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## Filming the river: memories of the tidal Tamar

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### Abstract

*Our paper explores the affinity between location and the registers of memory through the material specificities of moving image and the place of cinema using two recent moving image artworks, Reach and Maelstrom: The Return (2014), as case studies.*

*Reach is an 'environmental' direct animation that enables a symbiotic conversation between artist and place through film's agency as a sensitive and sensible recording medium. The imagery is created by burying 16mm filmstrips in the alluvial mud of the banks of the Tamar, allowing the river to 'make the film' through the flow of its tidal waters and the action of the biota. In Maelstrom: The Return, mysterious upwellings and whirlpools flood with cinematic memories of long-forgotten arrivals and departures at the mouth of the River Tamar, effected through the 'projection' of archival home movie footage upon the substrate of unstill waters and the 'sea of moving image'.*

*Our working method is a close reading of our subject and an interaction with it. We critically reflect on the affective interplay of memory in our engagement with elemental forces of place and the materials of filmmaking and the audience's embodied experience of moving image and sound.*

*Reach makes memories, Maelstrom retrieves them, yet both re-create memory in the present. The tidal river, like cinema, creates intermittent movement, the flux of stasis and motion effecting a confluence of histories and lived experience – like the stream of images on a screen, creating an experience of film that is recognisable yet different each time.*

**Keywords:** Film, Materiality, Memory, River, Tide.

### Introduction

This paper concerns two recent collaborative moving image artworks 'about place', *Reach*<sup>1</sup> and *Maelstrom: The Return*,<sup>2</sup> which focus on the tidal River Tamar and explore our experience of place and memory. Although these are separate projects, these works are thematically connected in that both relate to the confluence of histories at the locations and 'bring the past into the present' - in *Reach* we looked at the upper tidal reaches of the River Tamar; for *Maelstrom*, we were based at the mouth of the river where it meets Plymouth Sound. Each film was made in response to different parameters of context – *Reach* was an artistic commission, whilst *Maelstrom* was creative practice research. We followed a similar methodology and used film-based and digital technologies in the creation of these artworks, but used different processes and

strategies for each. In our essay we critically reflect on *Reach* and *Maelstrom*, in order to draw out and better understand the interplay of the materials and the material processes of filmmaking and the resonance between location and memory.

### Context

We are based in Plymouth, a city on the south coast of the far south-west peninsula of the British Isles. Known as Britain's Ocean City, Plymouth is situated between two rivers, the Plym to the east, and the Tamar to the west. The source of the River Tamar lies close to the north Cornish coast and the river then flows south for nearly one hundred kilometres, cutting through the south-west peninsula to form a natural boundary between the counties of Cornwall and Devon. The tidal section of the Tamar extends from Gunnislake weir for thirty kilometres until its mouth at the Hamoaze, where the river enters Plymouth Sound.

As artist filmmakers, we have separate practices, but we also work together collaboratively to create single and multiple screen works that explore our relationship to landscape, land and place. The natural world is an important strand of practice for both of us, and we have explored the environmental tensions of urban regeneration and expansion in several moving image projects sited in the liminal spaces of the city's borders with the sea. Living in Plymouth, the sea is a constant presence and we are affected by its tidal rhythms and marine weather conditions in our day-to-day experience. Previous artworks we have made, both individually authored and collaborative, that establish a thematic genealogy of practice relevant to the artworks discussed here, include *Night Sounding* (1993),<sup>3</sup> *Elemental* (1994),<sup>4</sup> *Blue Kayak* (2001),<sup>5</sup> *Teign Spirit* (2009),<sup>6</sup> and *Sea Front* (2009).<sup>7</sup> The cultural commentator Edith Doove has described our working method as "a kind of close reading of [our] subject and an immediate interaction with it" (Doove 2014). *Reach* and *Maelstrom* are products of a sustained interactive engagement with the tidal Tamar, a form of close analysis that allowed the specificities of place to 'speak' through a form of dialogic exchange with us. We will now consider each of the two films as case studies, in order to tease out our processes of engagement with place and elemental forces and to follow the flows of spatio-temporality.

