

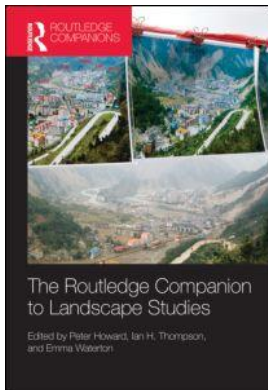
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### **Landscape and non-representational theories**

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# Landscape and non-representational theories

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Landscape research has recently seen a burgeoning of interest around notions of ‘affect’, ‘emotion’, ‘embodiment’, ‘performance’ and ‘practice’. Although these notions can be parcelled together in a variety of ways, in this chapter I want to situate them within the still developing range of work dealing with what has come to be termed *non-representational theory*. As a style of thinking, non-representational theory emerged in the mid-1990s. Though originally coined by Nigel Thrift, it is today associated with Ben Anderson, John-David Dewsbury, Paul Harrison, Hayden Lorimer, Derek McComack, Mitch Rose and John Wylie, all of whom, like Thrift, are geographers based in the UK. The term ‘theory’ is perhaps a little disingenuous here as it implies something in the singular; non-representational *theories* may be more useful a term (see Anderson 2009), as it denotes something of a catchall rather than a strict or prescriptive theoretical framework. With this in mind, Hayden Lorimer (2005: 83) has proposed the phrase ‘more-than-representational’, which seems to adequately sum up attempts ‘... to cope with our self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds’.

Irrespective of the terminology used or the particular shading of non-representational theory adopted, we can be sure of one thing: an impressive pedigree. Indeed, much of the recent theorisations in this area were presaged within the work of an extensive list of critical thinkers that includes Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Michel de Certeau. These scholars, along with their approaches to embodiment and practice, are regularly referenced alongside the work of more recent thinkers such as Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz and Bruno Latour within the non-representational literature. Although most often associated with the field of geography, non-representational theories have entered a wide range of disciplines, including performance studies, feminist studies, anthropology, science and technology studies, archaeology and tourism, where they have triggered richly varied attempts to tap into issues of race, music, ethics, asylum seeking, gardening, walking, travelling and so forth (McCormack 2003; Tolia-Kelly 2004; Waitt and Lane 2007; McHugh 2009; Nesbitt and Tolia-Kelly 2009; Darling 2010; Simpson 2011. See also Chapters 4, 7, 10 and 25). In common across this breadth of research is an acknowledgement that our understandings of the world are lived, embodied and tangled up with how we *do* things, our doings and our enactments in the moment (Carolan 2008: 410). In addition to revivifying an emphasis of everyday life, this style of thinking has also drawn attention to the corporeality of our bodies, notions of affect and

context, and an acknowledgement of the multi-sensuous landscapes in which we find ourselves (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000; Larsen 2008). Researchers who align themselves with non-representational theories thus simultaneously signal an intent to take very seriously the ways in which our bodies participate in the world that surrounds us.

In order to mobilize an understanding of how this all figures within landscape studies, the current chapter sketches out an overview of recent offerings from humanities and social sciences literature that touch upon ‘non-representational theory’, before moving on to account for what such an approach to landscape may involve. Following this, I offer some examples of how these theoretical approaches have been applied, noting in particular innovative methods that have emerged, before finishing with a nod to future directions.

## Introducing the field

Non-representational theory was first defined by Nigel Thrift (1996) in the volume *Spatial Formations*, which pieced together several concepts that had become central to his thinking at the time: ‘time-space’, ‘practice’, the ‘subject’ and ‘agency’. By working these concepts together, Thrift prompted a shift in thinking towards conceiving of the world in practical and processual terms, or, in other words, as something that was in a perpetual state of becoming. Linked to this was a dissatisfaction with the privileging of the visual (along with the attendant failure properly to problematize representations), which Thrift (1996: 4) saw as taking ‘precedence over lived experience and materiality’. Thus, although his position can broadly be seen to have emerged out of social constructivism, his suggestion is that we should think about processes of meaning-making as occurring within action and interactions with other people and the world around us, rather than solely within the representational dimensions of discourse and structures of symbolic orders (Anderson and Harrison 2010: 2). It is, to be more precise, a way of thinking; or, perhaps more accurately, a way of thought or a way of *thinking about thinking* that brings together cognition with impulse, intuition and habit, with no easy way of cleaving them apart.

