A tool for surveying The Landscape: report on work in progress

JACKY BOWRING

WHEN SEARCHING THE JOURNAL, *The Landscape*, for evidence of the picturesque, I was thwarted by its covert existence. The conventions of the picturesque are naturalised and taken for granted, reflecting Roland Barthes' concept of myth. Barthes' identification of denotation and connotation as the basis of myth were the foundation for the development of my research tool, the L-diagram.

Jacky Bowring is a PhD student in the Department of Landscape Architecture, Lincoln University, PO Box 84, Lincoln University, Canterbury, New Zealand. email: bowringj@kea.lincoln.ac.nz

FOR 18 YEARS the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects (NZILA) produced a professional journal, *The Landscape*. The journal replaced the *NZILA Newsletter*, and was intended to 'publicise the landscape philosophy more actively, and act as a vehicle for the dissemination of information about the profession and its activities' (Challenger 1976, p.17). *The Landscape* chronicled the development of the profession, it was the Institute's 'voice' (Challenger 1994, p.2). In 1994 continuing financial difficulties and the ongoing problem of finding sufficient content saw *The Landscape* cease publication with issue 54. These journals represent a significant corpus as an almost completely self contained, published discourse, by which the profession in New Zealand defined itself. *The Landscape* was therefore an ideal focus for my doctoral research, which explores the persistence of the conventions of the picturesque as an underlying design code in New Zealand landscape architecture.

As a research focus *The Landscape* has many advantages. For example, it is readily available; researcher bias is minimised because interviews are not needed; and the discontinuation of the journal means no imposed boundaries are necessary. However, it has one major disadvantage. The picturesque is very rarely referred to directly in *The Landscape*. It has been 'naturalised' and taken for granted, and is thus buried in the discourse. The challenge I faced therefore was how to unearth these buried signs of picturesque convention, slowly scraping and brushing away in the manner of an archaeologist investigating a site. Like all archaeologists I needed a tool.

The way in which the picturesque is concealed in the discourse of the NZILA is an example of what Roland Barthes (1968, 1973) calls myth, where meanings are 'buried beneath layers of what he termed ideological "sediment"' (Duncan and Duncan 1988, p.117). Barthes introduced the concepts of denotation and connotation to explain how myth operates. He suggests that at one level there is an apparently intended meaning for some image or idea: *denotation*. The *Chambers English dictionary* (1990) defines the verb *to denote* as 'to indicate by a sign: to signify or mean'. This definition could be portrayed as a simple relationship between a representation and its intended meaning (figure 1). From this perspective, a solely denotative reading could be described as realist, where a representation is considered to be a 'real' depiction of something. Brown and Keith reflect this view with their observation (cited in Pound 1982, p.43) that 'the very real qualities of topographical painting derive directly from the landscape'.
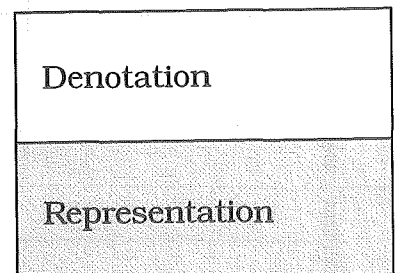
Figure 1: Defining denotation in relation to representation

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Representation	Connotation
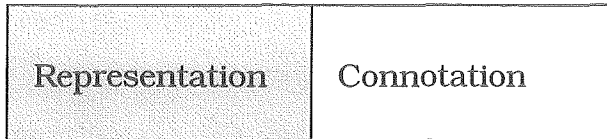
Figure 2: Defining connotation in relation to representation

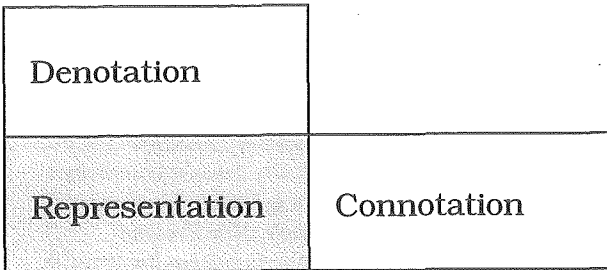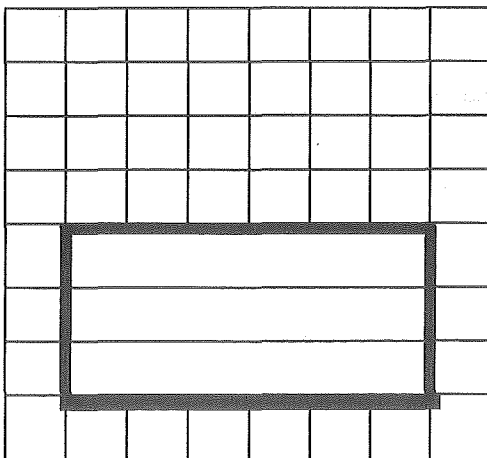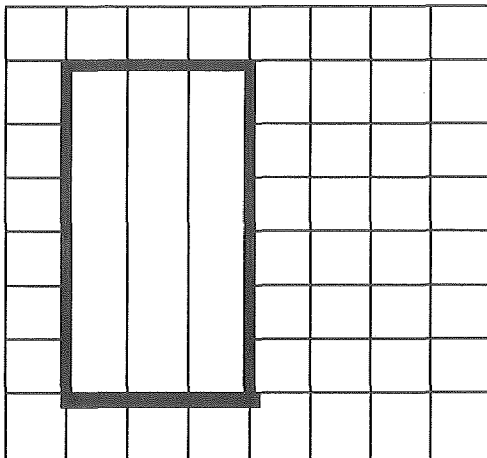| Denotation	
Representation	Connotation

