

# WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH A HORIZON?: LANDSCAPE IN RECENT AUSTRALIAN FICTION AND THE VISUAL ARTS

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IN an article written on 17th April 1929, Nettie Palmer wrote: 'A region or a way of life does not begin to exist until it has been interpreted by one artist after another . . . Only the artists . . . can show us the features and meaning of what we are perhaps beginning to love' (as quoted in Smith xxiv). As if anticipating the late twentieth century, Palmer's comments on place parallel much contemporary thought on the nature and role of landscape in literature and the visual arts.

Landscape is seen as a process, a web of inter-related events rather than a fixed, definable object, and herein lies its problem. Landscape is everywhere and nowhere; it is an elusive entity which can be variously described as a journey, a series of fragments, and the relationship of the land with the people who inhabit it. In a recent interview, Liam Davison suggested that he sees 'not one landscape existing, but a whole series of different landscapes which are shaped as much by individual perception as they are by communal understanding' (Davison, int.). It is this idea that, in part, shapes and informs his novel *Soundings*. During his book *Home: A Journey Through Australia*, Rodney Hall described his encounter with Lake Mungo as a place that possessed the powerful sense that it was like no other place on earth: 'So much more has been gouged out by wind and rain than remains, that the emptiness is palpable, pervaded by a sense of loss. It is a place rich in ghosts' (33). Hall calls upon such ghosts and such an emptiness to inhabit his novel *Just Relations*. He, like Davison, constructs a narrative fabric in which environment and characters are inextricably interwoven; where the personas of the land inhabit the characters as they, in turn, inhabit the land.

Gerald Murnane's novel, *The Plains*, while being vaguely located in the grasslands of the Western District of Victoria, is mostly glimpses of what he refers to as 'parts of a world which I can never see' (Murnane, int.).

The title of this paper, 'What can you do with a horizon?' is taken from Paul Carter's book, *The Road to Botany Bay*. His question addresses not only the factual nature of perspectives but also notions of spatial history and the inter-weaving of time frames. Landscape as a series of inventions, a set of diverse, and frequently, ambiguous perspective and horizons, is the structure and destination of each of the texts discussed in this paper.

The horizon, seen as a structural still point, became a measuring line of reality in spatial constructs. Growing out of the seventeenth century tradition of Dutch painting, landscape has been tied to the notion of an individual observer located at a particular point on the ground. It has a visual bias; a way of seeing projected onto the land. During the late 1960s, geographers actively emphasised the difference between their response to the land and that of the painter, poet, or novelist (Cosgrove 31). The difference, they suggested, lay in the act of map interpretation, and in a variety of actions such as survey, sampling, or detailed inventory which would achieve a synthesis of multiple perspec-

tives. The geographer, it was suggested, made no distinction between foreground and background. Contemporary geographers would not find such a separation so easy. Their theoretical responses to the idea of landscape suggest that the notion of being at once an observer of and participator in landscape is a possibility.

In his introduction to *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, David Meinig argues that 'if we want to understand ourselves, we would do well to take a searching look at our landscapes' (2). Attempting to clarify the concept of landscape, Meinig defines it by what it is not. Not being specifically nature, scenery, environment, place, region, area or geography, landscape is an accumulation 'composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads' (33). American geographer and philosopher Yi-Fu Tuan brings together human mind and vision, suggesting that 'we can think therefore we are able to see an entity called landscape' (qtd. in Meinig 89). As well as building upon David Meinig's idea of our involvement in the creation of landscape, Tuan's notion also draws attention to the theory that consciousness enters into the structure of reality. New images of the universe are replacing the long-held views of a mechanical world.

The organic and ecological images of a universe, which philosopher Charles Birch describes as 'more like a life than a machine' (Birch, xi) are significant for literature. The relationship of objects to experience, which Birch separates into external and internal relations, and the inter-connectedness of mind and matter, are concepts which offer a way of approaching the idea of landscape. Birch argues that most Western thought about relations has focused on the external rather than the experiential nature of the internal. In terms of landscape, a mountain is part of a physical environment, only when we engage in the act of 'seeing' a mountain does it become internal to our experience. It is not merely the external appearance but the structure and spirit within each substance of the environment including the human presence which offers the inter-connectedness which constitutes the universe. Birch suggests that in a post-modern world view 'science and religion will be concerned with the whole world. Each will bring a different perspective and emphasis' (Birch 146). This notion may be seen as a way of creating and understanding landscape, each perspective bringing a different horizon and meaning.

