

## Deep England

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### Abstract

Deep England as an icon arose during the Second World War as a unifying concept of everything English. This icon has, however, long historical roots, and its significance is not only patriotic, but it is also a reaction to modernity. The icon is materialized in a fictitious southern, rural and pastoral England with close-knit communities centred on the village green. A number of samples will be analysed to identify the cultural meaning of the icon in the light of the theories of Svetlana Boym (nostalgia), Marc Augé (places), Angus Calder (cultural history) and Paul Kingsnorth (sociology). Based on analyses of these samples the article finally suggests a cultural, semiotic definition of icons.

The samples are:

- Rupert Brooke: "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester", 1912
- Humphrey Jennings: *The Farm*, 1938, *English Harvest*, 1939 and *Spring Offensive*, 1940
- Terence Cuneo: "BRITAIN in WINTER", 1948
- J.R.R. Tolkien: "The Scouring of the Shire" from *The Lord of the Rings*, 1939-1949
- Agatha Christie: *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*, 1962

- Norman Scarfe: *Shell Guide Essex*, 1968 / 1975
- Paul Kingsnorth: *Real England. The Battle against the Bland*, 2008
- *Midsomer Murder: Small Mercies*. 2009.

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A poster from 1948 by Terence Cuneo for the Travel Association of the British Tourist and Holidays Board depicts a scene in a village street outside the pub the Flying Swan, an old slightly crooked building with a dangling painted pub sign on its front. In the foreground, a hunter with his two spaniels and his bag of three rabbits is talking to the squire on horseback and in riding dress and boots. In the background, the locals and a couple on a cycling holiday enjoy their pewter tankards of beer, pipes and cigarettes in the clear winter sunshine in front of the pub. The sense of community is stressed by the building in the poster being a public house, not a private one. All are in friendly conversation. At the bottom of the poster there is the caption "BRITAIN in WINTER". Is this really a picture of Britain in the winter of 1948? The question is the entrance to a wider research question of this article. It will examine the cultural meaning of renditions of English society of the nature of "BRITAIN in WINTER". It is the intention of the article to seek to explain why a semiotical construction of a rural and pastoral England with close-knit communities centred on the village green had become and possibly remains as an icon of English identity? The article will combine cultural history and sociological theories with a sample of different types of texts in the one hundred years from 1912 to today to find a pattern in the development of the icon of what has been called Deep England (Calder 1991, 182). The empirical material stretches over several media and genres, and as such, the approach of the article is consistent with the method called "a new imagology" by Anthony W. Johnson, which he describes as "a truly interdisciplinary field" (Johnson 2005, 50). In conclusion, the article will suggest how a semiotic process between an insecure and non-stable social reality and its textual representations can create a cultural icon. Here the term occlusion will be used to characterize this semiotic process of the production of icons.

### **Deep England: An Icon of a Perpetually Vanishing World**

A sense of loss and longing, which seems to run through depictions of Deep England, can already be found in Rupert Brooke's poem written in May 1912 "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester" (Brooke 1918/2010, 91). The poem is structured around "here" and "there". The poet is in Berlin ("here"), and he is longing for the old vicarage in Grantchester, Cambridgeshire ("there"). Whereas even nature in Germany is characterized by discipline and order "Here tulips bloom as they are told", English nature is pastorally free: "Unkempt about those hedges blows / An English unofficial rose". Obviously, the poet's homesickness is connected to distance, but in the final stanza with repetitions of the words "yet" and "still" and its often quoted line "And is there honey still for tea?", time enters into his concern. Grantchester is not only far away, there is a sense of foreboding that the place has no permanence and that it will vanish and be lost, and the poet's wish for time to stand still may not be fulfilled "Stands the Church clock at ten to three?"

There is nothing new in associating the English countryside with loss. In *The Country and the City* (1973/1975) Raymond Williams has documented how rural life has always been disappearing and has always belonged to the past. Williams goes back in a selection of literary history through the centuries (Hardy, Eliot, Bewick, Crabbe, Goldsmith, Massinger, More, Langland) to illustrate how the country and rural life have always fallen victim to societal changes. The result is that country life and culture have always been something that has passed away and is no more, and Williams' destination is the Garden of Eden, as the first loss of the many to come (Williams 1973/1975, 18-22).