Given the choice of words used to denote this style of thinking – ‘non-representational’, Thrift’s re-theorisation is often characterized as a response to the deadening of geographical thinking, or the draining ‘of life out of things’ as John Wylie has put it, triggered by too avid a focus upon representations (Wylie 2007: 163; see also Thrift and Dewsbury 2000; Lorimer 2005; Wylie 2007; Simpson 2008). Indeed, as Tim Ingold (1995: 58) has eloquently argued, ‘[s]omething [ ... ] must be wrong somewhere, if the only way to understand our own creative involvement in the world is by taking ourselves out of it’ (Ingold 1995: 58). However, this response to representationalism – an approach that Lorimer (2005: 84; see also Dewsbury et al. 2002; della Dora 2009) posits was the ‘signature theory of cultural geography’s landscape school’ (see for example Cosgrove 1984; Jackson 1989) – should not be read as an endorsement for approaches that are *against* the representational (Anderson and Harrison 2010). To the contrary, the research context that emerges is not characterized by an ‘either/or’ (representation versus non-representation), rather, by an ‘and’; but in order to take representations seriously, we first need to apprehend them ‘not as a code to be broken’ but as instances, events and practices that are ‘performative in themselves; as doings’ (Dewsbury et al. 2002: 438). For Lorimer (2005: 84), this means taking up a focus that:

... falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions.

Attention to these kinds of expressions, it is contended, offers an escape from the established academic habit of striving to uncover meanings and values that apparently await our discovery, interpretation, judgement and ultimate representation.

Given the stance taken towards the privileging of visibility, it is hardly surprising to see in Thrift's writings the foregrounding of *all* the senses, an emphasis on embodiment, encounters, performances and practice, and an understanding of objects and contexts as active and constitutive elements in all actions and interactions (Thrift 1996, 1999, 2003, 2008). When put together, this style of thinking came to conceive of a messier world, and certainly a complex one, that is in a continuous process of composition, dissimilar to that understood by many social researchers at the time (Thrift 2003: 20–1). With its emphasis on everyday life and a turn to practice, the body assumed a position of centrality, understood as in play with both sensations and affect. Along with prioritising the body, this return to phenomenological styles of thinking also triggered a foregrounding of the idea of 'performance' (della Dora 2009). However, while it has clear antecedents in phenomenological thinking (Tuan 1979; Relph 1981; see Wylie this volume), the way the body is positioned – as both produced by and a product of the world – is a little different in non-representational terms, as it depends upon how our bodies participate and/or are put to use, or, in other words, how they *perform* (MacPherson 2010: 4).

In taking account of the pre-cognitive, the intuitive and the habitual, those scholars attending to this area of research were required to take the biological more seriously (Thrift 2009). Here, a detour into neurobiology often seemed necessary in order to capture and explain that 'half-second delay' between action and conscious sensation (MacPherson 2010: 5), or as Thrift (2008: 7) describes it, that 'roiling mass of nerve volleys [that] prepare the body for action in such a way that intentions or decisions are made before the conscious self is even aware of them'. The pre-cognitive/pre-conscious is not, of course, something that we can easily put our finger on, or even put into words, as Carolan (2008: 412; see also Pile 2010) has so eloquently pointed out:

It is not that we cannot represent sensuous, corporeal, lived experience but that the moment we do so we immediately lose something. Representations tell only part of the story, yet they still have a story to tell, however incomplete.

It is within the pre-cognitive that the dynamic concept of 'affect' can be found, a term that has considerable purchase within non-representational theories, where it has become something of an exemplar or, as Steve Pile (2010: 8) points out, a key testing ground. Affect, in non-representational terms, is considered transpersonal, fluid and mobile, and, importantly, always 'inexpressible: unable to be brought into representation' (Pile 2010: 8). Simply put, this is because 'the skin is faster than the word' (Massumi 2002: 25, cited in McCormack 2003: 495), or as Thrift (2003: 2020) points out:

this historically sedimented 'unconscious' ranges all the way from the simple facts of how we measure out the world so as to ensure that we are in the right place at the right time to the way that our bodies are fired up by body disciplines often learnt in childhood and which push us in particular ways even before cognition begins to have its say.

This conceptualisation of affect is commonly aligned with the various readings of Spinoza and Deleuze that have surfaced within Human Geography, which are usefully synthesized by Ben Anderson (2006) and Steve Pile (2010). Anderson (2006: 735), for example, draws on both

scholars in order to sketch out his definition of affect as ‘a transpersonal *capacity* which a body has to be affected (through an affection) and to affect (as the result of modifications)’ (emphasis in original; see also McCormack 2003). Affect thus becomes something akin to atmosphere – invisible but sensed within our bodies, as feelings, and understood and expressed, as emotions: while the three (affect, feelings and emotion) are interrelated and all work together, they are never quite the same (McCormack 2010: 643; see also Anderson 2006). The first, ‘affect’, to follow from Anderson, is non-cognitive, the second, ‘feeling’ is pre-cognitive, with the third, ‘emotion’, envisaged as the only element that is both cognitive and consciously expressed (Pile 2010: 9). All three are important for understanding the interconnections between senses of self and the world. But these are different ways of knowing, doing and making sense than those we are used to; unsurprisingly, given our inabilities adequately to understand these concepts let alone theorize them, they have become an area of social life that has for some time been neglected.

