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# On Location: Landscape Cinema and Digital Memory

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## Abstract

*This paper critically reflects on the registers and affects of memory in relation to place, cinematic space, and the materiality of digital film-making technologies, using our recent moving image artwork, On Location (2017), as a case study: this practice-as-research film captures the location over a twelve month period in an unnamed sunken lane at a remote area of rural mid-Devon.*

*On Location is a form of landscape cinema that observes a year's seasonal cycle, capturing meteorological phenomena and the natural world using a range of experimental filming techniques, and accompanied by field recordings made at the site that capture the sonic architecture of the space. We made regular field trips to the location with cameras and sound equipment – these visits afforded us the opportunity to experience the place during a varied range of weather conditions through winter, spring, summer, and autumn, to respond intuitively using our camera and sound equipment, and then to review and reflect on the recordings we had made. Our memories became an integral part of this film-making methodology and were an important influence on the form of the completed film, which premiered in the cinema at Plymouth Arts Centre UK in January 2017.*

*We explore the dynamic interrelationship between memory, the process of capturing moving image sequences and the affective interplay between the recordings and our memories through repeated presence and absence at a location that seems both unchanging and in constant flux; and we reflect on the audience's embodied experience of moving image and sound.*

**Keywords:** film, location, materiality, memory, place

## Introduction

*On Location*<sup>1</sup> is a twelve-and-a-half-minute single channel colour HD film with sound,

and was created through a series of field trips undertaken by the authors, artist filmmaker Kayla Parker and the cinematographer and sound recordist Stuart Moore, to a hollow lane in a remote area of rural mid-Devon in England over a twelve-month period between 2016 and 2017. The resulting film develops a form of landscape cinema that observes a year's seasonal cycle, capturing meteorological phenomena, the shifting light and shade, and the ebb and flow of natural growth using a range of experimental filming techniques. The imagery is accompanied by field recordings made at the site that capture the sonic architecture of the space.

This practice-based research responds to the recent 'turn to materiality' in arts and humanities,<sup>2</sup> a paradigm shift towards a 'material culture' that focuses on the relationships and interactions between the human and the non-human: flora and fauna, the natural and built environment, meteorological and elemental forces, and technological artefacts. This 'material turn' ruptures binary oppositions, such as privileging 'culture' over 'nature'; it foregrounds the body and confers agency to the non-human, and considers matter to be active rather than passive and inert, a participant rather than an object to be observed and examined.

The research aimed to explore our experience of being at a specific site in the English countryside, working with digital technologies and recording devices in order to create a moving image artwork. We wanted to embody the place in the form of a landscape film through our engagement with the location and the film-making process and specificities of moving image and sound. Through allowing the film to emerge from its environment, with the landscape as an active participant, we aimed to develop methodological strategies and foster the emergence of 'an eco-sensitive cinema', aligned with the 'new materialisms'.

Both the authors are experimental film-makers and share an interest in the critical insights their practice can bring to contemporary concerns about the environment and landscape. We have collaborated on several films, and often use analogue materials on location at a site, of which the 16mm film *Reach* (2014) is an example. *On Location* further develops our research practice as a new materialist investigation, using digital film-making technology with its paradoxical perceived immateriality.

The landscape film *On Location* observes the progression of a year's seasons at a sunken lane in a remote area of rural mid-Devon visited by the British artist Annabel Nicolson 40 years earlier. The unnamed hollow lane which forms the 'location' for the film leads to the farmhouse featured in Nicolson's artist's book *Escaping Notice*, published in 1977.

*On Location* is the first practice output from a wider research project led by Kayla Parker, entitled *Escaping Notice: The Annabel Nicolson Project*, which responds to the growing interest in (re)discovering marginalized feminine histories, particularly those which engage with our increasing ecological and environmental concerns. Towards the middle of the 1970s, Nicolson moved away from working with film as a material and the materiality of film-making to more ephemeral elements such as light and darkness, fire and smoke, and connecting with place in the natural world. Her artist's book *Escaping Notice* documents the shift in her focus towards the natural environment, as she turned her attention to the countryside and engaged with the land of rural Britain.

