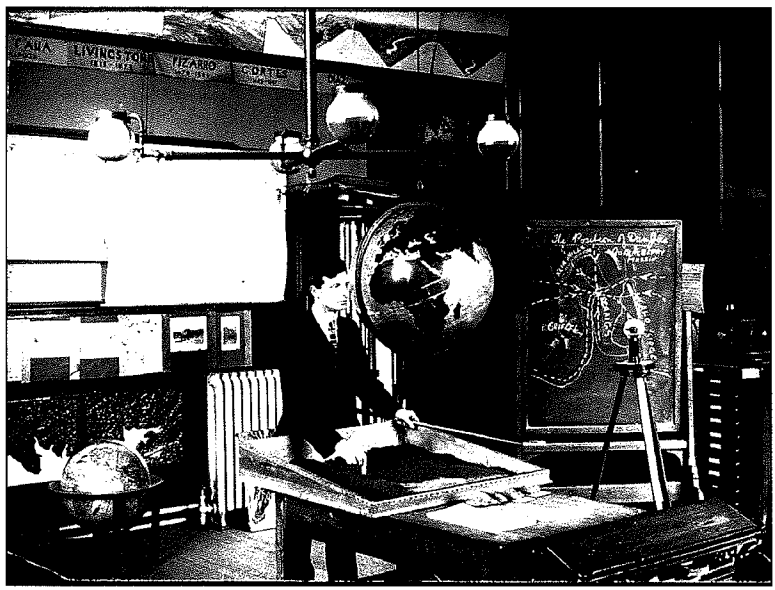
VISUAL AND HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHIES

Essays in Honour of Denis E. Cosgrove



Edited by
Veronica della Dora, Susan Digby and Begum Basdas

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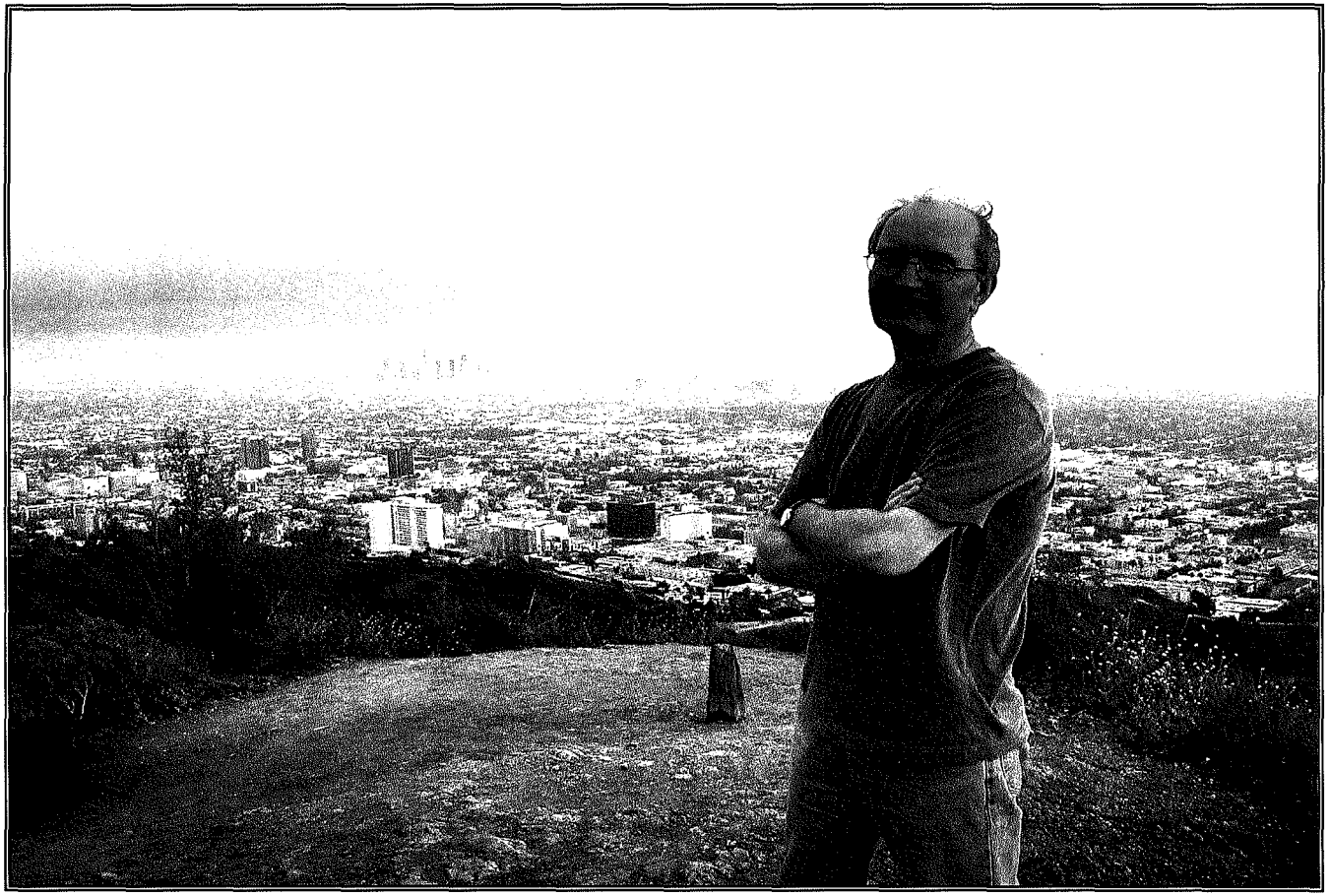

