

# A Sense of Places

Welcome to Heterotopia. A sense of places

*"And crawled head downward down a blackened wall*

*And upside down in air were towers*

*Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours*

*And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells"*

***The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot – 1922**

I'M NOT A GREAT FAN of lengthy, technical sounding jargon. It's invariably used to facilitate some form of obfuscation. A mask for ignorance. But the term heterotopia\* could have been devised to describe the work of Jane Ward. It would be difficult and thoroughly anachronistic to imagine that Michel Foucault didn't have Ward's work in mind when he coined the expression. The term appears so apposite; a mix of places and cultures. A sense of places. Out of time.

*"Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore"* **Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, 1939**

The elements are photographic and all the photographs are taken by Ward. All are broadly contemporary and all are European. The mix is exhaustive. Every landscape feature from the most tentative pebble to the most emphatic multi-storey car-park; from fern to fly-over; from cliff to clouds is employed. The list is endless. However each element is allocated a new function or definition. In one instance ears of wheat are employed to represent high altitude cirrus clouds. Tower blocks become stalactites and flats congeal and become distant mountain ranges. This is transformation; a powerful but neglected aspect of imagination. A defining feature of imagery and painting. I mention painting because I regard painting as a discourse which is as much about language as it is about stuff.

*"When I sit down to make a sketch from nature, the first thing I do is try and forget that I've ever seen a picture"* **John Constable**

The overall impression is a celestial collage of plain old stuff. Partial, etiolated and probable. It's almost impossible to ignore the sense of quiet, an imminent terror – a sense of uncertainty – a sense of apocalypse. A very British apocalypse. The end of days? There are many formal references to the master of the apocalypse, John Martin. However, the world of Ward and that of Martin are wildly different. The key similarity is the abundance of rock, natural and hewn. The theology of armageddon or eschatology is a rich and screwball mix of inevitability and old testament mythology. Martin's hell is a theatrical and rhetorical mix of hell fire and old testament standards; eternal pain, terror, suffering and guilt. All that and gnashing; lots of gnashing. Anyone familiar with millennial texts will have heard the expression 'left behind'. Following this train of thought; we, the spectators to this synthetic but disturbing spectacle, are just that – 'left behind'. A reference to the rapture? Perhaps. Ward's hell is closer to home – more psychological. Internal.

*"It's heaven – isn't it?" Airman, A Matter of Life and Death, 1946*

The most incongruous thing about looking at Ward's work is the realisation that although the components are themselves the building blocks of landscape, they've been allocated a new function. They've become small and familiar fragments of other places and other times. This exquisite and distant Airfix\*\* grey world appeals to our sense of wonder and our memories of not only Airfix but Minic\*\*\*, Triang and Hornby Dublo. The colour is mimetic and as such appears utilitarian. The miniature holds a particular place in our culture. It's not because we have toys and models as children but more importantly museums used dioramas as educational aids and no summer holiday was complete without a visit to a model village – two of the most charming nouns in one sentence. This isn't nostalgia, it's something 'hard wired'; something that involves power and control. Ward's work is best described as a laminate. A laminate that employs layers of imagery bonded together by shared meaning. A mix of small but numerous uncertainties and ambiguities. Landscape and memory. Context is everything.

*"For a philosopher there is more grass growing down in the valleys of silliness than up on the heights of cleverness" Ludwig Wittgenstein*

When I think of Jane Ward's work; contexts abound. I find myself overwhelmed by filmic references. The most immediate being Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's luminous masterpiece of 1946, 'A Matter of Life and Death' because of its monochromatic cardboard low-tech heaven. A heaven conjured from glass matts, balsa wood and vaseline. Now one woman sitting at a computer has more technology at her fingertips than the special effects departments of major studios like Rank\*\*\*\* or MGM, even in the post-war period. Ward's work and the 1946 film seem to address the fantastic in a robust and matter of fact way that appears 'British'. The drama is implicit. It's in the grammar. The still small world of 'work-a-day' surrealism. Apocalypse – what apocalypse? This is the kind of magic that demands contemplation and reflection, not faith.

*"Where the Northern Ocean, in vast whirls,  
Boils around the naked, melancholy Isles,  
Of farthest Thule; and the Atlantic surge  
Pours away the stormy Hebrides" Jane Eyre\*\*\*\*\* by Charlotte Bronte, 1847*

Space in Ward's images is ambiguous and indeterminate. It isn't space – but spaces. These spaces illuminate the ideas of theoretical physicists like Hugh Everett and writers like Olaf Stapleton. It was Everett who first postulated the 'many worlds interpretation'; what's more usually referred to as parallel universes. Stapleton's classic novel 'Starmaker' is an account of expanded conscience rather than conventional space travel. *Starmaker* is regarded not only as an innovative work of literature but one of the first science fantasy novels. It's the same in Ward's world; parallel worlds and worm holes are a possibility. Here is now there and up is the new down. It's like all intelligent

landscape images; what for centuries was a state of affairs is now a state of mind. You get the sense that contemporary and rather esoteric theories of time and space could be visualised. We're all familiar with the term 'black hole'. Ward seems to be asking us to embrace the idea of a white hole.

