

ESSAYS

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Stories of Perception, Time and Landscape in the Orkney Islands

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A Windswept Archipelago: Stories of Perception, Time and Landscape in the Orkney Islands

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In this article I examine three different people's perceptions of wind turbines in the Orkney Islands, an archipelago of approximately 20,000 residents off the north coast of the Scottish mainland. The turbines are a recent introduction, and provide an crucial opening into how the various residents perceive both the landscape and this landscape's position in time. Combining a phenomenological approach to landscape with a symbolic analysis, I demonstrate the myriad temporal perceptions and experiences that people in Orkney have of a singular place and explore how the turbines can be seen as symbols that are constituted and reconstituted throughout time. Although one singular location, the variety in experiences allows for a plurality of this place, which itself is intimately tied to a plurality of both time and meaning. These pluralities, which I frequently refer to as different 'Orkney imaginations,' allude to a range of values associated with the turbines, themselves intimately tied into differing notions of the relationship between nature and sociality.

“Life is always a dense fabric of concurrent tensions, and as each of them is a measurement of time, the measurements themselves do not always coincide...”

Langer 1953: 113 in Ingold 2011: 197

Introduction

The Orkney imagination is haunted by time... these words scrolled across a film clip of strong waves crashing against the Yesnaby sea cliffs and rugged coastline, projected onto a screen in the small dark theatre of the Skara Brae Visitors Centre. It was my first day in Orkney and I had decided to take a tour bus to get from Stromness (where I had arrived by ferry that morning) to Kirkwall (where my hostel was).¹ Skara Brae, a 5,000-year-old settlement, is one of many Neolithic sites strewn across this archipelago and the words were that of George Mackay Brown, arguably Orkney's most famous author. However, while undoubtedly an underlying presence in overall daily life, I was not initially motivated to come to this northerly Scottish archipelago because of its past, Neolithic or otherwise. Rather, I had been motivated to go there because of the current and various renewable energy related activities. From the outset, I was interested in the connection between human's perception of the environment and an engagement with 'renewable,' and therefore, more 'environmentally friendly' energy sources. What motivates the perception of renewable energy devices as a favourable addition to any landscape?

The presence of renewables² is not a new phenomenon for these islands. In the 1980s Orkney was chosen as the test site for three different commercial scale wind turbines. Many local residents mention an even longer 'energy history,' often referencing the use of water driven mills and small wind turbines made with cloth 'sails' (M₁-11.12.13, A₁-11.01.14). Today the presence of renewables can be considered in two categories, wind and marine. In this paper I would like to focus on wind turbines in particular and how the various residents of Orkney experience their presence. Currently over 400³ individually, community and commercially owned turbines dot the various areas of islands of this archipelago. These devices have added financial benefits to those invested in them, as well as adding physically to the pre-existing features of the surrounding landscape. A myriad of elements layer, enfold and jostle up against each other. The rolling low-lying hills are scattered with Neolithic monuments and settlements, most active archaeological digs. Pictish fortresses, Runic graffiti, raided tombs and current place names tell of the Viking invaders that followed. In Kirkwall, St Magnus's Cathedral, named after a saint whose story is told in Orkney's own Orkneyinga Saga, stands next to the Earl and Bishops Palaces, all built in the middle of second millennium. World War I and II

¹ Kirkwall and Stromness are the two biggest towns on the mainland, aptly called Mainland.

² In this paper I will use the term 'renewables' to mean renewable energy and renewable energy devices.

³ 'Over 400' is the number of turbines one small-scale turbine installer told exist on Orkney. However, in his Masters thesis on constraints to the electricity grid in Orkney, Ebenezer Ashie (2013) accounted for 652 cumulative approved wind turbine applications in 2013.

battlements dot the coasts, while both British and German war ships lay mostly hidden to all but those who seek them out. The causeways connecting Mainland and the south isles were also built at this time to prevent the German submarines from entering the protected waters of Scapa Flow. Other additions from the World Wars are less identifiable, such as the network of paved roads connecting the towns and villages of Mainland, the Haston Harbour and Industrial Estate. There are also homes; towns; hundreds of farms; an oil terminal; thirteen RSBP nature reserves; a number of protected Sites of Scientific Interest (SSIs); and a World Heritage Site. All of the features of the landscape listed, including the new addition of renewable technologies, are closely linked with both what draws people to these islands and what enables continued residence.

