
Denis Cosgrove, 'Uomo Universale'

Denis Cosgrove was a geographer whose work has continued to echo across the full spectrum of the humanities for the past twenty years. He was also a humanist whose influence has never declined within geography. Indeed, it is largely thanks to his efforts that cultural geography found the high place it deserves within the humanities, and the humanities found a place within geography. Denis was an *uomo universale* of our times. He was a talented polymath at home with Renaissance scholars, critical geographers, and contemporary art practitioners alike; a believer in the power of human creativity and in the value of cultural diversity; and, not least, an attentive listener.

Latin and Greek he picked up as a boy, at the Jesuit School in Liverpool, “because”—he humorously used to tell his undergrad students—“geography was regarded as a girls’ subject” and in order to remain in the A stream he had to give it up for the two ancient languages, which were considered “superior”. Italian he learned in the field, in the course of his doctoral research on landscape design and representation in Renaissance Northeast Italy. With Vitruvius and Panofsky he got acquainted in the library of the Department of Architecture at the Polytechnic of Central London, where he was working as a research assistant for a computer modelling project in the mid-1970s. But Denis was also familiar with statistics and physical geography, which he taught, along with his subject area, for eight years at the Oxford Polytechnic, while completing his doctoral dissertation.

Cultural and historical geographers almost instinctively link his name with ‘landscape’. It is his innovative approach to this concept that inaugurated and marked most of his career. As he revealed in a recent interview, to him ‘place’ always seemed “much too small”, much too focused and local. ‘Space’, on the other hand, he regarded as much too abstract, too broad, too disembodied and antihumanist: “an Euclidian mathematical discourse” better suited to the spatial sciences than to the type of geography he was after. Landscape, by contrast, seemed to offer a valuable alternative, for it worked through and in between these two concepts. It allowed the geographer to explore “a bigger picture”, but at the same time it “carried that sense of a tangible material world, which for me geography is rooted in and comes always back to” (interview with Freytag and Jöns, 2005, page 209). These qualities of landscape had fascinated Denis since he was a grad student. In his doctoral dissertation he defined landscape as both “artefact” and “art”: “an artefact in that it serves functional ends of human habitation, and also a form of art, in that it creates forms of symbolic human feeling” (Cosgrove, 1976, page 10). Landscape also possessed an aesthetic dimension that the other two concepts lacked, “both in the sense of aesthetics as beauty and in the sense of aesthetics as concerning the human senses (aesthesia)” (interview with Jin, 2005, page 89). Landscape invited a harmonious synthesis—it fulfilled Denis’s holistic aspirations. It allowed him to work on the borderline between lived experience and imagination, or rather to blur this borderline, in the same way that he blurred disciplinary boundaries.

Denis was a firm believer that ‘geography matters’, and in particular that place specificity does impact knowledge making. It certainly did with his scholarship, in the same way the American Southwest did with Sauer’s and rural England with Hoskins’s. Renaissance Italy shaped Cosgrove’s geography—and perhaps it contributed to shaping his persona too. He told us (his former PhD students) that at Oxford in the 1970s

there was an expectation that a grad student would specialize in a geographical region other than (and possibly culturally distant from) his or her own. But Denis's choice to conduct his PhD research in Northeast Italy derived more from his realization that many of the English landscape ideas he had come across and was interested in had come from there. And so, like a Grand Tourist in the past, he set out for the Veneto with John Ruskin as his guide (Vallerani, 2008). He amused me with his stories about his early adventurous cycling in the Venetian mainland to study the Palladian landscape. Unaware (or perhaps careless) that Italian roads were not really used for leisure, he merrily biked dozens of kilometres of truck-filled roads, as if in the English countryside!

