

Social Landscapes

There are moments when the social world seems more evident in an object or a gesture than in the whole concatenation of our beliefs and institutions.

Through our senses we measure the qualities of our surroundings—the tempo of life, the dominant patterns of color, texture, movement, and behavior—and these coalesce to make the world familiar or strange. In the 1920s Ruth Benedict suggested that the aesthetic sensibility was an important component in the cultural “configuration” of societies, although her schema of cultural types soon seemed overly reductive to most scholars.¹ Recently, social scientists have increasingly drawn attention to the senses and to how responses to sensory experience may be culturally constructed and specific.² Attention has also been given to indigenous aesthetic systems, including, but also extending beyond, artistic activities.³ Some writers have analyzed the forms and “poetics” of social performance, both public and private.⁴ Others have described how the emotions and social interactions of individuals may be closely associated with a society’s aesthetic principles and concepts of bodily harmony.⁵

The emergence of these studies points to a desire to remedy certain apparent omissions in anthropological description, often concerning subjects such as art, ritual, and religion about which a good deal has already been written. It also suggests that new methods may be needed to explore these interests, or at least new applications of existing methods. This has led to considerable experimentation in the writing of ethnographies.⁶ If one were to look beyond

the written literature, one would also have to include filmmaking in this démarche, most notably the work of Jean Rouch, beginning in the early 1950s.⁷ Since then, visual anthropologists have been looking for alternative ways of representing social experience, often (like Rouch) at the risk of upsetting more orthodox approaches.⁸ Yet it is through such radical moves that anthropology may eventually succeed in reuniting the sensory with the “cultural” landscape.

Defining this larger landscape is not only, or even principally, a matter of making a cultural inventory of the senses—exploring what Walter J. Ong has called the “ratio or balance between the senses”⁹ of different cultural groups, or (as another writer terms it) their characteristic sensotypes.¹⁰ Nor does it lie only in describing the aesthetic preoccupations and preferences of certain societies (as has been done, for example, of cattle-keeping Nilotes of the southern Sudan),¹¹ nor even in acknowledging the embodied and performative dimensions of rituals and other community events.¹² These are important aspects of the individual’s social and cultural consciousness, but gaining a fuller understanding of the relation of individuals to their societies would seem to require further analysis of the societies themselves as complex sensory and aesthetic environments.

So far this task has largely slipped through the gaps between anthropology, art history, and cultural studies. Anthropology remains largely concerned with aesthetics as it pertains to particular art objects and practices, and the discourses surrounding them, especially those associated with ritual or myth; art history with artistic production more generally as an institution; and cultural studies with the aesthetics of popular culture, as seen in advertising, mass media, and consumerism. Aesthetics as it relates to everything else in life apart from art or

conscious design has received comparatively little attention.¹³ As Howard Morphy notes, “in failing to consider the aesthetics of cultures, anthropologists ignore a body of evidence that allows them a unique access to the sensual aspect of human experience: to how people feel in, and respond to, the world.”¹⁴

“Landscape” has seemed to me an appropriate term to apply to these social environments, for like many actual landscapes they are conjunctions of the cultural and the natural. The experience of most anthropologists is that each community exhibits physical attributes and patterns of behavior that, taken as a composite, are specific to itself and instantly recognizable to its inhabitants. That these social landscapes have no individual authors is of no great moment; like the social forces that make individual authorship of art works relatively unimportant in broadly historical terms, their “authorship” has been collective over time, employing the full range of available media: stones and earth, fibers and dyes, sounds, time and space, and the many expressive possibilities of the human body. Even in its shifts and internal contradictions, a community acquires a character that provides a distinctive backdrop for everyday life. The result may not be a well-balanced whole, but the object in studying such social environments is not to reinvent a holistic typology of societies, nor to return to a hermetic sort of functionalism, but to understand the importance of these settings of human life as they exist in experiential terms. This problem can be approached variously through writing, museum exhibits, sound recordings, photography, film, and video. It demands, in addition to a capacity for analysis, a sensitivity to the aesthetics of community life—to forms and resonances that are often as complexly interlaced as the rhymes and meanings of a poem. Differences in emphasis must also be taken into account. Although aesthetic

considerations appear to play a part in the life of all communities, the social aesthetic field often appears more systematically ordered in some than in others. This is particularly true of small “constructed” communities such as schools.

A Constructed Community

I became interested in the aesthetics of social life while making a video study of a boys’ boarding school in northern India. Here was a small, self-consciously created community in which aesthetic design and aesthetic judgments seemed to play a prominent part. From my initial intention to study the school as a site of cross-cultural contact and socialization, I soon began turning my attention to more mundane subjects such as clothing, colors, timetables, eating implements, tones of voice, and characteristic gestures and postures. In one sense, this particularity is the very stuff of ethnography, but in anthropology such physical details tend to become adjuncts to larger questions of belief and social structure. Confronted more directly, they produced in me a desire to disconnect objects from the symbolic meanings with which they are conventionally invested. This led to a further shift. While I recognized that the school existed within (and was interdependent with) a complex national, as well as global, economy and culture, I also began to see it as a world in miniature, with its own distinctive material signature. Students moved in and out of this world, to and from other places and other lives, but the school impressed its own distinctive stamp upon them. Recently an ex-student wrote to me, “I think it will be very difficult to let go, impossible perhaps. I think I will always carry the school with me, wherever I go.”

The Doon School is a residential boys' secondary school in the town of Dehra Dun in the state of Uttaranchal. The town lies in the Valley of the Doon, between the Siwalik Hills and the foothills of the Himalayas. It enjoys a comfortable climate for most of the year and, along with the nearby hill station of Mussoorie, is the location of a large number of schools and national institutions, such as the Survey of India and the Indian Military Academy. Of the schools, Doon School is certainly the most famous, and perhaps the most famous in all of India. It owes its fame to a number of factors, but most obviously to the part its graduates have played in the ruling elites of India since Independence, particularly in government and industry. The school counts among its alumni former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, several cabinet ministers, a long list of members of parliament, and major business leaders. The role of its graduates in the professions, the military, the visual and print media, and the arts has been less pronounced but is still considerable. An Air Chief Marshall, a number of Army generals, and the writers Vikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh are all former students of the school. The school's impact on public affairs has been enhanced by a powerful network of "old boys" who display great loyalty to the school.