More recently, Paul Kingsnorth has travelled all over England to document the disappearance and loss of the parts of English culture, society, landscape, nature, economy and trade that are necessary to bind a community together and to shape a national identity or Englishness. Seven chapters in *Real England The Battle against the Bland* (2008) each contains case stories and statistics about the loss of rural pubs, canals, main street shops, non-industrial farming, local markets, orchards, and villages. Kingsnorth concludes that the result is loss of identity. The local places are drained of character and "replaced by things which would be familiar anywhere." (Kingsnorth 2008/2009, 6), and he sees his book as being "about promoting and

defending cultural distinctiveness" (9). Already in *The Heart of England* from 1935, Ivor Brown decries the new suburbs for their uniformity and anonymity: "What strikes one as so oppressive is street after street of exact similarity in all but name" (68).

Rural life, the country or the countryside have found their concentrated and iconic expression in the concept of Deep England, which was coined by Angus Calder in *The Myth of the Blitz* (1991). Angus Calder examines the intellectual history of the image presented of Britain in wartime propaganda. Geographically and culturally, Deep England is demarcated to this area: "There was a Green and Pleasant heartland, 'Deep England', which stretched from Hardy's Wessex to Tennyson's Lincolnshire, from Kipling's Sussex to Elgar's Worcestershire... It included those areas of the Home Counties around London that had not been invaded by suburban development. Parts of Kent, for instance, were 'deeper' than anywhere." (Calder 1991, 182).

In the three short films by Humphrey Jennings *The Farm* (1938), *English Harvest* (1939) and *Spring Offensive* (aka *An Unrecorded Victory* – 1940) the subject is purely rural. These films share some of the same footage of life in an East Anglia farm in Clopton through a spring day and of the wheat harvest at Sawston in Cambridgeshire. *Spring Offensive* is expanded with sequences about the importance of food production in the war economy and about the new War Agricultural Committees and an evacuee boy from Holloway. The Constable-like shots of farm life with pastoral harmony between animals, people, the land, the seasons and the slow tempo of country life culminate in a picnic scene, in which the womenfolk carry pitchers with home-brewed beer and refreshments to the harvesters' lunch-break. Two agents, however, disturb this static and traditional farm life of Deep England. The voice-over in *Spring Offensive* asks, "What will war mean to the countrymen?", and the harvesting sequences are a combination of an agricultural labourer working with a scythe to open the way for the new technology of the reaper binder. In other words, farming life is being changed by state or governmental interference and control of the War Agricultural Committees and by industrial technology, gyro tillers and tractors to plough up and drain grassland for wartime food production. Typical of Jennings (Christensen 2013, 115-135) this change is embedded in continuity because the agricultural committees are shown

to consist of the local farmers themselves, and the reaper binder cannot operate unless the edges of the field have been shorn by the traditional scythe. These three wartime propaganda films produced for The Crown Film Unit and the Film Division of the Ministry of Information are part of Humphrey Jennings' attempt to "to find the real character of England" (Aldgate and Richards 2007, 226). In this effort, rural life with its blend of modernity and continuity plays a central part, and in the context of Second World War propaganda film production, the role of the countryside and agriculture in the war effort was of importance. The Second World War had caused a renewed empowerment to the countryside as an economically crucial part of the war effort with its need to feed the population. The propaganda value of the English countryside and agriculture as described by Jennings in his films had this economic factor as one of its causes together with the cultural causes. The cultural cause was that the countryside with its organic continuity could become a patriotic icon that could unity the whole of Britain in the war. Calder mentions, "Jennings's troubled obsession with finding some interior essence of Britain" (Calder 1991, 181), and he concludes that this essence was found in the icon Deep England. The social consensus that was sought after in the war years and praised by Jennings was found here.

### **The Scouring of the Shire: Middle or Deep England?**

The temporal insecurity in Rupert Brooke's "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester" with its questions of "yet" and "still" is repeated in the "Prologue Concerning Hobbits, and other matters" in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. The present and the past tense are used indiscriminately so that the effect is that this world of the Shire is out of time (Tolkien 1939-1949/1974, vol. 1, 13). The Shire in itself is as close as one may get to Deep England, but this is a lost Deep England, and *The Lord of the Rings* may be read as an elegy for this world. Most prominently, the chapter "The Scouring of the Shire" illustrates the destruction of the Shire through Saruman, an agent of modernity and industrialism (Tolkien 1939-1949/1974, vol. 3, 249). The critique of modernity and the lament of the loss of a world of chivalry based on neat gardens, orchards, farm-production and artisans is a regressive critique. No solutions are offered apart from escape to the Western Isles together with the elves.

