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## Introduction: iconography and landscape

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STEPHEN DANIELS AND  
DENIS COSGROVE

A landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings. This is not to say that landscapes are immaterial. They may be represented in a variety of materials and on many surfaces – in paint on canvas, in writing on paper, in earth, stone, water and vegetation on the ground. A landscape park is more palpable but no more real, nor less imaginary, than a landscape painting or poem. Indeed the meanings of verbal, visual and built landscapes have a complex interwoven history. To understand a built landscape, say an eighteenth-century English park, it is usually necessary to understand written and verbal representations of it, not as ‘illustrations’, images standing outside it, but as constituent images of its meaning or meanings. And of course, every study of a landscape further transforms its meaning, depositing yet another layer of cultural representation. In human geography the interpretation of landscape and culture has a tendency to reify landscape as an object of empiricist investigation,<sup>1</sup> but often its practitioners do gesture towards landscape as a cultural symbol or image, notably when likening landscape to a text and its interpretation to ‘reading’.<sup>2</sup> This essay, and the collection which it introduces, explicate more fully the status of landscape as image and symbol and in doing so establish common ground between practitioners from a variety of different disciplines concerned with landscape and culture: geography, fine art, literature, social history and anthropology.<sup>3</sup> The discussion here is structured around the fertile concept of iconography: the theoretical and historical study of symbolic imagery.

### Iconographies

The interpretation of symbolic imagery reaches back to Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*, the first of many Renaissance handbooks acting as guides to an art which made systematic use of symbols, allegories and images from the Classical repertoire.<sup>4</sup> The terms iconography and iconology were revived

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove

this century, initially again in the interpretation of Renaissance imagery, by the school of art history associated with Aby Warburg. In opposition to the purely formalistic tradition of art interpretation associated with Heinrich Wölfflin (which analysed pictures purely in terms of the surface patterns of colour, chiaroscuro, line and volume, relating them principally to other works of art), iconographic study sought to probe meaning in a work of art by setting it in its historical context and, in particular, to analyse the ideas implicated in its imagery. While, by definition, all art history translates the visual into the verbal, the iconographic approach consciously sought to conceptualise pictures as encoded texts to be deciphered by those cognisant of the culture as a whole in which they were produced. The approach was systematically formulated by Warburg's pupil, Erwin Panofsky.

Panofsky distinguished between iconography 'in the narrower sense of the word' and iconography 'in a deeper sense'. Initially he labelled these two approaches 'iconographical analysis' and 'iconographical interpretation [or] synthesis' but eventually revived the term 'iconology' to describe 'iconography turned interpretative'.<sup>5</sup> Iconography 'in the narrower' sense was the identification of conventional, consciously inscribed symbols, say a lamb signifying Christ, or the winged lion of St Mark signifying in Venetian art the Republic and its power. Iconology probed a deeper stratum of meaning.<sup>6</sup> It excavated what Panofsky called the 'intrinsic meaning' of a work of art 'by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work'. There were no established conventions or specific methods that would ascertain these principles; they were to be reconstructed by a kind of detective synthesis, searching out analogies between overtly disparate forms like poetry, philosophy, social institutions and political life: 'To grasp these principles', wrote Panofsky, 'we need a mental faculty comparable to that of a diagnostician.' It was here in the interpretative search for such principles that 'the various humanistic disciplines meet on a common plane instead of serving as handmaidens to each other'.<sup>7</sup>

In a reference to the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer, Panofsky's colleague at the Warburg Library and author of *The philosophy of symbolic forms* (1923–9), Panofsky contended that iconology involved the identification of symbols, not in 'the ordinary sense e.g. the Cross, or the Tower of Chastity' but in the 'Cassirerian' sense; it involved the search for 'what Ernst Cassirer has called "symbolical" values'.<sup>8</sup> For Cassirer symbols were not

mere figures which refer to some given reality by means of suggestion or allegorical renderings, but in the sense of forces, each of which produces and posits a world of its own. The question as to what reality is apart from these forms, and what are its independent attributes, becomes irrelevant here. For the mind, only that

