

The Production of Space; The Meaning of Place in a Shifting Terrain

In this presentation I discuss the making of an artwork entitled 'In Passing' which is itself part of a larger visual arts project entitled 'Shifting Terrains'. The project explores how the production of space and temporality using photographic, moving image and text based sound media creates a certain meaning of place in a landscape. In this case, a landscape understood geologically as a 'shifting terrain'.

The theme of this symposium¹ is mapping which I take to be a geo-graphy, and the research for 'In Passing' approaches different conventions of photographic representation as themselves geo-graphies in the ways they produce visual space. The research also uses fieldwork methods of classification to assemble a text which then becomes the sound component of the final moving image/ sound work.

CONTEXT

The geographical context for 'In Passing' is a coastline settlement sited on an unstable shingle bank between an area called Romney Marsh and the sea, in the south east of England. Romney Marsh exists due to the presence of this shingle bank, a promontory stretching from Dungeness at the southern end of the Marsh (opposite Cap Gris Nez on the other side of the English Channel) to Greatstone some 2 miles to the North East.



¹¹ This text is an edited version of a presentation of 'In Passing' given at 'Art and Geography' University of Lyon, France Feb 2013

The shingle bank is made up of successive waves of shingle deposits first laid down some 6000 years ago through the wave action of longshore drift up the Channel.



The land supports arable and sheep farming; nuclear power and gravel extraction industries; tourism and permanent habitation and is an important ecological conservation site for flora, insects and migrating birds due to the unique geographical conditions.

The area is culturally neglected and economically depressed despite pressure for house building. There has been a recent proposal to build an underground nuclear waste facility there and the government has given the go ahead for major development of Lydd airport despite the lack of transport infrastructure. To some eyes, there is currently simply 'nothing there'.

As Romney Marsh is particularly vulnerable to rising ocean levels the natural shingle barrier at Dungeness has been supported over the centuries by sea walls to the East, to prevent flooding. However, this is a fragile and ephemeral 'shifting terrain', gradually moving east which will not last for ever, and it is acknowledged that at some point in the future the land will return to the sea.





'In Passing' follows a physical line drawn in the landscape. This line is a track made by a small steam railway line, built in the mid 1920's when the coast became a popular tourist destination for Londoners and the local Kent population. The train is a touristic novelty- it is however, a scheduled line, operating at regular intervals and is used by both local people and railway enthusiasts with their cameras. The line runs along the shingle ridge from the tip of Dungeness point. Here there are two lighthouses (one decommissioned), two nuclear power stations (one decommissioned) and a café. Where the shingle bank ends, the track arrives at New Romney station where there is a café, a few shops and housing.