### Reach

The first film is a site-specific direct animation artwork made along the banks of the River Tamar at the upper limits of its tidal reaches beyond Calstock. The film was commissioned by The River Tamar Project

for the *It's All About the River* film festival, which took place in September 2014 (The River Tamar Project 2014). Both the visual and audio components of the film were created by the place itself: the imagery was formed by burying 16mm filmstrips in the mud banks of the Tamar, allowing the river to 'make the film' through the movements of its tidal waters and the action of the biota - the flora and fauna living in the river's fresh and saline waters and its banks. The accompanying sonic environment oscillates between air and water, using a mix from a hydrophone placed in the river and the audioscape recorded above the water's surface.

In approaching this project, we were interested in the poetic affinity between the temporal and spatial linearity of the filmstrip and the Upper Tamar River at Calstock, and in the resonance between the elemental aspects of this landscape and immersive states of being. Although the images derive directly from strips of photochemical 16mm film material, it was intended from the outset that *Reach* would be shown as a digital piece, with its first exhibition as a digital 360 installation in Calstock Arts, close to the area where the film was made.

The histories of Calstock and its peoples were central to our project, and emphasise the central importance of the Tamar River in moving cargo – human, animal, mineral, and edible – along its length and across this stretch of water that separates Devon and Cornwall, and foreground the inaccessibility of this place by land, even today.

The flow and level of the Tamar at Calstock is determined by tides, and the cyclical nature of the flow of seawater up and down the river towards the limit of tidal reach just beyond the village. The change from ebb to flood is gradual, the ebb current downstream slows, there is a period of slack water, then slowly the flood tide starts flowing upstream again. The flood plains on the inner curves of bends of the Tamar at its tidal reaches are a marked contrast to the rocky cliffs of the lower river and the Hamoaze, and result from this place's unique topography.

The land on either side of the southern section of the River Tamar is notable for the mining activity that has taken place from medieval times. The natural resources extracted include copper, tin, arsenic, lead, silver, wolfram and manganese. Following the copper boom of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Calstock area produced half of the world's arsenic, a by-product of the smelting process of various metals, during the final two decades of the century. At this time, arsenic was used widely in the manufacture of pigments, dyes, glass, medicines and cosmetics despite its toxicity (University of Exeter 1996). However, by the first world war, the mining industry had collapsed, leaving a legacy in the landscape today of ruined mine buildings and contaminated workings (Calstock Online Parish Clerk 2016).

In the initial stages of our project's development, we met David Gilvear, the Professor of River Science in the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences at Plymouth University. Our conversations with Professor Gilvear changed our understanding of the River Tamar and were important in informing our engagement with our subject when we came to make

the film. We had thought of the river as being principally a conduit of water, with the banks and shores and the riverbed forming a channel for the freshwater flowing down and the seawater moving up and down according to the tide. As Professor Gilvear explained, he saw the river as being the whole ecosystem of the valley through which it flowed – for a scientist, the trees and animals living in the river corridor were an integral part of what constituted the river, as relevant as the watercourse itself. As a result of our discussions, we were alert to the whole environment around us during our fieldtrips to the locations along the Tamar above Calstock. We became sensitised to changes in atmosphere, noticed small details, and noted the continually shifting contours of the river from one visit to the next, as the river's mudbanks became eroded and collapsed into the water.

A key aim for us as artist filmmakers is to follow an ethical aesthetic practice that addresses social and political issues, working with the world and the materials and materiality of filmmaking, whilst being aware that we are "living in a damaged world" (Tsing 2014). In their *New Materialism* manifesto, published in 2012, Andrew Simms and Ruth Potts of the counterculture think-tank New Economics Foundation argue for a re-thinking of our relationship to the world and our use of its materials and resources. They state that 'The modern age has already been described as a 'story of stuff,' a time in which the human use and transformation of natural resources has created an age that future historians will term the 'anthropocene'" (Simms and Potts 2012, 2). Simms' and Potts' message is that we need to develop an awareness of limited resources and establish a deeper and more lasting relationship to the world and the non-human beings and things in it.

