



Baroque rurality in an English village[☆]

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A B S T R A C T

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The paper explores the concept of baroque rurality through employing concepts of affect and affordance within a study of an English village experiencing rural gentrification. The paper begins by outlining the concept of baroque rurality, contrasting it with so-called romantic approaches that have employed abstract notions of environmental or natural factors in accounts of rural in-migrational decision making. This paper then outlines conceptions of affect, affordance and more-than-representational perspectives before moving to an empirical examination of the relations that residents in a gentrifying village in the East Midlands of England have with the natures that surrounds them. The presence of positive and negative emotions with respect to a range of actants taken to be natural is highlighted, along with the significance of non-representation and pre- or semi-conscious relations with these actants. Attention is also drawn to the range of material affordances and ecologically embedded positionings and sensings described in accounts of rural living and rural in-migrational decision making. The paper concludes by considering the diversity of such positioning and the complexity associated with studies of baroque ruralities.

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1. Introduction

“The problem that writing on the countryside faces is that it still tends to work with a romantic version of complexity in which there is a basic wholeness ... that makes up a ‘natural world’ ... However, nowadays, there is a growing tendency to think of the countryside in terms of a baroque view of complexity in which the sensuous materiality of the ‘natural’ does not add up. Instead, it flows in many directions and can produce many novel combinations out of what might seem a rather limited set of elements, a set of world-in-themselves which may partially connect to each other but do not add up to a natural whole” (Thrift, 2003, p. 309).

“contemplative and mystical developments ... are widespread in modern societies, [and] constitute a background within which Nature is apprehended and which provides quite particular experiences of what Nature is. They form, if you like, an embodied ‘unconscious’, a set of basic exfoliations of the body through which Nature is constructed, planes of affect attuned to particular body parts (and senses) and corresponding

elements of Nature (from trees and grass, to river and sky)” (Thrift, 2003, p. 319).

This paper draws on and develops arguments in these two extracts. In the first, Thrift, drawing on the work of Kwa (2002), suggests that studies of the countryside need to move to a ‘baroque’ sense of rurality. Thrift is not using the term baroque in the sense of an aesthetic style or epochal social formation,¹ and hence the term

¹ The characteristics and associated historical/geographical identifiable presences of the baroque have long been subject to debate (e.g. see Mark, 1938; Wellek, 1946; Menashe, 1965; Deleuze, 2003). Whilst often used to refer to cultural forms with an elaborate style involving a plethora of detailed elements, this meaning is often conjoined with pejorative assessments such that detail becomes excess, as well as more circumscribed formal classification of style and temporal and spatial distribution as employed by studies such as Cosgrove (1984, p. 157), which identified baroque with a style of architecture constructed in sixteenth century cities such as Rome that employed “properties of grand perspective ...elevated to the level of fantasy by baffling elaborate decoration, *trompe-l'oeils* and the complexity of ground plans, curving colonades and serpentine facades”. Cosgrove notes how this style spread to cities such as Paris and influenced not only architects but also artists and landscape gardeners, it being argued that places such as Versailles and Hampton Court represent enactments of the ‘English’ and ‘French’ Baroque respectively (see Baridon, 1998). Cosgrove also highlights links between cultural style and social context, suggesting that the baroque was an expression of absolutism linked to reformulated feudalism. Such arguments reveal how the term baroque has been used to characterise historically specific socio-cultural formations as well as cultural style, an approach clearly enacted in notions of the Baroque as an epoch, such as Maravall’s (1986) characterisation of it as a dramatic reaction to economic crises and feudal seignorial responses in sixteenth century Italy involving feelings of threat and instability.

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baroque rurality here does not signal an investigation of rural spaces that might be viewed as potentially enacting such a style or formation, as undertaken, for instance, by Cosgrove (1984), Baridon (1998), Ridgway and Williams (2000), Conan (2005) or Puleo (2010). Instead Thrift is using the term baroque in a more ontological sense, suggesting that nature should be seen as a set of elements or actants that whilst often connected to one another do not constitute some all encompassing coherent whole. In the second extract, constructed in part through engagement with the work of Massumi (1996) and Lingis (1998), Thrift suggests that rurality is apprehended and constructed through ‘planes of affect’ attuned to parts of the body, its senses and particular elements of nature.

The latter set of arguments link closely to strands of Thrift’s work focused around ideas of affect and non-representational theory (see Thrift, 2008), which are coming to exert influence within rural studies (see Carolan, 2008; Wylie, 2002, 2003, 2005; Woods, 2010). Thrift’s arguments with respect to planes of affect also bear affinities to notions of affordance associated with the work of James Gibson (e.g. Gibson, 1979) and, to a lesser extent, Tim Ingold (e.g. Ingold, 1986, 1992, 2000, 2011). The work of the latter has been drawn into rural studies, notably in the work of Macnaghten and Urry (1998), Cloke and Jones (2001) and Jones and Cloke (2002), with notions of dwelling and taskscape given particular prominence, although as Howe and Morris (2009) note, both concepts have close resonances with the concept of affordance, a term that Gibson (1986, p. 127) made up to refer to the “complementarity” of a living agent and its surrounding environment.

