Rural Modernity, Everyday Life and Visual Culture

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Rosemary Shirley
Manchester School of Art,
Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

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List of Illustrations

About the Author

Rosemary Shirley is a Senior Lecturer in Art History at Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University. She has contributed chapters to *Affective Landscapes in Literature, Art and Everyday Life* (edited by Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell and Robert Hudson, 2015) and *Transforming the Countryside* (edited by Paul Brassley, Jeremy Burchardt and Karen Sayer, 2016). Her research centres on everyday life and visual cultures in historical and contemporary rural contexts.

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Introduction: Beating the Bounds

In his publication *Once a Year* (1977), Homer Sykes, photographer and chronicler of the strange folk festivals practised over the British Isles, documents the Beating of the Bounds ceremony that takes place each year in Oxford. On Ascension Day (40 days after Easter Sunday) the parish priest of St. Michael's church, the choir boys, the choir master and the parishioners gather together to perform the ancient ritual. Armed with long garden canes – the type used for keeping runner beans upright – they rain down blows on each of the 22 stones which mark the parish boundary.

Taking place in spring time, the festival has pre-Christian agrarian roots, marking the change in season and providing the opportunity for symbolic or actual sacrifices to be made to ensure a fruitful growing season and harvest. In a time before parishes were established, this simply meant walking the fields. Early in its history the Christian church began to tie its activities closely to the agricultural calendar adopting seasonal festivals as their own. In his study of such festivals, Ronald Hutton shows that in eighth century England the early Christian church began to regulate these often exuberant events, prohibiting any accompanying feasting and games and decreeing that participants should instead walk

1.1 Beating the Bounds, Oxford, 1977. © Homer Sykes.

exhibiting their fear and reverence towards God (Hutton 1996: p. 277). It was at this time that they were given the name Rogations from the Latin *rogare* – 'to ask' – a request to God for a good harvest and a blessing of the fields.

Such festivals also had a very real secular purpose to do with the everyday administration of the parish. In the sixteenth century parishioners became liable for certain taxes and financial duties payable to the parish and so it became important that boundaries be understood and maintained. Before most people had access to maps or the education necessary to read them, these boundaries were learnt through Rogationtide perambulations, with the brutally eccentric addition of actual beatings to ensure the younger members of the congregation were paying attention. W.E. Tate in his classic history of parochial administration, *The Parish Chest* (1983 [1946]), reveals that the practice of beating the bounds did not only refer to the beating of boundary stones but also of boys. Documents from the parish of Tunworth in Dorset show that in 1747 the ceremony included 'Whipping ye boys by way of remembrance, and stopping their cry with some half-pence' (Tate 1983 [1946]: p. 74). The idea being that having one's head hit against a stone, or in this case being beaten at the site of a stone, would instil a memory of its location and ensure the knowledge of the parish boundaries was passed on to future generations.

Varied and elaborate customs that demarcate the boundaries of a place continue to be enacted in many parts of the country.[1] While their purpose is to mark boundaries, these festivals can also have the effect of upsetting clear delineation. Temporal and conceptual boundaries between the country and the city and the ancient and the modern are shown to be mutable in festivals of this kind. In a very practical way these disturbances can be felt at the Oxford ceremony in the logistics of accessing the stones. Over the 600 years in which this ceremony has been performed the boundary markers have borne witness to centuries of civic development, deconstruction and reconstruction, meaning that they no longer simply lie in open ground but have to be searched out in shops, cellars, private property and even under the carpet of the Roebuck Inn. While the boundaries of the parish may have remained constant, the boundaries between country and city have become less distinct, and beating the bounds requires a complex negotiation of ancient markers, overlaid with modern developments, which in turn become venues for these ancient practices.

Today boundary stones are marked on Ordnance Survey maps with BS, but despite this orderly plotting they often remain unsettled. For a time I tried to discover the boundary stones of my own parish. This involved furtively trespassing onto farm land and rooting around in brambly hedgerows always to no avail. The obscure nature of these stones – present on the map but not in the field, perhaps communicates something of the mutable nature of the boundaries they describe. Alain Corbin's (1998) study of nineteenth century French villages shows how the range in which the sound of the church bells could be heard was a marker of the village territory, and that it was a matter of responsibility to ensure that the settlements in the furthest corners of the village bounds could hear the bells, which were the primary form of communal announcement at that time. In this instance of aural boundary marking, weather conditions such as winds and fog would disrupt penetration of sound therefore effectively changed the village boundaries.

