Stories of a ruined space: filmic and sonic approaches to practice-as-research

Christopher Brown & Andrew Knight-Hill

Abstract

This article reflects on the authors' work in investigating how audiovisual practices might represent the experience of disused or ruined structures. With backgrounds in visual and sound practice respectively, the authors have, in their most recent experimental film project *Coccolith* (2018), conceived the Ramsgate wartime tunnels in Kent as a point of collision for divergent artistic approaches to the representation of space. Challenging the site's association with wartime mythology, the project sought to reconfigure the relationship between film and sound practice in order to articulate an alternative representation of the tunnels' history, heritage and temporality. The article reflects on the role of the sound designer in developing soundscapes that embodied the ruined space, and on the role of the director in visually conceiving a spatial experience of the tunnels characterized by the absence of sound – silence. We argue that in conceiving an audiovisual project in terms of texture and gesture, it is possible to reconceptualize both the role of the soundtrack in relation to a film's diegesis, and the role of the director in relation to sound design.

Keywords

space, audiovisual, texture, gesture, Ramsgate, *Coccolith*

Word Count

6,317

Stories of a ruined space: filmic and sonic approaches to practice-as-research

Christopher Brown & Andrew Knight-Hill

Introduction

This article will focus on *Coccolith* (2018), an audiovisual practice-as-research project and the first collaboration between the authors, which came about as a result of our shared interest in the creative representation of space and derelict or ruined structures.[i] The project was shot in the Ramsgate tunnels in Kent, UK, which have been central to a range of historical experiences in the maritime port city. Comprised of a railway tunnel constructed in 1863, a scenic railway tunnel built in 1936, and a network of air raid shelters dug in the late 1930s, this network of passageways extends over five kilometers under the city.[ii] We sought to represent the experience of the tunnels by conceiving and experimenting with forms and methods of storytelling that offered an alternative to those of mainstream commercial cinema.

Coccolith is a short film (16 minutes, 44 seconds) made with a small budget allocated from internal research funds at our institution. This placed constraints on the time we were able to film in the tunnels, which was limited to two days, working eight hours underground per day. This was the maximum we could afford given the costs of accommodation, food, and the payment of cast (five people) and crew (ten people, excluding the authors). The fact that we were producing the film within a university context, however, did mean that we were able to make significant cost savings elsewhere; for instance, we were able to access high-end equipment at no cost, which maximized the project's creative scope within the tight timeframe.

The film will premiere in London in November 2018 at a screening and discussion event targeted at creative practitioners working in academic contexts. However, the film is primarily aimed at audiences at film and sound festivals, especially events focusing on short-form experimental and alternative audiovisual practice; we are aiming for further screenings from early 2019. The film cannot yet be viewed online, given that festival submissions are still in progress, although the following discussion references some clips that are available to watch.

The project aimed to reconfigure the relationship between film and sound practice, the respective disciplines of the authors. Striving to articulate a genuinely audiovisual mode of film production required us to reconsider both the role of the soundtrack in relation to a film's diegesis, and the role of the director in relation to sound design. *Coccolith* conceives the spatial and sonic affordances of the ruined tunnel as the locus of meaning in the film, and our approach prioritizes the characters' immediate experience of place over conventional forms of emplotment. Dug into chalk, the tunnels are ambiguous structures, created by humans, but with human intervention defined by the creation of emptiness where rock was previously present. Yet in the sense that the chalk walls of the shelter tunnels are largely unadorned, human activity has allowed the rock to appear to us in its natural state, signaling the environment's ambiguous relationship to people – and indeed to living things more generally. For *Coccolith* takes its name from the microscopic calcite shells shed by ocean algae, which accumulate on the sea bed over millions of years, forming chalk. In their very composition, therefore, the tunnels at Ramsgate evidence both layers of geological history, and the past existence of living things.

The film explores the material result of this historical accumulation (the tunnels themselves) whilst also deploying notions of accretion figuratively, by

allowing multiple histories inscribed in the same place to co-exist in the film frame. The five characters in the film emerge from different periods in time: the present-day (Liam), the 1930s (Postcard Woman), the 1940s (Smoking Man), the future (Surveyor), and an alternate present-day (Disco Woman).[iii] They are shown to be on individual journeys at different points in time, thus whilst they experience the same *place*, the fact that they emerge from different temporally-defined worlds means that their experience of *space* is different, a distinction which will be explored below. This resonates strongly with Heidegger's concept of historicality, whereby 'history has its essential importance neither in what is past nor in the "today" and its 'connection' with what is past, but in that authentic historicizing of existence which arises from Dasein's *future*' (1978, 438).[iv] Installed in a particular world at the moment of birth, our characters each have a heritage that differentiates their mode of experience as they project themselves (in the sense of anticipating their future) onto the world.

