

Introduction

The central question, thus becomes, what are the core or master symbols, and how do they articulate with the other symbols constituting the culture under study, integrating them into a coherent system.

J. G. Feinberg, Schneider's symbolic cultural theory:
an appraisal, *Current Anthropology*

In a world where physical and digital realms increasingly intersect, the concept of the cultural landscape emerges as a dynamic and multifaceted arena where consumers, brands, and topographies intersect to create meaning and value; it is an overarching term for the liminal space between the physical and digital geographies.

Cultural landscape is a term that is used in the area of media, culture, and communication studies, but it is a term that lacks boundaries and is hard to pin down; which is not unlike the concept that it maps. Historically, cultural landscapes were linked to physical landscapes, studies in cultural heritage, and geographical concepts. As the term has gained a foothold in the humanities and evolved to areas of cultural geographies, the way we understand it must shift to accommodate these changes that now include the human aspect of spaces and how we inhabit them. This can be mapped across the digital sphere, where it plays a key role in the creation of communities in digital hubs and in developing digital suburbs.

Part of the role of brands in this space is how they put down roots here in order to become navigational beacons for consumers as they move through the space and construct their identity. Though there are parts of the cultural landscape that map over the physical landscape, much of the terrain is fluid and dynamic, and evolves as the socio-political and economic contexts ebb and flow within a particular area of the landscape. The dynamic movement of the cultural landscape opens up the potential for power and ownership to shift from brands to consumers and communities.

The adjustment that happens when power is moved from a brand to consumers and back again is akin to how consumers in the physical world use landmarks to navigate their spaces and move towards or away from a destination. Chapter 2 focusses on the role that brands play as landmarks which, while they do act as navigational beacons and provide pathways to the brand in the form of structural narratives, are more than the brand's physical assets. Brands in the cultural landscape are a symbol of the brand's equity and image that consumers can use as a means of closing the gap between their self-identity and self-projection. These two interrelated concepts of identity are how some consumers see themselves and how they want to be seen by others. Brands in this sense are both cultural and situational identifiers that consumers use to bring together their sense of self-alignment and identity. When brands are able to put down roots and grow as landmarks in the cultural landscape, consumers look to them to navigate the terrain.

This navigation simultaneously happens in digital spaces, which has altered how brands and consumers interact with one another and has brought about two-way communication. It has also highlighted the fact that every consumer has an individual identity and what a brand symbolises for one consumer might not be the same for another. By paying attention to consumer communities when they speak to and of brands, brands can better walk the line between knowing too much about a consumer and knowing enough that the consumer feels a connection with the brand. When brands become landmarks in the cultural landscape they are able to be utilised by both those consumers who love them and those who know of them, but choose to steer clear.

When we talk about how brands and consumers co-create meaning and value in the cultural landscape, this has to do with how capital is formed and exchanged. Chapter 3 highlights the value that combining the perspectives of economic-, consumer-, and society-focussed approaches can bring to the understanding of capital in this space. Drawing on the ideas of Foucault and Bourdieu help to define capital as a concept in the cultural landscape and trace how it shifts as contexts alter. Leveraging different forms of capital enables both consumers and brands to understand and navigate their spaces, while also showing how capital exchange sometimes follows its own route, which is directly related to, but does not determine, power dynamics in the cultural landscape. Power here is not a top-down process. It is disseminated in, and sometimes concealed by, societal norms and the changes within them.

One area where societal norms seem to be challenged is in that of gender. In Chapter 4 the focus is on gender and the role it plays for brands and consumers. The act of consumption is often considered feminine and this can alter how brands develop their structural narratives. Brands seeking to develop themselves as landmarks in the cultural landscape need to be aware that most aspects of the shared landscape are gendered and that gender is related to, but is not the same as, sex. There is an element of performance of gender that is related to the consumer's performance of self. How consumers identify within the framework of gender alters how they relate to a brand, with research finding that consumers tend to be more attracted to brands that best reflect how they see themselves and how they want to be seen. With this in mind, brands can develop their image to more closely align with gendered elements that consumers can pick up on. Doing this has pros and cons. Some consumers will see the gendered nature of a brand and avoid it, but for those consumers who feel that they more closely identify with a brand's gendered elements, they can feel that that brand is a safe space around which they can potentially develop a community.