An initial stimulus for the research project was two outdoor performances enacted 40 years ago by Nicolson, and documented in her artist's book. *Sweeping the Sea* (1975) is represented by a small photograph in which the figure of Nicolson stands on a pebble beach grasping a long-handled broom, with which she carefully brushes the low waves lapping the shore at her feet. *Combing the Fields* (1976), described by her as a private performance of caring for the land, is illustrated by a photograph of the artist 'combing' knee-high plants in a field one frosty winter morning with a huge hand-made comb. In her description of the

performance *Sweeping the Sea*, Nicolson refers to herself in the third person, as "the woman" who had "this trick of making herself part of / the background of being just slightly out of focus" (Nicolson, 1977: npn). The praxis of withdrawal or retreat suggested by Nicolson is resonant with feminist performance - fleeting and immaterial, enacted by the body - as a means of protest.

For Parker, Nicolson's enigmatic and ephemeral performed artworks seem to collapse the divide between nature and culture, object and subject, human and non-human. They speak to her across a gulf of four decades and propose an understanding of the environment as a symbiotic conversation effected through creative practice, emerging from a somatic substrate of reason, feeling, and action to become a unifying and transformational experience between artist, audience, and materials.

We suggest that Nicolson's strategy may be seen as a potentially radical position of new materialism offering film-makers a potent schema for ethical action in the 21st century Anthropocene, the current geological era in which human beings have a lasting negative effect upon the Earth.

In *On Location*, Parker proposed to respond as an artist to the landscape through which Nicolson had walked during her time spent living in Devon in the mid-1970s, as she moved to and fro between the farm and the local village. Nicolson's project was about 'escaping notice'. Walking along the hollow way, she moved unseen - she was literally immersed in the landscape as a result of being in this deeply sunken lane. The track is typical of ancient routeways across the English countryside, which have been used by successive generations of people to move themselves and their animals from one place to another. Countless footsteps over the centuries have hollowed out the surface of the track so that one walks below the level of the fields on either side. The sunken lane in *On Location* ran down a hill and formed the streambed for several springs, creating a rocky slope and a extremely muddy lower section. As well as a path and a right of way between farmed land, the hollow way serves as a boundary between fields. It is also an

inscribed memory, a record of people and animals moving through the landscape, and the politics of access and ownership. The location in the landscape is the history of this place made visible, its appearance is directly related to its use as a thoroughfare.

Whilst there are no specific material traces of Nicolson's movements through the part of the countryside beyond the documentation in her artist's book *Escaping Notice*, in walking the hollow way 40 years later we are part of the continuum of wear that collectively creates the hollow way we experience today. Just as we left footprints and dislodged a few stones, our digital film *On Location* creates a parallel trace by moving electrons around unseen paths on flash memory cards and hard disks.

## Methodology

Our guiding principle throughout was Nicolson's reflexive commentary in her artist's book:

Her lack of direction was plain and she seemed to have plenty of time. After a while one realised that she was less distinct, though not actually further away. Perhaps it was deliberate this trick of making herself part of the background of being just slightly out of focus. (Nicolson, 1977, npn)

In this, there is a sense of Nicolson choosing to fade away, to escape notice – literally – by removing herself from sight into a third, liminal space between her body and the environment, where the delineation between place and the dominant position of 'man' over nature and the environment is elided. This empathetic correspondence between natural and cultural phenomena is characteristic of Nicolson's 'take' on the world during this period of her life during the 1970s. Being 'in place' in the hollow way with our visual and audio recording 'instruments', Parker felt tethered, as if by means of an umbilical connection between 'bodies' – her own corporeal body and that of the Earth.

The philosopher Shaun Gallagher foregrounds the key role of the body in perception, and has interpreted Merleau-Ponty's thinking on our perceptual engagement with the world as one in which the 'pre-conscious' human body incorporates its environment within its

reflective sensorium: "Phenomenologically, or experientially, the environment is an indefinite extension of the lived body" (Gallagher, 1986/2004, 287). Gallagher also comments that Merleau-Ponty in his later writing considered the living body and the environment to be an integrated continuum of reciprocal sensing and being sensed: "the environment is that living connection comparable, or rather identical, with the existing parts of my body itself" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, 205).

