

Research Article

Title:

Mapping a First World War Archive Through a Contemporary Lens.

Abstract

This article examines my current research, which is comprised of the making of a gallery installation film, *Palimpsest*. This film uses contemporary images of the everyday to contemplate events of the First World War as represented in a collection of unique, first hand, unpublished letters sent home to London by mapmaker Rifleman Barney Griew. *Palimpsest* has been commissioned by *Changing the Landscape*, a multimedia arts project developed by Sarah Kogan and supported from public finding by the National Lottery through Arts Council of England and was the first contemporary art exhibition at The National Archive, UK.

My writing explores the process and methods of representing the past through contemporary spaces, and their configuration into a continuous biographical narrative denoting the journey taken by Griew. In illustrating the development of the film, I scrutinize the work of the New Topographic Photographers of the 1970s focusing on their representation of landscape, the images of Thomas Ruff and the Russian Formalists. These examples are examined to draw comparisons and evaluate the fostering of critical understanding. I conclude by discussing the importance of contemporary digital technology in shaping our perception of the past.

Key Words

First World War
Archive
Digital Filmmaking
Palimpsest

Introduction

How does a project mature? It is obviously a most mysterious, imperceptible process. It carries on independently of ourselves, in the subconscious, crystallizing on the walls of the soul. It is the form of the soul that makes it unique, indeed only the soul decides the hidden 'gestation' period of that image which cannot be perceived by the conscious gaze.

(Tarkovsky 2012:44)

Tarkovsky wrote about the importance of the subconscious in devising a project, the experience of living with an idea in the hope that it becomes focused, sharper and speaks the truth. The aim of this article is to chart aspects of the making of my film *Palimpsest* and consider the conscious influences and contributions that have shaped its 'gestation' period. Many of these elements

relate to the research I have carried out, while other decisions reside within the subconscious, which I will attempt to explore in this piece.

In the centenary year of the beginning of the First World War, I developed a film installation that presents an unofficial and personal version of events during 1916 as told by a mapmaker who was stationed in a network of trenches in Gommecourt, some metres from the German lines. The aim of the film is to validate the voice of the foot soldier, enhance our understanding of the process of preparation for battle on The Front, and deepen our knowledge of everyday life during this time. The correspondence reveals nuances of family and sibling relationships, as well as detailing conditions of military life and the nature of long distance communications. The research highlights the significance of the family archive in providing new insights into historical events by giving access to both official and personal documents that allow us to revisit this moment in history.

The collection of letters, which are held by Kogan, are an extraordinary document of an infantryman's final journey to the Front and are recognised of national importance. William Spencer, Principal Military Specialist at The National Archives, described them as 'unique' (www.changing-the-landscape.com, 2014). Luke Smith, Digital Lead for the First World War at the Imperial War Museum, and creator of Lives of The First World War, described them as 'rich and fascinating' [conversation] (personal communication, May 2014). The National Archives' estimate that by the end of March 2017, the project's total public reach, including online activity, and real visits, will be over 5 million.

Three narratives

There are three different narrative strands that have emerged from *Changing the Landscape*, which form the basis of my approach to the making of the film *Palimpsest*. Primarily, there is the story of Barney Griew and his journey from the East End of London to the battlefields of northern France. Like many nineteenth century East European Jewish immigrants, the Griews settled in Hackney, and Barney worked in the family's furniture factory in Hoxton Square.

As the details of Griew's journey unfolds, through his correspondence he 'recounts' his own narrative, creating himself as a fictional character. Each stage of story thickens through 'cause and effect' and the rationale of time and place becomes established with increasing importance as the plot deepens. The needs of the hero become clear and a fully shaped narrative with conclusion and meaning is produced. The chronology of events creates an Aristotelian structure with each correspondence taking us closer to the main character creating association and attachment. Every stage is an individual scene belonging to a meta-narrative, providing a series of twists and turns to the story. Added to this is the question of the censor's pen and to what extent this has produced an edited version of events? The aspect of censorship is subtle in the correspondence and suggests to me that Griew was aware of the editing process, displaying great skill in describing his experiences and avoiding compromise of military confidentiality. All this is fertile ground for speculation, intrigue, reflection and creative responses to the archive, which has great potential for

contemporary work to produce new meanings in relation to past events through creative practice.

The letters, which are of a personal nature and written to his family present the last months of Griew's life, giving a contemporary reader access to a rich history. Griew's skill as storyteller has to be recognized as his ability to construct narrative is adroit, he carefully weaves unspoken messages and information into his text giving the impression that on a personal level, more is being said than the mere words on a page. Through his story telling technique he creates a desire within the reader to engage with his history. The pervasive nature of Aristotelian structure draws us in, placing us close to proceedings, and drives forward to the final chapter of his life.

