ISLES OF GRAIN

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Abstract – The focus of this paper is a video work that was exhibited as part of the 2008 London Festival of Architecture, inspired by an island in the Thames estuary called the Isles of Grain. The piece is made up of 4 photographs turned into a video using an editing technique that creates the effect of a slow moving and exploratory work that interacts with a composed sound work. The aim was to ‘reanimate’ the image thus restoring a time/space continuum back into the photograph.

PLACING THE SENSES

Before considering the technical aspects of the work it is useful to lay out some of the conceptual aspects of the video by referring to an essay by Steven Feld. In the essay *Places Sensed, Senses Placed*, Feld considers the way a place or location might be experienced over and above the predominant sense of sight. In other words how do we engage all the senses to construct the character of a landscape and how do we experience the attributes of this character. He says:

... that as place is sensed, senses are placed; and place makes sense, senses make place [3].

What is omitted in this clever and astute observation concerning, what Merleau Ponty [4] might define as an embodied position in relation to experiencing landscape, is the role of reproduction. The representation of how a place is sensed, whether for instance the artist utilises the medium of paint or digital technology, entails the act of distancing the viewer from the scene so the sense of place in an artwork is depleted of what Walter Benjamin defines as ‘aura’ where “*even the most perfect reproduction...is lacking in one element, its presence in time and space*” [1].

The work (*Isles of Grain*) reflects on both the experience of place but also the intervention of this experience through mechanical reproduction.

The origin of the idea for this work goes back to photographing Cold War sites in England. Subsequently this work became a book entitled *The Hush House*. The inferred reference to sound or lack of in the title of the book locates an ongoing enquiry into the way the photograph not only stills the scene but also reproduces the world as mute. The censoring of sound and movement might mean that the photograph is a rather limited medium but it is these restrictions that create an aesthetic and philosophic position from which to ponder the way the senses become separated as a result of reproduction.

The experience of examining a photograph is multifaceted in terms of reflection on what is being scrutinised when freezing time and space as well as an awareness of form in the photographic medium, the arrangement and accumulation of grain in the case of analogue. Grain is the atoms of life in the photograph. (The title of the work makes reference to this fact). The fantasy of reanimating a photograph is one that few of us have not considered when reflecting upon a photograph of a loved one or a place of particular interest. The act of putting the photograph back into the stream of life becomes for me the genesis of this project whilst also appreciating the impossibility of such an act.

An important influence on the Isles of Grain project occurred whilst visiting the decommissioned Cold War military locations that made up *The Hush House* project [5] and discovering that they were extremely peaceful places and how quickly nature was in reclaiming them. The experience of the senses being caught up in remembering the military tensions and fear of atomic warfare seemed to fly in the face of the tranquillity of Greenham Common, a nerve centre of the Cold War. Just over a decade ago, the storage of nuclear weapons here threatened the world with a potential apocalyptic showdown between the west and the east. It is now a nature reserve.

To wander amongst the ruins of these Cold War sites was to fantasise about the sound of these military epicentres, be it the roar of jet engines or the unimaginable noise of nuclear Armageddon. Yet this could be difficult when the prevailing sounds might be the hum of insects or the rustle of trees being disturbed by the breeze. A montage of sound in one's head can contribute to the making of photographs, though perhaps subliminally.

If defining a sense of place means considering the way senses re-arrange that place, then memory also has a place in this debate. As Henri Bergson says in his book *Memory and Matter*:

There is no perception, which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience. [2]

It was the memory of these sonic montages that kept resonating and the gradual realisation that it might be possible to work towards the way sound could be aligned with photographs formed the issues raised in this paper.

SOUND AND VISION

The *Isles of Grain* collaboration was the realisation of this idea by bringing sound to photography. Traditionally in film, the soundtrack is installed to amplify the tone or atmosphere of the film or heighten in the viewers' mind the significance of a particular scene.

The soundtrack in this work has its own narrative drive, using the photograph as a musical score to reflect on the sense of place but also create a sense of the fragility of such places; either as a result of climate factors or because the Estuary is under duress from London's expanding boundaries. The *Isles of Grain* video is in fact part of a larger project entitled *Soundings from the Estuary* that examines the Thames Estuary as a marginalised site threatened not only by urban expansion but also rising sea levels.

