

Landscape as sign language by Simon Warner

In memoriam Jay Appleton 1919 - 2015

Prospect-Refuge Theory, as formulated by Jay Appleton in his 1975 book *The Experience of Landscape*, postulates that a love or taste for landscape is driven by primitive, hunter-gatherer instincts that have evolved into feelings of pleasure when the land before our eyes affords – or appears to afford – the opportunity for vantage or shelter. We subconsciously evaluate our environment as a theatre for survival, appraising places for their quality as habitats if we had to depend on them. This basically Darwinian theory bridged what its originator called the ‘no-man’s land’ between the physical environment and our emotional reactions to it. But it applies equally to visual art: a landscape painting or photograph can elicit the same emotional response as exposure to the land itself. We have entered the world of environmental aesthetics in which Jay joined a tiny handful of earlier writers, notably the American philosopher and educationalist John Dewey (1859-1952) whom he considered a direct influence, and whose coining of the word ‘experience’ to express the relationship between an individual and their environment may have given Jay the idea for his own book title *The Experience of Landscape*.

My introduction to these ideas was indirect. I was beginning to look more critically at the roots of my own landscape photography practice, and kept coming across brief references to Jay Appleton’s work – for example in Malcolm Andrews’ *Landscape and Western Art* and Simon Schama’s *Landscape and Memory* where, in the bibliographic guide at the back of the book, Jay is acknowledged as one of two scholars responsible for reviving cultural geography in Britain. When I looked more closely I discovered that Professor Appleton was still living independently in Cottingham, a short distance from the University of Hull where he had been Professor of Geography from 1978 to 1985. Over the next couple of years we worked together on an exhibition revisiting the main principles of Prospect-Refuge Theory, with my photographs of the British countryside set alongside a new commentary by Jay himself. The exhibition: *Image, Instinct and Imagination – Landscape as sign language* was opened by Dr Julia Bradbury at the Royal Geographical Society, London in April 2014 and has toured to galleries in Edinburgh, Halifax and Bath.

The twin poles of Prospect-Refuge Theory establish the fundamental need to explore an environment for food sources (hunting and gathering) and the equally fundamental need to find places of safety and shelter. The ability to see clearly and remain protected is paramount. It can be argued that these instincts precede the instinct for mating and reproduction. There is a third term in the Prospect-Refuge equation, namely Hazard. All places of refuge involve hiding or sheltering *from* something, and a good prospect ensures the early detection of predators and enemies. In his autobiography Jay recalls coming across a passage in Konrad Lorenz’s *King Solomon’s Ring* that describes the strategic advantage of being able ‘to see without being seen’ and realizing that this formulation was actually the crux of his argument, because such a condition gives you Prospect and Refuge simultaneously.

Hazard broadly corresponds to the Sublime in Burke's original terminology from *A Philosophical Enquiry into the origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) where he lists the attributes of the Sublime as including Terror, Respect, Astonishment and states that the Sublime '...in all things abhors mediocrity'. A modern way to put this might be to say that the Sublime resists appropriation, and its centrality in Jay Appleton's theory is what rescues the hypothesis from any charge of being non-progressive. We use our experience of previous refuges and prospects dynamically to deal with new threats and opportunities that present themselves every day.

Here is a pair of pictures from the Hebrides to illustrate contrasting Refuges:



Fig.1 Torrin, Isle of Skye

The sturdy-looking house is protected by a shelter belt, and the mountain (Bla Bheinn) seems to offer a sheltering wing as well. Loch Slapin behind may partly serve the function of a moat, keeping unwanted visitors away from the house and hay crop, and providing fish to eat. These potent Refuge symbols reduplicate each other visually to create the strong suggestion of a desirable habitat. The idea of Reduplication is important to the theory – it occurs when one visual symbol is reinforced by another, and it's a way of analyzing composition in functional terms. So here the mountain top, treetops, cottage roof and neatly capped hay stooks all suggest cover and protection.



Fig.2 Cille Bhrighde, South Uist

In comparison, here a house stands in total isolation with nothing to screen or shelter it. The water may protect it from access but the water is also the principal threat, and visually there is nowhere to hide. The symbolism of Refuge (inside) and Hazard (outside) are in Contraposition, provoking our curiosity about the house and its inhabitants (can anyone live here?).