In parallel to this, is the second element of narrative, which encompass the two research journeys Kogan and I made in order to retrace Barney Griew's final footsteps to the location of the battlefield at Gommecourt, the place where he died. This aspect provides the contemporary visual evidence, and a parallel time frame, which forms the main concept of the film.

Thirdly there is the contribution of art practice and the use of film language as a response to the experience of the archive of letters, which relies on the traditions of the plastic arts and literature to create a visual embodiment of Rifleman Griew's journey. This can be seen in the light of other art forms that celebrate an individual such as a requiem or a portrait. Documenting is another key aspect of my film and while it draws on these three traditions, none can be seen as a defining or determining genre.

In 1971, photographer Walker Evans commented on the relationship between documentation and art: 'You see, a document has a use, whereas art is really useless. Therefore art is never a document, though it certainly can adopt that style' (Goldberg, 1981:364). While my film borrows from different modes of production it cannot be seen as a document or as archival. It represents an archive and is displayed in an archival vitrine, but in contrast it uses the cinematic form of composition, editing, sound design and music to portray a tragic story of an individual who left home as a young man and went to fight in the battlefields of France. While the film employs tropes and references to the traditions of archive and historical documentation, it is the cinematic nature of the piece that delivers the emotional aspect of the story.

Figure 1: The Changing the Landscape Exhibition at The National Archives, UK.

Evans's work became recognized in the 1930s in the USA when he joined the Resettlement Administration (RA)/Farm Security Administration (FSA) to document the life of North American farm workers and demonstrate how the federal government was attempting to improve the conditions of rural communities during the Depression. His approach contributed to the notion of photography becoming a legitimate art form and Evans's work became a major influence on the New Topographic Photographers. Evans operated on the

fringes of documentary photography and art practice; his images demonstrate that work produced across different spheres could borrow from existing traditions to produce new meanings. Work produced within the domain of the plastic arts is able to take on a variety of forms and approaches but not necessarily be recognized as embodying one particular individual style, it can be a hybrid of methods. This type of work adopts an intertextual aspect through referencing styles, practices or genres. The aim is primarily to reveal the process of making, offer insight into methodology and raise questions about form as mediator.

The National Archives, UK gives the work a scholarly context in relation to historical documentation, in addition to the other venues: Atrium Gallery at the London School of Economics, and Wolfson Reading Room, Manchester Central Library.

Representing a voice

Barney Griew's correspondence leading up to those events on 1st July 1916 read like diary entries and include detailed stories and sketches, he wrote several times a day to different family members.

To Isaac, his brother and confidante, Barney wrote the unvarnished truth in harrowing detail; to his sister, Fanny (Kogan's grandmother) he expressed emotional turmoil; and to his parents a heavily redacted version of his day-to-day life, censored in order to spare them anguish. It is these multiple viewpoints that make these 150 letters and drawings of such exceptional historical value.

(www.changing-the-landscape, 2014)

By late May 1916, Griew had moved up the line on the Western Front and was fighting in the trenches. In a blue letter indicating censorship, to his brother Isaac he wrote of his experience:

The Firing Line
France
May 22nd 1916

Dear I,
Just received your letter, hence this answer. Am as above. Isn't all honey dodging big shells, etc. my pal, Middleton sitting between Sam and myself, was hit by a high explosive in the head and I hear he has died since r.i.p. We were very friendly having a great interest in common in sketching. We can't tell why we were not hit as well, as according to rules, about ten of us should have been hit.

(Extract of letter, Rifleman Barnet Griew Barney, 1916)

Two days later he wrote again to his brother, describing the shelling and the danger to his friends and colleagues:

Scouts

B.E.F 1
France
May 24th 1916

Dear I,

Here we go again, still in the fighting line. The modern instrument of man have been rather busy – but I have been lucky enough to dodge everything that has come my way. I have had some exciting times – and look like having some more until we are relieved. Sam and Weiner as well as myself are quite enjoying our novel experiences here.

(Extract of letter, Rifleman Barnet Griew Barney, 1916)

Some days later on 28th may 1916, he writes to his aunt and uncle with a lighter tone as he is now resting and he mentions the whereabouts of his cousin, Arthur Schuman:

Well, here we are - after a fairly trying spell in the trenches. Still, we are all fine and fit and looking forward to our coming rest. At the present moment Arthur Schuman is in the trenches but by the time you get this he will be resting with us. Sam and I, as you know are battalion scouts, a very interesting job. We have had some exciting times together.

(Extract of letter, Rifleman Barnet Griew Barney, 1916)

I spent several weeks in the Picardie region filming at various locations, visiting the places mentioned in Griew's letters such as Saint-Pol-sur-Ternoise, Le Couroy, Halloy, Thièvres, Frevent and Doullens, where he writes about the nature of his accommodation and the towns he visits. From a billet in Bayoncourt, he wrote a letter entitled 'Resting', dated May 29th 1916:

...We are resting now after being in fairly hot action for some time. It's a great relief to feel secure again, even if you still hear the guns. In spite of some trying times we are all well and hearty feeling in the pink, and determined to make the most of our rest.