It is pertinent, therefore, to question how the response of writers and painters to the environment becomes part of our guidelines for 'seeing'. I suggest that the overlaying of words as a device, the repeated descriptions from diverse perspectives, generate nuance and absence through juxtaposition and powerful association. Part of the strength of the novels and paintings discussed in this paper is in their attempts to get at the experience of landscape, doing so as Veronica Brady proposes 'by setting it in an unfamiliar context, its own fictitious world' (Brady 1).

The three novels *Just Relations*, *Soundings* and *The Plains*, and the images by Fred Williams, John Wolsley and Rodick Carmichael have as a common thread the interweaving of place and spirit. A sense of landscape is born out of multiple perspectives and a timelessness which, combined with a pervading atmosphere of history, evoke a continuous interplay of present, past and future.

*Just Relations* is a most powerful rendering of landscape, creating a magically real place which is somewhere between myth and map. Through domestic detail, the telling and re-telling of folktale and legend, Hall moves from the mundane to the mysterious. Whitey's Fall is at once abundance and absence. It is a landscape created by living ghosts who remember the future as well as the past. Throughout the novel Hall makes and remakes a mountain. Like Bertha McAloon's knitting, the narrative builds a landscape from the threads and patches of shifting horizons and locations. The mountain cajoles, rebukes and colludes with the folk of Whitey's Fall to create a place where the inhabitants

live and breathe the substance of place. They see it variously as a comforter, an enemy, a source of optimism, a brooding beast, or, as Fido does, compositions of line and colour, and 'the one thing that [he] must learn to see' (257). For Davison's photographer, Jack Cameron, and Murnane's film maker, learning to see the landscape is also part of the challenge. Each novel explores Tuan's inseparability of mind and vision.

In *Just Relations*, Rodney Hall's characters and their environments are inseparable: an idea exemplified by Bertha McAloon who creates knitted landscape pictures. (Hall calls her 'The Webster' in his portrait of her.) 'They're kind of windows', she says, 'That's what you'd see if you could look outside' (371). As a prodigious knitter, Bertha McAloon has produced epic pieces, not mere cardigans and socks but stage-curtains, carpets, an entire house interior, and sculptural figures in chairs. And then there's her tree. 'They cut down my old tree, you see', she tells the Craft Consultant of the Australian Historic and Aesthetic Resources Commission, 'so I'm knitting another'. Her work becomes 'a triumph of imagination' which the Craft Consultant says must be preserved. Enmeshed in her fibrous interior, Bertha McAloon 'sometimes [believed that when knitting] the horizon itself would unravel to become her wool, that it was being drawn into her personal web' (356). Her knitted mountain is described as 'a heap of loneliness', (371) a crumbling, moth-eaten grief which, she says, she intends to drag around after her. The knitted world of Bertha's mountain is an entanglement of imagination, a personal landscape made tangible through a domestic art form.

Eventually liberated from what she describes as her 'art and half a lonely life of subservience to an ideal' (470), Bertha flies off to join the inhabitants of Whitey's Fall in their carnival-parade departure. Seeing herself as Cecil B. de Mille's missing link in the unfolding drama, she introduces a rare aerial landscape description in which the mountain has almost ceased to exist. Indeed, it has been packed up on the carts and is being carried away. Bertha is freed from the restraints of her knitted horizon. Realising that the ideal of a particular, unchanging landscape is futile, she is free to experience a unique perspective of herself and her mountain. Hall uses Bertha as an important part of his accumulated landscape in *Just Relations*. By raising her into the sky he introduces another way of seeing: without a horizon.

