

# Memories of a Journey at Night

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*In 2000 we completed a project exploring motorway travel and motorway environments in the UK. The project resulted in a body of work<sup>1</sup> including moving and still imagery and installations exhibited at Prema, Gloucestershire; Gasworks, London; Fredereike*

*Taylor Gallery and The Armory Show, New York. This short essay is a recollection and reflection on the experience of researching for the project and of selected completed works.*

## Amassing Darkness

People journey continuously back and forth. And in doing so construct memories, which become an internalised often unconscious filmic process of capturing and editing.<sup>2</sup>

The journey really begins when the vehicle enters the darkness, leaving behind the orange ambient glow of street and motorway intersection lights. The darkness unfolds silently and seamlessly. Blackness engulfs the vehicle compartment and brightens its instrument lights. Speed becomes relative to the other moving bodies occupying this side of the motorway. In front of the vehicle we project a constant volume of light that scans over a high-speed texture of tarmac and white lines. Framed by the screen, we stare at the limits of the headlights and the darkness beyond.

Our memories of journeys during the day with fleeting glimpses of animated life compound a sense of presence within the darkness. Its density becomes visual saturation, like overlaying a thousand images and watching the blackness grow. It is replete with our captured memories and edited presences that we project into its space, all our journeys and the landscapes we have passed amassing to eclipse what reality lies beyond the road. In this way, the blackness beyond and to each side of the headlights becomes an accumulation of multiple but unseen topographies, settlements and occurrences. With high speed travel at night, the rural landscape becomes full darkness.

## Perceptual Erasure

The degree of slowness is directionally proportional to the intensity of memory. The degree of speed is directionally proportional to the intensity of forgetting.<sup>3</sup>

We are driving every day. Acceleration, speed, passing landscape, de-acceleration, motorway services, acceleration, speed, passing landscape ... Motorway services are serial repetitions of architecture that create intervals of time on the journey. They break the smooth, engineered space of the motorway and the internal car environment. They are markers in the act of travelling but not of place. Their location is not related to a landscape but to a network. Our experience of them is not positioned within the network but within our journey. They oscillate around our needs, either too close or too far, until they are “the next one.”

Stopping at services activates both memory and the act of forgetting. One service station can seem like another but each has its own eccentricities. We may not be able to assess which services are which from memory. And so we navigate a mental construct of many simultaneously, and are frequently surprised by the position of the shop or toilets or coffee bar in relation to our expectations. These are slippages in our experience between mental and physical space. In the moments of stopping off from the motorway, we are still mentally travelling at speed with its intensity of forgetting whilst bodily moving slowly through physical space with

Fig. 1: Sophie Warren & Jonathan Mosley, *She said she couldn't remember the details of the journey #1* (2000) © Warren & Mosley

its intensity of memory. The particularities of each service space are experienced, memories constructed, and then we accelerate and begin forgetting the stop again. Our memory tends not to be aligned to the motorway services' rural landscape, nor to its exact architectural environment but to the serial act of stopping in the journey that edits and composites our experiences of multiple "welcome breaks." As artists, we wanted to intervene in this constant perceptual erasure, break this serial repetition and to make one transient environment into our destination.

### Suspension

Mesmerised by a specific diesel canopy, we repeatedly drove from a city centre, through suburbs and outskirts, into the darkness along thin lines of motorway tarmac to a motorway services, arriving at the canopy's concrete forecourt. This transient environment became our destination. We sustained our gaze on the diesel canopy and suspended the continuation of the journey. We surveyed and documented its architecture and hard, engineered elements using our soft bodies as a scale; pace, eye height, length of forearm, boot to hip. Out of vehicle and stepping away from the designated paths for pedestrians, we experienced an environment not-for-us and constructed visceral memories of dwelling in a place about passing through.

Exposed to de-accelerating trucks, from the concrete forecourt we filmed the diesel canopy, editing out live all the passing vehicles and people using the canopy, compressing the documented time. Within the film's production we stretched the recorded footage out again, slowing its incidental movements and looping the sequence into one continuous moving image. The experience of watching the film *Memories of a Journey at Night* suspends the viewer within the transient space before the diesel canopy. The viewer is held at the point before entering, using or passing through the fuelling station and resuming the journey. The architecture of the canopy, with its branding and coloured, lit allure, signifies its consumptive, corporate lineage. However, its insistent and immobile presence in the moving imagery and the stasis of the viewer in relation to its space strips away its functionality and transitory convenience. The film suspends us before the architectural symmetry of the structure. The canopy becomes the destination, reminiscent of a temple to which one travels in order to be touched momentarily by its light. But motion is denied. Only the film's jump cuts and distant tail-lights of cars on the motorway indicate a freedom of passage and the passing of time. The suspension of progression into the station creates a stillness and slowly directs attention to the blackness beyond, framed by the canopy. The canopy is a threshold to this darkness, its brightly lit architecture giving a dense and black intensity to the surrounding rural night that it denies.

### Endnotes

- 1 Body of work is titled *M5 Southbound: Welcome Break* and was funded by Arts Council England and University of the West of England. More information on the works and details of reviews of the project can be found at <http://warrenandmosley.com/>
- 2 Stephen Doesinger, "Simcity," in M. Toy (ed), *Consuming Architecture*, (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1998): 84-85
- 3 Milan Kundera, *Slowness*, (London: Harper Perennial, 1997)



Fig. 2: Sophie Warren & Jonathan Mosley, Production still from *Memories of a Journey at Night* (2000) © Warren & Mosley