

Landscape versus Science and the Law: *The Box of Delights*

Rural spaces in television fiction are rarely discussed, yet they have often played significant aesthetic roles, in some cases constituting figures of narrative design. The television historians who do address rural settings tend to describe the onscreen landscapes either generically, or as if they were a series of discrete paintings. These perspectives have a degree of validity: landscape paintings from Claude to neo-romanticism often provide the point of departure for composition, though the result is nonetheless a space through which protagonist and camera move fluidly. As Patrick Keiller has argued, television narratives also tend to superimpose an affective palimpsest on the landscape which may or may not detract from the specific pro-televisual character of a location. Cheating – the practice of using one landscape as a stand-in for another – may accentuate the sense of superimposition.

Keiller's palimpsest can be seen as a subordination of a particular location to the exigencies of storytelling. If we take this approach, then we might be inclined to read the landscape typologically rather than as a specific, individual site which itself shapes and determines narrative. However, this would be to ignore the rigour with which programme locations are researched both during pre-production by the crew and, after broadcast, by pensive spectators eager to trace the locations used. Viewers' interest in locations is in evidence on hundreds of fan websites: locations are arguably as important to any programme's intertextuality as its stars. Three qualities: narrative, landscapes as generic type and the specific connotations of individual sites are often meshed together with a complexity which demands consideration.

*The Box of Delights* is a case in point. For those of you who are unfamiliar with it, *The Box of Delights* was adapted from John Masefield's 1935 novel by the BBC children's drama department in 1984. The programme is set in the mid-1930s. It begins as a young boy, Kay Harker, encounters Cole Hawlings. A criminal called Abner Brown wants to get possession of Cole's magical box – the box of delights of the title. Before Cole is kidnapped, he entrusts Kay with this box. The story then

follows Kay's investigation of the box's powers and history while he spies on Abner and eludes Abner's henchmen.

The narrative unfolds through a series of landscapes, all shot on location apart from two magical spaces, which are animated. Each landscape characterises and demarcates an individual segment of Kay's narrative arc: the programme's sequences seem like discrete parables, each of them identified with a distinct landscape style. As this is an adventure story set in the countryside, landscape is often imbued with a contingent, functional character: for example, landscape as refuge. Faced the threat of pursuit, the heroes often seek refuge. Kay Harker uses the box of delights to shrink himself so that he can hide in the countryside. The shots from his point of view thus become the gaze of a hunted prey.

It is not only dimensions which change, but also the ontology of landscapes. In one scene, Kay's mentor figure, Cole Hawlings, escapes from his pursuers by going into a landscape painting of the Alps, which hangs in Kay's house. At the same time, the local respect for an institution set in a country estate is challenged. Abner's base is a castle which poses as a missionary college. Despite Kay's testimony, the police continue to perceive the castle as a bastion of respectability. Kay, however, is able to read traces of villainy in the landscape. He trespasses on the grounds of the castle in order to spy on Abner. His friend, Peter, is worried they may be caught by gamekeepers. Kay, however, can see that the habitat has not been cared for: he says, 'Easy to see you don't live in the country. If this place was properly preserved, we'd have seen some pheasants, or keepers' vermin boards.'

The programme echoes a topical issue of the mid-1930s, when the novel was written, namely the concern that seemingly respectable landowners, such as the Cliveden set, had dangerous fascist leanings. Think *Went the Day Well*, *Remains of the Day* and Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up*. The politics of the villains in *The Box of Delights* are never made so explicit, but they have a quasi-fascist preference for advanced technology as a means of iniquity: they travel in a car that turns into an aeroplane; they threaten to use a torture device called the scrounger; Abner spies on his men with a televisual surveillance system and the gang have a knack for using telephones to fool the police. The local inspector's blind rationalism predisposes him to be

hoodwinked: he believes that magic is a matter of simple trickery and relies on the telephone as his sole means of investigation. After being deceived by a call from Abner's gang, he smugly lifts up the telephone and states: 'Now that is how science helps the law. You thought your friend was scrobbled and now you hear, by science and the law...that all is fine.'