Following the George Mackay Brown quote at the beginning of this paper, I argue that the experience of the turbines and their place in the landscape can be linked to differences in overall understandings of Orkney's place in time. Following the arguments of a number of anthropologists concerning the notion of 'landscape' (Bender 1993, 2002; Flint and Morphy 2000; Ingold 2011; Olwig 2009; Tilly 1994) I build on two propositions. Firstly, that we are materially and conceptually as much a part of our environments as they are a part of us, both continuously being shaped and reshaped by and with each other. Secondly, that our experience and understanding of our worlds (i.e. environments, including others around us) is resoundingly personal. With these positions in mind, it is understandable that "the plurality of place is always in the making, and how it is used and perceived depends on the contours of gender, age, status, ethnicity, and so on, and upon the moment," (Bender 2002: 107). Reflecting and expanding on the Langar quote included before the introduction, I would add that as "human life is a process that involves the passage of time" (Ingold 2011: 189) the plurality of time is also always in the making. In Orkney the plurality of place, as linked to time, becomes increasingly apparent in the variety of very personal opinions and experiences of the landscape, which are further highlighted by the recent, rapid and extensive introduction of wind turbines. What follows is an analysis of three encounters I had with different Orkney residents, each depicting what could be referred to as different temporally situated 'Orkney imaginations.'

Built to Last

Wind battered up against the thin walls of the building where I was interviewing Roger. We had met through the Orkney Renewable Energy Forum (OREF), of which he was a board member. Roger grew up and has continued to live in Orkney. Moreover, Roger is Orcadian; he has 'generations in the kirk yard,' as many would put it. In the early 1980's Roger began his apprenticeship with a local company of trade engineering. It was at this time that two companies, Howden and the Wind Energy Group, were setting up trials for three different wind turbine devices over at Burgar Hill, in northwest Mainland. The company he was apprenticing for was involved in putting the Howden machine together and commissioning it. "I found it intriguing," Roger told me, "And the fact that Orkney was up in the centre of it all, just similar to the wave and tidal every *noo* [now]." Roger is currently the head of Orkney's main supplier for construction materials, as well as a large range of services. The company supplies ready-mix concrete, blocks, precast, quarrying, haulage hire, truck and plant services, plant/container/accommodation sales and hire, waste management, and skip hire; on top of this they are also registered scrap metal merchants. Or, as Roger would describe the company, "we're here to try and give a good service to the community."

Roger's perspective points to the intermingling of his own history with Orkney's 'energy history.' These histories can be seen as providing the base for how and why Roger thinks of the development and generation of renewables in Orkney as a productive and generally positive venture. However, his understanding of and position on this matter is not just influenced by the personal details of his life I have described above. For Roger, the presence of the turbines connects to deeper issues of what it is to be Orcadian.

When I see the bigger [wind turbine] machines... they look... really substantial, really powerful – look like they do a good job.

...

tha smaller machines to me look like... a desperate attempt to do something, they're sorta... flying around very quickly... at high speed and I don't particularly like them.

Quality. There's not the quality about them. And I think the local people like a bit of quality. That's what the culture is about... Ya *ken* [know]? ... When you go to Skara Brae... it's been here for over 5,000 years. So. I think... historically, locally, here things have been built to last... So I like the ones that are built to last. (R₁-28.9.14)

While Roger does not explicitly mention work, he does link the ‘local people,’ both past and present, with the production of strong and durable structures. This durability, I would like to highlight, is expressed as a testament to the ‘quality’ of construction and work in the building process. The link between durability and quality of work is further emphasized by the test of time Roger’s example – the 5,000-year-old Skara Brae – has withstood.