Denis Cosgrove (1948-2008)
Photograph courtesy of Neil Roberts

Table of Contents

11

Iconographies Elsewhere
Reading Sri Lankan Landscape in Translation

Tariq Jazeel

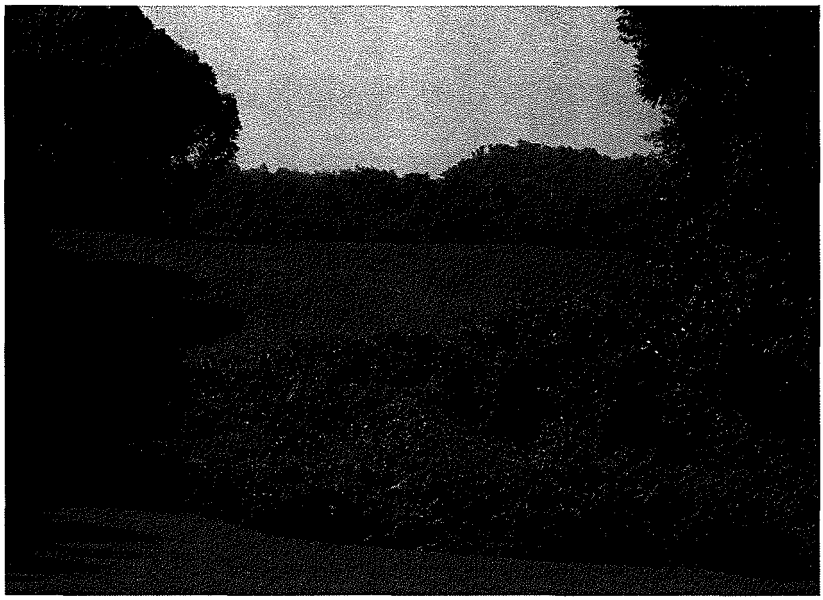

Fig. 11.1. View over Cinnamon Hill at Lunuganga, taken from the main house (photograph by the author).

In a quiet spot on the banks of Lake Deduwa on Sri Lanka's south-west coast lies the sprawling estate of Lunuganga, the home and garden of the late Geoffrey Bawa, perhaps the most well-known of Sri Lanka's 'tropical modern' architects. Now owned and run as a boutique hotel by the Lunuganga Trust, this 25-acre assortment of stunning landscapes and eclectic architectural experiments was Bawa's country retreat from 1948 till his death in 2003. Of the landscapes and views that Bawa created here over the years, one stood out as the architect's favourite. Standing at the estate's main house, looking across the thick lawn and up the gentle slope of Cinnamon Hill, the eye is directed through a corridor of trees either side of a green field, and in the middle distance, on the crest of the hill, a lone tree looms over a large pot (fig. 11.1). The tree directs the gaze across the horizon toward the white dome of the Katakuliya temple, a Buddhist stupa nestled into the thick vegetation on a hill in the distance beyond the estate (fig. 11.2).

Fig. 11.2. View over Cinnamon Hill at Lunuganga, taken from the middle ground (photograph by the author).