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: iconography and landscape* 3

can be visible which has some definite form; but every form of existence has its source in some peculiar way of seeing, some intellectual formulation and intuition of meaning.<sup>9</sup>

In the same year, 1925, as Cassirer made this case in the *Studien der Bibliothek Warburg*, Panofsky deployed the concept of symbolic form in his own essay: 'Die Perspektive als "symbolische Form"', a study of changing modes of perceiving and representing space, not as mere 'conventions' (to be taken up or not at will) or as true or false beliefs, but, much as Cassirer held language or mathematics to be, as 'symbolic forms' which structured the world according to specific cultural demands.<sup>10</sup> As an example of the interpretation of perspective as symbolic form Panofsky compared two pictures in which the subjects 'seem to hang loose in space in violation of the laws of gravity': *The Three Magi*, painted in the fifteenth century by Roger van der Weyden, in which the infant Jesus hovers in mid-air, and an Ottonian miniature of around 1000 AD in which 'a whole city is represented in the middle of an empty space while the figures taking part in the action stand on solid ground'. An inexperienced observer might assume that

the town is meant to be suspended in mid-air by some sort of magic. Yet in this case the lack of support does not imply a miraculous invalidation of the laws of nature . . . In a miniature of around 1000 'empty space' does not count as a real, three-dimensional medium, as it does in a more realistic period, but serves as an abstract, unreal background . . . Thus while the figure in the van der Weyden counts as an apparition, the floating city in the Ottonian miniature has no such miraculous connotation.

As experienced observers we may grasp this 'in a fraction of a second' but this still involves 'reading "what we see" according to the manner in which objects and events are expressed by forms under varying historical conditions'.<sup>11</sup>

Panofsky applied this approach of 'reading what we see' to built as well as to painted forms. He argued that designers of gothic cathedrals 'began to conceive of the forms they shaped, not so much in terms of isolated solids as in terms of a comprehensive "picture space"', just as contemporary Church Fathers were conceiving of their textual apologetics as tightly articulated *summae* wherein the whole structure of the argument could be read off from the table of its contents and textual subdivisions. Thus, Panofsky pointed out, the entire constructional order of ribs and vaults may be read off from the cross-section of a single nave shaft. While acknowledging its status as building he found it fertile to regard gothic architecture as text, not just 'a way of seeing – or rather designing', but as a 'mode of literary representation', a treatise in stone, an architectural scholasticism.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

#### 4 Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove

Caen and Durham were to be read as cultural symbols of a whole age by being set in the full context of their spatial and intellectual articulation.<sup>12</sup>

If the medieval 'Age of Faith' wove the meaning of its world out of images and signs it was not in this respect fundamentally different from any culture. Thus when Panofsky likened iconography to ethnography<sup>13</sup> he pointed to a broad truth for all cultural study, one stressed in modern anthropology. Clifford Geertz's conceptualisation of culture as a 'text' and his dual method of 'thick description' ('setting down the meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are') and 'diagnosis' ('stating as explicitly as we can manage, what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found and about social life as such') have much in common with Panofsky's notions of iconography and iconology.<sup>14</sup> It was perhaps inevitable that Geertz was eventually to uphold iconographic art history (in the writings of Michael Baxandall) as a model for ethnography.<sup>15</sup> Since the 1970s ethnography, often of an explicitly Geertzian kind, has greatly influenced social history. In his essay 'A bourgeois puts his world in order: the city as a text', Geertz's colleague, Robert Darnton, analyses the representations of Montpellier in an account of the city written in 1768 by 'an anonymous but solidly middle-class citizen'. The first half of the account translated into writing the idiom of the urban procession. Such a procession 'expressed the corporate order of urban society . . . it was a statement unfurled in the streets through which the city represented itself to itself – and sometimes to God, for it also took place when Montpellier was threatened by drought or famine'. By 1768, however, 'the language of processions was archaic. It could not convey the shifting alignments within the social order that resulted from the economic expansion of the mid-century years.' In the second part of his account the author 'began to grope for an adequate terminology . . . the city no longer appeared as a parade of *dignités*. It became a three-tiered structure of "estates" (*états*).' And finally, and culturally more congenial for the author, the city became 'the scene of a style of living' made up of musical, masonic and educational institutions.<sup>16</sup> By his 'thick' description of this account, through a dialogue of 'text' and 'context', Darnton captures the shifting iconography of a modernising urban landscape.<sup>17</sup>

