required an elaborate vocabulary of physical distinctions to display the appropriate status of each household (cf. Muthesius 1982 especially Chapter 17), a language of class that has persisted as a practical mapping of urban life. Although access to the productive hubs of the city was obviously important, the more that functional elements, such as shops, transport facilities, entertainment sites, were adjacent to domestic residences the more the status of those particular houses was comparatively devalued. The vacuum of what had previously been a shared communal drama was increasingly filled with the sponsored encapsulated dramas of spectacular shows, municipal magnificence and governmental and commercial display.

I have mentioned that exclusivity was more concerned with possible dilution of status through the co-presence of near-peers, marked differences between low and high status groups within a district could be tolerated and were indeed necessary. Processes of urban migration, inadequate and insufficient housing stock, and poor wages and long hours all meant, however, that there were appalling rookeries, ghettos and slums blighting nineteenth-century cities within which the working class was concentrated. There were uneven and differentially effective attempts throughout the century to intervene and repair these sores, even if only ambiguously intentioned. For example, when railway lines were laid into city centres, or when sewage pipes or other forms of road improvement were undertaken, it was usually easier to knock through poor districts. These and other forms of rudimentary town planning might be undertaken to break up concentrations of the poor in the interests of social discipline and control, or because such patently unhealthy cesspits were breeding grounds for disease, particularly in the light of dominant miasmatic theories of disease transmission, which threatened other class quarters.

More positively, improving transport facilities and rising living standards meant that speculative building for the working class could be lucrative. The ambition to re-locate in suburbs was not therefore confined to the wealthy, and in the processes of reorganisation the social landscape of working class community was recast: 'The forms of working-class districts [changed] in the early and mid-Victorian years from a *cellular* and *promiscuous* to an *open* and *encapsulated* residential style' (Daunton 1983 p. 214). What this meant in practice was:

change from inward-looking dead ends turning their backs on the public thoroughfares to outward-looking streets; and from a pooling of space between houses to a definite allocation of space to each house. The threshold between the public and private had been redrawn and made much less ambiguous.

(Daunton op. cit. p. 215)

The significance of the development of working-class residential districts lies in the way it points us to another aspect of the inter-relationships between class and popular. The culture of the emergent and later mature working class was frequently seen by contemporaries as disorderly and lacking respectability; more seriously it was inappropriate for the disciplined self-control necessary for an industrial and bureaucratised labour force. Other grounds of concern were that it was seen as a fertile breeding ground for class organisation which threatened the bases of social order; and it lacked the crucial institutional frameworks of family and sobriety (Storch 1982). There were therefore a variety of interventionist strategies commonly motivated by the perceived need to instill more appropriate cultural expectations amongst the lower orders.

Crudely we can group these strategies under the two headings of: discipline – attempts to stamp out inappropriate cultural forms; and incorporation – in which the force of class consciousness was dissipated through realisation of common interests and acculturation into the favoured cultural forms of more respectable society. To speak of strategies can imply thought-through and planned interventions, which did undoubtedly exist, but more pervasively there were a set of discursive formations within which vocabularies of order and respectability became inscribed in everyday experience.

There are two consequences of this point. The first is that in addition to studies of the role of new police forces in controlling street life, or the suppression of traditional carnivalesque (Donajrodzki 1977), we need to appreciate the significance of less explicit frameworks such as urban form and cultural conventions in new forms of social control. These interactively meant, for example, that by mid-century observers could marvel at the propriety of visitors to the Great Exhibition as willing adherents to the demands of social discipline and codes of conduct. The second is that it would be misleading to see these discursive formations as simply imposed on a more-or-less recalcitrant popular culture. To the extent that class consciousness became institutionalised it did so within cultural forms that accepted norms of respectability as consistent with or essential to forms of political and religious identity (an example of the sometimes contradictory expectations that could develop is provided by Colls' 1977 study of popular song in mining communities). The popular, then, as it became couched within languages of class became a shifting terrain in that the same phenomena could be seen from a variety of perspectives as part of quite distinct modes of dramatising collective formations.

One of the richest resources with which to illustrate these issues is provided by the development of sport as activity and entertainment in nineteenth-century cities (Mason 1980; Elias and Dunning 1986; Holt 1989). First, because the development of sport in its modern use involved the decay or abolition of traditional forms of play and game, being replaced by more formalised activities governed by agreed national rules and usually involving a national administrative machinery for the organisation and government of the sport. Second, because in popular sports performance was made theatrical in order to be commercialised. Investors had to commit resources to the building of stadia and management of teams and publicity had to be generated in order to stress the spectacular character of the entertainment. Third, the language of class inexorably gave a social character to different sports, or ways of playing within a sport, so that the taste publics of players and spectators came to exemplify class and local identity; institutionalised to the extent that different sports could exist as almost distinct cultural forms. And fourth because despite the appropriation of sports to different class cultural milieux, there could still be articulated themes of disinterested value, reconciliation and social harmony through sport which would provide a

dramaturgy of collective, national, identity superseding the divisions of a segregated society.

The salience of a language of class to a phenomenology of urban culture in the nineteenth-century city is then that, through the perspectives of class, inadequacies in traditional discourses of social order were made clearly apparent. There were in a sense new social formations waiting to be given shape and vitality. If the city was no longer a theatre in its dramatic totality more specific stages for new types of social function had to be founded and developed. Principally the legitimacy and dramatic force of the government and discipline of urban society had to be made manifest. In raising these considerations a further use to the notion of the popular becomes relevant. If traditional structures and insignia of authority can only limply command their presence in changing circumstances, then their scenario must either be re-written (as happened with the Monarchy, cf. Cannadine 1983), or new modes of political organisation develop. The history of nineteenth century British cities can be written as a narrative of struggle for control over changing instruments of government between competing publics. I am less interested in the politics of accommodation than in the ways in which popular support was presumed, mobilised and displayed. The popular came then to be interdependent with publics and their opinions – the community as imagined entity (Anderson 1983). The artefacts through which imagination was given form and substance, and specific cultural character, are necessarily instances of popular dramatisation.