Doon School is also notable for spreading a particular style of education to other schools: a self-consciously egalitarian, secular approach based upon a commitment to public service and a belief in Western-style scientific rationalism.¹⁵ Within this regime, the school aims to produce "all-rounders" with equal proficiency (if not brilliance) in studies, games, and social skills. There is an official emphasis on setting one's own goals and competing against oneself rather than others. Although Doon School and Mayo College (in

Rajasthan) have both been called “the Eton of India,” in the case of Doon School this is something of a misnomer. It was always a school for the reasonably well-off, but it was never the preserve of the upper classes (this was rather the role of Mayo College), and in fact it attracted the sons of the new technocracy that was developing in Punjab and the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) at about the time the school was founded. Over the years many other schools in India have gradually adopted aspects of Doon School’s style of education and have, in effect, been “Doon-ized,” partly through appointing teachers and headmasters who taught at the school.

The video study coincides with the publication of a written study of Doon School (and two other north Indian schools) by the anthropologist Sanjay Srivastava.¹⁶ It was Srivastava who first interested me in Doon School, although I already knew something about it and had become acquainted with several other schools in nearby Mussoorie. He suggested that the schools he was studying might be suitable subjects for a film, and over the years we discussed many possibilities. We have remained in close communication about Doon School ever since, and I owe much of my understanding of the school to his observations and insights.

Srivastava’s study focuses on how the school has both reflected and shaped concepts of the modern Indian citizen and nation in the twentieth century. My interest has been more in how the school, as a small society, has developed a particular aesthetic design in its informal daily life and its more formal rituals and institutions. I believe this kind of “social aesthetic,” while it is sometimes elusive, plays an important part in the life of all societies but is very often overlooked by anthropologists and historians. Perhaps because it is more

conspicuous in some societies than others— especially those that could be termed “hyperaesthetic” communities, such as schools, religious orders, the military, and certain ultranationalist states—it may not always receive the attention it deserves.¹⁷ Certainly for me, it was only by living in such a community that I began to consider social aesthetics a subject worthy of study in its own right.

“Aesthetics” in this context has little to do with notions of beauty or art, but rather with a much wider range of culturally patterned sensory experience. (It is closer to what the Greeks originally meant by aisthesis, or “sense experience.”) It is thus not “beauty-aesthetics” in the Kantian sense.¹⁸ Nor does it here imply the valuation of sensory experience (as in European aesthetics), except as this bears upon the ability of people to determine what is familiar or unfamiliar. It also includes much that derives from nature rather than culture, such as the geographical setting of a community, and even much in the life of its members that is onerous but to which they become habituated. Doon School’s social aesthetic is made up of many elements, and consists not so much in a list of ingredients as a complex, whose interrelations as a totality (as in gastronomy) are as important as their individual effects. These elements include such things as the design of buildings and grounds, the use of clothing and colors, the rules of dormitory life, the organization of students’ time, particular styles of speech and gesture, and the many rituals of everyday life that accompany such activities as eating, school gatherings, and sport (itself already a highly ritualized activity).

What is interesting sociologically is the extent to which these aesthetic patterns may influence events and decisions in a community, along with the other more

commonly-recognized social forces of history, economics, politics, and ideology. All these forces are, of course, interconnected, but it often seems that the aesthetic features of a society are too easily assimilated into other categories, to such an extent that they become invisible or are ignored. Alternatively, aesthetic features may simply be seen as the symbolic expression of more profound forces (such as history and ideology) rather than influential in their own right. Although aesthetics may not be independent of other social forces, neither is it merely the residue of them. My working premise has been that the aesthetic dimension of human experience is an important social fact, to be taken seriously alongside such other facts as economic survival, political power, and religious belief. It is important because it often matters to people, and influences their actions, as much as anything else in their lives. But because aesthetic decisions often appear to be made autonomously, in the face of economic or political logic, we have a strong tendency not to recognize their importance.

The social aesthetic field, composed of objects and actions, is in some respects the physical manifestation of the largely internalized and invisible “embodied history” that Bourdieu calls habitus.¹⁹ Bourdieu comes closest to identifying habitus in physical terms when he speaks metaphorically of the “physiognomy” of a “social environment.”²⁰ But this physiognomy is more than metaphorical, more than “a system of structured, structuring dispositions.”²¹ It is not only an attribute of the self (of whatever class, whatever society) but exists all around us concretely, in the disposition of time, space, material objects, and social activities. It includes the very areas of practice that Bourdieu himself, in his research among the Kabyle of north Africa, felt previous writers had systematically ignored, “such as the structure

and orientation of time (divisions of the year, the day, human life), the structure and orientation of space (especially inside the house), children's games and movements of the body, the rituals of infancy and the parts of the body, values (nif and h'urma) and the sexual division of labour, colours and the traditional interpretation of dreams, etc."²²

Some communities ("hyperaesthetic" communities being at the extreme) appear to place greater stress on the aesthetics of social life than others. In the popular imagination, Japanese and Balinese society are particularly noted for their aesthetic preoccupations. However, this should not be seen as unusual but rather as a more conspicuous expression of a concern of all societies, and one that can take quite varied forms. Some societies specifically emphasize artistic expression, others codes of interpersonal behavior, others special regimes of physical activity or public display, and still others particular forms of religious or spiritual experience. In this regard, Vladislav Todorov has observed that industrial production played a largely aesthetic and symbolic role under Stalinism. "Communism created ultimately effective aesthetic structures and ultimately defective economic ones. . . . Factories are not built to produce commodities. . . . They result in a deficit of goods, but an overproduction of symbolic meanings. Their essence is aesthetic, not economic." He concludes: "Society is a poetic work, which reproduces metaphors, not capital."²³

Whatever its particular local form, each variant serves to define a familiar social space and the individual's sense of belonging, like a lock and its key. Local aesthetic sensibilities may often be attuned to very humdrum activities, such as agricultural or office work, or be defined by painful experiences, such as physical stress, grief for the dead, or (in some religious sects) the infliction of

wounds. Appeals to the aesthetic sensibility may also be a means of social control, as in totalitarian states that create a powerful repertoire of public rhetoric and ritual. It does not follow that these states are particularly interested in the arts; indeed, rather than encouraging artistic experimentation, their attitude is more likely to be conservative and prescriptive. Although it is unclear why some societies stress the aesthetics of social life more than others, those that have developed in isolation, or that draw their membership from varied backgrounds, or that need to contain serious internal divisions, may find in the sharing of a strong aesthetic experience a unifying principle.

