This is one of those essay ideas that springs to mind and meets an immediate voice of caution. No one else does it, so neither should you. No one writes essays about the expeditionary practices of navigating your way ‘backstage’ in a search for a cafe or pub’s toilets. But I’m afraid the temptation to venture into this barren zone was too great to bear. So, here it is. A reflective journey on half-remembered searches for the sanctuary spaces buried deep in someone else’s private territory. It is also about why these islands of public convenience exist and why it feels odd to venture in search of them. Rest assured that, in what follows I don’t dwell on the toilet. The piece is largely about the liminal space encountered in the search. The journey is the interesting bit, not the arrival.

‘I may be some time’

For me the best part of a trip out to a pub, cafe or restaurant is the opportunity to sneak off to the toilet. No, this is not a confession of cottaging or drug dependency, rather a celebration of the opportunity to pass beyond the public face of a commercial establishment that searching the bowels of a building for its loos presents.

Often the journey starts with a 360 degree survey of the scene, trying not to be too obvious or to intrude into the private jollity of other parties in the room. Then, hopefully, a sign or a pattern will emerge in the way that occasionally people walk off stage into areas that are not the entrance/exit. If lucky there will be someone else in your party who has already made the trek. Ask them in a whisper if they will point you onward. But before asking them, or the staff here, first perhaps a conscious pause for thought about which of the many words you carry around for ‘the bog’ is suitable for this establishment.

Then, with a route set, you are off and walking increasingly purposefully across the room, gliding between others’ tables, trying to make it all seem perfectly natural (which it is). But – still – on the way there and on the way back you can’t help but feel that everyone is watching. Everyone knows what you are up to.

After an eternity of room-gaze crossing you are there, at a turn, a doorway, some other change of scene that announces that you are at the threshold, at the brink of ‘backstage’. The transition is signalled by a narrowing of passage, a sudden chaotic density of space-use: watch out for the buckets, the stores, the equipment occupying this narrow indoor lane. And in contrast to the room you were just in – the commercial space – the here you are now in is empty of people. Sounds echo out from the kitchen, a clatter of pots, the hum of an extractor fan, tinny fragments of voices or music from a rusty radio drift towards you – but no-one ever comes out into the passage. And for that you are glad, because you don’t feel entirely sure that you have the right to be here. This anxiety spurs another rapid visual survey, a reflex anticipated by the more considerate establishments, who will have posted some ‘onward’ instructional signage. Although often this may have more of a feel of telling you which turns not to take: the ‘private – staff only’ commands on every door you are not meant to stray through.
The best loo-hunting journeys require a tour of long winding corridors, with bends and puzzling junctions, then stairs – an up or a down – some more winding and eventually (at the moment you are about to doubt either your own navigation or the sincerity of the signage that you have been putting your faith in) the destination is upon you.

Soon the realisation hits you, that you have strayed deep into the backstage area. Visits to Berlin from the West must have felt this way (sort of). Here you are, in a public enclave deep in foreign private territory. Perhaps you are no longer even in the same building. Did those stairs and winding passages take you out of the pub? Have you, Alice-like, been lured into some parallel universe, one like an earnest early 1970s sci-fi film where all the humans have disappeared and you will spend you remaining days solely in the company of the rusty radio, catering sized tins of baked beans and dull polished metal surfaces?

Within the loo cubicle there is some womb-like comfort born of universal functionality (all loo china-wear looks the same even if it is marked diversity in states of cleanliness). But there will also be varieties and ages of hand dryer, paper towel dispenser and ventilation ducts. How many decades have these things been this way? Time moves more slowly out the back. Surfaces are more approximate. This a world of ‘make do’, in contrast to the annual upgrade and daily wipe clean of the commercial space that you have now strayed from.

Looking at these devices you may try to date their designs. You may linger over the manufacturer plate riveted onto the dryer as it blows water from your hands. ‘World Dryer Corp’, and their HQ in a mid-west industrial US city that you've never heard of, where they seem to breed dryers at a world dominating rate. A whole city devoted to producing a clone dryer army. Maybe.

Then perhaps the window catches your eye, slightly ajar. Is that because of the thick layers of paint on the metal frame now prevent it from closing, or is this an attempt at ventilation? If sufficiently open, there may be a chance to peek though it and glimpse a yard area beyond. A private little, tumble down world that is not designed to be viewed by patrons, and yet if glimpsed tells you so much about the manner of this place.

For me the best images glimpsed from these window slits are of delivered piles of stores; bulk and boxed legion of ingredients. A catering supply delivery, a surfeit of stuff, more than a life-time’s horde of ketchup sachets. That abundance, stripped of any presentational flair, is naked commerce. What you are glimpsing is the reception point where everything is tipped into this building, this business, and will eventually appear heated, portioned and presented in the eating zone. Things are instigated here and from this point forward value is ‘added’.

But hey, you can’t stay here all day. So thoughts turn to the return, and its uncertainty. Why do these places often have less directional signage on the return journey? Is one stumbling trek really sufficient to have done away with the need for return-ward pointers? In the worst cases there will be doors, identical in colour. One will be the way back into the living, commercial realm, the others will lead who knows where (the kitchen probably). In moments like that you may wish for an Ariadne’s thread. Or maybe you could have sprinkled bread crumbs. But either would be very hard to explain if you did encounter some backstage staff.