This dramatization of a particular understanding of heritage is intended to challenge the association of the tunnels with wartime nostalgia and mythology, further consolidated following the reopening of the site as a visitor attraction in 2015. Tour guides tell of the grassroots struggle of the local mayor to get the tunnels built during rearmament, for instance, or of Winston Churchill's visit. This reflects what Edensor (2005, 138) refers to as a politics of organized remembering in heritage attractions, which in its reification of the past as linear and fixed relies on a 'narrative impulse' which 'can eclipse the past's alterity'. With Dover just fifteen miles away, the popular association of white chalk cliffs with Britishness and wartime resilience has significant reach in Ramsgate; a myth so potent to have become almost self-evident to many, but which from a phenomenological perspective can be critiqued as a façade, as itself the product of an historical accumulation of discourses.

The use of the Ramsgate tunnels as a site for the commodification of memory has the effect of imposing a fixed meaning on a particular place, a characteristic shared by much mainstream narrative cinema, which tends to conceive place either as a backdrop, or as a drama-generating agent in relation to plot. Thus in preparing the project, we instead revisited a range of art and experimental cinema practice that conceives place, rather than narrative, as the locus of meaning – albeit often in a manner which charts the limits of our ability to determine the meaning of phenomena. *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (Werner Herzog, 2010), for instance, queries the process whereby the cave paintings at Chauvet prompt historians to narrate a past that may simply be unknowable. The imposition of meaning can feel similarly tenuous in ruins, empty and dilapidated environments unusual in the degree to which they 'foreground the values of inarticulacy', as Edensor (2005, 162), puts it, offering only 'disparate fragments, juxtapositions, traces, involuntary memories, inferred meanings, uncanny impressions and peculiar atmospheres' which 'cannot be woven into an eloquent narrative'. In eschewing conventional narrative forms, we sought both to reflect the fragmented nature of knowledge afforded by a ruin, and to articulate an alternative vision of history, heritage and temporality.

Our production was structured to facilitate an unusual degree of responsiveness to environment, and it is necessary, at this point, to set some parameters on the discussion. Issues relating to the absence of a script, and our method of shooting from a concept outline, will not be explored in detail here. Similarly, a methodological discussion of the directorial balance between intervention (instructing or guiding the actor) and non-intervention (allowing the actor to devise, improvise and spontaneously respond to the tunnel space) is outside the scope of this article. Our focus will instead be on the *audiovisual,* the implications of fusing filmic

and sonic approaches to practice-as-research. For the experience of developing this project has afforded novel perspectives for reflection on notions of space, and the functional role of sound and image within the construction of space on film.

Coccolith and audiovisual space

Space can be understood as the three-dimensional interval of distance between objects, whereas a place, which Tuan (1977, 4) refers to as a centre of 'felt value', is endowed with specific socio-historical and cultural meaning. Yet Tuan suggests that in experience, 'the meaning of space often merges with that of place' as, for example, 'what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value' (6). The Ramsgate tunnels can be identified as a place associated with wartime mythology; in challenging that association from a phenomenological angle, however, we sought to strip away these connotations of place, and instead attempted to approach the tunnels in the first instance as a space.

This experiment required us to articulate a mode of production that enabled interplay with the materiality of the tunnels, in line with Bolt's (2004, 6) understanding of practice-as-research as material thinking rooted in Heidegger's notion of *handlability*, a form of comprehending with the hands and eyes that involves 'a relation of care and concernful dealings, not a relation where the world is set before us (knowing subjects) as an object'. Our frequent use of locked-off wide shots in the cinematography, for example, initially came about as a response to the material qualities and limitations of the tunnel space itself.

The level of lighting in the tunnels was very low, and we were not able to increase this substantially, given the lack of power sources over long distances and

our limited budget, which prevented the rental of a generator or cabling. This restricted us to the use of existing lighting (single bulbs placed at intervals of around 10 metres) and battery-powered LED light panels. Several cameras with which we experimented were inadequate to capture the low-light environment without noise, let alone to render it creatively, while tracking shots were complicated given that the operator and camera assistants had to pass bulbs that unavoidably cast shadows. We concluded that the Arri Alexa offered, overall, the widest creative scope in the low-light conditions; moreover we did not need to budget for its use, given that the equipment was owned by our institution. Filming with an Alexa did, however, make tracking shots even more time-consuming to achieve: the weight of the camera body made quick manoeuvring in narrow tunnels impractical, whilst tracking characters at head-height risked damaging the camera on the low and uneven ceilings. Given that we had just two days to shoot the entire project, the use of tracking shots had to be kept to a minimum, and ultimately we filmed just three shots of this type.