For obvious reasons these artefacts will cluster in city centres and in terms of national political icons in metropolitan centres. They provide a stage for public drama and in so doing mutually constitute the city centre as spectacular site, and further intensifying the depth of distinction between public and private spheres. Town halls in the nineteenth century, for example, were built: to display local pride; to express the ambition of local influentials; to provide a focus for civic identity for municipalities whose boundaries and character were often amorphous; to provide a centre for social rituals and spectacles of government of newly-powerful urban élites which would rival the traditional pomp of aristocracy and squirearchy; and to give a physical form to a projected community of interests which would blur class divisions and effectively reinforce the 'natural' claim to influence of a middle-class élite.

The frequently medieval or gothic iconography of town halls may seem puzzling as celebrations of political change, but the salience of the past in nineteenth-century urban aesthetics is that it implied a stability in social order. In conjunction with many types of amateur and professional interest, respect for history 'supported the dominant social order by facilitating social assimilation, by screening out problematic aspects of the past, such as economic inequalities, and by fostering the celebration of a common past' (Dellheim 1982 p. 58). The romance of history could be used to create a

sense of community and to imbue political power with spectacular dignity and 'to impress laboring people with middle-class values and thus maintain middle-class hegemony' (Dellheim op. cit. p. 175).

We are therefore faced with an intriguing paradox that in important respects the dramatisation of an emergent social order in urbanising Britain was staged through an iconography of the past. The fact that the past visualised was frequently imagined or invented did not lessen its dramatic force (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983 have edited an excellent collection of essays on 'the invention of tradition', see in particular the essay by Hobsbawm; it should also not be assumed that ceremonials always suppressed dissent and were unproblematically functional for social élites, cf. Hammerton and Cannadine 1981). In the practice of invention the cultural landscape of metropolitan culture, through a variety of resources, was given a dimension through time to complement the spectacular space of the city.

The notion of landscape, then, as a form of spectacular dramatisation should be understood as more than a setting within which identity can be staged, it is the collective identity – in this case Englishness – within which the varieties of cultural taste can be accommodated:

Élite/mass and avant-garde/commercial were not pairs of oppositional terms but pairs of complementary ones. Each ratified the sphere and responsibilities of the other. . . . the artistic institutions of the national culture simply gathered up and acted as custodians of the best of the national past.

(Dodd 1986 p. 21)

The identity of our imagined communities becomes a claimed 'national character' as well as a national heritage, a set of political and cultural pre-suppositions that in each case of their use become in so doing a self-fulfilling prophecy (cf. Colls 1986).

The invention or constitution of nationness is a mode of dramatisation which is as much designed for audiences in other national 'theatres' as for the 'internal' audience within the nation. It is consistent with the spectacular character of the dramatisations that it did not have to be phrased through permanent buildings. The frequency of international exhibitions in the second half of the century provided 'ephemeral vistas' through which collective identity could be constructed and displayed:

At exhibitions . . . 'Olde Englande' came to stand for a range of traditional virtues Englishmen were supposedly ingrained with. Simple, solid, quaint, reliable, unchanging and hardy were the type of adjectives used to describe the English population, more than this they were applied to English culture in general.

(Greenhalgh 1988 p. 122)

These exhibitions drew upon a broad range of popular cultural styles and sources in order to dramatisé the pedagogical discourse ostensibly being exhibited, but it is important that it always was a use of popular forms to appeal to mass audiences. In their commercial success: 'the exhibitions heralded the end of vernacular entertainment and the beginning of mass international popular culture' (Greenhalgh op.cit. p. 45). That is the transformation of drama into the imagin-action of dreams (see also Williams 1982).

There is a crucial moment of transition here in the emergence of a mature popular culture transformed by the need to appeal to mass, national and subsequently international, audiences and the, obviously related, increasing domination of entertainment industries by mass distribution networks. The interdependence of popular culture as leisure with a culture of consumerism can be seen to be filling an ideological function of offering mechanisms of social reconciliation that transcend the divisiveness of urban segregation. Both through a phenomenology of personal choice and the anonymity of consumption (any style is accessible providing you have the resources and the wit to purchase it), the manifestness of structural divisions is vitiated: 'It is above all *collectivity* that the popular exists to prevent' (Clark 1985 p. 236). An ideological function that is only made possible and comprehensible, in Clark's account, through the re-structuring of landscape in nineteenth century city development: 'the end of the old patterns of urban neighbourhood and the birth of a city organized round separate unities of work, residence, and distraction' (Clark op. cit. p. 235).

To be sure, this conclusion is reached in relation to Paris only, a city where the re-writing of urban form was so clearly authored within a short period and was so clearly governed by reflexive concerns with what a metropolis should and could be, that it can be argued to be far too coherent for the pragmatic muddle of British urban development. There are, however, and the point of this chapter is to argue for, connections between reformulations of forms of dramatisation and the terrain of urban landscape and the cultural forms of mass entertainment; and one way of focussing their interconnection is through the notion of spectacle: 'as a separate something made to be looked at – an image, a pantomime, a panorama' (Clark op. cit. p. 63).

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