(Extract of letter, Rifleman Barnet Griew Barney, 1916)

As a part of my research, I travelled the routes from the billets in Halloy, Hénu, and Souastre to The Front in Gommecourt. This was important in gaining knowledge and understanding of the locations. Embodiment is an aspect of research that has provided an important background to my work. As the making of the film progressed, I found absorbing the atmosphere of places, listening to sounds, seeing the physical geography of the locations as mentioned in the letters, crucial in constructing an audiovisual response. For example, experiencing distances from one place to another and the physicality of the land helped in building an understanding of the demands that were placed on the soldiers. Knowing the distances Griew and his comrades marched, understanding the geography between the Front and the billets, or how far apart trenches were in Gommecourt, all this provided vital knowledge that contributed to the construction of the film, either consciously or subconsciously. For example when filming in the billets there was a particular atmosphere created by the

sound of the location. This was formed by the thickness of stonewalls, hay scattered on the floor and heavy wooden doors that slid shut. These physical features caused a muting of the outside sounds, creating a contemplative atmosphere that I found present in the words of Griew. I was keen to find a way of replicating this in the film through a combination of sound design and music.

As I filmed the interior of the barns, a small plane passed overhead some miles away creating a sense of distant activity. I later used this combination of sound and picture in the edit, changing the audio of the modern airplane to a distant World War I fighting plane to suggest a fly-over during battle. The particular combination of sound and image conjures up a ghostly past that resides somewhere in our subconscious.

In a symposium on Place-Based Arts at the University of Brighton (May 29th 2015), Iain Sinclair, British writer and filmmaker, gave a keynote lecture entitled, 'In Praise of Silence: caves, shrines, secret places and their war against virtual imagery and false narrative', he emphasized the importance of 'walking, listening and absorbing' the atmosphere of place, claiming it as a vital form of research providing essential 'visceral' attachment with location. 'The ground is all memoranda and signatures; and every object covered over with hints. In nature, this self-registration is incessant, and the narrative is the print of seal' (Emerson cited in Macfarlane 2012:5). Experiencing place has been an important aspect of preparation in the making of *Palimpsest* and while the conscious aspects of my research are vital in creating a substantive framework for narrative, much of the subconscious aspects were driven by my experience of place and location and openness on my behalf to be transformed back in time.

Structure

Palimpsest is presented in four parts, entitled *Home*, *Groundwork*, *The Journey*, and *Gommecourt*. The first part of the film includes contemporary images of everyday life filmed on the street where Griew lived, as I wanted to create a parallel time frame between the letters, the words he wrote in 1916 and the present-day activity in his neighbourhood. Busy traffic, overground trains and building developments signify city life, carrying on regardless. Shots of blocks of flats, which are framed in direct reference to Thomas Ruff's *Haus* series revealing the uneventfulness of the architecture, which now surround Griew's Victorian town house, the place where he grew up. These images create a familiar contemporary cityscape, which are used to indicate that time has moved on, and the making of the film is a reminder of the ordinary men who lost their lives in battle.

The second part is called *Groundwork*, the title is a play on the groundwork done in preparation for battle and the preparation of art works for the Changing the Landscape exhibition. We see close ups of letters, one explaining how lucky the soldiers were to be travelling to France in the spring rather than the winter. Griew's drawings of soldiers playing sports, officers resting, and portraits of friends are included. We also see inside Kogan's painting studio located a mile from the Griew household in Hackney, near the canal where the shipment of timber would arrive for the Griew furniture business, which was

located in Hoxton Square. The atmosphere in the artists' studio is similar to the billets in northern France evoking a sense of reflection and contemplation, which permeates the image and creates a connection between the contemporary and the past. The accompanying music builds, becoming sombre as we read in Griew's letter that he is preparing to leave the shores of England for France.

Part three, *The Journey* focuses on Griew's voyage across the English Channel. A split screen image provides two viewpoints, a close-up and a wider contextualizing shot, or a comparison of textures. Frames become abstract on occasion, purposefully framed to create texture, surface and colour. The viewer is invited to contemplate the physical quality of our everyday existence through scrutiny and encouraged to look at the detail of the 'real' as a 'thing', Susan Sontag described 'A work of art is a thing in the world' (Sontag, 1961:21). This is intended as a point of detachment for an audience, aimed at fostering critical engagement with representation and configured to create a framework of comparison. Representations of letters, postcards and drawings are often shown in single frame and in close-up to create an appropriate scale in relation to the viewer.