We made aesthetic decisions in relation to a set of constraints, and in doing so, explored a range of existing film practice that was thematically and aesthetically relevant. One such influence was *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2003), shot entirely within the confines of the dilapidated Fu He theatre in Taipei. In the film, the living and the dead coexist within the same frame; haunting configured to evoke the social and sexual practices of a bygone, partly fantasized cinema-going experience. Tsai utilizes a combination of long takes and long shots, emphasizing composition in depth. We adopted aspects of this style, finding it productive both in affording the actors relatively greater freedom of movement within the frame, and in reducing the prominence and physical significance of the actors in relation to the environment.

This helped us in depicting human beings as just one component of a broader material texture, via a spatial overview, whilst elsewhere the use of close-ups provided focus.

Such devices represent one means by which the tunnel space becomes narrated, and in this sense, the making of the film can be conceived as the process whereby a filmic space becomes a filmic place. The tunnel structure complicates this distinction, however. On the one hand, the Ramsgate tunnels are places in themselves (originally called 'shelter tunnels', indeed, with connotations of sedentary refuge). On the other hand, they are a network of narrow passageways, and can be considered as spaces designed to facilitate passage – movement – from one place to another. For space, Tuan (1977, 4) argues, is fundamentally 'that which allows movement' whereas 'place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place'.

The film experiments with this productive tension between space and place, and sound is central to this, with the extended shot durations allowing for subtle manipulations of the soundscape over time, enabling the environment itself *to sound*. The composer Denis Smalley cites Henri Lefebvre who states that 'Physical space has no "reality" without the energy that is deployed in it: energy modifies space or generates a new space' (2007, 38). The tunnels as a filmic space cannot exist without the energy of the performers and sounds deployed within the environment; these are not individual static moments, but variable trajectories that define spatial relationships through processes of change. Thrift (2006, 96) conceives of space as

> undergoing continual construction exactly through the agency of things encountering each other in more or less organized circulations. This is a relational view of space in which, rather than space being viewed as a container within which the world proceeds, space is seen as a co-product of those proceedings.

A material understanding of the tunnel spaces within the film is afforded visually through the cinematography and the actors' devised interactions with the environment, and sonically through what Chion (1994, 114) would describe as a high Material Sound Index (MSI). These indices are defined as the characteristics which refer to the concrete processes of the sound's production, connecting the listener to its materiality. Chion asserts, for instance, that 'Bresson and Tarkovsky have a predilection for materialising indices that immerse us in the here-and-now (dragging footsteps with clogs or old shoes in Bresson's films, agonised coughing and painful breathing in Tarkovsky's). Tati, by suppressing MSIs, subtly gives us an ethereal perception of the world: think of the abstract dematerialised klunk of the dining room's swing in *Mr. Hulot's Holiday*' (Chion 1994, 116). As we will explore below, the soundtrack in *Coccolith* takes advantage of MSIs in order to articulate and drive the filmic narrative.

During the development of *Coccolith*, the interplay of image and sound was conceived as a defining aspect of the project, and this carried through to the phases of production and post-production. Although the majority of the practical audio work on the film took place within the post-production phase, sound was central as a conceptual underpinning of the project from the outset. The following sections reflect firstly, on the role of the sound designer in developing soundscapes that embodied the ruined space, and secondly, on the role of the director in visually conceiving a spatial experience of the tunnels characterized by the absence of sound – silence.

Sound design: texture and gesture

The soundtrack for *Coccolith* employs concepts and techniques from electroacoustic music, allowing fluid approaches to sonic articulations of space and place. Electroacoustic music emerged with the possibilities afforded by the recording and amplification of sound. One of the pioneers of this new ideology was Edgard Varèse (1940) who, in the early twentieth century, envisioned a new musical ideal of 'organised sound' in which all sounds are considered musically valid. As opposed to motif and melody, Varèse conceptualised his 'organised sound' in terms of forms, layers and shapes. Almost fifty years later, Smalley elaborated upon these ideas through spectromorphology, an approach to conceptualising sound in terms of its frequency content and shape/trajectory, identifying gesture and texture as fundamental structuring strategies for electroacoustic music (1986). Smalley defines gesture as vectoral, 'concerned with action directed away from a previous goal or towards a new goal […] synonymous with […] growth and progress', contrasted against texture, which is reflective, 'concerned with internal behaviour patterns […] rapt in contemplation' (1986, 82). Thus gesture presses forwards, while texture marks time, a dynamic we explored in *Coccolith*.[v]

