

# AFFECTIVE LANDSCAPES

## An Introduction

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*Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell, and Robert Hudson*

**Abstract** This essay examines, in Ben Highmore's words, the implications of "a materialist turn towards the immaterial, towards affect, towards thingyness, the senses" and how this might be determined by "the social world that produced them." In viewing the "social," or "sociocultural," as always affective, and in viewing the significance of landscape in terms of how people define themselves and their relations to the world, this essay explores affect's key role in countering entrenched, predefined systems of thought and feeling and its potential for, in Jacques Rancière's terms, "redistributing the sensible."

**Keywords** affect; landscape; place; redistribution of the sensible; aesthetics; politics

It is of the essence of life that it does not begin here or end there, or connect a point of origin with a final destination, but rather that it keeps on going, finding a way through the myriad of things that form, persist and break up in its currents. Life, in short, is a movement of opening not of closure.

—Tim Ingold, *Being Alive*

This introduction is formed at an intersection of personal and professional interests, experiences, and ideas coalescing around and deviating from the notion of "affective landscapes." This subject was the theme of a conference jointly hosted by the Universities of Derby and Portsmouth, UK, in May 2012, which brought together scholars and artists from all over the world and sought to investigate what the phrase *affective landscapes* might mean and how it might be employed as a trigger for

theoretical and creative works. This special section of *Cultural Politics* was inspired by that conference, and the revised and expanded essays presented here originated in the conference and respond to the themes engaged with and articulated in those days of exchange and debate.

### ***Affective Landscape Politics***

Recent years have seen, according to Patricia Clough, an “affective turn” in the humanities and social sciences, “occurring at a time when critical theory is facing the analytic challenges of ongoing war, trauma, torture, massacre, and counterterrorism,” with world events that are “symptomatic of ongoing political, economic, and cultural transformations.” For her, the turn to affect is “registering a change in the co-functioning of the political, economic, and cultural” and consequently refocusing critical eyes on the definition of “the ‘social’” (2007: 1; see also Thrift 2008: 221–22; Anderson and Harrison 2010: 11–19). In its most basic meaning, “affect” refers to something that moves, that triggers reactions, forces, or intensities “that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body and otherwise),” simultaneously engaging the mind and body, reason and emotions (Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 1). Although *affect* is a contested and much-debated term, for our purposes, Anderson and Harrison offer a useful definition of it as “the aleatory dynamics of experience, the ‘push’ of life which interrupts, unsettles and haunts persons, places or things” (Anderson and Harrison 2010: 16). Significantly, however, as Judith Butler reminds us—echoing the forefather of affect theory, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose notion of the body was “one of the objects of [the] world” and “a grouping of lived-through meanings” ([1945] 2002: 81, 177)—“the body does not belong to itself,” because it is rather a

“vector” amid cultural and political networks, “in the world of others, in a space and time it does not control” (Butler 2010: 52–53). This “constitutive sociality of the body,” as Butler terms it (54), explains the many affective relations that commingle to define life and also alerts us to the vulnerability of the body to loss, violence, and other forces within this network.

As the following essays will explore, the sociocultural is always affective, for as Ben Highmore, one of the authors in this special section, argues, “a materialist turn towards the immaterial, towards affect, towards thingyness, the senses and so on are necessarily determined by the social world that produced them” (2011: 166), and as a result, as Anderson and Harrison claim, “it is often through affect that seemingly entrenched relations are interrupted, changed or solidified” (2010: 16–17). Therefore, it can be argued that affect, which might be considered romantic and immaterial by some, can be viewed as critically dynamic and political. For as Davidson, Park, and Shields remind us, “infused with power, grounded in place and located bodies, affect is viscerally political” (2011: 5), permeating every layer of everyday life. The affective landscapes explored in this edition “consider space and place beyond their material properties” while recognizing that this “beyond” of “imaginary places, ideals, and real but intangible objects . . . underpin and produce material places and social spaces” too (6). It is the relational interaction between the material and virtual that interests these authors and within which an affective cultural politics emerges, as people attach themselves to and detach themselves from place in complex ways, imbuing such landscapes with powerful associations and, in turn, with intense struggles over meaning and authority. This special section’s

essays return, through such relations of landscape and affect, to the fundamental questions of cultural politics:

Whose culture shall be the official one and whose shall be subordinated? What cultures shall be regarded as worthy of display and which shall be hidden? Whose history shall be remembered and whose forgotten? What images of social life shall be projected and which shall be marginalized? What voices shall be heard and which be silenced? Who is representing whom and on what basis? (Jordan and Weedon 1995: 4)

These are, inevitably, deeply affected and affecting concerns that resonate with the very stuff of everyday life and how it is lived and organized within space and place. Through an attention to the details of everyday life, which are particularly resonant in the essays that follow, and the subtle response to its sensed and lived landscapes, one reaches a "new education of the senses informed by the insignificant noises and events of ordinary life" (Rancière 2012: 6). In this precise sense, Jacques Rancière, according to Highmore, defines politics as "the enacting of a disruption in the parcelling out of allocated space, time and sense" (2011: 47). Echoing Jordan and Weedon's questions above, Rancière claims the aesthetics of politics is always about "a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time" (2009: 13).

Thus, when Nigel Thrift defines affect as "a different kind of intelligence about the world" emerging, in part, "from the setting itself" (Rancière's "properties of space"),

that is, from the multiple relations, actions, dispositions, and habits within the world around and also within us (Thrift 2008: 175, 176), he reminds us of the wider political significance that affect can play in the formation and deformation of the cultural. For our affective relations with landscape, in these terms, are always closer to what has become known as 'worlding' (see Stewart 2010), best explained by Anderson and Harrison: "In this sense, 'worlds' are not formed in the mind before they are lived in, rather we come to know and enact a world from inhabiting it, from becoming attuned to its differences, positions and juxtapositions, from a training of our senses, dispositions and expectations and from being able to initiate, imitate and elaborate skilled lines of action" (2010: 9).

As Michael Hardt has written, these relations of affect "illuminate . . . both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers" (2007: ix). Indeed, Hardt's own work and that with Antonio Negri (see Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004) has demonstrated ways by which close attention to "the production of affects," when examined alongside "the production of code, information, ideas, images, and the like," can enable "new political possibilities" through bringing to light new forms of exploitation, as well as suggest opportunities for "practices of liberation and refusal" (Hardt 2007: xii). Thus the attention to affective landscape relations as a form of "worlding" has specific political implications to do with how the land/world is "used," defined, represented, apportioned, exploited, and bound into discourses of the state, media, corporatization, or other systems of order and power. In trying to comprehend any active notion of the sociocultural within this framework of relations, the recognition and utilization of

affect as central to its understanding permits a more open definition that accepts that “everything takes-part and in taking-part, takes-place: everything happens, everything acts” (Anderson and Harrison 2010: 14).

Affect theory thus sees a turn away from overarching and, potentially, prescriptive or predefined concepts and theories toward the senses, the body, and the mind in their varied relations with the world—“everything takes-part and in taking-part, takes-place.” Inevitably, this has attracted criticism. Seigworth and Gregg point out that theories of affect “have sometimes been viewed as naïvely or romantically wandering too far out into the groundlessness of a world’s or a body’s myriad inter-implications, letting themselves get lost in an over-abundance of swarming, sliding differences” (2010: 4). Yet, as Thrift cautions, affect “is a navigation of feeling that goes beyond the simple romanticism of somehow maximizing individual emotions” (2008: 188), for, as we have already noted, it helps redefine and expand the cultural as a “weaving of material bodies” (Anderson and Harrison 2010: 13) that *has* to also include the seeming immateriality of affects (including, as the following essays demonstrate, hopes, dreams, moods, memories, longing, love, vulnerability, precarity, hauntings, and pain). In David Crouch’s words, this expanded, affective sense of the sociocultural will always be “breaking through continuing meta-thinking to attend to people’s living in the world” (2010: 125). Indeed, this process of “living in the world” and the choices and forces that both surround its happening and seek to curtail or control its shape and direction are *always* cultural and political.