Of this view, Bawa once remarked:

> Over the years moving through the garden as it grew, one saw the potential of various areas which had inherently different atmospheres. For instance, the long view to the south ended with the temple, but in the middle distance was a ridge with a splendid ancient moonamal tree and when I placed a large Chinese jar under it, the hand of man was established in this middle distance.[1]

Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels' agenda setting 1988 anthology *The iconography of landscape* offers a useful and politically enabling way of reading this kind of landscape, of understanding it as a 'cultural image, a pictorial way of representing or symbolising surroundings'.[2] As a 'cultural image', Bawa's garden estate can be seen as a cultivated scenographic series of spaces, a retreat for a landed and wealthy colonialised gentleman, and as a *landscape* the view implies a classically modern separation of active viewing subject from passive field of objects gazed upon, toiled over and possessed. The landscape's smoothness, its uninterrupted lines of sight, conceal the considerable choreography—even complacency—that has gone into this composition. For example, Bawa took care to sink an access road in the middle ground within a ha-ha to create these smooth lines of sight. Though Geoffrey Bawa's portfolio of mid- to late- twentieth-century work was famously influenced by international modernism, his creative élan was also and clearly inspired by diverse historical influences such as European renaissance humanism and eighteenth century English landscape design.[3] And of course, in Bawa's own words that choreography and labour is explicitly coded male. As the feminist critique of early iconographical approaches to landscape notes, patriarchy structures this kind of bourgeois landscape composition from within.[4]

Cosgrove and Daniels' iconographic method has taught us to read these power relations and politics; to read a landscape aesthetics inalienably connected with European and colonial modernity. Whether that process of reading takes a fraction of a second, or a more considered critical analysis, as Daniels and Cosgrove suggest in their introductory essay to *The iconography of landscape*, this still involves 'reading "what we see", according to the manner in which objects and events are expressed by forms under varying historical conditions'.[5]

In this short essay, departing from this landscape, from this view that is, I want to take Cosgrove and Daniels' iconographic method seriously. In particular, I focus on the reading and textual metaphors that it offers as a way of teasing out the power relations and erasures woven into a landscape thought *as* text.[6] Methodologically, reading it is important to stress is an active process. It is something we do. In most cases we choose to do it, and as such it requires a degree of effort from us to engage a text. In this respect, our ability *to* read is dependent on the language and idiom of a text itself. Or to put this slightly differently, our ability to read is dependent on the kinds of literacies we can bring to a text in order to read its script, to engage its own meaning and idioms. And this is the broadly visual and broadly methodological point that I want to tease out in this chapter by taking the iconographic method

elsewhere, into another knowledge space so to speak. Because if landscapes are texts, that is if we can understand Geoffrey Bawa's favourite view by reading its representational and textual qualities as Cosgrove and Daniels suggest (and I think we can), then the simple point I want to make in this chapter is that like all other texts landscapes are written differently, in different kinds of languages that readers must work hard to read, sometimes in translation so to speak. In figures 11.1 and 11.2 there is, I want to suggest, another kind of textuality and thereby another kind of politics that reading this landscape in translation is positioned to tease out.

Reading landscape in translation is a methodological variation on Cosgrove and Daniels' iconographic method that draws some influence from the well-known efforts of the Subaltern Studies Collective's efforts to work against the grain of Eurocentric knowledge structures, pluralising the rationalities, knowledges and textualities that a properly postcolonial interpretive methodology is able to effectively bring into representation.[7] In this sense, what I am urging here is an interpretive landscape approach that, following Dipesh Chakrabarty's well-known efforts to provincialise Europe and proliferate modernity with its non-European habitations, attempts to 'learn from the subaltern'.[8] To be clear however, Geoffrey Bawa can hardly be regarded as in any sense 'subaltern' if 'subalternity' is to be viewed in narrowly classed terms. Rather, I employ the notion of subalternity theoretically here as metonym for domains of knowledge that an aggressively secular, post-Enlightenment, Eurocentric knowledge production cannot bring into representation through the rational categorisations it creates.[9] So, as useful as the reading I have just offered of Bawa's Lunuganga is, it is a reading that engages the textual properties of this landscape that are transparent to the Euro-American gaze. There are other elements of this view, let us call them a 'subaltern aesthetics', that reading this landscape in translation is positioned to bring out and in so doing make visible other political landscape formations that are not immediately accessible to the Eurocentric gaze. This kind of interpretive landscape work then, aims as Chakrabarty puts it:

