

## Stealing the Steel City: manipulating cultural landscapes

Professor Alan Clarke

University of Pannonia  
Veszprém, Hungary 8200  
alanhungary@hotmail.com

### Abstract

Stealing the Steel City explores the (hi)stories of the city of Sheffield as it has been repositioned as a post manufacturing city in the North of England. One version of the story exists in *The Full Monty* but the transformation of the cultural landscape has been more complex. The city developed around the cultural landscapes of heavy industries and the cutlery industry but this has been replaced by one of the largest commercial retail sites in Europe and a public house named in honour of the cutlery makers. The city was divided by sport, with the oldest football club in the world Sheffield FC giving rise to two professional clubs - Wednesday and United. The development of the clubs has demonstrated the full impact of embourgeoisement and professionalisation. As a result, the presence of the professional summer sport has been questioned as Sheffield United remodelled their ground into a single function football stadium instead of operating as a cricket ground and a three sided football stadia. This has rewritten the cultural landscape as Wednesdayites now have no reason to enter the home of United (unless the two sides have to play each other).

*Keywords:* Cultural heritage, semiotics, embourgeoisement, commercialisation, civic identity

### Introduction

One day, Sheffield found itself largely redundant. It had emerged as a champion of the industrial revolution, refining steel making into a fine art of producing the finest stainless steel in the world. It had established a vibrant cutlery industry which put the knives and forks on the tables of royalty around the world. 'Made in Sheffield' was a brand, recognised long before branding theory was developed. Then the world changed and the cruelty of the world economy impacted heavily on the city. Steel was no longer the sole preserve of one country and cheap imports undermined the need to produce steel at home. At the same time, it seemed that new markets opened up to move cutlery around the globe as well. Hand crafted cutlery was largely replaced by industrially processed stamped out cutlery. Flimsy it

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might have been but it was cheap and available. Globalisation had come to Sheffield and it was a vicious god.

I was a school boy in the city when the dream still held true. My bus journeys to school meant crossing a city which was thriving. There was a road with steel furnaces on both sides, which generated enough heat to make you feel warm on the bus even on the coldest of days. I left to go to University and when I came back that city had disappeared with the collapse of the two main industries and the prospects for the city were bleak. This is captured brilliantly in the film *The Full Monty*, where the heroes are a group of redundant steel workers, with their lives sinking as fast as the steel girder they drop in the river when trying to steal it in one of the opening sequences. In fact the opening is a black and white sequence which was not made for the film but existed as a promotional film for Sheffield. 'Sheffield – city on the move' depicted a fast moving, exciting and expanding city. We Sheffielders were shown working hard and playing hard, at the cutting edges of technology, industrial and cultural production. This is juxtaposed with the cast of workers, drifting and trying to find a way of making a living in the same city which was only moving backwards if it was moving at all. This is the point at which the film departs from documentary and creates a complex fictional reality as not all the redundant steel workers took to striptease to solve their financial problems. However a semiotic reading of the film reveals that even the striptease is not straightforward. The idea of male nudity raises deep issues about the traditional notions of masculinity in a culture of heavy industrial production.

Waterton and Watson (2014) set semiotic analyses within the context of heritage but also incorporates a broader sense of tourism than is found in some heritage interpretations. This is important because semiotics should not be seen as being constrained by heritage and nor should heritage be seen as constrained by the internal semiotics of its own production and consumption. They develop Culler's notion (1990:2) that tourists are the agents of semiotics by demonstrating how within tourism settings the constructions, deconstructions and reconstructions of our heritages are represented as making sense.

Beginning with a sense of constructing the semiotics of heritage through the reading of representations, including language, communications, gestures, signs, symbols and images that "makes us human"(p.13) Waterton and Watson present a range of accounts supported by their own photographs as they critique the role of photography in heritage constructions. Utilising a Barthesian (1972) notion of myth, Waterton and Watson demonstrate how "a sign of something in one semiotic system shifts into another register and signifies something else, perhaps something more profound, and where the products of history are naturalized as common sense and a common identity" (p.41) They argue that they "make no sharp distinction here between the visual and other representations" (p.49). However they argue for more than this and advocate a semiotics based on more than representation,

encouraging a non-representational semiotics. In deed they suggest that there is a continuum with non-, more than - and other than representational experiences.

