

Sacred Geography:

Christopher Tilley and Barbara Bender:

Phenomenology and Contested Landscapes



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Overview

- Christopher Tilley - Background.
 - The Phenomenology of Landscape.
- Barbara Bender - Background.
 - Contested Places.
- Going further...

Christopher Tilley

- Archaeologist, University College London.
- Special interest in prehistoric landscapes, especially the Neolithic in Britain.
- Emphasis on 'post-processual archaeology,' or 'interpretive archaeology.'
- Highlighting the subjectivity of archaeological interpretation.
- A pioneer of 'landscape archaeology.'



Positivism and Interpretivism

- “The standard approach [...] within the archaeological literature has concentrated on factors of the environment such as relief, climate, soils, water supply and the seasonal availability of exploitable resources. These have been related to factors such as demographic patterns, technologies, transhumance systems, territoriality, and control over exchange networks and forms of social organization facilitating environmental exploration as means of adaptation [...] The location of sites thus becomes explained as a result of a mix of ‘rational’ decision-making processes involving some or all of these factors.” (Tilley, 1994, pp. 1-2).
- But what about other factors? Myth, story, history, experiences, beliefs...



Ontological Landscapes

- “[...] the physical and biological experience of landscape - earth, water, wood, stone, high places and low places, the wind, rain, sun, stars and sky. The rhythms of the land and the seasons correspond to and are worked into the rhythms of life. A landscape has ontological import because it is lived in and through, mediated, worked on and altered, replete with cultural meaning and symbolism - and not just something looked at or thought about” (Tilley, 1994, p. 26).
- Our world-view is grounded in our immediate landscape.



Powers of Place

- There are certain places in the landscape that have consistently drawn human attention.
- Sometimes characterised as ‘the spirit of place’ or the ‘power of place.’
- “The spirit of a place may be held to reside in a landscape. Familiarity with the land, being able to read and decode its signs allows individuals to know ‘how to go on’ at a practical level of consciousness [...] The place acts dialectically so as to create the people who are of that place” (Tilley, 1994, p. 26).



Sensory Archaeology

- Perception is important - sites are embedded in a wider environmental context, and can't be removed from it.
- “To understand landscapes phenomenologically requires the art of walking in and through them, to touch and be touched by them [...] The phenomenologist acknowledges the multi sensory qualities of our human experiences of landscape, that a landscape is simultaneously a visionscape, a touchscape, a soundscape, a smellscape, and a tastescape. These different perceptive experiences occur all at once. Thus our experience is always synaesthetic (a mingling or blending of the senses) [...]” (Tilley, 2016).
- We can never experience the world as it was in the past, but we can perhaps get closer to it.



Prehistoric Soundscapes

- “With the development of research in the embryonic study area of archaeoacoustics, it is becoming apparent that some rock-art occurs at places with distinctive acoustic properties. In addition, recent findings by this chapter’s author at Carn Menyn, Preseli, Wales, indicate that acoustic properties could have been factors in determining locations from which rocks were specially selected for monumental and ceremonial purposes. This paper overviews the general development of archaeoacoustics and gives examples of sites recently studied by the author that exemplify a range of acoustic characteristics” (Devereux, 2008).



Landscape

- “A landscape is a series of named locales, a set of relational places linked by paths, movements and narratives. It is a ‘natural’ topography perspectively linked to the existential Being of the body in societal space. It is a cultural code for living, an anonymous ‘text’ to be read and interpreted, a writing pad for inscription, a scape of and for human praxis, a mode of dwelling and a mode of experiencing” (Tilley, 1994, p. 34).
- Landscapes are layered with meaning and experience.



Barbara Bender

- Archaeologist and anthropologist.
- Emphasis on Neolithic archaeology.
- Pioneer of material culture studies in the 1970s and 80s.
- Worked on landscape phenomenology with Christopher Tilley.



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- Archaeologist and anthropologist.
- Emphasis on Neolithic archaeology.
- Pioneer of material culture studies in the 1970s and 80s.
- Worked on landscape phenomenology with Christopher Tilley.
- Currently Emeritus Professor of Heritage Anthropology at University College London.



Context

- “[...] the way in which people understand and engage with their worlds depends upon the specific time and place and historical conditions; it depends upon gender, age, class and religion. At any given moment and place landscapes are multi-vocal [...]” (Bender, 1992, p. 735).
- Perceptions and interpretations of landscape change over time, influenced by culture, but culture is also influenced by land.



