Installed in Chalk: Mapping Screen Performance in *Coccolith* (2018)

Christopher Brown

Introduction

This article will explore the mapping of screen performance in *Coccolith* (2018), a film directed and produced by the author that was shot in the Ramsgate tunnels in Kent, UK. Although screen performance broadly refers to acting undertaken for the camera rather than theatre or installation performance, the following argument makes a case for an approach to filmmaking that draws on notions of site-specific performance, more readily associated with installation art. For once we conceive of a camera and an actor as being installed in a particular place and then proceeding to perform that place, the concept of screen performance gains greater dynamism. While land and geological formations can themselves be considered as performing entities, as agentive in shaping a screen drama, this article will focus on human responses to the chalk tunnels—on approaches to filmmaking that support actors in offering affective and embodied responses to place.

The Ramsgate site comprises a railway tunnel constructed in 1863, a scenic railway tunnel built in 1936, and a network of air raid shelter tunnels dug in the late 1930s. The passageways extend over five kilometres under the city and have been central to a range of historical experiences in the maritime port. Following fifty years of closure, a section of the Ramsgate tunnels reopened to the public in 2015 following a Heritage Lottery investment. Visitors (at least those accessing the tunnels legally) are taken on guided tours of the half-kilometre-long section of the tunnels that is safe to enter, the same portion in which the film was shot.

The film was conceived as a practice-as-research project that sought to represent the characters' experience of the tunnels in a manner that challenged paradigms of commercial filmmaking, which tend not to value place in its own right, instead using it as a backdrop for an existing story. *Coccolith* instead owes a great deal to traditions in experimental and art cinema that have sought to rethink how place is conceived in relation to narrative, visualization, and performance (evident, for instance, in the work of Andrei Tarkovsky, Monte Hellman, Tsai Ming-liang, Claire Denis, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul—some of these influences are discussed below). Everyone involved in this project— particularly the director/producer, director of photography, sound designer, and actors—sought to develop a drama that responded to their experience of the tunnels. The project developed structures for screen performance practices engendered by a consideration of this specific environment.

A human response to the tunnels might be, for instance, physical (the actor lowers their head to avoid a low ceiling), perceptual (the actor stares into a vanishing point), memorial (the tunnel provokes a recollection in the actor), or associative (the tunnel makes the actor think of something else). I will argue that when a film project is structured in a way that enables the actor to affectively

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respond to the characteristics of geological material, it allows for a form of site-specific performance through which the relationship between place and space can be explored and critiqued. Tuan (1977) refers to place as a centre of "felt value," endowed with specific socio-historical and cultural meaning (4), in contrast to space, the three-dimensional interval of distance between objects and "that which allows movement" (6). 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 article concerns itself with how human experience of an environment might allow for a form of site-specific performance through which these interrelated notions of place and space can be probed. The experience of the tunnels, by both filmmakers and actors, is conceived in terms of a charting of movement—a process I will suggest can be understood as tender mapping, a concept derived from Bruno's (2002, 217–45) reading of Madeleine de Scudéry's *Carte du pays de Tendre*, and which I sought to articulate as an approach to film practice.

The tunnels are dug into chalk, and in their very composition, evidence both layers of geological history and the past existence of living things; *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. The film captures the material result of this primordial geological process—the chalk environment itself—while dramatizing notions of historical accumulation figuratively. Multiple histories inscribed in the same place coexist in the film frame: Liam (Matthew Harvey) is from the present-day, Postcard Woman (Emily Outred) is from the 1930s, Smoking Man (George Naylor) is from the 1940s, the Surveyor (Kazeem Amore) is from the future, and Disco Woman (Eugenia Caruso) is from an alternate present-day. These characters inhabit the same tunnel environment but are on journeys at different points in time.

At the level of process, we sought to develop strategies that enabled the actors to respond meaningfully to the attributes of the tunnel environment. A more critical configuration of filmmaking practice felt timely, given that the Ramsgate tunnels otherwise risk permanent affiliation with nationalist sentiment and wartime mythology. Tour guides tell stories about the townspeople who lived in the tunnels with permanent addresses during the war, for instance, or Winston Churchill's visit, during which he was asked to stub out his cigar for health and safety reasons. Guides relate how the city mayor in the 1930s was revered locally for his foresight in persuading a reluctant Home Office to get the tunnels extended during rearmament, an initiative now mythologized (probably inaccurately)[1] as the triumph of a grassroots hero over Westminster bureaucracy.

Just how important is political context in the telling of such tales? The constituency of Thanet South, where Ramsgate is located, had one of the highest national levels of support for the UK Independence Party at its most recent peak, with leader Nigel Farage standing as its candidate in the 2015 general election and taking 32 percent of the vote (BBC 2018). The region also had one of the highest votes in favour of Brexit, with 64 percent of residents opting to leave the European Union (Electoral Commission 2016). Tour guide narratives of British resilience in the face of European aggression might well say as much about contemporary concerns over globalization and immigration, toward which the Brexit vote gestures, as they do about wartime experience. The slow evolution of the Ramsgate tunnels into a heritage attraction entails the commodification of memory and a politics of organized remembering, of the type which Edensor argues, in its reification of the past as linear and fixed, relies on a narrative impulse which "can eclipse the past's alterity" (2005, 138).