The landscape he moved through was that of the great Venetian Renaissance painters: of Titian, Giorgione, Giovanni Bellini, and Paolo Veronese. It was also the landscape engineered by Andrea Palladio and surveyed by cartographers such as Cristoforo Sorte. It was an ordered ensemble of nature and culture that had been consciously crafted by its makers as a theatre. It was on this stage that Denis's saga began and his intellectual framework took shape. He frequently returned to these landscapes in the 1980s and 1990s, during his appointments at the University of Loughborough (1980–94) and Royal Holloway (1994–2000). He often travelled to Veneto on field trips with Stephen Daniels, or on vacation with his family. Since 1990 the Cosgroves were yearly hosts of Denis's friend and colleague Francesco Vallerani (also the Italian translator of his *The Palladian Landscape* in 2000). The two geographers loved making excursions in the *terraferma*. Francesco recalls how Denis was not simply interested in representation. Like a Renaissance scholar, he was always keen to understand the mechanics of things, especially when it came to water engineering: the way a watermill functioned or irrigation channels worked. He spent hours and hours in the archives examining old cadastral maps. In 1990 he coedited, with the physical geographer Geoff Petts, *Water, Engineering and Landscape: Water Control and Landscape Transformation in the Modern Period*, a text Francesco often adopted in his own classes. Keynote addresses, collaborative projects, and activities with Venetian geographers and other research groups also frequently took Denis to Veneto and other parts of Italy. Here I will mention only the workshop "Language and Representation" organized by the Venetian geographer Gabriele Zanetto in 1988, the EU-funded project "Nature, Environment, Landscape: European Attitudes and Discourses in the Modern Period, 1920–1970" (1993–96), of which Denis was the UK coordinator, the Leverhulme-sponsored project "Imperial Cities: Landscape Space and Performance in Rome and London 1850–1950" (1995–97), and the Gruppo di Gibellina, a research cluster which included Franco Farinelli, Vincenzo Guarrasi, Angelo Turco, French-speaking geographers such as Ola Söderstrom, Claude Raffestin, Jean-Bernard Racine, and other European geographers interested in semiotics.

Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape (Cosgrove, 1984), one of the classics of human geography and a 'milestone' in the 'cultural turn', was also conceived on the Venetian mainland. Along with the influential article "Prospect, perspective and the evolution of the landscape idea" (1985), this book inaugurated a new approach to landscape within human geography. It explored the close relationship between landscape making (and landscape representation) and ideology. If landscape was 'a way of seeing', the 'gaze' was that of the powerful, of the patrician who 'dominated' his land from the balcony of his villa. It was an ordering gaze that reduced the presence of peasants to a part of nature, and turned nature into an ordered private property. At that time Anglophone human geography was reacting against the 'universalistic' (and often uncritical) humanistic geography of the 1970s and turning 'radical'. In an academic context in which, Denis once told me jokingly, "everyone was a Marxist", this type of work was obviously received enthusiastically.

In Italy the book, which was translated in 1990 by Clara Copeta, was also successful, but its reception assumed a different tone, perhaps because of the different course Italian geography had been following. "In the 1960s", Massimo Quaini wrote, "the traditional *geografia integrale* (both physical and human) had been dead for almost half a century and was being slow in learning from more advanced European geographies, especially French humanist geography" (1992, page 10). From the 1960s to the early 1980s a small group of left-wing human geographers (including Lucio Gambi, Franco Farinelli, and Massimo Quaini) engaged in the so-called *geografia democratica*, the Italian version of early Marxist geography. Unlike in the Anglophone world, this type of geography, however, could never fully develop in Italy. The Italian academic system was much more closed and hierarchical than the British, or the American. In Italy, our discipline was still dominated by the traditional 'dogmatic' geography of Renato Biasutti (which was methodologically similar to Sauerian geography). Doing Marxist geography was compromising; it was risky for one's career. From the 1980s to the 1990s, however, traditional geographies (with their strong quantitative and economic component) had begun to open up to cultural anthropology and French (and later North American) humanistic geography. While cultural geography as a 'formal' subdiscipline did not exist in Italy, themes such as 'the sense of place' became common concerns among many Italian geographers. By the time *Social Formation* was published, this was the 'new' type of geography the most receptive Italian geographers were looking at (see, for example, Botta, 1989; Lando, 1993).

In Italy, *Social Formation* contributed to this humanistic project. Debates were more about challenging the positivistic perspective through a 'subjective' humanistic geography, than challenging Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph's humanistic geography through a 'humanistic Marxism'. In her introduction to the Italian translation of the book, Clara Copeta defined Cosgrove's approach as "interesting, unusual, and rather neglected, since until recently [Italian] geographical studies denied the existence of a common ground with art" (1990, page 10). Cosgrove's approach to landscape, she suggested, could be fruitfully compared with that of Italian 'historicist' geographers such as Lucio Gambi and Paola Sereno. However, while for the latter, art history and subjectivity were problematic when allied with a "positive science such as geography", for Cosgrove it was landscape that could not be easily constrained within "the rigid structures of the scientific method" (page 15).