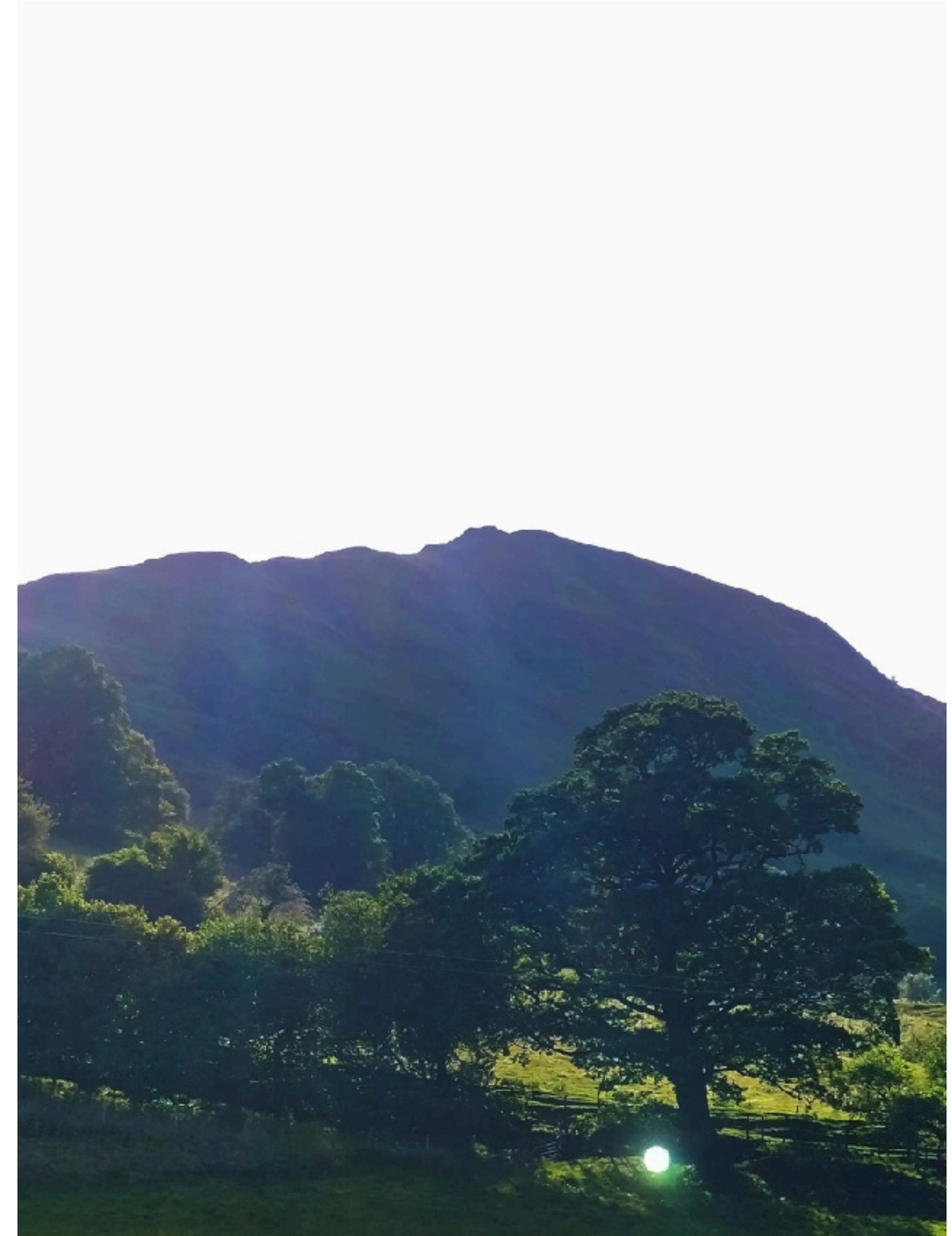
Contested Landscapes

- “[...] I want to explore not only the different ways in which, over a period of several hundred years, those with economic and political power and the necessary cultural capital have attempted, physically and aesthetically, to appropriate the landscape, but also how these appropriations have been contested by those engaging with the land in quite different ways” (Bender, 2002, p. 142).
- Different interpretations of the past, and the significance of particular sites, e.g. archaeological, pagan, indigenous, new age, etc...