How consumers and brands relate to gender is linked to the interplay between the power within societal norms and the socio-political and economic contexts within a particular location in the cultural landscape. The performance of gender within the cultural landscape is not dissimilar to the concept of authenticity, which is the topic of Chapter 5. Authenticity is a means of connecting one's inner and outer self, though it has an abundance of nuanced definitions. While being aware of the slipperiness of defining authenticity, we can better define this by relating authenticity to the consistency of internal and external expressions, and looking at how being authentic relates to an external referent and how well authenticity conforms to categorical norms. Grappling with authenticity is increasingly important for both brands and consumers as the changes across the cultural landscape move at pace. Alongside this we begin to see aspects of authenticity that are taken for granted. For example, in behind-the-scenes imagery and content where there is a level of intimacy and perceived authenticity between consumers and brands, and the spaces they inhabit become the norm, consumers seek something *more* authentic. As this chapter traces the movement towards the edges of authenticity it highlights the value that consumers put on the concept, while also seeking more reassurances from brands and others in the cultural landscape to both normalise the edges and bring consumers a sense of belonging.

Chapter 6 considers brand activism, which often goes hand in hand with authenticity. As more and more brands sell the same sorts of products or services at roughly the same prices, consumers are seeking ways to differentiate between them. Brand activism is a progression of corporate social responsibility that hones the concept of ‘doing good’ to focus in on key platforms. In the era of the public, in which we currently find ourselves, consumers expect more from their brands than for them to have an environmental impact statement; aspects that are widely considered good are often now simply expected of a brand. What consumers, led by Millennials and Gen Z, now expect is for brands to take a stand on social and political topics. Furthermore, they do not give much leeway for brands to straddle the line. This chapter hones in on what brand activism means in the current cultural landscape, its relationship to authenticity, and the pros and cons of capitalism and activism being bedfellows. It also touches on the balance that must be maintained by brands who also want to reach consumers who do not agree with their activist positions, and gives some examples on what happens when it all goes wrong and brands begin to lose a sense of ownership.

This loss of ownership and the transient movement of power are the subjects of Chapters 7 and 8. The ownership of items, content, and so on is directly linked to the ways that consumers are able to navigate their alignment of self-identity and self-projection in the cultural landscape. Every time that a consumer comes into contact with a brand – whether that is by purchasing a branded product, joining a branded community, or simply seeing another consumer associated with the brand – the perception of the brand develops further. Not only does the consumer have a role in ownership of a brand, those who work for and around a brand also have a key say in how that brand image is created and portrayed based on the employee and brand knowledge/power relationship. Ownership, then, is not simply physical possession; it is a state of mind that enables consumers to utilise the brand’s structural narratives to navigate the cultural landscape. With this in mind, we can begin to split the concepts of ownership and control. As the brand puts down roots in the cultural landscape and builds a base that can begin to serve as a landmark, consumers become co-creators in that space. This can take a myriad of formats, such as consumers specifically developing community groups, helping to clear paths for the brand’s narrative structures, or

highlighting the brand to other consumers. The brand no longer has complete control over their brand image and they must work with the consumers as power ebbs and flows.

Much like the streams of socio-political or economic contexts are ever changing as they move across the cultural landscape, so too do the power dynamics between the landscape, the consumers, and the brands alter. Chapter 8 digs into the ways that these power dynamics shift and the role that the exchange of capital plays as a catalyst. While consumers can become co-owners of a brand and help develop the brand's narrative structures, this can also go the other way, with consumers using their ownership of the brand and the power that amasses in brand communities to obscure the pathways leading others to the brand. This can happen in both physical and digital spaces; brands can be cut off or boosted as power shifts between them and the spaces they inhabit.

While it may be tempting to see this shift in power dynamics as a negative aspect of the relationships in the cultural landscape, this is not the case. Shifts in power can lead to positive changes for both brands and consumers. The final chapter in this book covers the application to industry in a too long; didn't read (TL;DR) format. If time is short, read this book from the back starting with Chapter 9, then read the other chapters to get in-depth considerations of each of the topics.

In addition to the main chapters of this book case studies are interspersed to highlight the ways the theoretical concepts are playing out in real time. These include Case Study 1, which considers how Virgin Atlantic and Anheuser-Busch's Bud Light engage with gendered aspects of their brand and marketing. A key element of this case study is the ways that these two brands embody authenticity, or not, and how consumers have reacted. Case Study 2 deals with a topic that skirted around the edges of the Virgin Atlantic and Bud Light advertisements: brand activism. By digging into both Kate Spade and Change Please, this case study shows how brands are able to engage with authentic activism and use partnerships to extend their reach while staying true to their values. The final case study, Case Study 3, follows the deep dive into power and its transience in the cultural landscape. With that in mind, it covers Skype, Burberry, and Old Spice and their capabilities to navigate the changes that come with shifts in power in different contexts.

1 *What We Mean When We Talk about the Cultural Landscape*

One of the most significant moments in the study of landscapes was the ‘cultural turn’ in geography of the 1970s and 1980s, which highlighted the roles of language, meaning and representation in the construction of social realities.