Traditionally, diegetic 'sound design' might be considered to serve a largely textural role – non-narrative, but instead describing the world of the film – while non-diegetic 'music' might be described as occupying a more gestural role, commenting upon and elaborating narrative thrusts. However, these distinctions are increasingly being called into question, both through compositional practice that adopts a more timbral aesthetic, and academic critique which challenges the logic of the non-diegetic, arguing that 'non-diegetic' elements actually play a significant part in the construction of diegesis itself (see Kassabian 2013; Winters 2010). The soundtrack for *Coccolith* provided a rich site for interrogating these problems, through the

adoption of the *musique concréte,* an electroacoustic music approach in which 'real world' sonic materials operate to serve both diegetic (telling) and narrative (showing) functions.[vi]

The tunnel environment presented both gestural (the pathways and trajectories of the tunnels themselves) and textural (the materials of the chiseled rock and brick) forms which served as key points of inspiration for the soundtrack. Each scene within the film possesses a unique soundscape, but this section will focus upon two key examples. The first explores the textural role of sound in constructing the real and imaginary spaces of the tunnels, while the second considers the gestural role of sound in amplifying narrative.

Liam descends into the tunnels and is plunged into darkness. In the sequence that follows (Clip 1), the limited spectral range of the low frequency rumble echoes the limited illumination within the frame and, more significantly, projects itself through the image to convey the notion of the unknown. The amorphous form of the noise texture is difficult to identify and its low frequency character delimits the frame, providing an impression of extended scale. Absence is a key feature of the soundtrack at this point. The swish of fabric and footsteps (present in previous scenes) are absent, projecting an abstract and almost dreamlike quality into the sequence (low MSI), while the compressed spectral range of the noise carries forward spatial metaphors of enclosed space, and might also trigger associations with submersion and underwater listening. On top of this, the sound of Liam's breathing conveys trepidation. Isolated from any other material sounds of the character, his voice takes on an almost disembodied form, increasingly akin to the acousmatic voices which punctuate the black. This denial of Liam's embodiment, through the suppression of his personal

sounds, positions the character in a liminal state, prefiguring his later entrapment in the tunnel environment.

As Liam emerges from the darkness, he is propelled by a gestural utterance and a vectorised noise tone, compelling him towards the light. As he progresses forwards, his footsteps are gradually revealed by a rising low pass filter, which opens up the higher frequencies and ramps up the MSI. By the end of the sequence, Liam's enriched personal soundscape positions him solidly within the physical and material world of the tunnel, secure for the moment from the calcifying effects of the environment.

The shifting textural and timbral qualities of the sound morph the constructed environment of the film, redirecting the focus of the scene. By articulating character movements with closely recorded sounds, the listener is placed within the personal space of the character. The familiar everyday experience of close tactile sounds (for example, fabric rubbing and brushing against fabric, skin on skin), which possess a high MSI, create an intimate human connection between audience and character while, in contrast, the absence of these sounds shifts perspective to the impersonal context of the tunnel. Individual and personal sounds are unique, isolated and distinct, whereas atmospheres and ambiences are manifold; their collective individualities occlude one another creating a non-distinct mass. When Liam loses his individual sounds he begins his transition out of the material space of the tunnel and into the abstract 'dream' space, from the individual and personal to the collective; subsumed into the space. Indeed, the mysterious character of the Smoking Man is framed by the relative lack of sound associated with him. When the pair meet (Clip 2), the crunch of Liam's footsteps, and the tension and strain of his fabric, articulate his concrete reality, while the Smoking Man is silent.