The proposed geologic epoch of the Anthropocene has gained currency as the current century has advanced, driven in part by a growing awareness that we are living in a world whose natural resources and environments have become increasingly impoverished and toxic.<sup>3</sup> Climate change is seen by many as resulting from the Industrial Revolution, which took place from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, exacerbated by the invention of the steam engine in the late-eighteenth century and a corresponding rise in carbon dioxide emissions. A deeper perspective is proposed by the paleoclimatologist William Ruddiman, who has suggested that humans have had a key geological effect on the Earth since the beginning of the Holocene, the epoch eleven and a half thousand years ago which began when the glaciers which covered much of western Europe began to melt and retreat. Ruddiman's estimation of the Anthropocene's origins at the end of the last ice age are based on his estimates of the atmospheric carbon dioxide produced as a direct result of agriculture and deforestation (Ruddiman 2013: 45-68).

We saw a correlation between the rapid decline in the manufacture and use of 'celluloid' film in moving image production at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the collapse of the mining industry in south-east Cornwall in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. 16mm is a format with industrial origins in broadcast news and documentary recording,

as well as a medium for amateurs and artists. We buried 16mm filmstrips – discarded lengths of film material from other projects – in the mudbanks of the river so the material would be marked by the movement of water and silt, and affected by the organisms living there, and could respond to the residues of the redundant mining operations along the upper tidal reaches of the River Tamar which continue to percolate down into the water. In finding a new purpose for the redundant, unwanted, cast-off 16mm material in this way, we align to the new materialism's imperative of "understanding materials through working with them ... understanding and working with the material, not dominating it" in order to gain insights into the potential and limitations of the material world (Simms and Potts, 2012, 13).

During the summer of 2014 we initiated the exchange, and the river answered – and so began our symbiotic conversation. The discarded filmstrips we recycled include lengths of clear leader, black and white countdown leader, scraps of found footage, sections of unexposed colour negative, and a sequence of colour leader trimmed from a screening print. This disparate collection of 'unwanted' 16mm film became transformed into the artwork that is seen on screen in the finished piece.

In the film *Reach*, as it is seen by an audience, these filmstrips appear in the chronological order in which they were made. We also included our early test strips in the final film. These clear filmstrips have mud and organic matter adhering to their surfaces, which we collected during our initial site visits walking the riverbanks of the Tamar above Calstock. In addition to wet river mud, which dried to produce exquisite patterns of ridges and craquelure, we collected samples of small plants we discovered along the area of inundation, which were then stuck to the film. These included pine needles, leaflets of medicinal Herb Robert, and decaying reed leaves. The inclusion of these experiments signal that the river is the whole of the valley, not just the watercourse. It also frames the work as an artist-created animation, in recognition that there is human agency in its creation. In moving through the valley to the water, we encountered the tiny slender leaves in a conifer wood, the leaflets of small plants growing close to the ground, the reeds in the mud along the margins of the river, the hover flies, water dripping from the rocks, and the mineral residues percolating down from the adits.

Later that summer we buried the rest of our collection of recycled 16mm filmstrips in the mud of the riverbanks. We visited our sites in the mid-tide period, to ensure that we could access the mudbanks and that the strips we left would be covered in water at high tide. Each strip was anchored in place with a stapled loop around one of the reeds growing along the inundation zone. We also buried several strips in the pools of mining seepage on the riverbank below the Okeltor arsenic mine just beyond Calstock. We checked the buried filmstrips at weekly intervals, removing those that were marked by abrasion, chemical reaction or the effect of bio organisms. These were washed and dried, and then each 16mm strip was digitally scanned to create a series of high-resolution images of the film 'frames'.