Even chalk, the raw material within which our filmmaking was installed, carries with it nationalist connotations: the White Cliffs of Dover, another quintessential symbol of British nationhood, are just fifteen miles down the coast from Ramsgate. In this sense, it must be acknowledged that to conceive of chalk as an accumulation of coccoliths, while geologically accurate, is nonetheless to offer a counter-myth, an alternative vision of the tunnels' history, heritage, and temporality. While our approach drew on discourses of mapping, to be further elaborated below, it is important to note that I was primarily concerned with mapping insofar as it enabled us to develop an approach to filmmaking rooted in our experience of the tunnels. The project was not seeking to counter the more reified heritage map, nor was it solely designed as an exercise in counter-mapping. This article will discuss the processes that shaped the making of the film, which sought to use the raw material of the tunnel environment to generate a tender mapping.

Point of Departure

In order to contextualize the subsequent discussion of tender mapping, it is worth first outlining the central ways in which the process of making *Coccolith* departed from typical industry paradigms. I have explored elsewhere the ways in which the project sought to reconfigure film and sound practice in the service of articulating an alternative representation of the tunnels and their heritage (Brown and Knight-Hill 2019). In contrast to commercial filmmaking, in which sound design primarily occurs in the post-production phase, we argued that by conceiving a project as properly audiovisual (by deploying concepts of texture and gesture, shared by film and sound practice), it is possible to rethink both the role of the soundtrack in relation to a film's diegesis and the role of the director in relation to sound design. The directorial adoption of mapping as an approach similarly evolved out of a desire to reconsider the relationship between performer and environment.

An important moment in the project's development occurred when the decision was taken not to use a script. I initially wrote a fifteen-minute screenplay for the film, and while many of its themes made their way into the final project, it was ultimately abandoned, and the actors never saw it. Using a script would have prevented us from fulfilling what emerged as a central objective of the project in the development stage, namely to facilitate site-inflected performances by the actors as their characters travel through the tunnels. In the place of a script, I wrote a concept outline of just four hundred words. This was designed to give overall narrative shape to the film and functioned as a guide for the cast and crew, listing the film's ten scenes sequentially and providing some very basic description of the action. I also wrote a few bulleted character notes for each actor, an example of which is included below. These documents provided a framework for scenes and characters that were subsequently devised, something discussed in detail below.

It is not my intention here to analyze in any depth the performances themselves—the results of the filmmaking—nor to discuss definitions of particular acting styles. I will instead focus on analyzing how the performances came about: the structures, contexts, and processes that shaped them. In doing so, I should acknowledge that my focus here on *human* performance does tend to exclude a consideration of the chalk tunnels as performative agents in their own right, which would challenge the implied ontology whereby land is viewed as passive vis-à-vis active human agents such as filmmakers or actors. A full consideration of this would require a separate study; what I intend to focus on here is how a film and its performances might be shaped by the human experience of site.

How might filmmakers and actors immerse themselves in an environment in a way that leads them to think, feel, and remember in ways generated by, and connected with, these tunnels? Site-specific practice is more readily associated with theatre, art, and installations than with filmmaking, yet site-specific approaches were particularly resonant when developing the project, and in terms of performance they can broadly be understood following Pavis as "a staging of performance conceived on the basis of a place in the real world (ergo, outside the established theatre)" (1998, 337). Films are, of course, always shot outside of the theatre, and usually (if shot on location) then in something approximating the real world. Yet, while the absence of a live audience does make filmmaking a qualitatively different endeavour to theatrical forms of staging, site-specific modes of working were useful to us when attempting to devise film performances that were not merely shot on location, but instead "conceived on the basis of a place."

Coccolith aims to situate the audience in the position of a visitor to the tunnels, on what almost comes to resemble a dark and twisted guided tour: an anti-heritage itinerary. Throughout the project's development stage, we revisited the practices of a range of filmmakers who conceive performance in terms of an itinerary through an environment that is mapped, either onscreen or implicitly. One such example was Monte Hellman, who when making the countercultural road movie *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971) sought to capture an impression of spontaneity in the actors' response to landscape, something he referred to as "the quality of doing something for the first time" (1995, 17). He insisted both on shooting sequentially and doing so over an actual cross-country route that could be traced on a map, explaining: "We would never get the feeling of covering that ground unless we actually did it. Beyond that, I knew it would affect the actors—and it did, obviously. It affected everybody" (Walker 1970, 37). Hellman used various tactics to further heighten this impression of immediate affect, such as withholding the script from the cast except for daily excerpts. The relationship between a map, upon which an itinerary is traced, and performance here comes into focus: Hellman was not seeking improvisation but instead site-driven performances that inflected narrative in a particular way. The dialogue may be scripted, but the performances are defined by the journey itself—by the actors *being there*, travelling along a route, seeing the landscape for the first time.

Though the subject matter is entirely different, *Coccolith* owes a great deal to earlier work such as Hellman's that is not easily categorized in relation to established modes of performance. Rather, performance is best considered in the context of a production's structuring thematic impulse—such as the way a film is shaped by the relationship between journey and place. The concept outline that replaced the script is an itinerary for an exploratory journey through the tunnels, or more precisely, three itineraries: one for Liam (the protagonist in the first half), one for Disco Woman (the protagonist in the second half), and one for the audience, comprising both of the above. These are not structured in relation to a map of an actual geographical area, however, but to a map of the Ramsgate tunnels that is entirely fictitious. This is the point of departure for tender mapping, an approach I will argue generates a kind of screen performance that responds affectively to the tunnel environment.