The School and Its Origins

Compared to many boarding schools in India, such as La Martiniere in Calcutta (founded in 1836) and Lawrence School in Sanawar (founded in 1847), Doon School is a comparative newcomer. It was opened in 1935 on the grounds of the former Forest Research Institute and was the creation of a group of moderate Indian nationalists led by a Calcutta lawyer, Satish Ranjan Das who, although he died before the school actually opened, had lobbied for it assiduously during the 1920s. Das envisaged an Indian school patterned on the British “public school,” which he felt had effectively trained young men to become responsible and resourceful administrators throughout the British Empire. But in contrast to British schools, he wanted an Indian school to be nonsectarian and responsive to Indian aspirations. He and the school’s other founders saw Doon as the training ground for a new generation of Indian leaders who would take over the reins of administration and government following Independence. By copying the model of the British public school, the

founders were attempting to show that Indians could compete with the British on their own terms without relinquishing their national or cultural identity.

This reflected the views of many Indian leaders and intellectuals of the time, but certainly not all. Characteristically, Nehru welcomed the creation of the school but Gandhi would have nothing to do with it. (Figure 4.1.)

The colonial discourses of imperial Britain celebrated the ideal of strong physical manliness in contrast to the stereotyped image of the ineffectual, even feminized male subject. One of the objectives of Doon School was apparently to counter this colonial view (even as it interiorized it), which in the Indian context had taken on an exaggerated form in the image of the effete Bengali man.²⁴ The image of the new, masculine Indian was to be built upon a regime of bodily practices borrowed from British schools, not only on the playing field but in the dormitory, classroom, assembly hall, and dining hall. Early morning physical exercises became a permanent fixture of the Doon School's daily timetable. In 1937, Sir Jagdish Prasad, a member of the school's Board of Governors, told the assembled boys:

The aim of this school might well be to give you the physique of the savage and the cultivated brain of the civilized man. My advice to you is to take pride in the development of your body no whit less than in the improvement of your intellect. Let this school be noted for the fine physique of its students. We in this country have not paid sufficient attention to the proper care of our bodies and have paid the penalty of premature decline in energy and mental vigour.²⁵

In some respects the physical regime at Doon proved less spartan and authoritarian than in many British schools, partly due to the fact that the British masters and headmasters who first came to Doon saw it as an opportunity to establish a more benign version of the schools they had left behind. The focus, moreover, was to be upon self-regulation rather than external discipline. The school took the radical step at the time of forbidding corporal punishment. The official doctrines of the school, enunciated by the first headmaster, Arthur Edward Foot, stressed self-control and self-monitoring, exemplifying Foucault's contention that institutions tend to turn their inmates into their own surveillants. "Boys who have apparently been well brought up at home," wrote Foot, "behave well in order to please their parents, or in order to please their school-masters. This is not a sound foundation for conduct. They must behave well and work well to satisfy their own self-respect and sense of personal responsibility."²⁶

Vision was to play an important part in this process, through its confirmation of the boys' physical development and their patterns of gesture, posture, and visible social behavior. Boys were taught to speak and act boldly, and to return the gaze of others steadily and fearlessly, even if that gaze came from the highest in the land.²⁷ Their disciplined character was to be seen in their dress, their orderly formations at assembly, physical training and games, and in the tireless energy with which they followed the crowded school schedule.

Foot, who could never resist an instructive metaphor, however oblique or (in this case) sexually allusive, likened the growth of a boy to the root of a plant observed through a magnifying glass:

Each tiny shoot on the root is covered with little hair[s] through which it takes food and drink from the soil. But the thing I especially noticed was that the tip of the shoot was free from the root hair. That is to say the part which was leading the way was quite clear from anything which would hinder it. This made me think how many of us are handicapped in the things we want to do by some little habit of self-indulgence which gets in our way. . . . Don't make excuses to yourselves, and don't be handicapped by habits.²⁸

The school's emphasis on the body reflects a set of deeper assumptions about the effects of the physical world on the individual. It also emphasizes individuality itself—the student set apart in body and personality from the mass of his classmates. “You can think of yourselves,” Foot said at the end of the first year, “as a pack of cards all with the same pattern of blue and grey on your backs; on the other side is each boy's special character.”²⁹ (Figure 4.2.) But each boy's character was also to be reshaped by his surroundings at the school. What lay outside the boy's body, down to the very clothes on his back, was to determine the inside. Sharing equal facilities, for example, such as the minimally-furnished dormitories, or equal responsibilities, such as leading physical exercises or serving at table, would of itself, and without further intervention, be conducive to an egalitarian outlook. As Foot himself put it, the individual is not best shaped by precept but by environment.³⁰ The school's very buildings, with their functional, undecorated architecture, and its grounds with their botanical tags on every other tree, would instil a sense of proportion and orderly thought. Since both were originally designed for the scientific purposes of the Forest Research Institute, the site was seen by the founders as eminently suitable for this. (Figure 4.3.) As Srivastava explains, the school's

philosophical origins lay in the “Bengal Renaissance” and the nineteenth-century Brahma Samaj movement, which embraced scientific rationalism as a release from the superstition and archaism of the established religions.³¹ The school was eventually furnished with its own workshops, paper recycling center, “boys’ bank,” store, and hospital. This emphasis on the creation of a setting has the flavor of missionaries establishing a place of order in a heathen land.

The scientific attitude of the school’s founders is perhaps more apparent today in a kind of brisk efficiency than in appeals to speculative thinking.³² In part this takes the form of measurement and labeling. The boys’ heights and weights are recorded twice a year, and at one time the names of the largest and smallest boys in each house were published in The Doon School Weekly. (Figure 4.4.) Those boys who are overweight are systematically slimmed down by physical exercise and the school diet. Upon joining the school, each boy is given a number which he keeps throughout his school career. At the start of the year, these numbers appear on beds and desks. They are used on school documents and in announcements at Assembly or after meals when boys are called to meetings or other duties. They are also essential for the management of school clothing, with a number tape carefully sewn into each item by the school tailors. The school day is punctuated by a succession of bells, some rung in the houses, some at the dining hall, and most importantly on top of the Main Building, signaling the beginning and end of each class. The timing of the Assembly is so precise that this bell usually rings just as the headmaster strides on to the stage in his black gown. This enactment of precision is rehearsed in a hundred smaller ways—in the correct making of beds, arrangement of clothing, and shining of shoes—although it must be said that one of the more

attractive aspects of the school is a certain perfunctory attitude toward such matters.