M. Atha et al., *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*

Once used as a term linked to cultural heritage based in physical landscapes, over time the phrase ‘cultural landscape’ has moved beyond the recognition of geographical and archaeological modalities to take on a ‘cultural turn’ (O’Keeffe, 2007, p. 3). This has enabled the phrase to be ‘conceived of as an emblematic site of representation, a locus of both power and resistance’ (Moore, 2007, p. x). Researchers of heritage, history, and landscapes have moved into adopting a more humanities-based understanding of the interactions of landscapes and the peoples and societies that inhabit them. They often go beyond the understanding of the landscape as an entity that exists outside the realm of society and look to the development (and sometimes loss) of collected memories that develop around a physical space. These social formations and institutions are fluid, context-bound, move across cultures, and transverse historical periods (O’Keeffe, 2007, p. 8).

This era of landscape culturalism in which we find ourselves must take into account the growth and development of digital landscapes that overlie physical landscapes and are inherently intertwined with cultural, and individual, identity. We must also consider the memories that are embedded within landscapes and the different institutions, organisations, power dynamics, and identity performances at play. With this in mind, a natural step is in moving to better understand how companies, organisations, and products – all considered here under the umbrella of ‘brands’ – interact with the landscape, each other, and consumers (as individuals). In order to do so, this chapter

first explores the changing ways we consider the cultural landscape and the evolution of consumer culture. It goes on to show how elements such as identity and brands are overlaid on a complex duality of physical and digital spaces in order to develop a theoretical mapping of the cultural landscape. Once the cartography of this space is outlined, we then consider how consumers read the map of the cultural landscape and learn how to move around it, the role of technology, and finally, the growth of the digital suburbs and how these elements extend, and potentially warp, the cultural landscape.

Co-opting the Cultural Landscape

To better break down the different layers of the cultural landscape as a basis for exploring the concepts of branding and power, we first consider the history of the term ‘landscape’, which dates back to thirteenth-century Dutch and relates to a land region that has been reclaimed or remade (Antrop, 2020, p. 1). With its introduction into English, we see the term being defined more widely, with aspects of art, metaphor, development, and more being ascribed to it, and with definitions altering based on the stance and agenda of those who are defining the term. Glossing over a long and rich history of the intertwined relationship between ‘landscape’, its myriad of definitions, and the study of geography and architecture enables us to arrive in a fuzzy area where the term has a ‘multiplicity of disciplinary interpretations’ (Atha et al., 2020, p. xxi), where landscapes after the mid 1980s can be seen as having both natural and cultural layers, which are further complicated by the digital.

In his work on the emergence of a cultural landscape, Taylor (2012, p. 23) notes that ‘[t]he assumption that is often made that “cultural landscape” is only to do with agricultural settings is misplaced: it is concerned with all human places and the process of making them and inhabiting them’. In the early to mid 1900s, Sauer (1969, p. 343) defined the cultural landscape as being a space that is ‘fashioned from the natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result.’ It is the place where humanity has impacted the natural environment (Jones, 2003). The shift to incorporate the human element of making and doing into landscape studies was enhanced in the early 1990s when the term ‘cultural landscape’ was further validated

by its inclusion as a conservation category by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO's) World Heritage Committee. This inclusion enabled the examination of heritage based on both its locational significance and its intangible cultural aspects (Taylor & Xu, 2020, p. 314).

While the use of the term by UNESCO seems to be a means by which the term can be cemented into the lexicon of studies of the places that humanity and landscapes come together, instead it is often seen as a 'chaotic concept' (Sayer, 1992), whose definition is messy, hard to pin down, and 'forever being re-organized. [Different understandings of the term ...] encroach upon one another, absorb one another, expand, contract, multiply, disappear' (Jackson, 1971, p. 188). In his work on defining the cultural landscape, Jones (2003) identifies no less than twelve working definitions by scholars and in administration that cross areas such heritage, conservation, physical geography, and agriculture. Likewise, Rowntree (1996) concludes that the use of the term 'cultural landscape' will continue, not because of its precision in identifying a specific concept, but due to its widespread use as relating to a variety of interactions between landscapes, societies, and the cultural meanings that different groups attach to different spaces.

Though some scholars consider culture as part of the landscape and therefore just choose to term all aspects as simply 'landscape',¹ there is also an adjacent area of research into cultural geographies that has 'long argued the importance of cultural artifacts of many kinds in mediating human experiences of place, space and landscape' (Rose, 2016, p. 334). These artefacts can be brands, products, or even pop culture (Hastie & Saunders, 2023). Here the term 'culture' is applied to indicate the ephemeral aspects of the landscape that are both physical (with real estate and locations that map onto brands) and intangible or cognitive (the digital and theoretical locations that a brand occupies for a consumer), linked to what Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir (2019, p. 11) call 'culturescapes', which 'are a kind of "ephemeral geography"'.