Interestingly, Anglophone critical geographers still praise *Social Formation* for its "explicit critical orientation and its focus on the ideological aspects of landscape and its role in normalizing class relations" (Berg, 2005, page 475). Revisiting the book after twenty years, however, Denis found this characterization much too narrow, and pointed out that *Social Formation's* "humanist and moral engagement are as important as its political concerns" (Cosgrove, 2005, page 480). Denis was not just a successful Renaissance scholar. He had a Renaissance mind. Like Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and the other Italian humanists he loved to quote, his was a free, creative mind; one that could not be easily constrained by the rigid structuralisms of Marxism, or of any other sort. That's why he soon turned away from it. This shift can already be sensed in the introduction to *The Iconography of Landscape* (1988), coedited with Stephen Daniels, and in his essay on 16th-century Venetian cultural landscape in the same collection. Here the emphasis is no longer on landscape as a manifestation of power, but on landscape as an expression of a "religion of the world"; on "the idea of landscape symbolizing an achieved harmony between human life and the hidden order of creation" (page 265). In the introduction to his edited collection *Mappings* (1999) he similarly challenged the (then much in vogue) Harleian reading of maps as mere instruments of power. He proposed instead their revaluation as far more complex

“cultural artefacts”, as “moral and metaphysical connections between interior and exterior worlds” (page 15).

While remaining critical and conscious that ‘power is unavoidable’, Denis also firmly believed that thinking about our relationships with others and with the world merely in terms of power and politics was limiting—for the discipline, and for ourselves. He sought to go beyond—and he did. Even in the heyday of the ‘cultural turn’, he was no mere ‘poststructuralist’. He was open to (and indeed a promoter of) pluralism and dialogue, but he was not a relativist. He knew where he was going. His research and academic life were always guided by a high moral concern. Perhaps this was the aspect of his personality and scholarly endeavour that has always fascinated me most.

I first met Denis in 2001. I had recently graduated in Italy. At that time, the wave of the ‘cultural turn’ had just touched the Mediterranean shores. Critical geography was just beginning to make its way into the Italian academy and there was a lot of enthusiasm among young Italian geographers. Some of them talked about ‘postmodernism’, ‘deconstructionism’, ‘power-relationships’. Phrases like ‘politics of difference’ or ‘social construction’ echoed through the corridors of my university as absolute novelties. To undergrads like me, they often sounded like magic formulae able to reveal the way in which society worked. Foucault too was powerful. Then I moved to Los Angeles. Not long after my arrival, I remember, I happened to sit in on one of Denis’s undergrad seminars. At some point, he provocatively asked a question on the meaning of knowledge. Full of Foucault (just as I was), the students confidently answered: “Knowledge is power!” I thought it was the obvious answer. I would have probably said the same. “Only?”, Denis replied, “Don’t we learn to become better persons?”

Denis was not a social scientist. He was a humanist. And he was always very keen to point out the distinction between the humanities and the social sciences. He did not like the word ‘actor’ and he thought that the term ‘subject’ had been overexploited. Like Renaissance scholars, his focus was rather on the ‘Self’. He was more interested in ‘self-knowledge’ than in ‘power-knowledge’. The Neostoic motto ‘*nosce te ipsum*’ (‘know thyself’) often recurs in his recent conferences and writings. Unlike the social scientist, the humanist does not have ‘projects’ to change society, but he or she humbly undertakes an inner, self-reflexive journey whose ultimate goal is moral self-improvement. This journey, Denis claimed, was not necessarily reducible to questions about power. Denis was not an activist. He was, rather, trying to find the balance Italian Renaissance humanists sought between the *vita activa* (the active life) and the *vita contemplativa* (the contemplative life). In a recent interview, he complained that geography had forgotten about the latter:

“I think probably since the early 1970s, when David Harvey and others claimed the project of geography should be about public policy, has probably committed itself too fully to *la vita activa* and has ignored *la vita contemplativa*. And that’s important because that’s also about the dialectic between the research and the educational sides of geography. ... Eight years at the Oxford Polytechnic led me to the belief that if graduates will be properly trained they need to be taught about geography as a learning practice, not simply a research project. It seems to me that the impact of my geography is realized primarily in the classroom, or by students reading my work. It’s not in policy; it’s not in changing social relations, or in liberating one particular oppressed minority or another” (Freytag and Jöns, 2005, pages 212–213).