More reminiscent of the Forest Research Institute's interests is the school's own natural history museum, stocked with specimens donated in the early years, ranging from stuffed mammals, birds, and reptiles to a human foetus preserved in a jar of formalin. Scientific apparatus figures prominently at Founder's Day exhibitions, when parents look with bemusement at miniature volcanoes erupting, gas-filled tubes lighting up in different colors, and sparks leaping from one copper ball to another. The school particularly prides itself on the success of its more daring expeditions into the high Himalayas. These occur during the two annual mid-term breaks, which are almost sacramental occasions when the entire student body ventures out on trips of varying difficulty into the surrounding countryside. That groups of schoolboys, led by a few teachers, regularly climb to altitudes of over 20,000 feet not only proves astonishing to other schools but provides a sentimental link to the past prowess of Empire.

The School-World

When I first went to Doon School it struck me as a kind of theater. There was a performance going on. A bell would ring and everyone would rush on to the stage, dressed in the same costume. Then they would depart. An hour or two later another bell would ring and they would rush on again in a different costume. It was at this point that I began thinking it might be possible to view a small community such as a school much as one would view a play or other

creative work. But who in this case were the creators, the players, and the viewers? Clearly the boys themselves were the raw material of this creation, upon whose bodies the aesthetics of the school was imprinted. But at the same time these same boys were also its foremost audience.

By the creation of a social aesthetic, I should stress here that I do not mean a system of signs and meanings encoded in school life, but rather the creation of an aesthetic space or sensory structure. I am not proposing the exegesis of a cultural text, a hermeneutic anthropology.³³ Signs and meanings there clearly are at the school, for a great deal of history and ideology underlies its aesthetic choices, but these qualities both exceed and are experienced differently from any interpretation that might be placed on them. Nor would such meanings necessarily be understood by the boys themselves—either upon first arriving at the school, or indeed ever. What does speak to them is a particular structure of sense impressions, social relations, and ways of behaving physically. This must be assimilated and acted upon—and therefore be “understood”—in quite a different manner. In a sense, it is a code without a message. As Bourdieu puts it, for them, the acts they learn “may have, strictly speaking, neither meaning nor function, other than the function implied in their very existence.”³⁴

When I came to the school I was not thinking of such distinctions. And as must frequently happen to others, the ideas with which I began were gradually overtaken by ideas that assumed greater importance. My interest in the school as a site of cultural cross-currents gave way to what was for me a new way of thinking about the configuration of forces in community life. Rather than looking at a multiplicity of intersecting histories and cultures (postmodern anthropology’s currently ascendant conception of social experience), I found

myself much more interested in a cultural phenomenon that could more accurately be viewed as homogeneous, or at least as a temporary coalescence of elements. Through the viewfinder of the camera I found myself drawn into a matrix of life that I felt exerted a powerful influence on all around me. What I began to realize was that the boys in the school lived neither in a homogeneous society nor in a multiply-fragmented global one, but in both. Like many of us, they moved between “little worlds” of family and school and a larger world that they encountered in the streets, during their travels, and on television. And like many of us, they learned to accept and adapt to a state of more or less permanent cultural confusion. Perhaps all the more reason, then, for them to bind themselves closely to the islands of relative coherence in their lives.

In certain respects, and more than most other communities, a school aims at a steady state. As older students leave, younger ones come to take their place. Schools can thus be seen—beyond their role in training the young—as institutions for capturing the ephemeral state of childhood and youth. In this they serve a utopian dream: to create a regulated world, insulated from aging and historical change. Adults look across the borders into childhood much as colonial administrators once looked upon “primitive” societies. The ideal school community thus resembles the archetypal community of functionalist anthropology—inward-looking, ahistorical, conservative, and self-perpetuating. Conversely, the functionalist model of anthropology can be seen as permitting an infantilized vision of remote, small-scale societies, investing their inhabitants with some of the same utopian qualities that inspire the makers of schools. The “natives” were characteristically seen as childlike in both their virtues and excesses. The administrator and the schoolmaster

habitually regarded their respective communities (albeit often benignly) from similar positions of worldly power and experience.

Schoolmasters, however, must also relate schools to the wider community. At Doon School there have been two views, seemingly opposed, one introspective, the other nationalistic. On the one hand, the school is seen as a microcosm of the larger society. Arthur Foot remarked, “it has been truly said that [the] school should be the replica of the larger and progressive community outside.”³⁵ The more utopian vision is that the school is the microcosm of a nascent society—a society-in-waiting. It is both an exemplar and a kind of hatchery. Its role is to contribute to the making of society, or, as Foot put it, “the production of boys for the service of a free India.”³⁶ This was also the vision of Doon’s Indian founders, who wanted the school to produce a new generation of leaders who would guide the nation. The same goal could also be put in more negative terms. Sir Jagdish Prasad, speaking in 1937, said, “this school will indeed have made a notable contribution to Indian advancement if by this intermingling of creeds, castes and race . . . a type is produced free from the communal, racial and regional antipathies that so disfigure our lives.”³⁷

Conceived as an ideal community, a school at its inception and as it is built up over time has much in common with other creative works. There is a gradual integration of its official doctrines, ceremonies, and physical attributes, so that none stands in need of independent justification. Indeed, where justification is sought it is not so much in particulars as in an appeal to the whole. There is a synthesis of the material and metaphorical. In the botanical garden that forms the school’s grounds, the most solemn events are enacted in the Rose Bowl—a setting which joins together botany with the neoclassical order of a Greek

amphitheater. Foot's comparison of a boy to a root cannot be seen as entirely coincidental. A year earlier he had compared a boy to a growing flower,³⁸ and a month before to a path that required annual weeding.³⁹

To those who desire change within the school, the call is often to draw closer to the ideals of the original design, or to restore what has been lost. There is a tendency to deplore the erosions of present-day life and hark back to the school's Golden Age, placed somewhere between 1936 and 1945. To those who support the school through the Doon School Old Boys Society, the school has acquired a retrospective perfection which absorbs even the things they hated most, such as early morning P.T. This creates a resistance to change which extends, irrationally, to even the most trivial matters, which are heatedly opposed, such as the proposed removal of some quite inappropriate statues from the Rose Bowl. One reformist master confided to me that the most dire word for him at the school was "Dosco"—the universal term for a Doon student or Old Boy—because it was used as the ultimate defense against change. "DoscOs don't do that," or "That's not for DoscOs," eerily recalls Bourdieu's formulation of class conservatism: "That's not for us."