> To go to the subaltern in order to learn to be radically fragmentary and episodic ... to move away from the certitudes that operate within the gesture that the knowing, judging, willing subject always already knows what is good for everybody, ahead of any investigation. The investigation, in turn, must be possessed of an openness so radical that I can express it only in Heideggarian terms: the capacity to hear that which one does not already understand.[10]

To signal this act of reading differently I use the metaphor of 'translation' quite deliberately in order to signpost detours through a set of debates elsewhere in disciplinary terms, notably the postcolonial variants of literary studies where translation as method has long been regarded as far more than a straightforward matching of equivalences. Translation instead is posed as a far more productively unsettling process wherein challenges are posed to the 'tolerance' of a language for assuming unaccustomed forms.[11] As Gayatri Spivak has written, good translation is the most intimate act of reading,[12] wherein the reader must work hard to understand the nuances and idioms of a text that are not available straight-forwardly to the Anglo-

phone social-sciences or humanities, or I would add, to the iconographic method. Reading in translation then is a process that methodologically surrenders to the 'special call of the text'; to as much as possible excavate and make visible the difference of a text in terms true to the singularity and rhetoric of those differences.[13]

So I return to *Lunuganga*, particularly to the architect Geoffrey Bawa's words. If we read them in translation as it were, I want to suggest another kind of worlding emerges. Bawa uses this as an example of an 'atmosphere' inherent to an area of the garden. This is more than just a 'view', and the view provides a more-than-visual aesthetic. Notice also how the Buddhist temple is integral to this composition, such that in a particular idiom it is key to the special atmosphere 'inherent' to the place. The temple, on this reading, signifies a somewhat naturalistic and harmonious reality in which the estate is set, so that if the 'hand of man' is established in the middle distance, then the stupa is in fact woven into the environment beyond. As we know, Bawa worked hard at naturalising this view, at producing this kind of naturalistic and harmonious reality, by sinking the estate's access road. As he went on to remark: 'In this view the vision of the lake was too slight to be effective and it became obvious that a part of the ridge needed to be lowered a few feet to make this whole composition establish itself with a total finality which has not changed and now looks as if it had been there since the beginning of time'.[14]

He clearly strives to produce a timeless, palpably sacred aesthetic, and by doing so we should note that this kind of effort is characteristic of a kind of complacent and self-conscious modernism. Importantly in this sense, the sacred for Geoffrey Bawa is no problematic counterpoint to modernity. Buddhism, or rather an ornamentalised Buddhist aesthetics, is made by Bawa to participate in its own conditions of becoming modern.[15] In Bawa's description of this landscape then, there is more than a faint outline of an alternative iteration of modernity: a Buddhist aesthetics that reading the landscape in translation is poised to tease out.

But Geoffrey Bawa was neither religiously nor ethnically Buddhist, nor was he a religious man at all in fact. However, across southern Sri Lanka a scriptural and textual Buddhist philosophy is thick, palpable.[16] Making a similar point in his writings on Tibetan Buddhism and the Western imagination, Peter Bishop has stressed how historically many Tibetans have not thought of themselves as 'Buddhists'. Rather, as people immersed in a society heavily textualised by Buddhist philosophy and scriptures their beliefs merged indefinably into their local territories and everyday practices.[17] Buddhism works in similar *thickly* aesthetic ways in southern and central Sri Lanka. And to stress this point is to remind that through the nineteenth century a range of intersecting colonial governmentalities, including the imperial science of comparative religion, were responsible for producing and normalising the emergence of Buddh*ism* as a 'world religion'; that is to say a demarcatable system of doctrines-scriptures-beliefs mapped onto Sri Lankan society.[18] The broader point here is that in the English language the word 'religious' continues to mark a rational, Enlightenment teleology that separates the regressive mire of the sacred from the civility of the secular.[19] But for many in southern Sri Lanka, in un-comparatively un-'religious' ways Buddhist philosophy and aesthetics textualise society and space as much as Enlightenment rationality does. To paraphrase Raymond Williams, at *Lunganga* an aesthetically Buddhist structure of feeling is residual as an effective element

of the environmental present.[20] It haunts Bawa's words.