Waterton and Watson develop their semiotics through the analyses offered of 'heritage landscapes', which may come into existence around one individual, one object or be part of a broader system of representation impinging on and working through discourses in play. As they argue "A panoply of other cultural forms and practices falls into place behind such representations, there working to legitimize and sustain them. ... In each of these practices, sign systems are used to create and sustain meanings, but also, as we know, to limit and deplete it. The semiotic landscapes of heritage attractions are where these signs are active in representing the past in the present, there making sense of the social world as it is, with appropriate antecedents, evocations, values and legitimations. (p.118) The power of this was brought home to me when asked to brief a Hungarian colleague visiting Sheffield, my home town, for his first ever visit there. My stories of the 'steel city' and the centre of the finest cutlery making was reduced in the telling to steel's memorialisation in the three figures to found at the bottom of one of the sets of escalators in Meadowhall, once – if not still – Europe's largest shopping mall. That this cathedral to consumerism attempts to maintain a link with the sites industrial past is almost as reassuring as finding that the small businesses which produced the knives and forks for the world's top tables is commemorated in the name of a bistro, Little Mesters, referring to the Sheffield term for the once famous manufacturers.

This also carries echoes of Barthes' speculations on the role of semiotics in teaching, concluding one essay by arguing that: "The necessities of promotion, professional obligations (which nothing then prevents from being scrupulously fulfilled), imperatives of knowledge, prestige of method, ideological criticism – everything is there, but *floating*." (Barthes (1977) p.215 emphasis given in the original) What Waterton and Watson (2014) have demonstrated that the need for critical engagement is possibly even more important now that societies and their media have become more complex, yet the challenge of floating becomes more difficult within any new semiotics of heritage tourism.

This paper, by necessity, addresses both tangible and intangible cultural heritages as they were shaped and, in turn, shaped the lives of the communities in Sheffield. Intangible cultural heritage, as defined in the Convention adopted by the 32nd Session of the General Conference of UNESCO, means in the first place the practices, representations, and expressions, as well as the associated knowledge and the necessary skills, those communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. The intangible cultural heritage, which is sometimes called living cultural heritage, is manifested, inter alia, in the following domains:

- oral traditions, expressions and language;

- the performing arts;
- social practices, rituals, and festive events;
- knowledge and practices about nature and the universe;
- traditional craftsmanship

Intangible cultural heritage, while being transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their historical conditions of existence; intangible cultural heritage provides people and groups of people with a sense of identity and continuity. The safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage promotes, sustains and develops cultural diversity and human creativity.

This new **Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage** was conceived in order to reinforce solidarity and international co-operation as an instrument for all countries for identification, safeguarding and enhancement and promotion of this heritage, and is of special importance for those countries of Southern Eastern Europe that have suffered from recent conflicts. I would contend that the ravaging of the traditional industrial structures are an equivalent conflict and promote similar issues for those concerned with cultural heritages.

To serve the safeguarding of this heritage, UNESCO-ROSTE has begun a major activity concerning Living Human Treasures. Living Human Treasures are persons who embody to the very highest degree the skills and techniques necessary for the production of selected aspects of the cultural life of a people, and the continued existence of their material cultural heritage. This quotation from UNESCO's Guidelines for the establishment of a 'Living Human Treasures' system underpins a programme that began in 1996 for the purpose of promoting the transmission of traditional knowledge and skills by artists and artisans before they are lost through disuse or lack of recognition. We have to look to the fictional to see this in Sheffield but the messages are still important.

The changes to the cultural heritage landscapes encourage us to focus on:

- transition from the protection of the individual monument to the protection of urban area and an entire historic town;
- social aspect and the role of residents, such as the physical and social component of historic area, the question of authenticity and the broader connection to sustainability and environmental systems;
- complexity of the inhabited historic towns: identification, evaluation, inscription and management (e.g. World Heritage Sites).