Roger’s temporal focus is on duration and durability, on structures of the past, but also on the continuation of current structures’ presence. His is an experience and perception that is not just of form, but also of process; constantly created and elaborated on by his movements through the enduring structures built by past residents of this same archipelago. From these movements, permanence has come to be perceived as a virtue. This permanence is one that allows for change and additions to the landscape, as long as they comply with the standards of work and construction of the structures that have come before them. It is through such durability that, for Roger, the landscape is as alive with the past as it is with the present.

There is another element to Roger’s comments, one that situates the legitimacy of his statements within the rights and wishes of a specific group of people, to which he belongs. Roger does not just speak for himself on this matter, but for the ‘local people’ in general: “the local people like a bit of quality. That’s what the culture is about.” What ‘the local people like’ is fundamental to Roger’s particular experience of the landscape. When Roger sees and thinks of the large turbines, he doesn’t just see the physical machines or just think about his own past experiences working with building materials and at the Burgar Hill testing site. He sees and thinks of them as representing a long history of ‘quality,’ of which he is a part. In this sense, the turbines are a symbol, but not just of one concept or notion. Nor do they stand-alone. For Roger, the turbines intertwine with the structures of the landscape to represent the continuation of elements of the past in the presence. These elements are fundamental to both his and a larger Orcadian understanding and experience of the landscape as within the continuation and progression of time.

Anthony Cohen’s (1986) ethnography about the constitution of local identity in the Shetland island of Whalsay is quite pertinent here and is helpful to elucidate Roger’s own association with a particular group of local people. One of Cohen’s major arguments is that this distinctiveness, and the associated boundaries of belonging and difference, can be located in symbolic representations. It is the joint recognition of interpretations of symbols that lead to an understanding of cohesion, primarily established in opposition to an external difference. However, such symbolic representations do not necessarily mean the exact same thing to people within the same group. Hence they are re-constituted and elaborated on throughout time, allowing for and understanding development, change and variety that exists beneath the surface of ‘sameness’ often attributed to ‘locally distinct’ categories of people. The following example may seem to contradict this last point as it presents juxtaposition between local support for the turbines and incomers rejection of them. However, it does serve as an example of how different perceptions of the landscape and its temporality can be in Orkney. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that these examples are just a few of the many characters and opinions in Orkney, a point I will return to throughout this paper.

Industrialization of the Landscape

In their own ways both Ingold (2011) and Bender (1993, 2002), along with Flint and Morphy (2000) and Tilly (1994), critically situate their approach to landscape against an historical understanding of landscape in Western and colonial discourses and practices. All argue that these discourses and practices perpetuate a nature/culture dichotomy, in which landscape, as nature, is often seen as a timeless backdrop of human activity. The above example aligns with their arguments for landscapes and environments to be considered as both processual and deeply intertwined with human activity and consciousness. Together these arguments have formed what is known as the phenomenological approach to landscape. Roger’s statements exemplify the link to the intimate and historical knowledge each person builds up through his or her lived experiences, which Bender (2002) and Ingold (2011) most notably make. However, the following example challenges the encompassing ubiquity of this view. In doing so, this example begs the questions: If the phenomenological approach to landscape is reaction to the understanding and representation of nature and culture as dichotomous, can lived experiences of this dichotomy as ‘true’ factor into a phenomenological analysis?

One day at yarn spinning class I was chatting with an English woman, Julia. Now in her sixties, she had lived in Orkney for almost thirty years. While chatting I decided to ask Julia why she moved up. She

replied by telling me of how crowded it was down there, in the south of England, how it took forever to get anywhere and how you always had to drive, often through traffic. She had wanted to move away, not only from the number of people, but also from what she felt was the stifling nature of miles and miles of cement roads, the twisting network of row houses and shops, big-business; the speed and 'drive'. In short, Julia wanted to 'get away from it all,' as she put it. I was interested to see what Julia's thoughts were on the presence of renewables. When I found her alone fixing one of the wheels during the tea and coffee break I struck up our conversation again by telling her a bit about my research.

