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Thinking Edgelands: Romantic overtures and environmental sensibilities in post-industrial and post-natural topographies

Tragic, in these times of culture, to be divided
by a shortfall that is already riven in two.
The abstemious think otherwise, keep to themselves
in hazy rituals whose ultimate purpose
gets blotted out by new trends in passionate landscapery.
John Ashbery, "The Binomial Theorem", *A Worldly Country* (2007)



Figure 1: Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts *Edgelands* (2011)

Geography has wielded a signifier for the urban phenomena, edgelands: “the interfacial interzone” between urban and rural.¹ As Frances Spalding notes, the term is new, freshly

¹ Marion Shoard, “Edgelands of Promise,” *Landscapes* 1.2 (2000): 74-93; Nick Gallent, Marion Shoard, Johan Andersson, Richard Oates, and Christine Tudor, “Inspiring England’s Urban Fringes: Multi-functionality and Planning,” *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability* 9.3 (2004): 217-233.

brandished by innovative spatial discourse; however, this type of space has subliminally registered in the British imagination for some time:

Somehow we know immediately the meaning of “edgelands”. The word evokes zones where overspill housing estates peter out or factories give way to black fields or scrubland; where unkempt areas become home to allotments, mobile-phone masts, sewage works, cooling towers, dens, places of forgetting, dumping and landfill.²

The authors of *Edgelands* consider England’s canal networks as one of these spaces, transformed from the highways of commercial carrying during Roman occupation of the south of Britain to the inland arteries of industrial expansion and colonial relations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of which over 2000 miles of navigable canals remain today. In their analysis of the “double life” of canals – adopted as natural features where they cut through the countryside, dumping grounds when found in urban spaces – Farley and Symmons Roberts question how this “broken network” can be “reconnected and revived”.³ Their question is partly materialist (the physical land and water) and cultural (the imagining of these waterways); the idea of re-establishing bonds, either of communication or emotion, runs right through this inquiry.

In a critically anti-nostalgic text, the authors establish a binary to be explored here in their use of the Latin prefix (re): past and present, rural and urban; to reconnect and revive these spaces and yet to do this without looking backwards. From here the imaginary realm that seeks “romance” on the canal’s narrowboats is open to intertextual geocritical scrutiny:

Just as the ancient frost fairs allowed for revelry and licentiousness, because the law of the land did not extend to frozen lakes and rivers, so life on a canal seems to offer an escape from convention and restriction. Walk past a mooring and your eye is drawn behind the lace curtains, where couples who have dodged the rat race wave to you, their matching bicycles strapped to the deck of the garishly painted *Lady of Shallot*, kettle whistling on the

² Frances Spalding, Review of *Edgelands: Journeys into England’s True Wilderness*, by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts. *The Independent*, February 25, 2011.

³ Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts. *Edgelands: Journeys into England’s True Wilderness* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011): 118. Hereafter referenced as Farley.

stove, and an open copy of *The Wild Places* on the table. Now, across England's canal network, boat-hire companies let you taste this reverie for anything from half a day to a fortnight.⁴

Farley and Symmons Roberts place England's labour history out of view while a sense of escape – or freedom – is framed and degraded by transformative terms: from the space of carnival to industry into leisure product, to afford an affected bourgeois-conservative lifestyle; who would have reckoned? The evident cynicism reads a very British production of space. It compresses an observational eyewitness account of people in space while alluding to the elision of reality from the image-based landscapes of the nineteenth century and of the authors' peer – the neo-Romanticist writer, Robert Macfarlane.

Edgelands seeks to expose a grammatical ideology; that is to say an underpinning archaic literary referentiality between text and world, which speaks to identity at scale (i.e. nationalism) and leads to individualistic cultural practices (i.e. the possibility of escape). Both degrees of agency are plastic and impressionable; their coherence can be subject to cultural and historical formulations of space – in this example, a former state of the nation and its lifeways. The narrowboat takes its name (although it drops the definitive article) from Tennyson's 1833 ballad that recasts Arthurian legend to evoke a lost England and incite a medieval British imaginary. Yet the poet laureate's opening – "Long fields of barley and rye, That clothe the world and meet the sky"⁵ – suggests something beyond nostalgia in the emphasis on material conditions; it portends a poetic subject cognate with Farley's and Symmons Roberts' connections between industrial capital and the imagination – a fusion wherein inauthenticity might adumbrate realism. There is a proto-spatial discourse in Tennyson's inquiry into the tension between society's utilitarianism and the needs of the human individual, the latter is adaptive yet comparatively slower changing; this tension is written at the altitude of nation formation and has entered the English literary canon for this reason. However, Tennyson's poem is mobilised for its mood in *Edgelands* – precisely the quality that it is used to invoke