The object quality of letters, their physical appearance such as tatty edges, texture of ink, undulating indents in the surface of the paper (where Barney wrote his last words) are signifiers of insignificant but intimate moments. These are presented in order to evoke a shared experience between viewer and Griew by showing the material qualities of the letters. They are shot using a macro lens to elicit a physical intimacy with the writings. This detail formulates an understanding and knowledge on an intellectual and visceral level. The shift in scale, as defined by the frame, engenders a reassessment of the letters as objects presenting a sculptural reading of the physical quality of the content. This is yet another connection with the past that reaches into the present via the subconscious, through the representation of objects in a contemporary world that were held, touched, felt, folded and written upon in another time.

The final section of the film is called *Gommecourt* and focuses on the last day of Griew's life, which was in a field in northern France. We see a letter from Griew on the screen, describing how he had gone beyond the wire into no man's land, this is followed by a series of close-ups of muddy fields in Gommecourt and using split screen we see trench maps from The National Archives. These are hand drawn documents produced in Gommecourt by military mapmakers, possibly Griew. We see drawings of trenches called 'Yankee Street', 'Whiskey Street' and 'Yiddish Street'. The soundtrack is of flies and insects suggests close proximity to the ground, a view that Griew might have had while crawling through the mud as a mapmaker. As we get nearer to the Front the soundtrack intensifies, creating a more dramatic atmosphere signifying danger ahead. Bad weather sets in and eventually a crescendo of music, thunder, mixed with distant shelling marks the terrible and dramatic end of Griew's journey.

Figure 2: A Still from *Palimpsest*, trench maps, and earth.

The battlefield today

In stark contrast to the dramatic descriptions of the July 1st, 1916 (as mentioned in the letters), during my research trip, I found Gommecourt a quiet, neat, unassuming field with a single-lane track rising to woodland. The remote sound of a tractor could be heard, a small War Cemetery was situated on the ridge to the south, heavy trucks appeared on the distant horizon, agricultural machinery rattled by from time to time creating bizarre silhouettes against the skyline. Rural life continues here, seemingly unaware of what lies below the thin veneer of chalky soil, which is now cultivated farmland. The ordinariness of everyday life was striking given the brutality and futility of its past. When standing in the peaceful field at Gommecourt it was hard to imagine the mayhem and carnage that occurred a hundred years before, the contrast of past events and contemporary landscape was striking.

Figure 3: A view of Gommecourt today.

The isolated settings in Gommecourt are located among clusters of houses and stretches of open countryside; they are on the fringes of major roads linking large cities. These are the 'spaces in between'. The physical land is flat with occasional disruptions but certainly nothing dramatic, this eventually gives way to expansive skies. These lands are not vistas of beauty but prosaic, functional, practical landscapes, spaces between the main events, which is perfect for arable farmers to work with heavy farm machinery.

It is the banality and normality of the everyday that is conspicuous here, the landscape stretching before me became a site to be read; the mediation of this topography could be scrutinized through visual imagery. Walter Benjamin wrote: 'To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize "how it really was" It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger' (Benjamin 2009:7). Representations of this landscape naturally allude to the experiences of First World War soldiers that fought here, in a contemporary context, the space between image and past enables one to take control of intellectual imaginings of historical events. The physical presence conjures up visions of the past, but the written words of Barney Griew, with his internal reflections and descriptions of his final days are as close to "how it really was" as one could imagine.

The process of searching for evidence of past events, the act of reading landscape was reminiscent of the approach taken by The New Topographic Photographers who appeared in the US during the mid seventies. Their concern with representation was one of banality, producing images that were stripped of spectacle that led to landscape becoming understood as a topographic state. This connected with my experience in northern France, reading ostensibly uneventful locations that were visually banal, lacking in any dramatic features, (one could argue they were devoid of emotion), but they were sites of significant past turmoil.

The New Topographic Photographers arrived on the scene in 1975, marked by an extremely influential exhibition curated by William Jenkins at the George Eastman House, New York. According to Jenkins the photographs

achieved 'anthropological viewpoint rather than critical, scientific than artistic' (Jenkins cited in Cheng, 2011). These ideas were manifest through detachment, as in the photographs of Stephen Shore that showed anonymous road intersections using a network of objects and shadows to take on their own values in terms of direction, surface and colour. These formal concerns gave his pictures an ordered structure, releasing advertising hoardings and traffic signs of their normal indicative character as graphics.

Robert Adams, also a New Topographic photographer, was concerned with the notion of abandonment as reflected in the empty trailer parks in Denver, or the landscapes of Colorado that he photographed in black white. Mark Kozloff suggested;

What Adams achieves is a poetry of depredation. In an era of landscape color, the black and white strikes a memorial note, and a curious mournfulness pervades scenes of an otherwise humdrum brutality. It's not that Adams appears to think tenderly of these undeserving views, but that in capturing them as moments of lonely experience he projects them back into nineteenth-century landscape tradition and perceives their horizons as seemingly deserted now as they were then.

