Sacred Nature and Profane Objects in Seachange

by

Nick Osbaldiston, B Soc.Sci. (Hons)

Humanities Research Program
Queensland University of Technology

n.osbaldiston@qut.edu.au
0415-212-211

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Abstract.

This paper seeks to interrogate the Seachange phenomena by utilising cultural theoretical principles developed by Durkheim (1995[1912]) in his examination of religion. It is argued that nature plays a significant role within the Seachange discourse by being ‘sacralised’ against the mundane or ‘profane’ metropolis. By interrogating public documentation developed by local councils, it is shown that nature is constructed as ‘pristine’ and ‘untouched’. This is counter-posed against the city which is aesthetically devoid of authenticity or pleasantness. Objects of technology which signify the metropolis then are considered profane and require separation from the natural world.

However, the paper shows that through policy innovation, this separation is achieved on a visual level rather than physically, due to the demands of these areas for services (Gurran, Squires & Blakely, 2006). This occurs through hiding the ‘profane’ objects from the spectacle of nature, or if that is not possible, by blending them aesthetically into the natural surrounds. The paper concludes by examining the manner in which past ‘mundane’ objects such as 19th century infrastructures, are symbolically transformed to represent part of the area’s ‘sacredness’. Thus, the sacred/profane distinction is not fixed and immobile, but can shift according to cultural understandings.
Keywords: Seachange, Durkheim, Sacred/Profane, Material Culture.

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**Introduction.**

The phenomenon known as Seachange has achieved substantial interest in both public and academic arenas. Most of these pieces are concerned purely with understanding the motivations behind the movement (Burnley and Murphy, 2004; Salt, 2001; Dowling, 2004), whilst a few seek to make theoretical sense of the issue and challenge stereotypical views (Osbaldiston, 2006; Ragusa, 2007). In this paper, I seek to analyse the phenomenon using a cultural theory approach through interrogation of the role that nature plays in shaping the Seachange discourse. It will be shown that natural form is juxtaposed against an aesthetically mundane metropolis (Macnaughten and Urry, 1998). This is then interpreted through the Durkheimian (1995[1912]) cultural dialectic of the ‘Sacred’ and the ‘Profane’. By utilising this conceptual framework, we can investigate Seachange by symbolically understanding how participants in the movement ‘sacralise’ nature against the ‘profane’ city. Through examination of documentation on both a marketing and policy platform, this paper reveals that nature in Seachange is viewed as ‘pristine’ and ‘untouched’ by human hand (Clarence Valley Council, 2006d). Yet, the paper will show that urban technologies, mostly mundane, are important to the region’s growth and service capabilities (Clarence Valley Council, 2006d; Gurran, Squires & Blakely, 2006). As such, the separation between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ is founded not on an actual physical basis, but rather on the visual ‘gaze’ whereby technologies symbolic of the metropolis are either blended or hidden from the spectacular (Sunshine Coast Regional Council, 2008). Yet, the relationship between sacred nature and profane objects can be
fluid whereby objects and infrastructure from previous eras are transformed through discourse as ‘markers of the land’. These once ‘mundane’ objects form part of the ‘sacred’ dialectic amongst Seachange locations and add to the aesthetic appreciation of an area (Macnaughten and Urry, 1998:187; Gurran, Squires & Blakely, 2006). This will be explored in more detail towards the end of the paper.

2. Discussion.

2.1 – Locating the ‘Sacred’ in Seachange.

For the first part of this paper we shall analyse the ‘sacred’ in the Seachange movement. We could spend much time discussing the manner in which the ‘self’ is actually ‘sacralised’ according to Durkheimian principles (Durkheim, 1995[1912]). Here, Seachange takes on the form of seeking for ‘authenticity’ whereby the individual displays their body and engages in activities according to beliefs of what is ‘real’ in conjunction with other Seachange reference groups (Goffman, 1959, Etzioni, 2004). This is certainly something to entertain in the Seachange movement, and another model of simplicity, Downshifting (Schor, 1998; Etzioni, 2004; Hamilton, 2003). However, in this paper we forego this investigation for another focal point. For in Seachange as will be shown below, there is a distinct and perhaps collectively held belief amongst the wider social group that nature itself is sacred. Thus it requires separation and even protection from the metropolis, which is profane (Durkheim, 1995[1912]).