Fido's mountain is 'minus all foreground'. Isolated in a room behind the old shop, his only view is through a high fanlight window. Thinking his mountain into being, Fido creates landscape caricatures in a variety of media. He sees the mountain first as a series of drawings in ink with various coloured tints for each season, to which he adds imaginary foregrounds (35). The mountain, as well as being 'a display stand for the world's biggest exhibition of leaves', offers Fido the opportunity to create his own gallery of landscape images: 'an overblown Corot; a romantic surge of clouds and aggressive red earth, and irresistible art-nouveau spotted gums' (231).

Hall's use of art history is powerful in its emphasis on artifice and creative play, but its strength in the novel lies in its questioning of the relationship between mind and landscape, and he shares with painter Fred Williams the fragmentary and illusory nature of landscape. Williams' painting, *Gorge Landscape*, 1981, challenges preconceived ideas about space and horizons. His gorge is at once depth and height. Overpowering heat and desolation inhabit the picture surface offering no escape. Like tossed bones, the skeletal trees are scattered between earth and sky, and between earth and earth. An ambiguous flatness tantalizes us with glimpses of dimension and in a defiant gesture, the gorge becomes a mountain. The painting, like Hall's novel, becomes a dilemma.

Fido's comment that 'people don't think there are other people thinking' (231) directly addresses the fragmentary and illusory nature of landscape. In the quandary of

thinking, Hall tells us that the mountain '... rushed upward, a surface of chewed tatters, then revealing itself as a writhing mass of beastly heads, a clash of energy, a tangle of horns and wings in the desperate throes of murder or escape' (231-32). The mountain is fractured, transformed into raw energy and mythic resonances. It is no surprise, therefore, that when Fido is offered a new perspective through a hole in the wall, he throws paint at the fanlight window. Smearing it across the glass with a straight edge of cardboard, he drags the paint 'into a semblance of the spirit of the mountain' (233). Fido responds physically and mentally. Here landscape is a palimpsest of imagination.

As part of a series of very short portrait chapters, Hall refers to Fido as 'The Shape Thinker'. This cameo offers a focal point for the interplay of the visual arts and narrative structures. Situated almost at the physical centre of the novel, it forms the pivot around which Hall builds his narrative and focuses on the illusory nature of landscape. The notion of artifice is intensified when Fido's room becomes a *camera obscura*. Seeing an inverted landscape, Fido sits 'mesmerised inside his camera. His heart stopped so he wouldn't spoil the photograph' (256). Looking out from his room he sees a colour negative image: a landscape where green is red and gold is mauve. Hall uses visual art terminology and puts a frame around it within the narrative. By lifting out colours, shapes and words, by exploring them minutely, the familiar becomes unfamiliar, and we, like Fido, re-assemble the parts to create a greater whole.

Jack Cameron, Davison's character in *Soundings*, uses a mobile '*camera obscura*' – a photo-finish camera – to explore the swampland area around Westernport, Victoria. Similar to Fido's fanlight window, the thin slit of the camera provides a limited view. But unlike Fido whose position is fixed, Cameron moves constantly, obsessively focusing on what he refers to as the still point. By recording a continuous series of images he could, he believed, capture the passing of time.

There is a sense of journeying through and of mapping the land as Cameron moves from panorama to detail. Like painter John Wolseley, Davison structures his work from survey, fragmented images, and the idea of a layered landscape where the past inhabits the present. Wolseley said of his painting: 'I intend this to be a landscape as it is experienced in the ground as I move over it, rather than one painted by an onlooker who has distanced his subject' (*Orienteering* 150). Wolseley's work is a transcription of journey – lapsed time, significant objects, maps, charts, written responses and descriptions, and has been described as being similar to the continuous strip-scan photography of satellites (*Orienteering* 40). Davison shares with Wolseley the visual images of map-making and scientific scrutiny as structuring elements. His character Jack Cameron sees 'only the land, always seen through the eye of the lens, always with the aperture set at infinity' (*Soundings* 15). By limiting his view Cameron actually sees more and yet he remains obsessed by the inadequacies of his own perception. He is searching for connections, and Davison uses Cameron's various photographic 'events' to develop a structure which creates its own internal composition. The swampland of Westernport is experienced from moment to moment, detail by detail, and with glimpses of other moments and other details. Historical fragments haunt Cameron's photographic images, and the voices of previous lives act as sounding lines through the layers of experience. Each narrative strand corresponds with stages in Australia's history, and each offers an interpretation of the land which enriches our sense of region.