On the Map

That maps are instruments of power as much as a representation of a part of the earth is by now well established, as is the view that mapping is inextricably linked to the rise of the modern state. Thongchai (1994) argues that the process of mapping itself brings into being state borders, the shape

and visual form of a nation, and obscures the origins of the state in history. For Wood, maps are fundamentally propositional, and mapmakers "extraordinarily selective creators of a world—not *the* world, but *a* world—whose features they bring into being" (2010, 51, original emphasis). Ramsgate recently appeared on a map in *Darkest Hour* (Wright 2017), during a scene in which Churchill masterminds the Dunkirk evacuation, helping consolidate existing propositions regarding popular understandings of nationhood. The city is identified as the starting point for a return trip to Europe, symbolizing English resourcefulness in the face of continental aggression. This occurs in the context of a film that, along with *Dunkirk* (Nolan 2017), has been seen to offer "a reflection and endorsement of the Brexit mood," representing "England congratulating itself on its past—an idealized past, shorn of inconvenient fact" (Jack 2018).

In contrast, a map of the Ramsgate tunnels that appeared in *The War Illustrated* on September 27, 1940, proudly announced: "Ramsgate has the world's finest shelters!" It traces the tunnelled route using a thick black line laid above the streets of the city, which is drawn more faintly in the background. The tunnels are shown to connect various public buildings, landmarks, and squares—municipal markers of the state and its mobilization in the war effort. The text below the map emphasizes the success of the subterranean network in saving lives, consistent with the reassuring solidity of the thick black line that signifies the tunnels, drawn on a massively exaggerated scale. Rings of dotted lines encircle areas subjected to heavy bombing, reminding us of the devastation wrought upon the city. The map is an assertion of national strength, certainly, but one that responds to an immediate and palpable fear of death, quite different from the cozy nationalism that drives contemporary wartime nostalgia.

On *Coccolith* we sought to critique, at a localized level, the spatial foundations of national mythmaking by creatively remapping the Ramsgate tunnels in a manner that enabled the actors to affectively respond to the site—what I refer to as tender mapping, to be discussed below. Conley has argued that reading and seeing are co-extensive in cartography and film, and a map "requires complex modes of decipherment quite similar to those required for close and exacting making and study of cinema" (2007, 207). *Coccolith* utilized several of Conley's ideas. Our predilection for wide shots emphasizing topographic representation, relief, perspectival tension, and depth of field will be examined below. More broadly, a mapping impulse defines the film's structure.

The film map, which was designed and used by the director when preparing the shoot and was the basis for the concept outline given to all the actors. Map: Christopher Brown.

The camera follows an itinerary through the tunnels that roughly corresponds to the form of a figure eight, with the two protagonists each completing a circle or loop. The audience is made aware of tunnels branching off in different directions, and cavernous spaces with multiple exits. The numbers indicate the location of scenes that appear sequentially along the route:

1. Liam on the promenade
2. Liam enters the tunnels via a stairwell
3. Liam walks through a dark shelter tunnel
4. Liam encounters Postcard Woman
5. Liam walks past Smoking Man
6. Liam meets Disco Woman at the disco ball in the railway tunnel
7. Disco Woman walks along a tunnel
8. Disco Woman encounters the Surveyor
9. Disco Woman follows the Surveyor and makes a phone call
10. Disco Woman returns to the disco ball before turning to leave

This fictitious map bears little resemblance to the actual layout of the Ramsgate tunnels, shown (in an approximate rendering) below. The dotted circle indicates the portion of the tunnel complex in which the film was shot, the only area that is safe for the public to enter.
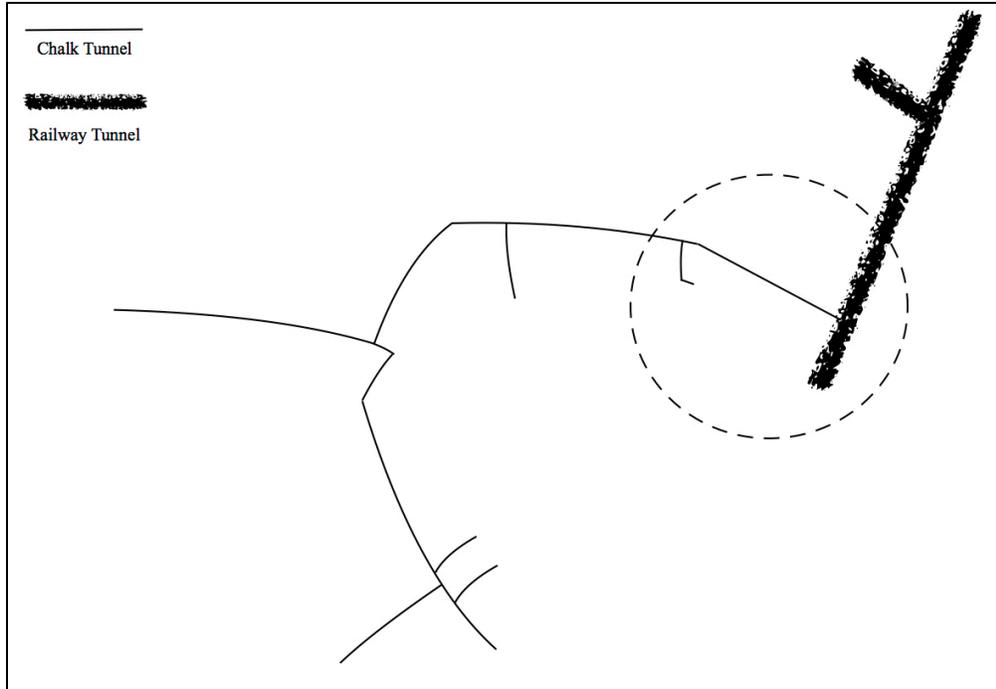
An approximate rendering of the layout of the Ramsgate tunnels. Map: Christopher Brown.