In order to appreciate this, we shall consider the Seachange movement briefly and its relationship to nature before moving into more empirical investigations. Simply put,
Seachange refers to the permanent exodus of urban residents towards idyllic and tranquil beach or bush settings (Burnley and Murphy, 2004). Whilst motivations are varied in the geographical shift, most Seachangers appear to believe that regional locations somehow satisfy an internal longing for slower, cleaner and more sociable lives (Burnley and Murphy, 2004; Osbaldiston, 2006). Some even suggest that through their own Seachange they have been able to procure ‘better lives’ because they are no longer exposed to the unpredictable nature of the city environs (Osbaldiston, 2006). Others also proclaim that living closer to the natural environment provokes timelessness and peace not shared with the metropolis (Osbaldiston, 2006; Dowling, 2004). However, most Seachangers share a disdain for the city and what it offers in terms of both lifestyle and aesthetics, a notion amplified within some academic circles. For instance, Kate Soper (2007:221) declares with soberness that those who live in the ‘cities are largely denied’ aesthetic experiences like ‘total salience’, ‘full darkness’ or ‘clear vision’. This critical concern for the city and its environs is not new of course. Simmel (1991[1903]), Benjamin (1999[1935]) and Kracauer (1995[1963]) for instance all wrote extensively about the mundane influence that the metropolis had on subjectivity and aesthetic engagement.

Disdain for the city is also highlighted in the romantic literatures which serve to construct the countryside as clean and fresh: an alternative to dirty industrial cities (Macnaughten and Urry, 1998). Engagement with nature here is a chance for quiet serenity, ‘proper living’ and meditative enjoyment (Macnaughten and Urry, 1998:175; Szersynski, 2005). The industrial centre, on the other hand, represents all that is unholy, invading ‘the human orifices’ with undesirable sensations (Macnaughten and Urry, 1998:175). As
such, the relocation of individuals into the ‘country’ for aesthetic reasons is not entirely
new. Szersynski (2005:105) shows us that 19th century escape from the city was
motivated by a moral stance against technological and social progress; Macnaughten and
Urry (1998) also explain how movement into countryside was tied to a bourgeois
sentiment to acquire ‘proper living’.

We can see then that nature had a significant role to play in constructing the dichotomous
relationship between city and country. Similar and comparable to these ‘movements’ past
is the manner in which nature appears to be counter-posed against the uncharming and
uninspiring metropolis in Seachange. So whilst nature provides for leisurely enjoyment,
peaceful surrounds and opportunities for self-actualisation through meditation and other
‘spiritually’ sourced activities, the city provokes feelings of stress, anxiety and boredom
(Dowling, 2004; Osbaldiston, 2006). Wherefore, it is here that we can begin to
implement Durkheim’s (1995[1912]) analysis of the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ which I
will review briefly now.

Essentially Durkheim’s (1995[1912]) argument is that much of cultural life can be split
into two distinctive categories as assigned by the wider collective conscience. His
informative examinations into this binary code appear distinctly in his treatment of
religion. The ‘sacred’ here relates to anything, whether object or ritual, which is
commonly held in reverence because of its symbolism with ‘beliefs, myths, dogmas and
legends’ (Durkheim, 1995[1912]), p34). The ‘sacred’ object itself has no intrinsic value
itself but acquires ‘sacredness elsewhere’ (Durkheim, 1995[1912], p84). Associated with
the ‘sacred’ then are rites and rituals which keep it separated from what is labelled as the ‘profane’. For Durkheim (1995[1912], p36) the distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ things then, is as stark as ‘good’ versus ‘evil’ or ‘health’ and ‘illness’. The two must never be mixed or touch, otherwise they would lose their symbolic significance. Subsequently, ‘human activity’ revolves around the organisation of social life through ‘symbolic manipulation’ and control of sacred and profane things in order to maintain the distinction (Smith, 2008, p21). Smith (2008, p20-21) recounts:

> These imaginative templates enable societies to make sense of the world by organising their environments and experiences using broader, extra-contextual symbolic patterns. Such cultural systems live symbiotically with the collective rituals that reproduce them, these being oriented around that deep gulf separating the sacred from the profane, the pure from the impure.