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Major Works*, Edited by Adam Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 1-3.

nostalgia in broadcast media, which when read too quickly (and within the cultural canon that betokens superficial heritage formation)⁶ is understood as fake, disconnected from the real attributes of space.

Rather than look to a past, whether to articulate unrealised potential in the present – Tennyson’s real subject, as with other English critiques of the extended wake of the Glorious Revolution (1688) – or for historical values, the authors of *Edgelands* have a singular project in mind: to keep focus on the modern. Their concentration is firmly fixed on the symbolism of the hidden fibre-optics lying underneath the canal towpaths connecting cities, companies and communities;⁷ a focus which relates to surfaces and their depths portending a reverse archaeology or an inverse palimpsest: underneath things there lies the present rather than a past. Conclusively, their attention is not on the less worldly repose of the pre-digital age. It is thus that Macfarlane’s text, *The Wild Places* (2007), is sarcastically framed within an anti-Romanticised space.

This complex, literary space belies the celebration of the edgelands as constructed, unreal, fragmentary, i.e. modern; it is a space where Farley and Symmons Roberts gloss literary detail to write against history in their text as a means to establish a mode that celebrates contemporary space. Their project is thus not a “geographical inquiry into historical experience”⁸ but a spatially disassembled cartography of particularities of the present.

Wayfinding Through The Domain

Edgelands is not a map of a single totality. It is not a figurative abstraction of a land mass read north to south or east to west, for example. It is a record of the qualities of multiple landscapes and their attributes; these are gathered together in a cluster of modulated

⁶ A compelling analogy is the poem “Jerusalem” by William Blake; originally a preface to *Milton a Poem* (1808), now an anthem of British nationality and conservatism that draws from Blake’s allusion to the myth of Jesus Christ visiting south west England with a tin miner (Joseph of Arimathea) during the years unaccounted for in the New Testament. It is an understatement to call this irony; Blake’s emphasis is the critique of industrialism under the banner of the nation, and the poem embodies a continued ‘mental fight’ against the establishment following the failed English revolution (John Milton was a civil servant under Cromwell’s Commonwealth of England, 1649-1660).

⁷ Farley *op. cit.*, 119.

⁸ Edward, Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993): 7.

kinds; into an emphasis on things or themes, which are clearly distributed in space but are not structured by an overarching geographic pattern. Twenty-eight chapters, ranging from “Cars”, “Containers”, “Canals”, “Ruins”, “Retail” etc. disrupt any desire to assimilate the edgelands into a two-dimensional cartographic representation of space. The reader does not journey from place to place, but through a series of accumulations of things in multiple spaces: portakabins and palettes; bridges and cars and lights.



Figure 2: Stephen Gill, *Archaeology in Reverse* (2003)

Edgelands is a model of multifocal geocriticism. It is social, political, environmental; it undertakes many excursions through heterogeneous spaces – sites are located between urban and rural, sometimes feral and loose, sometimes over-disciplined and contained; it engages with literary texts and runs through multiple academic disciplines to articulate a dwelling thesis absent of nostalgia. This particular displacement of focus on a traveller in a terrain by both high-brow and humorous meandering through debates in the arts and sciences, reaches apotheosis in the chapter “Ruins” – significant, I feel, for its historical register. Here, focus on the relationship between the practice of life and the production of space is inflected with biological science; here, genomics offers

fresh ground for polemical attack on conservative thinking. Taking the idea of “progressive detachment”, Farley and Symmons Roberts examine a sense of freedom, of being out in open space, within (and part of) the wild. With humanism to one side, the authors’ dwelling thesis invokes an evolutionary naturalism; biological language indicates that genetic faults and errors switch off certain parts of the genome over time, which results in a species being alienated from instinctive behaviour.