The third map zooms in on this and is a map on which the numbers now correspond to the locations where the scenes were filmed, which lack any pattern or sequence.
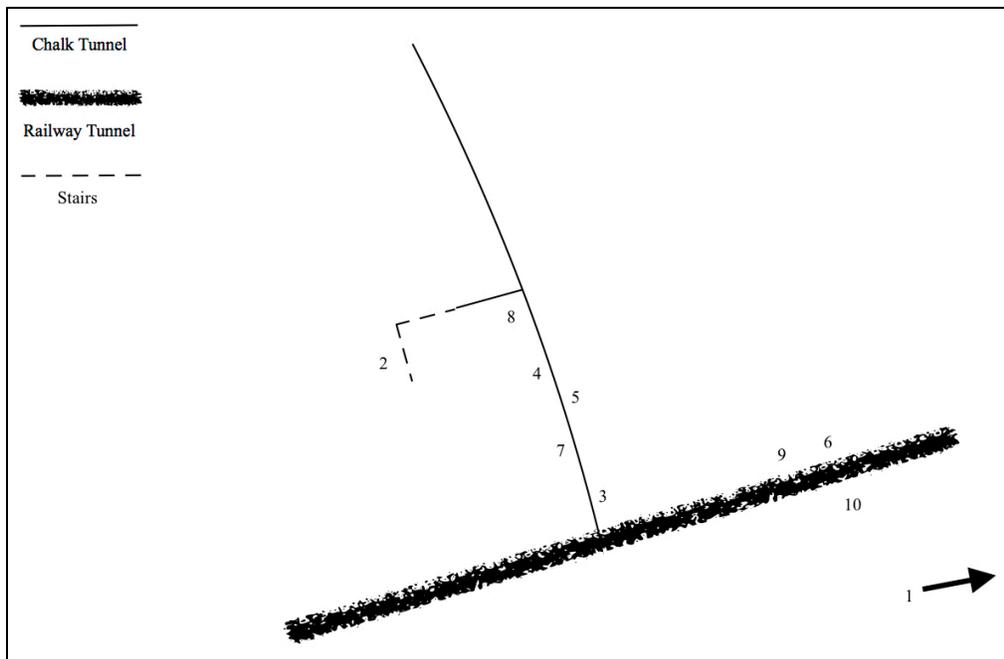
Map of tunnels with numbered filming locations. Map: Christopher Brown.

In emphasizing the circularity of the characters' itineraries, the imagined film map generates overlapping journeys at different points in history, in line with the film's critique, while encouraging

a particular mood: the tunnels appear twisted and maze-like, thus confusing and scary, when in reality they are readily navigable.

Fictional mapping of this type relies on the handling of audience perspectives on space, which depends on them being accustomed to established modes of spatializing narrative. Liam's entry into the tunnels is a case in point. A wide establishing shot shows him walking toward the tunnel entrance on the cliffside promenade.

Liam approaches the tunnel. Photo: Christopher Brown.

The shot then cuts, within classical conventions of the 180-degree rule (the reinforced cliff wall even makes the line visible), to a shot of Liam entering the tunnels via a stairwell.

Liam entering the tunnels via a stairwell. Photo: Christopher Brown.

In reality, the entrance is nothing but an inset shelter with a seat, while the stairwell is an air raid shelter entrance some distance inland (these stairs lead nowhere, as the entrance has long since been sealed). Similar strategies are used later in the film, for example in the scene in which Liam arrives at a fork in the tunnels and has to decide which route to take. He opts for the lit passage, into which he strides before the film cuts to a shot of him progressing along the passage. The lit passage in the first shot is in fact an alcove little more than a metre in depth, originally constructed to house a chemical

toilet during the war. A light panel was placed in the alcove to establish continuity with the lighting in the second shot, filmed in a lit tunnel elsewhere.

It remains contentious to refer to spatial trickery of this type as mapping. Indeed Misek considers a mapping impulse to be immediately obstructed by this type of editing because a map "represents a spatial totality. A film, by contrast, fragments space-time into the discrete unit of the shot. When individual shots are edited together, the result usually involves spatial discontinuity, temporal discontinuity, or both" (2012, 54). Yet film mapping can also be considered as a more process-oriented engagement. Neither Bruno (2002) nor Conley (2007) would consider spatial or temporal discontinuities in editing as necessarily obstructing a film's mapping impulse. On the contrary, Bruno (2002, 241–45) argues for the ways in which such dislocations consolidate *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959) as a work of cartographic cinema. The issue is partly one of terminology, which Roberts suggests is "very loosely defined if measured against those more likely understood by professional cartographers: makers of maps in the more conventional sense" (2012, 69). At stake in such debates is perhaps the discipline of cartography itself, which Wood argues is often erroneously conflated with mapmaking when it is in fact a comparatively recent professionalization of the practice (2010, 121).

If, when making *Coccolith*, we certainly felt no allegiance to any "conventional sense" of mapping, then I would concede that the film map could be considered a diagram of a tour, rather than a map. For de Certeau (1984), maps involve *seeing* (the knowledge of an order of places) and present a tableau, whereas tours entail *going* (spatializing actions) and organizing movement (119). But as far as film practice is concerned, how easy is it to differentiate between the two? When preparing the project, I revisited Bruno's reading of Madeleine de Scudéry's *Carte du pays de Tendre*, a work which "made a geographical documentation of relational space in the form of a map" by which women might navigate interpersonal relations (2002, 223). This tender mapping later crossed into film and "does not reproduce the ordering principle of analytic knowledge but rather tries to chart a movement," calling into question de Certeau's binarism: "In Scudéry's form of cartographic narration, as in film's own, there is no distinction between map and tour. Both are a form of architectural narration." (245). As the map and the tour become indistinguishable, a tender mapping is generated. Conceiving a practice-as-research project in these terms enables us to reconsider how the directing of screen performance, as a process, might be attuned to the features of a specific environment and its history.