Wrapped up in this manner, affect has become a key concept that cuts deeply into the ontological and epistemological realignments central to non-representational thinking. Much work has recently emerged that focuses upon this, including within the field of landscape research. Here, affect and non-representational theories have started to animate new and creative approaches, triggering research responses that attempt to access, understand and communicate the ways in which people perform and embody the landscapes that surround them.

### Landscaping non-representational theories

Despite the synergies between the ways we engage with ‘landscape’ and notions of practice, embodiment and performance, the term has for some time been understood in terms of representation, as a way of seeing (Wylie 2007: 14; see also Wylie this volume). Here, research interests have, for example, coalesced around unpacking landscape construction and interpretation (cf. Cosgrove and Daniels 1988). More recently, a rich seam of landscape-focused research has grown out of non-representational theories and can be mapped onto the wider engagement with sensuous and embodied knowledge occurring across the social sciences. Most relevant here would be the work of Michael Carolan, Tim Ingold, Mitch Rose, Gordon Waitt and John Wylie. As with Thrift, this turn to ‘non-representation’ within specifically landscape-focussed research seems to have been triggered by a growing tension towards the dominant – and somewhat obdurate – notion that landscapes can somehow be captured and understood as things that are seen and gazed upon. A corollary of this has often been the assumption that landscapes are reflections or, as Rose (2006: 541–2) more convincingly puts it, they exist ‘as far as culture gives [them] an existence, symbolising and expressing culture’s hidden essence’. In these renderings, landscapes are not so much entities in themselves, capable of affecting, provoking, stimulating and *doing*, but remain a sort of code or undercurrent. There is much to be gained, then, from non-representational approaches that emphasize the ways in which people interact – routinely and creatively – with landscapes in their everyday lives, along with associated embodied and technologized practices (Lorimer 2005; Wylie 2007; Larsen 2008). This is because in these approaches we find a landscape that involves a full range of sensory experiences: it is not only visual, but textured to the touch and resonating with smells, touch, sounds and tastes, often mundane in nature. It may be a moody landscape, dark, sharp and foreboding, or associated with memory, light, breezing and sweet, or, perhaps still, wildly atmospheric. From here, it is not just a matter of understanding how we think about the landscapes that surround us, but how they in turn *force us to think* – through their contexts, prompts and familiarity (or not) (after Dewsbury 2009; see also MacPherson 2010).

Landscapes in this rendering are not static backdrops, but instead are imagined as fluid and animating processes in a constant state of becoming. More importantly still, our precognitive and embodied interactions with them draw us into equally fluid practices and performances. This sense of motion has been captured by David Crouch (2003, 2010) and John Wylie (2007), both of whom have tweaked the word 'landscape' into 'landscaping', or 'spacing', in an attempt to foreground notions of practice and process (see also Merriman et al. 2008). For Wylie in particular, this shift to 'landscaping', which turns the word from a noun into a more rhythmic and mobile action verb, denotes our attempts to grasp and interact with the landscapes that surround us, forcing us as researchers to move towards '... the simultaneous and ongoing shaping of self, body and landscape via practice and performance' (Wylie 2007: 166; see also Lorimer 2005; MacPherson 2010). Body and landscape thus become recursively intertwined, both constitutive and constituting, and always in a process of (re)formation. Indeed, they become, to borrow from Thrift and Dewsbury (2000: 415), extensions of the body and mind, and vice versa.