If a blackbird’s genome dictates that at the first sign of spring it must make a cup-shaped nest lined with mud and grass, then that’s what it will do. Once that part of the genome is inactive, the animal is simultaneously blessed and cursed. If you lose the deep, instinctive pull to make a certain kind of shelter in a certain place at a certain time, then you can, in theory, make whatever kind of shelter you can think of, from an igloo to a skyscraper.⁹

I aim to think of this in terms of a species’ action or skill in space, and of the literary project that writes out space in lieu of history (preceding genres, preceding human action). Philosophically, when thinking of genome or text, one might be tempted to contemplate the advantages and disadvantages of working from a historical position to articulate *life* and its future; to think how a cost might be incurred when culture either leans heavily on the past, or draws from archival evidence.¹⁰ This disposition might undermine an alternative project that entertains a species’ ability to adapt; a perspective that might understand space as an affordance for life, its properties enable life forms to enact their energies, to perform actions.¹¹

To take this evolutionary position to the scale of culture (which appears to be moving at a rate faster than our biological adaptations)¹² indicates a tension between longing and belonging; for ideas of the past, and in the spaces of the present, respectively. For example, Farley and Symmons Roberts celebrate concreted nameless spaces as

⁹ Farley *op. cit.*, 165.

¹⁰ See Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (1873).

¹¹ James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979).

¹² Climate change is one example: human induced, largely by our pursuits related to the spoils of technological advantage over other species. Humans and other species are failing to navigate loss of biodiversity (increased species extinction rates) and the pressure to find new homes, new sustainable practices for life (energy use, food consumption, dwelling places).

versions of “wilderness”.¹³ What was once the Forest of Arden in the English Midlands for Renaissance England, is now the National Exhibition Centre (NEC) Car Park for contemporary poets; and it is these “badly stitched together places” without a name that are overlooked by our culture, not looked at nor looked into, and by consequence the difficulty of such spaces “to have an imaginative life”.¹⁴

Two things follow from here: space itself generates the possibility for imaginative engagement; as spaces change materially and in our historical (and creative) records, artistic and human dialogues with these spaces moves, too. While the NEC lends itself to new forms of writing it also frames these new forms as a response to what came before: edgelands that were once something else – and in this case, historically significant. Literary and material spaces are corollaries for one another; as Henri Lefebvre writes: “The space which contains the realized preconditions of another life is the same one as prohibits what those preconditions make possible”.¹⁵ The NEC embodies the potential for many pre-capitalist places of nature to be transformed by economic pressures; the site also indicates the need to establish a genre and fix this (e.g. Shakespeare’s pastoral) before one can transgress it.

Ironically, *Edgelands* steps close towards cliché when the authors distil this bi-directionality between life and life world into a short sentence: “we take the metaphors for our lives from the language we inherit, but we shape and colour them from our own experience”.¹⁶ The primitive forest, home to the exiled court of Duke Senior in *As You Like It* (1599/1600) indicates the attainment of freedom from persecution while also metonymically registering the large-scale forced movement of traditional labour from pastoral spaces to the cities. In the hands of the authors of *Edgelands* it mocks a sense of perfection or an eternal state of quietude fixed in culture (a physical space or a literary genre), while progressively detaching from the pastoral mode and prohibiting Romanticised access to a historical cultural formation.

¹³ Paul Farley, and Michael Symmons Roberts, “Edgelands: Between the Urban and the Rural – Video,” *The Guardian*, March 22, 2011.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Henri, Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Translated by David Nicholson Smith, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991): 189-190.

¹⁶ Farley *op. cit.*, 32.