### ***Fugitive Work***

What sets affect apart, particularly in the ways that it engages with landscapes, is not

its emphasis not on the grand narratives or Crouch’s “meta-thinking” but its valuing of the small-scale, the ordinary, and the everyday, or upon what Thrift terms “fugitive work”—that is, “the little, the messy and the jerry-rigged as a part of politics and not just incidental to it” (2008: 197). It is this remarkable attentiveness that affect brings to the possibility of a renewed cultural politics derived from considerations of how humans interact with space and place: how they are defined by it, define it, and, in turn, might interrupt, alter, and reshape those definitions. Tracing the nuances and ambiguities of landscape in all its manifestations, from the rural to the urban, from the man-made to the seeming wilderness, the cultivated to the derelict, can become a resource, not for indecision or vagueness, but rather “to expand the envelope of the political” and perhaps “restore the spaces of moral and political reflection that ‘man’ has collapsed and bring new forms of politics into being” (197). As Highmore has written, such attention to place “means that the particular is studied as if it could contribute to a more general account of the world” (2011: 2) through which Thrift’s “new forms of politics” might emerge. One can see this in the essays that follow through their attention and reattunement to overlooked and marginal sites and spaces: to the various uses made by state and individuals of the bombsites of postwar Britain, to controlled and uncontrolled roadside memorials, and to real and imagined council estates.

This recording of forces and particularities of sensibility through our relations with landscape heightens awareness like a shock to a wearied system of predefined and long-established expectations. They act to interrupt and unsettle this system through moments and passages of what Jane Bennett has called

“mood[s] of enchantment” combining, in unpredictable ways, both “delight and disturbance” (2010: xi). Through our bodily, affective entanglements with place and all its varied and complexly layered forces (actualities, representations, memories, absences, imaginings, etc.), we are impelled to think and rethink, to feel and to perceive in unexpected flows, and consequently to “drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension,” acting as the “persistent proof of a body’s never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world’s obstinacies and rhythms” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 1). As Sara Ahmed puts it: “To be affected by something is to evaluate that thing. Evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn towards things. To give value to things is to shape what is near us” (2010: 311). Highmore singles out Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* (2007) as an example of how this “shaping” might work, for he senses in her writing a type of “pedagogy” emerging through her detailed attentiveness to place and people whereby readers become “more and more alert to . . . surroundings. Your skin begins to prickle with the apprehensions of the lives of others, of resonances of care and indifference, of anxiety and ease” (2011: 8). Politically, of course, this acts to alter perceptions, raise questions, and create doubt—“it attunes and reattunes the human sensorium” (8). As Stewart herself puts it:

Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences. They’re things that happen. They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in publics and social

worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like *something*. (2007: 1–2)

As we noted earlier, Jacques Rancière claims such an approach is precisely pedagogic because it forges a “new education of the senses” (2012: 6). Seigworth and Gregg refer to this process of being affected and affecting in turn, this potential of affect to trigger a positive chain reaction of “thought,” “movement,” and “extension,” as an “affective bloom space” (2010: 9), the space open and accessible to all of us to take in our surroundings, events, others, and engage with them actively and differently.

Of course, the politics of affect explores the complex struggles around these potentialities since, as a process of action and interaction, affect can be used in varying ways and for varying ends, some of which might contain and render immobile its generative power. For example, Thrift refers to “an authoritarian capitalism which relies on sentiment, media, and lack of attention and/or engagement to most political issues to hold sway” (2008: 222), while Highmore (in this volume and 2011: 165) and Harvey (2005) see the practice and manipulation of affect, and its associated individualist turn, as central to the emergence and dominance of neoliberalism as a form of “common sense.” Emphasizing individualism and privatization rather than collectivism, mutuality, and the welfare state, Harvey and Highmore see the promise of what Lauren Berlant calls the “fantasy of the good life” (2011: 1) as registered through the appeal to certain “feelings” within the sociopolitical system, including “ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart” (Harvey 2005: 3). However, as these essays begin to demonstrate, affect can also lead in other directions, ones more

critical and more affirmative of relational, cooperative political positions and that point toward what Rancière terms “reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible” (2012: 25).

### ***Redistributing the Sensible***

Rancière’s work on aesthetics is helpful as a link between affect and politics, given that he defines politics as “the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision” (2012: 24). Ultimately, politics, he claims, “revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (2009:13), and its challenge is to reconfigure such spaces through its redistribution of the sensible to create “new modes of sense perception” (9). Central to Rancière’s argument is the role of art practices, which for him are always sociocultural, as they are for the essays that follow, whether in Rose Macaulay’s novel or Sheelah Latham’s photography (Highmore), improvised roadside shrines (Bednar), or the work of George Shaw (Waites). Such aesthetic projects function through affective presence, to provoke, intervene, and disrupt the established regime of the “sensible” with its “general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility” (Rancière 2009: 13). As Jane Bennett argues, affects extend beyond the human, agreeing with Rancière that they are “interfering with the functionality of gestures and rhythms adapted to the natural cycles of production, reproduction, and submission” and undoing “the sensible fabric—a given order of relations between meanings and the visible” (Rancière 2009: 39, 64) so as to propose something else: other relations and

alternative orders from “below the threshold of note” (Bennett 2010: 105).

