

## **Seeing and living in the diorama of the post-industrial landscape.**

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This paper considers some key themes; seeing, living, the diorama and the post-industrial landscape. These are brought together in order to ask questions about photographic practice and consider whether or how photography can shape our understanding of the rural. In order to consider 'seeing and living' we might begin by exploring a social or community based context for these terms, since the questions that sit beneath them: "What is it that I see?" and "How is it that I live?" are focused on people and their encounters with where they live. With these specific questions, the answer to the first question may inform the second and vice versa, so that neither one can be thought to be more important than the other. Both questions require us to make some consideration of space and of the visual and the relationship that links these two terms. It may therefore be appropriate to consider not the question of "images of the landscape" and what might constitute this genre but rather to ask whether we might reflect on the "landscape-as-image". By conceptually shifting the perception of landscape we may be able to seize a new way of understanding the rural and the social relationships within it. If we understand the landscape-as-image then the proposition that post-industrial landscapes are little more than large-scale dioramas is a further shift of visual referencing. Alongside the term post-industrial we can perhaps consider other terms; "work," "the conditions of working," "land use," and "jobs" into our discussion, and how these bind into our social and community contexts.

The Cornish Alps is a term used by locals to describe the white mounds of industrial waste produced by the china clay industry, located in the centre of the county of Cornwall. The waste from china clay open pit mining is white in colour and was piled high into sky tips which dominated the skyline around the area. They are also an unavoidable sight on any road journey toward the West along Cornwall's A30. With the exception of the Eden Project, located nearby, tourists to Cornwall largely overlook the clay area. However, to the local community the area is imbued with a history of employment and subsequent decline and of the transformation of the material of the earth into

Cornwall's very own Alps. It is this metonymic use, this repackaging of the landscape into something else, where the function and meaning of this landscape to the community who live within it, is not dissimilar to the function of the photograph, referring as it does to something that is no longer or never was there. To reflect on this post-industrial rural space as an image is to allow a small breach into the understanding of land ownership, commerce, production and the social relations that construct the pockets of communities that live within the so called Clay Villages.

The social narrative of the post-industrial landscape brings us to the second theme; that of "living." Dr Joanie Willett noted: "the paradox of life in Cornwall; on the one hand it is perceived to be a fantastic place to live, and on the other it has been one of the poorest parts of the UK for some time." She goes on: "when Cornwall is described, discussed or imagined it is as a fiction constructed through a particular set of illusions and narratives, designed to sell a particular visitor experience."<sup>1</sup>

How then can the camera and the photograph and the image impact on living and on social relations? How can photography be taken up and used to enable some difference? It is unlikely to begin with redundantly illustrating the landscape by taking pictures of it by the practice of photography in isolation. Therefore a starting point into the questions outlined here begins not with photography but with a consideration of what is representation. There are arguably two positions with regard to the theory of representation. Firstly, 'Who is to be put into the position of being represented and what are they to be shown doing?' and secondly, 'Can what people believe and the ways they behave, be potentially changed by the way they are represented?'

Walter Benjamin suggested that social transformation was only possible if the division between theory and practice is transcended. Theory itself is entwined with privilege and the minority of groups for whom it is understood and is considered important. Nevertheless, the aspiration to remove any division

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<sup>1</sup> Willett, J 2009, 'Why is Cornwall so Poor? Narrative, Perception and Identity', Ph.D thesis, Exeter University, Exeter

between theory and practice sets out a desire to incorporate a theoretical insistence into any work. We should therefore seek to embody theory within practice and to attempt to explore theories of representation through a practice based approach. Embodying theory into landscape photography is also an attempt to build depth into the genre that is sometimes regarded as being superficial in nature. Therefore, it seems a '*traditional*' or '*conventional*' approach to landscape photography would only produces images that provide context and familiarity. However, a participatory or collaborative photographic project may be an alternative framework for understanding the socio-political implications connected to considering the landscape-as-image.