The origins of these reluctant spaces

The experience of delving into an alien territory – of going backstage – doesn’t arise with purpose built venues. There are no winding corridors, no intriguing staircases, no over-painted window frames. In short, there is no journey. The toilet zones of multiplex cinemas (for example) are close to hand, designed into the building from the start. They are not an afterthought that requires an expedition.

No, it is older buildings and their provision of their sanitary conveniences in areas other than the core commercial zone that have these enticing effects of taking you ‘backstage’. In these places these toilets were once private, this area was never designed or intended for public gaze. And yet a requirement came along and had to be accommodated. Backstage had to be opened up because loos had to be provided for the patrons. Access was therefore reluctantly inserted into the static layout of the building, and the public permitted to pass into the backstage solely for the purpose of reaching them.

And the origin of those requirements? Well, there is a widely held view that cafes and bars must provide WCs for their patrons. Digging in, try to find the root of this requirement, I find earliest parliamentary debate about public toilet provision, I find legislation and I find British Standards. The best picture I can glean is that the (splendidly titled) Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 empowers local councils to take action against owners of establishments at which food and drink is served if they fail to provide sanitary conveniences. But the 1976 Act does not compel this, local authorities do not have to crusade in favour of such provision, and therefore (according to the British Toilet Association [yes there really is one]) local enforcement practice varies wildly between different local authority areas. Some care strongly about enforcing this, others don’t. Public toilets in such places therefore exist either in vague rumour based anticipation of possible council requirements or as a result of actual intervention.

Whatever the specifics of the origins of this optional legislative control, it is (for me at least) instructive to think that the oddness felt when venturing backstage in search of the toilet is actually a liminal experience for all concerned. For the environmental health officer ‘it depends’ on local practices and policies, for the owner he’s left unsure, for the patron he feels uneasy as he steps backstage.

A trip into backstage areas in search of the loo is thus an opportunity to savour the materialities of these public/private, voluntary/mandatory, welcoming/rejectant, old/new ambiguities in regulators’, owners’ and users’ engagements with place.
‘Painting the sky brilliant white with Titania’s ubiquitous dust’ – cautious thoughts on atmospheric modification

'They came in tiny parachutes
dissolving through the atmosphere
From planes not seen or heard’
Slab (1987) ‘Undriven Snow’

This blog essay is about the atmosphere, specifically the alien-ness of matter in the atmosphere. It is about attitudes towards the vastness of an uninhabitable portion of our world and specifically the material strangeness invoked by news of a gravity defying plan to inject earth into the sky.

Sky – the final frontier

Peter Sloterdijk (2009) has characterised the twentieth century as the era of ‘explication’ of the atmosphere. In his book he points out how during the last century the sky came to be knowable, occupable and weaponisable in ways previously beyond comprehension. Before the ‘modern’ era, the sky was unattainable, majestic and unbounded. The sky was heavenly, or at least a transition to a ‘higher’ realm beyond. Up was blessed, down was cursed. Sky was rampant ‘other’ – nature bringing events to man (life giving rain and sun, and death bringing storm and drought) at times and places of its choosing.
Titania’s white power

I’ve been preparing a lecture this week in which I’m trying to show the breadth of environmental law in a very short teaching slot. I’ve chosen titanium dioxide as a case study, and I’m really glad that I’ve taken my investigation in that direction. Because TiO₂ offers even more holistic weirdness than I’d thought it would.

Titanium dioxide (otherwise known as Titania), is a mineral pigment made from titanium ore. The ore is extracted from the ground in vast open mines, it is then shipped around the world to large energy (and acid) guzzling production sites. The resulting pigment gives plastics and rubber opacity and whiteness and is used in a diverse range of everyday products such as art paints, printing inks, paper, ceramics, textiles, glass, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics and food (where its presence is as food additive ‘E171’). Our modern world would look very different without this white power additive. In the US per capita titanium dioxide ‘consumption’ is 3.4kg per year (est. 1991).

Titanium is the ninth most common element in the earth’s crust, and over 90% of extracted ore is processed into millions of tonnes of titanium dioxide pigment. It was adopted in the twentieth century as a replacement for the toxic pigment, white lead. First extracted from ore in 1908, commercial pigment production commenced in 1918. In the 1990s it was discovered that titanium dioxide when irradiated by sunlight has photocatalytic and hydrophilic effects which have now been commercialised into coatings that rendering glass ‘self-cleaning’, and enable coated paving slabs in Japan to ‘eat’ atmospheric pollution (Emsley 2012).

Painting the sky

It is a proposal to inject millions of tons of titanium dioxide into the upper atmosphere as a way of tackling climate change that has caught my attention. Ker Than (2012) describes a plan proposed by Davidson Technology, to disperse the white power using high-altitude balloons so as to form a sunscreen layer a millimetre thick which would absorb and reflect sunlight, offsetting some of the climate changing global warming effects attributable to greenhouse gases emitted into the atmosphere from other human activities. Titanium dioxide has the highest refractive index amongst known materials – it is the whitest of whites (although some TiO₂ nano-particles are actually transparent: TDMA 2012).

Than’s depiction of the delivery method, of hoses flying up skyward, paints a surreal picture – very Dali-esque (or Heath-Robinson, take your pick):

“For Davidson’s project, a slurry containing titanium dioxide would be pumped skyward via flexible pipes, which would be hoisted aboard unmanned balloons flying about 12 miles (20 kilometers) high. A “hypersonic nozzle” would then spray the slurry as fine particles into Earth’s upper atmosphere.”

Than also notes that this would be a long term project – the injection having to continue for centuries until atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases reduce (which would require changes to on-the-ground manufacturing and carbon dependency).