### ***The Horizons of Visibility***

The articles in this special section explore relations of affect through close examinations of specific landscapes, both real and imagined, from “below the threshold of note.” Ben Highmore’s essay “Playgrounds and Bombsites: Postwar Britain’s Ruined Landscapes” shows how, in post-1945 Britain, affect was regulated by particular interpretive frames or a distribution of the sensible, so that youth became defined by its association with waste-ground, forming a particular “mood-world.” He traces the “vacillating meanings” of concern, fear, and creativity associated with these landscapes, as youth adapted them to their own existence. Damaged youth as a cultural archetype found its perfect match in these bombed-out spaces, alongside the multiple affects emerging from the same terrain, such as the aggressions of war, dreams of regeneration, and the good life; together, these created an “image-repertoire,” “fashioning the moods and feelings from wrecked landscapes.” Drawing on Paolo Virno’s work on “emotional tonalities,” he argues that an ambivalent structure of feeling in the postwar world suggested both “cheerful resignation” and “social assimilation,” as well as urging “radical transformation.” This conjuncture of internal conflicts gave rise to and legitimated the growth of neoliberalism as a means to overcome such sociopolitical contradictions. This persists today, according to Highmore, with a “pernicious” image-repertoire that blames urban blight not on uneven economic development but rather on feral youth, thereby sanctioning the disintegration of the welfare state as just another part of the ruined landscape, social heirs of the playground-bombsite. Thus Virno’s picture of

a world caught *between* pessimism and optimism is, according to Highmore, a “mood-world” that refuses to just follow the path set down by the state or by corporations and sees instead outcomes other than unfettered progress. Its cultural politics is present in the photographs of children using bombsites as playgrounds, who are looking out at those who would see their situation as a justification for the surge, at all costs, toward the future-driven good life. Perhaps, as Highmore suggests, melancholy, always imbued with a sense of what has been lost, is another, rather more questioning, affective response to this dominant neoliberal discourse.

In Ian Waites’s “‘Places in Which I Forgot Things’: Memory, Identity, and the British Council Estate in the Paintings of George Shaw,” there is also a powerful commentary on how landscapes become bound up in particular mood-worlds to the extent that they become shaped and defined by them. What is lost in this process of normative distribution, like Highmore’s waste-ground as moral danger, are the other meanings a landscape holds, the affects it circulates as lived experience and memory in those who knew it intimately. George Shaw’s paintings engage with and create these affects with a similarly melancholic air, or what he calls a “kind of mourning,” which productively remembers and reuses what has been lost as the raw material for art to counter those dominant images of run-down, one-dimensional landscapes associated with the British council estate. Waites sees in Shaw the cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) of the welfare state with its endless promise of the better life for all, now adjusted by years of neglect and neoliberal privatization. But in the ambivalent wonder of Shaw’s paintings, the traces of hope and beauty persist alongside ruin and hardship in a “constantly shifting limbo” that, if nothing

else, refuses to ignore these vital, if controversial, landscapes where people continue to live out their lives. Culturally and aesthetically, Shaw reclaims these affective landscapes not as popular nostalgia but as “spectral,” and so haunted by layers of time past, present, and future, which in his case lead him back to childhood. Like the children playing creatively on Highmore’s bombsites, Shaw’s paintings reimagine his past through emptied-out, unpopulated places, which nonetheless resonate with affects that form his relational autobiography distributed across spaces that others ignore. His art interrupts conventions that see land as always “to be used” and productive, reimagining council estates differently, awkwardly—as intimate spaces that, like bodies, decline and die. “The things that made me are in themselves becoming unmade,” he writes.