The photographic image is a part of everyday-life, it is the dominant form in virtually all our encounters within a mediated world. Furthermore, the image, as an actant, plays a fundamental role in the formation of the beliefs, ideas and values according to which people live and communities are formed. The photograph represents ourselves to ourselves. The photograph unavoidably connects with, engages and activates the socio-political process. It is arguably a creative apparatus that has become and continues to become more and more universal. Although as David Campany has recently suggested: "There seems to be little doubt that photography has been eclipsed. It no longer symbolises the visual Zeitgeist. It no longer epitomises the general field of representations in which we live. . . . That belongs to the hybrid space of the Internet."<sup>2</sup> While Campany is probably correct, it is perhaps better to consider the framework through which we see the image as *relating to* photography rather than belonging to it. Photography is still like the practice first encountered many years ago, yet it is also fundamentally altered by the way in which images can now be consumed and shared and by the sheer volume of images produced. As Benjamin predicted: "The illiterate of the future will not be the man who cannot read the alphabet, but the one who cannot take a

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<sup>2</sup> Campany, D., 2013. In the Light of the Lumieres: Art at the Beginning and Ends of Cinema. In: N. Campbell, A. Cramerotti, eds. 2013. *Photocinema the Creative Edges of Photography and Film*. Bristol: Intellect.

photograph,”<sup>3</sup> to which, today, he would have perhaps added “and upload to Facebook.”

Daniel Palmer has stated with reference to an alleged collaborative turn: “Thinking about photography in collaborative terms invites us to reconfigure assumptions about the photographic act in all its stages.”<sup>4</sup> Palmer suggests that images are produced through engagement and are collectively produced and experienced. With this in mind and in an attempt to understand such a reconfiguration, part of my own research explores the relationship between people, photography and the landscape through community based photography workshops in and around the Cornish Alps. The participants in this project all lived in Cornwall and were either from the area or had connections with the villages around the clay mines. One unexpected outcome was the participants’ understanding of the processes they had gone through to produce their images and the feelings they had while taking and presenting their work collectively. Most of the images might be described as ‘*an intuitive response*’ to what was there. However, it was the narratives and stories that connected these images that were often far more interesting.

In “Relational Aesthetics” Nicolas Bourriaud speaks about: “artists proposing artworks as moments of sociability and objects producing sociability.” Bourriaud states: “The philosophical tradition that underpins relational aesthetics was defined by Louis Althusser as a ‘materialism of encounter’. The essence of humankind is purely trans-individual, made up of bonds that link individuals together in social forms.”<sup>5</sup> Jacques Rancière in his work *The Emancipated Spectator* defines the image as a certain connection of the verbal and the visual, a link between the seen and the spoken.<sup>6</sup> The image is not only the space of representation but is also a social space, where narratives begin and end. The images produced are shorthand for personal narratives. Rancière speaks about the passive spectator or audience and

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, W., 1972. *A Short History of Photography*, *Screen*, Spring p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Palmer, D., 2013. A Collaborative Turn in Contemporary Photography?. *Photographies*, 6:1, pp. 117-125.

<sup>5</sup> Bourriaud, N., 2009. *Relational Aesthetics*. France: Les Presses du Réel

<sup>6</sup> Rancière, J., 2009, *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso

considers whether like Arthaud and Brecht, there is a role for a more active participant in looking. It is the relationship of the spoken, virtual, psychical, thought based image to the digital image presented on the screen, that may provoke a deeper, ontological question relating to photography, the image and the participant who also becomes spectator. It is the personal narrative, enabled by photography, which multiple individuals “speak through,” together forming a collective voice and that contributes to producing a type of active looking. The ease with which the digital image can be created, the ready access to cameras and imaging devices, means that for participants photography is also note taking or journaling of their experience. While it may not be possible to suggest anyone felt empowerment simply by taking digital images with their camera, the research so far has recorded that participants felt that by passing through their environment with a camera their knowledge of it was modified and to a certain extent their behaviour was changed. It may be argued that when discussing the images and talking about personal narratives that the Deleuzian idea of the optical image joining with the memory or fantasy image was articulated. Similarly in his book “The Future of the Image” Jacques Rancière suggests that the image may refer to three things: “The simple relationship that produces the likeness of an original: not necessarily its faithful copy, but simply what suffices to stand in for it.” Secondly: “. . . there is the interplay of operations that produces what we call art: or precisely an alteration of resemblance.” And finally: “the image is not exclusive to the visible. There is visibility that does not amount to an image; there are images which consist wholly in words.”<sup>7</sup> To see with the camera is therefore also to speak of seeing.