"Well, this is sure the right place for that," she replied.

"What are your thoughts on it all? ...I mean, renewables here..." I asked.

"They're terrible, the [wind] turbines, that is," Julia responded.

"Oh really? Why so?" I probed a bit further.

"They're a blight on the landscape. This is exactly the kind of thing I moved up here to get away from.

This sort of... industrialization of the landscape."

(J₃-16.3.14)

Unlike Roger, who sees the wind turbines as adding to and reinforcing what he considers to be part of the Orcadian 'culture,' Julia has a much harsher reaction, one that relates inversely to the reason why she moved up to Orkney in the first place. Her expectation and understating of what Orkney *is*, what the landscape *should be*, can be located in this reason, one that is fundamentally about the negativity of population density. In Julia's experience people make it harder to get places, slow things down, cover things (land) up. When in a dense concentration, people dominate. For many others like her, Orkney was and still is the place to 'get away from it all.' While often an unrecognized undercurrent, in this 'Orkney imagination' the landscape is often considered 'unspoilt,' by the effects of human domination.

The issues of time, human presence, and one's surrounding environment are deeply intertwined in Julia's statements. Although there are clear connections between movement and time, I propose that these comments say more for how Orkney is perceived *within* time than how time is experienced in Orkney. Julia's expectations of Orkney set it up as outside of time, a place that should be preserved the way it is, or at least the way it is in her imagination. Such an understanding of Orkney resists the introduction of wind turbines, as they disturb the preservation of the place as it was imagined to be. On the other hand, Roger sees Orkney as he has throughout his life, a place that changes and develops with the passage of time. Orkney is even one with an 'energy history,' justifying and situating the current presence of wind turbines as congruent with an ever expanding past. Julia and Roger's understanding and experience of the turbines as part of the landscape represent two contrasting 'Orkney Imaginations.'

Much like Andrew Whitehouse describes in his (2009) article on the different ways farmers and RSPB workers in the Scottish island of Islay see and experience the same piece of land, Roger and Julia could be said to be seeing and experiencing the same place, but in ways unique to their experience and understanding. Whitehouse's analysis takes a primarily symbolic approach, informed by the works of Anthony Cohen (1996), discussed above. Whitehouse argues that the Loch Gruinart RSBP reserve, the piece of land in question, is a symbol through which both the contestation of difference is located and the differences between the farmers and RSPB employees is constructed. The same could be said for Roger, Julia,⁴ and the wind turbines. For Roger, his current experience and perception of the turbines has been constituted over the course of his life in Orkney, and in conjunction with his own work with similar machines and knowledge of the landscape. For Julia, her experience of the turbines exists in opposition to a life lived elsewhere and an expectation of

⁴ However, it would not be appropriate to label it as a contestation in the case of Roger and Julia, or even in the case of contestations between the opinions on the wind turbines and their place within the landscape of Orkney. For one, there are a variety of opinions, which cannot be dichotomously labeled as 'positive' or 'negative,' as I will discuss later on in this section. Secondly, there is not an overt contestation within the community concerning this issue, or at least there was not during the time of my fieldwork. Finally, for the purpose of the argument, I am placing Roger and Julia's statements against each other. The two, anonymised for their privacy, made no reference of the other or of any other similar opposing viewpoint in their comments.

how Orkney would be an escape from that life. There is not only a difference in how each understands and sees the turbines, but how each understanding and perspective has come to be.

There are major differences in how each example of Roger and Julia's way of seeing does or does not serve to complement the understanding of nature and human sociality as deeply intertwined, which the phenomenological approach to landscape promotes. Despite originating from a different set of experiences, I argue that the phenomenological approach is equally equipped to address the foundations of Julia's more dichotomous understanding of nature and culture. Unlike Roger's her lived experience and knowledge of Orkney is limited to 30 years she has lived there. What's more, this understanding is informed by her expectations of the place, set up in opposition to her lived experience in the south. Considered in such a way, it is the full extent of Julia's experiences of life over time that have influenced and constituted her current understanding of this place just as much as Roger's have. As Bender notes, "The point is simply that it is we, through our embodied understanding, our being-in-the-world, who create the categories and the interpretations," (2002: 104); however, I would change the end of this quote to say, "the categories of *our* interpretations." For Julia, this 'embodied understanding,' this 'being-in-the-world,' is one that has been lived in different places. Therefore, it is informed by those experiences, as was and is her expectation for life and landscape in Orkney.