This paper will explore how notions of affect and affordance can be employed to understand how residents of one English village, many of whom were in-migrants to the village, came to sense and make sense of the natures of their worlds. Recently Halfacree and Rivera (2012) have argued that attention should be paid to what happens to migrants’ lives subsequent to relocation to a new place of residence, suggesting that, in at least some cases, representational influences at the point of migration are “over-written and eclipsed” (p. 109) by other, more-than-representational experiences, including “affective and affordance-based dimensions of rural living” (p. 107). They add that such dimensions may well involve giving a strong emphasis to the rural environment and its “uneven, confusing and unruly forces”, such as “other animals ..., plants ..., inanimate objects and physical forces”, as well as to the social entanglements associated with becoming an inhabitant of a rural community.

This paper in a sense represents a response to Halfacree and Rivera’s call to develop accounts of affective and affordance-based aspects of rural living beyond the point of in-movement. Drawing on a research project entitled ‘Gentrifying nature’ conducted as part of the UK Research Councils’ *Rural economy and land use* (RELU) programme,² the paper focuses attention on the natural dimensions of rural space stressed by Halfacree and Rivera. It argues that many studies of rural nature within migrational and rural gentrification studies have implicitly adopted what Thrift identifies as a romantic conception, although Halfacree and Rivera’s discussion might be viewed as pointing to a more baroque notion of rurality. Building on this, the paper seeks to develop a more-than-representational account of residents’ relations with baroque nature as found within a gentrifying village in the English Midlands. The paper argues that affective relations might usefully be

differentiated into represented emotions, pre- or semi-cognitive feelings and unconscious affects, and that they emerge in association with the affordances of range of actants that co-inhabit village spaces, creating complex sensings of nature and rurality.

2. Romantic and baroque concepts of nature in the study of rural migration and gentrification

Halfacree and Rivera’s stress on the significance of the rural environment within rural-migration is far from unique, with studies over many years identifying nature as a strong ‘motivational pull’ leading people into rural living. Halfacree (1994, p. 168) himself argued that attention needed to be paid to the significance of ‘environmental reasons’ in understanding the “rural dimension” of counterurbanisation”. He claimed that a widespread, if at times ‘secondary’, motivation for rural migration was people’s perception of a countryside’s ‘social’ and ‘physical’ quality, with the latter being constituted by features such as open spatiality, peacefulness, cleanliness, aesthetic beauty and ‘naturalness’. More recently, Murdoch (2003, p. 276) argued that the “primary cause” of counterurbanisation was “the desire on the part of many households to live in the countryside, that is to be immersed in rurality” (original emphasis). He added that, “this ‘immersion’ has two aspects: firstly a social aspect ... [a] wish to reside in a rural community; secondly, a natural aspect as counter-urbanisers seek to live within a particular kind of *material* environment ... that includes traditional buildings, open space, green fields ... [and] proximity to nature” (Murdoch, 2003, p. 277).

A series of further studies can be identified as suggesting that physical/material/natural aspects of rurality constitute an important migrational attraction, with the precise terminology varying considerably. Walmsley et al. (1998), for example, argued that rural in-migration was motivated by a combination of employment and lifestyle considerations, with ‘physical environmental factors’ such as a ‘pleasant climate’ and an ‘attractive physical environment’ figuring highly with regard to the latter. Such factors also figured prominently within studies of amenity migration (e.g. Dahms and McComb, 1999; Deller et al., 2001; Hunter et al., 2005; Argent et al., 2007; Gosnell and Abrams, 2011). Other studies have focused on concepts such as scenery and landscape, with Halliday and Coombes (1995) identifying the former as a motivating factor for half the in-migrants to rural Devon, while Paquette and Domon (2003, pp. 434–435) suggested that ‘landscape character’ influences migrational flows, with particular landscapes acting to “sustain selective rural migration flows” (see also Paquette and Domon, 2001a,b; Hjort and Malmberg, 2006). This argument can be seen to exhibit connections with Smith and Phillips’ (2001, p. 467) discussion of ‘greenspace’ in rural gentrification, whereby in-migrant households are seen to hold “varying predilections for different representations of ‘green’ Pennine ruralities”.

These are only a small selection of studies pointing to the significance of nature in constituting rural in-migration and, indeed, rural gentrification.³ Many of these can be seen to exhibit the representational and relocational focus critiqued by Halfacree and Rivera (2012) given their focus on conceptions of rurality in the selection of migrant destination and their neglect of post-migrational experiences and relations. However, in the current context I wish to highlight a further aspect of these studies, namely that their discussions of ‘the pull of the rural’ in migrational decision-making enrolled rural natures through use of some generalized heading such as ‘environmental influences’ or ‘natural

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³ See Smith (2002), Darling (2005) and Phillips (2009) for discussions of the relationships between migration and gentrification.

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