On one hand, the new site is, quite simply, a former space that is concreted over with neither toponym nor memorial; yet the earlier form of the space is incompletely erased, an active referent that conditions the new space as one dependant upon its predecessor (its former state) for its definition. On the other hand, the site can be read as a space released from its history; the unnamed space might be difficult to access in the cultural imagination, and yet this difficulty portends other materialist issues: (i) unknown, disconnected from the centre, the space remains on the edge of life – physically and culturally – and can thus afford critical objectivity from within, to measure and reflect back upon our cultural norms to which this space is ‘other’; (ii) the unnamed, too, can fall foul of further appropriation and assimilation by market forces without the loss or impact registering in the cultural realm. Without a moment given to evaluating the impulse to develop and grow, Farley and Symmons Roberts understand the scientific reduction (“progressive detachment”) on the human scale, as “liberation from instinctive behaviour” that leads to “the birth of civilisation”.¹⁷ Our culture has evolved from a deep map of instincts; yet, owing to the pull of these instincts and genomic ghosts, we “wax lyrical about hills, forests, rivers, moors”¹⁸ – the call of the wild. Moreover, and more wittily, the authors claim that if genetic science had not created the term “wilderness” it would have been “necessary for wilderness writers to invent it.”¹⁹ Homesickness owing to a memory of wild places and desires to be at one with nature is a psychological and ideological position misconceived by our cultural frameworks, which invoke an ultimate array of fallacies: historical emotional connections, sustainable place attachment and the conflation of self-identity and nationhood.²⁰

Directly after this conflation, humorous counterpoint situates a manifesto of edgelands inhabitation:

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Buell understands three directions within the concept of place: they are (i) toward environmental materiality (ii) toward social perception or construction (iii) toward individual affect or bond. Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, (London: Blackwell, 2005): 62-3.

We would like to start a counter-movement. Rather than escaping to the forests of the Highlands, park your car at Matalan and have a walk around the edgelands woods. This has the added advantage that you won't die of exposure if you take a wrong turn. And if we must visit mountains, let's make sure there's always a café near the summit, so we can have a drink and enjoy the company of our fellow travellers. Snowdon has already taken this bold step. Now all we need is a Premier Inn on the top of Ben Nevis and a Little Chef on Scafell Pike. Let the campaign begin.²¹

If the reader is deaf to satire they might be mistaken to read only a sarcastic tone when the authors wish to construct a motorway cafeteria on the highest mountain in England; however, the critique of nostalgia is coupled to a critique of unbridled fetishisation of consumerist, late capitalist security incurred at significant cultural cost. Throughout *Edgelands* satire keeps late capitalist consumerism at a distance while simultaneously marking the end of nature (i.e. nature deprived of its independence from humans). This modernism is central to the critical impulse in *Edgelands* that asserts some value in the understated, undervalued and overlooked places of becoming:

Well, our spiritual path would be a track worn down by dog-walkers and schoolkids, on the outskirts of a north-west English conurbation. It would start on scrappy grass, then weave its way through a copse of feral trees. Every now and then a makeshift den or tree house can be seen, or a water tower looming where the trees peter out. Charred bonfire patches crop up on one side or the other and the sky is overcast above.²²

The scene is clearly a conflation of the authors' home territories, Manchester and Liverpool; a fused imaginary place that is known well and thus valued for its place in the writers' experiences of their country.

This space is revealing of a range of elements – the site of play, unkempt greens, the feral and the tatty, the edge of nature and ubiquitous energy technologies for our unchecked consumption, the signs of the temperate climate – things that are hardly surprising to the authors, and yet they are remarkable i.e. worthy of remarking, to regard with attention for their personal emotional pull. The idiomatic reference to the suddenness of space “crop up” both alludes to crops (the reduction of pastoral practice in

²¹ Farley *op. cit.*, 166.

²² *Ibid.*, 33.

the modern period) while signifying the world arising on its terms, revealing itself in the open. While these spaces are self-animating, they draw from European and national historical contours, local dialect and personal experiences. This representational complexity with a focus on things (objects in landscapes) is less the disclosure of spatial relations as presented to the flâneur moving through metropolitan habitations with a view to knitting urban meditation to material conditions, and more the impressionistic glance at the polycentric urban agglomeration, “conurbation”. The edgelands imagination is attuned to the gaps between things in the world and between adjacent cities whose disunion reveals “feral” and “makeshift” spaces.²³

Moving In Territories

In his examination of *Edgelands*, Macfarlane celebrates it as a promiscuous “delight” and yet qualifies its innovation:

