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THE MODE OF PASTORAL IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT

NURT RUSTYKALNY W ROZWOJU URBANISTYCZNYM

Abstract

Currently many cities are experiencing a so-called urban renaissance. This has led to large scale rehabilitation of historical centres and living quarters, inflated property prices and to what is generally known as gentrification. Whilst we have seen many attempts to explain these processes through the housing market – focusing either on the demand of the supply side of the market – in this paper I will seek to establish the urban pastoral as a specific mode of urban life, which expresses itself in many ways, one of which might be gentrification.

Keywords: urban pastoral, gentrification, landscape, urban aesthetics

Streszczenie

Wiele miast przeżywa obecnie tak zwany renesans urbanistyczny, który doprowadził do rehabilitacji wielkiej skali w zabytkowych śródmieściach oraz w dzielnicach mieszkaniowych, jak również do wzrostu cen nieruchomości oraz zjawiska określanego jako gentryfikacja, czyli podnoszenie statusu biednej dzielnicy lub ulicy poprzez osiedlanie się tam bogatszej ludności. Odnotowano liczne próby wyjaśnienia tychże procesów poprzez analizę rynku mieszkaniowego, które zawsze skupiały się na aspekcie popytu bądź podaży. W artykule niniejszym zamierzam przedstawić nurt rustykalny w życiu miasta, który znajduje odzwierciedlenie w wielu zjawiskach – jednym z nich może być właśnie gentryfikacja.

Słowa kluczowe: nurt rustykalny, gentryfikacja, krajobraz, estetyka urbanistyczna

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1. Introduction

In 1999 the British art historian Julian Stallabrass published a critical book about the so-called Young British Artists (YBAs). Within this neo-Marxian take on the London art-scene of the 1990s he discussed the phenomenon of the “urban pastoral” as a means of understanding contemporary urban developments.

As an art critic Stallabrass certainly focusses on the role of the “urban pastoral” within the art world, but he also hints at the possibility that processes like gentrification might not only be linked with the production and trade of art works, but also with the urban pastoral itself¹. This paper will try to explore in what ways the notion of urban pastoral might help us to better understand urban processes which might typically be explained through the lense of social sciences, economics or political science.

Stallabrass draws heavily on the writings of the literary critic William Empson. In his 1935 book *Some versions of pastoral* Empson introduces the urban pastoral as a way of understanding class dynamics in contemporary culture. A classic pastoral, according to Empson, describes rural life in a highly aestheticised and idealised manner². To make this work, the difference between the observer and the described object has to be sufficiently large³. In fact the observer will always be socially superior, but pretending to prefer the “simple truths” of the object’s life. In the urban pastoral, the relationship between object and observer is the same, with the “simple but honest” working-class population forming the background for the “real”, “authentic” urban life of the middle classes. This imagined “real” and “authentic” urban life is idealised in a way similar to the classic pastoral, as its “roughness” is cushioned by affluence and social separation⁴.

2. The English Landscape

Before the emergence of urban pastoral, the working poor made their way in to the more classical rural landscape painting. During the 18th and early 19th century, the rural landscape was a popular topic in English painting. The English pastoral was different form previous depictions of rural life in the sense that it did not show an idealised Arcadian landscape, but the very English countryside with picturesquely ragged rural workers. John Barrell discusses the emergence of this specific English type of pastoral in relation to new forms of agricultural economies and uses its depictions in paintings to reveal, what place in society the rural poor occupied at the time, what (moral and aesthetic) constraints shaped the depictions and why they suddenly started to appear in art at all. Notably, during the time in question was the high time of enclosure, during which the less wealthy rural population had lost or was loosing whatever independence they might have enjoyed previously, degrading them to a kind of rural proletariat⁵.

¹ [12], p. 245 f.

² [4], p. 6 ff.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 19 f.

⁵ [2], p. 4.