Within this second scene, the sound adopts a more gestural characteristic in order to convey the intense trajectory of the characters' meeting. The scene is underpinned by a noisy soundscape that, in contrast to every other atmospheric sound within the film, changes over time. The noisy atmospheric tone is a slowly descending glissando, multiple copies of which are overlaid so as to create a Shepard tone effect, an extended and unbroken descent in pitch. Further, as these imbricated tones drop in pitch, their stereo width decreases, drawing in from the sides to the centre of the frame. The effect of this is twofold: firstly, the decreasing pitch creates an uncertain impression for the audience because in no preceding scene has the atmospheric sound shifted in such an uncanny way; thus the perceived impression is one of imbalance and insecurity. Secondly, the soundscape draws attention to the perspective of the extended tunnel projecting away from the characters into the distance, set in tension with the foregrounded characters. This occurs in a dynamic fashion; the first shift in panning occurs when Liam crosses into the frame, drawing the soundscape with him towards the Smoking Man. In this way, the sonic gestures of the tunnel atmosphere are linked with the motion gesture of this character, and a musical tension is constructed. When Liam stops in front of the Smoking Man, the trajectory of the tone continues onwards into the distance, narrowing and descending. As the tone and Liam have been gesturally connected, their subsequent divergence ratchets up the tension of the later scene. They move from a position of harmonic concordance to discordance. This is an example of an audiovisual gesture, one that constructs both the diegetic space of the scene and the narrative trajectory of the film.

Gestures convey forward motion and are thus naturally inclined towards conveying narrative, but they need not do so by operating independently within either distinct aural or visual domains. As implied by Chion's (1994) concept of added

value, the most powerful audiovisual associations are those that present divergence, but audiovisual gestures can also operate in concordance with one another. When the two men appear again together in the final dancing scene (Clip 3), their lethargic movement shifts in time with the repetitions of the looping music; both men have surrendered themselves to the tunnel and to the music. Neither character possesses any of their own mimetic sounds: no breathing, no fabric, no footsteps. They are completely unanchored, enveloped by the dreamy electronic music that fills the space. Concordant gestures link all three elements of the audiovisual together (Liam, Smoking Man and the music).

Silence: directing as listening

Discussing industrial ruins, Edensor argues that the mundane routines and embodied pursuits of the former workers are 'communicated by the ghostly traces of their residues' (2005, 149). This might entail the architecture as a whole, or the tiny remnants of the former occupants themselves, 'the skin of the workers that remains as dust, the crumbs from their snacks, and miniscule vestiges of blood and sweat' (155). *Coccolith* was named after the microscopic calcite shells that evoke pre-historical activity, with the characters similarly conceived as the ghostly residue of a more recent human past. However, an actor attempting to use such traces as a prompt for performance faces difficulties when it comes to sound. Edensor observes 'the peculiar quiescence of the ruined factory' and notes how 'the soundscape is haunted by an absence of noise' (149). Yet this absence is of a different order to the haunting of landscape, as it has no material basis; the residue of the Ramsgate tunnels' past might be seen, touched, smelt and (theoretically) tasted, but it cannot be heard.

When visualizing the film and working with actors, therefore, the director sought to dramatize the inaccessibility of the past sounds of the tunnels, and to represent the eerie experience of silence one has when entering them alone. Practitioners and theorists have followed John Cage in emphasizing the relativity of this experience, however, the elusiveness of 'absolute' silence and the paradox whereby there can be no such thing as silence without sound (see Cage 1973). Chion (2016, 48) discusses the ways in which Cage associated silence with traffic noise, citing the composer's remark that when he hears music 'it seems to me that someone is talking, and talking about his feelings or his ideas' whereas when he hears the sound of traffic, 'I don't have the feeling that anyone is talking. I have the feeling that sound is acting.' Silence is a performance that entails the absence of gestural intention (associated with speech, for instance) and instead emphasizes textural ambience.

Yet the relationship between the two could be seen as interdependent. Chion (2016, 49) asserts that the sound of traffic is 'like a series of events that simultaneously cancel each other out while also, in their diversity, never melting into a collective mass. Each noise effaces the other by simultaneously not being very different and yet never being an exact replication.' A texture could thus be comprised of numerous gestures. But do these gestures necessarily all have to be sonic – can visual gestures contribute to a texture of silence? Discussing the work of Tsai Ming-liang, Lim (2014, 126) argues that an aesthetic of silence is a structuring feature of 'slow cinema', asserting that Tsai 'prefers to use visual and silent devices rather than verbal expression to construct his cinema of slowness'. Silence is understood not as having nothing on the soundtrack, which is technically impossible, but as a stylistic choice that might entail, for example, sparseness of dialogue, the accentuation of ambient noise, and the absence of (conventionally defined) non-diegetic music (see

Lim 2014, 116-122). Further to this, Lim draws on the work of Greg Taylor, who argues that silence on film has to be constructed visually through rhetorical devices, among which he lists 'resolute fixity (the shot as still image)' and 'the tendency to restrain movement within the frame while having those figures spend an inordinate amount of time *looking* at their world' (cit. Lim 2014, 127).