Our filmstrips were acted on in their entirety by the river, and in making the digital film *Reach*, we scanned the whole width of each filmstrip so that the sprocket holes were visible. Essentially, it is a sculptural manifestation across the whole width of the filmstrip and both sides of the film. This is very different to filming with a camera, and indeed projecting, where the gate of the apparatus defines the area of spectatorial interest. Making the digital moving image artwork in this way shows the film is an object, a sculptural object with a presence in the world and a history. *Reach* is a hybrid between a sculpture and a moving image artefact, and its imagery is not bounded by the film frame, which resonates with the concept of the valley containing the twice-flowing tidal river as its central element.

*Reach* had an all too brief weekend displayed in its intended 360-degree looped presentation before the installation was dismantled. The film was reconfigured as a single-channel work in order to allow it to be seen more widely. An HD edit framed the 16mm scans with the film edges and sprocket holes in view passing through what might be described as an imaginary projection apparatus at 25 frames per second, titles, credits and an adjusted soundtrack marked the transformation to a linear film.

## Maelstrom: The Return

Our second film is located on the rocky promontory on the westernmost edge of Plymouth known as Devil's Point, which forms the western shore of the River Tamar. Here, the swirling waters of the river pour through the narrow gap between Devon and Cornwall to meet the salty tides of Plymouth Sound, its topography producing riptides and whirlpools, and unique meteorological conditions. These dangerous waters gave Devil's Point its name. It is the place where Francis Drake is said to have met the witches with whom he conjured up the storm that drove the Spanish Armada away from England's shores. Close to this point, Captain Cook set sail on his three voyages of discovery and the naturalist Charles Darwin sailed off to the Galapagos.

This practice-based research project received support in the form of a Moving Image Art Bursary from the Centre for Moving Image Research (CMIR) at University of the West of England and the Royal West of England Academy, Bristol (RWA). Our aim for this project was to capture the confluence of the histories and lived experience of this place in moving image and sound. Devil's Point is an area we have often visited to walk along the coast, and we have used this area as a location for previous film projects. The CMIR-RWA bursary gave us the opportunity to extend our engagement with the River Tamar as creative practitioner-researchers. Through *Maelstrom*, we were able to further explore the resonance of the site and further develop our collaborative work focused on the Tamar.

To begin our project, we responded to the moving image material held by the South West Film and Television Archive (SWFTA) that featured Devil's Point. The majority of the archival footage we uncovered was television news coverage of the outward and inward

voyages of warships, as these vessels rounded Devil's Point, usually accompanied by crowds of waving onlookers grouped on the grassy bluff by Plymouth Sound. Other broadcast material featured significant stormy seas in the Hamoaze and nearby inlets and bays. Amongst the archive relating to Devil's Point, we discovered a small collection of un-edited amateur footage dating from the early 1960s.

In parallel, we conducted research into the histories of the area, including vernacular sources, and engaged in a reflective dialogic process at the location. It was a requirement of the CMIR-RWA award that we submit regular bulletins to the commissioners during the making of the film. This encouraged us to record our thoughts using sound, photographs and video – in addition to written reflective notes and drawings – during regular site visits to Devil's Point, and when reviewing film materials at SWFTA and in the edit suite. From these recordings we produced audiovisual documentation, which we intended would communicate our research processes and share our working methods with audiences as the project evolved.

Our theme of recycling and repurposing 'unwanted' material continued with *Maelstrom*, and again our methodology resonates with the emerging paradigm of the new materialism: "By making and mending objects we enter into a different kind of relationship with the material world. Made objects communicate across cultures and through the ages" (Potts and Simms, 2015: 13).

To create our film *Maelstrom*, we selected a sequence of the non-professional filming, which had been donated to SWFTA by the relatives of an amateur filmmaker. This 8mm colour home movie footage was dated 1961 and comprises several handheld shots. The filming depicts a small group of friends enjoying a visit to Devil's Point, possibly on an outing to watch the ship that can be seen passing around the headland from the Hamoaze to Plymouth Sound. From the clothes the people are wearing and the vegetation that can be seen in the background, we surmised that it was late spring or early summer when these activities took place. Also, towards the end of the sequence, one of the women picks a bunch of yellow flowers – possibly wallflowers, which have a sweet scent – and holds them to her nose. On previous visits to Devil's Point, we had noticed these flowers growing wild on the cliffs above the area used by sea anglers, a small platform close to water level at the furthestmost tip of the point that is accessible by walking.

