

Report on AHRC Framework Seminar on 'Land, Air, and Water', University of Nottingham, Saturday 2 July 2005

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'Land, Air, and Water' as a working title for the day's discussions was a necessarily huge brief and the aim of the framework seminar was to bring together as many different researchers and practitioners from as many different disciplinary domains as possible to explore the potential for research in this area. To this end, the day was a huge success, with participants from over 30 HEIs in the UK, representing subjects as diverse as archaeology, architecture, art, creative writing, drama and performance, film, history, history of science, geography, language, literature, meteorology, music, philosophy, and politics, plus representatives of major British museums taking part. The discussions were, as might be expected from such a gathering, wide-ranging and I have attempted to summarise and synthesise them in what follows, extracting in the process identifiable research topics for future consideration by the AHRC when determining its funding criteria and programme specifications for the strategic area of 'Landscape and Environment'.

The day's proceedings

Keynote lecture:

The day began with a keynote lecture from Professor Tim Barringer of Yale University entitled ' "In the air all around us": Elgar's aesthetics of landscape'. This was an impressive working example of the rich potential of cross-disciplinary encounter. Professor Barringer's paper expertly drew together strands of art history, musicology, biography, and cultural theory to offer a persuasive account of Elgar's often contradictory engagements with landscapes which might be described as both pastoral and urban, as well as a convincing refutation of many of the myths that have accrued around his compositions.

Roundtable session:

The roundtable session which followed invited representatives from several different disciplines to speak from a disciplinary standpoint about the kinds of research potential that they identified in the strategic research area. We heard brief position papers from representatives of geography, history of art, music, literature, politics, and the museum sector. Additional categories of focus for the

day emerged, including the agency of fire in the spheres of landscape and environment; some discussion was also made of the importance of material culture to several of the focus topics. Via a discussion of seas and seascapes and the historical, literary, and narrative recording of sea voyages and exploration, the importance of extending the boundaries of study beyond a defined UK geography was made explicit. Many participants throughout the day picked up on this issue.

The session revealed the very different methodologies and discourses being mobilised by the individual representatives and their sectors, but also gave us food for thought in terms of whether the more familiar interdisciplinary clusters in the arts and humanities (for example English and History) or the social sciences (for example Politics and Sociology) could be challenged or broken down in any positive way by new research initiatives in this area. The session was equally helpful in identifying certain disciplines, such as environmental politics, that might more traditionally apply to the ESRC for funding, as eligible to apply to the AHRC under headings such as 'Landscape and Environment'. Making sure the academic community was aware of the full potential for applications from a diverse sector to such a programme was one obvious outcome of the day, as was a growing awareness as discussions progressed that we need to remain alert to, indeed sensitive to, the different disciplinary discourses and practices that pertain in certain sectors.

Breakout sessions:

The afternoon was structured around six parallel breakout sessions under specified headings. These were a highly successful and productive element of the day, largely enabled by the hard work of both facilitators and participants in advance of the day itself in the form of email exchanges and discussions. This meant that the discussions on the day were focussed and engaged directly with the research questions emerging from the respective topic. The value of cross-disciplinary exchange was confirmed by the complex but insightful discussions that took place on six specific subject areas which the conference organiser had identified as possible areas for future research projects under the 'Land, Air, and Water' brief. Summaries of the main discussions in each session are offered below, as well as some overall comments. The organiser attended sections of each of the sessions and received full reports of the discussions from official notetakers.

Air and Pollution [Facilitator: Dr John Thornes, Geography, University of Birmingham]

This session considered the representation, appropriation, and exploitation of air and pollution as both subjects and concepts. There was concern expressed about the need to improve the 'visual literacy' of approaches to atmosphere and a discussion about how better to visualise science. There was exploration of the representation of atmosphere in fine art, film, technological media, and literature with several participants making the case for the need to revolutionise currently narrow cultural perceptions of atmosphere. The discussion culminated in the idea that radical reconceptualisation of 'air' could be fruitful both for scientific endeavour and awareness, both in the academic and the public spheres, of environmental issues.

Earth Matters [Facilitator: Dr Richard Kerridge, English, Bath Spa University College]

With a wide range of participants from fields including creative writing, theory, critical musicology, cultural geography, documentary making, philosophy, politics, and architecture, the discussions in this session touched on several issues specific to particular disciplines but also identified a potential focus for an interdisciplinary project on the question of authority in interpretation. Questions and issues raised which led to this focal point included:

- Is it possible to establish common paradigms and concepts that could cross disciplinary boundaries, and what would happen to them in the process?
- What was the role of science, and particularly popular science, in debates on environment?
- Where is authority vested in debates?
- What is done with information, and what forms does that information take? (Here it was felt that various disciplinary methodologies could be employed).
- Authority needs to be seen as both spatial and performative.
- Where there are competing claims to authority how might these be challenged from a variety of disciplinary perspectives?
- Authority can be approached historically as well as in contemporary contexts.