It would be tempting to call this residual structure of feeling a 'Buddhist nature', but that again presents a weak translation tethered to the Eurocentrism this time of 'nature' as concept-metaphor. It is to seize upon another of the Enlightenment's founding binaries—that of nature/culture—to bring a non-dualistic Buddhist aesthetics into representation. To treat these aesthetics as 'Buddhist nature' evokes the omni-present prison house of global comparativism to which Eurocentric knowledge confines us. Any other 'nature', thought this way, cannot be anything but another Enlightenment Cartesian rendering of the rich fabric of a world that for many positioned outside the West refuses to metaphysically coagulate into discrete natural and cultural spheres.[21] Reading *Lunuganga's* landscape politics must take a different turn I want to suggest; a more creative and intimate translational turn in order to evoke the agency of the non-dualistic Buddhist textural properties that are written into this space, and more importantly to bring their racialised politics into view. In the last section of this chapter this is what I set out to do by recalling an encounter in Bawa's garden that clearly articulates this uneasy triangulation of the sacred, the aesthetic and the political in and through space.

A few years ago I shadowed two architectural interns as they did renovations at *Lunuganga*. We stayed on the estate, in a pavilion house on Cinnamon Hill which is located somewhere between the main house and that 'atmosphere' Bawa described. Like much of Bawa's architecture, his Cinnamon Hill house opens out to the surrounding field and nearby jungle such that it is very difficult to distinguish between the house's outside and inside space. Historically and stylistically, Bawa was one of the first of Sri Lanka's architectural modernists to begin to routinely practice this kind of architectural 'opening out'. Indeed, it came to be narrativised by modernists like Geoffrey Bawa, and before him Minnette de Silva, as an explicitly 'post-colonial' architectural technique that drew upon Sri Lanka's 'indigenous' architectural traditions, notably as some architects would stress from vernacular Sinhalese as well as monastic Sinhala architecture.[22] One evening we sat in this opened out living area and chatted about the estate. I asked my companion, who I will call Romesh, how he felt being in a place like this. He paused before turning to ask his friend a question in Sinhala. 'Infinity' he replied. He thought a little longer before saying, 'I feel like my mind keeps making these connections, one after another, to infinity. It's difficult to explain, words can't explain it. Actually in Buddhism there's a good explanation for this.' He then proceeded to tell me a story about the Lord Buddha, the monk Ananda and their conversations about the search for the sphere of the infinity of consciousness. Finally, he said he thought only in this type of place could this happen.

So what of Romesh's infinity? Well, the lines of connection between that space-time and Romesh's experience are clear; he tells us that a Buddhist textuality of sorts plays a central role in the way he is constituted there and then. Grasping these aesthetics on Romesh's own terms necessitates that we more fully grasp the altogether different worldings that I have been teasing out of Bawa's description, and inscription, of this space. It is true that his formulation bares some similarities to another trope, European romanticism, and another figure is William Wordsworth, who in his

Preludes declares the scene before him as he stands at Mount Snowdon as the emblem of a mind that feeds upon infinity. But my point in this chapter is that to make such straightforward comparisons is again to place Europe as the silent referent, the comparator, in our readings because Romesh speaks his infinity very differently. His is an undoing, an exteriorisation of subjectivity, not a romantic mind that devours an infinity-as-object in ways that keep the romantic, and liberal, self in tact.

As Romesh himself says, Buddhism provides a good explanation for his becoming infinite. To understand his spatially contingent becoming infinite then means mobilising a Buddhist mode of dwelling. This is to stress the metaphysical presence of a Buddhist textualisation of reality that begins with a notion of dharma, something like energies or forces comprising the universe. The bifurcation of dharma into selves and worlds is the result of attachment to this world, therefore the ontological presence of dharma like this conceives of modernist knowledge of the nature-object, even the landscape object itself (as either view or materiality), as but a projection, an illusion. A universal Buddhist reality is unknowable through subjective knowledge of object-fields. Instead it is only graspable intuitively as the self unravels into the infinity of dharma.[23] And importantly, according to Romesh's testimony, only in a place like *Lunuganga* can this happen. Reading Bawa's textualisation of *Lunuganga* in translation, against the grain of terms like 'landscape', like 'nature', like 'religion', helps us to see why and how Buddhism provides a good explanation for Romesh's spatially contingent infinity; there and then so to speak. It is to join the dots between that space and his experience, to take seriously the agency of those aesthetics that are written into this landscape composition in texts and idioms that are perhaps at first invisible to a Eurocentric iconographical gaze that would insist on decoding the 'landscape' through categorizations such as 'sacred/secular', or 'nature/culture'. The point is that these categorisations provide only inadequate translations to convey the aesthetic conjunction of space and Romesh's experience there and then. That is why he struggles to find the English words to explain his experience to me. As Spivak has stressed in precisely this sense, language and idiom are key to making sense of things and selves as they are distributed through worlds conceived as simultaneously imaginative and real: 'In my view, language may be one of many elements that allow us to make sense of things, of ourselves. I am thinking, of course, of gestures, pauses, but also of chance, of the sub-individual force-fields of being which click into place in different situations, swerve from the straight or true line of language-in-thought. Making sense of ourselves is what produces identity'.[24]