The epic strife between orcs and hobbits in Middle Earth does not belong to peaceful Deep England. It has been suggested that the Shire is more Middle England and deeply conservative than Deep. In the article "The real roots of Middle England" Charlie Lee-Potter (2004, 25) asks: "Scared of modernity, obsessed with tidy houses, they call the lower orders orcs (or is it oiks?). What do the Hobbits remind you of?" The concept of Middle England is a politico-sociological one and it connotes a postulated majority of middle-class and lower-middle class people with right-wing views (Moran 2005). Deep England and Middle England are related ideological concepts, but there are decisive differences. Deep England is consensus seeking, whereas Middle England is aggressively defensive. Deep England is an alternative to modernity, whereas Middle England is a reaction to modernity. The habitat of Deep England is the ideal of an unchanged rural village with gardens, whereas the habitat of Middle England is the suburb with gardens centres. Middle England is as exclusive as it is a defensive, political concept, whereas Deep England with its inclusive and unifying function has inherent power to be iconic of a whole nation's self-image.

A discussion of nostalgia may clarify the distinction between Deep and Middle England. Nostalgia can be defined as longing motivated by loss of the original object of desire and by its spatial and temporal displacement, as already seen in Rupert Brooke's poem. Svetlana Boym (Boym 2001, XVIII) has distinguished between two kinds of nostalgia, and this distinction can be applied to Deep and Middle England. Restorative nostalgia concentrates on the imagined past and seeks to rebuild it. This kind of nostalgia is characteristic of nationalist movements and revivals, and it is anti-modern. Reflective nostalgia concentrates on the longing for the lost past and the loss of it, and as such it is an ongoing process about the present's relationship to the past. Reflective nostalgia is constructive in the sense that it in its negotiation with the past makes use of it to define the present in a critical way, and not just seeks to recreate the past in the present as restorative nostalgia does. Seen in this light, Middle England's conception of the present is pure loss as expressed in the elegiac aspects of *The Lord of the Rings*, whereas Deep England becomes a tool of dealing with the present. Most clearly seen, Second World War British propaganda uses the icon of Deep England as an antithesis to fascism.

### Shell Guides: Anthropological Places and Non-places

The Shell Guides each covering a county were published from 1934 to 1984. The series was financed by the Shell Oil Company, and notable general editors were John Betjeman and John Piper. The target group was the new middle-class suburban motorists, a fast growing number of customers. By 1933 there were two millions licenced cars in Britain and in 1938 three million (Heathcote 2011, 58). The guides advocated a mode of travelling that was motoring on the open road and arriving at an authentic and unspoilt rural, possibly secluded, village, which could not be reached by train. A guide typically contained a map, a gazetteer and some essays dealing with specific subjects pertaining to its county. Each guide was illustrated with a large number of black and white photographs.

The Shell Guides contain a paradoxical mixture of the modernity of the motorcar and on the other hand the ideal of unspoilt places to drive to or drive through. The cover photo of the *Shell Guide Essex*, 1968/1975, shows the street in the historic village Stepping from the point of view of a driver as he is entering the village from the open road, and there is a solitary pedestrian precariously walking in the middle of the village street. The meeting of the modern car and the ancient village cannot be completely harmonious. A closer inspection of this guide reveals, however, that this guide was a turning point in the general attitude of the series to modernity. The guide published before in the series, *Rutland*, 1963, written by W.G. Hoskins had a conservationist standpoint, and it regarded modern development as detrimental to authentic, rural England. There are echoes of Tolkien's "The Scouring of the Shire" in *Rutland*: "The worst blot on the landscape is not indeed buildings at all, but the hideous poles and wires of the electricity board." (Hoskins 1963, 8) In the 1975-edition of *Essex* its writer Norman Scarfe is cautiously optimistic as he describes how public planning has sought to retain the old in the new. He quotes from the policy statement of *The Essex County Council's Design Guide for Residential Areas*, 1973: "To perpetuate the unique building character of the County and to re-establish local identity..." (Scarfe 1968/1975, 7), and he praises a number of restoration projects, before he concludes that the tide seems to be turning. Nevertheless, after two pages about modern Essex in the seventies, the introductory essay of the book is about historical subjects, and it includes a stanza by John Betjeman:

The deepest Essex few explore  
Where steepest thatch is sunk in flowers  
And out of elm and sycamore  
Rise flinty fifteenth-century towers. (8)

A survey of the subjects of the 122 illustrations in all in the guide indicates that also *Essex* presents an England of the past. 101 photos have historical subjects, primarily architecture, 15 photos show the modern world, and six are timeless, primarily nature. Ten of the illustrations show people, and almost ironically, considering it is a Shell Guide, only three photos have cars in them. On p. 133 of *Essex*, there is a photo of the modern world of transit. It has the caption EAST MERSEA, and most of the space of the photo is taken up by closely parked caravans. Only in the far background, the silhouette of historic buildings can be glimpsed. This photo illustrates the paradox of the Shell Guides. The desire of the guides to introduce the new car-owning, suburban, often educated middle classes to the heritage and landscape of authentic Deep England and Englishness, and the guides' invitation to their readers to go there, helped create a new kind of places that were without any social-semiotic meaning. They certainly did not have the iconic cultural significance of the authentic places written about with enthusiasm in the guides. This kind of places has been called non-places by Marc Augé.