These approaches were declared the importance of entire historic town, the role of locals and also the need of management operation. From the local-size destination point of view, all historic settlements seek to develop their heritage attractions in a sustainable way.

Sheffield has little built heritage but used to centre its tourist appeal on the fact that Mary, Queen of Scots had been held imprisoned in Sheffield Castle -not disturbed that only a few bricks of the building remained! The massive buildings of the steel industry have largely been demolished but some of the small workshops that housed the cutlery industry remain. These have been rethought and are now used for many different purposes. This apparent lack of the tangible has perhaps forced more attention to be paid to the intangible components of heritage. It is perhaps odd that the performing arts and music in particular have prospered so much in the industrial landscape but they have and are now celebrated. There may be a link back to the works and their bands. There may also be a connection to the working class communities producing their own entertainment. However the diversity shown here seem to offer little reference to the brass bands found in the factories.

What Sheffield has witnessed is 'commercialization' that is to say the transformation of cultural forms, both tangible and intangible, through the application of business values and the investment of capital, which is often also seen as involving or creating a market economy. Commercialization is often defined tautologically as the introduction of the commercial to the production or development of new forms of business. This reveals more if we critically explore the values underpinning the concept of the commercial are explored. It can be observed that not only do we increasingly live in a market *economy*, but also in a market *society* – which means that the market and its categories of thought have come to dominate ever more areas of our lives. Moreover we can see that this is not just a market but a series of markets and the new markets created through the decommissioning of the productive sectors and the emergence of a retail and service economy is significant.

Introducing a new idea in 2011, the UNESCO General Conference, Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape stated that "...historic urban landscape is the urban area understood as the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes, extending beyond the notion of 'historic centre' or 'ensemble' to include the broader urban context and its geographical setting." There are some new approaches in the concept, for example: Introducing a new idea in 2011, the UNESCO General Conference, Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape stated that "...historic urban landscape is the urban area understood as the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes, extending beyond the notion of 'historic centre' or 'ensemble' to include the broader urban context and its geographical setting."

This is well demonstrated throughout the history of tourism as the origins of the hospitality relationships and the ability to travel have been transformed by the injection of capital and

the recognition of the success criteria of capitalism. Commercialization also involves the introduction of standardization, with the added necessity for replicability and repeatability in the touristic offer, as Minciu et al (2010) observe in their analysis of the holiday offer in protected spaces. Standardization is often related to achieving economies of scale in production processes, however the market tendency in the last decades has been towards increased mass customization (a combination of individualization and mass production) while still keeping the underpinning values of the market.

These characteristics may be contrasted with the spontaneity and individualised forms claimed for early tourism. However tourism has always included an element of the commercial even where it was based on voluntary and mutual exchanges of hospitality but this is changing as can be seen even in rural homes in Thailand (Kontogeorgopoulos et al 2015). The exchanges were based within the contemporary economy and not as part of the development of a specialised economy. There has been much debate on the developments of standardised mass tourism versus individualised tourism, especially around the concept of new tourism but even these new tourism offers exist within the market and within the processes of commercialization.

Commercialization can be seen to involve a number of processes which have been identified and also draw on other concepts. These include commodification which “is generally taken to be the process whereby ways of life, traditions and their complex symbolism are imaged and transformed into saleable products” (Robinson, 1999:11). While commodification is certainly not a recent innovation, what is new is its scope and power. It has become intensified and institutionalized in new and far-reaching ways, carrying meanings that reconfigure our understanding of the world and our place within it. The very character of life seems increasingly consumeristic and commercial, which can therefore be seen as a parallel of commercialization.