There are strong reminiscences of Keith Basso's (1996) *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* here, as well as hints to the rationale behind Barbara Bender's (2001) edited volume, *Contested Landscapes: Movement, Exile and Place*. More explicitly, though, this turn to non-representational theories has sparked a blurring of the line between that of materiality and that of perception, or the 'seen' and the 'seer' (see della Dora 2009 for a fuller exploration of this). From this standpoint, landscapes are no longer physical 'somethings' that are simply viewed. Nor can they be understood as the ephemeral 'way of seeing' implied by representational approaches. Rather, as Merriman et al. (2008: 203, emphasis in original; see also Rose 2002) point out, we are now required to think of the term as 'the materialities and sensibilities *with which* we see'. The urging of non-representational theorists to give weight to objects and the inanimate also means that, to borrow from Thrift (2008: 9), we as researchers have to be prepared for the landscape to 'answer back'. Practices of landscaping and experiences of embodiment are not, then, comprised entirely of intentionality, rationality or conscious and continuous deliberation – affects, feelings and emotions are also always invariably shaped in the ways we move through landscapes and, in turn, allow them to flow through us. In order to follow this through, I only need think of the landscape across the road from my grandmother's house and affective memories are triggered – with that, the landscape is put in motion and a series of emotions begin to circulate my body. I know this landscape not just with my eyes or in memory but as a body, too, as it affords me a sense of belonging and identity (after Carolan 2008). Thus, while landscapes are necessarily contingent upon our movements through them, they also continue to shape our expressions, experiences and emotions.

This idea of knowing the landscape 'as a body' is particularly evident in Michael Carolan's (2008) explorations of the countryside, through which he argues for corporeal knowledge and deeply sensuous engagements with place. Carolan's project engaged with both farming and non-farming residents in rural Iowa and a search for the significance of embodied interactions. Here, participants hinted at a process of knowing their surroundings *through* their bodies and, importantly for some, through their tractors. Their 'being-in-the-world', as Carolan (2008: 414) points out, is deeply sensuous, habitual and corporeally enacted. Likewise, David Crouch (2000; see also Crouch 2010) has taken a non-representational approach to place, leisure and tourism in an attempt to understand the processes of 'making knowledge' through *doing*, not only through human agency but by focussing upon how that agency interacts with non-human or post-human elements, too. For him, it is a negotiated practice, with landscapes and place subjectively produced, encountered and understood through action. In a similar vein, Paul Simpson (2008) has applied what he terms an ecological approach to street performances occurring

within the urban environment, paying particular attention to the affective powers of street performances. Although only loosely applying his analysis to a landscape in the form of a streetscape, Simpson (2008: 823) nevertheless draws attention to core issues of non-representational theories, namely the interplay of affective intensities between everyday life and the non-human forces of nature.

My own research into affective encounters within the urban landscape of Stoke-on-Trent likewise threw up similar instances that are demonstrative of engagements between bodies and material surroundings. Here, in an area affectionately known as The Potteries, small traces of the past continue to haunt, with the area's peculiar urban skyline, dotted with the distinct shapes of pot-banks, their cobbled yards and fiery, smoking bottle ovens, serving as a reminder of an industry now all but gone. One of the last remaining stands of bottle ovens can be found at the *Gladstone Pottery Museum*, where one regular visitor made the following comment:

It feels almost a part, a part of us, it's like if this was, if this was ever knocked down or people were trying to destroy it I would have very strong viewings about it because we feel it belongs to us. You ... our ancestors made this place what it is so, you know, it belongs to us really, we've all got a share in it if you like.

*(GMA009, female, 18–29, teaching assistant, cited in Waterton 2011)*

In this instance, it is possible to glimpse the ways in which the museumscape – and the wider industrial landscape it represents – can become part of the living body, absorbed into an embodied encounter. Indeed, the above quote serves as an illustration of how we feel the world, such that we – our identity – and the world ' ... *become* something through these dynamics of embodiment and habituation' (Russon 1994: 295, cited in Carolan 2008: 414, emphasis in original). Although the data gathered were often filled with examples of mundane, everyday encounters, they were nonetheless characterized by a bodily encounter, a sensuous awareness and at least fleeting moments of belonging and identity, all of which were triggered by acts of *being* and *doing* within the museum itself. Apposite here is a recent observation made by Crouch (2010: 14), who argues that:

To 'feel' landscape in the expressive poetics of spacing is a way to imagine one's place in the world. The individual can feel so connected with space that s/he no longer is aware, momentarily, of being (merely) human; we may *become* the event, become the landscape.

In this guise, all possibilities for engagement with landscape cannot help but be highly performative; and they surge and pulse, always in movement and in the process of being formed or becoming.