Farley and Symmons Roberts are not the first to venture into the edgelands, nor is the region nearly as ignored as they suggest. For decades the edgelands have been crawling with chroniclers: psychogeographers, biopsychogeographers, autobiopsychogeographers, deep topographers, and other theoretically constituted lovers of the detrital, gleaning their ruminations on ruination.²⁴

Macfarlane is unconvinced by a text’s focus on a wide range of different things without a single examination of a space in depth. At this point he clarifies a line of (male) writers and filmmakers that are transforming nature writing and documentary traditions in the UK; Patrick Keiller, Chris Petit, Richard Mabey, Kenneth Allsop and Iain Sinclair are all listed as exponents of a “modish” and “debatable space.” Macfarlane qualifies the spaces of this male imaginary as follows:

[B]rownfield sites and utilities infrastructure, crackling substations and pallet depots, transit hubs and sewage farms, scrub forests and sluggish canals,

²³ See Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1915).

²⁴ Robert Macfarlane, Review of *Edgelands: Journeys into England’s True Wilderness*, by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, *The Guardian*, February 19, 2011.

allotments and retail parks, slackened regulatory frameworks and guerilla ecologies.²⁵



Figure 3: Patrick Keiller, *Robinson in Space* (1999)

The first three artists find the geographic reach of mainland Britain suitable for a single canvas; the latter two indicate the vitality of comprehension derived from the experience of a singularly defined entity in space; i.e. one city suburb. However, such discretion is lost in Macfarlane's journalistic gloss. More instructive is the last of these six pairings; it stands out from the list of spaces for it is cultural. And it is very much the literary domain that Macfarlane is outlining here: the fusion of the imaginary and the geographic: first, this pairing signifies a warped genre or the loss of form ("slackened") and second, the inspired avant-garde ("guerrilla"); Macfarlane is not rushing to endorse the latter, at least not endorse whole-heartedly in their present comportment to space.

The new vogue in passionate landscaping of the British counter-culture's critique of capital (within the historical wake of the spaces of broken industry in the urban

²⁵ *Ibid.* Jamie clearly reads this as a gendered aesthetic in the UK. See David Borthwick, "The Sustainable Male: masculine ecology in the poetry of John Burnside," in *Masculinity and the Other: Historical Perspectives*, edited by Heather Ellis and Jessica Meyer, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009): 63-85.

outskirts of liminal Britain) as understood by Macfarlane, is followed up with an engaging conservatism. Drawing from Patrick Wright's sense of this politic-aesthetico as: "the New Baroque sensibility," characterised by a romancing "interest in debris and human fallout", Macfarlane posits the new literary cartography as a continuation of the "thought-crimes" of traditional landscape writing i.e. "the editing out of particular people, the excesses of the lyrical impulse", a failure that is "re-performed" in "just a new setting".²⁶

Degrees of solipsism and myopia are indebted to the degree of one's perceptual porosity, which in turn depends upon one's access to spaces. The train and car are celebrated in *Edgelands* as modes of transport that can take you out of the city and through the "empty" spaces between cities.²⁷ The car is the only way to enjoy the car parks that sprawl through these zones of transition, and naturally find adjunct status to the majority of shopping malls, retail parks, light industry and huge spaces for containerisation and other logistical parasites on industrial supply chains. Moreover, the edgelands become the domain "of boy racers", with customised sports cars flashing through the derelict sites at night;²⁸ they are the graveyards of cars, too, awash with scrap metal yards: "the automotive equivalents of the Paris catacombs".²⁹ If these spaces are to be celebrated, so are the ecologically unsound markets and practices that have created them and depend upon them. The point that Farley and Symmons Roberts keep returning to is this: there is no pure nature, and the most vibrant nature or wilderness that exists in England is one where it is hard to get to, and you have to entertain a new wisdom of nature that problematises an ethical relationship to space.

²⁶ Macfarlane *op. cit.*

²⁷ This is less the case in Macfarlane's view: "In Britain, over sixty-one million people now live in 93,000 square miles of land. Remoteness has been almost abolished, and the main agents of that abolition have been the car and the road. Only a small and diminishing proportion of terrain is now more than five miles from a motorable surface. There are nearly thirty million cars in use in Britain, and 210,000 miles of road on the mainland alone. If those roads were to be stretched out and joined into a single continuous carriageway you could drive on it almost to the moon" – Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta, 2007): 9.