The topoi of the source novel are not only techno-political: they are also social and personal. The novel's combination of fantasy, English myth and history, and the landscape of the Cotswolds smacks of neo-romanticism. 1935 - the year the novel was published - is sometimes given as the rough starting point of neo-romanticism in England. Masefield's rural themes pre-date this: his personal interest in the rural West Midlands originates from his early childhood spent on a farm in Ledbury. The novel is patently set south of Ledbury, since Condicote is referred to as the local station. However, novel and programme also feature Masefield's fictional toponymy – that is, the naming of place: the nearest town is called Tatchester. Kay changes trains at a station called Musborough Junction. Neither of these places exists.

The television adaptation complicates this mixture of actual and fictional topography, through its particular choice of location. Bewdley stands in for Condicote, so that many scenes take place 40 miles north of their ostensible setting. However, more noticeably, the programme moves the majority of the action to within 10 miles of Masefield's birthplace of Ledbury, with nearby Eastnor Castle playing Abner's base on screen. The programme's topography is thus more firmly grounded in Masefield's biographical history than the novel itself.

To this end, the programme follows *Brideshead Revisited's* lead. Evelyn Waugh's novel can be read as a kind of *roman à clef*, but the 1981 Granada television adaptation markedly accentuated the biographical thrust by introducing specific topographical references to Waugh's life which are not present in the novel. By the early 1980s, landscape had become a central theme in much English television drama, to the extent that such subtleties were more common.

In the case of *The Box of Delights*, the biographical mapping gives a firmer grounding to the topography Kay explores. The novel's tension between the manifestations of

landscape as fiction and as actuality is intensified by the screen version, which hints at the tension in the oppositions between animated and live action landscapes, and between factual and fictional toponymy. Significantly, near the start of the programme, Kay is travelling by train, looking out on the passing landscape. He breathes on the window pane and traces his initials in the steamed-up glass, superimposing his fictional name over the view of the scenery.

The interrelationship between these two layers of televisual landscape, actual location and narratorial palimpsest, is thematised by the programme. This is achieved partly through the programme's use of what were then sophisticated visual effects. I'm now going to screen a short clip from *The Box of Delights* and then I'll develop this point. In this scene, Kay is now in possession of the box of delights, and about to explore some of its magic.

### **CLIP**

The television version of *The Box of Delights* can be seen as part of a wider revival of a mythological rendering of landscape on television. For example, in the same year, 1984, the first season of *Robin of Sherwood* was transmitted. Richard Carpenter's mystical version of the Robin Hood legend also featured Herne the hunter as a character. The clip I've screened from *The Box of Delights* can be seen as the key turning point in the programme's landscape plot. In the magic cartoon wilderness inside the box, Kay is taught by Herne the Hunter that he must constantly alter his form to blend in and conceal himself from predators. Survival and aesthetics become melded. Kay effectively learns how to read the landscape as a site of danger. After this, in the 'real' world, he deftly eludes his pursuers by shrinking his body and finding refuge. Moreover, the box gives him the ability to transgress dimensions of size, time and space, and thus enables him to penetrate Abner's rural hideout. The picturesque grounds of Abner's castle are turned to his advantage: he exploits the picturesque's tendency to partial concealment in order to hide his own body. Kay's flexible relationship with the landscape becomes his biggest advantage over Abner's criminal science and the myopia of the police.

Like the 1978 film *The Water Babies*, which also mixed animation and live action, a child's imagination and size are depicted as virtues. In *The Box of Delights*, the box enables Kay to exaggerate his child's smallness, by shrinking his body. The difference between adult and child sizes is emphasised. How a landscape is perceived, the programme reminds us, depends on the dimensions as well as the ideological perspective of the figure in the landscape. While the depiction of the miniature Kay in the landscape is fantastical, it also provides a kind of intensified naturalism: the grounds are seen in much more microscopic detail than they would be in most landscape dramas. They are often filmed through a wide angle lens, redolent of a nature programme aesthetic, emphasising distance between the things on screen. The lesson Kay is given in the animated landscape inside the box, enables him to achieve a more dynamic relationship with the real landscapes outside the box. The combination of magical powers with rural observation makes for a series of magical realist landscapes.

The parabolic scenario depicted in the Herne the Hunter sequence I screened is, in form, more complex than the allegorical underwater section of *The Water Babies*. Kay emerges, noting that the adventure took only 2 minutes. In a rare inversion of ellipsis, this scene has a longer screen duration than story duration. Plot is allowed to take on the expansiveness of the wild wood. The exploration of the wood is expanded through Kay's subjectivity, rendered with frequent point of view shots.