There is, inevitably, a note of caution that needs to be flagged up in this chapter. This cautionary note is reminiscent of arguments made by Mitch Rose (2006) and Deborah Thien (2005), both of whom challenge researchers to think more critically about dominant conceptualisations of landscape and continue to ask politicized questions when attending to this bent of work. For Rose, Thien and others, sewing up understandings of landscape as both material and perceptual brings with it a risk that researchers may become so enraptured with the freedom of performativity that they lose sight of the ways in which difference, power and control also figure within the mix. In short, engagements with landscape may be negative, constrained and marginalizing, too, but in the rush to get back to the precognitive we may miss those steps where we think about such feelings and emotions. As Tolia-Kelly (2007: 337) has argued, the intuitive and embodied encounters often imagined in the literature are at times a

little too unproblematic in their conception. Moreover, as Lorimer (2008) has added, all too often they appear to float free, with no allowances made for imposed subject-positions and attendant capacities to affect and be affected. As a consequence, such approaches tend to assume that the engaging body is that of a mobile citizen, ‘freed of fear and concerns over racial and/or sexual attack, fear of the lack of “rightful encounter” with a particular moral geography governing access, and indeed, free of the chains of childcare, work and the economic constraints to roam’ (Tolia-Kelly 2007: 337; see also Askins 2009). Moreover, these narratives may overlook the fact that part of the purpose of performing with landscape is to communicate that a person or given group exists, that they have an identity and that they *matter*, thus claiming status and access to resources from others. As Tolia-Kelly (2007: 337) goes on to argue, in order to combat this we need an ‘increased acknowledgement of the place of difference and power in shaping the matrices within which “we” engage with landscapes’. The research agendas of those engaging with non-representational theories thus also need to include a critical and reflective account that attempts to make sense of any tensions between the politics of identity and the politics of affect (Askins 2009; Waterton 2012).

### Implications and future directions

As the reader will discern, a particular difficulty for this approach coalesces around issue of method and data collection. Perhaps the thorniest issue in this regard lies with figuring out how to access the unspeakable – the agency of landscapes, affect and sensuous experience. This, non-representational theorists advise us, occurs too fast and, in the end, is too excessive and complex for us adequately to theorize (Morton 2005). Indeed, as McCormack (2002: 470) points out, ‘... how, when such movement is often below the cognitive threshold of representational awareness that defines what is admitted into serious research, does one give a word to a movement without seeking to represent it?’ Methodologically, then, conducting research with a non-representational bent – which inevitably means attempting to attend to the automatism of affect – requires new approaches and vocabularies (MacPherson 2010: 3). This does not mean that we have to abandon the traditional in-depth interview, social survey or focus group discussions, however. Indeed, as Latham (2003: 2000) has so eloquently argued, ‘[p]ushed in the right direction there is no reason why these methods cannot be made to dance a little’ (Latham 2003: 2000). As such, there has been a swelling of work in this area recently, which has attempted this ‘push’ by means of methodological experimentation (see Crang 2003; Latham 2003; Morton 2005; Simpson 2011).

Work by Wylie, Yusoff, Lorimer and MacPherson, for example, attempts to entangle landscapes with bodies, to meld landscapes and selves, via the lenses of non-representational theories. Collectively, their examples include embodied accounts of coastal walking (Wylie 2002, 2005), forays into the Antarctic and that landscape’s ability inscribe itself onto the body (Yusoff 2007), Cairngorm reindeer herding (Lorimer 2006), and processes of intercorporeality as a sighted guide in the Peak and Lake Districts (MacPherson 2010), all of which mark out the possibilities for unpacking a more plentiful range of sensory experiences with landscape. In terms of methodological tools, Wylie (2003) has attempted to access the non-representational with use of experimental writing in conjunction with photography. Lorimer (2006) has incorporated ethnographic reflection into his research, along with detailed and expressive modes of writing. Others, still, have turned to the use of video as a tool for studying embodiment and the sensuousness of practice, thus evoking something of the non-representational via newer technological tools (see Laurier 2005; Simpson 2011; but see also Dewsbury 2009), while others pursue a performative ethnography (see Morton 2005). Irrespective of the methods pursued,



what these examples share in common is a focus upon participative or practice-based methods that move us forwards with regard to accessing the 'now' of experience as it edges into view (Morton 2005; Dewsbury 2009). The trick, it seems, is to continue to push at the boundaries of traditional methods so that the body, *our* bodies, can somehow become more central to the processes through which research is done, while at the same time keeping mindful of ethical and political implications (Crang 2003).

This chapter has attempted to make a handful of specific comments about how non-representational theories impact upon landscape research. Overall, I have argued that this theoretical turn has firmed up and fleshed out a series of longer standing assumptions that had already rendered landscapes affective, embodied, sensuous and material. To develop in this vein, researchers within the field of landscape studies need to continue to shape this theoretical terrain and experiment with methodological innovation, all the while emphasising the ways in which people and landscapes co-produce events and experiences. Indeed, when pressed in these directions, non-representational theories will help bring to the fore a fuller range of our sensate engagements with the landscapes that flow in, around and through us.

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