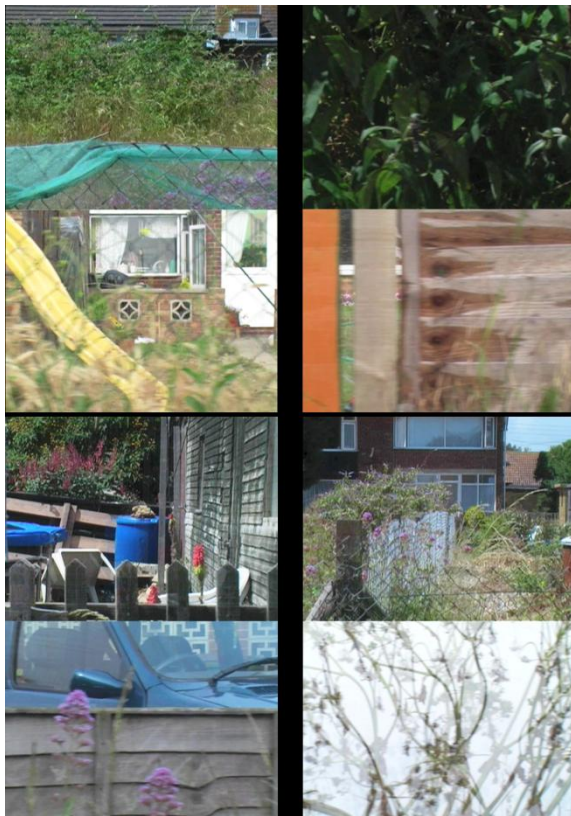


The train as a technology of transport and the camera as a technology of visual recording each track the landscape, and each technology prescribes particular ways of experiencing and understanding space and place. The rail track is a physical line on the ground, running parallel to the coastal road. The camera, tracking the landscape on board the moving vehicle, lays down a visual track that frames an image of place. Sandwiched between land and the sea, the track passes through shingle banks, sand dunes, gravel pits, gardens, pasture and ploughed fields. Along its length over the years has grown up a ribbon development of small chalets, mobile homes and bungalows with all the vernacular detritus of inhabitation.



Travelling along the railway line the camera frames a view of the landscape which is localised, partial; we see the bottom of gardens, alleyways, roads leading off to the fields beyond or the sea. Garden fences and walls, scrub and wasteland rub up close to the track, clinging to its sides. This is a 'behind the scenes', view.

Two video recordings have been made from the vantage point of a passenger on board the train, one facing East and one facing West. The video tracks are placed one above the other to make a vertical image which echoes the open door of the train carriage. The two tracks are flowing in opposite directions at once, flow and counter flow. In this counterflow there unfurls a rhythm of movement across a fixed spatial frame. At the horizontal axial meeting point of the two tracks, there is a co-incidence of movement- but also a bi-furcation, a coming together which is a continual fleeing away.



This axis recalls for me the equatorial line dividing the northern hemisphere from the southern hemisphere. The rotation of the earth creates winds and currents blowing to the right in the North and to the left in the South - a phenomenon known as the Coriolis effect. (I think also of how at times of the turning tide at the tip of Dungeness point one can see quite clearly the meeting of two separate currents- one flowing down channel from the east and one up channel from the west.)

The image is moving in two directions at once, and continually flowing towards the edges of the frame. And, as a continuous loop, it comes round upon itself without definitive point of arrival or departure. To see and understand that we are moving in two directions *simultaneously*, acknowledges that what we are seeing has already happened but also lies ahead of us. We can travel in one direction at the same time as we are travelling back again- this suggests not that time is reversible but that in our experience of temporality, we are constantly experiencing the past as the present even as the present inaugurates a future to come.

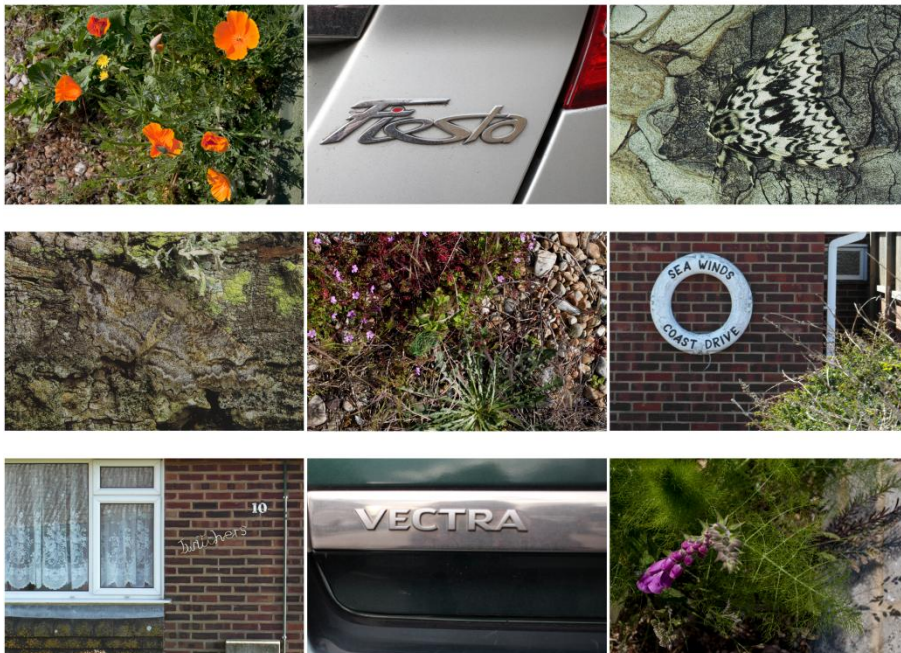
As we watch the video, our visual perception interacts with the automated flow of images structured by the settings of the camera. To render details of the scene distinguishable to the human eye the shutter speed needs to be fast, at 1/800 second. The speed of the train (a max of 25mph) combines with the speed at which the camera can record information. This however is further complicated by the inconsistent speed at which the train is moving- speeding up and slowing down at intervals. The automatic, regulated recording speed of the camera detects this change in rhythm.