Denis’s continuing interest in Renaissance geography was probably motivated by its contemplative and pedagogical aspect and by the fact that this geography had been in great part silenced (or downplayed) within ‘official’ histories of the discipline. Much of his work on Renaissance geography was influenced by (and in turn influenced,

in many cases) Italian scholars who worked outside geography. Art historian Lionello Puppi's writings on Titian, Ruskin, Palladio, and De' Barberi, the seminal work on perspective by historian of architecture Lucia Nuti, and map historian Giorgio Mangani's mighty tome on Abraham Ortelius constituted inspirational starting points for Denis at different stages of his career.

His scholarship, however, was by no means confined to the Italian Renaissance, or to landscape. It embraced virtually every stage of Western civilization and ended up embracing every scale. His moral concerns spanned from the local to the global; from ancient Greece to modern environmental history and contemporary art. Some of his MA students were themselves successful practising artists. His PhD students were a cosmopolitan mix from countries that included Brazil, Japan, Korea, Turkey, and Italy, with backgrounds in art history, architecture, design, oriental languages, and sociology. Only a few were interested in historical geography (and even fewer in the Renaissance).

Whether disciplinary or cultural, difference was an important ingredient for Denis. Tolerance and dialogue were at the heart of his moral concerns. When he moved to Los Angeles to accept his post as von Humboldt professor at UCLA in 2000, he became closely engaged with the geography and history of the city. Los Angeles' cosmopolitan identity fascinated him. He enjoyed lecturing to UCLA's culturally mixed undergrad classes—it challenged his Eurocentric scholarly formation. His Los Angeles was not the 'placeless' American metropolis described by humanistic geographers in the 1970s, nor was it Ed Soja's post-metropolis. It was the LA of the 1920s and 1930s, of what he liked to call "the modern picturesque". Cosmopolitan Los Angeles provided the setting for the culmination of a new phase of his research, just as the Palladian landscapes of the Italian Northeast had done for his early work. If the Veneto was the past, Los Angeles was the future—and the two, distant as they were, could nonetheless be juxtaposed to illuminate each other, as Denis showed on several occasions (see, for example, Cosgrove, 2006).

In Los Angeles, Denis's scale of interest had definitely shifted from the chorographic "with its interest in pictures and art" to the cosmographic "with its more speculative dimensions": from landscape to "earthscape" (Jin, 2005, page 95). Cosgrove's magnum opus *Apollo's Eye* (2001), ambitiously subtitled "A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination", was begun in London and completed in Los Angeles. It spanned Hesiod's *Cosmogony* to the Apollo lunar missions. In the astronauts' early reflections on the view of the planet, isolated in its fragile beauty, Cosgrove saw a continuation of Cicero's and Marcus Aurelius's Stoic tradition, which was reappropriated by Renaissance humanists and cartographers such as Abraham Ortelius. Gazing from a distance (whether physically or imaginatively) was no mere exercise of power, but, rather, a realization of the insignificance of mundane affairs, of the non-sense of wars and divisions, of 'unity in diversity'. Whether on a 16th-century map, or on a NASA picture, the image of the earth became for Denis an icon for global tolerance and a tool for self-reflexivity (Cosgrove, 2003).

"It is very easy for me to go back and talk about the 16th century, I feel happy and familiar there. But the challenges of the contemporary world are different. They are also the same, I mean the issues of 'Who are we in relation to the world? How should we live our lives in a way that is fulfilling and morally proper?' remain. ... Cosmopolitanism represents I think a significant recent debate, in which geographers have insufficiently engaged. But I think it's still a fundamental one for me living in Los Angeles. Los Angeles is today what much of the world is going to be in the new century, in terms of the mixture of cultures and peoples. So, I think it is important to reframe those very enduring questions which have been addressed particularly in Stoicism" (Freytag and Jöns, 2005, page 215).