Whilst the dichotomy culturally defined, classification of such is beyond mere admiration (Durkheim, 1995[1912], p82). For Durkheim (1995[1912], sacralisation of any object (even the self) emerges when it has special qualities that the profane lacks. Consequently, one of his introductory arguments in *Elementary Forms* is against the belief that religion was spawned through worship of nature. This he argues is due to the lack of scientific knowledge available in premodern times which left humans with ‘no awareness that cosmic forces’ were superior to their own (Durkheim, 1995[1912], p83). Szersynski (2005) expounds on this concept in subtle detail, espousing that contemporary concern with nature emerges with technical knowledge about our destructive capabilities on the natural world. As such, the current inclination towards the ‘desecularisation’ of nature is
in part a response to the belief that it is fragile, requiring conservation and care (see also Macnaughten and Urry (1998).

Whilst this is useful for showing how nature is sacralised on an ontological level, it does not provide us with understanding of how it is construed within the Seachange discourse. Following on from Durkheim’s (1995[1912]) description of the Sacred/Profane categories, we must find what special qualities nature possesses that the profane city does not. What we discover below is that the sacred and profane split is based on visual principles and is governed accordingly. This is because certain ‘mundane’ technologies are not only physically present in Seachange locations; they are also desired (Gurran, Squires & Blakely, 2006).

Through marketing publications designed to attract potential consumers of the lifestyle shift (in this case to the Clarence Valley region in Northern New South Wales) we can empirically locate the fundamental features of a sacralised nature. By analysing policy documentation, we can also unravel how certain profane ‘objects’ are governed against natural form. However, it appears from the data displayed below that sacred nature has certain qualities which are considered unavailable in urbanity. Consider the following excerpts:

The countryside is breathtakingly beautiful. Whether you’re exploring the rugged peaks and gentle valleys of the high country or cruising the wide open river plains, every turn in the road reveals something new and spectacular (Clarence Valley Council, 2006b, p1, italics added)
The beaches are punctuated with pristine rivers and streams, rugged headlands, shimmering lakes, some of the world’s finest surf breaks – and many are protected by national parks and reserves. In fact, the Clarence Coast has the longest stretch of uninhabited coastline in New South Wales (Clarence Valley Coast, 2006a, p1, italics added).

The Clarence Valley is blessed with vast areas of protected bushland and untouched wilderness of breathtaking beauty that promise endless opportunities for relaxation, meditation and nature based pursuits (Clarence Valley Council, 2006c, p3, italics added).

As displayed then, nature within the Clarence Valley is considered to be ‘new and spectacular’ because of its ‘untouched’ and ‘uninhabited’ landscape. This then promises the potential Seachanger ‘endless opportunities’ for subjective enjoyment similar to Maslow’s (1954) belief in ‘self-actualisation’.

We could spend the rest of this paper arguing against the reliability of nature to provoke such sensations considering the reliance that humans have on mundane technologies to procure them (Michael, 2000; Latour, 1991). Indeed, we could even argue that non-human interferences would most certainly disrupt the apparent ‘untouched’ attributes of nature here. However in doing so, I believe we would miss a greater theoretical opportunity to understand how material culture can shape the aesthetics of the Seachange experience.
2.2 – Profane and ‘Becoming Sacred’ objects in Seachange locations.

I now turn the rest of this paper’s attention to exploring how certain objects have cultural significance and can add to or take away from the pristine gaze of sacralised nature (Woodward, 2007). The first task is to establish what objects are symbolic of the city (or profane) and how they are separated according to Durkheimian (1995[1912]) logic. To accomplish this, the paper will interrogate policy guidance and initiative from the National Seachange Taskforce and the now dissolved Noosa Shire Council. These institution’s publications further highlight the distinction required between encroaching urbanity and nature. For instance, the paper Meeting the Seachange Challenge implores local councils to take action against the detrimental effect of the urban sprawl on ‘aesthetic and experiential qualities’ found in Seachange locations (Gurran, Squires & Blakely, 2006:15). They further propose,

often a local community has undertaken a deliberate strategy to promote their natural assets, only to find that they have actually stimulated a rapid population growth that threatens the very values that inspired it (Gurran, Squires & Blakely, 2006:15).