Filming Social Aesthetics

In any field the pursuit of an unforeseen object presents a problem of representation: how to begin defining it in a language that was not intended for it and for which it is opaque, or simply nonexistent. Can methods that were designed for exploring quite different sorts of objects be successfully adapted to

the purpose, or must new methods be devised? In the end, both approaches are probably necessary.

At Doon School I began asking myself whether it was possible to film something as implicit and all-pervasive as social aesthetics. Could it in any sense be isolated as a subject? I concluded that it could not, or at least not directly. One might be able to focus upon certain features of life in which aesthetic concerns seemed paramount, but this atomized the subject and caused it to disintegrate. Its reality lay elsewhere, in a wider aggregation of features. Unlike cattle among Nilotic pastoralists, there was no single, dominating locus of aesthetic interest.

Something as visible as the patterns and colors of clothing might be singled out for attention, but this was to risk giving these features an excessive symbolic importance, divorced from the actual contexts in which such meanings were submerged or overwritten by other, more immediate, forms of experience. In the case of school uniforms, these contexts included the obvious ones, such as the practical requirements of different activities, the division of the school into manageable groups, and the student hierarchy, but also less obvious ones such as academic achievement and methods of punishment.⁴⁰ It was important to see how these links produced new and complex associations, often naturalizing or justifying apparent incongruities, much as chemical compounds exhibit properties quite different from their constituent elements.

I concluded that social aesthetics, as both the backdrop and product of everyday life, could only be approached obliquely, through the events and material objects in which it played a variety of roles. The events might be small

and incidental, or ordinary, or large and extraordinary. In the end they included everything from simple hand gestures to the school's annual Founder's Day extravaganza, the torchlight tattoo.

The aesthetics of a society might very well be regarded as an aesthetics of management: an ordering of the elements of life for the balancing of physical needs, comfort, time, space, power relations, and sexuality. The aesthetic sense would then be seen as a regulatory feature of our consciousness, telling us when to be pleased and content or, on the contrary, anxious, disgusted, distressed, or fearful. It would be accepted as one among the many regulatory systems of society, although considerably less specific than, for example, kinship or customary law.

Despite this generally more diffused role, there is one particular manifestation of social aesthetics of which one becomes very conscious at a school like Doon: the aesthetics of power. However, the exercise of power can rarely be distinguished from its aesthetic expression, even when one or the other is clearly marked. There is nothing very edifying about a senior boy bullying a junior one, but there is nevertheless a pattern and protocol to it. In the many instances of explicit aesthetic display that I witnessed at the school (such as the lining up and grouping of boys at assembly, the ritualized cheering at sports events, morning physical exercises, and special events such as the annual Physical Training Competition) a lesson was being inscribed in the bodies of the participants, much as a repertoire of movements is gradually inscribed in the body of a classical dancer. These were not, in fact, symbolic expressions of power relations but their result. When boys cheered for their side at a House hockey match, the sense of power over their rivals—the power of their

House—was part of a larger regime of power in which older boys of the House felt it their duty to order younger boys to cheer.

The aesthetics of power is thus as much an enactment of power as a representation of it, and is codeterminate with a wider range of activities and social relationships, each with its own aesthetic manifestations. Power cannot be abstracted from such agencies as self-preservation and desire, which form part of the substratum upon which it rests. It would be difficult to determine which of the designs and rituals of a school such as Doon were created with clear objectives and which are part of a more unconscious adaptive and evolutionary process. Certainly the school has borrowed heavily from other, older schools, which have in turn taken much from religious and military institutions. The combination desk-lockers at which the boys study—called “toyees” at Doon—were an importation from Winchester College but have all the hallmarks of the monastery. (Figure 4.5.) In some cases the school’s procedures seem to be clear applications of principles developed elsewhere. The school’s use of house captains and prefects mirrors the British colonial policy of “indirect rule,” in that senior boys control many matters that in other schools, in other countries, would be directly controlled by teachers. But it is also plausible that indirect rule is itself a product of the British public school system.

Again, the design and management of school clothing, which is highly elaborated at Doon, cannot be ascribed to simple motives, although functional and utilitarian explanations abound. Pure cotton cloth of Indian origin was chosen for summer uniforms by the first headmaster on the grounds of simplicity, hygiene, and support for local industries, but this rougher material

also framed the growing bodies of the boys in an appealing way that may have been more pleasing to the masters than to the boys themselves. An item by a master in the school newspaper in 1985 runs as follows: "The boys standing on the lovely green turf, in their blue shorts and singlets; with the leaders in white ducks and singlets presents a refreshing sight."⁴¹ Here the line between aesthetics and erotics is unclear. School uniforms become not only indicative of social relationships but also a way of controlling, concealing, and exhibiting the human body, reflecting correspondingly complex motives in those who institute them. Differences in uniform for juniors and seniors, or ordinary boys and prefects, mark intersections of visual pleasure and power, as well as conceptions of discipline, disorder, childhood, adulthood, innocence, and experience. Another, more ironic, school newspaper item reads: "Lo and behold. Not a pair of white shorts in sight. The whole school lined up properly in games clothes! . . . Here was symbolism at its subtlest. The School dressed in the blue and greys of Sin while the angelic prefects flitted around . . . in radiant white."⁴²

Perhaps the most curious example of the school's preoccupation with clothing is to be found in its system of punishments. The most commonly-given of the school's punishments (and considered among the least severe) is called a "change-in-break." It is given for minor infractions, such as making one's bed badly or having unpolished shoes. Boys can often be seen before Assembly polishing their shoes with leaves or bits of paper to avoid the notice of beady-eyed prefects. If caught, the boy is given a chit and must run back to his house during the mid-morning break and change into his P.T. (physical training) uniform. He must then run back to the main building to have the chit signed, return to the house, change into his school clothes again, and return to have the

chit signed a second time. If he lives in a nearby house he may have to change into his games clothes as well, and run two more times, with two more signings. Another punishment, more common in the past than now, was to have to put on all one's uniforms, one on top of the other, and then report to the prefect or house captain. If one was lucky that was the end of it, but sometimes a boy was made to do exercises or run "rounds" of the playing field dressed in these many layers of clothing.