According to Than Davidson estimates his own plan’s costs as around $900 million per year, plus up to $3 billion per year for the titanium dioxide. Presently (2010 figures) world production of this mineral powder is just under 4 million tons (1.48 million from US production sources, 2.19 million from China), with five multinational companies having a 64% market share (Mowat 2012). Taking the current price per ton as around $3,000 (Hemmerling 2011) this suggests the plan would require an extra 1 million ton of titanium dioxide to be produced each year, with an attendant 20% increase in ore mining, processing and distribution of this white dust to the remote balloon launch sites from which it would be shuttled and pumped up into the sky.

Matter out of place

As an environmental lawyer what strikes me about this potential interplay between mineral earth and sky is the fine line between pollution and ‘solution’. As Mary Douglas (1966: 50) said, dirt is ‘matter out of place’. It’s all about context. Intentionally injecting titanium dioxide into the atmosphere is portrayed in Davidson’s plan as environmental augmentation of the air, yet more often the titanium dioxide industry has been framed as a polluter of land and water. Depending on the precise production techniques used titanium dioxide production waste includes dilute sulphuric acid, solid residue (chloride or sulphate salts), ore and pigment dust and gaseous emissions (Lane 1991).

The titanium dioxide industry was one of the first manufacturing industries to be singled out for special legislative attention by the European Commission. In 1972 Corsica brought legal proceedings against an Italian titanium dioxide plant following suflfurrence of ‘red mud’ discharges afflicting the Mediterranean coast (production of each ton of the white powder produces a greater volume of waste that has to be disposed of, traditionally via pumping it into the sea)(Hague 1992). The Commission was concerned that inter-state disputes about this aquatic pollution could undermine the harmony of European trade in this increasingly important industrial commodity and thus a Directive was issued in 1978 to harmonise how each member state should regulate these plants and their emissions. Subsequent Directives focused upon environmental monitoring of the effects of permitted disposal routes for this waste, including dumping on

> Blogroll

1864 Sheffield Flood Claims Archive
2dayslater
Abandoned Communities
Abandoned Tube Stations
AditNow
Affective Landscapes
Airfield Research Group
Amy Cutler
ARCH (Alliance against heritage crime)
Archaeology & Material Culture
Atlantikwall
Berliner Unterwelten
Biospheric Harm Aesthetics
BLDGblog
Britain from above
British Toilet Association
Bunker blog
Bunkerbehoud
Bunkerpictures
Bunkersite
Circular Site
Closed Pubs
Concrete Mushrooms
Conserving the 20th Century
land or injecting it into the soil.

These measures were early instances of international environmental law – born of a realisation that drifting plumes of red mud have no notion of national borders. As with the sea, so with the sky. Pollution emissions or remedial nano particle infusions into the sky would also need international consensus before emission, for clouds will drift where they will.

Aerography and appreciating the alien-ness of the sky

In the twentieth century we came to view ‘airspace’ as national territory, rather than private property. Technically, under English common law principles (as recorded by William Blackstone in 1769), a landowner owns the column of air above his land, right up to the ‘top’ of the sky. Whilst legislation mitigates this principle in order to allow aviation to cross his airspace, no provision has yet been made to allow the installation of an upper atmosphere sun shield above plots of land. Outer space (the space beyond atmosphere) is via international treaty terra nullis, owned by no-one. But in theory at least airspace within the atmosphere is private property of the surface owner.

Ownership of the sky is pretty irrelevant unless you can defeat gravity. The sky is not naturally inhabitable or meaningfully possessable. Matter is not normally installable in the sky. Gravity is a timeless force that normally keeps our thoughts, actions and concerns at or near ground level. But the titanium dioxide plan, is another instance of the gravity defying explication of the sky that Sloterdijk has conceptualised, and if ever implemented would have material consequences upon the ground (more titanium ore mining, more processing, more soil and water pollution, more energy consumption) and also novel legal ramifications in terms of sky-ownership.

Perhaps the danger here is that – via this march of explication – we are trying to conceptually and physically approach the sky as we do land. Introducing a collection of essays acknowledging geography’s fixation with the geo (i.e. land and matter), Jackson & Fannin (2011) speculate on what a genuinely understanding ‘aerography’ would need to look like, and how it would to differ from geography in order to break free of what Henri Bergson called ‘the logic of solids’.

We would laugh if anyone were to suggest that the sky was a solid, but if we are at the brink of demarking it as territory into which matter can be permanently inserted then we are at risk of transposing that solids logic into an alien world to which it may never be suited, regardless of the reach of our gravity defying technologies.

The permanent colonisation of sky-space by matter could also, of course, have unforeseeable chemical and/or climactic effects. In time would have to reap what we sow: the atmosphere might resist the explicatory logic of the human plan and reassert its sovereignty of the sky. Perhaps here we can leave the last word to another Titania, the queen of the fairies in William Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream (Act II, Scene i):

“...the winds, piping to us in vain,
As in revenge, have suck’d up from the sea
Contagious fogs; which falling in the land
Have every pelting river made so proud
That they have overborne their continents:
The ox hath therefore stretch’d his yoke in vain,
The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn
Hath rotted ere his youth attain’d a beard;
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock;
The nine men’s morris is fill’d up with mud,
And the quaint mazes in the wanton green
For lack of tread are indistinguishable:
The human mortals want their winter here;
No night is now with hymn or carol blest:
Therefore the moon, the governor of floods,
Pale in her anger, washes all the air,
That rheumatic diseases do abound:
And thorough this distemperature we see
The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts
Far in the fresh lap of the crimson rose,
And on old Hiems’ thin and icy crown
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
Is, as in mockery, set: the spring, the summer,
The childing autumn, angry winter, change
Their wonted liveryes, and the mazed world,
By their increase, now knows not which is which:
And this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate, from our dissension;
We are their parents and original.”
“It was willingly that I crossed over into the darkness of danger” – thoughts on the anti-aesthetics of electricity sub-stations

NOVEMBER 4, 2012  2 COMMENTS

Aghh, she’s done it again.