However, the oppositional representation of Roger and Julia's differences as all coming down to a difference between being local and being an incomer is far from the reality I experienced during my fieldwork. Furthermore, each person's understanding and experience of the turbines cannot be merely fitted into 'negative' and 'positive.' During my time in Orkney those I encountered included incomers who had moved up to Orkney specifically to work in the renewables industry and saw the turbines as a productive part of a transition from fossil fuels; Orcadian farmers who saw the turbines as part of a working landscape; Orcadian business men who saw the turbines as business opportunities; incomers who also saw the turbines as a part of a necessary transition; local and incomer nature enthusiasts who saw the turbines as an obstruction to the 'unspoilt' landscape; as well as Orcadians, primarily a small number of artists, who saw the turbines as unnatural, out of place, and even a blight on the landscape. While markedly present in ethnographies of Scotland, the local/incomer dichotomy is often represented as complex and interactive. Tamara Kohn (2002) considers islander identity in Scotland as along a continuum, regulated by the presence of a specific behaviour and the engagement in particular activities. Sociologists Ross Bond and Michael Rosie (2006) also consider 'Scottishness' in general along a certain continuum, however they complicate this continuum by gauging it's position in association to a number of other criteria. Other anthropologists such as Fiona Mackenzie (2006) and Kimberly Masson (2007) oppose the continuum perspective and instead focus respectively on how identity is employed and how subtleties in identity are negotiated. In his ethnography of Scottish Identity in Orkney, Michael Lange (2007) dissects a variety of notions on identity, heritage and belonging, to reveal the very complex and shifting network of ideas that lies beneath a simplistic surface of stereotypes and generalisations, all of which his informants are very aware of.⁵ In line with regional ethnographies that serve to demonstrate the overwhelming presence and complexity of identity and local/incomer distinctions in Scotland (Cohen 1986; Lange 2007; Nadel Klein 2009) the examples of Roger and Julia must be situated in a whole host of 'Orkney Imaginations' and their related temporalities.

Therefore, Roger and Julia's differences should not be considered as rooted in a distinction between being local and being an incomer. Instead we should focus on the very personal experiences and understandings that Roger and Julia have of both the wind turbines and their place within the landscape. Such an approach allows for the existence of variety and of the plurality of time and place. The very personal experiences that influence Roger and Julia's temporal associations of the landscape can also be seen as constituting the particular value, or lack of value, each places on the wind turbines. Such constitution of value can be further illustrated by the articulation of the potential value of the turbines as a future source of income, as is illustrated by the following example.

It's About the Future, Ya Ken?

I was in one of the northern isles, interviewing a woman, Sam, about the islanders decision to buy a commu-

⁵ Also see Jane Nadel-Klein (2009), Joseph Webster (2012), Fiona Gill (2005), John Gray (2000), Peter Mewett (1982), and, of course, Anthony Cohen (1987). For the purpose of this paper, I limit my list of ethnographies on identity and incomer/local distinctions to the area of Scotland. However, this is an issue that is present in places over the globe, to which a much larger list of ethnographies would attest.

nity wind turbine. In our interview Sam told me a particularly interesting story that had to do with changes in one local Orcadian⁶ woman's views about the structure.

There was a woman who was against the turbine at the start and during the vote. But after it was installed she started to see it differently. She saw how it was benefiting the community and would continue to. Afterwards she wanted to take down her dyke so that she could see it turning. She isn't around now, but her children and grandchildren are. That's part of it, ya ken, it's about succession (S-27.2.14).