The "change-in-break" seems designed to make one aware of one's clothing in the most acute and immediate way. Its various gradations and sensory qualities are intensified and become ever more keenly experienced as they are impressed upon one's consciousness. Here, as in everything else around one at the school, the social aesthetic field is never neutral or random: its patterning creates forces and polarities with strong emotional effects. Ordinary objects with which one comes in daily contact take on a particular aura, and this aura is augmented by repetition and multiplication. Both occur in the case of the stainless steel tableware used at the school. Every piece—the hundreds of plates, cups, porridge bowls, serving dishes, pitchers, knives, forks, and spoons—is made of the same bright, hard steel, which produces its own distinctive gong-like tones and clashing sounds. Its surfaces are unyielding and reflect back the bluish colors of the boys' uniforms and the overhead tube-lights, meal after meal. The strength and obduracy of this material cannot but be communicated as a direct physical sensation to the boys and to inform the whole process of eating with an unrelenting, utilitarian urgency. Stainless steel tableware is of course common in India, most notably in the South Indian thali.⁴³ Here it is elevated to a fetish of modernity. (Figure 4.6.)

A Pattern of Study

During the first months of my stay at the school I observed these complexities and began to consider my approach to them. I gradually adopted a three-pronged filming strategy. I first identified a set of themes that seemed to provide conceptual keys to the school's aesthetic structures and their importance in the lives of the students. These included abstract concepts such as hierarchy and threats to personal identity, but also more immediate topics of school life such as clothing, eating, informal games, and organized sports. I found another conceptual key in the phenomenon of homesickness, which was succeeded among older students by what they themselves called "schoolsickness." I next focused on certain classes of objects that seemed to be focal points in the aesthetics of everyday life. These included uniforms, the stainless steel utensils already mentioned, trophies and prizes of various kinds, beds and bedcovers, and semi-illicit dormitory foods (or "tuck"). Lastly, I decided to follow the activities of first-year students in an attempt to "discover" the school through their own discovery of it. In one instance, I spent three months filming a group of these students from their first day at the school. Here I concentrated on certain individuals, trying to see how they learned the rules and became sensitized to the school as a complex environment.

Over a period of two years, I spent nine months at the school, recording some eighty-five hours of material. This might be thought to constitute a kind of visual ethnography of school life, but because I was pursuing particular interests rather than attempting to be encyclopaedic, it falls short of that in many respects. There is little about the teachers, and the footage is

disproportionately about younger and middle students rather than older ones. Within the youngest group, a few individuals receive a great deal of attention. In selecting them I was more concerned that they were expressive of their condition than representative in any statistical sense. As we know, anthropologists often select their informants from those who stand out in a crowd, but this is perhaps even more the case in visual anthropology, where one looks for people who are particularly eloquent in their relations with others, either in speech or manner.

At the beginning I identified certain boys who were expressive or distinctive in some way. This eventually led me to the group of four fourteen-year olds who shared a room together. I had noticed at least three of them already, so to find them sharing a room was a welcome discovery. In a similar way, I was led to two others who were to figure prominently in the first film. The older of these, a sixteen-year-old, was already an important figure around the school, noted for his self-assurance and skill as an actor in school plays. In the film he became the exception who tended to prove the rules about peer pressure and conformity. He had successfully made a name for himself by being different from others and going his own way as a forceful but sensitive person. He was never good at sport, the safest avenue to success and power at the school. But his view differed from that of Vikram Seth, the writer, who had been unhappy at the school in the 1960s and who felt it was not a good place for a sensitive person.⁴⁴

I found myself thinking: Is this true that if you don't play a sport you can't survive? So very early on I took the attitude that, "I'm not going to play a sport, but I'm definitely going to survive." And—you can. It's

all about being at rhythm with yourself, being at peace with yourself, not really caring if you're popular amongst 90% of your classmates or not. I mean, it's very important to have your friends, and your soul mates, and the people you can really talk to, which you sometimes desperately need in school. But no, I don't think it's a hard and fast rule that if you're sensitive you can't survive in school.⁴⁵

A younger boy whom I noticed at an early stage also became a prominent figure in one of the films. I began filming him on my first brief visit, perhaps because he seemed to regard everything around him with the same mixture of trepidation and curiosity that I felt toward the school, but also with an eagerness to adapt himself to it. He radiated a sort of nervous courage. In the film he was to become a different type of survivor: one who accepts the school at face value, but who delights in it, who tries everything, and takes as much from the school as the school has to offer.

Among my tactics during my early days was to seek advice about possible subjects for filming from the teachers, particularly some of the younger ones who had formed close ties with the boys under their care. The following notes may give some idea of the variety of comments I received from one such teacher. They are given here almost as they appear in my notebook, minus of course the names. At the time I knew none of these boys.

Boy A: Tough, open, expressive, a little scatter-brained, good at drama & sports

Boy B: Good-looking, willing, competent, good all-rounder, a leader.

Boy C: Mature, articulate, clear ideas, excellent boy.

Boy D: Outgoing, mature, excellent academically, computer expert.

Boy E: Quiet, introverted, but strong boxer, good at soccer; English weak, on scholarship.

Boy F: Very academic, good singer, from rich family but unassuming.

Boy G: Precocious, bright, self-conscious, friendly, sweet.

Boy H: Shy, a recent arrival.

Boy I: Tense, rather stressed, insecure, subject to teasing.

Boy J: Has adapted well.

Boy K: From the hills, good sportsman, leader, photographer.

Boy L: Small, silent, mature, won't be pushed around.

Boy M: Pleasant, academic inclinations.

Boy N: Mischievous, lively, nice, weak academically.