Cosgrove, the humanist, turned to the Self to understand the world, and to the world to understand the Self. He was a very attentive listener and one of the humblest persons I have ever met. He always listened to everybody, colleagues and students alike, with maximum attention and respect. But his was a critical mind too. While open to new ideas, he was disparaging of fashionable jargons, or 'trends' for their own sake. Just as Renaissance humanists creatively reworked the knowledge of the Ancients to go further, so would Denis always reelaborate ideas and concepts in his own original way. He always encouraged us to be inspired, creative. He saw the interaction with other disciplines in the humanities as one way to fulfil this potential. He was often invited to give talks to audiences of historians, art historians, or architects. In 2000 he curated the exhibition *John Ruskin and the Geographical Imagination* at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. He also wrote catalogue essays for painters and photographers, such as his introduction to Lyle Gomes's evocative black and white photo album *Imagining Eden* (2005), or the essay "Without dimension" to accompany a book of photographs of the equator (both land and water) by artist Alan Cohen (Cohen et al, 2008).

During my postdoctoral stay at the Getty Research Institute (GRI) in 2005 I was surprised to find that most of my new colleagues (a group of world-leading scholars in archaeology, classical studies, art history, and other humanistic disciplines from different countries and institutions) were familiar with Denis's work. Scholars like them liked his work, because it offered a new spatial perspective; it made them think in ways they were not used to in their disciplines; to look at the same art object (or poem) with new eyes. Over the past couple of years, Denis had become a frequent guest of the Getty: as a commentator on important art exhibitions, such as *Courbet and the Modern Landscape* (2006), as a speaker at symposia, such as the *The God's Eye View* (2007), and even as a coorganizer of the interdisciplinary workshop *Faith and Space* (2007). A few months ago he was named Getty Distinguished Scholar for the year 2008–09 within the GRI Scholar Program "Networks and Boundaries". He was planning to work on a project entitled "Geography and Art in Los Angeles".

Denis's engagement with art was more than a creative exercise—it was a moral one. For him 'the beautiful' and 'the good' were related. He got upset with phrases like 'aestheticisation' (in the negative, critical sense of a pleasing screen hiding the 'real' nasty power-relationships):

"You only have to look say at fascism in Germany in the 1930s to see that aesthetics *can* act in that way, to cover over the surface much deeper evils. But I think that's again to narrow it down, to miss the liberating and consolatory power of beauty. And we don't often talk about consolation. I mean, we live in a hard and difficult and often tragic material world where we all suffer setbacks and sadness and tragedies. We need consolation, and beauty gives us consolation. There's beauty in what we as geographers study, and to deny it and remove it or say 'It's always a veneer for something else, it's a distraction' rather than taking it seriously is to miss out on some really important questions, and to do ourselves a disservice" (Freytag and Jöns, 2005, page 213).

In his academic and private life Denis was an optimist. Since he had been diagnosed with his incurable illness, he had never stopped hoping and fighting. Sometimes his serenity reminded me of Socrates at the moment of his death, comforting his sorrowful disciples with a description of the cosmos and its beauty. I found it uncannily similar to the descriptions Denis would quote in his *Apollo's Eye*:

"Well then, my friend, first of all the true earth, if one views it from above, is said to look like those twelve-piece leather balls, variegated, a patchwork of colours, of which our colours here are, as it were, samples that painters use. There the whole earth is of such colours, indeed colours far brighter still and purer than these:

one portion is purple, marvellous for its beauty, another is golden, and all that is white is whiter than chalk or snow; and the earth is composed of the other colours likewise, indeed of colours more numerous and beautiful than any we have seen" (Plato *Phaedo* 1975, pages 110–115).

In between his first sessions of chemotherapy, Denis was checking the last edits to the manuscript of his final book, *Geography and Vision*, a wonderful collection of essays that cover most of his career: from his early writings on Ruskin to modern representations of the Pacific. Sadly, perhaps he never saw the cover of this book, which entered production just a few months ago. Although he could not know or foresee it, at the very opening of the book he left us the most beautiful epitaph:

"The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handywork" (Psalms 19:1).

"Geographical inscription is simultaneously material and imaginative, shaping landscapes out of the physical earth according to human intentions: both the demands of practical existence and visions of the good life" (Cosgrove, 2008, page 1).

This 'good life' was the life Denis taught us through his writings, but also through his human example—with his rare generosity, with his humanity, and with his openness of mind. It was this good life he lived until the very end. And it was with his optimism and with a great message of hope that he bade farewell—on the dawn of Good Friday and the first day of spring.

Veronica della Dora

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Steve Daniels and Robert Mayhew for their valuable comments and suggestions on the first draft of this paper, and Francesco Vallerani for helping me trace Denis's 'Italian legacy' and for sharing his memories.

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