(Masters-of-photography, 2015)

Adams was interested in creating poetic images of the everyday and of depredation; his photographs are a testament to what has been lost and what remains. Many of the New Topographic photographers were influenced by the interpretation of landscape by writer J.B. Jackson who was concerned with 'vernacular landscape' and an interest in the sites of the everyday. They were also concerned with representing a landscape with a backstory. Wendy Cheng argued, 'Within this stance lies a double premise that one can portray landscapes in an objective manner, and read the landscape for meanings; as a document, the landscape is viewed as a repository of cultural human truths' (Cheng 2011:153). Landscape became something to contemplate, to look through, and discover a meaning beyond the image.

The work of the New Topographic Photographers, have been a major influence on generations of American and European landscape photographers. Thomas Ruff, a graduate of the Kunstakademie Dusseldorf, is a photographer who has progressed some of these ideas of banality. Matthias Winzen wrote the following about his image *Haus Nr.71*:

Ruff's photograph is not a narrative depiction of suburban eventfulness. The photograph's pictorial structures make us experience the image as eventful, while at the same time entangling our gaze. Only when we study the image for a time, do we notice the uneventfulness: the poignant banality.

(Winzen 2003:138)

Ruff, who was tutored by Bernd and Hiller Becker, two of the original contributors to the 1975 exhibition, creates images of banality that engages an audience precisely because of their prosaic nature, holding the gaze and inviting

scrutiny. Winzen goes on to discuss how this creates 'illusion' and 'disillusion', an aspect present in the images of the New Topographic Photographers. A balance exists between 'illusion' of landscape, and 'disillusion' of the recognition of formal or material qualities of the photograph.

The detachment fostered by the images of the banal invites a critical view of reality; the process of distancing promotes a more analytical, or topographic reading of that which is being represented. This is an aspect I believe is present in *Palimpsest*, which fosters a discerning audience ready to interact with the images. Achieving a state of distance within the viewer creates a state of readiness to view in a critical and questioning way. In her 1961 essay *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag suggests that any other way of viewing an image might be seen as sentimental.

All works of art are founded on a certain distance from the lived reality, which is represented. This "distance" is, by definition, in human or impersonal to a certain degree; for in order to appear to us as art, the work must restrict sentimental intervention and emotional participation, which are functions of "closeness". It is the degree and manipulating of this distance, the conventions of distance, which constitute the style of the work.

(Sontag 1961:30)

The concept of 'illusion' and 'disillusion' as recognized by Winzen in Ruff's photographs are an important aspect of visual language, which aspires to a sophisticated and subtle voice of criticism, an element I hope *Palimpsest* fosters in audiences, as they contemplate my moving images. This inherent criticism produced through the use of duality has its roots in the concept of visual juxtapositioning, which is present in the photographic works and montages of the Russian Formalists. This body of work has influenced my approach to bringing together a combination of images through the use of split screen. The film work of Sergei Eisenstein was founded on the principles of visual montage and brought together disparate images, creating dynamic and vibrant moving collages, to produce new meanings;

The basic fact was true, and remains true to this day, that the juxtaposition of two separate shots by splicing them together resembles not so much a simple sum of one shot plus another shot - as it does a *creation*. It resembles a creation - rather than a sum of its parts - from the circumstance that in every such juxtaposition *the result is qualitatively* distinguishable from each component element viewed separately.

(Eisenstein 1986:17)

The work by another Russian Formalist Alexander Rodchenko, offered a more subtle approach to the use of duality in the image through his photographs, which seemed more in line with the notion of 'point' and 'counterpoint', a melodic interaction. Rodchenko's photographs use a combination of framing, dynamism and scale to move the eye around the image, to offer a comparable and democratic view. The compositions hold the gaze as the eye searches for

meaning, to compare, to link up, to look into, to look across, to inform. In the magazine *Sovietskoye foto* (1934), he wrote about the possibilities of photography:

The multitude of its aspects are as complex as fine drawing, more interesting than photomontage.

The contrasts of perspectives. The contrasts of light. The contrasts of form. Viewpoints that are not possible either in drawing or in painting. Viewpoints with exaggerated foreshortenings and pitiless texture of the material.

(Rodchenko cited in 2008:10)

Not only did Rodchenko explore the power of comparison and contrast through his image making but was ready to discover new visual perspectives on the world around him, one that would bring new and revolutionary understanding. This freedom of perspective and point of view is an approach I have used in *Palimpsest* in considering the aesthetics of the frame and in attempting to create poetic and challenging imagery from everyday life. Rodchenko argued:

In photography there are the old focal points, man's point of view as he stands on the earth looking about him. It's what I'd call photography from the belly button, camera in the stomach.