²⁸ Farley *op. cit.*, 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

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Early in their text, Farley and Roberts make it clear that “this isn’t a book of walks, rambles, dérives, or flâneurisms”;³⁰ no rapid passage through atmospheres; no observations or points of view crystallised into vignettes of the urban stroller.³¹ The anti-pedestrianism by-product of the focus on the already known manufactures a space between experience and hyperrealism. Edgelands, the authors claim, are difficult landscapes to “immerse” the self in physically: “there would be no tree climbing, and swimming in standing water was out of the question”.³² With a mind towards “letting the terrain speak for itself, rather than framing ourselves within it as intrepid explorers” while travelling throughout the British Isles for this project, Farley and Symmons Roberts foreground the places of “our deepest emotional connection”: Manchester and Liverpool. These post-industrial cities and their spaces between “carefully managed wilderness areas and the creeping, flattening effects of global capitalism”³³ have either been, (a) “written off” as part of a human landscape – urban and suburban – that one might think needs to be transcended, “to discover true solitude in the wilds of northern Scotland”³⁴ or (b) reduced to “backdrop for bleak observations” on human mess and failed politics by psychogeographers.³⁵ Both these schools might use these spaces “as a short cut to misanthropy”, they claim.³⁶

Notably, misanthropy is revisited when looking at the car cadavers reaching up to the sky. For Farley and Symmons Roberts, this experience is good for the “eco-soul”:

It has a pathos. New cars are beautiful, and we don’t like to see them reduced to this by us, by those who should have taken better care of them. And maybe, because we put so much of ourselves into cars, maybe we see our

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

³¹ I am alluding to the creative works of Guy Debord (atmospheres) and the critical work of Walter Benjamin on Charles Baudelaire (vignettes).

³² Farley *op. cit.*, 9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

own demise foreshadowed in theirs, our own future, cannibalised for parts, broken open, cast aside.³⁷

Not unlike the pastoral genre and its promise of a space away from the city, a lot of this book is about getting to the edgelands; however, it is also deeply concerned with how these spaces can move us once we have been moved towards it. Pity, sympathy and sorrow are strong registers in this text despite the arousal of tenderness often held to betrayal by cynical phrasing and barbed tones. We have to take lament and compassion together in this text; we are asked to enter the conflated mode consciously aware that it is but one crucial step away from nostalgia in one direction and empathy in another.

Edgelands suspends this mode as an intellectual and emotional space; interestingly, the itinerant explorer is put to one side here and an enduring human quality (feeling) colours the text's sense of connection.

And this is why Farley and Symmons Roberts resist the lone walker with only a hardcopy map in hand with a mind to an eternal, enduring nature without other humans. Their text is oriented towards the spaces and practices where we have put ourselves. And it is here where we locate a more nuanced critique of abstract cartography and misplaced trust in technology:

It is not that the map must leave things out if critical information is not to be drowned in a welter of ever finer particulars. It is rather that the world of our experience is a world suspended in movement... In the cartographic world, by contrast, all is still and silent... Contrary to the assumptions of cartographers... life is not contained within things, nor is it transported about. It is rather laid down along paths of movement, of action, of perception.³⁸

When Michel de Certeau expressed the experience of being hemmed in by a train carriage ("Railway Navigation and Incarceration") he was alert to the insight gained from being placed within a vector of technology. We feel intact when surrounded by glass, when in a cage. It is a space where we can constitute the outside – viewed behind glass – as an object for our gaze: the "bubble of panoptic and classifying power, a module of

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁸ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, (London: Routledge, 2000): 242.

imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order, a closed and autonomous insularity”.³⁹ Farley and Symmons Roberts seem oblivious to this European inquiry; rather, they prefer to see what might happen from an accelerated, amplified version of this perspectival dilemma of the sealed, technological frame:

Although in-car navigation has been around for a long time, perhaps satnav is still in its infancy; its potential to guide and instruct, but also to unlock the textures of the landscape we pass through only yet hinted at.⁴⁰

