

Resounding Landscapes – Combining Psychogeography and Elements of the Landscape as Composition

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Abstract. Experiencing a landscape can be a vivid and visceral experience. For artists in particular, landscapes can be a source of inspiration for works, as well as providing integral frameworks in the process. Arguably, the experience between the walker and the landscape is a multi-layered form of communicative expression, where the walker engages in introspective reflection in addition to engaging with the surrounding landscape. This paper will discuss how psychogeography and sonification methods are used to inform the author's practice in creating audio-visual works, through examining the creative process of one of her works.

Keywords. Electroacoustic composition, music visualization, psychogeography, sonification

1 Introduction

Interpretations of the landscape cannot be separated from the observer; our personal experiences filter and colour our observations. Detailing the experience of being immersed in a landscape is a two-part process - firstly, the body processes the landscape through the senses (for most of us, this largely involves sight and sound), then secondly, the mind interprets these sensations through the prisms of memories in order to attach personal meaning to current experiences. Exploring the visceral relationship between observer and the landscape and the expression of personal narratives formed during my time in a place to an audience underpins my practice, which combines field footage, field recordings and performance as a way of creating audio-visual works. Much of the compositional processes behind my practice involve exploring how to incorporate visual and aural elements of the landscape into a vehicle for self-expression and self-reflection.

Arguably, the use of landscapes in the creation of artefacts is a form of communicative expression - between the observer and the landscape, and also between the artist and themselves. The act of immersion into a landscape, through being within and forging navigational methods, is a way for the observer to create a dialogue with the land. Through the lenses of this relationship, an observer can then direct their focus onto themselves and their internal dialogue.

When traversing the landscape, the inner landscapes of a person are projected outwards onto the surrounding environment. Learning about the lay of the land physically therefore becomes important, and in particular, the act of walking is an essential facet of the creative process. As noted by John Wylie, who wrote about his thoughts and experiences as he walked along the South-West coast of the United Kingdom, walking allows for a vividly tactile relationship with the land, which then facilitates closer relationships between walker and place [1]. David Crouch, who has written widely on the relationships between landscape and individuals, notes that new ways of thinking, feeling and moving become highlighted when a person is engaged with a landscape [2]. Therefore, the act of walking through a place is not only about learning about how to navigate physically, but also is a process on how to navigate a person's internal terrain.

By knowing and feeling the land, with its various undulations, the surrounding landscape can be used as a method of mapping the inner psyche. In this internal terrain, there are emotional boulders and mental valleys. There are rivers of feeling, clouds of doubt, winds of certainty. As Wylie concluded at the end of his coastal walk, '...landscape might be best described in terms of the entwined materialities and sensibilities with which we act and sense' [3], and this description describes the way a landscape can influence a person's responses.

The use of music, in particular, can be a potent method of communicating these experiences to an audience [4]. Music can be used as a way of mediating knowledge and imagination, where concepts of landscape, place and meaning can be situated together. When combined with visual representations of the landscape, it can be used to create powerful artefacts between the artist and their audience.

2 Combining psychogeography and audio-visual practice

The original impetus for my practice stemmed from a desire to find ways of intertwining aural and visual elements to create works. As my practice deepened, I developed a desire to create works examining my personal narratives in a place using elements of visual and aural documentation. Through this desire, my interest in psychogeography developed as I explored methods of processing my experiences in a landscape.

While psychogeography has been traditionally situated within urban environments and their effects on its inhabitants, there has been a move towards exploring the psychogeography of rural places. On a broader level, sonic-based psychogeography practices is about musicians explicitly reflecting upon the multiple geographies informing their practice, and the infusion of geographical aspects of a place into works [5]. Psychogeography therefore is a way for artists to invoke the emotionality of a place, while reflecting on an area's geographical features.

One artist I particularly drew inspiration from is Drew Mulholland, who describes his compositions as a form of sonic psychogeography [6]. His works particularly focus on the emotions a place invokes within himself, with Mulholland noting, "...you can't help but bring your own reaction to it [the place]...the place is kind of channeling something for you...It's a kind of conduit if you like." [7]

An example of how these ideas were incorporated into my practice is *The Dream Is Over*, a piece created in 2017 from a visit to Meckering, Western Australia. Situated about 138km east from Perth in the Western Australian Wheatbelt, Meckering was the subject of an earthquake in 1968, registering at 6.8 on the Richter scale. Remnants of this event remains today as reminders of the damage it caused - for instance, the Ruined Farmhouse just outside the town stands as testimony to the shock caused to the town that day.

The visit to the Ruined Farmhouse coincided with upheaval in my own life, where I had just ended an intense, passionate relationship. The end of the relationship felt like an internal earthquake – it was an unexpected shock at the time, the reasons caught me off-guard, and I experienced a profound sense of loss. The Ruined Farmhouse quickly struck me a reflection of my personal life at that point. Like the inhabitants of the Ruined Farmhouse, my life of domestic bliss was disrupted in a powerful moment beyond my control.

I began my creative process by taking photographs. I found one particular photograph, shown in Fig. 1, to be quite striking and used that as the main visual element of the composition.



Fig. 1. Photograph of the Ruined Farmhouse, Meckering Western Australia.