English pastoral painting was certainly not aimed at the depicted labourers. They would probably noticed at a glance that the depicted “simple but honest” life of the rural workers had nothing to do with their everyday lived reality. The beautified presentation of rural work was the way “how the labouring, the vagrant and the mendicant poor could be portrayed so as to be an acceptable part of the *décor* of the drawing room of the polite, when in their own person they would have been unlikely to gain admission even to the kitchens”⁶.

Barrell also suggest, that the rural poor started to appear in paintings to “in a way offer reassurance that the poor of England were, or were capable of being, as happy as the swains of Arcadia, their life as delightfully simple and enviable”⁷ whilst in fact they had just been deprived of the right to use commons, which caused hardship and made it difficult for them to support their families. Hence the classic English pastoral with its idealised depictions of the rural working class Barrell studies “could satisfy the rich and the leisured in their capacity also as the largeminded and benevolent patrons of England’s agricultural, mercantile and industrial progress. In order to do this, it was necessary to find a way of admitting into the Pastoral exactly those everyday concerns of work, organisation and management, that are hidden in the landscapes imported from Italy (...)”⁸.

If we transfer Empson’s and Barrell’s observations to an urban context we have to keep a few important characteristic in mind:

- Firstly, pastoral is not limited to rural contexts, it is an attitude.
- Secondly, pastoral implies a very clear social power relation between the superior observer and the inferior object. In this sense, pastoral is a class relationship that can occur anywhere in any stratified society.
- Thirdly, pastoral is not engaging with the depicted objects in a critical way. It is the opposite of social awareness.
- Fourthly, pastoral is an aesthetic strategy. It allows the middle class to appropriate new motifs into their culture, such as rural workers (in 19th century England) or other imagery of associated with socially disadvantaged groups.
- Fifthly, drawing from these characteristics, pastoral can be understood as a certain mode of experience and consumption.

Having discussed the sources of the pastoral, we can now set out to explore how it might be influencing contemporary urban developments.

Different from Empson’s times, in Europe the pastoral mode of experience has by now almost entirely shifted to the urban context. This is only partly due to the increasing urbanisation of Europe. Also, the rural landscape and the agricultural economy are highly engineered and offer little in terms of picturesque workers (or ethical husbandry). Industrial livestock farming, genetically modified crops, fertilizers, pesticides and gigantic machinery prevail, whilst traditional farmers markets spring up in towns where they cater for the environmentally aware, who can afford buying there rather than in discount chain-supermarkets. Apart from questions of industrial agriculture, most of the countryside is no longer dominated by agriculture at all. Around the smaller or larger cities, many villages

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

have become homogenous suburbs housing identical middle class families⁹. They are less suitable for the purposes of pastoral, i.e. the experience of an aestheticised, lower class environment.

3. Lifestyles of immersion

The transition of the pastoral from rural to urban in the practice of art is linked to societal changes in a different way. During the 19th century artist, formerly dependent on and paid for by the nobility, had to become economic entrepreneurs and to sell their work on the evolving market for painting, sculpture or literature. This led to the development of a bohemia, mostly concentrated in large urban centres where there was a sufficient concentration of publishing houses, galleries, theatres, bars combined with a potential audience. The independence from those benefactors was often complemented with an ostentatiously anti-bourgeois lifestyle regardless of their actual financial circumstances or class background, still the defining characteristic of today's bohemia¹⁰.

At the same time the bohemia solidarised with the disadvantaged and marginalised people Marx subsumed under "lumpenproletariat", glamourising them as their soulmates, with a similarly freer morale and outsider position in society¹¹. Through their lifestyle the bohemia implicitly criticised the bourgeois as well as the petit-bourgeois, which, as the idealisation of the urban poor, was rooted in their supposed cultural and intellectual superiority.

Solidarity with the disadvantaged urban poor was not exclusive to the world of art though. Parallel to the industrialisation of agriculture and the suburbanisation of the countryside the life of the urban poor started to attract the middle classes. This phenomenon can be traced back to the late 19th century, when middle and upper class city dwellers engaged in "slumming"¹², a leisure activity that took them to the slums to study the poor for educational, scientific or social reasons.