The challenge then of iconographically reading the politics of Geoffrey Bawa's landscape is no simple task. It involves contextual effort to decipher the non-secular scripts used in its inscription as meaningful and agential space. But the important question of politics still remains. Specifically, what are the politics that this kind of reading landscape in translation actually makes visible? As I stress in concluding

Fig. 11.3. *Paradise* (2003), a temporary installation by Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan at Lunuganga (photography reproduced with permission from Anoli Perera and the Theertha Artist's Collective, Colombo).

this chapter, in the Sri Lankan context the political stakes of the reading methods I have attempted to work through are significant, stretching as they do beyond debates within landscape geography.

Fig. 11.3 is a photograph of a temporary installation called *Paradise* by the Sri Lankan Tamil artist, Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan, produced during an artists' retreat at *Lunuganga* as part of a workshop in 2003. The installation, comprises a large, comfortable, oversized bed placed right in the middle of Geoffrey Bawa's favourite view. I shall come back to Shanaathanan's *Paradise*.

Readers will be aware of Sri Lanka's twenty-six year civil war that formally ended in 2009, where a militant Tamil nationalist organisation, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE), had protested the Tamil people's social, cultural and political marginalisation at the hands of a government and state that conceives of itself as ethnically Sinhalese and religiously Buddhist. If the LTTE were crushed by the Government of Sri Lanka Army early in 2009 to usher in a new dawn of 'peace', many of Sri Lanka's ethnic minority populations continue to be marginalised by increasingly banal modes of Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony that persistently pervade the fabric of everyday life.[25] It is true that in the context of conflict, militarised manifestations of Sinhala-Buddhist and Tamil nationalism are common and easily identifiable, but this creeping and non-secular ethnicisation of everyday life is less readily ac-

knowledged as either process or problem. In this context, reading Geoffrey Bawa's landscapes *in translation* is poised to make visible a strain of spatially instantiated Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism that passes for the ordinary, for the unpolitical. It is precisely the connection between ethnicity and religion, specifically Buddhism and a majoritarian Sinhala ethnicity, that makes Romesh's infinity irreducibly political. For if his body is produced *as* Buddhist this is at once an ethnicised self-fashioning. So it is the connections between this built-space and an ethnicised (non)self-fashioning that this active mode of reading landscape *in translation* is poised to bring into the public sphere. This is not to single Geoffrey Bawa, the architect, out as a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist. He was not. Rather it is to stress the pervasive ways that nationalist thought and inscription works in and through Sri Lankan space and society. It is to stress, in landscape terms, the aesthetic constitution of the political.

Given the aesthetics I have read from this landscape, an aesthetics that I am arguing is only really allowed to come into view when the landscape is read *in translation*, Romesh's infinity is entirely normal. That is the point of this chapter. And in this sense, I want to suggest that Bawa's landscape composition participates in a kind of 'cosmopolitan Sinhala Buddhist nationalism',[26] where spatially and aesthetically the Sinhala-Buddhist host is placed as sovereign, and Tamil, Muslim or any other 'other' can only arrive as guest, named as 'other', to-be-tolerated. Indeed it is this same grammar of thought that Bawa articulates when he stresses that, '... the long view to the south ended with the temple', because he does not need to specify it is a Buddhist rather than a Hindu temple. In this cosmopolitan Sinhala Buddhist idiom 'temple' cannot be anything else but Buddhist. That is the ordinariness written into this landscape.

Finally, back to *Paradise*. The thing about this seductive installation is that it is made from rocks. It is rock hard, extremely uncomfortable in other words. For the purposes of this chapter, placed in the middle of the landscape it references it speaks perfectly to that visual, and aesthetic, seduction that in fact hides a much more uneasy discomfort in terms of the ethnicised politics embedded in the landscape's composition. Much of Shanaathanan's work addresses the politics of ethnicity in Sri Lanka, he is a Tamil artist who early in his career was himself ethnically excluded from Sri Lanka's art spaces. It is likely that *Paradise* was intended to address the more obvious politics of class for which Bawa's rather bourgeois portfolio is more often critically engaged. Even so, for me *Paradise* seems to crystallise the problematic challenge of getting to know a thing, of reading it responsibly. If landscape is a thing, then taking Cosgrove and Daniels' iconographic method elsewhere by attempting to read landscape in translation is another way of trying to know the politics of that thing.