The eternal and iconic Englishness that the Shell Guides document is severely disturbed by the non-places, which Marc Augé writes about in his *Non-Places An Introduction to Supermodernity*. These non-places are without social and historical memory and their function is transit. Examples are service stations, motorways, lay-bys, out-of-town shopping centres, leisure parks, caravan parks and airports (Augé 1992/2008, xxii, 28, 64). It is the kind of places berated by Norman Scarfe in *Essex*. The places that are iconic, and which provide the main content of the Shell Guides, also as we have seen in *Essex*, are what Augé calls anthropological places. These places and architecture embody especially local history, social memory and communal identity. Augé gives as examples provincial town centres with war memorials, churches and town halls. (Augé 1992/2008, 42-43, 53-54). The large majority of the places presented in the Shell Guides are anthropological in this sense of the word, and as places, they embody the iconic quality of Deep England. The con-



cept of the Shell Guides themselves as motorists' handbooks documents that the icon of Deep England with its manifestation of a rural world outside time is on its way to becoming a tourist attraction of a fictitious nature.

### **From St. Mary Mead to Midsomer: Deep England as Pastiche**

The icon of Deep England and the English countryside in general was celebrated in the Shell Guides, but as the icon met with the reality of the motor car and its landscape demolishing accessories in the form of non-places, which are defined by their lack of social-semiotic content, the icon became threatened. Even a retreat into fiction was not always enough. A fictional representation of a Deep England village is Agatha Christie's St Mary Mead. Miss Marple's village was also being changed by modernity in the shape of the welfare state with a new housing estate, appropriately referred to as "The Development" by the villagers in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*: "One had to face the fact: St Mary Mead was *not* the place it has been." (Christie 1962/1984, 8-10)

The iconic Deep England village of St. Mary Mead has been re-born as pastiche in *Midsomer Murders*. The television series *Midsomer Murders* is set in a fictional English county, Midsomer. Apart from a spectacular high crime rate, this setting shares the characteristics of Deep England. The villages are always picturesque with well-trimmed hedges, and stable ingredients of each episode are the institutions of traditional English villages that according to Kingston's *Real England* are being lost at an alarming rate. One example is the village fete and flower show. In *Midsomer Murders*, the village flower show is the backdrop for murders, so that the series' reconstruction of Deep England and its community is negated. Here the icon of Deep England is merely pastiche, but it is still there. This is never more obvious than in the episode *Small Mercies* from 2009 where the village has been scaled down to an actual model village. The Bekonscot Model Village in Beaconsfield was used as part of the criminal plot. The body of a local young man is found dead in this model village, which is the chief tourist attraction of Little Worthy. In conversations in the episode, "the village" may sometimes refer to the real village and it may sometimes refer to the model village, thus stressing the unreality of both. The episode's

variation of the village flower show is a silly boat race. When DCI Tom Barnaby surveys this traditional communal celebration, he remarks: "You see, Jones, you look at this. You'd think you were in some kind of rural paradise, but how wrong you'd be!" Midsomer is pastiche of the icon of Deep England. As an icon, Midsomer is both unreal and real, and this middle semiotic position appears from the production notes in the Extra Features on the episode's DVD. The series *Midsomer Murders* is filmed in real locations, and as such, it is tied to English reality. However, the locations of each episode are a conglomerate of different locations from England, but these are edited together so that they form a specific Midsomer village and its surrounding countryside (Smith 2009).

As in the case of Humphrey Jennings' films from the late 1930s, Midsomer has been shot in real English, rural locations, but whereas Jennings' films were documentary with real, authentic local characters, Midsomer is fiction with well-known actors. It is the tension between fictitious plots and the real locations in Midsomer, which create a semiotic sign structure that results in a cultural icon. This semiotic process will be described in the conclusion of the article.