Several working examples of themes that could be explored under this heading were advanced, including wind farms and the impact of and responses to the recent foot-and-mouth crisis. It was suggested that 'narrative' was a useful umbrella term which would draw together ideas of authority, testimony,

pedagogy, and imagination. Discussion also touched on the question of the future use of these narratives.

Importantly, this session urged the AHRC and other funding bodies to consider teaching resources as one suitable outcome for such a project rather than relying solely on a model of scholarly publication. Multi- or transdisciplinary teaching resources (textbooks, databases, teaching archives) could open up future areas for research in important ways.

Moving Through and Dwelling in Landscapes [Facilitator: Professor Andrew McRae, English, University of Exeter]

The following common themes emerged from the discussions in this session:

- The deployment of and subsequent movement away from spatial theory and practice in the work of several scholars in the group.
- Issues and questions of agency, of people, objects, and the landscape itself.
- The potential for landscape comparison across space, places, and time. Here again the issue of moving beyond an Anglocentric emphasis was stressed.
- Potential for practical interactions with landscape, either through fieldwork or various artistic media: film, painting, sound.
- A need to embrace uncertainty and difference rather than closing down the discussions about what central terms such as 'landscape', 'environment', 'mobility', and 'dwelling' might mean.

There was the discussion of variant terminology between subjects and disciplines common to all the breakout sessions, but also interrogation and exploration of attendant issues of authority (i.e. who or what defines the meaning of place and landscape?) that echoed and complimented discussions in the 'Earth Matters' session. There was some interesting disciplinary divergence over to what extent landscape can be defined as 'text' and in textual terms, with contributions from archaeology, the creative arts, literature, geography, and philosophy.

The ways in which travel and dwelling of various kinds contributes to the construction, creation, understanding, and interpretation of landscape was a recurrent theme and, as at various points in the day, additional notions of landscape, including here caves and underground networks, as well as roadways and railways, were thrown into the mix.

Regional Landscapes [Facilitator: Dr David Parsons, Institute of Name-Studies, University of Nottingham]

There was a strong feeling in this session of the importance of historical perspective: an acknowledgement that a deeper sense of time was needed to unpack issues of regional identity. This articulation of a 'deep time' approach was complemented by what one theatre studies participant described as a 'deep map', which would recognise physical features of topography and geology alongside time and culture. This view was underscored by contributors from the discipline of archaeology, who stressed that much of what was often discussed in terms of nostalgia or loss in regionally inflected arguments was actually as much the product of human agency as those landscapes and societies that replaced it. Contributions from the areas of English Studies, Photography, and Architecture were also heard, with specific examples of these methodologies in practice being advanced and explored during the course of the discussions.

The overall feeling of the group was that in terms of policy making, those organisations which influence the development and use of the land/landscape (organisations such as Scottish National Heritage, English Heritage, etc) could be usefully informed by the work of practitioners and researchers on regional landscapes and that this could form one important wing of funding opportunities in the new programme. The need for comparative work was again stressed as vital to the health of research in this area.

Waterways [Facilitator: Dr Nicholas Alfrey, Art History, University of Nottingham]

This session, which included representatives from history, art, geography, linguistics, music, and photography, focused on different disciplinary perspectives but also on the fact that each of the participants no longer felt they could compartmentalise their practice in this way. Waterways as a topic invokes the geological, the practical, the political, and the cultural domains. The problems as well as potentials of handling as interdisciplinary a topic as water were therefore discussed alongside the recognition that it might require different, even conflicting, methodologies to approach different types of water: sea, river, canal, water as resource, flood, etc. A study that would consider water as an interconnected system that embraced the cultural, economic, and emotional was considered as a viable outcome. Issues of definition, cartographic and linguistic, as well as scientific, were explored by the group and the question was raised whether it would be beneficial to open up an interdisciplinary study of water in

the arts and humanities to water engineers and river scientists. While the problems of the latter were acknowledged it was felt that this was crucial to facilitate a more effective approach. The crucial point was made that science itself is an aesthetic practice and that dialogue in this area could prove beneficial in both academic and public policy terms.