Central to the project was to explore the Thames Estuary on foot in order to acquire a sense of place and, to reiterate Steven Feld, 'to experience the way senses make place'. To experience a sense of place, it is useful to close one's eyes and listen to the resonance of place. How does the ambient sound contribute or construct what might be defined as a soundscape? As a city dweller it takes time to acclimatize to the way sound can be both subtle and intermittent in rural environments in contrast to the unrelenting, urban cacophony. If walking is about accumulating an experience of place with the least intrusion on that space in order to know that place better, it is also about the isolation of incidents and observations that heighten the experience of place. This, in turn, might reveal something of the unconscious of a place, to embrace a psychogeographic position, or conversely to engage with my unconscious desire that drew me to the place in the first place.

The photographic work that forms part of the *Soundings from the Estuary* project examines the landscape that makes up the Thames Estuary in terms of its vibrant history from the Roman invasion to the river's role in shipping merchandise to and from the British Empire. In the early part of the twentieth century the Thames became the busiest river in the world and was aptly described by the writer Joseph Conrad as "the highway to the empire". At present the estuary is being subjected to contemporary pressures of urban expansion whilst, in the imminent future, climate change and rising sea levels will fundamentally affect the lay of the land.

MAPPING SOUND – A SONIC VIEWPOINT

Having established some of the key conceptual aspects of the project and examined the *Isles of Grain* work from a photographic position, it is important to consider the way that the sound was created and shaped to integrate with the imagery. When creating the soundscape it was judged pertinent to consider the actual experience of being in the place of the photograph's location. This experience was juxtaposed with having already seen the site as an image (for Dave Lawrence) before visiting the site itself. Consequently, the impression made by the original photograph, alongside the impact and possibilities of recording in the field presented an interesting challenge. The process had begun by viewing a selection of photographs (both artists jointly) and choosing a set of four locations/images. The choices of the final images drew upon a range of visual and sonic challenges as we developed an understanding as to what each expected

from the other in terms of contribution to the collaboration. As a composer, sounds and sound textures immediately came to mind when looking at the imagery and instinctively a mapping of potential sounds was conjured up in the mind's eye.

As the sound composer, visiting the locations used in the video work also meant responding to the specific historical, geographical, and social aspects of each site. There is no substitute for proximity and tangible immersion. In addition, it gave the opportunity to gather real sounds from the location – sounds that could later be used in composition to provide direct associations to the objects, scene, and nature of the photograph.

These sound references are not necessarily literal – for instance the sounds heard during a visit might not be the sounds heard at the time of the photographic exposure. Discussions with the photographer helped to bridge these gaps to ascertain the motivations for taking a particular image, not least the time of year and prevailing weather conditions. But essentially, as a composer, the biggest drive is personal experience – what the location itself rather than the photograph communicates but also to build up a sonic picture of the site.

The sounds used in the composition are a combination of real sounds sampled on location, sounds generated or performed in the studio and sounds recorded from completely different locations. The additions, and the overall compositional textures and structures/dynamics, are necessary in order to achieve the right emotional ambience with the still image, synthesizing sound with the photograph in a way that challenges conventional uses of sound and image. Through this process seemingly 'innocent' and ineffectual shapes and topography suddenly take on new and unpredictable meanings through the eyes and ears of the observer. The use of computer technology to reintegrate the aural with the visual creates a more reflective experience to the viewer.

In technical terms, the sound capture involved the use of a minidisc recorder and binaural headphones. Editing involved a combination of Goldwave, Peak, and Adobe Audition audio software. The same packages were used for what was quite minor post-production processing (with a touch of reverb here and there, and combinations of various filtering for one track in particular). Much time was spent selecting clips, layering and sequencing those clips, and combining them with prepared and performed sounds (analogue and digital). The layering and sequencing was achieved using Making Waves Audio software. Some of the originally analogue sounds were subjected to fairly extensive digital manipulation/processing in places – e.g. simple recorded spoken voice speeded up plus various other effects to create the imagined sounds of sea sirens in the last work entitled *Siren*.