There I was happily sitting eating my Sunday breakfast, content in the knowledge that I didn’t have any blog-essays budding in my mind to conflict with the need to show attentiveness to family socialities. I was grazing through tweets and then @venusingortex set my mind all swirling again.

I sit here now at the kitchen table, hastily typing out this post. Trying to purge my now preoccupying thoughts before my family wake up.

Towards the danger
"It rose before me, the space between us electrical. It was willingly that I crossed over into the darkness of danger."

It’s not the innuendo of @venusingortex’s tweet that has grabbed me, but rather its reminder of the lure of places of electrical danger. And these are places that find a curious overlap of a variety of aesthetics: those of the thrill-seeker; the industrial aesthete; the occupational risk assessor and the metal thief. Each notice these stations, read them in their own way and take from them rich meaning.

English judges developed a ‘doctrine of allurement’ in the Victorian period, by which a landowner (usually an industrial operator) could be held liable for injury sustained by child trespassers mangled by their heavy machinery. The doctrine was a pragmatic means to an end, a way of getting around the then very limited other protection in law for the safety of trespassers. But what the doctrine had at its heart was a strange belief in the Siren’s call of dangerous objects. That machines almost summon their victims towards them: that their non-human agency overwhelms the human power to resist their summon. This doctrine has now rather been overtaken by other trespasser protections (the Occupiers’ Liability Act 1984), but the ghost of that way of thinking about human-object relations in a safety context remains just below the surface.

As part of my work on occupiers’ liability and child trespass I’ve come across the occasional case in which someone young is electrocuted whilst trespassing within an electricity sub-station. The children (if still alive) usually say that they went in there to get their ball back (the classic excuse), though I suspect that sometimes the challenge was simply to see if they could get inside. A recent case examined in forensic detail just how many fences and other barriers that the youth had to assail to reach the point at which he was seriously injured. The judge marvelled at the youth’s climbing prowess and ingenuity but concluded from this that such determination left the youth solely to blame for the injury that had befallen him.

This forensic examination of the clambering is replicated in a series of medical studies in the US. Here postmortems have attempted to contribute to metal theft research. Trying to work out the intruders’ motivations by examining the chemical composition of their blood. And the conclusion? – that most of the dead intruders were high on drugs of one sort or another. Yes, unsurprisingly, trying to negotiate a safe path amidst high voltage electrical equipment is even more risk-prone if you are off your face.

Yet, in South Yorkshire alone each year there are a handful of serious injuries (and some fatalities) caused by metal thieves drawn to the sub-stations as a source of ‘free’ copper, but without the requisite appreciation that cutting into live conductive cabling will deliver them deadly electric shocks for free too. Somehow the lure of the copper is picked up in local knowledge-networks, but not the appreciation of the danger – what the sub-station actually does.

Here I’m reminded of a quote in a book by Roger Atwood examining the cultures of Peruvian tomb raiders, and how they overcame taboos about grave robbing:

“When you first start doing this, it makes you nervous. Digging up bones, you think you are going to incur a curse. But after a while it becomes easy. You don’t even think about it....Around here there is no other kind of work. I used to work at the diary factory but it closed. There is no work but looting” (2004: 32)

Thus, that act became normalised, the spiritual risks forgotten about in the face of material gain.

The sub-station as aesthetic object

Before embarking on my bunker project I had thought about selecting electricity sub-stations as my focal point. The bunker seam does probably allow for deeper mining in chasing after representational and usage mutations, but I did notice some of the artistic co-option of sub-stations before my bunker-swerve. The work of the Brechers (and their studies of industrial site elemental forms in the Ruhr) come close, but it is the mundane-embracing work of John Myers that is the exemplar. Here Myer’s picture (part of his mid 1970s Middle England series) speaks a thousand words about the non-place status of the rudimentary places at which the power networks intersect the local.
And then there’s the issue of how electricity infrastructure writes itself upon the landscape (a name check here for @lines_of_landscape’s photos of pylons). Lawyers have a special word for it: ‘wayleaves’. Little possessory footpads allowing the National Grid to march across the country, joining up the local encampments of transformers, huddled in hostile human country like the advance forts of a robot invasion.

But I think we can also readily see an aestheticisation of nodal points of electricity distribution in many Hollywood blockbusters. The strange transformer poles at the derelict power station or factory site that is the scene of the final showdown between the good and bad guys (perhaps set against a thundery sky with the crackle of lightening to add a natural frisson to the proceedings). From Frankenstein through to Iron Man the electric, and its places of production and use offer us a deadly fascination.