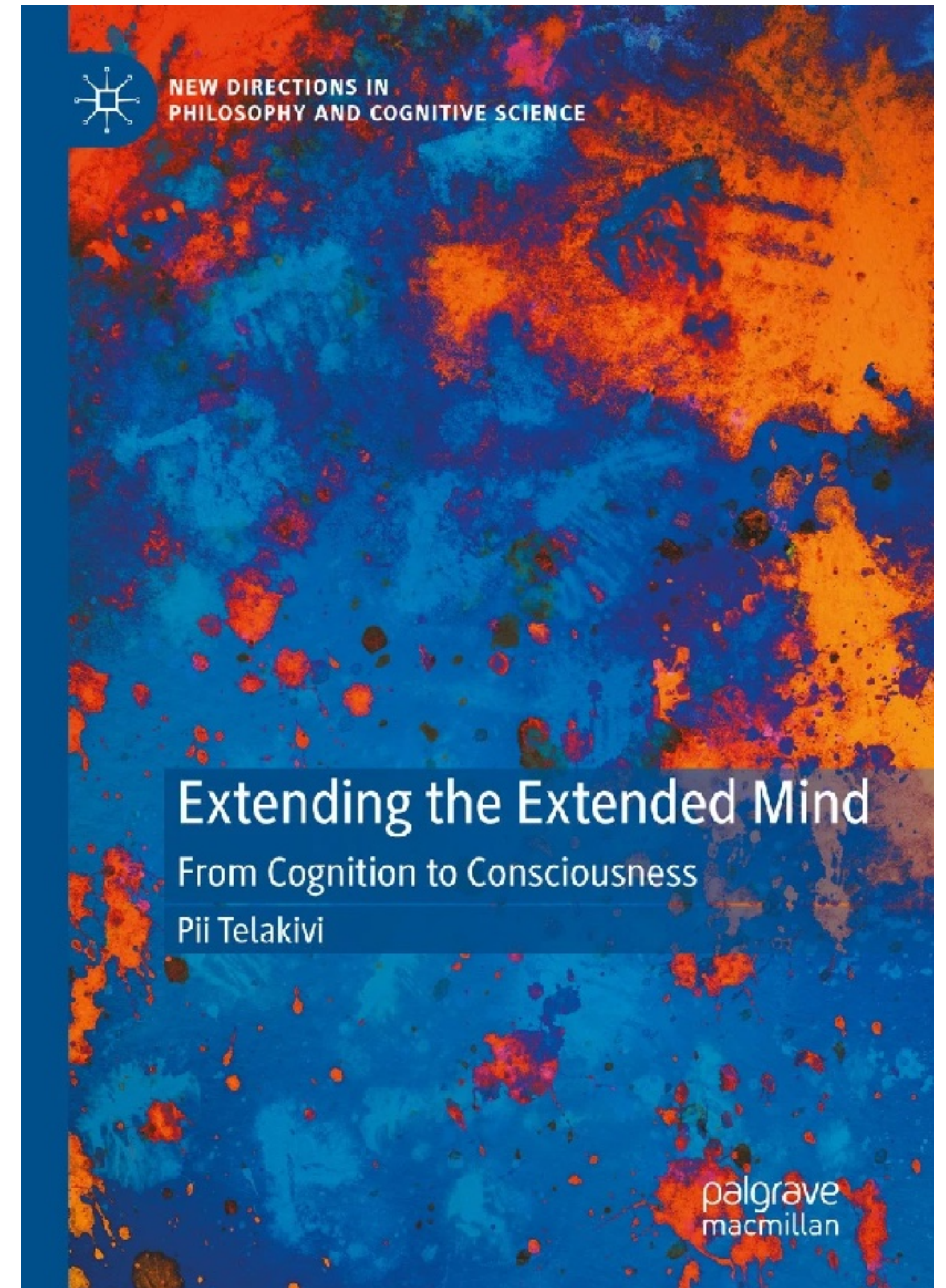
Active Landscapes

- Contrary to the way they are presented in art, landscapes are not static - they are active.
- Bender emphasises the “active presence of landscapes: people engage and re-engage, appropriate and contest them, use them to create and dispute a sense of identity, whether of self, group or nation” (Bender, 1992, p. 735).
- Cognition is extended out into the material world - our sense of self is also constituted from the environment.