It would seem then that Seachange in the other areas has in fact ruined the very ‘aesthetic’ (noted above as ‘untouched’ and ‘pristine’) values which promote participation in the first placeiii. This is also exampled in the policy document The Noosa Plan developed in 2006 to protect attributes of nature that underpins the areas ‘feel’ and ‘appeal’. The emphasis of this protection is on the visual gaze rather than an actual physical separation as Durkheim (1995[1912]) proposes. This is because certain technologies are unavoidable in regional locations due to the demand for services such as
telecommunications. As Seachange continues to flourish with the promise of metropolitan ‘creature comforts’, avoidance of infrastructure akin to the metropolis is unavoidable (Clarence Valley Council, 2006d).

Subsequently, the Noosa Plan does not advocate for a full physical separation of objects from natural surrounds. Rather, the separation is made visually. This is achieved by hiding profane objects away from the spectacular. For instance, whilst telecommunications infrastructure is ‘very important’ to the areas needs, ‘towers and other installations’ are hidden away from ‘visually prominent locations’ or in other words ‘sacred’ areas of nature (Sunshine Coast Regional Council, 2006:3/55). Thus the separation of sacred nature from profane objects is physical, but connected more to the visual attractiveness of the former. In another example, advertising signs which are a common feature of tourist centred areas (for instance, accommodation signage), are to be hidden from visibility around ‘waterways’ and beaches (Sunshine Coast Regional Council, 2006:10/356). To do so would inhibit the ability for the consumer of the visual experience to feel apart or separated from metropolitan environsiv. Most interestingly and not overly explored by this paper, is the concern over other sensations such as that of smell. For instance, large garbage containers within more built up areas of Seachange locations are to be ‘screened’ off thus eliminating the impact of this very mundane object in both the ocular and aromatic aesthetic appeal of the area (Sunshine Coast Regional Council, 2006:9-324).
Thus through these and other policies, mundane objects of metropolitan symbolism are kept separated from the serene natural environ, albeit in an aesthetically appreciated manner. However, what happens when this is not possible? The answer to this question, as already alluded to, is to attempt a blending of the object into the natural form surrounding it. Urban infrastructure, for example, such as roofs, awnings and other external components are inevitable and cannot be hidden away. However, policy guidelines demonstrate that these can be integrated into the sacredness of form by transforming them aesthetically. In a specific example, new infrastructure from urban development is to ‘reflect’ the natural environment around it through its ‘external colour schemes’ thus adding rather than subtracting from the ‘sense of place’ (Sunshine Coast Regional Council, 2006:9-311). Thus, the once ‘profane’ object, in fact is re-contextualised by blending it into the ‘natural surround’. In another smaller attempt to re-configure the object, fencing between infrastructure and the beach is to again to ‘reflect the natural environment’ through external colours schemes whilst also providing transparency in design (that is a certain distance apart reducing the visual impact of a fence being there at all) (Sunshine Coast Regional Council, 2006:9-321). The premise for doing so is to transform the symbolism of the fence to blend with the natural surroundings, thus losing its impact on the sacred (Durkheim, 1995[1912]).

So far then we have seen that profane objects are a concern for local policy visually (and in some cases in other senses) and are dealt with accordingly. However, some materials, whilst perhaps once considered profane, are symbolically transformed through discourse into the ‘sacred’. Thus the line between sacred and profane is one that can be
transgressed in certain situations, as Smith (2008:41) has recently shown us in his work on the execution. In the case of Seachange however, the aesthetic transfer of an object into ‘sacredness’ is based on the ability for certain artefacts to be connected symbolically to another time (Miller, 1995; Macnaughten and Urry, 1998; Woodward, 2007). As such, they become ‘markers of the land’ and contribute positively to the ‘authenticity’ or ‘timescape’ of the area (Macnaughten and Urry, 1998).