P.S. If I had time I’d now digress into the aesthetics of risk assessment and CEGB public information films – but I think that will get an essay in its own right someday…

References


@Lines_of_Landscape’s photographs of pylons: http://telegraphpolesandelectricpylons.tumblr.com

Pictures:
Angular transformer poles: https://twitter.com/VenusInGoretex/status/264327427847770113/photo/1/large

Rural substation: http://s0.geograph.org.uk/photos/21/46/214651_6be2e545.jpg

Myers substation picture via: http://rikrawling.wordpress.com/

‘Risk, Liability and Outdoor Adventure’ BMC Conference – notes and slideshow

“The pursuit of an unrestrained culture of blame and compensation has many evil consequences and one is certainly the interference with the liberty of the citizen. Of course there is some risk of accidents arising out of the joie de vivre of the young, but that is no reason for imposing a grey and dull safety regime on everyone”

Lord Hobhouse in Tomlinson -v- Congleton Borough Council[2003] UKHL 47, at 81
Here are the slides for my contribution to the British Mountaineering Council’s conference on ‘Risk, liability and outdoor adventure’. This event was targeted at landowners and managers and featured speakers from the BMC, RoSPA, the Country Land & Business Association, the National Trust, risk professionals and politicians. [NB: The BMC has now (9-11-2012) set up a webpage featuring summaries of all of the speakers’ presentations: http://www.thebmc.co.uk/bmcs-risk-liability-outdoor-adventure-conference-an-overview]

Everyone agreed that the risk of landowner liability for adults engaging in adventure sports like climbing, caving and wild swimming is low. The challenge though is how to spread that message to reluctant landowners…

And here – following requests – are links for items mentioned in the slideshow:


Confessions of a wandering mind – the slideshow

Here are the slides for my presentation today to Leeds Psychogeography Group (thanks Tina Richardson / @concretepost for inviting me). There’s an essay that I need to finish writing that develops the outline presented here. I will add it when done.

In the meantime, here’s what I promised for the talk in my promo blurb:

“Wandering the streets what do you see? Can the worlds of art and everyday professional aesthetics be combined? Why does it feel transgressive to even try?”

Aural history – time travel, double glazing and the lost sounds of the Seventies

“...how do we listen to sounds never before noticed, sounds long vanished or sounds that are not sounds, exactly, but more like the fluctuations of light, weather and the peculiar feeling that can arise when there is a strong sense of place?” (Toop, 2007: 112)

This blog-essay is about everyday soundscapes, what causes them, how they can be charted and why and how they disappear.

The drop forge in the valley
I remember lying in bed at night and listening to the drop forges drifting across the valleys. (PoS 2012)

So recalls Martyn Ware, a founding member of the first incarnation of Sheffield’s electro-pop pioneers The Human League. Ware accounts for the percussive influence of Sheffield’s then remaining heavy industry upon their early dystopian music, a musical transcription of the pounding of the city’s foundries’ drop forges which is particularly to the fore in their early song ‘Almost Medieval’ (1979). To this stentorian beat Phil Oakey narrates the tale of an unsettling journey back in time to the pre-modern era, thus:

“step off the tarmac, there’s no stagecoach speed limit
Behind the office swings the man on the gibbet…”

The point is made clear at the outset, for the League the past was grimmer (and grimier) than we might like to think, and everything was different there. In this early version of the world all the modern certainties are gone, and everything is degenerated. It is also sensorially different – it is a world of alien sights, smells and sounds. This is a “small world, dimly viewed through cataracts.”

I too caught a brief aural glimpse of Sheffield’s dull industrial thud when I first arrived here a decade ago. Early, on still summer mornings, already half awoken by vicious sunlight streaming through thin curtains, I would be fully roused by the kicking into life of the last remaining drop forge down in the valley. In response I bought blackout curtains and secondary double glazing. But still this behemoth found its way to me, the sheer force of this power press’s vibration through the neighbourhood’s ground and onward into the fabric of my home and the soft tissues of my head. After a couple of summers of annoyance the forge closed and eventually its structures were demolished. The site now sits empty and weed ridden, a scrub-gap between the local KFC and B&Q.

Listening again to ‘Almost Medieval’ a few weeks ago got me thinking about the soundscapes of my own past, and of their unattainability. The Human League portrayed their imagined trip back in time as considerably less than pleasurable. But it is the alien quality of the experience (rather than its repulsion) that intrigues me the most. In response to the song I recall a soundscape experienced from my childhood bedroom. A sound finding its way into that room via the windows. A particular set of sounds – cars ascending a gentle rise, driving up the valley in which my suburban home was situated. A particular car and engine tone, a particular interaction of rubber on tarmac, a particular reverberation of that sound within the funnel of the valley. This was all delivered into my bedroom until we got secondary double glazing (and a few years later proper double glazing – the old ‘crittall’ metal single glazed frames having finally been removed). On the arrival of these enhanced interfaces, those sounds faded from the sensory experience of being in that room. Only on summer days with the windows open would that outdoor soundscape tentatively venture inside again.

The impossibility of reclaiming soundscapes

So, I started wondering whether – if I went back to that house now and opened the window – would I hear that soundscape again?

I don’t think I would, and here’s why, a combination of reasons:

1) As we age our hearing capabilities change. The range of our hearing recedes. Only the truly young can hear into the high pitch spectrum. So, if I went back now there are acoustic fractions of the soundscape that I simply could not register anymore, no matter how much I might want to.

2) Cars have changed. So have their engines and the petrol inside them. Lead free fuel burns differently, engines are more powerful and the gentle rise is now achieved in lower gear than that prevalent in my childhood.