Further, the digital recording (standard video at 24 frames per second) is slowed down to 20% of its original speed. This slowed down chronological succession of images reveals the partial superimposition of one frame upon another in the process known as 'interlacing'. There appears a slight delay or echo in the image, a continual splitting apart as one is replaced by the next. While we imagine we see 'more' as a result of the slowing down, the interlacing structure reveals that there is no infinitely extensive recording which could ever replicate for our eyes the landscape as it is. Just as the limitations of 24 frames per second means there are intervals of blindness in the camera's vision, so our conscious visual perception is partial. Infinite *divisibility* gives way to infinite *invisibility*. (Something escapes us)

Furthermore, the flow of images are not each retained as separate snapshots, but interpreted by visual perception which is saccadic, restlessly darting over the visual field. Whilst our gaze may be held within the field of the frame, this gaze is not a glare, static, or frozen. It scans back and forth responding to reflected light interpreted by the brain at lightning speed. The delay in the interval between perception and recollection is the mind in action, it gives us our experience of duration and the flux of change which constitutes memory. In Gregory Flaxman's Introduction to 'The Brain is the Screen' he says, "Movement cannot be attained cardinally, according to the passing of chronological moments, because this reduces time itself to succession in space a la Xeno. Real movement takes place between such spaces, no matter how infinitesimally those spaces are divided, because

movement is not the measurement of space... real movement is... the consciousness of a *qualitative* change ...”²

So while the visual representation of the landscape along the track as distance covered, spatialises time as a regular sequence of framed images giving us an apparent movement through space- this movement is in fact simply a perception of change- of variation. The experienced duration of the video work is not only measured in chronological intervals, but is also a measure of time in subjective terms. In the philosopher Henri Bergson’s model of psychic duration, the subjective experience of duration is a fusion of heterogeneous parts so structured that *each moment is absorbed into the following one, transforming it and being transformed by it, with the consequent transformation of the whole*. For duration is above all memory, ‘which prolongs the before into the after and prevents them from being pure instantaneous presents’³



This is a lived place, not just an abstract representation of a space. I live in and walk around the surrounding landscape; I travel along the line in the train; I walk the streets beside the track; I drive around it by car- and each of these modes of travel and observation reveal different aspects of the place. There are signs in the landscape. And we organize these signs collectively as classes of things we share, we use and which allow us to identify a place as distinctive and particular.

My own interests have led me to identify four classes of things I feel are particular to this landscape: local flora; local house names; local species of lepidoptera (moths), and models of vehicles owned by local residents. The lexicology of names can tell us much about a place as well as what they represent.

² Gregory Flaxman, *The Brain is the Screen* (University of Minnesota Press 2000), 18.

³ Henri Bergson, *Duration and Simultaneity: Bergson and the Einsteinian Universe*, trans. by Leon Jacobson (Manchester: Clinamen Press 1999), p.55.