At the same time, social scientists started to research the slums. From 1849 onwards Henry Mayhew wrote *Labour and the poor* about the working poor in London, in 1889 Charles Booth published his famous first *Descriptive Map of Eastend Poverty*. The Chicago School in particular produced seminal studies about the everyday life of marginal groups, such as Nels Anderson's *The Hobo* (1923), Paul Cressey's *The Taxi Dance Hall* (1932) or William Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1942).

In his Study *Walks on the Wild Side* about the history of urban research Rolf Lindner not only explores the scientific history of urban research, but also the motivations of many urban researchers. He shows how covert participatory observation can a special thrill for many researchers, who were – or are – exploring the "dark sides" of European cities as well as for their audiences. It was made explicit, and it was a unique selling point that the authors of these reports had obtained their knowledge through immersion into the world they aimed

⁹ For a discussion about the proliferation of urban living see Lefebvre 2003 (orig. 1970) p. 212 ff.

¹⁰ [7], p. 43.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

¹² See New York Times September 14th 1884.

to research. The disguise used by writers and researchers alike often revealed as much about their preconceptions as it helped to gain information about the objects of their research¹³. It remains questionable though, how authentic the immersion can be, as the marked class difference between observer and field makes it always an ersatz-experience, unless perhaps in cases like Loic Wacquant who trained as a boxer until he reached professional level only to write about this particular sub-culture¹⁴.

4. Conceptualising the urban pastoral

So far we have followed the pastoral from an ideal Arcadia to everyday life, and from rural to urban contexts. To understand the dynamics of urban pastoral in the contemporary urban development we have to understand how it moved from specific sub-cultures into the urban mainstream.

As we have seen, the pastoral attitude is related to a certain amount of wealth and social status, although it may display an anti-bourgeois surface. This antagonism makes it almost impossible to link it to quantitative data or to locate it on a continuous scale, as well as it is difficult to integrate into urban theories looking through specific lenses, i.e. the social, spatial, infrastructural, political etc.

In contemporary cities, the strive for pastoral experiences possibly has led to the influx of middle and upper-middle class professionals into working class neighbourhoods, a process commonly described as gentrification. The assumption underlying mainstream gentrification theory is, that pioneer gentrifiers are welcoming the upgrading of their neighbourhoods until they might themselves become victims of rising housing costs and forced to leave¹⁵. Determining forces have been seen either in new modes of capital accumulation (with Neil Smith as the main protagonist) or changed patterns on the demand side, that favoured inner city housing for social or practical reasons (represented by the work of David Ley or Alan Warde).

Without questioning that all three forces might be promoting the renewed popularity of formerly run-down urban neighbourhoods, they fail to explain a few characteristics of contemporary urban developments:

- Firstly, gentrification evokes aversion and opposition especially among its very protagonists.
- Secondly, and contrary to theory, gentrification is not exclusively moving forward in stages. Research by Dangschat and Alisch has shown that in many cases pioneers, gentrifiers and other groups are moving into a gentrifying neighbourhood at the same time¹⁶.
- Thirdly, anti-gentrification activists frequently belong to the first group of pioneers but do not see themselves as part of the problem.

¹³ [10], p. 36 ff.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 190 f.

¹⁵ For an excellent overview see: Lees, Slater, Wyly 2008. For Clay's stage model see *ibidem*, p. 31 ff.

¹⁶ Dangschat 1988, Dangschat & Alisch 1996.

For the purpose of this paper pastoral is conceptualised as an attitude or a sensibility, a certain way of experiencing the city and its differences in classes and cultures. It describes the excitement of immersion into the worlds of others (of lower social status) and the related pleasure of experiencing oneself's social superiority – not only with regard to those of lower status, but also compared to one's own social group. In this sense, urban pastoral provides authenticity and distinction to the ones engaging in it. This specific distinction is based on choice rather than the necessity to become part of a socially inferior culture, albeit only for a short amount of time. Similar to the classic pastoral or the English landscape, a certain amount of wealth and the absence of significant everyday worries are preconditions for the pleasurable experience of pastoral. The increased and relatively evenly spread wealth Europe experienced in the second half of the 20th century made the pursuit of pastoral attitudes attractive and achievable for large portions of society, whilst the decreased attractiveness of rural environments inevitably directed the demand for pastoral to the cities.