3) There are more cars. There would be more traffic noise. A more complex set of sounds than the lone small car that I nostalgically imagine drifting past my window.
The arrangement of gardens has changed. Many of the front garden trees have been removed to create car ports. Those that remain are bigger. Back gardens are now more paved, and the pigeon lofts at the top of many of them when I was young have decayed into nothing. All of these factors would result in a different echo profile for the car-sounds within that valley.

Extension of the surrounding suburbs has reduced the proximity of that street to the countryside, resulting in fewer birds and their song (and less variety of those birds that are still there).

So, those sounds, and the environment that combined to produce and propagate them, have gone. Travelling in space to the place where those sounds once were will not achieve rediscovery of that soundscape, even if the double glazing is removed, or the window flung open. These then were the sounds of the Seventies, a product of a moment in time and its physical (and human) parts.

Sound and the Seventies

I recall also that there was a portion of that childhood soundscape that came only at night: Concorde's sonic boom as its shot overhead Atlantic-ward. Unlike the gentle rumble of suburban traffic noise, the arrival of the sonic boom with the launch of Concorde's supersonic trans Atlantic service from 1976 proved to be a very public, and hotly debated, development in the national soundscape, and noise pollution came to be THE pre-eminent environmental issue for much of that decade, before declining subsequently to its more recent 'cinderella' status.

During the late 1960s a number of developments co-incided to raise noise's profile. Concorde, and the 'threat' of supersonic aviation was one. The 'great' motorway building phase was another. In turn these developments led to new laws focussed on control of construction site noise, occupational noise exposure and principles of compensation for land blighted by these new noise-bearing transportation schemes. Meanwhile technical standards and controls started to appear by which the permitted noise emissions of vehicles and other machines came under control. Noise – for a while – was a very hot political topic.

I have a copy of a 1971 book, The Assaults on our Senses by John Barr. Evidently Mr Barr had already made something of a career out of chronicling the way that the modern world was dragging everything to hell, his previous work having been titled Derelict Britain. Barr's 1971 book attempted a sensory engagement with environmental problems as they were then framed in public consciousness. First, he presented sight and squalor offending that dominant sense. Then he moved on to hearing, and the offence of noise. In doing so he drew a distinction between 'noise on the ground' and 'noise in the air'. In his discourse upon aviation noise Barr was very much 'of his time', with anxieties about the imminent introduction of Concorde's transatlantic flights, the feared impact of its sonic booms upon dairy herds and human mental health to the fore. Evocative campaign groups, long since gone, are name-checked in his book: the British Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise (founded 1966), the Anti-Concorde Project (1967) and the UK Federation Against Aircraft Nuisance (1968).

But for Barr:

"Not even the thunderclaps of super-sonic airliners in the 70s will displace ground-level noise as the most continuously irritating, physically and psychologically damaging, ingredient of Britain's urban climate" (71)

Barr draws a bleak picture of a world drowning in sound, of industrialists rubbing their hands with joy at the productive clamour of their workshops, and of a cacophony of cars. But amidst this assault on noise, Barr momentarily falters, acknowledging the habituation of most to the everyday sounds of life, and chillingly depicts the horror of pure silence, the sensory deprivation of a sound-proofed chamber in which a subject is left alone with only his heart beat, breathing and the movement of his eyelids as acoustic companion. Even Barr concedes that sometimes, some sound may be better than none at all.

But like Barr, most of the debate (and legislation) about noise, as originally and influentially framed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, still focuses resolutely on noise as 'pollution', noise as something undesirably and that threats to the tranquility of silence. This approach remains evident in the urban noise mapping required by EU derived ambient noise mapping laws – the map as a register of zones requiring action ('acoustical planning') to reduce ambient noise and thereby improve human qualities of life.

Silence, and the individualisation of soundscapes was often what these laws and policies espoused. And here I think of Richard Sennett, who portrayed evidence of a widespread retreat from the public realm in his The Fall of Public Man (2003). Whilst he used the notion of individuals retreating into their homes and shutting out the 'public' world outside metaphorically, as symptomatic of a wider retreat from living with a public realm, we can actually take this image literally. There was a physical retreat, an attempt to block out the world beyond the private realm of the home: this was the rise of double glazing in the 1970s.

Yes the double glazing craze was partly driven by energy efficiency (the 1973 energy crises certainly focussed the minds of homeowners on their spiralling fuel costs), and a vague sense of being 'modern' via home improvement – but there was also much made of the new technology's ability to muffle the home against the noise of the outside world too. It is no coincidence that the raft of compulsory purchase laws made in the early 1970s, and their calibration of compensation principles for homeowners afflicted in the wake of new motorway schemes and airport expansion often offered up double (sometimes triple) glazing as their recompense: the victim fortified indoors in the face of an unstoppable march of concrete laying outdoors.
Thus, modernism’s project aspired to a technocratic control over soundscapes, ambient sound as an unwanted by-product of unstoppable progress, an externality, something to be channelled, muffled, designed out by the technocrats, the planners and the lawyers.

**Charting soundscapes**

Yet in recent years due to a congruence of technology and aesthetic sensibilities, some ambient soundscapes have come to be seen as a resource to cherish, a facet of place to characterise and/or an engine of regeneration (the vibrant consumerist ‘buzz’ of the plaza anyone?). Alongside the established ranks of the motorway scheme’s acoustic engineer and the ‘noise policing’ of Environmental Health Officers we now see poets, ‘sound-artists’ and other enthusiasts attempting to valorise ambient soundscapes. Notable projects have included The London Sound Survey, the British Library’s UK Soundmap project and the Positive Soundscapes Project. These initiatives (and many others) create a strange mesh of acoustic science and aesthetic poetics.