Boy O: Seeks bad company, troublesome, anti-academic.

Boy P: Very decent, dignified boy, non-athletic.

Boy Q: Mature, strong ideas, clear thinker, a leader.

Boy R: Easy-going, comic.

Boy S: Boisterous, popular, lively, funny.

Boy T: Academic, not an extrovert, good talker, gets on well.

I was fortunate to have the trust of the new headmaster, who gave me the run of the school. I was allowed to live there, take my meals with the students, and film where and what I wanted. There was never an attempt to direct or censor my work. The teachers were somewhat more guarded, but perhaps because I rarely filmed them, I was able to establish good relations with most of them and friendships with several. It was understood that I was engaged in a long-term research project, but the headmaster also saw my presence as an opportunity to create a greater awareness of visual media at the school. As one

way of contributing to this I trained a small group of students to produce their own video journal.

I came to know two successive groups of first-year students better than any other students at the school, although for one period I made a point of focusing on the group of four older students (14-year-olds in B form) who shared a room together. Here I was attempting to achieve greater breadth, both because they were older and because, as a group, they varied greatly from one another in personality, background, and maturity. These boys always maintained a certain reserve toward me. The younger boys were more unconcerned and came to regard the filming as a routine part of dormitory life. Perhaps because I was never a teacher at the school, and only rarely exercised a teacher's authority, I was accepted more readily as a harmless observer, and very occasionally as an honorary schoolboy. (Figure 4.7.)

From this material will come five "public" films and additional compilations of footage for specialist interests, such as studies of children's games and pastimes. I have made other compilations in order to return the material to the boys themselves, and to their parents. From the parents' point of view this is a precious resource. Most of them long to see what has been happening to their children, growing up rapidly in a world that remains largely closed to them. From the boys' point of view, the films are both a memory bank and a confirmation of what I have told them of my aims. One boy wrote to me: "I am going to treasure [the film] for my life. After all nobody is so lucky to have a film of his school days."

Although I soon focused my study on something other than cross-cultural topics at the school, the project remains cross-cultural in several respects. First, and most obviously, it registers my encounter as an outsider with one small microcosm (among many) of contemporary Indian life. It also explores the intersection of India's colonial past with its present national identity; and at another level, the school's intersection, as a cultural enclave, with the wider Indian community. Most importantly, perhaps, it is cross-cultural because it involves childhood, and what is increasingly seen by anthropologists as a significant separation between the cultural worlds of children and adults. In the case of a boarding school, this separation is made all the more acute by the added distance between family and institutional life.

The Doon School project, like many similar studies, can be seen as part of a larger effort internationally to apply visual media to fields such as anthropology, sociology, and history that have traditionally developed as disciplines of words. They are intended partly to explore alternative approaches to these disciplines, both as a method of research and as a means of professional publication. But to a greater degree, their purpose is to find out whether the use of visual media will in fact transform these disciplines, leading to forms of knowledge that were not envisaged before. The present project provides one more test of these possibilities. I can say at least that it was through the use of the video camera that I discovered new interests and was directed away from more naïvely preconceived ones.

If the study of social aesthetics sometimes seems quixotic, this is not, I believe, because it is an obscure or illusory part of human experience but because, on the contrary, it is both very obvious and yet highly dispersed through a wide

range of cultural phenomena, many of which have already been closely studied in other contexts such as the anthropology of art and cultural history. Perhaps for that very reason, the broader aesthetic aspects of social life, and aesthetic experience itself, appear to many scholars to have been adequately accounted for as aspects of something else. To a certain extent this is the logical consequence of the fragmentation of academic fields, but it also has to do with the constraints of expression. Most description in the human sciences is beholden to the writing skills of scholars. To describe the social role of aesthetics properly (its phenomenological reality) we may need a “language” closer to the multidimensionality of the subject itself—that is, a language operating in visual, aural, verbal, temporal and even (through synaesthetic association) tactile domains. To me, this suggests a new line of approach to what has long been inadequately called “visual” anthropology. It is an approach that has the potential to restore to anthropology the material world within which culture takes its forms.

[1999]

Notes

My thanks to the following people for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this paper: Kalissa Alexeyeff, Roger Benjamin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Mary Eagle, Chris Gregory, Judith MacDougall, Howard Morphy, J. David Sapir, John Shannon, Sanjay Srivastava, Lucien Taylor, and Salim Yusufji.

¹See Benedict 1928 and 1934. In *Naven*, Gregory Bateson acknowledged his debt to Benedict while proposing several hypotheses for the “standardizing” of the psychology of individuals in a society. (See Bateson 1936: 112-14).

²See Feld 1982; Stoller 1989, 1997; Howes 1991.

³See, for example, Scoditti 1982; Forrest 1988; O'Hanlon 1989; Coote and Shelton 1992.

⁴See Turner, 1981; Kapferer, 1983; Herzfeld, 1985; Hardin 1993; Stewart 1996. Earlier, Erving Goffman (1959, 1967) convincingly analyzed social interactions in terms of performance. (For related work, see Brown and Levinson 1987.)

⁵See Desjarlais 1992; Alter 1992. Desjarlais's approach intersects with mine, but somewhat obliquely, since his focus is more upon the physical and psychic state of the individual than upon the physical and social environment.

⁶See Marcus and Cushman 1982; Marcus and Fischer 1986. The more radical approaches include experiments in intertextuality and juxtaposition such as Michael Taussig's Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man (1987) and Oscar Lewis's oral autobiographical transcriptions (see O. Lewis 1961, 1964, 1967).

⁷In particular, such films as Les Maitres fous (1955), Moi un noir (1957), La Goumbé des jeunes noceurs (1965), and the cycle of Sigui films (1966-73).