Homestead Sea Champion Accord Charelle Sheeps Bit Northfleet Flame Carpet Focus
 Bracken Iris Sunrise View Lawsons Cypress Xsara Seashells Opium Poppy Blossom
 Underwing Lookout Escapade Common Poppy The Brig Foam Yellow Horned Poppy Fabia
 Marsh End Brindled Beauty Celandine Sea Winds Transit Californian Poppy Nikita Yellow
 Corydalis Crocus Swift Dusky Hook TipTally Ho Common Fumitory Beach Side Santa Love In
 A Mist Port Lumiere Larkspur Orange Footman Dingy Shears Fiesta Bela Travellers Joy Pax
 Partner Buttercup Chocolate Tip The Chart Columbine Freelanders Portside Curlews Lesser
 Meadow Rue Port Light Pale Pinion X Trail Black Currant Sumar The Beaches Corsala
 Elephant Ears Grape Hyacinth Beggars Retreat Northern Drab Saxifrage Scarce Dagger
 Limited Casa Shearway English stonecrop Gimbals Scenic Birds Foot Trefoil The Whip Dark
 Sword Grass Seagulls Caddy Common Vetch Pebbles Sea Pea Style Ravenstone Pearly
 Underwing Everlasting Pea Sedge Stowaways Escort Common Restharrow Tethers End
 Clover Astra Brindled Pug Ocean Breeze Broom Seacrest Pacific Primera Gorse Helios
 Cherry Plum May Day Water Carpet Panda The Buoys Blackthorn Bon Accord Discovery
 Fescue Pear Clipper Grey Shoulder Knot Apple Berlingo White Horses Cotoneaster
 Seaside Tipplers Drey Mondeo Hawthorn Quarter Deck Red Chestnut Nautilus Bramble
 Compass High Winds Windy Ridge Dewberry Elite Early Thorn Cables Length Small Blood
 Vein Agrimony Fort George Amazon Salad Burnet Sixpenny Dog Rose Lead Coloured
 Drab Prelude Harbour Lights Sweet Briar Rye Grass Varne View Ranger Sea Buckthorn Sea
 Witch Twin Spot Quaker Wych Elm HiJet The Hodges Hop May Day North View Micra
 Powdered Quaker Fig Broad Leas Common Nettle Transporter At Last Turkey Oak Brown
 Rustic Sea Mist Danish Scurvy Grass Early Grey Sport Silver Birch Silver Dawn Channel View
 Civic Pink Sorrel Spindrift Oak Beauty Sweet Spurge Beach Ness Picasso Trawlers Aspen
 Merry Thoughts Grand Cherokee Creeping Willow Common Quaker Avalon Common
 Dog Violet Lucida Dogs Tail Comtec Cranes Bill Auris Hebrew Character Lexus Herb Robert
 Sea Rest Rosebay Willowherb Carens Silver Wood Tudors Evening Primrose Clouded Drab
 Peace Haven Corolla Common Mallow Sentosa The Dolphins Vectra Hollyhock Satellite
 Hares Tail Four Ways Wallflower Megane Green Batt Shepherds Purse Sandy Lane Espace
 Eleagnes Spring Usher Honesty Oakleigh Rosy Wave Sunrise Vivaro Rape Pandora Black
 Mustard Mottled Umber Kangoo Lifes a Beach Sea Kale Sea Dream Little Dune Shogun
 Thrift Wave Crest Subangled Wave Knotgrass Agila Haven Rhubarb Rainbows End Prado
 Quaking Grass Broad leaved Dock Cypress Carpet Sandford Sandpiper Safira Chickweed
 Sun Tryst Rose Champion Oak Processionary Passat Willow Wisp Sea Spray Nottingham
 Catchfly Mistral Mondeo Ragged Robin Gypsy Moth Lucky Stones Scarlet Pimpernel Desire
 Larkfield Meadow Grass Heather White Lodge Galaxy Scarce Black Arches Ladys
 Bedstraw Rookery Nook Vipers Bugloss Connoisseur Way O The Wind Greater Periwinkle
 Sandy Acre Great Brocade Blue Cedar Corolla Forgetmenot Wits End Bindweed Octavia
 Carisma Tree Lichen Twin Spot Dodder Wild Oat Dun Robbin Vitara Henbane Ravenswood
 Nightshade Cooper Shaded Fan Foot Shingle Ridge Potato Fishers Salt Air Lancer Tomato
 Green Leas Sweet Tobacco Langmaids Yellow Underwing Beetle Great Stone Privet
 Conifers Seed Purple Marbled Foxglove Mariners Rest Dusky Peacock Common Field
 Speedwell C-Max On the Beach Snapdragon Tyrol Fusion Toadflax Hairgrass Golden Twin
 Spot Sea Echo Sea Way Country Greater Plantain The Tour Great Mullein Insignia Iris Foam
 Crocus Dingy Shears Portside Grape Hyacinth The Whip Pacific Fescue Quarter Deck Small
 Blood Vein Rye Grass North View Danish Scurvy Grass Beachness Dogs Tail Tudors Hares Tail
 Little Dune Willow Wisp Meadow Grass Sandy Acre Wild Oat Purple Marbled Hair Grass
 Sea Breeze Cats Tail Liberty Couch Grass Mauretania Tamarisk Grass Rivulet Sea Fever
 Snowdrop Puffin Sand Dunes Jersey Tiger Eastern Bordered Straw Kontiki Butterfly Bush
 Home by the Sea Omega Deadnettle Heavenly Grace Wood Sage Juniper Pug Sharan
 Little Bounds Holly Green Shutters Commander Burdock Sea Whispers Scarce Silver Y Thistle
 Passion At Last Knapweed Beachholme Touareg Hawkbit Beautiful Gothic Beachy Leas
 Dandelion Tigra Channel View Curry Plant Dunrunnin Colt The Passenger Goldenrod
 Fairview Malibu Envy Sea Aster Pebblehurst Daisy Pale Shoulder Verve Marina Feverfew
 Oasis Saxo Tansy Open Shore Clancy's Rustic Yarrow Seicento Point Tackle Oxeye Daisy
 Providence Megan