The blending of animation and live action, here with chromakey and quantel paintbox, was far in advance of that in *The Water Babies*. The effects may look dated now, but when the programme was first released on video in 1985, its sophisticated colour separation overlay was one of the first things listed as a selling point on the blurb. Renny Rye, the programme's director, initially wanted to shoot the programme on film. However, when he found that the visual effects available to the BBC were more sophisticated for video than for film, he changed his mind and shot the whole programme on video. At this point there was still a great deal of uncertainty among television directors and technicians on which recording medium was best suited for the depiction of landscape. The old system in evidence in, for example, *War and Peace* used video for interior scenes and film for exterior inserts shot on location. While television plays shot entirely on location, on film appeared increasingly during

the 1970s, some serial productions towards the end of the decade used video for location exteriors as well as interior scenes, with distinctive results. For example, LWT's 1977 *Love for Lydia* used mainly studios, but its location work was also on video. The sensitivity of video to sunlight is put to use for the pathetic fallacy in one scene, when a sudden blaze of sunlight followed by shadow marks a short-lived moment of happiness for Lydia. *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, broadcast on BBC in 1978 was shot entirely on location, on video. The quality of immediacy that video seems to retain in contrast with film is utilised well at the start of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* when a journey across a landscape elicits Mrs Henchard's memories. Past and present seem to take place at once, linked by the land she is traversing for a second time. The disagreement about media came to a head at the 1981 RTS conference on 'Picture Quality – the Technical and Aesthetic Characteristics' where Jonathan Powell complained that the outside broadcast team shot the landscapes in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as if it were a football pitch.

The uniqueness video lends *The Box of Delights'* landscapes is more pronounced. The special effects facilitated not only the superimposition of elements shot at separate locations, but the variation of their respective sizes. So, for instance, Kay's body could be superimposed on a landscape and be made to appear to get nearer or further away and larger or smaller. Likewise, two-dimensional landscape images such as the painting in Kay's house could be made to appear to move closer to the camera. Cole Hawlings could be shown moving into the two-dimensional landscape shown in the painting. The effect of this is to break the centripetal/centrifugal divide posited by André Bazin in his essay on painting and cinema. The usually centripetal image of a painted landscape seems to move towards the camera in *The Box of Delights*. Something similar occurs in the sequence I screened, where Herne's wild wood moves out of the box, towards us. In both cases, the frame within the frame grows until its boundaries are somewhere beyond the frame of the television screen. Thus the centripetal image of the painting or wild wood becomes a centrifugal one.

*The Box of Delights* exemplifies Shaun Sutton's argument that children's television drama was often at the forefront of developments in the practice of location shooting. The special effects enabled a more dynamic, magical relationship between figure and the landscape he/she is moving through. In its use of chromakey for landscape scenes

*The Box of Delights* was preceded perhaps only by Mick Hartney's avant-garde film, *Anchored State* which combined the image of a rocking ship with a background of beach and waves. The increasing attraction of video to avant-garde filmmakers notwithstanding, most avant-garde landscape pieces were still shot on 16mm in the 1970s, like most television location scenes.

In *The Box of Delights*, when Kay flies across the landscape or climbs through it having shrunk, the superimposition effected by quantel paintbox and colour separation overlay magically combines a naturalist landscape with a moving figure: the camera at once explores a location and traces a magical narrative across it. The whole story is ultimately revealed to be a dream: retrospectively, this makes sense of the fact that the major action commences directly after Kay has traced his initials over the window, passing through the countryside. The story is his dream, superimposed on the setting: thus the programme thematises the process in landscape fiction by which narrative and rural actuality are combined. The result is arguably a liberating one, in terms of eschatology. Masefield argued that if the playwright is successful, he or she 'acquires the equal justice of God, in the apprehending of which men become almost as God and speak with divine beauty and divine mercy, seeing past, present and future.' Kay's arc is similar to this: contravening science and the law, he experiences a landscape in which past, present, myth and premonition are combined. Kay's arc is imprinted on the landscape, but he also becomes receptive and responsive to its character, taking on the role of spirit of the place.