The hollow way revealed its phenomena through our bodily experience of the place over a year, the film allows our senses to connect with what is unseen beneath the visible landscape and captures experiences and meanings that are usually unnoticed in everyday life.

## Context

*On Location* explores the potential for digital landscape cinema and draws on the landscape films of Nicolson's contemporary, the British artist Chris Welsby. Welsby, now based in Vancouver, has consistently explored the landscape through moving image artworks that portray "the fluctuating patterns of movement and light resulting from the Earth's rotation and the pull of the Moon - and the equivalents in daily life caused by human traffic" (TATE, 2000). In his early films such as *Park Film* (1972) and *Seven Days* (1974), and the recent weather-driven film installation, *Trees in Winter* (2006), he has recorded over set periods of time, using systems and rules governing space and time to 'reveal' the rhythms of nature, meteorological fluctuations and patterns of human movement that are normally 'invisible' (Welsby, 2001).

Welsby combines a structuralist approach to film-making with the unpredictable processes of nature, exemplified in works such as *Seven Days* (1974), a timelapse re-presentation of the changing weather and Welsh landscape that compresses a week into twenty minutes. The film documents the landscape during daylight hours over a seven-day period, exposing one frame of film for every ten seconds from dawn to dusk, using a form of 'in camera editing'. The artist set his camera to follow the sun across the sky or the camera's shadow on the ground,

depending on the amount of cloud covering the sky, with a sound recording of the location taken every two hours. Welsby states: "Technology is both a subdivision of 'nature' and an extension of 'mind' ...the camera, as a product of technology, can be seen as a potential interface between 'mind' and 'nature'" (Welsby, 1980). Welsby further comments that his work "is an attempt to define an interface between technology and nature" (in Leggett, 2005) and asserts that his practice is

based on the interconnectedness of these systems, where landscape was not secondary to film-making process or film-making process to landscape, but process and structure, as revealed in both, could carry information and communicate ideas. (Welsby, 2005)

An environment, by definition, denotes the surroundings in which we and other organisms live and develop. The hollow way seems to us to represent a romanticised view of a pre-Anthropocene rural landscape, in which people have left their mark, but in a sustainable way, creating a path that has developed over many hundreds of years. As our filming progressed, we saw the hollow way hemmed in by modern agriculture and the pressures of intensive farming. The hedgerows were crudely cut with mechanised flails, smashing the saplings. The adjacent fields were planted with maize for biofuel as far as our eyes could see. Although we returned to the site many times over the year of filming, we only saw two people – both on horseback – and noticed occasional human footprints in the mud. The hollow way seemed to us to typify an archetype of the countryside, changing so slowly that it seemed to barely change at all.

If the hollow way is not used and becomes overgrown with vegetation and eventually becomes impassable, will we experience the sense of devastating loss and unhappiness that Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht has termed 'solastalgia'? 'Psychoterratic' syndromes that result from environmental and ecosystem distress were proposed in 2003 by Albrecht, who linked distress in the land to the experience of distress in the people who lived there (Albrecht, 2007, 2011). Albrecht coined the term 'solastalgia' to describe the psychological distress that results from degradation of one's home

and landscape by climate change or corporate action:

Solastalgia has its origins in the concepts of 'solace' and 'desolation'. Solace has meanings connected to the alleviation of distress or to the provision of comfort or consolation in the face of distressing events. Desolation has meanings connected to abandonment and loneliness. The suffix -algia has connotations of pain or suffering. Hence, solastalgia is a form of 'homesickness' like that experienced with traditionally defined nostalgia, except that the victim has not left their home or home environment (Albrecht, 2012)

Perhaps the hollow way itself will remain stable, but the land all around will change substantially in the coming years as a result of soil loss, tree diseases, and human intervention.

Anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing argues that we are facing a crisis and the precarity of the damaged landscape calls for a response, and that we need to notice the things in the world that previously we have ignored or been blind to. The diversity of the hollow way contrasts with the monoculture biofuel maize crop that runs alongside the track to the north and the grass field for cattle grazing to the south. We consider our film-making methods to be 'eco-sensitive' - a gathering process rather than an expedition to the countryside to hunt perfect shots, where the natural environment serves as fodder for our desires.