This is demonstrated then by returning back to the Clarence Valley documents. Here, certain technologies are designated as contributing positively to the aesthetic. For instance, the publication suggests that individuals can consume a ‘rustic, early pioneering feel’ through objects such as an abandoned gold rush town or a ‘solid rock’ tunnel built by ‘convict labour’ (Clarence Valley Council, 2006a:2). Within rural townships too there is also a familiar sensation of historical re-connection. Some areas are described to be lined with ‘19th Century colonial facades’ with one town’s main street also being ‘filled with antique treasures’ (Clarence Valley Council, 2006b:1; Clarence Valley Council, 2006d:2). Later on the documentation boasts that the area has a culturally defined sense of ‘old-fashioned values’ and ‘warm friendly villages’ (Clarence Valley Council, 2006b:2). Thus objects of the past, whether a 19th century awning or brickwork from convict labour, appear to form part of the aesthetic flow of the region.

These once ‘mundane’ objects then, now participate positively into the sacredness of the area. This is achieved by imbuing a sense of nostalgia through these objects for ‘time forgotten’ when things were simpler and centred on ‘community, neighbourliness and
mutuality’ (Macnaughten and Urry, 1998:161). Against such is the belief that time in metropolitan areas is disconnected, unsociable and individualistic (Macnaughten and Urry, 1998). Such a juxtaposition of values is imperative then as the sacred cannot exist without the profane (Durkheim (1995[1912]).

Conclusion.

Throughout this paper, we have explored the sacred/profane dichotomy through the nature versus metropolis discourse which flows through Seachange. Whilst the aim of this work has been to provide theoretical enlightenment on the movement itself, we have seen that it also shows how Durkheimian principles (1995[1912]) can prove very useful in material cultural studies. For instance, although natural form falls outside the field itself, the impact of objects that we can label ‘profane’, through Durkheim’s perspective, on sacralised nature is of importance to a cultural understanding of Seachange.

However, as we have seen, sacredness is not fixed and immobile (see Smith, 2008). It has the ability to consume objects into its parameters by aesthetically transforming once mundane objects, into contributors to the ‘feel’ of an area. In this case, we have viewed how objects such as facades (infrastructure) can imbue a sense of ‘time forgotten’ and community togetherness thus positively adding to the sacred (Miller,1995). Thus we can conclude as Durkheim (1995[1912]) suggests himself, that the sacred is not fixed and immobile, but able to shift according to social understanding. Within the Seachange discourse then, ‘sacredness’ applies to not only natural environments, but objects as well.
References.


Here I combine a manner of differently labelled movements into one. For instance, Treechange (movement into the bush or countryside), T-change (Tasmanian migration), Hillchange (movement into hilly countrysides and towns such as Toowoomba) and Greenchange (movement into green countrysides and farming communities) all involve a similar process to Seachange which is predominantly, and perhaps attributed to the television show, known as the shift towards the beach. Whilst all these different movements are important in their own investigation, it is unimportant to this paper to distinguish between each of them in a detailed manner. As such, the more popular term of Seachange (albeit ugly at times) will be used in this paper to describe all these migrations.

What I mean here is an acceptance that we can never truly be ‘alone’ with nature in a ‘romantic gaze’ type situation (Macnaughten and Urry, 1998). Interruptions from technologies like planes, 4wds, other humans (Michael, 2000), even workers cleaning walking tracks would most certainly disrupt the one on one engagement with nature.

For instance, the document discusses in some detail the problems of aesthetic spoiling which have occurred in Costa del Sol (Spain) as a result of immigration from other areas (especially England) of Amenity Migrants (Moss, 2006 – similar to Seachangers). Urban development has now dominated areas of once pristine aesthetic value (Gurran, Squires & Blakely, 2006).

In a previous paper (Osbaldiston, 2007) I have argued that Seachange is amicable to Simmelian theoretical analysis using his essay on ‘The Adventure’ (Simmel, 1991[1910]). Through his understanding then, making the ‘experience’ aesthetically different from ‘everyday’ life is tantamount to a successful adventure. Whilst there are various theoretical reinterpretations to be made in arguing this case, the ‘Adventure’ still maintains significance in the Seachange phenomenon.