An unfortunate consequence of a rhetorically ambitious insight is a failure to notice how perspective can be blinded by its broad brushstrokes. Farley and Symmons Roberts craft a view of technology adoption that can “intersect with a myriad of personal accounts and stories”⁴¹; it is exaggerated to the point where the text begins to read like an augmented reality device on a smartphone:

As each invisible isogloss is crossed on the long journey northwards up the M6, we could hear a voice alert the traveller: for example, the great “trap-bath split” that runs from the Wash to the Welsh Borders. We have lost our ability to find our way using the sun, the stars, the moon, the weather, or water, plants and animals. But most of us lost it many generations ago.⁴²

And this is perhaps the main flaw of postmodern edgelands experience theory: technology in relation to depleted and overlooked nature can make us look through our fantasies of early resourcefulness, to break through the “mysterious labyrinths of our own making”,⁴³ which we might think we are now unable to insightfully step beyond and yet, as indicated by the text, we are impelled to enliven the abstractions of the Cartesian map.

It is oxymoronic to illustrate the new possibilities for locating “England’s true wilderness” via an iPhone application that calculates iridium flares from satellites in visible proximity to the geolocation of the user; however, this toolkit is something Farley and Symmons Roberts sarcastically endorse as a provocation to the reader’s

³⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Translated by Steven Rendell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 111.

⁴⁰ Farley *op. cit.*, 18.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

conservatism. How is use of this new device any different to looking for other signals in the world via accumulated data, such as the first notes of spring after increasing numbers of mild winters mapped over time? Like the impact of global climate change impacting upon migration patterns and birdsong, the iPhone app is helping us to register and see the world of our making as it is in process; or, to refer back to Ingold: to view space “laid down along paths of movement, of action, of perception”⁴⁴. Without this insightful process-oriented reading of the space of experience, the shameless modernism of ground-truthing in *Edgelands* reaches beyond the abstractions of traditional cartography as a resource for cultural wayfinding yet it fails to map a deconstructed twentieth-century sense of cerebral liberty raised at the cost (or incarceration) of the physical.

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Degrees of connection or immersion in space – in recent or distant pasts – are key operating concepts lying in proximity to a sense of possibility in *Edgelands*. Reworking these varying modes of human expression and relation does not include a critique of a Romantic solitary by necessity, and yet the figure of the masculine walker out in the wilds is never too far from satirical exposition of the impossibility (and the irrelevance to urbanism) of noble savagery or “hermitic and lonely journeying”.⁴⁵ In part, this indirect critique of nature fetishism is attentive to the need for adults to be resourceful in either recreating or simply accessing the spaces “of solitude and apartness” that they once found so easily when children. Our near-past spaces have been packaged up, sold back to us and incorporated into a middle-class rhetoric of communing with nature:

In 2006 the Forestry Commission issued a booklet titled “Rope, Swings, Dens, Treehouses and Fires”, which carried the detumescent subtitle “A risk-based approach for managers facilitating self-built play structures and activities in woodland settings”. A tree is “a den on legs”. The booklet correlates den-construction and den location and use into levels of “low risk”, “medium risk” and “high risk”. On this scale, “low risk” means dens built from natural materials, “such as branches, bracken, leaves and other

⁴⁴ As above.

⁴⁵ Farley *op. cit.*, 41.

vegetation”, while the use of pallets, old kitchen units or, worse still, metals and asbestos and cars, together with tunnelling and deep excavations, takes the den into the “high risk” category. *Edgelands* dens would typically fail these building regs [regulations], being of necessity a bricolage of available natural materials and human waste. Reading this booklet, you realise how far we have come from public information films warning of the dangers of children entombing themselves in fly-tipped refrigerators on waste ground. You also realise how separate our official countryside is from our edgelands.⁴⁶

And this is a meeting point between *Edgelands* and Macfarlane: that there is another world beyond this marketed, risk-managed nature. The authors have taken different directions from this singular position. Farley and Symmons Roberts dispute the implicit binary and self-evident dualism in the culturally imaged separate zones of human and nature – “bricolage” is a key term for them; Macfarlane takes us away from this theoretical noise to allow a clear voice of human-traversed nature to present itself, as a space of historical entanglement for our listening.