The anthropologist Eben Kirksey, best known for his work in multispecies ethnography, believes that solutions to the issues of the Anthropocene lie in nature. He proposes that strategies for working with the problems we face and exploring possible futures may be found through engaging with living non-human ecologies. Kirksey argues for

the importance of grounding hopes in communities of actual living animals, plants, and microbes. Grounding hopes in living figures illuminates the possibilities that are emerging in an era of extinction and widespread ecological change. (Kirksey, 2014, 296)

Landscape is the result of human actions that transform space into place,

constructed by both our physical effort and our imagination: "Landscape results from human intervention to shape and transform natural phenomena, of which we are simultaneously a part" (Wells, 2011, 11) and focuses on the visual and visible elements of these constructed places. Liz Wells defines landscape as, "vistas encompassing both nature and the changes that humans have effected on the natural world", whilst reminding us that humans are an integral component within the ecosystem (Wells, 2011, 2). She states:

our relation to the environment in which we find ourselves, and of which we form a part, is multiply constituted: the real, perceptions of the real, the imaginary, the symbolic, memory and experience, form a complex tapestry at the heart of our response to our environment. (Wells, 2011, 2)

Our senses allow us to interpret and evaluate our embodied engagement with the world. In addition to the five 'exteroceptive' senses, which provide information about the world external to an individual - the 'distant' senses of sight and hearing, plus taste, smell, and touch that 'reach out into the world - there are at least three 'interoceptive' senses providing information about the body's internal world - sense of pain, thirst, and hunger. Additional senses include proprioception - a sense of the internal body's muscles and organs - and senses that mediate between the external world and internal body, such as our sense of balance (equilibrioception), movement (kinesthesia), temperature (thermoception), and our sense of time.

The phenomenology of perception creates an interwoven, reflexive and multi-modal sensory experience in order to make sense of the information provided by our senses. As explained by the noted anthropological researcher, Elisabeth Hsu:

...sensory experiences are produced, enacted and perceived in combination with each other, intertwined with emotion, meaning and memory. (Hsu, 2008, 440)

Aldous Huxley, the British writer and philosopher, proposed in his groundbreaking book *The Art of Seeing*:

sensing is not the same as perceiving. The eyes and nervous system do the sensing, the mind does the perceiving. The faculty of

perceiving is related to the individual's accumulated experiences, in other words, to memory. (Huxley, 1942/1982, 42)

The sensor in the body of a digital camera acts in a similar way to the human retina. Both register light from the environment and pass this visual data off to a mysterious memory bank: a flash memory card or the human brain.

Our film-making workflow aligns to the human process of perception via the distant 'exteroceptive' senses of seeing and hearing. Sensory visual and aural data passing into our bodies is selected, and perceived using our 'working memory', which interacts with our perception and enables us to work with optical and sonic information for short periods of time. We capture visual data with our cameras and record 'samples' of sound, store, organise and select shots and audio recordings.

The enterprise has similarities to mainstream 'nature' film-making in that a crew took itself to the countryside with equipment to record sound and images, which were then brought back to be edited into a finished film. However, there are many differences. The film eschewed the sharp, the colourised, the long-lensed gloss of the genre – the perfectly shot sequences that direct the spectator's attention, which are far removed from the experience of a walk in the country. No hides, no cranes, no drones. There was an openness to the filming that reflected the intention of being present in the landscape, with the footage as witnessing, rather than raiding it for its visual bounty. The wide pinhole shots we used give an impressionistic view of landscape rather a hyper-detailed representation. The reflections of the sky and overhead tree canopy in puddles of water bring the audience close to the experience of being in the place.

## On Location

To create the moving image artwork *On Location*, we adopted a mode of 'environmental embodiment', a type of dynamic corporeal awareness enmeshed within a particular place that is informed by the philosopher Maurice Merleau Ponty's phenomenological understanding of human perception (Merleau Ponty, 1945/2002). When 'in place' at the

location, our bodies' sensoria seemed to engage with the environmental affects of the hollow way and its attendant meteorological aspects, synchronising our movements and 'directing' our cameras.