The modern city with all its buildings, industry, shop – windows on two or three floors, trams, cars, multi-coloured advertising, ocean liners, aeroplanes, all this has brought about a change in the psyche of visual perception.

The most interesting aspect of contemporaneity is looking from below up and from above down. This is what we have to work at.

(Rodchenko cited in Lavrentiev 1995:21)

The body of work produced by these image-makers has provided me with a methodology and a model to explore landscape through visual means, which places an emphasis on the nature of looking. Ruff's work highlights concerns of banality and how to engage an audience with the uneventfulness of the everyday through the notion of 'illusion' and 'disillusion'. The Russian Formalists on the other hand bring another dimension of looking, one of juxtaposition, a method in which more than one image can be brought together to create a whole. It was the combination of these approaches that held the key to successfully explore the making of *Palimpsest*. The rich heritage these practices bring to our critical understanding of visually engaging work has been vital in building a film installation for contemporary audiences, and in offering new insight into the events of the First World War.

Issues of time.

These examples of photographic practices have been a significant influence, however, working with moving images has brought its own considerations,

How does time make itself felt in a shot? It becomes tangible when you sense something significant, truthful, going on beyond the events on the screen; when you realize, quite consciously, that what you see in the frame is not limited to its visual depiction, but is a pointer to something stretching out beyond the frame and to infinity; a pointer to life.

(Tarkovsky 1986:117-118)

During the editing of *Palimpsest*, I became conscious of the way in which time led an audience to 'sense something significant' (Tarkovsky 1986), which might lie beyond the image, a 'pointer to something stretching out beyond the frame to infinity' (Tarkovsky 1986), in this case, the past. The passing of time is another strategy that evokes a critical state within the viewer through creating expectation. It can provide space for reflection, or room for contemplation of an image, facilitating a subconscious connection with the work.

The frame around the image creates a static reference point, which helps to register time and movement. It is a point from which we can measure, as well as indicating subtle movement, such as growing shadows, shuddering grass or distant cars passing. All this creates a sense of change, of time passing, of 'nowness'. Comparative frames heighten an audience's awareness of time and embellish the visual experience. The use of two frames alongside one another, in a split screen configuration, places an emphasis on the duality of 'now' and 'then', and suggests comparison. The now in *Palimpsest*, is an illusion to real time, showing the reality of the moment and the point at which the camera records 'nowness'. This is heightened by the use of abundance through the use of static still images and extended duration of shots, which consciously registers time passing. 'Time, imprinted in the frame, dictates the particular editing principle; and the pieces that 'won't edit' – that can't be properly joined – are those which record a radically different kind of time.' (Tarkovsky 1986). In *Palimpsest* 'now' is shown by using a variety of simultaneous angles on details that are not reliant on their 'visual (recognizable) depiction' (Tarkovsky 1986), we see a close up of the surface of a road, a field, a building; this abstraction of the 'real' and long takes, invites scrutiny of detail, of light and shadow. By using split screen, I am able to include a combination of close up shots of surface (that appear as abstractions), alongside wider shots, which are contextualizing views that reveal the nature of the location. This combination uses the notion of 'illusion' and 'disillusion', as described by Winzen. The 'illusion' and 'disillusion' Winzen argues, exists through the representation of a façade of a house, a flat surface (disillusion), combined with the three dimensional illusion that also describes 'windows, footpath, and street lamps in the illusionist depth of the photograph.' (Winzen : 2002:138). It is this 'paradoxical interweaving of illusion and disillusion [that] produces conflict' (Winzen : 2002:138). It is this effect I strived for in the images of *Palimpsest*.

The technique of presenting one image alongside another was explored widely by Abel Gance in his 1927, three-screen film 'Napolean'. He devised a system of editing that he called 'simultaneous horizontal montage'.

In short, with Gance the French school invents a cinema of the sublime. The composition of movement-image always presents the image of time in its two aspects: time as interval and time as a whole; time as variable present and time as immensity of past and future.

(Deleuze 20012:49)

In Claude Lanzman's *Shoah* (1985) and Chantal Akerman's *D'Est* (1993), the past is articulated by showing the present, which harnesses memory and testimony to look back rather than presenting a fictional reconstruction of events. *Palimpsest* also uses the material and physical present as a way in which the past can be articulated. These films purposefully refuse to use archival footage, images of the past, or reconstruction and only use representations of 'now' in order to focus on the past. 'It is a sense of the past that comes into view with the "Now of recognizability", (Lebow 2008:11). In *D'Est*, Akerman chooses to use a series of steady camera tracking and static images shot as the circumstances demand, filming ostensibly what she saw. We see people in passing, working the fields, waiting for a tram, dancing; they go about their lives. They are all now, some thirty years later, ghosts of Soviet Russia. Steve Ball wrote: 'Akerman makes no commentary she allows the scene to speak, or perhaps to not speak, for themselves; lack of contextual information coupled with the individuals' inscrutability gives little away in this slow, measured flow of impressions.' (Ball 2013)

Akerman's approach, which is to take us on a journey across the East without explicit commentary on what is shown, provides a speculative reflection on that time in 1993, the end of communism and what it might mean to the East and the West of the future. The significance of this work is the powerful way in which it points to the past through the contemporary, as well as its unspecific positioning of the authorial voice and the potential for a nuanced view of its subject.