For this book, the cultural landscape is a space that is malleable in that the way organisations, societies, and individuals view it alters depending on their identity, on temporality, and on the

¹ For more information on the dropping of 'culture' from 'cultural landscape', begin with Jones, 2003 and Rowntree, 1996.

possession and movement of capital as a means of shifting power. While it has physical dimensions, it is more of a perspective on a series of overlapping topographies than a space that can be physically inhabited. With this in mind, we can begin to consider how each location, landmark, and individual views the cultural landscape and how they exist and move within it.

One of the ways that the cultural landscape is embodied is in how power moves within and across it. The cultural landscape goes beyond reflecting the relationships of power within the community that inhabits it to actually being a means and space in which that power can manifest (Rowntree & Conkey, 1980), inferring ‘cultural context, human action and activity and also change over time’ (Taylor, 2012, p. 22). Depending on the point in history from which we consider the cultural landscape, we will see aspects of it that have been preserved and imbued with symbolic significance by a group or society (Rowntree & Conkey, 1980). In the world of legacy brands such as Coca-Cola, Disney, Justin Boots, and so on, these brands have staked out a space and existence over a span of time long enough that they become embedded into the fabric of the cultural landscape. They are examples of the human application of culture to a physical landscape. For instance, Justin Boots make footwear for horse riders, yes. But what they really do is embody the concept of what it is to be a cowboy, an ‘icon of western culture’ (Justin Boots, 2023). Their placement within the cultural landscape and their value as an ‘icon’ enables Justin Boots to maintain their position on the map through several layers of topographical interpretation.

This placement gives the brand staying power within the landscape to become a landmark or anchor – a place that consumers all see within their cultural landscape that is steady and can be used as a navigational beacon.² Part of a brand’s drive to becoming a landmark is related to ownership of space. For Justin Boots, it’s boots, but it’s also a narrative about the legacy of the West, the hard and honest work of a cowboy, and the ideals the cowboy symbolises; where these ‘intangibles, such as social identity [in this case, as a cowboy, or at the least as someone who identifies with the ideals of freedom the cowboy represents], are ... realized by the landscape’ (Rowntree & Conkey, 1980, p. 474).

² The concept of brands as landmarks in the consumer’s cultural landscape is covered in depth in Chapter 2.

These intangible assets that Justin Boots and other brands hold are forms of cultural capital that consumers seek out to best reflect both who they are (self-identity) and who they want to be seen to be (self-projection).³ By staking out their location in the cultural landscape, these brands are able to wield the power of ownership to engage with consumers. The cultural capital that brands hold is deeply rooted in the space they occupy in the landscape and how they are viewed by consumers. This is connected to the cultural recollections of accrued capital, where ‘memory is collective, plural and yet also individual’ (Robertson & Hall, 2007, p. 21) and is thus activated by the ‘memory’ of landmarks – brands – that draw on this recollection of symbolism and prompt a consumer to act accordingly.

With this in mind, brands can take advantage of the uneven population and topography of the cultural landscape as an opportunity to take pieces of land and develop them in a way that will turn small ideas, or ‘whys’ (Sinek, 2011), into cultural landmarks. Along with this development to remake the natural landscape into something that better suits a community’s, or brand’s, needs comes the potential for influence and power. However, while remaking a cultural landscape to suit the needs of a brand might enable the latter to be the largest landmark within the area (be it clothes, shoes, cars, etc.), if this development is done with short-term gain in mind, it can overlook the potential longer-term ramifications, as well as refusing to acknowledge the brand’s ‘immense power as an agent of change’ (Salter, 1971, Introduction) and the responsibility that entails.

Historically the ownership of land ‘creates power and influence’ (Munton, 2009, p. S55) and much of that power was (and still is) held in the hands of a select group of landowners, which creates a hierarchy that decides how land can be used and by whom. Notably, the ownership of a particular piece of real estate doesn’t necessarily mean that neighbours will all be competitors or compatriots; these elements shift depending on the wider culture of a temporal period. For instance, if we consider mainstream clothing retailers, such as Zara, Urban Outfitters, H&M, UNIQLO, and so on, as holding landmark spaces as high-street/mainstream brands, they often physically exist in similar locations (such as Oxford Street, London), in clusters,

³ An in-depth look at how the movement of cultural capital relates to identity and branding is provided in Chapter 3.