

# Placing Space/Time Through Photography's Old and New Technologies

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Vision in motion and stereo perception are our biological ways of knowing the world. The static, planar image is a construction that we can build by projection through an aperture (the photograph), or by sectioning space, or with mathematical formulae. I propose that, rather than seeing it as a limitation, we can convey perspectival, and even temporal, relations in novel and formally economical ways with the still image.

In Jacques Henri Lartigue's famous photograph *Grand Prix 1912* the spectators and car wheels are stretched diagonally in a cartoon-like representation of speed and a reaction to it. His camera shutter sliced vertically across a large format negative, consequently images moved relative to the film as they were projected on its surface during a horizontal panning shot. His viewfinder kept pace with object of his primary attention the head of the driver, his father, as he passed stationary spectators, but the car wheel, close to the photographer, becomes an



James McArdle 2008 "Goad".  
Chromogenic print

ellipse that leans to the right while the figures lean to the left. His still camera thus records motion (time x space).

## Motion perspective

When we first pick up an object, we turn it in our hands so that our sight and sense of touch are exposed to every part of it. The same kind of inspection is extended from this bodily scale into the whole environment as we interact with it. John Herschel was the first to note motion perspective: "Let any one traveling rapidly [...] fix his eye steadily on any object, [...] he will see [...] the whole landscape thrown into rotation [...] round that object as a centre". He emphasised that the observer must arouse two states of attention to be conscious of the effect (Herschel, 1833).

This notion of a visual kinesthetic is advanced by J. J. Gibson, who promotes the primacy of motion in perception as 'optic flow' or 'flow perspective' (Gibson, 1979) relating vision to his 'ecological psychology', a theory that recognizes reciprocity between animal and environment.

The train is a classic platform for the observation of motion perspective. The passenger, through the train window, observes a world in motion. Both move in relation to the other and yet the impression of the passenger is that the world outside is somehow frozen (de Certeau:1984). The carriage provided the most handy simplification for Einstein in explaining relativity (Johnson, 1982).

Such observations, repeated by a population of travellers, soon led to an expression of its emotional effects. Paul Verlaine's poem *La Bonne Chanson II* (Verlaine:1869), one of the first poems in any language that describes such a scene, evokes a vision which causes the poet joy, a projection upon the pivoting point in the landscape. This phenomenon is also recounted by Xavier Herbert who sees "...the stunted trees...spinning past...in endless gyration..." (Herbert 1963). He uses it to express his sense of the alien unknown of the outback landscape.



James McArdle 2008 "Gush". Chromogenic print

Where do the internal and external meet? In this research, I have extended these ways of looking initiated by train travel. Elements of the landscape are collected in pan-shots from the car window, then these sites are visited on foot to gather close-ups. I find that at close quarters swivelling the camera in a bodily and manual gesture, the movements effectively consolidate detail within the surrounding streak and blur and the painterly swirl, the vortex. The resultant print, especially when viewed with one eye, provokes a sense of depth and motion, of being *in* the landscape. The digital permits the evolution of

this technique in documenting such a gestural landscape into a seamless triptych where a foreground close-up, medium shot and wide angled horizon are combined into a still photographic collage. Dirk de Bruyn responds,

"I would submit that these are not random operations but document a bodily relationship to these spaces. They add an emotional register of meaning. One of the most effective of these images places the vortex within the dark hole of a group of mine shafts that tend to pepper the local landscape. It is as if the fluid landscape is being sucked into these holes. Is this an indication of a spent and unsettled landscape, a space in crisis, or are these the traces of emotion imparted from the body of the photographer himself? In such a way the personal and the local can be read in dialogue in McArdle's work." (De Bruyn: 2008)

### The vortex of vision

The figure that emerges from this practical research is the Vortex itself, with a long history of association and resonance with the visionary in aesthetic and spiritual, mathematical, natural and scientific discovery. The form of the spiral, whirlpool or vortex, and the related Labyrinth, appear throughout art and literature and are also mystical symbols well known in occult circles. Bill Mitchell comments on William Blake's *Milton*, noting that "the Vortex serves as an image of the gateway into a new level of perception," for

"the infinite does not reside in an obscure, transcendent realm at the 'vanishing point' of three-dimensional space, but is located immanently in the intense, dialectical perception of immediate 'minute particulars,' a process which is symbolized and embodied in the vortex" (Mitchell:1978)

Kevin Cope traces the pedigree (Cope:1992) of Blake's vortex from Descartes' writings on natural philosophy (Dioptrics:1637). Jonathon Crary links Blake and the proto-modernist Paul Cézanne's 'sustained attentiveness' when he says "William Blake and Cézanne shared a related understanding of the universe as perturbations and differences between centers of energy." (Crary:1999).

## Conclusion

The discovery that an impressively strong 3-dimensional effect in a 2-dimensional photographic representation of natural outdoor scenes occurs when a single camera is directed around one point in the scene, thus drawing into relief the subject of attention and blurring the surrounding space, has important implications for understanding basic processes in 3-dimensional vision. For the development of new ways for generating 3D effects in motion and static representations of scenes we might well learn from photography's old technologies, as well as digital technologies of the static print, which have yet to release the full impact of their potential in the representation of motion and space.

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