The gallery context

The gallery space provides a context for film that is different to the traditions of literature and forms of cinema as established by D.W.Griffith, these became the foundation for dramatic cinema, and closer to what Jaques Ranciere identified as, 'the interplay of operations that produces what we call art' (Ranciere 2009:6). In *Palimpsest* the interplay of operations are varied and borrow from a selection of film forms such as observational filmmaking techniques, Slow Cinema, digital cinema, Expanded Cinema, documentary photography techniques, the use of sound design, musical score, editing and finally institutional exhibition context. All these elements combine to produce a new type of film language that responds to archival documents, which places them at the centre of the 'film idea'.

There is a unique use of letters in *Palimpsest*, which operates on several layers. Images of correspondence appear on the screen inviting the audience to engage with them in an intimate and literary way, allowing them to eavesdrop on a private conversation written over a hundred years ago; while at the same time presenting them as filmed objects focusing on texture, line, sculptural shapes and form. Added to this is a music track that uses emotional structures to create

mood and atmosphere to embellish understandings of the correspondence. This is presented as a moving image document through contemporary digital technology in a vitrine alongside art works, which are presented in institutions that value written texts and scholarly documents. As Walker Evans said, 'You see, a document has a use, whereas art is really useless. Therefore art is never a document, though it certainly can adopt that style' (Goldberg, 1981:364).

These pieces are not interactive in the contemporary sense, inviting action such as screen swiping or mouse clicking, but interactive in a cinematic sense, where audiences are required to watch and engage with the moving image in order to experience them fully. One of the unique aspects of this project, which initially attracted me, was the potential to use the institutions of research and archive as a gallery space, a place to see art and archive in the same location. My films use the tradition of the vitrine as a viewing space, are placed alongside artifacts and art works, while using television monitors to present my moving image piece. It is this combination of sources, the dialogue it creates between them, and the nonverbal meanings, which deepen our knowledge of multi-imaging in relation to narrative.

This way of working clarified my previous research, which culminated in the production of a film called *Writ in Water* (2009), a three-screen drama that explored the formal institutions of cinema consumption. This piece was made within the tradition of fictional drama rather than art practice, the aim of the research was to gauge the response of contemporary audiences, who are constantly exposed to multi-imaged visual sequences through advertising and other similar forms, to a film that utilized such forms to evoke a fictional narrative.

'The aim of the project was to address a range of points in reference to 'Continuous Partial Attention' (Stone, 1998) the way in which we interact with digital devices and are continually distracted by the demand they put on us to keep checking for communications sent via phones laptops, email and so on.'

(Bubb: <http://jimpscreenworks.com/?pid=bubb>)

Figure 3: A still from *Writ in Water*(2009)

There were several lessons learnt during the making of *Writ in Water* that deepened my knowledge of multi-screen story telling, which informed the making of this project. The conditions of viewing such work, is a point in question. *Palimpsest* is an art film installation viewed in a manner, which is determined by the audience. Four monitors are set into two vitrines, each part is labeled from 1-4, and the audience can choose to watch each one for as long they wish. Each part is between ten and twelve minutes in length and the audio is available through headphones.

The interaction with the screens cannot be predetermined as it is not a requirement for a viewer to watch the piece in its entirety, or in sequence, viewers will view moving images in comparison with other works placed around

the exhibition space. My approach was to create a chronological order as defined by Griew's journey, in the hope that viewers would follow the story. The method has been successful and the cinematic aspect of storytelling, which develops through cause-and-effect have remained as an important feature. The film installation is also a part of the whole exhibition and readings and connections are made across a variety of media. It exists in the world amongst other things.

A work of art encountered as a work of art is an experience, not a statement or an answer to a question. Art is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing in the world, not just a text or commentary on the world.

(Sontag 1961:21)

Palimpsest is not an answer to a question or a statement, or a text, or a commentary, but something about something created to provide an audiovisual experience. It is 'a thing in the world' (Sontag 1961). The film uses recognized forms of mediation to provide an emotional and tragic story, offering a nuanced view of historical events from the perspective of a young man enthused by the prospect of fighting for his country.

The film form is an appropriate medium for creating emotional and visceral engagement, but once placed within the domain of an art exhibition, the moving image has the capacity to create critical understandings of its content and aesthetics. The combination of these two aspects is significant in creating a critical approach to storytelling.