#### The iconography of landscape

A scholar of Renaissance art, Panofsky never addressed the European tradition of self-consciously landscape art and painting that became firmly established in the seventeenth century. The first great art critic and historian to devote his attention primarily to that tradition was the Victorian, John Ruskin. Over the past decade there has been a marked revival of interest in Ruskin's writings not only because they place landscape so squarely

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: iconography and landscape* 5

at the centre of social, political and environmental morality, but because his way of seeing and conceptualising has certain similarities to sensibilities today. Indeed, Peter Fuller has proclaimed Ruskin as ‘the true prophet of the “post-modern” and “post-industrial” era’.<sup>18</sup> In the most recent major biography of John Ruskin, John Dixon Hunt has pointed out how his great eclectic collections or ‘cabinets’ of materials – mineral, floral and artifactual specimens, so typical of the Victorian intellectual sensibility – faithfully mirror Ruskin’s mind in which ‘everything was more or less reflected in everything else’.<sup>19</sup> We are reminded of Fredric Jameson’s characterisation of late twentieth-century post-modern art as ‘no longer unified or organic, but now [a] virtual grab-bag or lumber room of disjointed sub-systems and random raw materials and impulses of all kinds’.<sup>20</sup> In landscape Ruskin sought a stable ground in which a consistent order of divine design could be recognised in underlying form. Landscape he treated as a text, taking his method from biblical exegesis, seeking the reassurance of order in the face of the apparent chaos of industrialising Britain.<sup>21</sup> Thus the central purpose of his first great text, *Modern painters* (1843), was to locate landscape in a broader context than the study of form and the history of style. The ‘higher landscape’ depended upon a humble submission of men to the great laws of nature, a close observation of the natural world and the application of the greatest skill and imagination in its representation. In the hands of a master like Turner, landscape became in Ruskin’s eyes a suitable subject for examining the deepest moral and artistic truths, rather as history painting had been viewed within the academic tradition.

In some respects Ruskin’s was a conservative attempt to wrest order from that quintessentially modern anarchic interplay of images and feelings which his own prose so often betrays, and which every sensitive Victorian faced as the onrush of modernisation and the faith-shattering impact of Darwin made ‘all that is solid melt into air’.<sup>22</sup> But while Ruskin proclaimed himself, like his father, a Tory ‘of the old school’, he also, and without apparent contradiction, styled himself a communist, ‘reddest also of the red’. He was indeed one of the fiercest critics of the demoralisation and alienation of industrialism. In *The stones of Venice* (1851–3) he claimed to find in late medieval Venice a perfect society, one that followed the hierarchical order of nature. A voluntary submission to the laws which run through all creation had produced a community where a wise and just patriciate governed a state in which other orders of men and women found the spiritual freedom to express their truest being, a state therefore which became a collective work of art and the beauty of whose architecture and landscape still express the disciplined human liberation which comes only through faith.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps it is not surprising that it should be at the very juncture of the medieval world with its vision of nature as an illuminated text replete with the signatures of divinity, glossed at the margins