An exhibition at Tate Britain called *Beating the Bounds* (2009) demonstrated the metaphorical potential of the process. To the consternation of one critic (Darwent 2009), the work on display did not centre on the festival itself, but rather used the concept as a way of thinking about embodied experiences of the world. The pieces worked to access the boundary between the viewing body and the art work itself. The works included all hit against this boundary in some way and in the process created an awareness of these different yet interconnected realms. Amongst the works was *Small Head of E.O.W.* (1957–8) by the painter Frank Auerbach, whose obsessively overworked surfaces thickly search for a visual equivalent to physical experience. A counterpoint to Auerbach's chunky canvas, Glenn Brown's flat rendering of *The Suicide of Guy Debord* (2001), is an inverted Auerbach portrait, painted by Brown as a completely smooth almost photographic surface. The disjuncture between the two pieces creates a jolt that is experienced physically. The Auerbach highlights the difference between the physicality of the sitter and their representation in paint, while the Brown accesses the difference between the fleshiness of the painting and its representation in photography (which is really a painting), both pieces creating a disturbing disparity in physical perception. 'It is in this "bump" between the living and the inanimate that something transformative occurs' (Tate 2009: n.p.).

This book has been inspired by some of the bumps encountered in an embodied experience of the English countryside: a dual carriageway shaving the edge of a bronze age burial mound, an abandoned stiletto in a wood, a pylon rendered in embroidery, and finally a wooden gallon bucket pouring flour into a supermarket carrier bag. Each of these bumps has been transformative in my development of the notion of a non-metropolitan everyday, and has been the initial impetus for each chapter.

This book endeavours to beat the bounds of the country and the city, thinking in more nuanced ways about how these realms interact. Throughout, this project is an attempt to perambulate the margins of ideas of the rural, the everyday and modernity, the bramble patches where these terms overlap and become problematic or charged. It is particularly concerned with examining and disrupting the boundaries between the country and the city; reactivating the rural as a site of modernity; and productively encountering the tension between the ancient and modern. This is done through the lens of the everyday, a perspective that allows an exploration of the 'countryside' as a populated place with lived rhythms and routines, rather than a 'landscape' which is primarily to be looked at or visited.

Everyday life has become a significant arena for critical thinking; in academic circles this interest is evident in themed journal issues (*Cultural Studies*, 18, (2/3), 2004), and a number of recent publications that work to re-evaluate the writings of many writers and thinkers through the frame of the everyday (Foley 2012; Gardiner 2000; Highmore 2002a; Moran 2005; Sheringham 2006). In the visual arts recognition of the everyday as a productive site of investigation, has also gained recent prevalence with the everyday being used as the organising principle for large scale international exhibitions (Castello di Rivoli 2000; Lyon Biennale 2009), and an edited volume bringing together artists' writings on the everyday (Johnstone 2008). However, as I will go on to detail later, so much of this current

activity assumes the urban everyday as a general condition. This metropolitan focus excludes significant areas of experience, meaning that those of us living outside urban areas rarely recognise representations of these kinds of everyday. It is important to investigate how non-metropolitan experiences of the everyday can contribute to (and complicate) wider contemporary theories of the everyday, a process which in turn generates new ways of thinking about the countryside.

THE COUNTRY AND THE CITY: NON-METROPOLITAN PROBLEMS

I use the term 'non-metropolitan' throughout this book, as I think it signals some of the problematics which surround the description and theorisation of the English countryside. What it does as a term is to defamiliarise the notion of the countryside, and in this process allow for some of the otherwise generalised complexities of non-urban landscapes to emerge. Working with the idea of the non-metropolitan creates the conditions for recognition that there are multiple degrees of 'countryside' between, for example, the suburbs of the Home Counties and the hills of the Lake District. It is in this realm of the multiple non-urban geographies that this study operates.

The notion that the non-metropolitan as a term is alert to multiple experiences may seem counter-intuitive as creating this new category effectively flattens out difference, and groups manifold places under the same umbrella. However, my argument is that the multiple nature of non-metropolitan experience resists definition, and therefore is most appropriately registered using a term which is itself an anti-definition. By anti-definition I mean that it refers to a huge geographical and psychological arena that can only be a relational term – a word which is essentially defined by what it is not. In the case of the non-metropolitan, what it is not, is the metropolis, but how far does this take us? To term an arena in the negative is to define it against a perceived lack, creating a definition based on inequality. However, I would argue that this inequality already exists and the awkwardness of this term 'non-metropolitan' does some work towards highlighting this and the inadequacies of existing terminology. The vocabulary surrounding location is loaded with notions of value and power. The word metropolis is derived from the Greek for mother city, and within this definition we immediately encounter a hierarchical distinction: the idea that the city as mother, birthed, attends to and disciplines its surrounding country.