With tender mapping, the map around which the concept outline of *Coccolith* was developed and its filmic tour become indistinguishable. With this in mind, the concept outline used by the actors is not merely a neutral document designed to assist the devising of scenes, but a written charting of movement. This creates an apparent tension for the actors, who, in their performances, must negotiate between mapped space (a chronological route and sequence, provoking a character's psychological journey) and unmapped materiality (the immediate experience of incoherent fragments of a site, provoking a spontaneous reaction). The following sections, focusing on this tension, discuss firstly, how the actors mapped their characters' emotions in relation to the attributes of the site, and secondly, how the cinematography and visualization constructed a space in which these journeys could unfold.

Direction of Travel

Absent maps drive the narrative of *Coccolith*. Liam becomes lost in the tunnel network and is ultimately trapped, whereas Disco Woman tries to find her way out and eventually succeeds. Losing and finding one's way are presented in psychological as much as spatial terms; the character notes each actor works with are strategically lacking a clear map, which opens the actor up to the exploration of devised work in installation. While the tunnels lure Liam into forgetfulness and reverie, Disco Woman consults a mobile phone, trying to access a cellular network via which she might be able to situate herself both physically (by activating a location function) and emotionally (by making a call to her estranged lover).

The production was structured to facilitate, through performance, the displacement of affect onto space. This was the objective in the earliest stages of casting, a process that sought to identify actors who were skilled in devising characters and in weighing up the impact of environment on performance. The experimental nature of the project's approach was stated in the casting call, and all of the actors except one (with whom I had previously worked) went through an audition process. Given that the project had no script, the actors were not required to learn audition sides in the manner that is usual for film productions and most theatre productions. Instead, they were asked to prepare two short performances that tested their ability to develop a credible performance from a simple scenario prompt. One of these was as follows:

> You are in a narrow tunnel. It is completely dark as you blindly feel your way along the rocky walls. The silence is deafening, which makes you scared. To calm yourself down, you talk out loud—imagining that you are speaking to someone you used to love. You apologize for what you did to them, and ask their forgiveness.

The scenario asks the actors to devise and undertake a journey along a tunnel trajectory that is at once physical and psychological, enabling the casting team (the director, casting director, and assistants) to assess the ability of the actor to credibly evoke their character experiencing the environment in question. The second scenario was similarly designed to encourage the actors to prioritize environment when undertaking their preparations, but emphasized desire and recollection:

> No dialogue. You are on holiday in an English seaside town, sitting at a table in your chalet, writing a postcard to a close friend. Your children play in the background, making a lot of noise. As you write, you try to decide whether to write the usual pleasantries, or to tell your friend about a man you saw on the beach earlier. You remember how you were attracted to him—but also how dangerous he looked.

In the auditions, the actors firstly delivered their prepared scenes. I then requested that they perform one of the scenes again, after giving some instructions that were intended to alter the tone of the performance. For instance, the second scenario tends to evoke emotions such as desire and love, and perhaps also feelings of nostalgia. One intervention I made after observing the initial performance was to tell the actor that an unknown person was standing directly behind them as they wrote the postcard. An adaptable performer would tend to interpret the scene differently as a result, for instance capturing a sense of unease or fear.

Given the nature of the project, the casting process was also designed to assess actors' confidence in working without a script. In many cases, it became quickly apparent that some actors were simply uncomfortable with this kind of approach. Others, however, responded effectively, and final decisions on casting were made after the filmed footage of the auditions was reviewed. The casting

process fed directly into the devising process. For instance, some aspects of the second audition scenario (the postcard, the children) evolved into the characterization of Postcard Woman, whereas different elements of the same scenario (desire, the man on the beach) helped shape the characterization of Liam.

The bulleted character notes and concept outline, given to the actors after casting, provided an itinerary through space and emotion from which to develop a performance. The character notes for Disco Woman provide an example:

- a character from the present
- she is Italian
- she has just left a party, dressed smartly in a dress with a shawl
- she carries a mobile phone
- she does not speak except for one moment when her emotions spill out[2]
- she is searching the tunnels for phone reception, so she can talk to someone
- a melancholy journey as she tries to come to terms with a betrayal
- is she troubled because she suspects her lover's infidelity?
- or are her feelings of abandonment provoked by something else?

The concept outline renders these initial prompts in a spatial dimension, guiding her emotional progression as she moves. She is introduced as immobile, swaying from side to side, lost and upset (scene 6). Next, she starts to walk, searching and inquisitive (scene 7). She then speaks on the phone, of her feelings of abandonment, of an era being over (scene 8). Her return to the disco ball indicates sadness, yet knowledge gained, as she observes the men who are trapped, trance-like, as she was previously (scene 9). The film then closes with her escape and empowerment (scene 10). This sets the stage for a tender mapping, tracing in broad terms Disco Woman's emotional route from stasis to movement, from entrapment to freedom.

"What is mobilized in film's own emotional mapping," Bruno contends, "is the plan of an unconscious topography in which emotions can 'move' us, for they are themselves organized as a course. In film, as in the emotional course mapped by Scudéry, sentiments come to be mapped as physical transformations, written as moving physiognomy" (2002, 245). In *Coccolith*, the relationship between this affective topography and the physical topography of the tunnels unfolded on set, but also during the devising process beforehand. Documents such as the character notes provided initial guidance, indicating, as it were, the general direction of travel, while the detail of characterization emerged through the devising process. Our preparations were typical of site-specific practice in installation, as myself and the actors researched "historical documentation; site usage (past and present); found text, objects, actions, sounds, etc.; anecdotal guidance; personal association; half-truths and lies; site morphology (physical and vocal explorations of site)" (Pearson 2010, 8, drawing on earlier work by Fiona Wilkie).