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove

by the insights of faith, and the Renaissance world of deeply engraved symbolism that Ruskin's vision should find its most comfortable resting point. Perhaps, too, it is appropriate that Ruskin should be rediscovered in today's world, so saturated in reproduced images

that nature itself threatens to become what it was for the Middle Ages: an encyclopaedic, illuminated book overlaid with ornamentation and marginal glosses, every object converted into an image with its proper label or signature . . . The quintessential modern experience of this new 'book of nature' is the stroll through the scenic wonders of a national park with a plastic earphone that responds to electronic triggers embedded at strategic locations along the path.<sup>24</sup>

Ruskin's modern appeal lies as much in this radical representation of nature as a complex interplay of images as in his appeal to a 'green' ideology of social harmony with a nature whose laws are incommensurable, irreducible to the analytic rules of positivist science and the profit-seeking logic of technology.<sup>25</sup>

The landscape tradition in painting which Ruskin did so much to promote and which peaked in England during his lifetime has been the subject of an increasing corpus of iconographical study that reaches beyond the disciplinary boundaries of art history. In his pioneering *Landscape into art* (1949), Kenneth Clark, himself a great admirer of Ruskin, attempted to place different styles of Western landscape painting – emblematic, empiricist, naturalistic, fantastic – in their philosophical and, occasionally, their sociological contexts. Seventeenth-century Dutch art, 'the landscape of fact', was, with its emphasis on '*recognisable* experiences', Clark asserted, 'a bourgeois form of art' for it represented the experiential world of the rising middle-class merchant patrons of Amsterdam and Haarlem.<sup>26</sup> Taking his title, *Ways of seeing*, from one of Panofsky's key phrases, but drawing too upon the marxist aesthetics of Walter Benjamin, John Berger took issue with Clark's interpretative emphasis on the philosophical as opposed to the social and economic in works of art and also in the idea that the history of high art was an expression of a unitary history of 'civilisation'.<sup>27</sup> Clark had described Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews* as an 'enchanted work', a 'naturalistic' landscape painting expressing the artist's 'Rousseauism'; 'They are not a couple in nature as Rousseau imagined nature', countered Berger, 'they are landowners and their proprietary attitude towards what surrounds them is visible in their stance and their expressions . . . the pleasure of seeing themselves depicted as landowners . . . was enhanced by the ability of oil paint to render their land in all its substantiality.' A way of seeing the world which 'was ultimately determined by new attitudes to property and exchange, found its visual expression in the oil painting: . . . not so much a framed window onto the world as a safe let into the wall, a safe in which the visible has been deposited'.<sup>28</sup>



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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: iconography and landscape* 7

Berger thus reformulated Panofsky's layers of meaning in terms of a marxist stratigraphy of economic base and cultural superstructure, the ideology of representation in English eighteenth-century landscape art serving to naturalise, and hence to mystify, basic property relations.

Around the same time as Berger, Raymond Williams conducted a similar polemical critique of landscape in English literature and by implication in polite English culture as a whole:

a working country is hardly ever a landscape. The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation. It is possible and useful to trace the internal histories of landscape painting, and landscape writing, landscape gardening and landscape architecture, but in any final analysis we must relate these histories to the common history of a land and its society.<sup>29</sup>

Berger and Williams inaugurated and often directly influenced a series of studies in many disciplines on the social implications of landscape imagery. Not all of them have been so confident as Berger and Williams in opposing a 'real' history of 'land' to an 'ideological' history of 'landscape', nor have they all been willing to reduce landscape aesthetics entirely to ideology.<sup>30</sup> But all have been intent to decipher the social power of landscape imagery, to identify, in the title of James Turner's study of seventeenth-century prospect poetry, the 'politics of landscape'.<sup>31</sup> Turner shows that many topographical and prospect poems went beyond the single vantage point of a spectator, perhaps by deploying conventions of mapping or inventory to 'work up an idea of human geography, a view of country life and regional character'.<sup>32</sup> While landscape for these poets connoted an attractive, elevated, comprehensive, disengaged and orderly view of the world – and hence a reliably objective one – so it was also distrusted (sometimes by the same poets) as a pernicious delusion, a dazzling trick designed to distort the world and its workings.