What makes the pursuit of the urban pastoral difficult and complicated in this situation is its widespread popularity. As long as only a few artists and urban researchers enjoyed the pastoral view onto certain neighbourhoods and cultures, there were plenty of opportunities to do so. They could easily become what is known as a pioneer of gentrification and enjoy the close proximity of working class people as well as interact with them on a daily basis – without giving up the comfort and the amenities of middle class life. As the pursuit of urban pastoral has reached the mainstream, the pioneers of pastoral (or gentrification) are threatened not only by rising housing cost, they are also losing the pastoral environment that used to provide distinction and authenticity. Having this in mind it is not surprising, that anti-gentrification activists often could be classified as pioneer gentrifiers, although it seems likely that they would strongly resist the notion of being part of the very process they are trying to oppose.

5. Broadening picture

The scope of this paper does not allow a detailed discussion of the gentrification research of the past decades. Instead, it aims to draw attention to the aesthetic dimension of location decisions hitherto neglected in a debate that has been dominated by economical, political and social science explanations. Whilst the role of artists and their aesthetic practices has been considered in a few cases¹⁷, the proliferation of these practices into the urban mainstream has been largely ignored. Artists, it is maintained, have due to their own social status and middle class background, either attracted capital investment or been attractors for gentrifiers themselves, who wish to locate themselves near cultural elites. Contrary to this conception this paper argues that artists are pioneers of pastoral aesthetic practices, which consequently become mainstream. The gentrifiers would therefore develop the same aesthetic preferences and engage in the urban pastoral in much the same way artists do. As Stallabrass puts it: "A little edge, just the right amount, is energising, and is necessary to spark off pastoral fantasy: simple rural folk enjoying rustic pleasures have become replaced by the characters of the inner city, similarly devoted in middle-class fantasy to the joys of politically incorrect

¹⁷ [3, 5, 6, 9].

humour, the circulation of obscenities, the joys of violence, crime and vandalism, carefree sexual encounters and drug-taking”¹⁸.

As an aesthetic practice, the pastoral is by no means limited to gentrification or, more broadly, to locational choices. Similar developments can be observed in fashion and music, where the aesthetic practices of deviant sub cultures have been adopted by mainstream consumers – “baggy pants”, the combination of sneakers and suits, the proliferation of body-tattoos, the influence of jazz, or more recently rap music, to name but a few.

Although location decisions are more fundamental than choices in music or fashion, we may argue that they are at least partly subject to the same influences. New, exciting neighbourhoods are certainly not as easily manufactured as a new pair of trainers, but if we understand that housing choices are not entirely determined by abstract factors such as demand, supply and financial power, we can conceive alternatives to the seemingly unstoppable upgrading of urban neighbourhoods. Homogenous, middle-class areas are not suitable for the pursuit of pastoral aesthetics. The aesthetic avant-garde will without any doubt find alternative strategies, which will then set the tone for new mainstream practices. Whether this will be prefabricated housing estates, suburban single family dwellings or something completely different – we can be certain that as long as sufficiently affluent people are making location choices, pastoral aesthetic will guide them, but not in which disguise it will reappear.



Ill. 1. Classic Pastoral: Adrian Ludwig Richter. Frühlingsabend (1844). Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Adrian_Ludwig_Richter_011.jpg

¹⁸ [12], p. 246.



III. 2. Classic Paroral: Caspar David Friedrich: Landschaft mit Regenbogen (c. 1810). Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caspar_David_Friedrich_027.jpg



III. 3. English Pastoral: George Stubbs. Reapers (1795). Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Stubbs_-_Reapers_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg?uselang=de



III. 4. Urban Pastoral: Richard Billingham: Ray's a laugh (1996). Source: www.recfail.com



III. 5. Urban Pastoral. Bone china plates displaying London post-war Council Housing. Source: [people will always need plates](http://people.will.always.need.plates)

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