Our deployment of this research was not neutral. Each character was conceived in relation to an aspect of the site that evoked either a marginalized history or an alternative perspective on history. Liam's name is instructive; it appears on actual graffiti in the tunnels, discovered during our initial recce, which homophobically alleges: "Liam is queer" (visible in the lower left of the shot of Liam entering the tunnels via a stairwell). This led to the protagonist being named Liam, aligning him both

with transgressive counter-uses of the site and with queer sexuality, aspects that form the basis of his emotional journey through the tunnels. Liam's is a narrative marginalized from the nostalgic, and resolutely straight, wartime mythology associated with the tunnels. He is also from the present, a choice designed to counter a heritage agenda that focuses on six years of the site's active history (1939–45) at the expense of the seventy years that have elapsed since.

The actors were given an unusual degree of freedom to develop their roles, albeit within defined limits; this contrasts with the norms of commercial filmmaking, in which actors are conventionally expected to interpret a written screenplay and to follow strict blocking instructions in relation to how the shot is staged and composed. After casting decisions had been made, I restricted my activity with the actors to the collaborative devising of characters, a process that lasted around three weeks. I let each of the five actors work with me in whichever way they preferred, for as much or as little time as they needed, encountering a diverse range of working methods. Some preferred to meet in person; others I spoke to over the phone. Some emailed written ideas; another exchanged messages with me. One drew on Method training to develop a role in line with personal life experience; another focused on visual prompts and image research. The intention was that the actors would arrive in the tunnels with fully developed characters and that their task, at the moment of filming, would be to articulate the character's response to the site.

Typically, I would start by giving the actors a prompt with which to work—an object or material associated with the tunnels. When devising the character of the Surveyor, for instance, I gave the actor two structural engineering surveys from 1954 undertaken by the Ministry of Works, entitled "Underground Accommodation," one surveying the shelter tunnels and the other the railway tunnel. The reports were previously classified (the authors appear to have been considering the possibility of renovating the tunnels for use as air-raid shelters during the Cold War). I asked the actor to draw from these documents whatever terminology and ideas he needed to develop his character, and we subsequently had a phone conversation in which we discussed what ideas the survey had prompted. We began to chat about the similarity of the tunnels to nuclear bunker sites and were reminded of *Into Eternity* (Michael Madsen, 2010), a documentary about the construction of a spent nuclear fuel repository in Onkalo, Finland, accessed by a tunnel that spirals half a kilometre beneath the earth's surface. Drawing on this influence, we decided that the character's agenda would be to assess the tunnels' suitability for the disposal of an unspecified waste substance, and a dramatic goal was shaped. In subsequent emails, we fleshed out the character further. For example, the actor originated the idea that the survey could be delivered vocally, and we considered how his voice might be recorded as he spoke, in the end opting to use a headpiece. When preparing the role, the actor memorized the survey nomenclature so that on-set, he could deploy it, without thinking, in the form of muttered observations delivered into a headset.

While I had a general idea as to the direction in which the actors were taking things, I did not know exactly who their characters would be—or become—until the camera was rolling and the actors were able to respond to the tunnel environment itself. Parameters were set out to maximize spontaneity: the actors were not rehearsed prior to the shoot; they did not meet each other; I did not discuss with one actor another's preparations. Once in Ramsgate, run-throughs were extremely brief and focused largely on warm-up or physical blocking where this was required. I will now turn to the filmmaking process itself, focusing on how the cinematography and visualization supported the actors in offering affective and embodied responses to the tunnels.

You Are Here?

When researching the history of the Ramsgate tunnels, I came across a description that I could not get out of my head. The narrow gauge "World Scenic Railway" was constructed within the tunnel complex in 1936 and featured train carriages fitted with spotlights above each window frame. A series of tableaux were fixed to the tunnel walls, depicting countries around the world, including Japan, Canada, Egypt, and Switzerland, which were illuminated as the train moved (Catford 2005, 2). Holidaymakers could explore the world, doubtless as an exotic spectacle, on their way to the beach. Framed illuminations, moving in front of the viewer's eyes, transporting them into fantasy explorations of faraway places; a productive tension between stasis and movement—were the tunnels giving me cinema itself? Sadly, the illuminations are long gone, and the scenic railway tunnel is ruined and inaccessible. But this imagery stuck with me, especially the format of the tableau; it left me with a feeling that the tunnels themselves had an aesthetic to release, a feeling that is ultimately irrational.

Few would subscribe, any longer, to the view that site-specific art has an original and fixed relationship to its location, and practices "that would prioritize the physical inseparability between a work and its site of installation" (Kwon 2004, 13) have generally been in retreat. These remarks may at first sight seem inapplicable to filmmaking, given that finished films are rarely screened at the locations where they were shot. But on *Coccolith*, we were consciously striving to avoid any notion of "shooting on location," with its reductive connotations of site as backdrop for a human drama. Instead, our production was conceived more in terms of an installation. To conceive of the camera and performances being *installed* in the chalk tunnels is not to imply their inseparability, but rather that the filmmaking approach responded, to an unusual degree, to the qualities of the site itself.

In commercial filmmaking, locations tend to function as a backdrop *for* something—usually human drama, an actor delivering scripted lines or action.

Liam approaches the Smoking Man. Photo: Christopher Brown.