This sense of the duplicity of landscape imagery is characteristically 'post-modern', and it is no accident that Turner's study took shape under the influence of a critic best known for his decoding of modern advertising as well as painting and literature, Roland Barthes.<sup>33</sup> Commenting on such criticism W. J. T. Mitchell states that

language and images have become enigmas, problems to be explained, prison houses which lock understanding away from the world. The commonplace of modern studies of images, in fact, is that they must be understood as a kind of language; instead of providing a transparent window on the world, images are now regarded as the sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparency concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification.<sup>34</sup>

The post-modern apprehension of the world emphasises the inherent instability of meaning, our ability to invert signs and symbols, to recycle

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove

them in a different context and thus transform their reference. Earlier and less commercial cultures may sustain more stable symbolic codes<sup>35</sup> but every culture weaves its world out of image and symbol. For this reason the iconographic method remains central to cultural enquiry. But the liberation of meaning in modern society, the freedom of intertextuality which Ruskin's writings implicitly acknowledge, emphasises surface rather than depth. The conservative picture of a 'deep' England with its stable layers of historical accretion, so profoundly threatened by modernisation, that W. G. Hoskins framed from his window in North Oxfordshire in the closing pages of *The making of the English landscape*,<sup>36</sup> and the more radical and demotic, but no less composed, England sketched by Raymond Williams looking out from the window in Cambridgeshire where he wrote *The country and the city*<sup>37</sup> represent alternative attempts to achieve that stability of meaning in landscape which Ruskin sought and which has become a characteristic and honourable response to the perceived chaos of the modern world. At the same time we recognise these Englands for what they are: images, further glosses upon an already deeply layered text. These images might also be seen as additional reflections to a more dazzling and more superficial pattern. From such a post-modern perspective landscape seems less like a palimpsest whose 'real' or 'authentic' meanings can somehow be recovered with the correct techniques, theories or ideologies, than a flickering text displayed on the word-processor screen whose meaning can be created, extended, altered, elaborated and finally obliterated by the merest touch of a button.<sup>38</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 D. E. Cosgrove, *Social formation and symbolic landscape* (London, 1984), pp. 13–38.
- 2 D. W. Meinig, 'Reading the landscape: an appreciation of W. G. Hoskins and J. B. Jackson', in D. W. Meinig (ed.), *The interpretation of ordinary landscapes* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 195–244; Pierce F. Lewis, 'Axioms for reading the landscape', in *ibid.*, pp. 11–32; James S. Duncan, 'Individual action and political power: a structuration perspective', in R. J. Johnston, *The future of geography* (London, 1985), pp. 174–89.
- 3 Similar common ground between those from different disciplines interested in landscape was sought in the symposium organised by the Landscape Research Group in Exeter, 1983, whose proceedings are published in *Landscape Research* 9, 3 (1984).
- 4 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: image, text, ideology* (Chicago, 1986), p. 2.
- 5 Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in iconology: humanistic themes in the art of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 1939), p. 14; 'Iconography and iconology: an introduction to



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Edited by Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: iconography and landscape* 9