Going Further

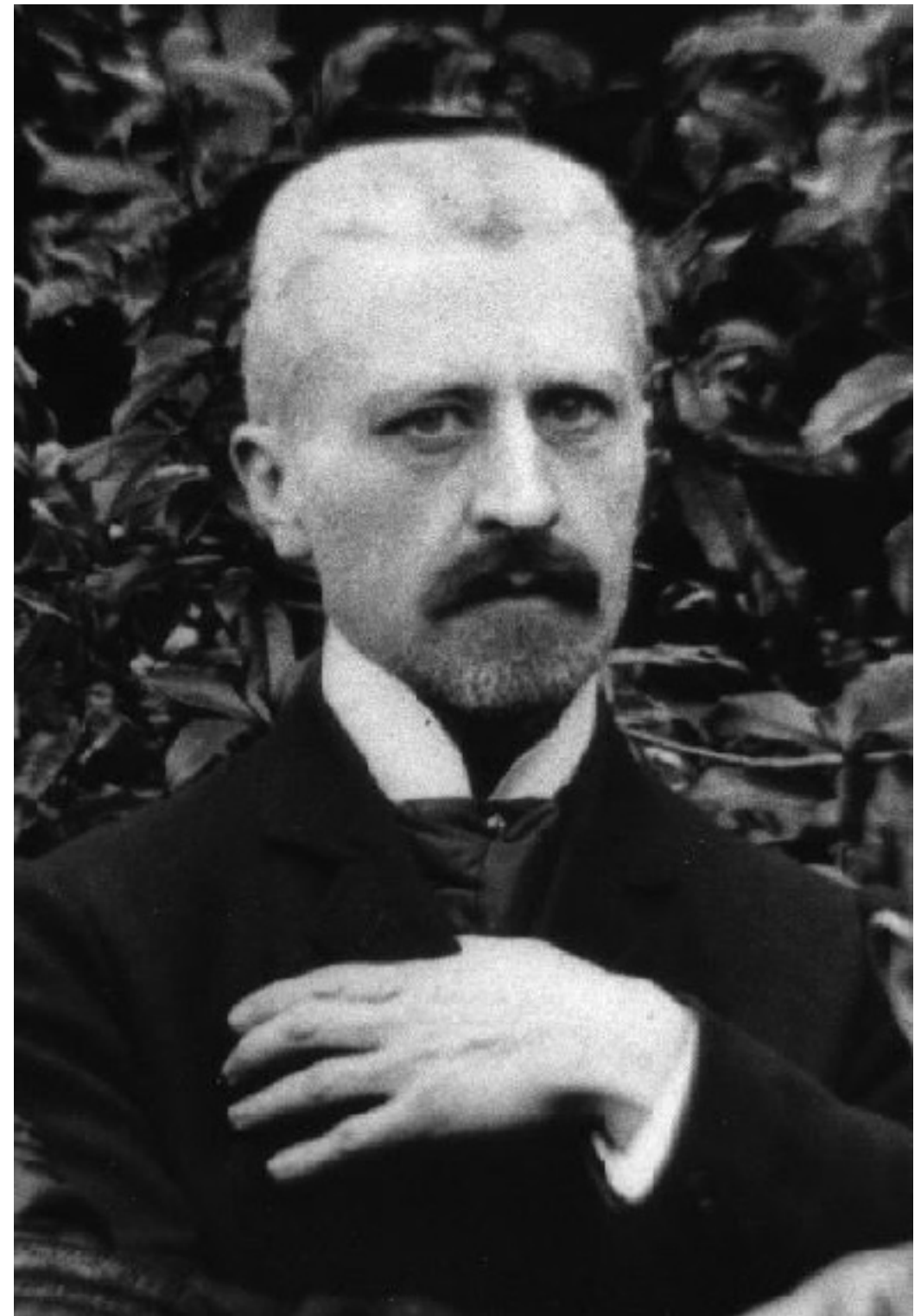
- If cognition is extended out into the environment, and in/through material objects, then what does that imply for consciousness itself?
- “[...] argues that conscious experience is sometimes extended outside the brain and body into certain kinds of environmental interaction and tool use. It shows that if one accepts that cognitive states can extend, one must also accept that consciousness can extend. The proponents of Extended Mind defend the former claim, but usually oppose the latter claim.”



The Numinous: *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*

- Theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937).
- Numinous experience - *the mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans* - understood as the very essence of religion.
- The sense of the numinous is conjured through our interactions with what he terms “the wholly other” - “something which has no place in our scheme of reality but belongs to an absolutely different one” (Otto, 1958, p. 29).
- “The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship [...] It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost gristly horror and shuddering [...] It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of [...] that which is a mystery inexpressible [...]” (Otto, 1958, p. 13).
- The numinous arises when we interact with certain places.

“...the implicit meaning may be rendered explicit. It is already the beginning of this explicative process...when a [person] says: ‘It is not quite right here’; ‘It is uncanny’...‘This place is haunted’... Here we have the obscure basis of meaning and idea rising into greater clarity and beginning to make itself explicit as the notion...of a transcendent Something, a real operative entity of a numinous kind, which later...assumes concrete form as a ‘numen loci,’ a daemon, an ‘El,’ a Baal, or the like” (Otto, 1958, p. 126).