When it comes to Prospect, Jay Appleton developed an interesting system of classification to differentiate varying kinds of view:



Fig.3 Wasdale from Westmorland Cairn, Great Gable

Panoramas are expansive fields of visibility, often best experienced from mountains or hilltops. Falling ground always suggests a strategic advantage to the observer, and the relatively huge advantage of being at such a height may explain why this spot was voted Britain's Best View in an ITV poll in 2007. In Prospect-Refuge terms beauty is always functional. Because trees are likely to interfere with sightlines the best viewpoints are often relatively free from refuge symbols.



Fig.4 The Avenue, Castle Howard

Vistas are views laterally constrained on both sides, offering particularly clear sightings of prey or predators but also allowing for concealment in the flanking vegetation.



Fig.5 Walsingham, Norfolk

Deflected Vistas are vistas cut short by a bend, prompting speculation as to what lies round the corner out of sight. These are some of the commonest compositional devices in landscape art and landscape gardening, stimulating the imagination to 'fill in the gap'.



Fig.6 Langdale Pikes from Elterwater

Indirect Prospects occur where an alternative vantage point appears likely to offer an even better view. All horizons qualify, because they are intermediate staging posts on the way to a view of whatever lies beyond, but they are especially effective when elevated into hills or backed by bright or coloured skies.



Fig.7 Callanish stone circle, Lewis

Skyscapes and Sky-Dados: In Prospect-Refuge symbolism a sheet of stratus cloud can become an opaque ceiling, cutting us off from contact with the brightness of the sky above. If it is separated from the horizon by a streak of clear sky or the colours of sunrise or sunset, the brightness will attract our attention and may become a potential escape-route from our imagined confinement into the freedom of open space, and this asserts a powerful sense of attraction. The term 'dado' is borrowed from a horizontal band of colour on a wall and here denotes a comparable aerial feature. In this picture the imagination is further helped by the standing stones which act as columns or stanchions holding up the cloud-ceiling.

Jay Appleton's starting-point in *The Experience of Landscape* was a question: 'What do we like about landscape and why do we like it?' The prevailing wisdom is that what we like is a savannah landscape of open grassland with isolated trees or clumps – this being our original African habitat after we descended from the trees. It has been noted by various writers that this type of country closely resembles the 'English' landscape style developed by Capability Brown on large estates in the 18th century and still immensely popular today.



Fig.8 Harewood, West Yorkshire

My picture shows the Capability Brown landscape at one of his best-preserved northern estates, where an intricate pattern of small fields and meandering tracks was swept away to provide grazing for sheep, trees for timber, a lake for fishing and a sense of infinite space. This has been achieved by emphasizing the natural line of the horizon with planting, giving the impression that the land continues over the brow of the hill. In one of Lancelot Brown's most telling remarks: 'I will make it so agreeable, no one will want to look beyond it' we see the subtlety of his artifice, tapping into instincts for sinuous lines and desirable contours, whilst also offering low-maintenance parkland and long-term economic benefits. In this view from the Terrace in front of the house, for example, it is impossible to see the carriage drive running just below our sightline along the opposite hillside. And of course the view from the Terrace is just what the doctor ordered in terms of Prospect and Refuge: with our backs to the well-provisioned mansion the view before us is a feast for the eyes, an essentially playful restaging of an age-old drama – scanning the distance for signs of the next meal and any signs of trouble.



Fig.9 Sandyhills, Dumfries & Galloway

But we don't need the savannah hypothesis to validate Prospect-Refuge Theory. Jay Appleton's ideas are equally applicable to the Aquatic Ape/Waterside hypothesis now gaining some acceptance in scientific circles. In this reading of human evolution we came out of the trees and onto the beach rather than onto the plains. My picture shows woodland giving way to an open shoreline, allowing unimpeded views from the refuge of tree cover, and a liminal space for activities that could include gathering shellfish, swimming and diving.



Fig.10 Towards Holme Fen, Cambridgeshire

Here is another belt of trees, emphasizing the importance of the woodland edge in Jay Appleton's theory – seeing without being seen. The broad raised track offers a reassuring prospect of unimpeded access to the shelter of the wood, avoiding the Impediment Hazard of the ploughed fields on either side.