- the study of Renaissance art', in Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the visual arts* (Harmondsworth, 1970), pp. 51–81, quotations on pp. 57–8.
- 6 Panofsky's stratigraphic metaphor for iconology forced him to suggest that the meaning of a work of art was somehow secreted below its surface configuration. For a criticism of this approach see Svetlana Alpers, *The art of describing: Dutch art in the seventeenth century* (Chicago, 1983), pp. xxiii–xxiv.
  - 7 Panofsky, 'Iconography and iconology', pp. 55, 64, 65.
  - 8 *Studies in iconology*, p. 6 fn. 1; 'Iconography and iconology', p. 56.
  - 9 Ernst Cassirer, *Language and myth* (New York, 1946), p. 8; originally published as *Sprache und Mythos*, No. 6 in *Studien der Bibliothek Warburg*, quoted in Samuel Y. Edgerton Jr, *The Renaissance rediscovery of linear perspective* (New York, 1975), p. 156. We owe the recognition of the importance of Cassirer to Panofsky to pp. 153–65 of Edgerton's book.
  - 10 Erwin Panofsky, 'Die Perspektive als "symbolische Form"', *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg: 1924–5* (Leipzig, 1927), pp. 258–331.
  - 11 Panofsky, 'Iconography and iconology', pp. 59–61.
  - 12 Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic architecture and scholasticism* (New York, 1957), pp. 17, 58.
  - 13 Panofsky, 'Iconography and iconology', pp. 51–2.
  - 14 Clifford Geertz, 'Thick description: toward an interpretative theory of culture' in *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays* (New York, 1973), pp. 3–30, quotations on p. 27.
  - 15 Clifford Geertz, 'Art as a cultural system', in *Local knowledge: further essays in interpretative anthropology* (New York, 1983), pp. 94–120, esp. 102–9.
  - 16 Robert Darnton, 'A bourgeois puts his world in order: the city as a text', in *The great cat massacre and other episodes in French cultural history* (London, 1984), pp. 107–43, quotations on pp. 120, 124, 140.
  - 17 For similar analyses of the ritual meaning of urban landscapes see Edwin Muir, *Civic ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton, 1981); and David Cannadine, 'The context, performance and meaning of ritual: the British monarchy and the "invention of tradition", c. 1820–1977', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 101–64.
  - 18 Peter Fuller, 'John Ruskin: a radical conservative', in Peter Fuller, *Images of God: the consolation of lost illusions* (London, 1985), pp. 277–83, quotation on p. 283.
  - 19 John Dixon Hunt, *The wider sea: a life of John Ruskin* (London, 1982). The quotation is from Kenneth Clark, *Ruskin today* (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. xiii.
  - 20 Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism', *New Left Review*, 146 (1984), pp. 53–92.
  - 21 D. E. Cosgrove, 'John Ruskin and the geographical imagination', *Geographical Review* 69 (1979), pp. 43–62.
  - 22 This is the title of Marshall Berman's essay on modernism: *All that is solid melts into air* (London, 1981). The quotation is originally from Karl Marx discussing 'the bourgeois epoch' in *The communist manifesto*.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove

- 23 Denis Cosgrove, 'The myth and the stones of Venice: the historical geography of a symbolic landscape', *Journal of Historical Geography* 8 (1982), pp. 145–69.
- 24 W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Editor's note: the language of images', *Critical Inquiry*, 6 (1980), p. 359.
- 25 Fuller argues that his holistic, ecological approach is the main reason for Ruskin's contemporary appeal: 'Mother nature', in *Images of God*, pp. 77–82.
- 26 Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into art* (Harmondsworth, 1956), p. 43.
- 27 John Berger, *Ways of seeing* (London, 1972).
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 106–9.
- 29 Raymond Williams, *The country and the city* (London, 1973), p. 120.
- 30 See respectively John Barrell, *The idea of landscape and the sense of place 1730–1840: an approach to the poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge, 1972), and Peter Fuller, *Seeing Berger: a re-evaluation* (London, 1980).
- 31 James Turner, *The politics of landscape: rural scenery and society in English poetry 1630–1660* (Oxford, 1979).
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 188–9. John Berger and Raymond Williams have also addressed advertising; see Berger, *Ways of seeing*, pp. 28–43, and Williams, 'Advertisizing: the magic system' in *Problems in materialism and culture* (London, 1980), pp. 170–95.
- 34 Mitchell, *Iconology*, p. 2.
- 35 Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and practical reason* (Chicago, 1976).
- 36 W. G. Hoskins, *The making of the English landscape* (Harmondsworth, 1970), pp. 298–303.
- 37 Williams, *The country and the city*, p. 3.
- 38 We are grateful to Mike Heffernan for his comments on earlier drafts of this essay.