To create our film *Maelstrom*, we overlaid this archival material with our own filming recorded on location in the autumn of 2014. Our recordings were focused on the phenomena we had observed at the surface of the water near to the end of Devil's Point. Along this short stretch of the coastline, the sweetwater of the River Tamar meets the mass of seawater in Plymouth Sound, and the meeting of these flows produces extraordinary whirlpools, glassy upwellings and standing wave patterns.

The eastern side of the narrowest point of the Hamoaze is guarded by a small fort-like structure, reputed to date from the time of Queen Elizabeth I. This

pillbox was pressed into use in the second world war to guard the approaches to the Royal Navy's Devonport Dockyard by having a flat pad of concrete set on its roof on which to mount a large gun. We used this elevated platform as a vantage point for filming the swirling waters with a 200mm telephoto lens on a full-frame DSLR. The telephoto was long enough to fill the frame with the upwellings and vortices but had a sufficiently wide angle of view to be able to quickly identify the fleeting phenomena through the viewfinder. Synchronous sound was recorded into the camera using a good quality shotgun microphone although sometimes the wind was too strong for its wind muff. Non-synchronous audio was also recorded onto a digital recorder using a professional MS stereo microphone system mounted in a Rycote suspension and windshield.

The area is a popular spot for watching the shipping movements or to look southwards towards Drake's Island, Plymouth Sound and the breakwater that protects it from the worst waves. We have filmed close by for a number of productions but *Maelstrom* was different in that the elevated filming position was used to get an uninterrupted view down onto the water surface rather than to frame features of the land/seascape. Our filming position is situated a few minutes walk from a car park so there was repeated journeys, unloading the gear and carrying down a footpath. We would never know whether there would be whirlpools or upwellings to film until we arrived on location. The most extraordinary disturbances needed conditions that were difficult to fathom. Tide height and direction, wind direction and intensity, river flow and other factors must have played a part. We also were at the mercy of the direction and quality of the available light by to capture satisfying recordings of the surface undulations.

Our intention with the filming was to create a moving background to composite with the archive footage. While each video recording was unique, exhibiting ripples, waves, whirlpools, glassy plate-like swellings or more mundane movements, it was similar to the views people have experienced at this location over the ages. This theme resonates through *Maelstrom* – the return of people to this place to look out – from the 60s family in the Super 8 footage to the apocryphal visit by Drake. Could a duality be the appeal of rivers like the Tamar and also the sea, in that they are always the same but always different? Could the appeal of archive film be encapsulated in those traces of the family caught in that location, a vicarious memory that persists?

In his non-fiction essay, *Dead Man Sings*, the American-Canadian science fiction writer William Gibson comments on remembering, forgetting and the elusive present captured on film: "Time moves in one direction, memory in another. We are that strange species that constructs artifacts intended to counter the natural flow of forgetting" (Gibson 2012: 51).

## Conclusion

In this paper we have used two recent collaborative moving image artworks, *Reach* and *Maelstrom: The Return*, as case studies to explore and affinity

between location and registers of memory through the material specificities of moving image and the place of cinema. Our methodology as creative-practitioner-researchers foregrounds the materials and materiality of filmmaking and uses close reading as a strategy for evolving the work.

The first project discussed, *Reach*, was made during the summer of 2014 on location at the upper tidal reaches of the River Tamar in Cornwall. We have framed this 'environmental' film as the result of a symbiotic engagement with the natural world and elemental forces, repurposing discarded lengths of 16mm film as a sensitive and sensible recording medium. The resulting film imagery seen by audiences was created by burying these 16mm strips in the alluvial mudbanks of the river, close to the redundant mine workings found in that area. Through this strategy we allowed the Tamar to 'make the film' through the flow of its tidal waters and the action of the biota.