### **Deep England and the Semiotic Creation of an Icon**

The iconicity of Deep England may be explained semiotically. During the article, it has been demonstrated that Deep England has the characteristics of an already vanished or a fast-vanishing world. Deep England is not real. Yet the significance of Deep England is all the stronger for this fact. In 1939, H.J. Massingham pointed out that the rupture between the country and the town had meant, "that the country really is regarded by the enormous majority as a picturesque playground." (Massingham 1939, 6) This reduction of the country to an aesthetic concept is also a reduction of the semiotic power of it as a signified. As an icon, the nearly vanished country and villages of Deep England have had semiotic content transferred from the signified to the signifier. The signifiers of Deep England have been exemplified in this article by different textual genres such as Brooke's poem, Jennings' documentary films, Cuneo's poster, Tolkien's fantasy novel, Christie's crime story, Scarfe's tourist guide, Kingsnorth's sociological tract, and the Midsomer TV-series. These textual cases span a 100 years, but they share and refer to the same signified, namely the concept of Deep England that was never

a real and stable place, but always vanishing. All the different textual forms of Deep England, of which we have seen some in this article, are potent with meaning of English identity that is far out of proportion with the actual existence of Deep England.

Based on this mechanism it is suggested here that this may be a general trait of cultural icons. Semiotically, a cultural icon is a sign where the signifier has achieved mythical proportions, and this achievement is based on the lack of balance between signifier and signified. A sign can become a cultural icon when it as a sign contains a much larger amount of signification than what the signified initially warranted. The Saussurean ideas of signifier, signified and sign were elaborated by Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies* (1957/1972), who added a second-order semiological system. In this, an overall new term or function, the myth was made up solely semiotically of a sign (the original combination of signifier and signified in the first-order semiological system) that became the new signifier. This new signifier then combined with a new signified to create a new sign. (Barthes 1957/1972, 115). This new sign Barthes called "signification" (117). Barthes gave the name "the concept" to the signified in this second-order process. The second-order process is a metalanguage as it is employed to speak about the first-order process, and myth has "a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us." (117) The initial distance mentioned above about cultural icons between the signified and the signifier where the sign contains more significance than the signified entailed can now be reformulated as the "significance" of Barthesian myth. The "significance" of the myth is created through two semiological systems, a first-order and a second-order. Barthes points out that "the concept" (the signified in the second-order process) is elusive: "One must firmly stress this open character of the concept; it is not at all an abstract, purified essence; it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function." (119) The disproportion between signified and signifier is included in Barthes' description of myth. He writes that generally a signified can have several signifiers, and "In myth... the concept can spread over a very large expanse of signifier." In the same way as myths can have many signifiers, myth is unstable and changeable: "they can come into being, alter disintegrate, disappear completely." (120)

Kenyan G. Tomaselli and David Scott (2009) also approach their definition of icons through semiotics. Initially they point out the iconic (i.e. mimetic) nature of icons, and then they proceed to modify this representational function of icons: "Icons can be deceitful to the extent that they occlude as much as represent their object." (18)

The lack of balance between signifier and signified as suggested in this article as a characteristic of cultural icons has now been elaborated with Barthes' semiotic process of creating a myth, and with the addition of Tomaselli and Scott's definition we can now be more precise about this lacking balance, and we can term it "occlusion". There is a semiotic passage between the original signified (e.g. the idea of Deep England), and its iconic signifier (e.g. the samples in this article), but this passage is meandering, and the thoroughfare is partially obstructed by occlusion. As Tomaselli and Scott put it "In this way the gap between icon and object can be filled with invisible layers of semiotic function that, like successive glazes or laminates of glass, both highlight and occlude the object." (19) These "successive glazes" have coated the icon of Deep England in different ways through one hundred years of samples in the article, and we have seen how many different signifiers the "concept" (the signified in the second-order mythical process) of Deep England has had in this period. Each "concept" coming and going, but the initial signified in the first-order process remaining. It is therefore quite possible to regard a cultural icon in the light of Barthes' system of cultural semiotics to understand its changeable nature better. In this connection, Walter W. Hölbling's *US Icons and Iconicity* (2006) also stresses how signification is an element of cultural icons: "icons constitute an attempt to focus and anchor the sliding of signification, to freeze the social indetermination into hegemonic forms, and to foster social cohesion by placing consensus over conflict. They are in short, a central element in the manufacturing of consent." (9) This social and hegemonic mechanism of cultural icons to create consensus through social and historical processes of changing signification has been demonstrated in this article. A relatively large sample of different versions of the icon of Deep England all reflect changing culture, history and social conditions, yet they all refer to the signified of the first-order process, Deep England. By doing so they "anchor the sliding of signification", and they "freeze the social indetermination into hegemonic forms", so that the icon of Deep

England contains consensus. The article has demonstrated how different kinds of texts during a period of one hundred years have used an almost non-existing Deep England as an icon of Englishness and English national identity.

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