Sarah Pink has suggested that when re-thinking the meaning and values of the image we should not only take into account sensory qualities, but also include concepts of movement and place. For Pink the photograph is produced and consumed as we move through environments. Pink’s argument emerges through Tim Ingold’s critique of the anthropology of the senses and network theory claiming to undermine the supposed dominance of the visual,

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<sup>7</sup> Rancière, J., 2009. *The Future of the Image*. London: Verso

placing images into the realm of an experience of environments and proposing them as interwoven in “everyday movement, perceiving and meaning making.”<sup>8</sup> To this we may add the virtual, spoken, image from which emerges a renewed sense of the social.

By relocating the image into an environmental experience it may be possible to use images in a different way, one that is focused on restoring social bonds and addressing isolation and alienation as outlined by Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics. Pink is primarily concerned with the image as forming part of a forward moving world. It is with this in mind that participatory photography projects may be used to create an environment of social experience, one centred on making, taking or creating images.

Daguerre, one of the inventors of photography was also credited as being the inventor of the diorama. The word Diorama means “through that which is seen.” The diorama is the constructed space, the imaginary three-dimensional representation of a space. Don Slater describes the diorama: “A demonstration of a technical power to transform the material of the world into representation.”<sup>9</sup> The post-industrial landscape is also such a demonstration, a lasting representation of an industrial age embedded into the land. To see and to live at all, is to see and live within a perpetual diorama, a space of constructed image and constructed narratives, and to understand and evolve these through “that which is seen.”

Simon Schama in *Landscape and Memory* states: “It is clear that inherited landscape myths and memories share two common characteristics: their surprising endurance through the centuries and their power to shape institutions that we still live with.”<sup>10</sup> To live within the diorama is to pass through it, to experience it as an image, to return to it daily and for the relationship to change and alter over time. The landscape is experienced at

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<sup>8</sup> Pink, S., 2011. Sensory Digital Photography: Re-Thinking ‘Moving and the Image. *Visual Studies*, Taylor Francis, Volume 26, Issue 1.

<sup>9</sup> Slater, D., 1995 Photography and Modern Vision. In: C. Jenks, ed *Visual Culture*, London: Routledge.

<sup>10</sup> Schama, S., 1995. *Landscape and Memory*. London: Fontana Press.

different times, interrupted, disjointed and lived within. In some ways participatory work builds on the socially-responsible realism encouraged in the writing of theorist Georg Lukács in that there is depiction not just of the landscape as it as seen but also of those individuals who live there or connect with it.

Burgin notes that no experience can be passive; for being only an observer is to deny one's significance as a recorder of a shared experience. Most recently he offers the word 'contemplative' rather than interactive in order to speak of the participation of the viewer in the creation of a work<sup>11</sup>. While the landscape itself may suggest a history and a narrative, it too, like a work, is encountered in a fragmentary and repetitive way. It is perhaps then, to contemplate, 'to look attentively and thoughtfully' at the landscape-as-image that we may interact in the social construction of those spaces. By taking the rural landscape to be something "through that which is seen", to be viewed as image or as a diorama, we live and see it not as subjects of knowledge, "knowing it as it is" but as subjects of the signifier, forming ourselves through its impressions and associations. Viewing the landscape as a representation of 'the material transformation of the world' sets in place our position as contemplative subjects. To use photography in this way, to record and recount the personal narratives, is an attempt to shift the medium to a place where the photograph has a differentiated relationship with its subject. To work with the images *of* the landscape is to engage in an act of cataloguing and archiving, a passive, curatorial role. However, to engage with the landscape-as-image opens the possibility of reading the landscape as a space of intersubjective narratives drawn together in the stories of the images we create and that these are very certainly and knowingly constructed. It is in understanding the social construction of the landscape that attempts may be made to rework and engage with the conditions that underpin the relationship between *where* and *how* we live in our communities.

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<sup>11</sup>Burgin, V. 2013. Interactive Cinema and the Uncinematic. In: N. Campbell, A. Cramerotti, eds. 2013. *Photocinema the Creative Edges of Photography and Film*. Bristol: Intellect.