Notes

[1] Geoffrey Bawa quoted in G. Bawa, C. Bon, and D. Sansoni, *Lunuganga* (Singapore, Times Editions, 1990), p. 13.

[2] S. Daniels and D. Cosgrove, 'Introduction: iconography and landscape', in D. Cosgrove and S. Daniels eds., *The iconography of landscape: essays on the symbolic representation, design and use of past environments* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 1.

[3] See D. Robson, *Geoffrey Bawa: the complete works* (London, Thames Hudson, 2002); and D. Robson, *Beyond Bawa: modern masterworks of Monsoon Asia* (London, Thames Hudson, 2007).

[4] See G. Rose, *Feminism and geography: the limits of geographical knowledge* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[5] Daniels and Cosgrove, 'Introduction: Iconography and Landscape', p. 3.

[6] For similar representational and textual approaches to landscape, also see D. Cosgrove, *Social formation and symbolic landscape* (London, Croom Helm Ltd., 1984); J. Duncan, *The city as text: the politics of landscape interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990); S. Daniels, *Fields of vision: landscape imagery and national identity in England and the United States* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994).

[7] For example, see R. Guha, ed., *Subaltern studies I: writings on South Asian history and society* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1982); R. Guha, *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1999 [1983]); V. Chaturvedi ed., *Mapping subaltern studies and the postcolonial* (London and New York, Verso, 2000).

[8] D. Chakrabarty, *Habitations of modernity: essays in the wake of subaltern studies* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 33; also see D. Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2000).

[9] See A. Johnson, 'Everydayness and subalternity', *South Atlantic Quarterly* **106**, (2007), pp. 21-38.

[10] Chakrabarty, *Habitations of modernity*, p. 36.

[11] S. Buck-Morss, *Thinking past terror: Islamism and critical theory on the left* (London and New York, Verso, 2003), p. 7.

[12] G. C. Spivak, *Outside in the teaching machine* (London and New York, Routledge, 1993), p. 183.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Bawa quoted in Bawa, Bon and Sansoni, *Lunuganga*, p. 13.

[15] See P. Jeganathan, 'Disco-*very*: anthropology, nationalist thought, Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan, and an Uncertain Descent into the Ordinary', in N. Whitehead ed., *Violence* (Santa Fe and Oxford, School of American Research Press, 2004), p. 195.

[16] See T. Jazeel, ''Nature', nationhood and the poetics of meaning in Ruhuna (Yala) National Park, Sri Lanka', *Cultural Geographies* **12**, (2005), pp. 199-228.

[17] P. Bishop, *Dreams of power: Tibetan Buddhism and the western imagination* (London, The Athlone Press, 1993).

[18] D. Scott, *Refashioning futures: criticism after postcoloniality* (Princeton, Princeton Uni-

versity Press, 1999), pp. 53-69.

[19] Chakrabarty, *Habitation of modernity*, p. xx.

[20] R. Williams, *Marxism and literature* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 121-135.

[21] Also see B. Braun, *The intemperate rainforest: nature, culture and power on Canada's West Coast* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 1-29.

[22] D. Robson, *Geoffrey Bawa: the complete works*, pp. 49-108; A. Pieris, *Imagining modernity: the architecture of Valentine Gunasekara* (Colombo, Stamford Lake Pvt.) Ltd. and The Social Scientist's Association, 2007), pp. 1-16.

[23] See K. Klostermaier, 'The nature of Buddhism', *Asian Philosophy* **1**, (1991), pp. 29-38.

[24] Spivak, *Outside in the teaching machine*, p. 179.

[25] See T. Jazeel and K. Ruwanpura, 'Dissent: Sri Lanka's new minority?', *Political Geography* **28**, (2009), pp. 385-387; and C. Brun and T. Jazeel, eds., *Spatialising politics: culture and geography in postcolonial Sri Lanka* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, Sage, 2009).

[26] See Jeganathan, 'Disco-*very*', p. 195; Q. Ismail, 'Anil's ghost: a flippant gesture', *Pravada* **6**, (2000), pp. 24-28.