Figure 3: The L-diagram

Figure 4: Polarising filters are transparent to light in one plane and absorbent to light perpendicular to it

But there are other meanings attached to a representation—its *connotations*, which the *Chambers English dictionary* defines as 'the implication of something more than the denotation of an object'. The connotative meanings can be shown visually as an alternative or additional interpretation of the representation (figure 2). A relativist reading focuses only on this connotative axis, exemplified by Pound's analysis (1983, p.13) of New Zealand landscape painting: 'If landscape painting *is* a window, you can see nothing through it of the land; it offers nothing but signs painted in paint; its surface is full of nothing but paint, it is painted entirely over.'

Working with these ideas of denotation and connotation and my visualisation of them, I developed a model or notational system to conceptualise the idea of myth. In this 'L-diagram', denotation and connotation are placed at right angles to each other, and intersect to form myth (figure 3).

The concept of the L-diagram can be paralleled with the principles of polarising filters. A polarising filter is transparent for light within one plane, but absorbent for light perpendicular to it (figure 4), a principle of preferential absorption used in Polaroid lenses to cut out glare. When two polarising lenses are 'crossed', or placed at 90 degrees to each other, the effect is an almost complete blocking of the light (figure 5).

By analogy, denotation and connotation each let through a 'preferred' reading and eliminate the 'glare' of an alternative interpretation. Further, when denotation and connotation come together ('cross'), as they do in myth, they become confused. A transparent or innocent view is no longer possible; in its place is an uneasy, ambiguous, obscure picture, where we no longer know what is denotation and what is connotation. Connotation is naturalised as denotation, and the two are completely conflated. The L-diagram denaturalises myth, pulling denotation and connotation apart. It thus becomes a model of myth and an analytical tool.

Although the L-diagram owes a debt to the work of Barthes, it makes a major departure from his notion of semiological chains. Barthes conceptualises myth as a hierarchical system of planes: denotation comes first, and connotation appears at a subsequent level. In contrast, the L-diagram does not build connotation from denotation, but shows how each has an equal pull on the representation, and can exist simultaneously.

L-diagram and the picturesque

The central myth of the picturesque can be expressed with an L-diagram (figure 6). Whilst all landscape design must by definition combine nature and art, the relationship between the two in the picturesque is ambiguous: 'First there is nature (as if that is a certain thing), then there are pictures made by a painter, then there is a landscape designer making something that looks like paintings that look like nature' (Robinson 1991, p.13). Picturesque design denotes nature, but has connotations of the art that depicted

nature. The art on which the picturesque was based was very specific, initially drawing on the Golden Age imagery of Claude, Poussin and Rosa, and subsequently on Dutch and English painting. The influence of the initial imagery is significant, itself being based on myth and thus encumbering the picturesque with further connotations. Figure 7, for example, shows an L-diagram for a painting by Claude Lorrain. Whilst apparently denoting the Italian countryside, the image naturalises the connotations of Arcadia, and all the accompanying ideology.

An example of the picturesque as myth in *The Landscape* is an apparently innocuous 'naturalistic' design for a wetland. At Limeburners Creek Wetland, winner of the 1990 NZILA George Malcolm Award, the intention was 'to give the appearance that it had occurred naturally, when in fact it was man made' ('1990 Brickmakers Awards' 1991, p.7). Over time, the judges envisaged, the wetland would 'appear entirely natural rather than artificial' (ibid). The wetland's designer, Dennis Scott (1991, p.15), describes how 'the plant communities generally contain a diversity of species in the image of natural systems' and 'Stakes and large hardwood tree branches have been placed at the junction of islands and open water areas for birds to perch on'. The L-diagram in figure 8 indicates the relationship between the denotation of the branches and their connotations of artificiality. The practice of 'planting' dead trees is not new. Eighteenth century picturesque theorist William Gilpin (cited in Meyer 1992, p.168) described rotten and dying trees as 'capital sources of picturesque beauty' and Manwaring (1925) recounts how William Kent was laughed at for carrying imitations of paintings so far as to insert dead trees in the landscapes at Kensington and Carlton Gardens. The paintings which inspired Kent were those of Salvator Rosa, and he is known to have possessed a Rosa. Figure 9 expresses the relationship between dead trees and the influence of Rosa. While Scott's dead trees are justified on purely ecological grounds, figure 10 illustrates how the L-diagrams can be linked, to plot a string of connotation back to Rosa. Thus the transparence of the Limeburners Creek proposal is challenged and the claim of an innocent nature is revealed to be a myth of the picturesque.