Ritzer developed the concept further through his analyzes of McDonaldisation and Disneyfication (Ritzer and Atalay, 2010) as his observations produced a generalized view of this Americanization of commercialization under the perceived hegemonic influences of the two giant corporations and the spread of their products. However, not only does the argument work on a grand scale, it is possible to see the impacts on a local level. For instance it has been argued that the processes play a great part in the production and consumption of souvenirs (Swanson and Timothy, 2012) where even the simplest item is the result of the complex processes underpinning commercialization. Lepkowski Ostrum (2012) has noted how the royal cuisine of the World Heritage Site in Hue is not exempt. This is more than the accounts of negative impacts in traditional tourism texts as the examples demonstrate how original social practices, rituals and gifts are transformed into abstract baubles of the consumer society.

These processes also lead to standardisation and the spread of commercialized forms throughout the world. The processes of globalization refer to more than the spread of an economic model as it is also a cultural and discursive force in the development of tourism in the world. However there have been objections to the homogeneity implied in this process and there have been calls to introduce and retain elements of the local in the development process, known as glocalization. (Ritzer and Atalay, 2010)

Many of the examinations of commercialization call into question the changes involved in these processes and explore whether those changes can retain any sense of the authentic. For Sheffield, commercialization and especially over commercialization raise important discussions about the elements of authenticity which would need to be retained for a commercialized offer to be able to speak to authenticity. (See Clarke, 2014 and Papanicolaou, 2011)

It is also important to recognise that the processes of commercialization require a sense of agency. The developments are driven by entrepreneurs who drive the process and seek the avenues to make the offers more profitable as Chew (2009) observed within the Hong Kong Bun Festival. Sheffield may not be as exotic but the analytical framework reveals many interesting examples if we look at the emergence of the Sheffield Film Festival, the Sheffield Book Festival and the Sheffield Beer Festival as well as the development of what were intended to be more permanent parts of the city's cultural infrastructure, the Centre for Popular Music and the Nameless Photographic Gallery.

The forces, pressures, and cultural changes which drive commercialization are gathering greater influence. It is difficult to find anything which is resistant to commercialization, even the recent research on religious tourism highlights this (Clarke, 2013). Underpinning the commercialisation of Sheffield was a shift in values, which sociologists have referred to as 'embourgeoisement' developing the notion of the affluent worker studies. There is some irony that it was the study of the affluent worker in the 1970s that inspired this concept that now gains a renewed relevance in these days of austerity. What was observed was that as workers had more disposable income, they shifted their choices to ones which previously been seen as middle class rather than working class. This could be seen in clothes, cars, holidays and even the type of leisure activities undertaken. This adoption of middle class values was seen to be aspirational but these studies were applied on the back of individual groups of workers and the sense of individual agency. However embourgeoisement can be seen operating at a different level, at the level of the collective which makes the choices seem less benign and perhaps not even choices.

We saw the changes in professional football driven by huge financial investments from television rights transform the 'people's game' into entertainment. Not all of this is necessarily bad, football grounds used to be dirty, hostile and unsanitary places which were

often dangerous, not only because of the behaviours of the so-called fans but because of the design (or lack of it) of the grounds themselves. My generation bridges the stories of my father travelling to the football on the same bus as the players to seeing my children counting the Bentleys and Ferraris in the players' car park (obviously separated from the ones where ordinary supporters can park). Footballers can now command huge salaries – and good luck to them – but at what cost to their connections to the roots of the football clubs and their supporters. We still make a great deal of local derbies, where teams from local neighbourhoods or regions confront each other. However given the transfer market, it is always interesting to ask how many of the players involved actually appreciate the importance of the confrontation. There are obvious examples where the conflicts are still real – the Barcelona vs Real Madrid games have so many layers of cultural significance that even if you only scrape the surface, the importance is apparent. But what does it mean to players from entirely different cultures when Sheffield Wednesday play Sheffield United? Being named after the same city may be a clue. However the ground of another football club is almost as close to the home of Sheffield Wednesday as the home of Sheffield United and they are called Rotherham, which would leave outsiders struggling to understand why it is so important for Rotherham supporters that their team beat Sheffield Wednesday.