Man with a digital movie camera

Figure 4: Man with a movie camera in Gommecourt, France

My production methods were neither drama or documentary, but more reminiscent of the Russian Constructivist and Formalist Dziga Vertov who travelled the streets of Soviet Russia in 1929 in search of images to represent a developing new world. Interestingly Vertov's concerns were chiefly formal, considering the construction of the frame, movement, light shade and so on.

The man with the camera must give up his immobility (these days it's the immobility of drama rather than cumbersome cameras of course). He must exert his powers of observation, quickness, and agility to the utmost in order to keep pace with life's fleeting phenomena' ... 'Life's chaos gradually becomes clear as he observes and shoots. Nothing is accidental. Everything is explicable and governed by law.

(Vertov 1992:287)

Whilst filming, I chose to concentrate on framing that presented the everyday in an extraordinary manner by emphasizing the physical or formal aspects of a subject. When shooting on the streets of Hackney I employed a simple static frame using observational filming techniques, capturing contemporary life through the use of long takes. I wanted to take the audience on a journey and the

development of time and space employs the frame in a variety of discerningly chosen locations. The journey starts in East London, travels across the English Channel and eventually to the villages of northern France. Frames were carefully composed and constructed to eliminate any unnecessary action or movement that might become too disruptive. The aim was to create considered pictures, often without action or moving subject, the frame becoming an abstraction that subtly challenges the viewer's perception of reality. I considered these images as 'moving photographs', which adopted the considerations of photography and referenced the approach taken by many of the New Topographic Photographers. These images not only recognized the two-dimensional aspects of the frame, but also create a sense of space, isolation, observation and banality.

During shooting, I mainly worked alone or with a small crew, travelling from location to location without time constraints or technological restrictions (within reason). Because of the developments in technology, I was able to consider each setup carefully, construct every frame through the viewfinder, and write with the camera in a purposeful way. Having the luxury of editing my own material and being free of a tight production schedule allowed me to build a visual language through trial and error, which is also indicative of art practice. My experience in film production guided me through the process and helped me in creating a solid working pattern while maintaining an aspect of experimentation. This interplay between disciplines was important in keeping ideas fluid and open to exploring unknown avenues. The relationship between production and post-production in filmmaking is always defined by budget and working practices. Operating within an academic context, where the demands of research have to be met, provides a different context, one that enabled me to consider each stage carefully and form a practice that was able to navigate the unknown. There is no clear model for work that uses archive as its starting point and the challenge of working across disciplines in order to convey the story of Griew appealed to me. This presented an opportunity to explore multi-screen narrative through practice-based research, and reach new audiences.

Conclusion

The anniversary of the First World War has generated a number of cultural projects within an array of disciplines, both government and commercially funded, where the abundance of digital technology has been a significant factor. The First World War was a mass conflict reaching across the globe at a time when documenting events for large audiences became possible, and much of that evidence still exists through moving image, photographs and recordings. The popularity of these funded projects has in part been dependent on this phenomenon, as has the fact that we can still see and hear events that were recorded on film or audiotape, as they happened. Some projects (such as *Palimpsest*) have produced responses to archives as a contemporary record, this in turn creates yet another lens through which to view the past. The messages signified are reframed within current terms, raising questions as to the way in which we view the past, the nature of the narratives, their authority and their mediation.

Thanks to new technologies, perspectives on past events have changed, as new evidence has been uncovered, adding strength to the 'unofficial' view of the ordinary foot soldier. A combination of personal accounts and military records now provide a comprehensive picture of events from the past, and includes a range of perspectives. The landscape has changed and new conclusions are drawn. Throughout the public screenings of *Palimpsest* I have discovered a high level of interest in the personal archive that plots the story of Barney Griew, a young Jewish furniture maker who left Hackney to fight in the First World War. It has captured people's imaginations and led them to consider their own relationship with this moment in history. Through my film, viewers have connected with events of the past, have been emotionally moved, reflected on the lives of their ancestors and invested in their own histories.

In this essay, I have illustrated the significance of my research through practice by taking this opportunity to reflect on the 'imperceptible and magical' (Tarkovsky 2012) process of maturing the project through filmmaking. 'It is the form of the soul that makes it unique, indeed only the soul decides the hidden 'gestation' period of that image which cannot be perceived by the conscious gaze' (Tarkovsky 2012:44).

Palimpsest presents a contemporary view of the past by taking us closer to those events through new representations of a personal archive. This approach not only utilizes a combination of traditional filmmaking techniques but takes on new methods of storytelling, exploration of narrative, use of multi-imaging within the context of art practice, while at the same time exploiting the facility of digital technology.

End

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Notes

1. B.E.F was the British Expeditionary Forces that were at the Western Front throughout WW1.

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