I heard this woman's story at least twice more during my time in Orkney. This woman's final understanding of the turbine and potential actions seemed to typify what many saw turbines to be: an investment in the future. Sam also elaborated on this point of the story, saying,

The locals have a different mind-set. They want to know the island and community has a future, not just for the next year, or even for the next ten, but also for the next 100 years... Locals have lived through development, they have seen that is what happens and that is what makes your life better (S-27.2.14).

In a way these comments echo Roger's. While his comments focused on structural durability, both comments imply a sense of continuation or stability.⁷ Interestingly enough, the value placed on these qualities of permanence does not contradict the occurrence of development and change. Furthermore, for Sam, the story of 'the woman who changed her mind' is as much about present tensions between various understandings of the landscape – in which *the measurements don't coincide*⁸ – as it is about the future orientation of 'local' residents. However, as the head of that island's Development Trust and a long time resident, Sam was particularly attuned to the future viability of life there, something the presence of the turbine enabled. Therefore, while temporal connections can be drawn between Sam and Roger's comments, each retain their personal specificity.

The change in the woman's perception and experience are also representative of how the plurality of place can depend on time, referencing the Bender passage quoted at the end of the introduction to this paper. In this quote Bender (2002) discusses the various configurations of personhood, identity and the moment. Once again we see how individual experience and perception of our surroundings is constituted through our lived interactions with the world. As life is a process lived through time, so too are our experiences lived throughout time, inherently fraught with change. On the one hand this process may be the further development of a perception as valid or true, the durability of ideas. On the other hand, as the woman in Sam's story also shows, this process can also be transformation or alteration; the imbrications of meaning exist both in the same time, as it varies person to person, and within each person throughout time. Cohen's (1986, 1987) understanding of the continuous interpretation and elaboration of symbols is also helpful to consider here, primarily in conjunction with the phenomenological approach to landscape. In this approach perception and experience influence each other, not in one particular order, but interchangeably and even at times simultaneously. The woman in Sam's story goes from objecting to the turbine to seeing its worth and then to wanting to change her view so she can *see* it more often. The woman has since died, as Sam notes in her story, so I was unable to speak with her directly about her change in opinion. However, as Sam tells it, the change in this woman's understanding about the value of turbines played a crucial role in her perception of them. In this case, experience does not seem to be the direct motivating factor prompting her change in opinion. Instead the woman's change in understanding and perception elicited a wish to change how much the turbine was present in her life and therefore to change her everyday experience of it. Experience and perception interact interchangeably, simultaneously influencing each other. Indeed, Sam is also appropriating the story of this woman into her own symbol or category for interpreting and understanding place of the community turbine within the landscape of the isle.

⁶ I say 'local' and 'Orcadian' to further emphasis that she was from that particular island. She was both local to Orkney, but, even more so, to the island in question.

⁷ An interesting recent parallel, which I do not have the time or space to fully discuss here, is Katharine Dow's (2013) chapter "Building a stable environment in Scotland" in the edited volume *Parenting in Global Perspective*. Here Dow considers pressing issues of global environmental degradation and climate change affect current and potential mothers in Scotland. Parallels are drawn between what is a stable and supportive environment, fiscally and physically, for a child and for the human population.

⁸ A reference to the quote by Ingold included at the very beginning of this paper.

Conclusion

The examples of Roger, Julia and Sam serve to demonstrate the range of temporal perceptions and experiences the residents of Orkney have of the same place. The particular development of wind turbines draws out this range, providing a recent change in the landscape through which I positioned my discussions with each resident. As demonstrated, perception and experience do not merely exist, but are developed over time through each person's individual engagement with the world, enabling an understanding of experience that is at once deeply personal and open to change. Here I have combined the phenomenological approach to landscape with a symbolic analysis in order to understand how symbols are constituted and reconstituted throughout time. The temporalities I have explored suggest an array of values associated with both objects and ideas, each encapsulated in the turbines as material and symbolic forms and in the 'Orkney imaginations' they inhabit. In Orkney, the plurality of place intimately tied into a plurality of both time and meaning, bringing in to play different notions of nature, sociality, past, present and future.

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