There were concerns expressed about what kinds of projects the AHRC might seek to fund under such a heading, with an assumption that those projects with practical application or utility, with 'value' in certain measurable public policy outcomes, might be favoured. This led to discussion of whether the AHRC was simply supplementing ESRC projects by adding in those elements not usually incorporated in their funded studies and projects, such as the emotional and the cultural. One concern raised that the AHRC might wish to deliberate on further was whether specific action needed to be taken when determining the criteria for funding to safeguard arts and humanities representation and distinctiveness.

Weather [Facilitators: Dr Richard Hamblyn, Freelance academic and author and Dr Vladimir Jankovic, History of Science, University of Manchester]

In ways that clearly mapped onto the session on 'Air and Pollution' this session considered issues of representation and the 'real'. The limits both to linguistic forms and the potential narrowness of specific disciplinary viewpoints were explored and contested: one example that was invoked was the idea of the sea voyage, a topic that had also been discussed under the heading of 'atmospherics' in the 'Air and Pollution' session, with the point being made that the voyage needs to be conceived of in terms both physical and psychological. As well as the recurrent theme of the problems of linguistic representation, issues of physical interaction with the weather and ideas of audience and reception were interrogated.

The major barrier to, although also positive challenge to, future multidisciplinary encounter was seen to be the different discursive domains in which disciplines operate and understand themselves. It is clear that one obvious outcome of the framework seminar could be a multidisciplinary project to explore the language issue in landscape and environment, with a potential for several disciplines as well as institutions to contribute, as well as for the kind of pan-European, global, or comparative aspect being urged both in this session and elsewhere in the day's discussions. One participant described art in this context as a 'science of

discourse', a phrase which clearly struck a chord with fellow participants and which might be unpacked further in future research and exchanges.

Closing session:

The final session of the day was a plenary one in which the facilitators summarised for those present the essence of the conversations that had taken place in their sessions. The floor was then opened up to more general discussion with representatives of the AHRC before the close.

Overall comments:

What emerges most forcefully from the combined discussions and interactions of the day is that there are crucial issues of language and discourse to be explored as part of any transdisciplinary work that takes place in this area. There is huge potential for a major research project that would involve several institutions and disciplines looking at these issues. The value of interaction between sciences and the arts – the case of the potential for shared research between engineers, river scientists, cultural geographers, linguists, literary historians, cultural historians, and creative practitioners, in the area of waterways is one vibrant example – emerged as key to any major funded interdisciplinary project that might emerge under this heading. Many participants welcomed the links that became possible on the day itself between creative and applied practice and the representational studies and scholarship more familiar to the domains of literature, history, and, to an extent, cultural geography. Space also appeared to open up for genuine exchange with the social sciences on issues of policy and public perception.

It seems clear that in devising the programme specifications for this research area the AHRC will want to consider issues of transdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary as well as stretching the notion of what 'applied' research might mean in this context. Pedagogic outcomes were rightly highlighted as an important area for consideration in any funding specifications. Huge potential for funded PhDs on specific projects, projects that would encourage links across and between disciplines and methodologies emerged from discussion, as did the value placed in supporting the creation and maintenance of cross-disciplinary teaching resources in this area.

There are, undoubtedly and perhaps inevitably, some areas of disagreement to be negotiated. The extent to which notions of the environment should be or are always politicised was one point of fervent debate throughout the day. Some

participants felt that the move from considering the environment to considering environmental issues was rarely being made, although there were other contributions on subjects such as climate change and pollution that suggested the opposite. Some questioned the politicisation of practice in this way. There were also anxieties about the possible dilution of disciplinary structures and methodologies in a perceived emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration and about whether funded projects would necessarily be expected to have a practical application in terms of public policy.

Possible research outcomes:

Important outcomes include the identification of several possible major projects to be funded under this scheme and the enthusiasm of many participants to establish smaller networks under certain headings for continued intellectual exchange. The importance of funded studentships, as well as support for pedagogical initiatives, became clear.

In a manner similar to the 'Diasporas' project, the AHRC may well want to consider making some funds available under the scheme for the networking facilitated by the four framework seminars to continue, though it was also recognised by many present that several existent AHRC funding opportunities should be deployed by individuals to enhance and extend their personal research in this area, and that involvement in one scheme did not militate against applications to another.

It was always likely that a day with such a broad heading and such diverse participants would raise many more questions than it could satisfactorily answer and that it would pose many problems for researchers in the field as well as offering direct encouragement to their individual projects and interests. Nevertheless, I think it is a fair representation of the day, and subsequent feedback, to say that the majority of us left enthused by the sheer potential for future cross-disciplinary encounter and exchange that we had registered during the day's exchanges, and with an enriched and enlivened understanding of our own practices.

Julie Sanders
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