In laying the groundwork for performance, we sought to experiment with rhetorical devices such as these, which contributed to the construction of a 'silent' texture. We sought initial inspiration in archive material, such as a photograph that appeared in *The War Illustrated* in September 1940, which features a man in a suit, possibly an architect or engineer, leaning against the left-hand wall of the tunnel. His apparently casual posture seems at odds with his gaze; he is not looking at the camera, nor is he drawn to the depth or extent of the tunnel. Instead, he stares directly ahead, expressionless, facing a wall that is just over a metre away. This, coupled with his positioning opposite a light bulb, suggests the image was staged. The man's unnatural fixity and peculiarly directed gaze reinforce the impression of the tunnel's silence.

The framing evoked a niggling sense of déjà-vu: a man stood leaning on the left, facing a centre frame devoted to a symmetrically composed vanishing point. We recalled this as the final shot of *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949), in which Holly Martins (Joseph Cotton) waits for Anna Schmidt (Alida Valli), but is ultimately snubbed as she walks straight past him. Though here motivated by narrative, the staged detachment of Valli's performance is not dissimilar to the man in the tunnels, while all diegetic sound has been removed: Anna's footsteps cannot be heard, while the rate of the falling leaves implies an unheard breeze. The fixity of the framing (a locked-off wide shot of 90 seconds in duration) and melancholy zither score by Anton Karas underscore the silent qualities of the performances, with gesture (Martins'

weary reaching for a cigarette) and movement (Anna's defiant march onwards) suggesting two characters whose perspectives are now so opposed that they barely seem capable of occupying the same space.

A scene in *Coccolith* graphically recalls both influences, experimenting with devices through which an aesthetic of silence might be constructed. The Smoking Man initially stands against the left wall. In the next shot, 72 seconds in duration, Liam walks into frame to join him, before walking away, towards the vanishing point (see Clip 2, a similar movement to Anna's from *The Third Man* but shot from the reverse angle). Silence is evoked by the physical restraint of one actor and the slow, deliberate stride of the other. Rooted to the spot, the Smoking Man stares ahead at the wall, apparently unaware of Liam's presence. Liam tries to make himself known to the man by moving closer, stopping within inches of the man's face, but what commences as a sexual advance evolves into a studied examination. As Liam walks away into the distance, the man begins crying.

To the extent that the actors playing Liam and Smoking Man had no dialogue, their performances recall those from a silent film – which is not to suggest that the characters cannot hear their own universe.[vii] Performing silence in *Coccolith* was often instead a question of physical technique. For example, if the silent star Lillian Gish described her practice of progressively increasing the scope of her gestures as the shot type became wider (Day-Mayer 2002, 81-82), then in *Coccolith* the actors were directed to minimize their gestures regardless of the shot type, and not to alter the slow speed of their movement. This significantly reduces the impression of motion in long shots, distancing the film from the conventions of silent film performance, and evoking instead the conventions of slow cinema, a textural aesthetic of silence.

Rendered in this way, Liam and Smoking Man's detachment from one another implies multiple present-tense experiences of the same place, which the audience views in composite, but which the characters experience individually. In exploring these dynamics, the staging additionally referenced a 244-second shot in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, in which the unnamed Japanese tourist (Mitamura Kiyonobu) cruises the backrooms of the cinema and encounters an unnamed man (Chen Chao-jung), with whom he shares a cigarette. Despite their physical proximity and the tourist's desire for sex, the other man is haunted and barely seems able to register another presence; for most of the shot, he makes no eye contact, instead staring vacantly ahead. The pair stand in awkward stasis, and when the tourist moves closer, within a few inches of the other man's face, he is not rewarded with a reaction.

The reflexive aspects of these scenes in *Coccolith* were intended to evoke staging devices derived from both the tunnel photographic archives and past cinema. The scene in *Coccolith* was designed to mirror the director's own impression of the uncanny when first seeing the photograph of the man in the tunnel, which provoked memories of scenes not personally experienced, but staged in past cinema – memories characterized by, and remembered for, their silence.

If the absence of dialogue in these scenes in *Coccolith* contributed to the construction of an aesthetic of silence, then speech was used in some other scenes. Speech is usually conceived in film as gestural, as scripted dialogue that drives the narrative forward, and could be understood in terms of Smalley's (1986, 82) understanding of gesture as the vectoral, explored in the previous section, 'concerned with action directed away from a previous goal or towards a new goal', synonymous with growth and progress. However in *Coccolith*, speech does not operate in this manner and was instead conceived as having more in common with texture, which

Smalley argues is 'concerned with internal behaviour patterns […] rapt in contemplation' (82). Scripted dialogue was not used; instead two characters (Liam, Smoking Man) remain silent, whilst the improvised speech of the others (Postcard Woman, Surveyor, Disco Woman) was conceived as utterance, a texture of physical performance. This 'foregrounds the values of inarticulacy', to use the phrase with which Edensor (2005, 162) describes the aesthetics of a ruin:

> Rather like the nature of a ruin, the stories about it must similarly be constituted out of a jumble of disconnected things, occurrences and sensations. Ruins are disarticulated spaces and language can only capture their characteristics through halting speech. Bits of stories suggest themselves then trail away into silence.