I also took multiple field recordings of the ruins – the sounds of metal being shaken by the wind and creaking under my footsteps, the sound of gravel crunching underfoot, the sound of wind being channeled through bits of rubble, and the sound of rain.

These sounds were then edited in Adobe Audition. Some of the sounds were slowed by varying degrees (200x, 400x, 800x, 1600x) to create the sensation of the earth itself moving and shifting. Other sounds had some manipulation (delay, reverb) or manipulation. These sounds were then layered on top of each other to create a ten-minute composition.

Contour lines from Fig. 1 were used to create percussion lines for the composition, as a method of sonifying the physical geography of a place. Fig. 2 shows the contours of the Ruined Farmhouse being placed on a grid to approximate a stave. These markings were then reproduced in Ableton Live to generate percussion lines.

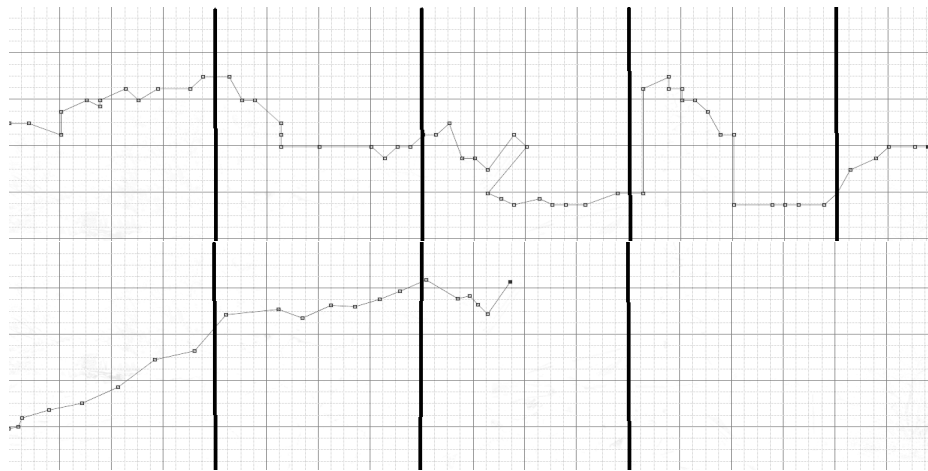


Fig. 2. Using the contours of a photograph to create percussion lines.

The composition was then placed into Adobe After Effects to create a music visualisation, as shown in Fig. 3. There were two reasons for creating a music visualisation – firstly, it acted as a way to tie the photograph and the composition together, thus giving audiences an additional visual cue and secondly it gave added a layer of reactivity between the visual and audio. For *The Dream Is Over*, I had wanted to create a slowly fading image of the photograph, gradually leaving behind the music visualization in itself as a symbol of memories. Using Trapcode Sound Keys, I used the composition to generate key frames for the animation, which were used to control the particle effects via Trapcode Particular.

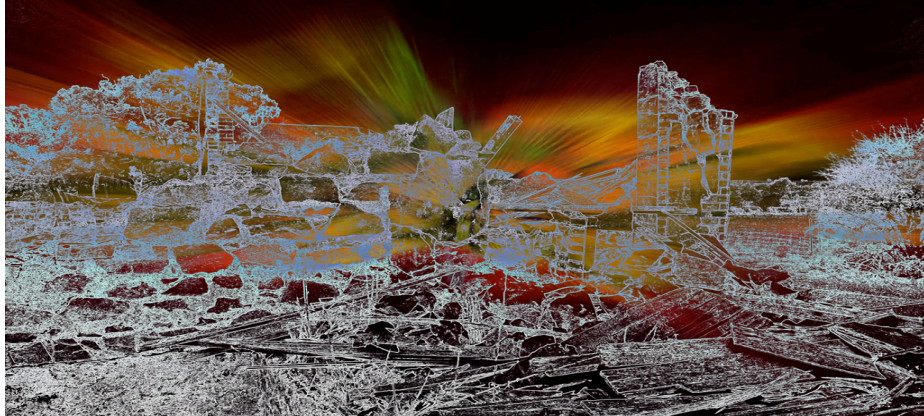


Fig. 3. A screenshot from *The Dream Is Over*, with an inverted version of the photograph and the music visualization playing behind.

3 Reflections

I performed *The Dream Is Over* live at Spectrum Project Space in Perth on October 7th, 2017. The live performance also featured live guitar and vocals provided by myself, with the audio-visual work projected on a screen behind me. I also provided an additional layer of feedback between myself and my vocals through a MaxMSP patch, which changed the contrast and brightness of the audio-visual work according to the volume of my vocals.

Playing live offered an interesting point of reference for both myself and the audience. Through performance, the audience could see me responding emotively to the work, and likewise I was able to create a connection with the audience, channeled through my instruments.

Through the creative process and the live performance, the main striking feature is the symbolic nature of the landscape, and the subjectiveness of interpretations of the landscape. During my time at the Ruined Farmhouse, I had the sense of overlaid histories, with the history of the place intermingling with my personal history. The resultant composition was not only a way to invoke the place in a physical sense, but also in an affective sense. In essence, through *The Dream Is Over*, I learnt about more about the area – and ultimately, more about myself.

References

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