⁸A film that provoked anthropological outrage (as well as praise) was Robert Gardner's Forest of Bliss (1985). In documentary films there is a long history of interest in exploring the aesthetics of everyday life, dating back at least to the "city symphonies" of Vertov, Ruttmann, and Cavalcanti, and continuing in such postwar films as Rouquier's Farrebique (1947). Ethnographic filmmakers have tended to approach the subject more indirectly through material culture, ritual, and art, perhaps considering it insufficiently recognized as a topic of social analysis. But interest in this aspect of social experience is certainly evident in the films of Robert Flaherty, if not earlier, and is explicit in Basil Wright's Song of Ceylon (1934). It was also a concern of Gregory Bateson in his studies with Margaret Mead of Balinese society in the 1930s. Although Jorge Preloran's

Imaginero (1970) is ostensibly about a craftsman and artist, the film explores his larger aesthetic world comprehensively, as do other Preloran films, such as Zerda's Children (1978), about an impoverished family of wood-cutters. One problem for filmmakers has been how to distinguish their own aesthetic responses from those of their subjects. Another has been how to separate the broader aspects of cultural style from a society's officially consecrated aesthetic practices. Still another is how to define aesthetic experience in contrast to "nonaesthetic" experience. This is a very large subject that I plan to treat at length elsewhere.

⁹Ong 1991: 29.

¹⁰A concept proposed by Mallory Wober. (See Wober 1966, 1991.)

¹¹See Coote 1992, E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1940: 16-50) and Neville Dyson-Hudson (1966: 96-103) had already devoted some attention to the aesthetic role of cattle among the Nuer and Karimojong respectively.

¹²See Bloch 1974; G. Lewis 1980; Jackson 1989.

¹³It is of course possible to argue that these other aspects of life often function as works of art, as Gell (1995) argues in his response to Coote (1992) on the aesthetic role of cattle in African pastoralist societies, but in the end this is perhaps a category dispute. For another view, see Kupfer, 1983.

¹⁴Morphy 1996: 255.

¹⁵This is succinctly expressed in the 1948 Founder's Day speech at Doon School by the Governor General of the United Provinces, Shri Rajagopalachari: "It is wrong to think that science teaches only science. Science brings about a change in the whole attitude of boys. It brings about correct judgment, alertness and obedience to laws." (The Doon School Weekly, 30 October 1948.)

¹⁶Sanjay Srivastava, Constructing Post-Colonial India: National Character and the Doon School, London and New York: Routledge, 1998. I began the video project in 1997. Doon School Chronicles, the first part, was completed in 1999 and released in 2000.

¹⁷Among those who have discussed the aesthetics of ultranationalist states are Umberto Eco (1977), Klaus Theweleit (1987), Boris Groys (1992), Vladislav Todorov (1994), Susan Buck-Morss (1994), and Alla Efimova (1997).

¹⁸See Gell, 1995: 21-22.

¹⁹Bourdieu 1990: 56.

²⁰Ibid.: 60.

²¹Ibid.: 52.

²²Ibid.: 9.

²³Todorov, 1995: 10-11.

²⁴See Rosselli 1980; Sinha 1995.

²⁵The Doon School Weekly, 13 November 1937: 3.

²⁶The Doon School Book, 1949, reprinted in Chopra 1996: 40.

²⁷Foot wrote: "By 14 he should have learnt all the ordinary principles of social behaviour. He should know how to stand up and speak to a variety of different types of people—to his own mother, to someone else's mother, to his father, to his schoolmasters, to servants, to Mahatma Gandhi or to the Viceroy, and to do this without any self-consciousness." From "Fourteen," Doon School Magazine, 1938.

²⁸The Doon School Weekly, 13 March 1937: 1.

²⁹The Doon School Weekly, 20 June 1936: 1.

³⁰ "We believe that character-training is more a matter of organisation than instruction. . . . The purpose is achieved not by precept or instruction, but by

creating an environment in which a boy is led to do things for himself." The Doon School Book, 1949, reprinted in Chopra 1996: 40.

³¹ Srivastava 1998: 60.

³² Srivastava devotes considerable attention to this topic. See especially Chapters 3 and 5.

³³ For Clifford Geertz, the task of anthropology is "scratching surfaces" by examining the representations people make about their lives, and it is a piece of bad faith to try to go further. (Geertz 1986: 373.) My view is that it is important to try to go further if we are to go beyond the play of textual understandings to a more physically-grounded understanding. One reservation about hermeneutic anthropology is its selective focus upon what are considered to be exemplary cultural performances (or "performed texts"). This approach is seen as a way of exposing indigenous symbolic systems and as a guarantee that the objects of study are "socially constructed units of meaning" rather than ethnocentric projections of the investigator (Bruner 1986: 7). However, the underpinning of this selectivity (usually of highly ritualized and emotionally heightened events) presupposes an equivalence between the meanings of such events and the conduct of everyday life. The problem is not that interpretive studies produce sterile exegeses, or that the events themselves are unilluminating about the assumptions and modes of self-representation of a society, but that they may convey to us rather little about actually living in it. The fear of the hermeneuticists is that too close an experience-near focus leaves the anthropologist "awash in immediacies" (Geertz 1983: 57), but it is in fact very much the task of the visual anthropologist to deal in such immediacies and to fashion out of them a work of analysis.

³⁴Bourdieu 1990: 18. Bourdieu also refers to this form of understanding, which need never rise to the level of consciousness, as “learned ignorance” (Ibid.: 19). Anthony Forge (1970: 289) makes a related observation in the case of Abalam iconography, which he believes is meant to produce an effect upon its viewers “directly” rather than through its symbolic meanings—a view quite opposed to the “cryptological paradigm” of cultural description, to use Chris Pinney’s phrase (1995: 94).

³⁵The Doon School Weekly, 23 May 1936: 1.

³⁶The Doon School Weekly Supplement, 27 May 1944.

³⁷The Doon School Weekly, 13 November 1937: 3.

³⁸The Doon School Weekly, 7 March 1936: 2.

³⁹The Doon School Weekly, 27 February 1937: 1.

⁴⁰In 1969 the school began awarding students a black blazer for high academic achievement as a counterbalance to the blue blazer, awarded since 1940 for achievement in sports. Clothing is also a feature of school punishments, such as the “change-in-break” described at the end of this section.

⁴¹ A.N. Dar, “The Ethos of Sport in Doon School,” The Doon School Weekly, 1 November 1985: 5.

⁴² “The Moving Finger Writes, and Having Writ, Moves On,” The Doon School Weekly, 6 April 1985: 2.

⁴³ A thali is a meal served on a large, circular stainless steel tray made with indentations to hold the portions of the various foods.

⁴⁴Vikram Seth, Founder’s Day Speech, The Doon School, 1992.

⁴⁵ Personal communication, 14 November 1997.

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