Sound recordings made of the reading of the names become the aural tracks accompanying the visual tracks - an act of speech, which itself has a particular place as part of social exchange in a local environment. Yet no mere sum of words or intervals of movement can replicate the experience of living in the world, or 'lebenswelt'. Whilst I was filming from the moving vehicle, I was also aware of the rising and falling hum of voices in the open carriage around me, comments and phrases which were unstrung from a sustained conversation. Words refer to things but the voice speaking them also has its timbre, texture, rhythm, and vitality - what Roland Barthes refers to as the grain of the voice. The sound track of **In Passing** constitutes a series of vocal refrains, a rhythmic recitation in parallel with the image tracks. The landscape is a visual /aural text in which we drift between hearing and listening, looking and seeing, recognition and reverie but are always called back to this rhythmic pulse.

So what substantiates the meaning of place for each of us? There are the concrete material conditions of vernacular place here: tidal inundation and withdrawal; erosion and accumulation, organic growth and decay, synthetic fabrication and decomposition. There is a stratification of relations, geological, climatic, industrial, ecological and cultural- which once we understand them as a complex, enriches our understanding of lived landscapes, however local, mundane, insignificant and despoiled they may appear to the casual eye. It is often in neglected overlooked pockets of land that small but significant change can be observed and we can understand evolutionary change as both local and spontaneous. However the meaning of place is also substantiated, given fullness, by the action of our subjective memory constantly recreating the pulse of present experience.

The core of my interest in this work then, is how to experience 'in passing' not as a movement through but as a change 'in place'. The image of place while changing, remains, held within the visual frame, unfolding within a continuous present. In starting with the linear, the progressive and quantifiable, this mapping in practice suggests an undoing of uni-directional time and a consideration of how rhythms of change can engender infinite possibilities both for an experience of time and for the meaning of place, however ephemeral that place might be.

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