Davison and Wolseley share in the exploratory nature of the landscape experience, and the notion that the past doesn't cease to exist simply because we have moved beyond it. Each work explores a parallel time frame, fragments of fictional and historical pasts juxtaposed with a fictional present. There is also a constant hinting at a time beyond.

Parts of Wolseley's journal made enroute contain lists of 'Today's Found Objects', which include such diverse items as 'Elastic and felt padded object. Probably part of a male surgical truss; a Holden inlet valve, probably 1950s; a damaged long-horned grasshopper; part of wing of blue butterfly; a Shell 'rip-off' cap— Sealed for your protection against leakage, SUBSTITUTION, and DILUTION' (*Orienteering* 152). Many of these objects were drawn into the painting and provide 'physical aspects of the past', an idea Davison uses in *Soundings* when Cameron stumbles upon some old railway lines. These tracks, which emerge as a brief linear flurry only to disappear into the swamp, give expression to a process which, Davison suggests, exists 'even without that physicality' (Davison, int.). An imagination of something else being there shapes our perception of a place and becomes part of the experience of landscape.

Concepts of space, environment, nature, spirituality, and time become part of a library of landscape in Gerald Murnane's *The Plains*. All responses are recorded. The text is a document which celebrates the processes of documentation. It is a search for something not yet found '... a visible equivalent of the plains ...' (51). For the narrator/film maker, the plains are a paradox. There is anxiety in encountering a land which is alternately visible but never accessible, and always invisible and yet touchable. Murnane's work has a visual bias which questions the idea of a fixed horizon and emphasises the abstract qualities of landscape. Heshares with painter Rodick Carmichael the dynamism of texture, tone, rhythm and the ambiguities of space. For both workers the horizons are unreachable and yet able to be touched.

Carmichael's painting, *Mount Moriac*, 1980, is a response to the 'tyranny of gravity' (*Orienteering* 54). Being a square canvas, there is no implied vertical or horizontal, and the structuring of the work is intended to stress the flatness of the picture field. The work offers a number of perspectives, and argues forcibly for the perplexity of horizons. A similar obsession with perspectives sets up rival manifestos of expression within Murnane's novel. Some plainsmen argue for the power and integrity of the zone of haze 'where land and sky merge in the farthest distance' (Murnane 19), while others turn their attention to detail as expressed in a painting of the plains titled 'Decline and Fall of the Empire of Grass'.

Considering 'all art to be the scant visible evidence of immense processes in a landscape that even the artist scarcely perceives' (80), Murnane's plainsmen struggle with the problem of learning to see. The film maker's attempt to record a region that only he could explain, brings together Davison's photographic imagery and Hall's visual structuring. There is repeated emphasis on individual response to ambiguous space and the endless task of conveying the totality of landscape. Murnane and Carmichael question the limits of a horizon and draw our attention to the complexity of flatness.

Murnane's film maker does not produce a single image. He researches, documents and engages with the people and the land. In a scene which parodies the formal paintings of figures in a landscape, the film maker is himself photographed taking a photograph 'staring obligingly at some empty zone' as if having his eyes 'fixed on something that mattered' (112). His final act is to turn the camera on himself: '... I would ask my patron ... to record the moment when I lifted my own camera to my face and stood with my eye pressed against the lens and my finger poised as if to expose to the film in its dark chamber the darkness that was the only visible sign of whatever I saw beyond myself' (113).

Giving shape and visibility to inchoate feelings, the works of these writers and painters become part of our apprehension of place. While Hall's mountain, Davison's swampland, and Murnane's catalogue of ideas about the plains are at once created and creators within the narratives, they move beyond the texts to become part of the

experience and imagination that we bring to the idea of landscape. In their attempts to move beneath the surface of the land as part of a search for meaning, these writers and artists explore an unseen dimension and, in a symbiotic relationship, become mediators in the feast of experience which becomes landscape.

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