Accessing Spaces

The momentum achieved at the end of *Edgelands* places us firmly in the territory of late capitalist hyper-reality. In reviewing the retail park’s sibling, the outlet village, Farley and Symmons Roberts negotiate Jean Baudrillard’s semiotic concept, “simulation”.⁴⁷ These spaces defined by a collection of manufacturers’ shops usually located outside towns and cities sometimes take on a singular theme – an Elizabethan outlet village for example. As such they speak directly to a postmodern death of reality where there is only ever a version of a thing (or things) that did not really ever exist; there was no such market place in Renaissance England. Baudrillard speaks of the ‘death’ of the real in line with contemporary life connecting deeply to television, virtual reality games, Disneyland and the internet: things that merely simulate reality. For the authors of *Edgelands*, this raised consciousness might have been alerted north of the English Channel in the new marketplaces that bill themselves as “experiences”:

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

Although [Baudrillard] probably wrote... between drags on Gauloises in the corner of a café on La Rive Gauche, the penny might have dropped even sooner had he sipped an espresso brought from a barrow pushed by a man in authentic street-vendor costume at an English outlet village.⁴⁸

False-copies, no less real than the world they simulate, are not the domain of Macfarlane; but neither are they at the centre of *Edgelands*, for there is something else out there, potentially authentic. And it is really a question of how to get at it, be part of it, for Farley and Symmons Roberts. Throughout this essay I have indicated that this issue is partly related to making an internal connection to real experience (e.g. drawing from childhood) than imagined possibilities (e.g. urban utopias, nostalgic pastorals), and it is predominantly conceived in relation to how we embrace the advantages of technology (the car, the iPhone, the thematised space for our consumption).



Figure 4: The Classy Traveller, Valmontone outlet village (2013)

Turning back to the film-set scenes of outlet villages within which we are situated to undertake retail therapy, the *Edgelands* authors make a stirring point:

⁴⁸ Farley *op. cit.*, 219.

So why the poetic air of melancholia? There's a sadness to these places. A successful pastiche makes us feel nostalgic for something we never knew, a past we never experienced. Struck by a nameless sense of loss, we stop for a hazelnut latte outside a timber-fronted Oxfordshire cottage selling designer stilettos.⁴⁹

The bittersweet longing that is endemic to the psychological state of homesickness cuts through the critique of postmodern selfhood here; the attempt to twist this into satire is well made but never fully recovers from the atmosphere of loss installed by the first move. This melancholic tone seems intentional. Moreover, it acts as the closing half of the frame to which the book opens:

For a long while, an entire childhood in fact, we wondered where the countryside actually was, or even if it really existed... it was easy to walk for a short while and soon find yourself lost in back lanes or waste ground, to follow the wooded perimeters of a golf course, an old path leading through scratchy shrubland, or the course of a drainage ditch... But none of this ever really felt like the countryside: the sunlit uplands of jigsaw puzzles and Ladybird books, the rolling hills of biscuit-tin lids, the meadowlands and glades in the framed, reproduced pastorals our parents hung on our living-room walls or that we saw on television or read about.⁵⁰

In Lancastrian terms, the landscape image on the biscuit tin was always mythical, never real. Equally true for regional Britain is a futurist limitation, as Doreen Massey notes: "Amid the Ridley Scott images of world cities, the writing about skyscraper fortresses, the Baudrillard visions of hyperspace... most people still live in places like Harlesden or West Bromwich".⁵¹ Anyone who lived within reach of a city in England in the 1970s might feel a sense of the uncanny reading the passage above, for it replaces scepticism for things that are *not known* with things that *are known*, *deeply* in *Edgelands*.

In the final analysis, solipsistic and illusory psychological modes in *Edgelands* learn from former preoccupations with wildness, from hyperrealism and from childhood memories. Equally, these cultural experiences – of the deep past, the derailed

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵¹ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (London: Polity Press, 1994): 163.

imagination, and the near past carried to the present, respectively – impact on the voice that is given to these new spaces. Whether the modes of access to these spaces is causally related to this voice is unclear; however, we can be certain that the emotional and satirical modes present in the texts under view either endorse or negate the nature of longing inherent in our nostalgia for wild places.

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