There is a conservationist sensibility to the fore here – born of a realisation that soundscapes can be lost for ever. And this sentiment can come to the surface now, because technology enables us to have a realistic stab at capturing soundscapes in a meaningful way. Smartphone apps, social media and digital recorders enable collaborative archival ‘capture’ of samples of soundscapes for posterity, with linking of those samples to maps via geo-coding enabling an interactive place-sound (and time) based interrogation of the aural archive.

Perhaps when they are grown up, my kids will be able to salvage their adult nostalgic yearning for the lost soundscapes of their youth by logging into one of these archives and re-living the sound-moment courtesy of a passing enthusiast’s carefully executed and geo-logged sampling of the local sound-world outside their bedroom windows earlier today.


**Picture credit:**


**FILED UNDER** BUILT ENVIRONMENTS, DARK REAL ESTATE, ENTHUSIASM, INDUSTRIAL MUSIC, INFRASTRUCTURE, LAW & PLACE, LAW & THINGS, MATERIALITY & MEMORY, MEANING MAKING, MELANCHOLIA & NOSTALGIA, ROADS, SOUNDSCAPES, TRAVEL AND DISTANCE, WANDERING

Always searching for somewhere to park: some ruminations on cows, clamps and immobilizing motor vehicles

SEPTEMBER 19, 2012 LEAVE A COMMENT

“The way humans hunt for parking and the way animals hunt for food are not as different as you might think” Tom Vanderbilt
So, I step out of the supermarket and look across at a familiar scene: the dark bunker-like edifice of the local Boots store’s loading bay. But today I have illicit car parking on my mind so the large ‘No Parking’ sign and elderly perimeter chain catch my eye. That will do nicely. I position myself to take a picture. It starts to rain, but I am resolute. This side road is quiet; click – photo one achieved.

But then a flurry of cars mess up my view, and suddenly two cars in turn glide off road into this prohibited zone. Each driver looks slightly surprised at the other’s like-mindedness, but in an unspoken balletic dance they both park up in this space. One car leaves almost immediately. But the red car stays. Slightly miffed I decide to try and freak the driver out by carrying on snapping. We exchange frosty glances as he and his wife (both retired and not all looking like they have any occupational association with Boots or its logistics) step out of their shiny red sports car and set off for their shopping spree, no-doubt regaining smug composure as they walk off:

We are not weak.
We know where to park.
We’re brave enough to ignore that sign.
Experience tells us that nothing happens if you park here.

Thinking about parking

According to Ben-Joseph (2012) vehicles are immobile for 95% of their working lives, they have to occupy a static point in space during such states of ‘rest’. Parking is a fundamental necessity in the urbanised world, and it provokes its own grammar of reading the streetscape – the 100 yard stare of the driver, hoping to spot a place to park-up before he has already driven past it. This need-to-park shapes how we design, manage and interact with our urban realm. As Paul Groth has put it, rather grandly:

“The ancient Egyptians organized their life and their gods in reference to the life-giving Nile. Colonial New Englanders organized their village life around the axis mundi of the meetinghouse, the place that manifested their connection to the cosmos. Although it happens just below the level of awareness, the parking space generates the most significant sense of personal and social place in the cosmos for today’s urban Americans; it is their axis mundi” (quoted in Ben-Joseph, 2012: 3).

In 1990 I stood in the basement of a Barcelona bookshop killing time. Whilst most of the books there were in Spanish, one caught my eye. The title was simple, a single English word: Parking. I’ve never seen the book since. In my mind’s eye I see it as filled with elegant three-colour (black, white and red) stylized diagrams of parking manoeuvres, each page an instructional yet beautiful diagrammatic depiction of a vehicular manoeuvre. On balance, I think it was probably an art book, but maybe it was an instructional manual, I really don’t know. It hovered indeterminately between the two. Whatever words were written there were in Spanish, so they didn’t help me understand the context of this book.

In a mild way that book haunts me to this day. A taxonomy of vehicular dance, a mapping of the possible ways in which a car can move in relation to other obstacles (many of which were in the book – as in life – other cars). There’s a great game – Rush Hour – that explores this, a puzzle in which a packed congregation of vehicles must be unjammed by the trial and error sliding of cars and lorries until a way can be found to unlock the gridlock.

The book left me with a feeling for the urban tessellation involved in finding (and slotting into) a parking space. That feeling that everywhere is almost full up, a clock ticking, time and space running out. That act of driving around looking for somewhere geometrically viable to park in, yet with an additional essential evaluative layer within the search algorithm: consideration of where it is permissible to park. Here’s where I return to the domain of mundane law, and it’s shaping role, within spatiality and the normative dimension of everyday life.

Let’s momentarily go back to the rear of the Boots store. The loading bay and its sign sit there passively, come rain or shine, cars coming and going – a testimony to the approximateness of such mundane, everyday declarations of territory and the city’s tantalisingly prohibited but parkable forecourts, bays and verges. As the red car shows, if you want to stop people parking you have to do something more than signage, and the available options are about to change.