*"I'm tired of you positing alternative realities"*

**Marge during an argument with Homer – The Simpsons**

One of Britain's most defining landscape paintings, 'Entrance to a Country Lane of 1939' by Graham Sutherland has what can only be described as a hole in the middle. A compositional convention since Poussin and Claude. Likewise Ward's work has a hole or similar space at the centre of most images. This space seems to function like an exit or a way through this familiar but alien world. A portal or a stargate perhaps? The references to science fiction and gaming culture abound; the god-like overview, the distant miasma and the model railway sense of scale conspire to keep us apart. The illusion is one of control.

*"Don't panic... don't panic..."*

**Ford Prefect – Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Universe – BBC Radio 4 – 1978**

Apart from time warps and cosmic projection the relationship between what we now call landscape and landscape painting isn't a straight forward matter. Since the beginning of the 15th. century the Dutch were using the term *landskyp* to describe a genre of painting that depicted the world without referring to antiquity, religion or overtly didactic subject matter. At this time what we now call landscape was referred to simply as the land. People didn't harbour aesthetic notions about their farms, fields and animals. This was imposed not grown. The term that defined a genre of painting would later be adopted to describe the land. The land became the landscape and because we named it – it became 'ours'. We got to name it and then lose it.

*"I've caught this magical landscape and it's the enchantment of it that I'm so keen to render. Of course lots of people will protest that it's quite unreal. But that's just too bad"*

**Claude Monet**

No discussion of Jane Ward's work would be complete without referring to the light. The landscape may be Ward's subject matter but her content is light. Light bathes these images and light fixes these images. Light is ubiquitous. Light as Ward uses it seems to be eroding these images. This erosion creates spaces. Not places but spaces. The sense of light is both euphoric and terrifying. Is it the end of time? Or the beginning? Ward's work breaches the grammar of the familiar. Definition is discreet yet ambiguous. This is achieved by the scrubbing and purging of the picture's surface. To the point where the weft and warp of the cotton duck becomes synonymous with the pixels. The image appears atomised – as if it had been erased. In this topsy-turvy world light misbehaves and gravity seems to have taken a holiday. Another reminder, if it were need, that pictorial space is fictive.

*"Isn't white that which does away with darkness?" Ludwig Wittgenstein – 1951*

There are many possible 'accounts' of Ward's work. Everything from beginning to end. From big bang to last breath. Air, light and heat in which a series of places collide and occupy each other. Here becomes there. This must be Heterotopia. A place where nothing ever happens and natural disasters abound – from the 'Boxing Day' tsunami to the Tunguska air blast of 1918. The aftershock reverberates still. It's the experience that is universal. Places as a singularity. No matter how often you say it – it sounds wrong. It's the precision and the stillness that resonates. Welcome to Jane's World.

*"There's no place like home; there's no place like home; there's no place like home ..."*

**Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz – 1939**

#### **Footnotes:**

\*A Foucault's six defining principles of Heterotopic space;

1. Locations of crises and deviance.
2. Spaces which change in function.
3. Several places juxtaposed as a single space.
4. Spaces linked to 'slices of time'.
5. Locations that have a system of opening and closing.
6. Function in relation to all remaining space.

\*\*B – Airfix still make plastic construction kits moulded in mid-grey plastic.

\*\*\*C – Triang 'Minic Motorways' was an OO (or 1/64 scale) roadway system that employed the same technology as Scalextric. It was conceived to complement OO model railways.

\*\*\*\*D – Arthur J. Rank were distributors for Archers Films – which included 'Black Narcissus' and 'The Red Shoes'.

\*\*\*\*\*E – The quotation is from Jane Eyre who is quoting Thomas Bewick, who is in turn quoting James Thomson, the Scottish poet and playwright who wrote the lyrics to 'Rule Britannia'.

#### **Brief bibliography:**

*My Life* by Thomas Bewick

*Michel Foucault* by James Miller

*Arrows of Desire* by Ian Christie. (A history of the Archers Film Co.)

*Landscape and Memory* by Simon Schama

*Selected Poems* by T. S. Eliot

*Remarks on Colour* by Ludwig Wittgenstein

*Culture and Value* by Ludwig Wittgenstein