The scene in *Coccolith* in which Liam approaches the Smoking Man illustrates how our approach was somewhat different. The concept outline provided merely some basic guidance: "Liam moves forward, and finds Smoking Man again. Smoking Man is leaning against the wall, staring ahead, and now seems unaware of Liam's presence." This guidance evokes a dramatic idea (a relationship, or lack thereof), but the detail, realization, and affective qualities of the drama emerge from the manner in which the actors are installed within the location and how the performer responds to the

environment. This dynamic plays out in front of the camera and generates emotional resonance. Liam looks close into Smoking Man's eyes and seems to be attracted to him in some way, but after glancing toward the vanishing point of the tunnel, he moves away. It is the actor's response to the tunnel that implies there is a choice between staying and leaving. It is as if the tunnel draws him away.

If remapping the tunnels provided a context for an actor's physical and emotional journey, then our cinematography assisted in the creation of a filmic space in which this could play out.[3] During the development phase, we decided to capture the majority of the scenes in their entirety using locked-off wide shots; some of these appear in full, while others were edited. This approach came about in response to several factors: site-specific limitations; our desire to heighten the actors' responsiveness to the environment by affording them reasonable freedom of movement within the frame and the opportunity to perform a scene in full; research into the aesthetic practice of other filmmakers; and my desire to reference the tableau format which I intuited (however mystically) the tunnels had afforded. The framed illuminations in the scenic railway took the holidaymakers on a tour, whereas the *tableaux* might have been viewed as one might read a map, allowing visitors to identify landmarks and locations distributed across an image-field. As discussed above, this distinction between the map and the tour is broken down once filmmaking, as a process, is reconceived as the tender mapping of a particular site.

Site-specific limitations set the parameters for our later aesthetic decisions. In the recce, it became evident that the level of lighting in the tunnels was very low, and that we would not be able to boost this substantially, given the lack of power sources over long distances and our limited budget, which prevented the rental of a generator or cabling. We were instead restricted to the use of existing lighting (single bulbs placed at intervals of around ten metres) and battery-powered LED light panels. After some experimentation, we concluded that the Arri Alexa offered the widest creative scope in low-light conditions. The body of the camera is heavy, however, which made quick manoeuvring in narrow tunnels impractical. Tracking shots, in particular, were time-consuming to achieve: following characters at head-height risked damaging the camera on the low and uneven ceilings, while the operator and crew had to pass bulbs that unavoidably cast shadows. The budget limited us to two days in the tunnels, so while three complicated tracking shots were filmed, we made far more extensive use of long, unbroken takes with no camera movement.

Ultimately just three tracking shots were taken, and two of these had to be filmed with a smaller DSLR (Digital Single-Lens Reflex) camera, which was more practical to operate in the shelter tunnels. The shot in which Liam enters the chalk tunnel for the first time was filmed in darkness, with the character illuminating the walls using his torch as he walks. Our approach was influenced by the scene in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2010) in which the characters enter a cave and explore it by torchlight. Apichatpong has discussed this scene in terms of how Plato's cave allegory is complicated by Buddhist perspectives and also takes on resonance in the context of the effacing of Thailand's history.[4] Consciously connecting film to the shadows from the fire on the cave wall, Apichatpong's shots focus less on the characters than on the walls of the glistening cave, illuminated by the characters' torches. Our scene in *Coccolith* attempted something similar. Tracked from behind as he walked, the actor was free to shine his torch onto any area of the tunnel wall, which spotlighted and distorted, at random, the textures of the chalk surface. The scene attempts to evoke the proto-filmic qualities of shadow-and-light-play, while the raw material being illuminated—chalk—acts as the film's central metaphor for historical accumulation.

As the above example suggests, in developing our aesthetic approach, we turned to existing practice that explores the relationship between site, camera, and performance. Another influence was *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2003), shot entirely within the confines of the dilapidated Fu He theatre in Taipei. The film features ghostly characters that haunt the decaying cinema complex, while formally, it utilizes wide shots extremely long in duration, emphasizing composition in depth. Many of Tsai's performers, meanwhile, give the impression that their characters are unaware of others around them. A ghostly woman (Yang Kuei-mei) who is watching a film eating watermelon seeds remains oblivious to the terror she has engendered in a Japanese tourist (Mitamura Kiyonobu) seated a few metres away. The performances give the impression of characters occupying the same place but different spaces, a notion also taken up in *Coccolith*. Take the scene (captured in a single shot) in the railway tunnel in which the Surveyor enters, followed by Disco Woman.

The Surveyor enters, followed by Disco Woman. Photo: Christopher Brown.

The actor playing the Surveyor was told to perform as if his character was alone and unable to see anyone else. The actor playing Disco Woman, by contrast, was told that she was able to see and hear the Surveyor. At play here are two characterizations involving different temporalities—two spatial routes—meaning that each actor had different perspectives on the physical topography of the tunnels at the moment of performance. This resonates strongly with de Certeau's notion of space as practised place, which Kaye considers vital to much site-specific art as it "admits of unpredictability" and allows a single place to be "realized in successive, multiple and even irreconcilable spaces" (2000, 5). On *Coccolith*, we were attempting to enable two notions of space—embodied by the performances—to coexist within the frame (in keeping with the film's concept of inscribing multiple histories within a single site).