The phenomenological geographer David Seamon explains the term 'environmental embodiment' as:

the various lived ways, sensorily and mobility-wise, that the body in its pre-reflective perceptual presence encounters and works with the world at hand, especially its environmental and place dimensions. (Seamon, 2013, 148)

In addition to making field sound recordings, we used a range of experimental filming techniques, which evolved during our repeated visits to the site, such as pinhole cinematography and lenses we constructed using the meniscus of water collected from a spring which ran along the hollow way. The affective interplay between the audio and visual recordings and our memories, through repeated presence and absence at a location that seems both unchanging and in constant flux, were an important influence on the finished film.

## Conclusion

Whilst electing to work in a more organic way and follow the guiding voice of Nicolson rather than adhere to Welsby's structural imperative, the chronology of the hollow way through a seasonal progression in *On Location* does create a 'time lapse', as twelve months are presented on screen in twelve minutes. However, our aim in making the film was to use 'environmental embodiment', guided by Nicolson's praxis, to push beyond the conventional boundaries of representing landscape in cinema and to communicate ideas about our relationship to place through creating moving images and audio that captured our experience with the location.

Landscape painting and photography are pictorial representations of land as a working environment or as a space for contemplation, in which the image stands in or is a metaphor for the scene portrayed. The frame presents what Wells refers to as a 'slice' of what is chosen by the artist to be 'seen' of the environment

by the camera – and as audience or viewer we must look through this frame.

The artist Mike Leggett, a contemporary of Annabel Nicolson, observes that the presentation context - the cinema or gallery - provides another frame for the work. As a spectator in these cultural, darkened spaces, "we collude with the artist in the process of making the world 'natural'" (Leggett, 2005).

As Deke Dusinbere wrote in the summer of 1976:

The significance of the landscape film arises from the fact that they assert the illusionism of cinema through the sensuality of landscape imagery, and simultaneously assert the material nature of the representational process which sustains the illusionism. It is the interdependence of those assertions which makes the films remarkable - the 'shape' and 'content' interact as a systematic whole. (Dusinbere, 1976, 2)

*On Location* seeks to expand our perspective 'beyond the frame' by offering an array of multiple viewpoints and shifting perspectives rather than the fixed position required by the conventionally framed image. This is counterpointed by the soundtrack, which draws the audience into the frame, with its modulated and resonant diegetic score. The accompanying audio is recognizable as the 'real sounds' that belong to this place, but the activity that produced them is often off-screen, such as the military jet racing overhead and barely heard sounds of distant passing trains. Observing nature through being in the landscape, foregrounding an embodied response that draws on a range of senses and emotional states experienced rather than relying sight alone and merely looking at surface features and their pictorial representation.

Chris Lukinbeal, a media geographer who specializes in 'on location' film production, reminds us that:

Landscape and film are both social constructions that rely primarily on vision and perception for their very definition. Vision links and distances us from cinema and landscape; it makes it easier for us to be disengaged through the act of viewing. Yet there is an intimate bond in this disengagement, where the viewer must reach out and establish some sense of place whether it is through a

windshield, on a movie screen, or standing in the middle of a scape. (Lukinbeal, 2005, 3)

*On Location* was first exhibited in the cinema at Plymouth Arts Centre as part of its *Gallery in the Cinema* artists' moving image programme during January 2017. The high quality digital projection of the twelve and a half minute film from a 2K DCP<sup>3</sup> on a large screen, with the enveloping soundscape, created an engaging and immersive experience for the audience. The undirected experience - the film has no onscreen text or voice over - in some way replicates the experience of being in the 'natural' rural landscape. People have commented that the film has affected them deeply, evoking memories or, possibly, dreams, of a remembered or imagined past. Although this hollow way is unremarkable, as film-makers who have paid attention to the place, we can share our digital memories through our moving image artwork and enable others to create their own memories.

## Notes

- 1 For additional details about the film, *On Location*, please refer to [http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/films/films/on\\_location.html](http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/films/films/on_location.html)
- 2 This materialist turn has also impacted on the sciences, particularly in the biomedical field, leading to a consideration of vitality in the inanimate and non-human.
- 3 DCP is a 'digital cinema package', the current standard cinema projection format.

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