Other terms that are used to refer to the lands lying outside the metropolis are *regions* or *provinces*. Again these are relational terms and their years of usage have been imbued with metro-centric power relations. Raymond Williams, always alert to the complexities of geographical (and associated ideological) meanings, draws out these hierarchical distinctions. In his formulation of the term *regional* (Williams 1989 [1976]: p. 265), he refers to an assumed relationship between the dominant and the subordinate. An example is found in the idea of the 'regional accent', a sub-ordinate term which implies that there is such a thing as a dominant 'national accent', from which regional variations deviate. However, Williams also points out that in its modern usage, regional can have the positive association of desirable

distinctiveness, especially in regard to architecture and cooking, albeit value which is often bestowed by a metropolitan audience rather than one that has been self determined.[2]

The unfortunate *province* however shares none of the region's favour, its Latin origins betray the weight of subordination; the word province refers to an administrative area of a conquered land. Williams comments that later nineteenth century social snobbery drew upon this unhappy formulation, with provincial becoming a term of relative inferiority to an assumed centre. In this way metropolitan and provincial were used respectively to indicate a contrast between refined or sophisticated tastes and manners and relatively crude and limited habits and ideas (Williams 1989 [1976]: p. 265).

The most common vocabulary used to articulate the relationship between the metropolitan and the non-metropolitan is the pairing of the *country* and the *city*, a complex binary positioning from which Williams generated one of his most engaging books. Here he usefully catalogues the cultural associations that have gathered around these locations:

> On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence,
> and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of
> learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed:
> on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place
> of backwardness, ignorance, limitation (Williams 1993 [1973]: p. 9).

Such associations, which Williams goes on to challenge, are nevertheless very powerful and have affected the place of the country and the city in the cultural imaginary of the nation.[3]

So why not use the word country instead of non-metropolitan? Indeed country could be used in this way, one of the more obscure definitions charted by Williams is a specialised use of the word country by the metropolitan postal service, to simply mean all areas outside the capital city (Williams 1989 [1976]: p. 81), a definition which for me gets closest to the way I am using non-metropolitan. However, the more commonplace understandings of the word country place it as a term with dual meaning, containing both notions of country as a nation and country as the rural or agricultural parts of a nation i.e. the countryside. Of course these two definitions are conflated in deeply felt and quite complex ways.

The English landscape and specifically that of the southern counties of England has been made to stand as a synecdoche for the country as a whole. Most obviously in times of conflict when, during both the First and Second World Wars, stylised posters of generic rolling green hills were paired with patriotic slogans showing the population what they were fighting for (Short 1992: p. 2). In more recent times the conflation of country and countryside was famously put to political use by John Major when, as Prime Minister in 1993, he made a speech designed to reassure Euro-sceptic MPs of the security of Britain as a sovereign nation. The image which he conjured up was of the UK as one large rural community, which seemed to have been preserved as some sort of living village museum:

> Fifty years from now, Britain will still be the country of long shadows on county
> grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and

– as George Orwell said 'old maids cycling to holy communion through the morning mist' (quoted in Paxman 2007: p. 142).[4]

For this study it is with the later definition that ties country to countryside, that the problem lies, for the non-metropolitan is not an exclusively rural location. The term non-metropolitan aims to defamiliarise traditional notions of countryside and allow room for thinking about places that are more usually excluded by the term rural, loaded as it is with the pressures of the picturesque and the peaceful, places that themselves complicate the established polarities of the country and the city. This strategy aims to dislodge one of the major problems with discussing the countryside or indeed the rural: that there is always somewhere more rural than you: a market town in the New Forest may not feel 'rural' when compared to a similar community in the Lake District, then again when the Lake District is compared to a location in the Scottish Highlands the criteria for being 'rural' might change once more, a situation that leads to a feeling of being inauthentically rural, or not rural enough to contribute effectively to rural debates.