For the actors devising their performances in *Coccolith*, speech was either halted completely, or constructed out of this 'jumble' of things before trailing away. The character of the Surveyor, for instance, is from the future, a contractor of a corporation tasked with scoping out the tunnel as a possible location for the disposal of dangerous waste.[viii] When devising his character, the actor was provided with a set of architectural surveys of the Ramsgate tunnels, dating mainly from the 1950s, containing phrases and terminology which he memorized and incorporated into his character's verbal note-taking, improvised at the moment of performance.

The Surveyor's words offer only confusing fragments of narrative, and are indeed inherently contradictory, comprised of terminology from the past, yet delivered by a character from the future. More important is that the actor's speech occurs as a result of his direct interaction with the environment: he looks at, touches and feels the tunnels, and as he does so, speech is produced. Sontag (1966, 20) writes that silence in art can be used to undermine 'bad speech', that is, 'speech dissociated

from the body (and, therefore, from feeling), speech not organically informed by the sensuous presence and concrete particularity of the speaker and by the individual occasion for using language'. Our approach in *Coccolith* was designed to ensure that the majority of speech in performance appeared organic, reflecting not merely the 'individual occasion' for using language, but the particular space in which language was used.

This was reinforced by our discovery after the shoot that the actor's words – archival survey nomenclature – made no logical sense when delivered in the wartime shelter tunnel. For revisiting the old survey reports, we realized that the terminology half-recalled by the actor at the moment of performance instead referred to the disused Victorian railway tunnel, an entirely different location in the complex. Attesting to an experience of the ruin as a disarticulated space, utterance of this type neither halts speech, nor renders language meaningful, but is instead a sonic texture of physical performance.

Conclusion

In conceiving an audiovisual project in terms of texture and gesture, it is possible to reconceptualize both the role of the soundtrack in relation to a film's diegesis, and the role of the director in relation to sound design. Sounds embody both tactile impressions of the environment and also perform functions in the filmic narrative conveying mood and tension, ideas that might traditionally be associated with non-diegetic music. These gestural and textural sounds do not simply flesh out the world of the film, but actively convey the narrative and phenomenological experience of the

film itself. They are neither sound effects nor detached external commentaries upon the diegetic action, but are instead part of an indissoluble audiovisual entity.

Further, by abstracting characteristics from the visual and the sonic, one can map and deconstruct gestural and textural associations across the audiovisual space. The elements of *Coccolith* are not individual narrative layers that can be unpicked, but one cohesive whole, each part of which modulates the other and which can be understood in musical terms. Indeed the project as a whole demonstrates the creative potential of directing as listening, conceiving visualization and performance in relation to sound design before the fact; the value of experimenting as a filmmaker with concepts associated with electroacoustic music, such as spectromorphology, which identifies gesture and texture as fundamental structuring strategies. Emerging practices of this type, situated within the relatively fluid environment of the academy, assert the importance of genuine audiovisuality as a mode of filmmaking.

References

Bolt, Barbara. 2004. "Heidegger, Handlability and Praxical Knowledge". Paper presented at the *Australian Council of University Art & Design Schools Conference*, 23-25 September. http://acuads.com.au/conference/article/heidegger-handlability-and-praxical-knowledge/

Brown, Christopher. 2018. *Coccolith*. UK: Coccolith Productions.

Brown, Christopher. 2015. *Remission*. On DVD: *Boys on Film 13*. UK: Peccadillo Pictures.

Cage, John. 1973. *Silence*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Catford, Nick. 2005. *The Ramsgate Tunnels: Main Line, Public Air Raid Shelter & Scenic Railway*. Ramsgate, Kent: Michaels Bookshop.

Chion, Michel. 2016. *Sound: An Acoulogical Treatise*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Chion, Michel. 1994. *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen*. Translated by Claudia Gorbmann. New York: Columbia University Press.

Day-Mayer, Helen. 2002. "Documents on Performance: Lillian Gish on Acting on the Silent Screen". *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 29 (1): 80-82.