The cultural roots of Sheffield drive deep into the urban landscape and have always been riven by contradictions. It is a city which prides itself on its labouring past and its socialist beliefs. Yet it has a Western corner of affluence protected from the rest of the city by public parks donated by the richest entrepreneurs to the benefit of the city, its working people and the owners. Now part of the industrial North East has seen the industries replaced by Meadowhall a retail centre, a cathedral to consumerism. The irony should not be lost on those of us interested in post-modern landscapes as the old steel works set the template and ground rules for the more modern building.

The steel works were spectacular – not only in terms of scale but also in terms of cultural dominance. The factories named areas of the city – for example, the Parliamentary constituency still bears the name of Sheffield, Brightside. Clearly this name is derived from the Brightside steel work complex, reflecting the self-deprecating humour which has been noted in the United Kingdom since at least the times of Robin Hood. In the same way that the tallest of the Merry Men, standing over 2 metres tall, was known as 'Little' John so this factory was known as 'bright', when the resultant pollution was anything but.

### **Even the football has its heritages**

Sheffield is a place with claims to be the home of football in England. It is the home of Sheffield FC, the oldest football club in the world (which is why Wednesday and United supporters hate it when media commentators refer to their team as Sheffield, because they

are! Once upon a time, somewhere in the United Kingdom, Football was invented by two pioneers who believed in the power of the beautiful game and who dedicated their soul to the invention of it: Nathaniel Creswick and William Prest. These two men wrote the rules and laws for a new game and founded the World's First Football Club, Sheffield FC on the 24th of October in 1857. Sheffield also hosted the first night game with floodlights on, on the 14th of October, 1878 – although the contemporary reports in the Sheffield Telegraph suggested that much of the crowd were there to see the lights rather than the football. The Blues won!

Sheffield Wednesday were founded in 1867 bringing together two elements of Sheffield's cultural landscape. In those days retail outlets had one half day closing afternoons during the working week and the Co-Operative shops closed on a Wednesday. The Co-Operative was a genuinely socialist organisation providing local shops for working people, through collective ownership. Like most employers at the time, the Co-Op offered recreational opportunities for their employees through a Sports and Social Club. This became the Wednesday Cricket club and when the Summer season ended, they moved on to play football and became the Sheffield Wednesday Football Club. They are still the only football team named after a day of the week! (Clarke and Madden, 1986)

Sheffield has lost more of its cultural landscapes than the steel works. The city was home to one of the major cricketing venues as Yorkshire County Cricket Club shared the Bramall Lane Facilities with Sheffield United Football Club. This produced an effectively three sided football ground, leaving room for the cricket pitch and the cricket pavilion.

The idea of welcoming the football revolution was enshrined in these plans to make Bramall Lane a proper football ground. Four sides give a stadium more atmosphere and allow more tickets to be sold – assuming that an audience can be found. There was also a degree of local politics and rivalry involved as Sheffield Wednesday had succeeded in getting their ground Hillsborough selected as one of the venues for the 1966 World Cup hosted in England in 1966. This included the building of a new North Stand, still known lovingly as the Cantilever, as it was built with technology supporting the roof from above rather than on columns which disrupted sight lines for those sitting in the stand. It was one of the first to be built using this technology and drew a great deal of attention to the club, casting an ever deeper shadow over the rivals who played at a cricket ground.

### **Oppositional politics**

Sheffield has become known for strong political beliefs. It has been a labour strong hold since the authority was created but has seen, if there is such a thing, as the early owners acting as benevolent capitalists. The history of the city is marked by their generosity. The

parks donated by them still bear controlled town/city council, except for a very short time, ever since the authority was first created. There is a strong sense of civic pride and loyalty to the local people. It was first expressed through trade unions and by the founding fathers of the city's industry. If there is any doubt who they were, their names – and still mark the city into zones where the green parklands form a barrier between the city and the donors' houses. Not only socialism thrived but also non-conformist religions found a home in the city and this then connected to growing movements in favour of nuclear disarmament and peace. There are strong connections to the international peace movement, celebrated in the public open space in the city centre being known as 'The Peace Gardens' and in the annual community festival known as 'Peace in the Park'. This builds on historic linkages to the methodist religion as one of the centres where preachers appeared to large open air audiences.