The presentation of ecological designs as solely natural is a persistent myth in landscape architecture. Seddon (1995, p.7) suggests the driving force behind such attitudes, as typified by Ian McHarg's (1969) *Design with nature*, is 'the Romantic wish to conceal our interventions in the natural environment'. He contends that 'the romantic impulse is often justified by practitioners in scientific or deterministic terms, often borrowed from ecology, although landscape architects are not noted for their knowledge of this difficult science' (ibid, p.8). Treib (1995, p.51) also challenges the myth of the natural in ecological designs, why the natural is so easily accepted:

> Is it because the 'natural' pattern, masquerading as nature, is less open to question by client or visitor alike? . . . Or is it a conscious or unconscious harking back to received picturesque values?

The dead trees at Limeburners Creek are revealed to have connotations of the picturesque, providing an illustration of the way the picturesque is reproduced in the discourse through the sign of the 'natural'. The conflation of the
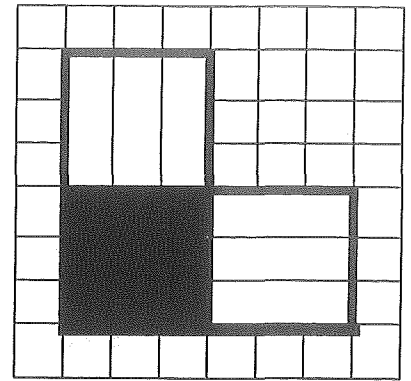

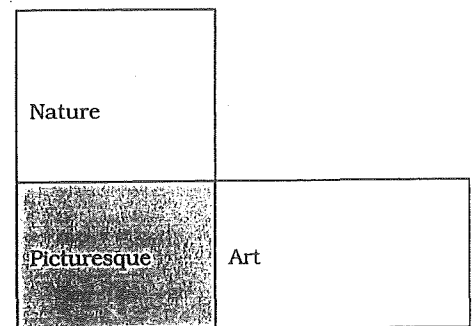*Figure 5: When crossed at 90°, polarising filters form an almost opaque zone*

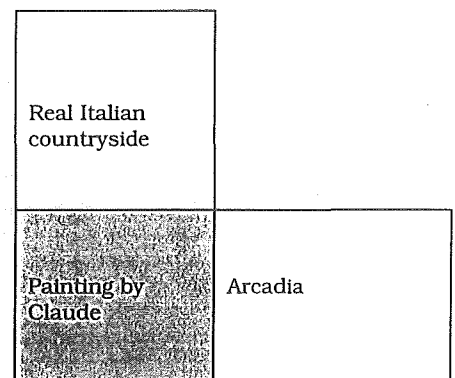*Figure 6: The myth of the picturesque*

Figure 7: L-diagram for a painting by Claude Lorrain

picturesque as natural is one of the myths unearthed in the survey of *The Landscape*, demonstrating how the picturesque has been naturalised in the discourse, taken for granted, concealed. The L-diagram provides a notational system for the dissection and display of myth, challenging the deceptive innocence of the published discourse.
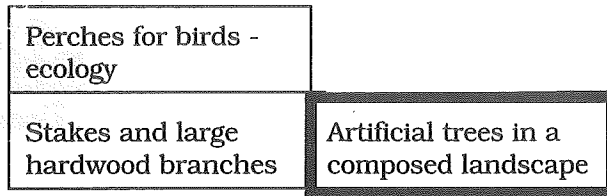

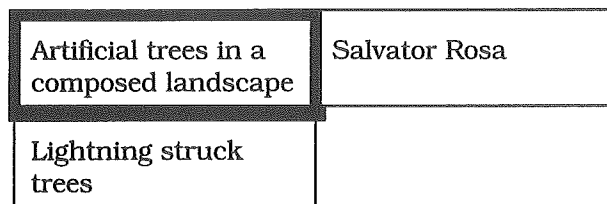*Figure* 8: *Perches for birds have connotations of artifice*

Figure 9: *Artificial trees have connotations of Salvator Rosa*
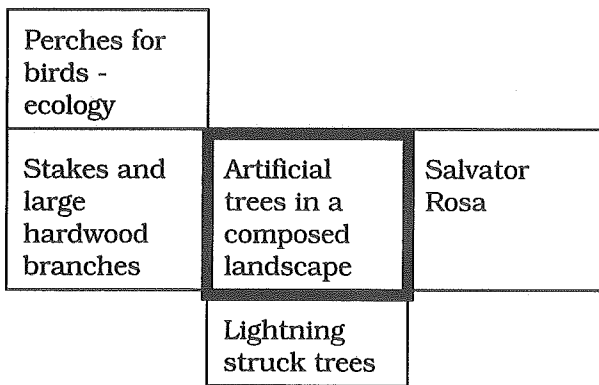

Figure 10: *Salvator Rosa at Limeburners Creek*

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