Extrovertive Mystical Experience

- Stace distinguished between introvertive and extrovertive mystical experience.
- **Introvertive** - interior experiences, visions, oneness.
- **Extrovertive** - Specifically refers to mystical experiences that are either initiated by, or which transfigure, the natural landscape, revealing an underlying unity and the interconnectedness of all phenomena.
- “The extrovertive mystic with his physical senses continues to perceive the same world of trees and hills and tables and chairs as the rest of us. But he sees these objects transfigured in such manner that the Unity shines through them...the extrovertive experience is sensory-intellectual in so far as it still perceives physical objects but is nonsensuous and nonintellectual in so far as it perceives them as "all one”” (Stace, 1960, p. 15).



Nature Mysticism

- “There is no doubt that as a boy I was becoming what might be described as a nature mystic. Somehow, I felt the presence of something which was beyond and yet in a way part of all the things that thrilled me – the wildflowers, and indeed the insects too. I will now record something...[that] I have never told anyone before, but now that I am in my 88th year I think I can admit it. Just occasionally when I was sure that no one could see me, I became so overcome with the glory of the natural scene, that for a moment or two I fell on my knees in prayer – not prayer asking for anything, but thanking God, who felt very real to me, for the glories of his Kingdom and for allowing me to feel them. It was always by the running waterside that I did this, perhaps in front of a great foam of meadowsweet or purple loosestrife...” (Alister Hardy, as cited in Hay, 2013).



Nature Mysticism

- “...I did not mean a belief in a deity with an anthropomorphic image, but did at least mean a belief in an “extra-sensory” contact with a Power which *is greater than, and in part lies beyond the individual self...*
- Towards this, whatever it may be, we have a feeling, no doubt for good biological, or psychological, reasons...of a *personal* relationship, and we can it God” (Hardy, 1966, p. 9)



Extrovertive Mystical Experience

- As I watched, suddenly the whole countryside changed and everything in it, without exception, simply glowed with numinous light – it seemed no longer to be lit by the sun but by its own internal radiance. Sunlight was not reflected from it, but I myself and everything else seemed to have become light – which now inter-penetrated and shone through our previously dense physical forms...The whole scene shone with an extraordinary golden glow, which included the sky and the atmosphere itself.

(RERC Reference: 10003, Male, no details).

- “As we conversed the situation became unreal. The plants and shrubs and the three pine trees in a copse...became unreal. And yet they were more real than I had ever seen them in the 3 1/2 years I had lived there. Instead of merging into a general familiar pattern, each item of plant, shrub and tree, stood out singularly, vivid, vibrant...The whole area became something on its own, apart from the rest. The whole area became something I had never seen before. I became filled with a feeling of elation and well-being such as I have never before or since experienced...I felt that I had seen Nature as it really is.”

(RERC Reference: 002780, Male, 1941).



Extrovertive Mystical Experience

- “My mother and I were walking on a stretch of land...known locally as 'the moors.' As the sun declined and the slight chill of evening came on, a pearly mist formed over the ground...Here and there just the very tallest harebells appeared above the mist. I had a great love of these exquisitely formed flowers, and stood lost in wonder at the sight. Suddenly I seemed to see the mist as a shimmering gossamer tissue and the harebells, appearing here and there, seemed to shine with a brilliant fire. Somehow I understood that this was the living tissue of life itself, in which that which we call consciousness was embedded, appearing here and there as a shining focus of energy in the more diffused whole. In that moment I knew that I had my own special place, as had all other things, animate and so-called inanimate, and that we were all part of this universal tissue which was both fragile yet immensely strong, and utterly good and beneficent. The vision has never left me. It is as clear today as fifty years ago, and with it the same intense feeling of love of the world and the certainty of ultimate good. It gave me then a strong, clear sense of identity which has withstood many vicissitudes, and an affinity with plants, birds, animals, even insects, and people too, which has often been commented upon.”

(RERC Reference: 003039, Female, 1922).

Going Further

- We could also extend these ideas into the realm of the non-human.
- Similar processes may be in action for non-humans too - developing their sense of cultural, identity, self, etc., in the context of perceptual landscapes.



Summary

- Tilley - post-processual archaeology, emphasis on the phenomenology of landscapes through bodily perception - how they are experienced, and how they may have been experienced in the past. This is an interpretive enterprise.
- Bender - landscapes are active and entwined with our thinking about who we are - our sense of self and identity. Landscapes can mean different things to different people at different times, and often at the same time.
- We can take these ideas further, e.g. exploration of sensory landscapes (visual, aural, tactile, etc.), pushing the boundaries of extended cognition - if we think through and with the environment, then we are not fully 'in here.'
- We can also extend these ideas into the realm of the non-human.

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