The cultural landscape was shifted with the development of the Crucible Theatre in the centre of town (despite the fact that it has produced high quality innovative theatre, it is still best known for being the home of the World Snooker Championship which holds centre stage for three weeks every year ending with Bank Holiday weekend in May.)

The city has seen a centralisation of the cultural offers, as the estates around the city have lost local cultural institutions, such as cinemas as the cultural landscape has been refocussed first into the centre and then into the Meadow Hall development. A similar policy was implemented in regard to sports provision, with local estate based facilities, such as swimming pools, being replaced by grander more central ones. The city enjoys two cathedrals (a Church of England one and a Catholic one) but Meadow Hall has emerged as a new Cathedral of consumerism. This latest Cathedral has become a site not only as a place of conspicuous consumption but actually as a site of conspicuous non-consumption as purchases are not always necessarily the most significant part of the experience of worship in this most recent Cathedral. It is more about being seen to be there.

### **Summary: you never know when someone might offer you a piece of fruit**

What this paper has addressed are the issues that arise from trying to read a cultural landscape semiotically. Sheffield was iconic – associated with the steel industry and stainless steel in particular. The city was cutlery and cutlery was the city. Indeed the second football team in the city is still known as the Blades because of this. Sheffielders were rightly proud that the city was known throughout the world (or those parts of the world that we knew about) for fine craftsmanship. This still holds true but is harder to justify as the traditions live on as heritages but connect less with every new generation. Meadowhall has statues of steel makers in the concourse but what they are doing must be a puzzle for the increasing numbers of shoppers with no connection to the steel industry.



Figure 1: Heritage statues at Meadowhall

Similarly the ‘Little Mesters’ who produced cutlery and apprenticed cutlery makers are now remembered in the name of a gastro-pub (and I have not dared to check whether they use Sheffield cutlery or not). But what does this term mean to the customers? Is it just a quaint Northern name for a good place to go and eat? Or does it still connect with the traditions of cutlery making?



Figure 2: Little Mesters

My mother was always proud of the city and its cutlery. She almost always gave gifts of cutlery to visitors or on significant anniversaries and she always carried a fruit knife in her handbag. A fruit knife is a relatively short knife but sharp enough to peel and cut fruit, no more than 5 centimetres long. Her’s always came in a leatherette pouch – they did not last long, because she would often pass them on to people she met – and were omnipresent, because as she said “you never know when someone might offer you a piece of fruit” and she was going to be ready. What she would have made of airline security, I do not know.

We can use semiotics to explore the significance of these heritages. The messages of encoding and, more so, decoding are made evident through the presentations and representations of the heritage interpretations to be found in and around the city. However semiotics must be taken out and used in our every day practices. The power to create and limit meanings is very great if ‘we’ do not seek to read it, critique it and make sense of the meanings in our own worlds. This is the task being posed when Waterton and Watson conclude their 2014 book with a series of questions – “Now we can take another step and explore a valuable seam of inquiry that places people and their moments of engagement at the centre of our studies. The embodied semiotics of such an experience have the potential to reveal layers of meaning that might otherwise never be examined, leaving the semiotic landscapes of heritage tourism even richer places than once they were. (p.123) We must as researchers, teachers, students and managers take this enriching challenge into our ways of being and explore the meanings that can be experienced. We must recognise that everything is there, but floating. Attempts to tether the drifting meaning or steer the course of the construction are to be recognised and analysed.

What Sheffield had was a set of semiotic narratives, which generated a cultural identity grounded in cultures of production. There was a strong sense of knowing that Sheffield was the best (and whether it was or not in any objective sense is largely irrelevant as the confidence oozed from the belief). Then the world turned and the profits relocated. The economic dismantling took a serious toll on the city, not just financially but culturally. The market solution that was enacted was transformative and, in an economic sense, was successful. The city survived, more or less, and the retail and service sectors have thrived. The questions remain as to what has happened to the sense of heritage of the steel city and what effect there has been on civic identity. The fact that there are statues and pubs bearing the legends of the past are significant but are they enough to drive a multicultural city of the future forward?

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