Robert M. Bednar’s “Killing Memory: Roadside Memorial Removals and the Necropolitics of Affect” examines roadside memorials as sites of political struggle between contesting forces for the right to control memory and affect in public landscape. How is memory and affect distributed? Who should be remembered and who not? What Bednar calls “compulsory compassion” is the performance of controlled affect that is regulated by the state and media through what it permits to be expressed, in contrast to the more spontaneous forms of loss and mourning constructed at roadside sites. Together with other mechanisms that determine “who matters and who does not,” there emerges a form of “necropolitics” exercised on the memory of actual bodies killed on the roads, dependent upon what aligns with state law or is congruent with state-approved objectives. Like the bombsites turned to playgrounds or the council estates as tactile havens, the



unregulated roadside shrine can be a genuine, creative vernacular space rather than an instance of state-sponsored approved discourse. Echoing Highmore's "image-repertoire," Bednar draws on the "interpretive repertoire" through which differing views on the roadside memorials gain attention and are circulated within US culture and then proceeds to intervene in its authorized meanings to reveal alternative perspectives. What he terms "territorialized affect" are those interpretive acts that approve or regulate roadside memorials and, therefore, control and order public spaces for particular uses. As Bednar shows, spontaneous, vernacular uses are permitted only when they serve approved discourses of the state, such as those associated with the group Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and, therefore, highlight the victims rather than seek to understand the perpetrators or their problems. Bednar notes that "affect is always radically uncontained" and in excess of consciousness, and so, as all these essays demonstrate, affect has the potential to "detritorialize" such systems of distribution, control, and approval and, in this particular essay, to even challenge those official structures and procedures for dealing with the dead. In this regard, affect overflows established boundaries and reasserts difference, like the right to grieve in public and to reject the manufactured affect channeled through the state, the media, and other institutions of power with their "presumed affective response."

Ultimately Bednar, like Highmore and Waites, looks to "denaturalize a discourse" of presumed affect and reattune us to the multiple possibilities of response and relations to both landscape and affect. In Rancière's terms, they seek to introduce "disagreement" (1999) into the notion of a sociocultural "we" and, through affective relations with space and place, to remind us

of the deep and changing nature of politics as "whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise" (1999: 30).

There is, of course, always some risk inherent in the politics of affect, which is simultaneously also its dynamic, uncontained potential: for we cannot know where it will go, it just will. The precarity of affect emerges because we are willing to imagine a culture not defined by habit, as Highmore argues (2011: 171), but rather one in which habit becomes a "dynamic set of features that includes established habits and the becomings of the habitual," that is, allowing in the as-yet-unformed potential that hovers at the edge of things, in the marginal and the improper, perhaps in the "invisible habits that tell their secret stories" (171). Yet, through such affective relations, we open ourselves to the forces of others and the world, which can be both disturbing and enchanting, for it exposes us to a sense of precariousness, as Judith Butler reminds us, through which we recognize we are "living socially" in a meshwork of connections and interconnections, and that, therefore, "one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other" (2010: 14). In the end, the potential politics of affect emerge most clearly in Butler's description of the body "as fundamentally dependent on, and conditioned by, a sustained and sustainable world; responsiveness—and thus, ultimately, responsibility—as located in the affective responses to a sustaining and impinging world" (2010: 34). If the fate of the body is tied to others and to the world, then it is "traversed by a relationality" that encourages "fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility" one to the other (Butler 2006:



22). To think this way is to cause the normative distribution of the sensible to be disrupted, as the “very ‘I’ is called into question by its relation to the Other” (23) and a form of “dispossession” occurs through which the possession of the individual, isolated self (its “knowingness”) is undone and rethought as “our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another” (28, 30; see also Butler and Athanasiou 2013). Thus, through this method, affects such as melancholy, grief, loss, vulnerability, and mourning disarm us, dispossess us, exposing our “unknowingness,” and, as such, provide “a resource for politics,” forming “the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself,” and, therefore, move us beyond self-enclosure and isolation toward some shared, reciprocal sense of valued life (Butler 2006: 30).

In the end, these essays assert that “acts of politics and acts of art disrupt and reorder the social sensorium, making new experiences possible, making new voices heard as speech, altering the horizons of visibility” (Highmore 2011: 48). It is the breach in the “normative landscape of assigned sense” (52) and its distribution that interests Rancière and that becomes manifest in these essays, as they juxtapose forms of accepted visibility and sayability with alternative, questioning, disruptive forms devolved from critical affective landscapes. These works trace aesthetic affects both in art practice and through the lived experiences of the everyday, with all its possible “vibrant matter” (Bennett 2010: viii). In this regard, they extend Rancière’s political domain to a wider sensorium, a “mood-world” that asserts, with Tim Ingold, that life is “a movement of opening not of closure” (2011: 4) and, with Kathleen Stewart, that “the world is still tentative, charged, overwhelming, and alive” (2007: 128).

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