*Maelstrom: The Return*, the second film, was made after *Reach*, during the autumn of 2014. With this project, our focus was the area known as Devil's Point at the mouth of the River Tamar on its eastern shore. In *Maelstrom*, we have overlaid archival home movie footage, shot at Devil's Point in 1961, on our own filming of dynamic phenomena on the surface of the water off the promontory. The audience experience is of a duality of cinematic memories 'projected' upon an ever-moving substrate of a 'sea of moving image'.

Our critical reflection on these moving image artworks suggests that, whilst both re-create memory in the present, *Reach* makes memories and *Maelstrom* retrieves them. To conclude: like cinema and a stream of moving image, the tidal River Tamar creates intermittent movement, an interplay of stasis and motion that brings into being a confluence of histories and lived experience and creates an experience of that is recognisable yet different each time.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The single channel trailer for *Reach* may be viewed online here: <https://vimeo.com/105863719>; for more information about the film, please refer to: <http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/films/films/reach.html>

<sup>2</sup> To view the film *Maelstrom: The Return*, please go to <https://vimeo.com/116467729>. For additional details about the project, please refer to <http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/films/films/maelstrom.html>

<sup>3</sup> *Night Sounding* is a One Minute Television commission for The Arts Council and the BBC's arts and culture programme, *The Late Show*. Made on 16mm colour reversal stock in 1993, the film is an aural and visual sounding from the shoreline of an industrial, fishing and military port [http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/films/films/night\\_sounding.html](http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/films/films/night_sounding.html)

<sup>4</sup> The 10-minute Super 8 film *Elemental* commissioned by Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery for the *Strandline* exhibition in 1994 <http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/films/films/elemental.html>

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Moore created the silent video artwork *Blue Kayak* for Aune Head Arts' *Dartmoor Lives and Landscapes*, using a handful of digital video frames filmed by one of the project volunteers, Jeremy van Riemsdyke [http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/other\\_films/other\\_films/blue\\_kayak.html](http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/other_films/other_films/blue_kayak.html)

<sup>6</sup> *Teign Spirit* is a collaboration with Teignmouth and Shaldon Museum in Teignmouth on the south Devon coast,

commissioned by Animate Projects for *Sea Change*. The film matches the viewpoints and sea views of black and white holiday movies, shot just before the outbreak of the Second World War, with those of the present day resort [http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/films/films/teign\\_spirit.html](http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/films/films/teign_spirit.html).

<sup>7</sup> *Sea Front* captures the rites of passage for Plymouth youth along the waterfront of the Hoe on Super 8 Kodachrome 40 colour reversal film [http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/other\\_films/other\\_films/sea\\_front.html](http://www.kaylaparker.co.uk/other_films/other_films/sea_front.html)

<sup>8</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to venture further into the debated epoch of the Anthropocene. The authors recommend the edited volume *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (Davis and Turpin 2015) for readers who are interested in exploring artists' responses to the challenges of climate change and the anthropocene.

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## Filmography

*Blue Kayak*. 2001. Directed by Stuart Moore. UK: Sundog Media. Digital video artwork.

*Elemental*. 1994. Directed by Kayla Parker and Stuart Moore. UK: Sundog Media. Super 8 film.

*Maelstrom: The Return*. Directed by Kayla Parker and Stuart Moore. UK: Sundog Media. HD film.

*Night Sounding*. 1993. Directed by Kayla Parker. UK: Sundog Media. 16mm film.

*Reach*. 2014. Directed by Kayla Parker and Stuart Moore. UK: Sundog Media. 16mm film and 360 installation.

*Sea Front*. 2009. Directed by Stuart Moore. UK: Sundog Media. Super 8 film.

*Teign Spirit*. 2009. Directed by Kayla Parker and Stuart Moore. UK: Sundog Media. HD film.