Edensor, Tim. 2005. *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality*. Oxford: Berg.

Heidegger, Martin. (1962) 1978. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Reprint, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Herzog, Werner. 2010. *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*. USA: Creative Differences.

Hill, Andrew. 2014. *Sounds of the Cultural Quarter*. Arts and Humanities Research Council: *Affective Digital Histories*. http://affectivedigitalhistories.org.uk/apps

Hill, Andrew. 2014. *Stille Lyd*. http://ahillav.co.uk/Music/Music.html

Hill, Andrew. 2013. *Abstracted Journeys*. http://ahillav.co.uk/Music/Music.html

Kassabian, Anahid. 2013. "The End of Diegesis As We Know It?". In *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, edited by John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman and Carol Vernallis, 89-106. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lim, Song Hwee. 2014. *Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Madsen, Michael. 2010. *Into Eternity*. Finland: Films Transit International.

"Ramsgate Has The World's Finest Shelters". *The War Illustrated*, September 27
1940: 324.

Raynauld, Isabelle. 2001. "Dialogues in Early Silent Screenplays: What Actors Really
Said". In *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, edited by Richard Abel and Rick
Altman, 69-78. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Reed, Carol. 1949. *The Third Man*. UK: British Lion Film Corporation.

Smalley, Denis. 2007. "Space-form and the acousmatic image". *Organised Sound* 12
(1): 35-58.

Smalley, Denis. 1986. "Spectro-morphology and Structuring Processes". In *The
Language of Electroacoustic Music*, edited by Simon Emmerson, 61-93.
Basingstoke: Macmillan Press.

Sontag, Susan. 1966. "The Aesthetics of Silence". Chapter 1 in *Styles of a Radical
Will*. London: Penguin.

Tati, Jaques. 1953. *Mr Hulot's Holiday*. France. Discifilm.

Thrift, Nigel. 2006. "Space: The Fundamental Stuff of Human Geography". In *Key
Concepts in Geography*, edited by Nicholas Clifford, Sarah Holloway,
Stephen Rice, and Gill Valentine, 95-107. London: Sage.

Tsai, Ming-liang. 2003. *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*. Taiwan: Wellspring Media.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1977. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota.

Varèse, Edgard. 1940. "Organized Sound for the Sound Film." *The Commonweal*,
December 13: 204-205.

Winters, Ben. 2010. "The Non-diegetic Fallacy: Film Music and Narrative Space".

Music & Letters 91 (2): 224-244.

Video Clips: Links & Captions

Clip 1: Liam enters the tunnels in *Coccolith* (Christopher Brown, 2018).
https://vimeo.com/255546926

Clip 2: Liam encounters the Smoking Man in *Coccolith* (Christopher Brown, 2018).
https://vimeo.com/255547081

Clip 3: Disco Woman watches Liam and Smoking Man dance, before making her escape in *Coccolith* (Christopher Brown, 2018).
https://vimeo.com/255547229

Endnotes

[i] Our previous work addressing these themes includes *Remission* (Brown 2015), a reimagining of Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* shot in crumbling wartime installations on the Dartford marshes, and *Sounds of the Cultural Quarter* (Hill 2014), part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council's *Affective Digital Histories* project, which explored the forgotten history of Leicester's industrial and post-industrial pasts through interactive sound maps.

[ii] For more on the Ramsgate tunnels, see Catford (2005).

[iii] The cast are Eugenia Caruso (Disco Woman), Matthew Harvey (Liam), Kazeem Amore (Surveyor), Emily Outred (Postcard Woman), and George Naylor (Smoking Man).

[iv] Original emphasis. See also 424 - 455.

[v] Of course, these distinctions are not absolute binary states, a continuum flows between the two. Smalley (1986, 83) describes sonic materials as being either 'gesture carried' or 'texture carried'.

[vi] This built on previous research projects and commissions exploring the dramatic and representational possibilities of *musique concrète* approaches, such as *Abstracted Journeys* (Hill 2013) developed as part of the EU-Funded *Compose With Sounds* project, and *Stille Lyd* (Hill 2014) developed thanks to a grant from the British Council and Arts Council England.

[vii] Reynaud (2001, 75) notes that 'silent cinema' was a retrospective term, arguing that the era was characterized not by actors imagining a silent storyworld, but instead by 'hearing spectators, who temporarily lose our ability to hear'.

[viii] When developing this character, we looked at the Finnish documentary *Into Eternity* (Michael Madsen, 2010) about the construction of an underground nuclear waste repository.