An example of this problem of positioning can be seen in a Mass Observation Archive directive on the subject of the 'The Countryside' (Mass Observation 1995).[5] The correspondents were asked if they lived in the countryside, a small town, or even a suburb that is rural. The majority did not feel able to class where they were living as rural, however many described their locations as having rural elements such as green fields and open spaces. The general feeling of confusion about what constituted 'proper' countryside speaks of the persistent problems of terminology surrounding discussion of non-urban experience. This is especially pertinent as so many areas of the UK would seem to fall somewhere in between rural and urban. It is these difficulties which have contributed to the relative invisibility of the specifics of non-metropolitan experiences in political, theoretical and aesthetic discourses.

David Lowenthal (1994) provides a useful framework for thinking about the countryside as a series of constructed narratives, arguing that the English landscape is deeply linked to national identity through a combination of four rhetorical factors which characterise how the countryside is thought and spoken about: *insularity, artifice, stability* and *order. Insularity* links England – or more accurately Britain's, geographical position as an island with a carefully guarded mindset of independence from Europe which often runs towards xenophobia. This is evident in the use of the white cliffs of Dover as a national symbol, specifically associated with wartime patriotism. In more recent times Britain's island nature has been celebrated in the long running BBC Sunday teatime television series *Coast* (2005– ongoing) which traces the nation's coastline, treating it as a point of national pride, and derives much of its content from spectacular aerial footage of the nation's shoreline.[6]

In Lowenthal's formulation *artifice* refers to the narrative of constant stewardship, which is expounded as necessary for the continuity of the English landscape. One way in which this is evident is in the frequent panics around the need to control invasive species of plants and animals, an instinct which also enacts the trope of insularity.[7] Considering artifice as a central characteristic of the landscape makes the important point that there is nothing natural about the way the landscape has

come to look, that what might be thought of as a kind of eternal arcadia is the product of the dialectical forces of development and preservation. The work of the government funded organisation Natural England is relevant here; they provide stewardship payments to farmers in return for the implementation of schemes designed to enhance habitats for native plants and wild life and preserve the 'look' of the English landscape (Natural England 2011). What is significant here is that the custodians of the landscape are most often a landowning elite, farmers who make a significant proportion of their income from stewardship schemes, or paternalistic organisations such as the National Trust, and the narrative of essential custodianship ensures their continued role.[8]

This links to the final characteristics of *stability* and *order*. Ironically it is *changes* in how the landscape is worked and who lives there, for example the decline in agricultural employment and the subsequent middle-classing of rural places that has, as Lowenthal argues, made tourism one of the chief contributors to the rural economy. This gradual transformation has contributed to the formation of the pervasive narrative of the countryside as a place of stability and unchanging continuity. In a model based on tourism the countryside becomes heritage. Lowenthal calls it 'a vast museumised ruin' (1994: p. 24), forever a signifier of a history based in nostalgia.[9] It is interesting to note that the importance of stability is reinforced by a permanent state of alarm that it is about to be lost: ancient landscape being eroded by walkers, ancient trees becoming diseased and falling down, ancient monuments succumbing to the forces of entropy and needing funds for repair. The narrative of stability has to be anxiously defended, feeding back into the importance of the use of artifice to maintain order. Finally the characteristic of *order* draws the previous three narratives together, asserting that the orderly maintenance of the physicality of the landscape that is so important to a sense of stability, can only be carried out under the leadership of those families and institutions that have accrued so much continuous experience of land management over the hundreds of years in which they have been custodians of the land. In this way the perceived need for physical order leads to reproduction of the social order, which of course feeds back into the idea of stability and continuity.

These four persistent narratives can be seen to contribute to the idea that the countryside, or its place in the national imaginary stands in opposition to some of the major characteristics associated with modernity. The countryside's insularity is a refusal of cosmopolitanism or border crossing; its artifice is used to extinguish difference and maintain a contrived permanence; an emphasis on stability becomes denial of change; and the importance of order is an attempt to reproduce rigid social and geographical structures. This opposition to modernity can be seen in Raymond Williams assertion that 'The common image of the country is now an image of the past' (1993 [1973]: p. 297), a statement which is still true today. Popular representations of the countryside seem to derive their attractiveness from situating English rural communities and locations as alternatives to the tensions, pressures and ugliness of modern everyday life. The Sunday evening television schedule, of which *Coast* became such a stalwart, is well known for providing a quantity of relaxing escapism ahead of the working week to come (see Sanghera 2010).[10] It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that so many of these