It should be obvious by now that Prospect and Refuge are not mutually exclusive, but complementary values. Most views and most pictures will have elements of both, and probably potential Hazards as well, and the aesthetic appeal of a landscape artwork will lie in the tension that exists between the 3 points of this triangle.

For a photographer, Prospect-Refuge Theory provides a new way to think about composition. Tired conventions of perspective and framing take on new life when they are appreciated as symbolic tools of an adaptive behavioural system. The instinct for form (that some of us like to think we have) can be reinterpreted as an evolved instinct for survival itself, and we can take this knowledge back into our more immediate concerns with the cultural and political life of our time.

Jay Appleton is not a household name, and (as a non-academic) I can only speculate about why his ideas – with their strong Darwinian lineage – were not taken up more readily. Jay always thought that, being a geographer, he upset the fine art establishment by his left field intervention into aesthetics, but perhaps he published at a

bad time. Materialist approaches were about to sweep away the liberal humanist base of Humanities subjects, among them Human Geography, and Jay's real adversaries turned out to be not the traditionalists but the post-modernists.

Jay's strongest influence was on landscape architects, who were quick to see the significance of ideas that offered a universal explanation for people's landscape preferences. In the USA Prospect-Refuge Theory influenced the environmentalist and philanthropist Prentice Bloedel, whose Reserve on Bainbridge Island in Puget Sound near Seattle is a mix of public garden and forest park. In *The Wright Space* (1991) the American architectural historian Grant Hildebrand demonstrated that Jay's landscape model can apply equally to the domestic interiors of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Recently there have been a number of more scholarly endorsements, especially from Dennis Dutton (another Darwinian author) whose 2009 book *The Art Instinct* makes the case for art and art appreciation as an actual evolutionary adaptation. He pays tribute to Jay Appleton whose Prospect-Refuge Theory, he says, 'continues to be compelling', and his first chapter is imbued with Jay's environmental aesthetics. Gordon Orians, an American evolutionary biologist who stayed with Jay in Yorkshire whilst working on English landscape gardens, gives considerable attention to Prospect-Refuge Theory in his 2014 book *Snakes, Sunrises and Shakespeare – How Evolution Shapes our Loves and Fears* and provides this restatement of Jay's key assertion: 'Every time we look an object or scene, we see at it through the eyes of our hominid ancestors, unconsciously assessing what we could do with it or in it'.



Fig.11 Julian's Bower, Alkborough, North Lincolnshire

To sum up, here is another Panorama, this time with a reach or 'fetch' of over 45 miles, described in Jay Appleton's own words:

'The picture relies on the clarity of the light and illustrates the advantage of falling ground. The immediate foreground is free of vegetation that might impede the Prospect, but we are assured of the proximity of Refuge by the line of the treetops, high enough to catch our attention but not to interfere with the view.

'The tidal River Trent enters from the left in the middle distance, joining the Yorkshire Ouse at Trent Falls (a misleading name, as there are no 'falls' as such) to form the

Humber. Until the opening of the Humber Bridge, some 7 miles downstream in 1981, this water-body interposed a formidable barrier between Lincolnshire and Yorkshire.

'The panorama illustrates well how landscape is a product of the interaction between nature and humans. The fields bordering the rivers are a natural floodplain reclaimed as productive farmland over the past 150 years. Since this picture was taken in 2003 the whole middle distance has been given back to the estuary and restored as floodplain in one of the Environment Agency's largest realignment projects, providing a cushion against tidal surges. However the storm surge of 5 December 2013 caused considerable damage to the infrastructure of the site, with fences being carried up to 1km from their positions by the force of the water.

'The foreground platform, on the edge of the Jurassic escarpment, showcases a rare example of a mystery puzzle to challenge our curiosity. Julian's Bower is one of a number of turf mazes in England whose origin, date of construction and function has defied investigation. Like many ancient sites it is situated at a dramatic viewpoint, suggesting ceremonial or observational importance. What we can be sure of is that instinct demands we carry on questioning.

'In addition to providing *factual* geographical information the procedure that began with environmental perception has to make room for the imagination and for our resulting emotions. When we contemplate a panorama like the one here our personal space becomes temporarily equated with the whole visual field, and from this viewing-platform it appears *vast*, giving rise to a kind of proprietorial vision of our surroundings and of our place within them. Of course reality is compounded with fantasy, but we are not exclusively rational beings and it is often imagination that has the last word.'