In his analysis of the interplay between the spatiotemporal aesthetics of art cinema and video installation practice in Apichatpong's work, Kim (2010) observes a tendency to use shots with extended duration that exceed narrative economy. This allows viewers to become engrossed in the spatial properties of the individual shots: "The spatial dimension of duration acquires a phenomenological depth and length in which the moment of the viewer's perception and the temporal register in the image are inseparably fused together" (Kim 2010, 128). The use of extended duration in several scenes in *Coccolith* drew on these conventions, associated with slow cinema, an approach to filmmaking which in formal terms is defined by long takes, static camerawork, a preference for wide shots, and a tendency to maintain a distance between the subject and the camera; both Apichatpong and Tsai have been associated with this approach.[5] The use of long

duration and static camerawork on *Coccolith* was designed to encourage the viewer to consider the spatial relationship of the performers to the tunnels. An example would be the shot of seventy-two seconds in duration, in which Liam approaches Smoking Man then retreats into the depth of the tunnel (shown above). Other scenes, such as that featuring Postcard Woman, were later edited, albeit in a limited manner. But crucially they were staged and shot in an unbroken manner, thus giving the actors the freedom and opportunity to perform place, to respond to the ruined tunnels, to the "disparate fragments, juxtapositions, traces, involuntary memories, inferred meanings, uncanny impressions and peculiar atmospheres" that Edensor suggests are evoked by ruins (2005, 162).

Our approach to cinematography in *Coccolith* was designed to facilitate actors generating space by performing place. The camerawork seeks to capture the resulting unpredictability and ambiguity via a predilection for wide and unbroken shots, long in duration, which allow the performances to play out in full. It is the combination of the cinematography with the encouragement of the actors to respond to the attributes of the tunnels that generates the performing of place. But implicit in this, is there not a lingering adherence to the actuality of a single or orderly place? "Despite the proliferation of discursive sites and fictional selves," Kwon observes of site-specific practice, "the phantom of site as an actual place remains, and our psychic, habitual attachment to places regularly returns as it continues to inform our sense of identity" (2004, 165). Our approach betrays a conviction that the work and its site of installation *perhaps might* be inseparable.

The cinematography certainly keeps open this proposition. Our wide shots were intended not only to encourage the actor to attune to the place but also to de-privilege the place of the actor within the frame, drawing attention instead to the geological strata and matter such as chalk. Human beings are depicted as just one component of the tunnels' broader material texture via a spatial overview, while elsewhere, the use of close-ups provides focus.

Liam meets Postcard Woman. Photo: Christopher Brown.

The shot in which Liam meets Postcard Woman in certain respects aligns the project with visual realism as conceived by André Bazin, whose theories Conley argues are implicitly built on cartographic principles, exploiting the lexicon of geography and geology, contending "a loose or even unbound network of tensions of the same charge that are distributed *all over* the image-field. No one place or site has privilege over another. The image-fact requires the shot to be read as might

a map" (2007, 8). In one sense, *Coccolith* could be seen to visually render a topographic understanding of realism, emphasizing the tunnels' raw material. Yet this always remains in tension with the characters who emerge from specific timeframes and exist in particular spaces. In exploring the shot as one might a map, the viewer is asked to contemplate the propositional connections between film, performer, and the materiality of the tunnels.

Epilogue: Redrawing the Map

If *Coccolith* is primarily concerned with using the characteristics of the tunnels to generate a process of tender mapping, then occasionally, our desire to counter-mythologize conflicted with this aim. This is perhaps most evident in Disco Woman's phone call. Hitherto silent, the character suddenly launches into a sustained, fast-paced diatribe. Her speech was designed to shock because it is unexpected, but also because it is delivered in Italian, invalidating any assumptions that the character might be British. This moment represents the deliberate imposition of commentary onto the environment, hence our decision to shoot in an extreme close-up that excludes the architecture and pushes the background into soft focus.

And what is nationality - a question of blood?

Disco Woman's phone call. Photo: Christopher Brown.

The actress devised the monologue herself after we exchanged a few ideas and notes. The ostensible subject matter is Disco Woman's feelings of abandonment by her lover, but this was a device that enabled us to reflect on Brexit, on the myths of nationhood that motivated us to offer a creative remapping of the tunnels in the first place.

Wood refers to mapmakers as "extraordinarily selective creators of a world—not *the* world, but *a* world" (2010, 51), a characteristic shared by actors and filmmakers. To map something is also to acknowledge tensions in the interpretation of place and the fundamentally propositional nature of that practice. If mapping is to bring something into being, to conceive of film practice-as-research as an exercise in mapping is to adjust conventional boundaries between seeing, reading, and doing. The process of making *Coccolith* suggests that filmmakers can adopt practices that encourage a tender mapping, attending to the unique features of a particular place.

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Further information about *Coccolith* is available at http://www.coccolithfilm.co.uk.

Notes

1. The mayor most likely succeeded in this because he had a relative in the Home Office.

2. See Brown and Knight-Hill (2019, 320–23), which offers a detailed account of the role of the director in visually conceiving a spatial experience of the tunnels characterized by the absence of sound—silence.

3. The cinematography achieved this in conjunction with sound. For a full discussion of how sound helped shape cinematic space on the project, see Brown and Knight-Hill (2019).

4. Apichatpong is the director's given name, by which he is referred to in the article, in line with Thai naming customs. He explains that in *Uncle Boonmee*, "I wanted to go to the roots of this narrative, which is the cave, in which we live and where we created the first films, the drawing of the shadows from the fire. So, there are many reflections of the allegory in my films, but I am also really fascinated by Plato and Buddhism. Ok, this guy comes down and tells us about the sunlight, but is that reality? I am not sure whether the outside to which he is pointing is necessarily reality." (Apichatpong 2016).

5. See, for example, Lim 2014. These formal strategies are always matched by a slowness or stillness of content; stories exploring mundane existence and individual agency within local cultures, in a manner often critical of the capitalist/modern/globalized obsession with speed. Other filmmakers associated with slow cinema include Pedro Costa, Béla Tarr, Lav Diaz, Kelly Reichardt, and Jia Zhangke.

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