On the 1st October 2012 it becomes a criminal offence in England to clamp or otherwise immobilise a vehicle because it is parked without the landowner’s permission on private land. This provision is a small portion of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 which primarily deals with the more dramatic civil liberties issues of biometrics, the regulation of CCTV and powers of entry to land. Here I want to think a little about parking, clamping and the mundane interactions of law and the technology of vehicular immobilization. Along the way I will also have something to say about ancient laws on seizing straying cows.
Thinking about clamping

In 1991, very early in my career as an apprentice lawyer, I was asked to research the legality of vehicle clamping for a client, a local University. As I looked into it I found that the legal research trail was pointing towards medieval legal rulings about rights to seize and retain livestock that had strayed onto your land, the ancient rule of distress damage feasant. That rule was a pre-industrial one, and as regards seizure of livestock it was abrogated in 1971 by the Animals Act. But that Act said nothing about the curbing or abolition of the rule as it had come to be applied to non-animals in subsequent cases. By the reign of Charles I it had started to be applied to inanimate objects, and in 1853 it had been successfully invoked to impound a railway locomotive that had trespassed onto a competitor’s line. I relished this chance to read about ancient cases of bovine ransom, and train confiscation.

At the time of my research there was no regulation of the newly emergent ‘industry’ of vehicle clamping and release fees, and in the intervening 20 odd years there few cases have reached the senior courts to specifically develop this area of law and portray it in the modern way (with cars) rather than the ancient one (with cows). But my legal training told me that cows and cars can, at an appropriate level of generalisation, be treated as the same thing. The search for answers to legal research questions often requires this descent into the realm of analogy.

Whilst a mundane – everyday – issue, clamping proved to be an emotive one over the last two decades. In the handful of cases in which its legality was tested the courts equivocated – they didn’t like the idea that private landowners, or their clamping contractors, could set their own penalties, but they accepted that someone parking on private land in an area where a notice clearly indicated that no permission to park there was given, amounted to an agreement – a contractual acceptance of the fate that would befall you if you proceeded to park there.

Attempts were made to shave off the exploitative extremities – introduction of codes of practice, formation of a clamping association and a training certificate (a similar trajectory to the ‘professionalisation’ of bouncers (night club doormen)). But the base question remained – was clamping (and charging of a ‘release fee’) lawful, and if it was should it be outlawed?

Well, as culmination of a cross-party trend, the 2012 Act, finally, sees that question answered. Clamping or towing away is now prohibited.

Thinking around barriers

But (there’s always a but) this prohibition leaves open other ways of achieving immobilization and defence of private parkable spaces. There is nothing in the new law to stop landowners introducing barriers – pole gates, chains, gates or other ways of closing a space to access or egress and as a result trapping the trespassing car inside. Provided the barrier was present at the site when the unauthorised parking occurred (even if not deployed to prevent entry – i.e. raised or not fully chained across) that will be regarded as a lawful restriction of the vehicle’s movement if those barrier devices are later moved into a ‘closed’ position. A removal fee could then still be charged, and such a charge would still be upheld by the courts provided it was shown to be a genuine measure of the cost of attending and opening the barrier, rather than a penalty aimed at punishing the unauthorised parker.

Wheel clamping was an innovation of the 1990s. Prior to that decade unauthorised parking spaces were controlled by chains, bollards or pole-barriers. But these were largely plot-wide controls. The whole loading bay (in my example) would either have to be open or closed to access at any single point in time. The clamp enabled a selective, more targeted control of territory – and a strategy which could be more readily commercially incentivised and outsourced.

For the first time, by these means, individual cars could be targeted. The plot could be left physically open to access without affecting all other users of that plot, or entailing constant human oversight.

Wheel clamping was an innovation of the 1990s. Prior to that decade unauthorised parking spaces were controlled by chains, bollards or pole-barriers. But these were largely plot-wide controls. The whole loading bay (in my example) would either have to be open or closed to access at any single point in time. The clamp enabled a selective, more targeted control of territory – and a strategy which could be more readily commercially incentivised and outsourced. For the first time, by these means, individual cars could be targeted. The plot could be left physically open to access (e.g. for lorries arriving there throughout the day), and the rules of use could become more differentiated. And all of this was now achievable without the need for a permanently resident parking attendant (anyone remember their little huts and ex-colonial seeming uniforms?). Instead of a simple binary of closed/open-to-access, controls over duration of stay, type of vehicle and permit-based parking could all be enforced through immobilization against individual cars without affecting all other users of that plot, or entailing constant human oversight.

The banning of clamping and towing will see the return of older technologies of parking control – access barriers, bollards and chains (but probably not resident parking attendants). So – get ready – here come the boom days for the barrier designers and suppliers and the men driving round in vans, opening up barriers after payment of their release fee. The clamp may be dead, but vehicle immobilization will evolve via a new wave of urban plot re-enclosure.

Watch this space (but don’t park in it).

The atmosphere splits the Sun's white light into its separate colours, just like a prism: it bends red more than orange, orange more than yellow, and so on. Because red undergoes the strongest bending effect, it appears to fall past the horizon first, followed by orange, yellow and green. The colours beyond green – blue, indigo, and violet – are strongly scattered by the gases in the atmosphere. That's why the sky appears blue. But as a result, the last coloured light that can be seen as the Sun falls below the horizon is green. Normally this effect is very slight.

Blue Skies

The exact blue of the sky isn't as important as the coherence of the painting, so choose your blue to suit the rest of the color scheme or for the need to lift or stain. Look for the temperature bias you need, cool or warm. The maxim, "less is more," definitely applies when creating atmospheric sky washes. Wetting the paper helps to hold a large sky together and prevent seams. Large masses of moving water benefit from flecks of untouched white paper left within the wash, and ripples are often best indicated by linear streaks of untouched paper. You'll find masking fluid, wax resist and scratching off to be useful allies here. Once again, less is more; the less overworked the water, the fresher it will feel.