TIME AND THE IMAGE

The manipulation of time is perhaps one of the most important aspects of the *Isles of Grain* work. In effect, this is what the digital rostrum camera technique creates (or gives back) to the still photograph. By subjecting the photographic image to this treatment, it becomes possible to create a temporal narrative structure not unlike that of the moving image with one exception the image remains fixed. By scanning over the photograph using 'the rostrum effect' the scene is explored by zooming in and panning across and

in effect imitating the way the human eye might scrutinize the photograph. The difference between the machine scanning the image and the eye, is that the rostrum effect edits out the remainder of the image and isolate details of the image, in a way that the eye cannot readily perform. Consequently, the sound can respond and emphasize specific aspects in the picture.

EDITING THE *ISLES OF GRAIN*

The editing of the video, as previously mentioned, was done on Final Cut Pro and was researched and overseen by Robert Muller. Having scanned the photograph, the main facility of the software used was the motion tab, which has previously been referred to as the 'rostrum effect' in this paper. Using key frames to plot the direction and speed of the rostrum effect proved to be time consuming and a slow and complex operation. The key issue was to get the movement across the image to simulate the movement of the eye. It often became apparent that if the speed or change of direction was too fast or too slow, it became difficult to look at, rather like a cameraman who moves the camera without understanding the etiquette of film movement.

The edit also involved synching precisely the sound with the image so that as the sound responded to textures, shapes or atmospheres precisely. With this in mind the visual edit had to be completed before the sound could be synched with the image. Throughout the editing of the video it was necessary to keep in view the original photograph and what kind of transformation we were attempting to achieve by 'animating' the image as well as creating a sonic coherence. This meant many experiments and discussions, as well as viewing the work with Rob Muller but on the whole consensus was arrived at amicably.

CASE STUDY : *RADAR*

The piece entitled *Radar* taken from the *Isles of Grain* video is a more extended work comprising two photographs montaged together. Combining two photographic images enabled a longer duration and visual terrain over which to scan.

It was interesting to see the way the Final Cut programme completely reconfigured the images not only in to the way specific elements in the photograph were drawn out by isolating them from the bigger picture but also the way, for instance, that when the rostrum camera moves over the water, the effect was both eerie and captivating and the sound created an atmosphere that drew upon the grey overcast conditions that is common in all the photographic work. The sounds for this piece are largely composed from digitally, synthesized sound recorded in and around the radar tower. The sonic work is supplemented with ambient sound of lapping water from the Thames in addition to recording the approach to the tower to collect a more wild blustery edge to the composition. Layering and fusing of sounds is a key element to the sound work, and is mainly achieved using various software programmes but also the addition of sounds constructed in the studio.

The opening image of the piece evokes a typical river edge scene indicating a pastoral ambience. As the viewer is drawn into this watery and slightly melancholic scene, a detail of the partly corroded wartime structure is revealed and the sound begins

to enter a darker and more visceral phase. This was achieved by the physical bowing and contorting of metallic strings supplemented by digital effects.

The radar tower dates back to the Second World War so it was necessary to travel back in time sonically by incorporating digitally generated sound (using a Roland JP8080) – to reflect electronic and radio wave activity surrounding this fragile structure which seems about to sink into the mud of the estuary. The use of an electronic bow sound applied to various pitched strings is a reference to radio communication.

The middle section of the work dissolves into a silent phase, as the image of the grey sky dissipates and then slowly returns as a misty and diffuse landscape, depicting a still and watery world where the horizon is indistinguishable from the river's edge. Water, mud and light merge into a single form.

As the soundtrack returns, it is as though the river has absorbed and retained the sounds received and emitted from the radar tower all those years ago, perhaps having lain dormant in the mud and sporadically emitting an echo of this past, like marsh gas. To add to this murky ambience, the sound of a remote lighthouse station can be heard which in turn morphs back into the soundscape, which in turn responds to the calling sounds of the local bird life along the edge of the estuary.

CONCLUSION

The final sound/video installation consisted of 4 pieces of work lasting half an hour in total and was projected in a blacked out area of the gallery. This work formed part of the *Soundings from the Estuary* exhibition at the Novas Gallery in Southwark as part of The London Festival of Architecture 2008.

The work took over a year to develop and most of the difficulties lay in developing a convincing tracking of the image in response to the sound that included finding a suitable tempo in response to the ambience of the work. Rob Muller carried out extensive research and tests into the limitations and quirks of the motion tabs as well as where to place the key frames to change the direction and speed of the rostrum effect, a time consuming task.

References

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